Dreams of Mobility in the American West: Transients, Anti-Homeless Campaigns, & Shelter Services in Boulder, Colorado

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

For people living homeless in America, even an unsheltered existence in the urban spaces most of us call “public” is becoming untenable. Thinly veiled anti-homelessness legislation is now standard urban policy across much of the United States. One clear marker of this new urbanism is that vulnerable and unsheltered people are increasingly being treated as moveable policy objects and pushed even further toward the margins of our communities. Whilst the political-economic roots of this trend are in waning localism and neoliberal polices that defined “clean up the streets” initiatives since the 1980s, the cultural roots of such governance in fact go back much further through complex historical representations of masculinity, work, race, and mobility that have continuously haunted discourses of American homelessness since the nineteenth century. A common perception in the United States is that to be homeless is to be inherently mobile. This reflects a cultural belief across the political spectrum that homeless people are attracted to places with lenient civic attitudes, good social services, or even nice weather. This is especially true in the American West where rich frontier myths link notions of homelessness with positively valued ideas of heroism, resilience, rugged masculinity, and wilderness survival. Today even formerly tolerant liberal municipalities are rationalizing aggressive anti-homelessness campaigns by connecting homelessness with mobility.
In Boulder, Colorado, like many similarly sized towns in the west, there is a real population of highly visible young travelers whose presence is ubiquitous downtown during the spring and summer. In recent years these seasonal groups have become the topic of much debate in Boulder as the city struggles to reconcile its reputation as one of the nation’s most socially progressive and tolerant communities, with a public and political call to clamp down on all visible homelessness. Therefore, in order to examine the effects these mobile groups were having on attitudes towards the year-round local homeless population, I conducted seven months of fieldwork in the city during 2012 and 2013. For the purpose of this qualitative study I identified three distinct local populations, and across winter, spring and summer I worked with two of them: 1) ‘Travelling kids’ 2) ‘Homeless’ 3) Marginalized. In order to better understand the location and bureaucratic categorization of these populations, I first spent the winter volunteering in a Boulder shelter, interviewed the directors, and employed participant observation from first-hand involvement in regional “Point-in-Time” homeless counts. Subsequently I tracked changes in these populations using ethnographic data gathered on the streets of Boulder during the summer of 2013. This case study links a wider urban policy analysis with considerations of historical and contemporary representations of homelessness in the western United States. Through these connections we may better understand prevailing social attitudes towards unsheltered populations, how representations of homelessness shape urban governance, as well as the consequences of current homelessness policies on the actual people living precarious and unsheltered lives on our nation’s streets.
Dedication

For my grandparents: Tom, Sophie, Rusty, & Jean

Acknowledgments

The seeds of my fascination with the American West were sown in Butte, Montana, 1999, and I am forever thankful for my extended “American family,” the Bones & the DeBordes of Big Sky Country, for the brave move of taking a teenage British exchange student into their homes for a whole year. These big-hearted people introduced me to the landscapes and cultures at the core of this work. The roots of this dissertation sprouted a few years later, around Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2004, and grew into an undergraduate thesis at the University of East Anglia. For those early academic years and their continued mentorship I am grateful to Dr. Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Dr. Rebecca Tillett who did so much to encourage my work and include me in their professional networks. From this time and the years since I’m grateful for many times, appropriately scholarly or appropriately otherwise, spent with Matthew Paul Bailey, Chelsea Armstrong, Worthing & Cameron, Richard Pook, Gareth J. Clayton, Matt Kiszka, Jonny Pelham, Xochitl Campos, Gabbi Campos, Gloria Castillo, Ryan Bone, Sophie King, Rami Mallis, Simon Elliot, Harriet Pile, Morgan Duffy, Eoin McHugh, Liam Sloan, Jim Kershaw, Helen Pidd and many others. I steered away from academia for a year before a looming career as a news reporter sent me careening back toward it. This was only made possible by a post-graduate studentship award from the British Association of American
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The heavy lifting of this dissertation, however, happened in the times I wasn’t in the American West and gained some perspective on it. Of the Ohio people, born and naturalized, who helped me with this in multiple ways, I’m happy to know Brett Zehener, Lee Wiles, Oded Nir, Andrew Culp, RaShelle Peck, Damon Berry, Zach Henkel, Justine Law, Nick Crane, Zoe Pearson, David S. Lewis, Jenny & Walker Pfost, Trent Saksa, Erica Di Claudio, Nate Salyers, and very many other folk in and around Columbus who’ve made my time here fun and engaging. My first advisor at the Ohio State University, and the person who took a real interest in my project and brought me here, was Ruby Tapia. Now at the University of Michigan, Professor Tapia was a huge
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Fieldwork for this project took place in Colorado during winter and spring, made possible by an award from the Schools Competition Act Settlement Trust. For this indirect support, as well as numerous other financial contributions, I must acknowledge Shrewsbury School for their continued enthusiasm for my education. During fieldwork I lived in north Boulder and I owe a great deal of thanks to my good friends Ben and Dorinda Savage, along with ‘the fellas,’ for sharing their lovely home with me. This study simply couldn’t have happened without their kindness and generosity. I also owe Matt Kiszka & Justin Kushik for the regular use of their couch when winter nights made the walk up Broadway unappealing: You’re the best mates, hiking and skiing partners I
could ask for. Thanks also to Joe, Z, Kristi, Daisy, Kevin, Brooke, Angela, Krista, James, Brittany, Ryan, Ed, Paddy, and the many other people who kept me outdoors and healthy in Colorado while working on this project. Finally in Boulder, this study would not have been possible without the residents & staff of the shelter for letting me work alongside them, and also the numerous travellers, young people, and members of the wider community — transient and otherwise — who gave so freely of their stories for this ethnography. During the lengthy writing process my special thanks are reserved for Ollie Wigmore & Ana Kim for their friendship, late night conversations, a much needed spring getaway, and the use of their home at the times I most needed it! Also thank you to the extended Keene family in British Columbia for their support and kindness in sharing their vacation and summer cabin with me as a special and peaceful place to finish chapters. To my mum and dad, thank you for all your support, love, and encouragement in the long decades of my formal education since that ominous phone call from Church Stretton Methodist playschool circa 1986. I love you both and I hope this in some way makes up for all those parent-teacher meetings you had to endure. My thanks and love also to my sister Dr. Emily Lyness, still the first and only “real Doctor” in the family. And lastly to Tracie Keene: You do more for my life and thinking than I can list here, and I know you wouldn’t want me to anyway. I love you. Thanks for all the support and adventures. Here’s to many more!
Vita

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Introduction:

The Boulder Bubble: “25 square miles surrounded by reality”

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t understand why anybody is homeless in Boulder of all places. Why don’t they take responsibility for their lives?” – systems analyst, female, thirties, Boulder, 2013

“You’re writing about homelessness eh? You’re in the right place – lots of homeless folks come here because we’ve got such good services.” – clinical psychotherapist, male, fifties, wine bar, north Boulder, 2012.

“On August 15, a memorial was held in downtown Boulder for the nine members of the homeless community who have died in the city so far this year. Five of nine who died were living outside on the streets where camping, which in Boulder is defined as even being covered by a blanket, is now punishable by jail time.” – Boulder Rights Watch letter to City Council, August 2014

The Tip of the Iceberg:

Boulder, Colorado. It is a 12 am on a mild weekday morning in early March and the main downtown thoroughfare Pearl Street is bustling with tourists, young families, and locals on their lunch break. Three scruffy white youths in tattered clothes make up an acoustic jug band busking in the street playing an aggressive, anarchistic, brand of punk laden with swear words. The young men sing with a deliberately provocative vulgarity
that offends the sensibilities of many passers by. Some members of the public heckle the band: “Watch the language there are kids around!” or “knock it off!” The band responds by yelling back defiantly: “We were kids once too, we heard those words!” and: “they’ll grow up and learn them anyway!” A shouting match ensues between a well-dressed middle-class woman and the leather-clad lead singer of the band. He calls her a “fucking hypocrite.” As the woman walks away muttering something about the cops, the band launch into another one of their violent melody-less numbers. It’s hard to discern the lyrics over the street din (and to be honest the musical din) but the song seems to extol the virtues of being ‘home free’ and ‘care free’ and only needing enough money for drugs, smokes, and booze. Another song references “oogle” — a “tribal” name adopted by many young runaway street kids — and another enacts an argument between the singer and his estranged father about smoking dope. The band call themselves “Gutter… something” and between the style of their dress and the themes of their songs, they present as archetypical travelling street kids; a particular demographic comprised of young rootless and homeless outsiders familiar to most of Boulder’s Pearl Street-walking public. As it turns out when I approach them they are in fact all local kids — born and raised in nice Boulder families and living together in a cooperative punk house since graduating from Boulder High School. For these white males in their late teens, homelessness is a kind of ideation, a street performance they use to signal disaffection and disillusionment with the notoriously privileged community in which they came of age. Nevertheless, for most passers-by for whom the band’s presence is a source of clear annoyance and offence disrupting an otherwise idyllic day out strolling in the early spring
sun, this counter-cultural troupe no doubt signified something else: the beginning of an unavoidable seasonal Boulder phenomenon that would set the tone of family trips downtown for months to come.

Boulder, Colorado is known throughout the western United States as a leading example of a much sought after new urbanism which combines progressive values and concern for the environment with an emphasis on localism, healthy outdoors living, and a strong community ethos. Home to the University of Colorado Boulder and numerous high profile science institutes and tech companies, from the 1990s onwards the city won just about every lifestyle accolade going in the national press including *Forbes* magazine’s #1 “city in which to live well”. Much of Boulder’s reputation came from a longstanding political willingness to balance commercial interests in the town with the welfare of all residents. This politics was facilitated both by an aging municipal elite made up of former hippies who had moved to the town in the 1960s and by a strong private sector which seemed to place community, philanthropy, and volunteerism high on the civic agenda. Boulder’s location nestled deep in the foothills of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains also bolstered an electorate comprised strongly of young outdoors enthusiasts — climbers, bikers, skiers and hikers, people whose enjoyment of the natural environment tended to jibe with ideas on the political left — sustainability, clean-tech industry, social health, and progressive localism of all kinds. Boulder’s famously leafy pristine urban landscape is supported by widely popular initiatives such as the city’s “Urban Wildlife Management Plan” which aims to protect all wild animals in the municipal area and emphasizes conservation efforts in urban parks and wetlands.
Boulder’s “Open Space Preservation” policies too, whilst more controversial, have since 1899 controlled urban expansion through a series of federally backed zoning laws designed to stem growth and preserve views of the mountains with their miles of hiking trails which encircle the city. With urban sprawl largely contained and all future development subject to a dedicated sales tax and confined beneath an elevation of 5,750 feet, housing in the city is scarce and real estate prices consistently high. As Amy L. Scott notes in her essay “Open-Space Politics in Boulder, Colorado”, this longstanding conflict between “culture and nature” is very much written into the entire fabric of life in the city:

…Boulder’s urban environmentalists made open space central to both the physical design of the city and the culture that developed within its borders. Boulder activists pressed city planners to think critically about the connections among environment, economy, population, and sustainability and to adopt an ecosystem-management approach to urban planning…By demanding a voice in decisions about land use and economic growth, Boulder’s postwar environmental coalition imagined a spatial-fix to suburban growth that has continued to influence urban development in the West and throughout the United States. (65)

Half-seriously referred to amongst locals as ‘The People’s Republic of Boulder,’ ‘25 square miles surrounded by reality’, and even more seriously as ‘The Boulder Bubble’, residents of the small city have long tended to maintain a knowing understanding that their idealized lives are far-removed from many problems blighting most of urban America. A generous view would be to note that much of this safe insularity has been well earned, not least by a willingness on the part of Boulder residents to contribute to a well functioning and democratic civic discourse, supported by a vibrant university culture and a healthy alternative press, which maintains a strong focus on
community issues and the public good. The city, for example, has consistently maintained a volunteerism rate well above the national average and civic engagement is palpably high. Indeed as funding for social welfare was gradually eroded on a national and state level throughout the late twentieth century, Boulder saw a swift and apparently seamless transfer of the responsibility onto local municipal initiatives and a network of independent non-profit agencies. The city is now a relatively successful example of privately run welfare services in the United States. In stark contrast to most cities in the U.S, Boulder’s homeless shelter operates a yearlong volunteer waiting list to manage the high numbers of local residents who wish to devote their time to helping. While other service providers, churches, and shelters across the nation serve up an unappetizing mix of defrosted fast food that has passed its sell-by date, and scrape by on odd assortments of donated produce, it is not uncommon for residents of Boulder’s shelters to find themselves sitting down to expertly prepared meals, fresh vegetables, or deserts donated by Whole Foods. On the face of things, in an America blighted by the severe and ever-worsening decay of its social safety net, the medium-sized mountain town of Boulder in Colorado gets quite a lot right.

Amidst the expensive organic food markets and yoga studios that mark this kind of upper-middle class living however, it is also inescapably obvious that as a metropolitan area Boulder has consistently lacked ethnic, cultural, or social diversity. Embarrassingly for a community priding itself on liberal values and inclusive livability, as well as its lauded designations as America’s ‘happiest’, ‘healthiest’, ‘fittest’, and most ‘outdoorsy’ town, it is also fast becoming regarded as its ‘whitest’. This reputation is not
uneared. Whilst there are of course people who live and work within the city from many ethnic backgrounds, at least more than the popular imagination would acknowledge, the high cost of living and massive housing prices have led to largely homogenous demographics within Boulder’s city limits. The most recent census data from 2010 recorded Boulder’s “racial composition” as 88% white compared to nearby Denver which was 68.9% white and has notably more ethnic diversity than its affluent neighbor (census quick facts). House prices in Boulder are also typically twice the national average for a single family home (Trulia). Zoning laws and the town’s once-vaunted open space preservation policy have exacerbated this problem in recent decades, and the situation now is that many people employed in Boulder’s service sector cannot afford to live in the city, instead opting for a half-hour commute into the Denver suburbs or more affordable nearby communities such as Longmont, Lafayette, or Nederland. Furthermore many of Boulder’s civil servants, especially police and fire personal, can ill afford to live locally and this has contributed to tensions surfacing during debates on the usage and management of public space. Here is the less generous (and oft satirized) popular interpretation of Boulder’s “bubble” reputation: a whitewashed and over-privileged city, heavily populated by wealthy elitists, “trustafarian” college kids from either coast, and aging liberal sellouts, more concerned with preserving their extreme bourgeois lifestyle than the welfare of others in the community: A town whose ex-hippy credentials have given way to a thin veneer of liberal concern covering an otherwise rapidly waning tolerance for those who would threaten this safe urban utopia.
Somewhere in between these competing visions of Boulder exists a set of tensions that in very recent years have began to appear in numerous sites of public discourse. Nowhere more is this apparent than in the town’s conflicted and wrenching battle with visible poverty and homelessness. If Boulder’s glaring whiteness is by now the object of some discussion, albeit usually in the form of ironic and knowing allusions made in polite liberal conversation, the related economic disparity existing within the town is rarely acknowledged at all. And on the face of it the town does lack much economic diversity. Boulder isn’t quite like some of the more famously ritzy Colorado mountain towns such as Telluride or Aspen where it is often said that the “billionaires are kicking out the millionaires,” but it isn’t far behind. According to census data the median household income for Boulder County in 2012 was $67,403 and the median family income for the City of Boulder in 2011 was $113,681 (U.S. census quick facts). The average listing price for houses is now estimated at $986,417 (Trulia). Indeed with home prices unattainable for all but the very well off, a powerful illusion is maintained in Boulder that only the affluent live here. The tight property market and the invisible poverty it propagates through marginalizing low-income families, combine with an equally visible ‘Boulder lifestyle’ marked by lots of disposable income, top-of-the-line sports gear, high tastes, expensive outdoor pursuits, and all the time to enjoy them.

The popular local blog site ‘Stay Out of My Namaste Space’ And Other Things Said By White Women in Boulder is just one venue poking fun at this element of Boulder. On this site contributors are invited to submit vapid and privileged remarks they have purportedly heard uttered by “white women” in public places around the city, in a
misguided and sexist attempt to satirize some of the many contradictions of the local community. The entries are unverifiable, predictable and invested in portraying Boulder females in particular as inhabiting the center of their own universes. Another high profile blog posting recently raised similar points about the downsides of Boulder’s lifestyle, and asked: “Is it Possible to Be Too Boulder?”

Could we truly tire of the ladies lunching next to us extolling the trials and tribulations of their nanny share and yet the other gaggle of friends oozing over the “must-have pour-over coffee” from one purveyor or another? — have we lost our acceptance and devolved into tolerance? Do we turn noses up at those who dare order a real burger over a quinoa variation …Have we forgotten what life is like outside of the Boulder Bubble, in places such as (gasp) Denver? Or maybe even Chicago… In cities where the lifestyles are more diverse, the costs of living lower, and the racial diversity (oh, come on — Boulder is pretty dang white) greater — is there something we could learn or be reminded of that would make living in a sweet ass town like Boulder even greater? (Your Boulder)

Many Boulder residents live in an idealized bubble, largely oblivious to the actual degree of endemic local poverty and wide economic disparities in their city. What is more interesting however is that this prevailing view of life in the Colorado foothills as somehow utopian and sheltered from many of the social issues that plague the rest of the nation, competes with the reality that most Boulder-ites do encounter “homelessness” of some kind almost every day. Panhandlers who approach people for food and change outside downtown bars and restaurants, vagrants patrol the lines of traffic stopped at lights or on the edge of the city near the highway. Large groups of young scruffy travelling kids or punks congregate in the parks and pedestrianized areas between the university and the central business district, especially during the summer when they can usually be seen sleeping on the grass outside the court house or huddled in smoky illicit
groups under shady spots along the Boulder creek. These young travelling groups in particular are almost an architectural feature of life in downtown Boulder. When I asked a guide for downtown walking tours if she ever avoids taking tourists near these large nomadic gatherings she replies: “…sometimes people get uneasy, but as I see it they’re a part of life in Boulder, they always have been.” This fact alone renders the city a fascinating case study in which to examine cultural representations of homelessness because, to an extent, Boulder’s socially aware population encounters something other than “normal” American homelessness when faced with such ubiquitous urban nomads.

As in similar towns such as Ashville, Santa Fe or Missoula, an argument might even be made that, in the past, a core of counter-cultural hippy travellers and buskers was tolerated by the city, well aware that its cultural reputation and tourism were staked on the presence of such colorful groups.

For years it seemed as if Boulder was holding out as one of the last bastions in defiant resistance to the march of neoliberal urban governance that had fostered the growth of anti-homelessness policy nearly everywhere else. However around 2011 or 2012 as a slew of thinly veiled quality-of-life legislation came into effect and joined forces with a growing chorus of anti-homeless rhetoric in a number of civic circles, things seemed to be poised on the verge of change. In recent years the seeming take-over of downtown parks and malls by “the homeless” has become a point of some conflict in the community, and slowly the same battles are finally being fought in Boulder that have long characterized urban living in most similar-sized tolerant cities across the nation.

Recently there have been several high profile community backlashes against plans to
extend homeless services in the town. Although it may be a political minority behind these actions, explicit concerns have been thrust into the local discourse that expanding services would attract even more homelessness to the city from the surrounding region and beyond. Also on the rise are open calls to actively sweep the homeless from public spaces, and such debates have appeared with increasing frequency in local media.

Furthermore since 2011 a long-standing ban on camping in the downtown area, which for decades had operated somewhat under the radar of both law enforcement and homeless populations alike, suddenly began to be aggressively enforced year round as more and more homeless people were ticketed amidst outcries from legal advocates. Then in 2012 a raft of municipal legislation was passed by the city council which rendered numerous other aspects of everyday Boulder life illegal in the downtown area, including biking, smoking, and dog walking – that could be selectively enforced by the often unpopular Boulder Police Department.

Given then that tolerance for homelessness in the city appears to be undergoing a gradual but definite retreat, what ‘kind’ of poverty and homelessness do Boulder citizens actually believe they are encountering? Is there anything about Boulder that makes it different? This dissertation builds on evidence that Boulder does experience a similar degree of endemic and situational homelessness to most of urban America, and explores how the social fact of endemic homelessness is obscured by myths of mobility and representations of transitory youth. How much are rising discourses of anti-homelessness and attendant shifts in urban policy linked to widespread assumptions of mobility amongst homeless populations? Are such assumptions in some way born out in the
particularities of Boulder’s urban space, service network, culture, media, as well as the heightened visibility of people who might in various ways conform to such a ‘transient’ stereotype?

The seasonal phenomenon of mobile young adults is common throughout the western United States where countercultural movements have long coalesced around idealized mobility and an ethos of communal outdoors living that thrives in traditionally liberal mountain towns like Boulder. Rather than identifying as poor, these subcultures typically welcome anybody who abides by shared values of mutual resourcefulness and amongst themselves employ terms like “ho-bum” and “home-free” as distinct from “home-less.” In Boulder especially, travelling collectives are related to wider intentional communities such as the Rainbow Gathering, which started in Colorado during the 1970’s and draws a predominantly young crowd to the region for experiments in utopian living and anti-consumer lifestyles. However, homeless or otherwise, like many other cities which have by now been in the anti-homelessness game for some time, Boulder is gradually starting to clamp down on this form of migrant living. Early assaults on public space and a negative turn in public attitudes undoubtedly take such travelling populations as their focus. Such changes in policy and public attitudes can combine with potentially drastic implications for the wider unsheltered population of homeless people whose circumstances and poverty are both very real and very local concerns.

Of primary consequence to this study is the question of how much this most visible group of “homeless-esque” travellers might inform public perceptions of homelessness in Boulder, unwittingly frame public policy debates, and influence the
treatment and welfare needs of all those on the city streets. At stake too is whether such perceptions are effectively being underwritten by a weight of cultural knowledge that has long conflated homelessness with tropes of youthful mobility, heroism, survival, white male-ness, selective poverty, and subcultural indolence. In tandem with this exploration of cultural representations, I aim to assess the reality of life on Boulder’s streets for all people in need of shelter and social services in the midst of shifting public attitudes, whatever their circumstances. My central question is whether ambiguous categorizations of “homelessness” in bureaucratic and urban discourse might support longstanding cultural stereotypes of masculinity, self-reliance, and mobility, which contribute to hegemonic views, anti-homelessness campaigns, and ultimately work to legitimize misguided objects of urban policy.

In order to tackle these questions I conducted fieldwork in Boulder, Colorado during winter, spring, and summer 2012 / 2013. During the winter season I volunteered in a local shelter, interviewed the directors, and participated in the city’s annual ‘Point-in-Time’ homeless counts to better understand how the issue of homelessness was being addressed. I also systematically reviewed local media, read message boards, interviewed journalists, and local residents regarding their views on homelessness. Subsequently in the summer I tracked the changes in local populations through ethnographic data and participant observation on the city streets. Critically, there are three ‘different’ and ‘distinct’ populations of paramount concern in this study, and it is precisely their complex blurring in public space, cultural discourse, and urban social policy, that is most at stake. Whilst
the use of these categories will be rigorously critiqued, for the purpose of structure these
objects of study can best be defined as the following populations:

1) “Travelling kids”: a self-identified term used by the loose collectives of travellers I interviewed on the streets in Boulder, and also to an extent represented by the popular cultural figure of ‘Alexander Supertramp’ in *Into the Wild*, analyzed in Chapter 3, and by ‘Kai the Homeless Hitchhiker’ -discussed in Chapter 4. In more *blurred* terms, the term ‘travelling kids’ *may or may not* also relate to the populations characterized in local discourse as ‘problem transients’ or ‘aggressive panhandlers’ explored in my primary case-study in Chapter 1 of Arcata, California, and the smaller examples of Ocean Beach, California and other cases throughout the west. Thematically, these populations might primarily be thought of as ‘not-from-here,’ or as inherently ‘mobile’ and ‘not from anywhere’. Travelling kids are visible in high profile urban areas to an extent that my second population category tends not to be.

2) “Homeless”: In this dissertation the term ‘homeless’ refers foremost to a population of chronic or situationaly homeless people – a diverse population seeking shelter services in Boulder either as a result of an emergency situations or long term chronic marginality. This population is vulnerable to loss of housing throughout the year due to a host of structural and systemic reasons well established in the social scientific literature, which I will draw upon throughout. As suggested through my participant observation in the shelter, interviews with social workers, and the only limited statistics available in Boulder and northern Colorado, this is an overwhelmingly local population and their homelessness tends to represent a loss of mobility. They are ‘from here.’ This term is also employed extensively throughout the historical and social science literature where it will be engaged with on its own terms.

3) “Poor / marginalized”: these terms will be used primarily to discuss scholarship in the social sciences and interdisciplinary humanities, which highlights structural inequalities that enforce lack of secure shelter and mobility, and economic precarity on marginal and racialized populations. These populations may well also become caught up in anti-homelessness policies, and of course may also be heavily represented in category (2) as simply people seeking services.

That these multiple populations are extremely muddy in cultural discourse is of key interest, as is the extent to which they are meaningfully differentiated in institutional,
policy, and urban discourse. The policy of my primary field site, “The Mountain Shelter for the Homeless”, is to shut its doors as an emergency night shelter during the months of April to October. This is significant on a number of levels: Firstly it is during these months that the city typically experiences its influx of seasonal travellers who may be motivated by such externalities as regional music festivals, the rainbow circuit, perceptions of good summer living in the Rocky Mountain west, or the reputation of Boulder as a communal gathering place for social misfits of all types, especially since marijuana became increasingly decriminalized in Colorado culminating in the state’s legalization of recreational sales of the drug in 2013. The Mountain Shelter’s seasonal policy is even more significant because any homeless population is necessarily more visible during the comfortable warmer months when their more sustained presence in public space is prone to clash with the heightened use of outside municipal areas by all citizens. Most of all however, the very fact that the only true night shelter for single adults in the city is shut for the spring and summer is important because it leaves the 160 + people who stay there searching for other options as part of the estimated 1000+ people who end up homeless in Boulder every year (PIT). And on the face of it options for shelter in Boulder appear very limited during the summer months — there are scant provisions for homeless youth and women fleeing domestic abuse, but the vast majority of unsheltered individuals over 18 are left with nowhere obvious to go apart from Denver.

Keith Duncan, as I’ll call him here, Executive Director of The Mountain Homeless Shelter, gives the reasons behind their seasonal policy: “Yeah, so it’s funding.
It’s … we don’t want to be a youth hostel for the travelling folks in the summer. We have a 90 day limit on our emergency program so clients who use our services in the winter couldn’t use them in the summer anyway.” As Boulder’s homeless population morphs during the summer, even the most hardened homelessness advocates often seem unable to separate the stereotype of footloose youth from their knowledge of homeless populations at large. Ted Woods (pseudonym), Manager of Programs for the Mountain Shelter, elaborates on this predicament. He thinks that the question of travelling kids is indeed often in danger of setting the tone for all debates on homelessness in Boulder:

“It gets a lot of attention, so we spend a lot of resources and time addressing that particular sub-population. The city gets a lot of complaints about it so the city throws resources at it, pulls us into the mix about how to solve these problems. We spend a lot of time on this small portion of the population primarily because they are the most visible part and that just intensifies in summer.”

The related question of where shelter residents are meant to go from April to October when the shelter closes at night is a tricky one to put to Keith Duncan, and he is quick to list options that interestingly themselves presuppose a degree of local mobility on the part of the homeless: “There are other regional services and shelters, there is a shelter in Grand Junction and Denver and a shelter in Fort Collins and Greeley, there is an intake process for the church shelter based on their criteria.” Grand Junction is 255 miles from Boulder down Interstate-70, whilst the smaller towns of Fort Collins and Greeley with their equally limited and stretched welfare services are both over 50 miles away. Ted offers more insight into the realities presented for the shelter residents during the summer: “People disperse in all kinds of ways. They could go into Denver for services if they think that’s appropriate, or they could move up into the hills and camp in
the summer — some of them are probably staying at the churches who allow a finite amount of people to camp on their property. They go in all different directions.” The next question is also a difficult one to ask, but both social workers are clear and cognizant about the visibility issues their seasonal shelter policies might potentially lead to: Do they think that the shelter closing its doors in summer risks the year round homeless population blending with the transient population in the minds of Boulder citizens who might encounter both groups downtown? Ted responds first: “You’d like to think that the population of Boulder is somewhat sophisticated enough to be able to differentiate between these two relatable issues that are not the same… but I’m not certain that they are. Some probably are, some aren’t.” Keith also feels that this is a unfortunate knock-on effect of the Mountain Shelter’s seasonal closure, and he raises another key question of visibility: “The options decrease but we’re talking about a small but very visual presence in the community who make a very visual impact…if we’re talking about the whole of homelessness in Boulder, from ages 0 to 85, is your perception of what’s going on in small area really that accurate?” I suggest that “no”, the whole of homelessness in Boulder is not accurately represented by the presence of panhandlers and drifters on Pearl Street: It is however, precisely where a lot of residents of Boulder have most of their encounters with homelessness and therefore is the area which most informs their knowledge of homelessness issues in their community. The insights of these two longtime service professionals illuminate a real and pressing difficulty concerning the representation of homelessness in the western United States:

“That’s the visible part, yep, it’s like the iceberg right? ... you see the top part and you don’t know the science so that’s what you assume…so those people
who you’re speaking of specifically, again the data is terrible around it but we have big brains we can assume that when there is a decrease in services for that part of the homeless community that they become mobile and go somewhere else perhaps, I mean, it’s very hard…especially for us to judge from up here, we’re not interacting and we don’t know whether they’re staying in town or not.”

Both Keith and Ted evoke the “tip of the iceberg” analogy for the rest of our interview and it is clear they do worry about the impact of this most visible representation of homelessness in Boulder, as well as the reactions they engender in the Boulder public. In reality, despite the best will of service providers whose work exists in a delicate ecosystem encompassing the needs of their clients, the support of the community, and the political courtship of Boulder’s official agencies for minimal funding, certain aspects of life on the streets do appear to be getting tougher for the city’s homeless population whether they are here year round, or just passing through during the summer. A politics of representation therefore comes at a premium and tensions inherent in local debates over homelessness can be found across a number of civic forums. As much as wider American homelessness is best understood first in situ as a loss of mobility rather than as its liberating achievement, it is also true that in the West especially, many towns and cities do for times experience a very real temporary influx of seasonal workers or actual traveling populations whose presence by roadsides or in high profile commercial areas is a significant urban phenomenon. It is also an explicitly mobile one. It is this differentiated profile of the homeless population that makes Boulder, Colorado, an especially good site in which to study both the realities and the representations of unsheltered people in the American West.
Chasing the Object

In cities like Boulder throughout the American West, liberal urban polices which used to have room for fine-grained distinctions between deliberately mobile lifestyles and endemic local poverty, now emphasize the former while implicitly obscuring the latter. For a recent satirical iteration of the cultural problem mobility presents for representations of American homelessness, we don’t have to look outside of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains. “Night of the Living Homeless” was a 2007 episode of Comedy Central’s long running cult cartoon South Park, based in a fictionalized small Colorado mountain town that is reminiscent of Boulder. In this episode the creators of the puerile but socially astute comedy pointedly attack one of the most misguided myths of homelessness in the American West. As increasingly large numbers of homeless people descend on the little town of South Park, the panicked residents trace the cause back to one small act of individual charity that they believe has triggered the massive influx of panhandlers. An unstoppable force summoned forth after one small boy gave some pocket change to a man begging on the street, the homeless of South Park’s are characterized as zombies, shuffling ever-forward through neighborhoods and homes in with panhandles outstretched and a chorus of “change”, “spare any change?” The satire knowingly constructs its homeless caricatures as overwhelmingly male, white, grizzled, and utterly dependent — literally as ‘living dead’. As the panhandler’s requests for “change” become more persistent the besieged middle class citizens grow desperate and ultimately turn to violent measures in an effort to protect their families. Eventually the
population realizes that their homelessness problems started after the nearby town of Evergreen advertised that South Park was a “Haven for the Homeless” in an attempt to encourage its own destitute wanderers to depart before they destroyed the ideal community. As one of the battle-scarred survivors from Evergreen recounts:

The homeless first started arriving in Evergreen 3 months ago…at first there were only a few of them asking for change, sleeping in parks…but then more showed up and we realized there was something different about them, they fed off our change to the point where they were buying homes - then we’d have no idea of who was homeless and who wasn’t. The people living right next door to you could be homeless and you wouldn’t know!

This critique quite brilliantly points out how “homeless” in American culture is so often seen as an essentialized identity and a character defect, not as a lack of shelter or resources. In the episode’s finale the young South Park residents hit upon a genius plan to rid their hometown of the homeless influx. Rigging an armored bus with a loud-speaker blasting a recording of 2pac’s hit number “California Love”, over which the boys badly dub alternative lyrics, they slowly drive westwards out of town — closely followed by hundreds of zombie-esque street people migrating in their wake. The grade-schoolers’ version of the song of course, extols the many virtues of being down-and-out in California as opposed to Colorado:

California, is nice to the homeless! California, super-cool to the homeless! In the city, city of Santa Monica, lots of rich people, giving change to the homeless, in the city, city of Redwood, they take really good care, of all the homeless, in the city, city of Marina del Ray, they’re so nice to the homeless, get the party started, California, you can go now, to the city, city of Venice…you can chill and be homeless...

The episode title is a clear parody of the cult zombie film Night of the Living Dead, and it is this particular construction of the homeless as “undead” or brainless stumbling entities
that *South Park* most strongly lambastes. As satire however, South Park was not only tapping into a set of American cultural pathologies casting the homeless as the perennial ‘other’ — an ‘undead’ and amorphous entity, highly mobile and willing to travel for handouts — it also highlighted a political belief underpinning much civic discourse in the west that an imminent ‘invasion’ of homelessness must be constantly resisted in order to protect businesses, homes, families, and quality of life. And as South Park suggested, nowhere perhaps does such a discourse have potentially more political traction and consequence than amongst the resort towns and wealthy satellite communities of Colorado’s front range. It is within idealized towns like Boulder, places widely viewed as safe, desirable, healthy, and socially progressive, that previously tolerant public attitudes can most rapidly turn against homeless populations. For such a shift towards anti-homelessness to occur in even the most liberal of communities there need only be a general belief amongst the local population that their desirable and tolerant community has become so tolerant and desirable that it has begun to attract homeless people from other cities where life is not quite so good. According to this type of thinking however, what is ‘desirable’ about a town like Boulder for homeless people is not seen as equivalent to the factors that make a community desirable for upper middle class citizens. Much like the idea Trey Parker and Matt Stone lambasted in *Night of the Living Homeless*, often the default belief in the American West is that the poorest of the poor are significantly attracted by social services, ready, willing, and able to travel long distances to avail themselves of charity. Given the right conditions therefore, a kind of ‘siege mentality’ or rhetoric of invasion can easily take over local discourses of social welfare.
amongst even liberal populations. Some time around 2011 or 2012 these cultural conditions appeared to have reached fruition in Boulder, Colorado, as vocal sections of the famously tolerant populace were starting to wonder if “enough was enough” with direct consequence for urban policy and the homeless population at large.

Notions that homeless people are nomadic have long shaped political and public sentiment regarding unsheltered populations in the United States. From nineteenth century encounters between housed citizens and displaced Civil War veterans on the ‘bum’ or ‘tramp,’ to canonical literature championing the roguish wanderings of pre-depression hobos, to Hollywood films that enshrine the wilderness as a refuge for heroic white masculinist icons fleeing the constraints of home and society — cultural representations of homelessness draw heavily on American ideals of manliness and independence such as work, resourcefulness, duty, individualism, and self-reliance. A national imagination of homelessness fomented during the ‘tramp scare’ of the nineteenth century and eventually cemented the image of hard-living, hard travelin’, hard drinking hobos of the Great Depression. This imagination had plenty of room in it for elderly, white, alcoholic, derelict old men living destitute in bad areas of town. The idea of homeless women, children, and youth however was harder to stomach for the housed middle-classes, and far harder a truth to represent in popular culture. Cultural representations linking homelessness with mobility have also relied heavily on the mythos of the American West, and many of the positively valued ideas of space and individualism that accompany it. In this region of America the dream of freedom hinges on an ability to move in both social and spatial terms, and thus the western myth exposes
a conflicted cultural relationship with central rights of property, inviolability, and a strong cultural value of ‘home.’

Present day media representations of homelessness are not all that different from historical constructions despite new regimes of policy. Associations between transience and homelessness continue to be perpetuated in urban discourse and by those promoting hardline policies encouraging the homeless to ‘move along.’ Mobility continues to be projected onto diverse homeless populations, often with the stigma of irresponsibility and aimlessness. Such discourses emphasize connections between poverty and geographical freedom while local and national services are reduced as part of the retreat of the welfare state. In the United States today, structural poverty is being confused with valued mobility and the ascetic freedom to ‘leave it all behind.’

This dissertation hypothesizes that the logic of an itinerant homeless population, whilst stubbornly resilient throughout the United States, is most deeply embedded and politically unquestioned against a Western backdrop of wide-open landscapes dotted with rapidly expanding urban centers. It is from within these dispersed locales of the Western imaginary that the stereotype of homelessness has historically, culturally and politically morphed into something more freely characterized in the American vernacular as ‘vagrancy’ or ‘transience’ — both terms in which mobility is implicit. In the West homeless people have often been referred to as ‘drifters’ or ‘transients’ — defined by the very idea that they are only passing through and will not stay long. ‘Rugged individualism’ and tropes of tough, heroic, white masculinity are national and cultural ideals inseparable from the cinematic landscapes of the high plains, the southwestern
deserts, and the sprawling Rocky Mountains. Popular cultural treatments of the American West, from pioneer dime novels to the iconoclastic road movie, have all constructed the region as the timeless destination of American nomads, cowboys, Indians, rangers, and outlaws. The extent to which these nomadic populations blend in the national psyche with the more endemic issue of local urban homelessness, as well as their effects on service discourses and urban policy, is of particular interest in this study. It is therefore specifically within these sites where complex issues of visibility and homelessness collide with a genuine localized experience of Western ‘transience’ that I intervene.

Inequalities are subject to even more disappearances in the Western states, as the urban experience of citizens in these newer, sprawling, dislocated cities has become characterized by an absolute reliance on the automobile. Suburban civic perspectives are heavily mediated through transit arteries connecting homes, businesses and schools with commercial districts. In such places the majority of encounters with others occur in the over-determined and sanitized spaces of strip-mall consumerism. Older, poorer, neighborhoods and pedestrianized downtown streets where people congregate often represent ‘no go’ areas for many citizens who perceive their lives can be more conveniently, and safely, conducted from the commercial outskirts of town. In this way already hard-to-see social problems such as homelessness may become further obscured in public discourse based on cultural representations and then formed under the limited set of perspectives “sunbelt” urban environments afford.

One problem for ethnographic studies of homelessness is that the very task of defining, identifying, constituting, and interpreting the margins and those people who
temporally inhabit them, is also contingent upon the same narrow views of mobility and “place” that the dominant culture uses to define people as “homeless” in the first place. With this predicament in mind I set out to examine the public politics that arise from an actual public presence of actors who may in some way conform to idealized notions of American homelessness as freedom, youthful mobility, and the powerful cultural myths of western masculinity, heroism, and wanderlust. I was also specifically interested in local discourse and cultural representations that work to construct homelessness as white, young, able-bodied, overwhelmingly male, and, most importantly, visible to a degree which in reality it is not. Political demographers Robert Rodgers and Stephen Macedo provide an insight into the contemporary western American city and the nature of its social erasures, noting a “…troubling antidemocratic dynamic empowered in part by the structures of local political fragmentation that challenge the simplistic socio-economic binaries associated with suburbanization” (95). Their contention is that whilst suburban America may be more diverse and politically salient than is often imagined, the structural fragmentation within suburbanite populations has established an entrenched form of localized politics, special interest and isolation, that increasingly marginalizes groups of lower economic standing and perpetuates racial and class segregation. In this way the privileges of some small communities become entrenched through a complex “sorting” process of up scaling, zoning, localized politics and a culture of decentralized metropolitan living.

When holistically applied to a wider area like the one around my field site, encompassing Denver Metro and its many satellite towns, this observation usefully
situates Boulder as an interesting case study in which to examine a range of social interactions with homelessness: a famously affluent community with undoubted privilege whose workforce is largely made up of people who cannot afford to live in “the bubble” but whose actual denizens’ experience is almost exclusively formulated within it. Of those part-time Boulder-ites who do not reside in the city, many likely commute from one of the many Denver suburbs – anodyne dormitory communities conforming neatly to these scholars’ concerns of “political fragmentation”. Others live in nearby communities such as Longmont or Nederland and are well aware their working days in Boulder represent a partial escape from the outside world. For this group there may also be a degree of resentment towards those who can afford to reside in the city, as well as aspiration to soon move “within the bubble” themselves when economic situations improve. Regardless, all these groups come together socially, professionally, and temporarily in Boulder; all are aware of the ills of society outside the city, albeit in vastly differing ways; and therefore all are liable to view any perceived encroachments of those social ills inside the safe boundaries of Boulder’s “bubble” quite differently. For an ethnographer then, the margins are simply not where they used to be. They are constantly displaced, in flux, fleetingly reconfiguring themselves around highly localized structures of power, identity, and authority in a deceptively cosmopolitan structure. The political economy resulting from this degree of atomized urban living is that more than ever knowledge of poverty, homelessness, and inequality rests as heavily on representation as it does on actual urban encounters. By critically analyzing cultural representations of homelessness alongside a civic discourse of mobility and anti-homelessness therefore, we
may illuminate and challenge those underlying cultural assumptions contributing to neoliberal subjectivities which subtlety and persistently project emphasized agency, mobility and collectivity onto individuals whose very situation has resulted in some way from the impairment of all three.

For Stuart Hall the power of representation was tied up with both identity and knowledge. It is through all kinds of circulating cultural representations that we produce knowledge and make meaning of our social worlds: “…in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis — narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority” (42). Hall theorized that representation produces social knowledge through an “… open system, connected in intimate ways with social practices and questions of power” (42). It is with this basis that I take on an analysis of American homelessness and mobility on the level of mass mediated representations from literature, film, music and popular culture, but also through the relations of power that find purchase in interactions with people culturally coded as “homeless” that take place everyday in our contemporary cities. For such an analysis the concept of “discourse” will be key as I argue that the representative dimension of modern homelessness extends far into urban space and policy in complex and meaningful ways.

“Discourse” is here taken to mean “…a group of statements which provide a language for talking about — a way of representing the knowledge about — a particular topic at a particular historic moment…Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But...since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and
influence what we do — our conduct — all practices have a discursive aspect” (Hall, 44). Taking a constructionist discursive approach to the “subject” of homeless Americans therefore, this dissertation seeks to interrogate ways in which representations have *not only* produced knowledge about homelessness and mobility in this culture, but have in fact combined with political-economic forces and neoliberal subjectivities to sculpt a widely accepted political “object” of homelessness. The ethnographic thrust of my study especially seeks to establish in more concrete terms how urban encounters with the very people who should be the *subjects* of discourse on homelessness in this society, are in fact being reduced to mere *objects* of policy, partly as a result of the powerful cultural representations at work. Lastly, I use the concept of the ‘object’ (as in the ‘object’ of U.S homeless policy that I chase throughout this study) to mean something culturally recognizable and agreed upon which has become *meaningful* in society precisely as a result of the entire weight of situated cultural knowledge backing it up. In this way cultural constructions have the capacity to organize and regulate the bodies, behaviors and beliefs of entire populations. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe put it in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (1990), “…we use [the term discourse] to emphasize the fact that every social configuration is *meaningful*” (100). This is the true power of “discourse” as it can ultimately shape our material realities and quality of life, and for a population like “the homeless,” whomever they may be, the stakes of this are obviously considerable.
Review of literature

In 1996 anthropologist Ida Susser reminded us in her essay “The Construction of Poverty and Homelessness in U.S. Cities”, that awareness of extreme poverty whether through advocacy, scholarship, or the nuts-and-bolts work of institutional management, rests upon our culture’s ways of ‘seeing’ the immiseration of many under the expanding inequalities of advanced capitalism: “As poverty increases worldwide and the gap between rich and poor grows ever greater, the poor have become invisible, marginalized, or excluded from public view,” she wrote. “This change has been little considered in the anthropological literature” (411). By framing contemporary ethnographic data within a situated historical and cultural analysis, I wish to argue that perceptions of endemic homelessness in the United States have in fact always pivoted on the question of what the public are seeing versus what we’re not-seeing, and therefore people experiencing homelessness are as much vulnerable to the narrow pendulum of powerful existing cultural narratives as they are to the more capricious, yet better-documented, nature of changing institutions, policy regimes, and the built environment.

Homelessness has often been analyzed as the dichotomy of aberrant bodies that are either ‘apparent’ or ‘hidden’ in public space, and much academic discussion has been devoted to the potential political consequences of this problem. In *The Visible Poor* (1992) Joel Blau showed that the housed public’s encounters with homelessness rely upon visibility and the particularities of public space. This is precisely because for many citizens, interactions in public represent their first and only exposure to the ailing social health of the nation and attitudes become formed according to such experiences. Blau’s
work tackled the nascent political culture of anti-homelessness throughout the late 1980’s, and described a range of policy struggles which compared homeless people to “urban graffiti” — visible, aberrant, and a disruption to the safe urban environment. In Blau’s field site of 1980s New York, homeless people were banned from rummaging through garbage, and even prevented from sleeping in rail terminals by a policy of spreading ammonia on the floors at night (4). Writing from a Social Welfare perspective and advocating a renewed focus on the social contract, Blau saw the turn to aggressive anti-homelessness as a direct reaction to increasing public awareness of homelessness during the preceding decade:

These responses suggest that perhaps the single most significant attribute of homelessness is its visibility. Visible poverty disrupts the ordinary rhythms of life, while the written set of rules are well known — do not double-park your car, do not litter the sidewalk, another, equally powerful set of rules never appears in writing. These rules assume, for example, that one stranger in public does not come too close to another, and that public displays of poverty are somehow improper. Since only the most desperate exhibit their poverty, the slightest glimpse of their desperation makes others feel uneasy. Witnesses to homelessness then become like the unwilling spectators of a domestic quarrel. They know these things occur, but firmly believe they should be kept private if it is at all possible (4).

The sociologist Peter Rossi showed in his 1990 paper “The Old Homeless and New Homeless in Historical Perspective” that throughout the 1950’s and 60’s homelessness had declined to the point that social scientists predicted it would all-but-disappear from urban America. Then in the 1980’s, Rossi noted, almost as if overnight “…homelessness increased rapidly and drastically changed in composition” (954). “The old homelessness” of the 1950’s as Rossi termed them, had been mainly old men living in downtown skid-row areas and cheap hostels — on the “wrong side of the tracks” and
in those parts of town that the affluent or middle-class had little reason to frequent. Rossi’s identification of a “new homeless” in the 1980’s represents shifts in the social scientific literature of homeless studies as well as in the structure of national social services, but also in the day-to-day urban experience of average American people: “The new homeless were much younger, more likely to be minority group members, suffering from greater poverty, and with access to poorer sleeping quarters. In addition, homeless women and families appeared in significant numbers” (954). His observation raises a number of questions regarding visibility and the complex relationship between homelessness and the built environment. Whilst the “old homeless” were generally confined to distinct ‘no-go’ areas of the city, and therefore seldom encountered by housed Americans, they also resembled marginal figures of society who were less likely to tug on the heartstrings of the nation to any significant degree. However, an increasing awareness that homelessness was not the preserve of old alcoholic white men, but rather a fact of urban living that encompassed women, children, and racialized minorities proved unsettling for the majority of American society for whom aspiration and upward mobility were core values. Even more unsettling to national mythologies in the post civil-rights era was the inescapable fact that homelessness disproportionally affected minority populations. During the 1960s ethnographic studies of American inner city poverty began to parse out the racialized and gendered realities of advanced marginality and homelessness from the national mythologies of dominant culture. Perhaps most famously Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967) grappled with the complex intersections of the New Deal's limits when it came to racialized, gendered
and urbanized communities. Liebow's ethnography focused on single men on the margins, claiming that woman and children had long been the preserve of family studies.

Part of the reason for the increased visibility and the resulting fear of homelessness was due to a raft of post-war urban policy that had altered how day-to-day living was experienced in American cities. Roger Miller discussed the changing urban topography in *The Demolition of Skid Row* (1982). Miller’s claim was that both The Housing Act of 1949 as well as subsequent efforts towards urban renewal significantly changed both the experience and geography of poverty in the largest American cities. As skid rows were demolished and slums cleared, the spectacle of a visible poor became increasingly anomalous within improved urban surroundings that prioritized commercial spaces, regulation, uniformity, and sanitation. No longer as easily able to usher homeless people out of business districts, local authorities concentrated on initiating prototype welfare systems. One such scheme in Chicago promised to “raze the buildings of skid row and flood the residents with social services while relocating them” (Miller, 13) Whilst such initiatives did little to address the root causes of homelessness, they did everything to alter the geography of poverty in American cities and as a result the way unsheltered people were perceived by mainstream society.

The changing architecture of previously run-down locales and the decreased patterns of mobility effectively altered the visibility of urban poverty and precipitated a transition between what Rossi termed the “old homeless” and the “new homeless” (954). The demolition of skid rows and the seemingly insatiable political appetite for massive urban renewal during the 1960’s and 1970’s did little to eradicate homelessness, but
rather displaced disenfranchised urban citizens to new, more fiercely contested public arenas. This forced relocation of those people on the margins later coincided with other social developments, most significantly the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill during the 1970’s and the return of large numbers of traumatized veterans from an unpopular foreign war. Both groups were more likely to upset the environment of orderly city streets through potentially violent or anti-social behaviors, and therefore immediately caught the attention, fear and concern of cosmopolitan citizens. As Rossi observed the “new homeless” were much more apparent to the average urbanite and could usually be seen sleeping in doorways, bus stations or other public places: “The immediate evidence of the senses was that there were persons in our society who had no shelter and who therefore lived, literally, on the streets” (956). Therefore the urban poor not only rose straight to the consciousness of the nation, but their diagnostic traits became simultaneously entwined once more with the defining characteristics of old: the apparent “craziness” of former in-patients or the overt masculinity, addiction, hostility, or physical trauma of battle-scarred ex-military personnel. Writing in *Walking to Work* 1984, Eric Monkkonen made this connection and warned against basing social reactions to homelessness on the preconceptions of the previous century:

> For the comparatively small number of tramps today, tramping is no longer an expected and rational part of the search for work. That is, they did not grow up in a culture in which the tramp for work was expected and predicted. For the capable, it is a trauma, one producing anger and loss of self-esteem. Only for the incapable and the mentally ill has tramping become a way of life in the late twentieth century. That the mentally ill and the incapable should have no alternative than to tramp may be an indictment of our society comparable to that caused by the existence of mass tramps of a century ago, but the homeless people of the late twentieth century do not emblematically represent the same socioeconomic system which their nominal predecessors do. (14)
With the stereotypes firmly in place however, the reaction of housed American society was predictable. Homelessness and mobility were inexorably connected and a caricature resembling the feral skid-row tramp of yore, once again became the ‘acceptable face’ of homelessness. It was this easily recognizable cultural figure that most strongly underpinned the first ‘clean up our streets’ initiatives of the 1980’s in cities such as New York and Chicago, and gradually the rest of the nation followed suit. The ambiguous and anachronistic lexicon with which homelessness was popularly discussed during the 1980’s amidst its latest rise-to-consciousness, only served to further complicated the issue. The resilient lore of the hobo, the bum, and the tramp was revived as a way of thinking about the destitution on America’s streets, but also as a way of speaking about it. Thanks to the legacy of literature, film and other popular culture, the terms of poverty had become blurred and thus the words ‘drifter’, ‘transient’, ‘hobo’ and ‘bum’ became quite interchangeable with “homeless.” However, whether individuals suffering from the worst social inequalities were to be viewed as romantic and survivalist, or deviant and lazy like the ‘tramps’ of before, the problem could still engender the same feelings of inertia and impotency amongst concerned citizens and outraged communities alike.

The nature of living without shelter is that the line between public and private is immediately blurred, as are behaviors that usually correspond to this division. It is this, perhaps more than anything else, that is fundamentally challenging to housed citizens as it subverts the social value of ‘home’: “To be homeless is to have suffered a fundamental rupture of the ties that bind. It signifies the breach of that intimate contract that regulates relations between private lives and the public worlds of work, consumption, political
participation, and general social intercourse…” explains sociologist Kim Hopper in *Reckoning With Homelessness* (2003): “The public domain becomes personal theatre, site of those private practices and stigmatized bodily functions that are normally carried out in hidden reaches of home” (62). Since Blau and Ropers’ work of course, questions of visibility and the nature of public versus private space has become even more entangled with the neoliberalization of urban space and the advent of ‘public-private’ corporations that regulate formerly common space in myriad ways. This shift heralded the establishment of what sociologist Loïc Wacquant termed “a new government of social insecurity” with the state now directing the behavior of those caught up in economic turbulence (2009). The result of this governance is that it mediates the very environment in which most urban citizens encounter extreme poverty and homelessness today.

Wacquant’s contribution has been to provide a political-economic critique of late capitalist societies and their reliance on punitive measures and the physical removal of any bodies which “look” marginal. This is a key consideration for any analysis of anti-homelessness campaigns, and also for a study of the power of representation on encounters in public space. By drawing our attention to the way in which the neoliberal nation state criminalizes the very poverty which it is producing, Wacquant theorized a type of “advanced marginality” which defies all fixedness precisely because it must remain mobile and invisible in order to even exist in its marginal state, evading incarnation and state violence (1996, 2009).

In the western United States then, the very visibility of homelessness often exists against a landscape that is itself visually synonymous with core concepts of American
freedom. In this light, visible social poverty in the West presents markedly different stakes than its counterpart in more densely populated regions to the east where social inequalities are harder to hide and associations with mobility less easy to make. In the words of Cotton Seiler in his cultural history of American automobility, *Republic of Drivers* (2008), the allure of the road in America is that of “…moving to represent oneself as an unfettered and self-directing agent” (43). Representations of the American road carry connotations of idealized freedom and mobility, and figures encountered upon the road risk becoming viewed according to such cultural logics. Furthermore, as Seiler argues, ideas of freedom and individualism promised on ‘the road’ were invoked across a number of social and political sites in the mid twentieth-century as a specific antidote to Cold War anxieties about the failing moral fabric of a proud national figure whose values were based upon manliness and integrity:

The radical expansion of automobility that the Interstate Highway System enabled was catalyzed by…the discourse of the declining American character and a corresponding reassertion of a heroic, archaic, and emphatically masculine individualism in cultural and scholarly production and state propaganda (and) the related designation of mobility…as a constituent element of the American character…(72)

Perversely, it is also the particular visibility of ‘homelessness’ against newer urban landscapes that renders the West most revealing of the obfuscations and misrepresentations of a neoliberal political order and the specific urban architecture it has ushered in. Efforts towards improving social health on a regional, state, and national level therefore hinge significantly on the experiences and representations of homelessness in the ‘proving ground’ of the American West. The problematic that the combined methods
of cultural studies and ethnography can illuminate is how much the term “homeless” describes a real population at all. I will address this question in Chapter 5 through participant observation in Boulder’s homeless counts and a critique of social science categorizations.

The extent to which political misrepresentations of homelessness play a major part in shaping public concern over the issue was noticed by urban anthropologist Anthony Marcus in *Where Have all the Homeless gone? The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis* (2006). Rare amongst social science investigations into homelessness, one of Marcus’s chief contentions was that public policy often failed precisely because attempts to define ‘the homeless’ were themselves fraught with problems:

One of the key reasons homelessness could appear and then disappear so quickly without any resolution or denouement is that the group that was identified as the subject of policy may not have really been a salient group. Without a clear definition of the target group or problem, designing policy becomes something like looking at a set of clouds floating through the sky: the angle from which they are regarded and the amount of sky in the field of vision determine the shape that is seen (88).

Through five years of ethnographic research on the streets of New York, Marcus became increasingly aware that the very category of ‘homeless’ bore little consistency across his various sites of inquiry. Academic colleagues, he noted, advocated against worrying about definitions, instead counseling him just to pick a category he was comfortable with and ‘stay close to the ethnography.’ Marcus observed that it was of little use turning to the weight of scholarly literature in the social science canon of ‘homeless studies’ as most writers either acknowledged the shortcomings of the term, then used it anyway, or replaced it with conceptions of ‘underclass,’ ‘working poor,’ or ‘extremely poor’ (13).
Spurred on by a 1990 New York Times poll that claimed ‘86% of New Yorkers saw homeless people daily,’ the anthropologist next turned to ‘non-expert’ sources including friends and neighbors whom he drove around his field site of Upper Manhattan in an attempt to understand whom they considered to be homeless. This inquiry at least showed that, as is usually the case with conversations of poverty in the United States, questions of race are never far away: “They tended to use a folk category that described people with some combination of dark skin, poor grooming, inappropriate behavior, and little to do with the day but hang out on the streets” (15). His informants on the streets all agreed ‘homeless’ was a useless category imposed only on an institutional level to determine who got a shelter bed. A disillusioned Manhattan social worker on the brink of resignation supported this view, saying that the term had practical value as it appeared on budgets but that “…only an idiot could convince himself that being homeless is anybody’s number one problem” (17).

Part of the problem with the need for a definition before ‘homelessness’ can be treated as a meaningful object of policy or study, is that the category unavoidably brings with it assumptions of group identity and ‘belonging’ that in reality are absent on the streets and in the shelters of urban America. Whilst social welfare agencies draw many people whose circumstances have in one-way-or-another found them seeking help, these circumstances are unlikely to become a focus of identity building between strangers or temporary acquaintances subjected to the confinements and humiliations of institutional living. That this is in no way a novel realization for those who work everyday with this nebulous ‘category’ of people, is quietly implicit in the absence of the term ‘homeless’
from nearly all institutional language in service agencies. Within social service agencies the term ‘homeless’ is generally relegated in favor of less essential denotations. Shelters therefore, do not take in ‘homeless people,’ they work with residents. Social health agencies do not help the ‘homeless,’ they work with clients. This reflects an understanding that, albeit lingua franca in everyday civic language, ‘homeless’ is merely a catchall descriptor imposed from the top down which bears strikingly little relation to the circumstances, housing options, or diffuse identities of people to whom the term is most often applied. Too often studies of homelessness rely entirely on unthinkingly objective categorizations of homelessness. In American culture particularly this is because stigma attached to the term ‘homeless’ means that a subjective categorization is impossible. As Marcus noted: “…it was as difficult to find someone who self-identified as homeless as it was to find a self-identified yuppie…” (14).

This study proceeds from an acknowledgment Marcus eventually settled upon that “homeless” is only “a very weak and abstract social performance, with little room to appropriate an identity…” (18). However, whereas Marcus was concerned with whether the public noticed homelessness or not, I am specifically concerned with what happens when we do notice it, how we notice it, and the ways in which the neoliberal city of the 21st century both shapes and is shaped by these encounters. I contend that the problems cultural representations present for policy formation can be most effectively illuminated from a critical cultural studies perspective without replicating the need for definitions that previous ethnographies have necessarily relied upon: As Marcus himself noted: “Without
agreed-upon boundaries and definitions, social science becomes no more than a series of exercises in imaginative description” (8).

In an ethnographic tradition concerned with finding a culture amongst ‘the homeless’, ethnographers Mitchell Duneier (Sidewalk, 1999), Robert Desjarlais (Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood Among the Homeless, 1997), Philippe Bourgois (Righteous Dopefiend, 2009) and Teresa Gowan (Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco 2010), have all emphasized ways in which homeless people construct ‘homes’ and identities despite their precarious circumstances. Gowan’s study in particular argues that an over-reliance on diagnoses of mental illness in scattered welfare institutions has the effect of driving many single men back onto the streets where they may better find a sense of self ascribed to traditional gender roles of work and masculinity. Whilst these important ethnographic interventions greatly help to understand how people resist in the face of trauma, addiction, mental illness, and diminished social contracts, in this study I am primarily interested in where popular assumptions of mobility amongst homeless populations stems from, and exactly how they impact upon the lives of all people living in the absence of home.

My call in this dissertation is to take a markedly new approach aimed at understanding the issue of homelessness, critically, as seen through the eyes of the un-homeless majority in whose communities’ anti-homelessness policy is being implemented. As I “chase” this policy object down the discursive alleyways of American homelessness, a further goal of this dissertation is to expose through participant observation and ethnographic interview the blind spots and obfuscations of what
Geographer Christine L. Jocoy recently called the “culture of quantification in American social policy” in her paper of the same title (2012). Although annual counts of “the homeless” are by now so entrenched in well-meaning efforts by state and local agencies to establish need for services across urban America, the data produced is narrow in its representation of this most complex set of societal failings. Simply stated; we can’t count what we don’t see. Whilst best guesses suggest the numbers of people without shelter may have fluctuated somewhat relative to population increase against the constantly shifting political-economic, institutional, and social tapestry of the 20th and 21st centuries, I contend that the real seismic changes accompanying the inevitably expanding inequalities of advanced capitalism can be observed in what the dominant culture accepts as the ‘acceptable face’ of marginal living in the United States. This if anything may prove to be the most mobile concept of all.

On the subject of traveling and mobility amongst subcultures of homeless or homeless-esque people, You Owe Yourself a Drunk (1970) was a classic study of “urban nomads” in which James Spradley saw both mobility and choice as inherent aspects of homelessness: “…some men enter this life by way of choice…these are men who don’t want a steady job, no desire to compete in the rat race. Society looks upon him as a man who can’t keep up when he is one who doesn’t want to keep up” (72, 253). Similarly Snow & Anderson in Down on their Luck (1993) noted a “coherent subcultural group” of “hippie tramps” whose lifestyles were premised upon self-sufficiency, mobility, sociability, countercultural values, and a “sense of solidarity” (188). Even more relevant to the groups of “travelling kids” who in some way present as an archetypal “ghost” of
stereotyped American homelessness in this study, connections between homelessness and traveling were unpacked in more detail later by Randall Amster in *Street People and the Contested Realms of Public Space* (2004). Writing ten years ago Amster concluded that under the conditions of globalized capitalism distinctions between the “local” and the “global” were becoming increasingly meaningless in conversations about homelessness and the rising new urbanism, and his ideas are in line with one starting point of this dissertation: “In the end, it appears that both homelessness and gentrification are local issues with global origins and implications…there is a dominant and demonstrable trend emerging, one that has been imposing an inevitable linearization of development norms and regimes of spatial and social control…this is the direction *every* city in the global system is inexorably moving” (208).

Whilst social science has been well placed to wrestle with the *material* and concrete effects of such key policy shifts as Fordism, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, an eroded social contract, or the advent of neoliberal social visions, globalized capitalism and the withdrawal of the welfare state, it has struggled to connect these engagements with the less tangible question of exactly *how* the dominant culture has both responded to, and made possible, this structural degradation. Similarly while Cultural Studies offers tools to address these later questions, it has tended to struggle at engaging with the former — real lives in concrete places. What is needed therefore is a critical engagement with that specific problem of cultural representations — both mass mediated representations in popular culture but also those that occur as encounters in urban space and powerfully inform the political and social sentiments of un-homeless
citizens. The task of this study is to map this cultural analysis onto social policy with the aim of furnishing a more nuanced account of the obstacles faced by people experiencing homelessness and the institutions they inhabit. Critically, because homelessness is a social failing experienced differently by those not currently homeless — it is ‘their’ perspective and the problems it presents that is both the key inflection of this study and the claim underlying its ethnographic component.

In *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism* (2010), Carol Greenhouse reminded us that ethnography is at its core the “...science of contextualization — context construed through personal relationships, bound by self-knowledge, expectation, and commitment, and by language, memory, and imagination to registers and relatives of experience beyond the present here and now, including the felt import…of collective institutions. (2)” The concept of *feeling* informed by the cumulative weight of cultural representations and urban experience is a crucial consideration to any ethnographic study examining the ways we construct knowledge about a topic like homelessness and mobility.

Yet whilst mobility is a key heuristic for this project, it is also the host of associations that cling to exaggerated contemporary nomadism which really raise the attendant questions of representation the field of Cultural Studies is concerned with — especially categories of race, age, gender, work, visibility, disease, addiction, and ability. The types of identities this culture most unquestioningly assumes have agency to move freely and travel are the young, the unaffiliated, the able-bodied, the fit, the male, the white, the single, the irresponsible, and the independent. This dissertation will explore the extent to which these assumptions may or may not hold true, whilst analyzing the
bolstering of this narrative through mass-mediatised constructions of homelessness and the visual subjectivities by which unsheltered lives are 'experienced' from the perspective of most of us in sheltered American society. It is after all the frequent encounters citizens have with localized homelessness in public space that have the most potential to frame perspectives, knowledge, and political logics surrounding issues of social welfare and urban governance. If these interactions are limited to a certain kind then one effect can be that they lend significant support and credibility to social and political rhetoric resting on notions of 'individuality', 'freedom', 'choice', 'deviance' or 'criminality' amongst homeless populations. As we shall see, these arguments are now being regularly deployed across even tolerant municipalities and do significant work towards legitimizing hardline urban policies. Such a discourse also does much to prevent mainstream culture from fostering deeper understandings surrounding the causes and symptoms of homelessness in America. Worst of all continued cultural assumptions about homelessness ultimately impinge upon the resources, opportunities, and safety of all people living without adequate shelter or services on the nation’s streets.

**Chapter Summary**

In Chapter One I discuss the rise of anti-homelessness in the American West from within previously tolerant communities. Looking to the famously liberal town of Arcata, California, as well as employing ethnographic data from Boulder, I analyze discourses of mobility around anti-homeless campaigns. This section combines media and discourse analysis with a discussion of legal frameworks behind shifting urban polices. Chapter
Two historicizes the iconic “hobo” figure discussing his emergence as an icon of mobility and nostalgia in literature, film, and popular music. Chapter Three presents an analysis of contemporary discourses of American mobility, homelessness, and wilderness wandering in the west, centering on the book and film *Into the Wild* and the mythologizing of its protagonist. Chapter Four analyses the figure of the rugged individualist and the nomadic hero / anti-hero through film, videogames, and the 2013 case of “Kai-the-Hatchet-Wielding-Homeless-Hitchhiker.” Chapter Five deploys ethnographic data gathered in Boulder to critique the categorizations of social science, local media representations of homelessness, and public attitudes towards unsheltered populations in the city.
Chapter 1:

Anti-homelessness in the contemporary American West

“The tramp has remained an ominous symbol, always solidifying blackly when times are bad. The Joads and their kind could have wandered for ever along the pit galleries of American life, never identified as a particular and altered phenomenon, had it not been that the compass needle flickered inside them toward the West as the direction-finder always had in the American promise, and they had gone like migrant birds to the illusory summer.” — Kenneth Allsop, 1972

“Downtown Denizens Try Liberal Town’s Patience: Fed up with youthful wanderers and the homeless, Arcata outlaws sitting on the sidewalk or lingering in the area with a dog...” — Headline in the Los Angeles Times, 2001

“City attracts homeless for more than one reason: They come for its tolerance, diversity as well as programs” — Headline in the San Francisco Chronicle, 2007

The criminalization of poverty and homelessness has been much discussed in academic, advocacy, and social welfare avenues over the past decade (cf. Wacquant 2011, NCH 2009, Feldman 2004, Amster 2004). There is little doubt that, for people living homeless in America today, even an unsheltered existence in the urban spaces most of us call “public” is fast becoming untenable. Anti-homelessness legislation is now standard urban policy across much of the United States, and political initiatives aimed at
removing homelessness from view employ strategies ranging from the selective enforcement of municipal codes against ‘undesirables’, to the aggressive control and manipulation of built physical environments with the goal of making public space uncomfortable and unsafe for vulnerable populations (cf. Davis, 1992). As Mariana Valverde has recently outlined in her analysis of municipal law in Toronto, legal frameworks now explicitly target public space (2012). Valverde stresses a core distinction between constitutional law, which assumes personhood, and municipal legal purposes in which “…we only exist insofar as we have a place to stand…” (54). This drastically different view of citizens-in-space underpins the legal framework implemented through successive waves of neoliberal policy, and has now infiltrated the culture to such an extent that ‘public space’ has taken on an entirely different meaning.

Mike Davis noticed this degree of rapidly escalating “urban securitization” in Los Angeles of the 1980s, and even then he clearly saw this trend amounting to “the destruction of public space” (City of Quartz, 226). Davis noted policies that are now being instigated in cities across America including the construction of “bumproof” benches, destruction of public toilets, and the widespread use of irregular sprinklers to deter people from sleeping in open spaces (233). He was also clear which city population felt the impact of securitized public space most sharply, and the perpetual mobility that these policies forced upon them:

Such cynical repression has turned the majority of homeless people into urban bedouins. They are visible all over Downtown, pushing a few pathetic possessions in purloined shopping carts, always fugitive and in motion, pressed between the official policy of containment and the increasing sadism of Downtown streets. (236)
All of these seemingly innocuous environmental urban phenomena have the specific
effect of rendering the built environment inhospitable to homeless people, but
importantly they also set the conditions for a one-sided legal contest as everyday
activities fall subject to selective policing under city codes with the political will of
commerce behind them. Of course for people without shelter the end result of this
double-pronged architectural and legal assault is considerable: with fewer places to sit,
nap, work, or attend to the most basic human functions, these private activities are forced
even further into open public spaces where they are subject to repeated criminal
prosecution. For the most vulnerable populations, women, the elderly, the single, the sick,
and the young, the consequences of these policies can amount to the possibility of real
danger as sleeping in well-lit well-populated areas becomes unviable. Thus the ‘war on
poverty’ has become ‘the war on people-in-poverty’ and political promises to ‘clean up
the streets’ show themselves to have a very specific human object in mind.

The commonality across much of this new urbanism is that unsheltered people are
increasingly being treated as moveable policy objects, and pushed even further toward
the margins of our communities. This is especially true in the regional American West
where strong cultural associations with space, mobility, and nomadism are projected onto
homeless populations whom many citizens assume are drawn to their towns and cities by
the promise of good living and charitable welfare. The extent of this problem is that even
the most progressive municipalities in the region are now firmly opposed to all
homelessness in public space, and many formerly tolerant cities have adopted some of the
most aggressive anti-homelessness legislation yet.
This chapter discusses two cases of this rising tide of anti-homelessness campaigns from culturally liberal urban areas in California and Colorado drawing upon local media discourse, analysis of urban policy, and ethnographic fieldwork. I particularly focus here on the representation and the reality of the “mobile homeless” and how they shape public discourses of homelessness. Included too is discussion of other high profile anti-homelessness campaigns from across the American West, as well as an engagement with social scientific literature outlining the political-economic, legal, and institutional frameworks by which homeless populations today are being subjected to increasing legislative hostilities in public space.

**Conflicts in Bohemia**

Arcata, California was long known as the town where the 1960s never really ended. Famed in the region for its tolerance of all lifestyles, the town’s identity exemplified the Golden State’s reputation for laid-back living and community-centered politics. One 2001 news article noted that, in Arcata, “…environmentalism and social tolerance are civic creeds” (Boxall). Home to Humboldt State University and boasting a city council prided for its liberally progressive values, Arcata was the first town to have a green party majority in governance and, in 1989, declared itself a ‘Nuclear Weapon Free Zone’. During the late twentieth century the small college town of 17,000 people was also a haven for bohemian dropouts, hippies, drifters, youthful wanderers, and transients of all kinds. An established fixture on the west coast summer circuit for travelling kids drifting between liberal coastal towns, the New-England style plaza in the city center
became a “small-town version of Height-Ashbury” — filled with scruffy bohemian types sleeping in the shade, playing music, congregating with groups of other travellers, or just hanging out in crude day-camps, sitting in the sun smoking the abundant California weed with mangy dogs at their feet (Boxall). In 1995 when Grateful Dead bandleader Jerry Garcia died, Arcata also experienced an influx of ‘deadhead’ devotees of the group, who found an easy home amongst the liberal students, marijuana proponents, and environmentalists who comprised a significant presence in the local community.

Around the same time however, sections of Arcata’s population started to grow increasingly tired of the constant presence of travellers in the downtown area, and tensions began to be reflected in both local media debates and city council minutes. Being approached for money and handouts especially irked local citizens, and by 1995 the editor of the weekly ‘Arcata Eye’ described being panhandled multiple times during the course of a block-long walk as “the new normal” (Romney). Early legislative attempts to break up the nuisance groups came in the form of “quality of life” ordinances, passed by the city council with public support, and aiming to change behavior around the plaza by prohibiting smoking, drinking, skateboarding, and glass containers. Bans on dogs in the downtown district followed, or more specifically, a ban on hanging out with a dog – the legal wording made provisions for “dogs on leashes who are passing through” – who were tolerated as long as they did not linger. In 1996 another measure took aim specifically at drum circles on the plaza, banning sounds that were “…boisterous, penetrating, repetitive [or] of unusual rhythmic or tonal character” (Arcata Municipal Code). Then in 1999 the city leased a building one block away from the plaza to the
Homeless Resource Center – a move which in the minds of an increasingly vocal and powerful number of Arcata residents backfired horribly: “You could watch the change” one councilwoman claimed. “Word got out to young adults travelling a circuit from Santa Barbara to Eugene, Ore. It became a magnet. They served lunch every day. You didn’t have to do anything – just come eat.” (Romney) This sentiment echoed a deeply held assumption in the contemporary United States that homelessness represents the attainment of mobility, rather than the loss of agency, and therefore the location and environment of experiential unsheltered living can be selected according to such factors as service provision, climate, environment, or regional politics. That there are regions of America offering a significantly “preferential” experience of homelessness is almost a given in most conversations amongst housed people on the topic of unsheltered lives lived on the nation’s streets. This in turn often gives way to the commonly held assumptions such as these that functioning social services are enough to attract significant numbers of ‘vagrants’ to an area, especially to an area like Arcata with good weather and social conditions.

The next raft of municipal codes floated in on the emotional tide the extended homeless services had released, and by 2001 the city had taken aim at the entire downtown district, making sitting or lying on curbs or sidewalks illegal. In February of that year a headline encapsulated the cultural and political shift that was afoot in friendly, tolerant Arcata: “Downtown Denizens Try Liberal Town’s Patience: Regulation: Fed up with youthful wanderers and the homeless, Arcata outlaws sitting on the sidewalk or
lingering with a dog.” The article went on to describe a growing political schism in the small town of Arcata:

Liberal Arcata — or at least some of it — has just about run out of patience with the homeless and youthful wanderers who congregate at the downtown plaza like shaggy pilgrims at a shrine.

The City Council has adopted ordinances one might expect to find in a gated community, not in the free-spirited home of Humboldt State University…

The new regulations have prompted outcries that city leaders are trampling on individual rights and betraying the town’s progressive spirit. (Boxall)

At first the city council too seemed keen to walk a line between preserving individual liberties and the liberal character of Arcata, whilst also ensuring that the ‘greater good’ was not being harmed by the behavior and demands of transient outsiders. Nevertheless, following a number of heated exchanges in City Council meetings, and emboldened when a petition launched to put the new measures to public referendum failed to gather even half the signatures it needed, the Mayor of Arcata in 2001 appeared to feel on safe political ground: “Everybody has a story about bad experiences near the plaza. It’s not part of a liberal philosophy to let one group take over a town” (“Patience”) She went on to point out that Arcata was not the “…only liberal coastal town to crack down on street life” — at that time Seattle had its own ordinances against sitting and lying in public areas upheld after an ACLU appeal, while similar laws in Berkeley had been repealed. The article went on to report the perceived grievances Arcata residents had with “young people” wandering up and down the West Coast:

During the summer, the sidewalks ringing the square can be clogged with the homeless and the aimless. They beg. They hang out. They do drugs. Many have
dogs. Some of the street people turn belligerent and rude when their requests for money are ignored. They yell and curse. They throw things.

“In the last two years [aggressive behavior] has escalated to the point where even the tolerant have a hard time with the fact that they can’t walk down the street without being accosted in some way,” said Arcata Chamber of Commerce Director Jody Hansen. (Boxall)

The 2001 article did include the voices of some citizens who were concerned that the ordinances were vague and could be “selectively enforced” against targeted groups of people. Really though, as much opposition to the news ordinances came from local dog owners as anybody else, scared they would have to look over their shoulder for police when walking their pets at night. Foreshadowing the future of Arcata, however, the report ended with a quote from a couple found “strolling along the edge of the plaza with their Shih Tzu,” who owned a second home in town, but lived most of the time in West Los Angeles. Their position was clear: the downtown scene was “intimidating” and the dog ordinance was a necessary way of addressing a “complicated issue”: “They want food. They want money. During the summer, people are sitting all along the fence with dogs and sleeping bags” they complained (Boxall).

The next time Arcata’s homeless problem surfaced in the media was over a decade later, in August of 2012, in the wake of one of the most comprehensive pieces of anti-homelessness legislation yet introduced in the Western United States; legislation which effectively criminalized everyday life in downtown Arcata and targeted a very specific population:

Panhandling in Arcata tests the city’s tolerance:
Long known as the “Berkeley of the North,” Arcata traditionally has welcomed the downtrodden, embraced the leftist fringe and fostered a live-and-let-live ethos. But these days the square is strangely mainstream. While one quadrant is still dotted with homeless nappers, the immaculate lawn is populated by families with toddlers and its benches have become a prime lunch spot for working folks.

Behind the transformation is a host of factors that send itinerants a new message: Don’t come here. (Romney)

Despite the familiar claim that the town’s “tolerance” was once again being tested, by 2012 the original raft of anti-homelessness ordinance was in fact an established and accepted part of life in Arcata. Further laws banning camping and smoking had also been added without much public resistance. The old Homeless Resource Center, which used to provide daily meals, had been closed down permanently along with a recycling center that for many years was a well-known source of casual income for transients passing through. Furthermore, a city sales tax hike had paid for two “rangers” whose job it was to expel campers from local parks and forestland, as well as enforcing behavior on the city plaza — still the main site of conflict between liberal residents and homeless of all varieties. Other forceful anti-homelessness policies ushered in during the first decade of the twenty-first century included a crackdown on April 20th celebrations — America’s unofficial stoner holiday — and closing down the Redwood Park where a “stream of pilgrims” had for years gone to observe the laid back California lifestyle.

None of these measures, however, had apparently achieved desired results for the previously progressive town of Arcata. According to the article, even after this raft of legislation, city workers were “…still cleaning up dirty syringes, rotten food and human feces, according to a report. The bus station’s ventilation system ‘seemed to suck in the
outside cigarette and marijuana smoke.’ Restaurant take-out orders dried up at dusk because customers dreaded being hit up for food.” So in 2010, citing damage to the environment and the interests of commerce, mayor Mark Wheetly had introduced a severe “unlawful panhandling” ordinance under the policy banner of “Public Welfare, Conduct, and Morals”. The move banned all active begging, which it defined as “aggressive”, but it also broadly restricted all passive solicitation in town through a complex web of fine-grained behavioral distinctions, ambiguous legal interpretations, and specific spatial stipulations. Upon passage of the new anti-homelessness articles, Councilwoman Alexandra Stillman underlined the cultural motivations behind Arcata’s legislation in no uncertain terms: “We’re changing our image” (Romney). The three-part ordinance began by listing the City Council’s findings, which it used to underwrite the new laws. Below is an abbreviated summary of the concerns stated in council minutes, and drafted into the articles:

March 17th, 2010
Ordinance No. 1399

An Ordinance of the city Council of the City of Arcata Prohibiting Panhandling

TITLE IV: Public Welfare, Morals and Conduct

Article 10 – Unlawful Panhandling

• Within the past few years there has been a substantial increase in aggressive solicitation or panhandling throughout the City of Arcata as well as an increase in targeted panhandling in certain areas of the City.

• Aggressive panhandling…is extremely disturbing and unsettling to residents and business and contributes not only to the loss of access and enjoyment of public spaces, but also to an enhanced sense of fear, intimidation and disorder.
• …targeted panhandling at locations where residents are captive audiences…intimidates persons who are approached, interferes with privacy and security…

• …panhandling of commercial customers as they enter and exit retail establishments…has caused many retail customers to avoid shopping or dining within the City. The situation threatens the economic vitality of the City.

• This law is timely and appropriate because current laws and City regulations are insufficient to address the above mentioned problems. The restrictions contained herein are neither overbroad nor vague and are narrowly tailored to serve a substantial governmental interest. (City Council Agenda)

The open emphasis placed on the “fear” and “intimidation” of residents in the legislative language is immediately interesting as a rationale for rapidly increased governance and state control. In *Punishing The Poor* (2009), Loïc Wacquant noted that whilst the fear of crime is not related to its actual incidence, even this marker (as measured in sociology by agreement with the statement, “I do not feel safe”) has in fact remained relatively stable over the past three decades, aside from three modest peaks in 1978, 1984 and 2001 (274). This would suggest that the fears motivating such legislation run much deeper than a simple response to increased crime. Rather, they resemble a cultural paranoia regarding anything that may threaten to disrupt and disorder the over-determined public spaces in which commerce is seen to thrive best. As Wacquant reminds us, the expressed need for such state control on the micro level, is not only an aspect of neoliberalism which exacerbates class and racial divisions, it is also in stark contrast to the laissez-faire model by which state control is being alleviated on the macro level:

…when it comes to handling the social turbulence generated by deregulation and to impressing the discipline of precarious labor, the new Leviathan reveals itself to be fiercely interventionist, bossy, and pricey. The soft touch of libertarian
proclivities favoring the upper class gives way to the hard edge of authoritarian oversight, as it endeavors to direct, nay dictate, the behavior of the lower classes. The results of America’s grand experiment in creating the first society of advanced insecurity in history are in: the invasive, expansive, and expensive penal state is not a deviation from neoliberalism but one of its constituent ingredients. (308)

Furthermore the Arcata City Council’s claim that panhandling results in the “loss of access and enjoyment” in public spaces, delivers a remarkably one-sided assertion about “who” should get access and “what” type of enjoyment is to be permitted in the downtown area. This is a unique observation: Not only does hard-lining policing of this kind further a generalized insecurity, such “sorting” mechanisms operate a fine-grained control of exactly “who” belongs in an urban area and who does not. That a city council and community previously notorious for progressive values and tolerance should instigate such a narrow degree of legal oversight in public space, is powerfully illustrative of just how far the ‘common-sense’ logics of community and urbanism have travelled since the 1960s. It is also broadly in line with concerns raised by the few Arcata citizens who did speak out in 2001 as the first waters of neoliberal reform began to trickle into their hippie haven: “When they say, ‘No sitting, no lying,’ they’re targeting a group of people…Arcata is just a friendly city to hang out in. It shouldn’t be restricted to rich people” (Boxall). It is also worth noting here that the council’s stated concerns regarding the decline in visitors to restaurants and shops in the downturn area did not even hint at the context of the 2008 economic downturn which had wreaked havoc on main streets all over small town America — and especially in the state of California which was the first victim of the subprime mortgage crisis. This is a clear example of how periods of widespread economic insecurity provide opportune moments to push through political
legislation aimed at removing the poor and aberrant from areas in which they are not welcome. For the town of Arcata to openly claim amidst a three year period of rising poverty, decreased consumer spending, and housing-insecurity on a statewide and nationwide level, that the new anti-homelessness laws were “timely and appropriate” because previous City regulations had proved ‘insufficient,’ demonstrates a rising cultural preference for policing-based solutions to social problems, and the massive power of American cultural myths which still encourage us to view homelessness as individual failing rather than structural crisis, even when confronted with massive evidence to the contrary. Once again I reiterate my central point: the city of Arcata’s 2010 claim that residents had become “captive audiences” of increased panhandling and therefore needed legal protection, is a claim only able to be made convincingly in a culture which has effectively “targeted” a narrow slice of the population as the subject of restrictions and regulations. This very specific target of homelessness offers very little resistance, and moreover, very little reality. Youthful, able-bodied, travellers, with all their attendant racial and gendered privileges, provide such a target and therefore these groups can easily become the unwitting objects by which anti-homelessness policies are justified.

With these claims in place as a seemingly irrefutable basis for what was to follow, the passage of Arcata’s 2010 “Unlawful Panhandling” ordinance launched into a series of painstaking definitions designed to “narrowly” serve the “governmental interest” as it quite openly and clearly stated in preface:
A. “Aggressive manner” shall mean:

1) Approaching or speaking to a person, or following a person before, during or after panhandling, if that conduct is likely to cause a reasonable person to:

   (i) Fear bodily harm to oneself or to another, damage to or loss of property; or…

   (ii) Otherwise be intimated into giving money, goods, or other things of value.

2) Approaching an occupied vehicle…

3) Knocking on the window of, or physically reaching toward or into an occupied vehicle…

4) Continuing to solicit from a person after the person has given a negative response…

5) Intentionally touching or causing physical contact…

6) Intentionally blocking or interfering with the safe or free passage of a pedestrian…

7) Using violent or threatening gestures…

8) Using profane, offensive or abusive language which is likely to provoke an immediate violent reaction…

9) Following a person while panhandling… (City Council Agenda)

The subtle power of this kind of legislative action is in the three-pronged strategy with which it operates: Firstly it appeals to existing social paranoia based in an almost universal fear of the unknowable elements inherent in the public sphere. Next it furnishes a catalog of genuine examples of threatening behavior, as in the above list, which nobody can argue would, in their incidence, constitute at the very least an annoyance and for many of us an unsettling interaction. To anticipate the argument of my more broad-based
cultural analysis in the chapters to follow, the underlying motivations in this law seem to project a public sphere suffused by threat and violence. This supposes we ignore the strange loss of agency projected onto the “reasonable pedestrian” upon whom this all hinges. A fictitious person who once in the street can simultaneously be expected to hand over money and possessions out of intimidation, but by the same token is also expected to display an “immediate violent reaction” if exposed to offensive language. This is, if nothing else, a schizophrenic and politically inclusive hybrid of stereotypically liberal submissiveness and a “Dirty Harry” style vigilantism that is the very archetype of rugged individualism in the American West. That either has ever operated much in Arcata remains unclear.

However, the real knockout blow delivered by such carefully sculpted ordinances, came in the third round as the ordinance proceeded to deliver catch-all legal definitions of both “panhandling” and “public-place” before defining and listing every common physical feature of the built urban environment — especially “Automatic Teller Machine,” “Check cashing business” and “Intersection” —and the exact distance, in feet, which would-be panhandlers must remain from them:

“Panhandling” shall mean asking for money or objects of value...Panhandling shall include using the spoken, written, or printed word, bodily gestures, signs or other means with the purpose of obtaining an immediate donation of money or other thing of value.

"Public Place” shall mean a place where a government entity has title or to which the public or a substantial group of persons has access, including, but not limited to, any street, highway, parking lot, transportation facility, shopping center, school, place of amusement, park, or playground.
It should be spotted that the inclusion of vaguely inclusive terms such as “other means” and “including, but not limited too”, leaves plenty of room for the selective enforcement of these measures as becomes politically expedient. Noticeable too, are the ways in which neoliberal shifts of this kind are actively supported by an appeal to a by-now well-worn American cultural value that still believes it can distinguish between private property and public space. The irony is that in progressive Californian Arcata, as in by now almost every city in America, anti-homelessness laws masquerading in support of ‘public morals’ and ‘public welfare’ in fact take as their precondition the unchecked power to swallow up formally public space by dictating absolutely the behavior the public are allowed to engage in there. In essence such laws render utterly transparent, controllable, and uniform the very physical spaces and modes of behavior that characterize “the public.”

One clear problem is that such lengthy documents cannot be posted in sufficiently public view, and as such those most vulnerable to them remain largely ignorant of their massive scope, in turn giving police and enforcers a significant advantage because, as we all know, “ignorance of the law is no defense”. For people on the streets, especially those made vulnerable by illness or addiction, as well as those travelling through for a short time and unaware of the rules, the urban environment becomes a veritable minefield, strewn with trip-wires specially designed to be triggered by certain aberrant bodies whilst other more privileged bodies skip by without even knowing they are there.

In some testimony to Arcata’s much-feted progressive spirit, the anti-panhandling ordinance of 2010 did meet more resistance from local residents than had other anti-
homelessness measures in the proceeding decade. Although the City Council did pass the measure, the newspaper also reported deliberation and dissent amongst at least some of the members:

Councilman Shane Brinton opposed, calling the restriction on non-aggressive behavior a likely infringement on constitutionally protected speech. Councilwoman Susan Ornelas reflected the community’s torn conscience: “While we’re a progressive town and we’re very open-hearted,” she said, “we have limits on our tolerance.” In the end, she was swayed to vote against the majority… (Romney)

After the council voted once more not to amend the ordinance, resident Richard Salzman succeeded in bringing a lawsuit against the city in 2012. Political campaign manager Salzman, whom carried a “pocket version of the Constitution,” said he had no quarrel with the ban on “aggressive begging” but was “outraged” with the ban on “the most passive forms of panhandling.” In one of a series of stunts to highlight the overreach of Arcata’s mayor in favoring commerce and corporate solicitation over personal charity, Salzman took a photograph of himself holding a sign and standing at an intersection next to a man advertising a $5 pizza special. Salzman’s sign read: “Please buy me a pizza before I am arrested for holding this sign!” (Romney)

Following the filing of Salzman’s lawsuit in Humboldt County Superior Court, Arcata City Attorney Nancy Diamond was confident that the ordinance was safe, modeled as it was after “…what’s been done elsewhere in the state and country, and what’s been tested in court.” She stated in a press release: “We are not the first community to look at panhandling ordinances. This is very widespread and there is a fair
amount of judicial law we were able to look at…we weren’t acting in a vacuum.” (Mintz).

Nevertheless, in September of 2012 a judge dismantled large sections of Arcata’s ban on passive forms of panhandling, declaring the city’s reach unconstitutional on grounds of free speech (Scott-Goforth). Remaining unscathed however, were the original definitions of “aggressive panhandling” as well as the spatial stipulations prohibiting begging within 20 feet of businesses, ATMs, and on public transport vehicles. A severability clause in the original document ensured these would stay in. Whilst it is of course true that on one level severability clauses are legal wording merely designed to protect municipalities from having to draw up entirely new legislation in the event of a successful challenge, it does show that a significant element of the rising tide of anti-homelessness legislation resembles a war of attrition; invested as much on *Realpolitik* and the gradual eroding of progressive cultural values. Proponents of neoliberal control are in a sense able to hurl as much legislation as they can dream up at the proverbial wall, and see what sticks. This is evidenced by the sheer scale of similar movements across the nation — a 2012 report by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty found that “…slightly more than half” of 234 cities surveyed had bans on aggressive panhandling, the same proportion had outlawed it in specific areas, and a quarter had prohibited all begging city-wide. (NLCHP)

Amidst challenges and part-victories for anti-homelessness legislators in larger west coast cities such as San Francisco and Seattle, it is not simply that an “unlawful panhandling” ordinance of this scale was passed in a town like Arcata that is critical here.
That the ordinance remained in place, in full, for two years, and then emerged from the courts retaining significant chunks of its original provisions, is only half the story. Just as important to consider is the forever altered cultural terrain that such anti-homelessness legislation leaves in its wake, as well as the real world implications for services, communities, and people’s lives once even some of the measures become common-sense aspects of daily life. In other words, even if the more draconian measures are challenged and then dropped from the statute books, the real damage is already done through the discursive formations necessary to bring such measures to political fruition in the first place. The tone of the 2012 article is most instructive here:

But balancing the comfort of the haves with tolerance for the have-nots has come down to a complex question of just who is worthy of help: The chronic homeless or the recently down-and-out? What about the in-your-face drifters who take handouts with little gratitude? (Romney)

It is absolutely critical to note that the playing field on which homelessness could now be discussed in Arcata was changed for good: access to local services and charity was not something transients deserved, especially not objectionable and ungrateful ones. The kind of moralism reflected here, also reflected recent debates in Arcata and elsewhere which were in the process of reviving a longstanding tension in American culture. Since the eighteenth century, civic discourse and political debates have at times of economic and cultural insecurity been preoccupied with conceptualizing those who are “worthy” of alms, and those who are not. Those who are not, in particular, include the “drifters,” “transients,” and “vagrants” who are the prime imaginary target of these policies. That a paradigmatically liberal and progressive town like Arcata had arrived at such a conversation in barely 12 years, is serious testimony to the radical damage neoliberal
logics have inflicted on the cultural and political landscapes of urban America since the early nineties. As Carol Greenhouse has noted this shift towards a “moral language” of neoliberal regulations enforces a certain vision of civic order (The Paradox of Relevance, 167). This offers one clue perhaps, as to the cultural mechanisms behind the seemingly rapid disintegration of liberalism in towns like Arcata, and also an explanation for the considerable limits and blind spots inherent in even progressive knowledge about homelessness in contemporary American society.

Notions of local homelessness quickly give way to such anachronistic political logics as those of a “deserving and undeserving poor” when hijacked by the narrow discursive parameters that were as much a prerequisite for Victorian morality, as they are for neoliberal policy shifts today. Writing in a 1999 essay “Home Truths: Media Representations of homelessness” Steve Platt noted that this idea resurfaced in media of the 1980s and has antecedents in Victorian attitudes towards social welfare: “…there has been a consistent attempt on the part of the media to divide homeless people into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ cases. The ‘deserving’ homeless…tend to fall into the category of ‘victims’, while the ‘undeserving,’ as well as being portrayed as the authors of their own misfortune, fall into the category of ‘scroungers’” (106). For this distinction to be applied in a town like Arcata (or in any tolerant community) suggests that prevailing attitudes towards homelessness now take as their focus a more unsympathetic discursive object of homelessness, one marked by notions of independence and mobility. Perhaps more than anything, the experience of Arcata exposes the significant role established cultural associations between homelessness and mobility play in furthering
anti-homelessness legislation. Regardless of the actual diversity which defined different experiences of homelessness in Arctata, once the tides of public opinion (or as it was consistently characterized in the media, “tolerance”) began to shift in the mid-nineties, the terms “homeless”, “transient”, “dropout,” “drifter,” “itinerant,” “traveller,” and “youthful wanderer” were all used interchangeably and implicit connections with the inherent mobility and ‘movability’ of such people were employed time and again until anti-homelessness legislation was passed.

It is critical to stress that, regardless of the eventual shrinking of the broader legislation, a familiar pattern of shifts in both the tapestry of homeless services and the culture of the downtown district did effectively change Arcata forever. The 2012 newspaper coverage started with a “disheveled” man in his late thirties who had recently been ticketed for camping in the park, and for smoking in the square. In the months before the legislation softened, he had also been cited when a police officer caught him on a downtown sidewalk holding a sign reading: “I could use a little help today.” The man reported that the reprimands had become “…an everyday thing.” The newspaper found plenty more people willing to attest that things were just not the same in liberal Arcata:

But even with the panhandling ordinance removed from the equation, life for the homeless here has been harsh, some said. “Arcata acts like they’re the only town that has homeless people. They harass ‘em,” said Big Al, a burly 58-year-old with fading blond curls who arrived from Austin, Texas, a dozen years ago. Big Al received one of the panhandling citations after a gas station owner was unable to run him off with sprinklers. He has since modified his sign — it simply reads ‘Have a nice day’ — and settled with his dog, Sophia, into a spot under a pedestrian bridge. But state workers recently cleared the branches protecting his sleeping alcove, leaving him exposed.
If you’re poor or on food stamps, the message is, ‘Go to Eureka or McKinleyville,’” he said. (Romney)

It is immediately telling that the person the newspaper found to deliver this perspective on the changing urban scene, was not a young traveller passing through Arcata, but rather a twelve year fixture of the local scene, in his late fifties, and very much a “homeless” person at home. “Big Al” in this discourse presents as the real victim of Arcata’s cultural and political hijacking, left to cope with aggressive state incursions on his daily life long after the ghosts of homelessness they were designed to chase off have disappeared on down the road. This highlights the actual impact on communities and individuals of withdrawing services such as Arcata’s Homeless Resource Center amidst political hysteria that they were a “magnet” for outsiders attracted to the town for free handouts. The reality, as Joel Blau reminded us in The Visible Poor, is that homeless populations rarely travel specifically for services (28). The powerful myth of a “magnetic” urban poor, freely wandering the nation in search of handouts and better opportunities, gives legitimacy to hardline urban policies which displace, disperse, disorientate, and criminalize an already politically weakened and vulnerable population. When such a myth surfaces in the liberal discourse of Arcata and cities like it, an already severe social crisis is only worsened as those like Big Al are left in its turbulent wake to fend for themselves in an increasingly hostile cultural and political environment.

Also mirroring damage left in the wake of withered social contracts in towns all over the nation, in Arcata too, inter-faith groups and religiously affiliated private missions are now left to pick up the slack. Since the formerly progressive community’s
established Homeless Resource Center was forcibly closed amidst the wave of anti-homeless sentiment, the only welfare institutions left are those like the Humboldt All Faith Partnership who rely on private funding and a considerable degree of individual charity. This is a strikingly familiar picture left in the wake of neoliberal policy reform and the cultural shifts underpinning it. As absolutely indispensable as these faith-partnerships are as ultimately the last providers of social welfare for many vulnerable people in the United States, questions must be asked about the long-term structural viability of their valuable efforts, as well as the potential for unregulated value-based judgments to creep in causing uneven access to services. In Arcata at least, this was a problem about which the representative from the All Faith Partnership was acutely aware: “How do you make a judgment of the deserving poor?” (Romney).

Through examples like Arcata it is clear that neoliberal policy reforms under the guise of “public morals” are instigating a massively regressive cultural and political movement in the United States. Anti-homelessness campaigns of this kind are now commonplace across urban America, and they are plunging the nation back in time towards a private system of social welfare bound only to the morals and values of religious institutions. The end result will be a system resembling the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reliance on alms houses and criminal codes to control, detain, and minister to a poor forced perpetually into motion. Especially clear parallels can be made with Victorian era moral attitudes towards homelessness in the United States, which freely distinguished between a “deserving and undeserving” poor, advocated a hands-off approach by the state, and left the task of tending to the most needy either to jails or
churches — whichever took them first. The important difference is that, whereas in the pre-industrial conditions of the early eighteenth century heightened mobility and migrant labor were strong diagnostic markers of endemic homelessness, in the early twenty-first century, they are simply not.

The legislative anti-homelessness movements that we are now left with have precedent in private and institutional initiatives which previously attempted to move homeless “drifters” down the road. Although at first rarely sanctioned by city governance, in the early 1980s this approach was beginning to be experimented with in eastern municipalities through the combined powers of commercial interests and conservative social values. Assumptions of poverty and mobility underpinning such initiatives at this time were strikingly similar to the ones at work today, and operated with the logic that if somebody were homeless they were simply in the wrong place. Therefore, it was thought, the most charitable course of action was to help them on their way ‘home’. One notable early example was in Burlington, Vermont, where a consortium of local businessmen formed the “Westward Ho!” program in order to buy one-way airline tickets for downtown Burlington’s most conspicuous beggars (Blau, 4). That this venture unquestioningly coded the “West” as the natural location of “displaced” homeless people, points towards the seeds of anti-homelessness in the region today. As bad as Burlington’s effort sounds however, similar practices of “encouraged-mobility” have long been implemented in more formal institutional welfare management as well — especially in the network of private and religiously affiliated missions that have ministered to the poor and homeless in America. At one time or another it has been
possible in many cities to find charities and churches offering one-way bus tickets to homeless and indigent people — the well meaning gesture once more underpinned by a strong cultural belief that to be homeless is to be ‘not-from-here’. With the emergence of the logic of “Greyhound therapy” in the structures of twenty-first century urban governance however, the entrenched cultural connections between mobility and visible homelessness have become even clearer.

In recent years, American cities’ efforts at forcibly moving the aberrant poor have ranged from the insidious to the ridiculous. An initiative taken in Denver, Colorado, during the July 2008 Democratic National Convention for example, attempted to vanish the city's nearly 4,000 homeless people by distributing free movie tickets and day passes to cultural attractions in the hope of sweeping them out of sight while television cameras descended on the downtown area (Denver Channel). Another recent example of conflict between a perceived transient population and an established urban self-image, came in 2010 when the seaside community of Ocean Beach, San Diego, briefly flashed into the national headlines with a very visible public ‘anti-homelessness' campaign that had its roots in cultural tensions rather than political ones: “Welcome to Ocean Beach: Please Don't Feed Our Bums” read the bumper stickers, igniting a divisive community conversation about the homeless problem which had increasingly become colored by incidences of 'aggressive panhandling' and other social transgressions in public sight. Amidst the throes of economic decline however, the widespread media attention this otherwise fairly unremarkable localized campaign drew was in part attributable to the southern Californian region's cultural association with laid-back attitudes and a
permissiveness towards what one article termed 'idiosyncratic lifestyles': “It's ironic that it's happening in this community known for its live-and-let-live spirit,” commented a council spokesperson. “That said, they're targeting one kind of homeless: able-bodied white males with laptops and cellphones” (Perry). The immediate significance of this campaign and others like it, is that they typify ideas about marginal and precarious populations across the nation whilst feeding into that longstanding discourse by which the political economy of endemic American poverty relies upon spinning such social facts as mobile problems, and the human-beings experiencing them as a threat to be moved and discouraged rather than structurally addressed. Indeed the 'Don't Feed Our Bums' bumper stickers and T-shirts were quickly replicated in other urban areas including Seattle, San Francisco, Hollywood, and even on Capitol Hill, as well as spawning a fraught counter-protest: 'I Heart Bums' (“Bum Sticker Anniversary”).

Conflicts such as these most likely occur with more frequency in regions perceived to be desirable destinations for tourism or leisure. In Hawaii political debate has long raged regarding visible poverty and there has been much conjecture about where the state’s homeless population might be “from”. Officials have even considered a “homeless express” to fly homeless people off the island and ‘back’ to the US mainland:

HONOLULU -- No money? Just go home, already.

That’s the message Hawaii will be sending to some of the state’s thousands of homeless -- at least the ones who want to leave.

In what is hoped to be a more loving version of the old “bum express” of the Mainland, the state is considering giving plane tickets to those who’ve found
themselves on the street because of the high cost of living and low prospect for jobs in the Aloha State.

HB 1187, the “return-to-home” program, would give out-of-state homeless people a one-way flight back to friends, relatives or other support groups. It’s estimated that each homeless person cost Hawaii taxpayers $30,000 to $35,000, while a plane ticket can be had for $400 or less.

“This isn’t meant to solve the entire homeless problem in the state of Hawaii, only the specific population that came to Hawaii with dreams of hula girls serving mai tais on the beach and has then encountered the harsh reality of homelessness in Hawaii,” said homeless advocate Netra Halperin in testimony to the House Finance Committee today. (All Hawaii News)

The options are either that significant numbers of precarious people move to the very same privileged areas in which the middle-classes take their vacations, or that homelessness occurs disproportionately to people who are visiting these areas. Whilst the official idea that people become “trapped” in homelessness once on the island may be a slight variation on a theme, it is also barely removed from a more pervasive argument that “homeless people” travel to resorts like Honolulu to be homeless. Evidenced in this debate is a naked concern that no longer even needs to be hidden in cultural discourse that the presence of such people is directly opposed to the enjoyment and leisure of everybody else. The outcome is a concerted effort to move homeless people from sight — even if, as in Hawaii, it is with the belief that this eviction is in fact benevolent or charitable.

As Leonard C. Feldman emphasizes in *Citizens Without Shelter* (2004), the selective criminalizing of every day life is a precise form of political exclusion which uses existing cultural stigmas as a rationale for suspending people’s democratic right:

“The overall effect of these laws is to turn the homeless into outlaws, non-citizens whose
everyday coping strategies place them outside the law. Ordinances banning public sleeping place a ban on homeless persons themselves” (100). Anti-homeless sentiments have increased alongside a dramatic shift in the way we understand our relationship as citizens to the built environment. Contests of citizenship in public space are a socio-legal problem, but this means that they are also a question of cultural representation. They are also about how the national imagination conceives of a public sphere. The slow manner in which there was staged a physical and emotional retreat of the public from our public space, is contrasted only by the speed at which a tightly-spun web of micro-laws and ordinances followed to ensure we could never go back to it. This retreat owes much to the way in which local and municipal law, as well as culture, has come to value property and real estate markets over the civic rights of people, and ultimately over our right to be recognized as people at all. Indeed, during the ‘Occupy Movement’ protests of 2011 a new section of society woke up to a realization about public space that those without resources and homes had known for a long time. Middle class citizens who voluntarily inhabited parks and sidewalks for a period of popular protest suddenly discovered ordinances that had previously only affected the homeless people and the disenfranchised. The subsequent state crackdown of course, as well as the raft of legislation it ushered in, affected everybody.
Boulder, Colorado on the brink of anti-homelessness

"We're not all the same. We come from different circumstances. But we get these disgusted faces from the community, if they see you with your backpack, like we're all scum. You have people say we should be put on a bus and sent somewhere." — “Renee,” 50s, homeless in Boulder

It’s spring of 2013 and a young man with tangled dreadlocks and a backpack runs up to a middle-aged female tourist downtown who has just lit a cigarette in the wake of the new smoking ban: “Hey didn’t you know? – Quick, you’d better give me that before you get fined! I’m a local, they’re targeting tourists.” She looks on shocked as he walks away smoking her cigarette towards a waiting group of fellow travellers.

Following a unanimous decision by the council in early 2012, in January 2013 (at the start of my time in Boulder) the city enacted a full smoking ban in the downtown municipal area, including the courthouse lawn and the four pedestrianized blocks along Pearl Street. After a short transition period Boulder police officers were able to start writing tickets in March, also the month during which the weather becomes warmer and the first travellers trickle into town. Tickets carry fines of up to $500 for the first two offenses. A third offense within two years could result in a fine of up to $1,000 and up to 90 days in jail (“Boulder Bans”). Although in the first instance the media made no connections between the proposed ban and the presence of panhandlers or homeless who hang out on the mall, the public response was quick to make it for them. Aside from a few business owners who worried the ban might drive tourists away, the public response was highly supportive of the anti-smoking measures — especially when people began to
realize an enforced ban could only help drive the homeless away from the downtown area. One comment beneath the Daily Camera story epitomized these strong sentiments:

This should clean up the mess of transients by the courthouse. Businesses are afraid that the ban might steer tourists away? I suspect the gross stench and begging of herds of transients might be more of deterrent than a 4 block-smoking ban. I hope banning it on the lawn by the library is next. That place is absolutely disgusting, but a-could-be beautiful place to see the Boulder creek or have a snack, as a local or tourist. But the benches and entire lawn are consumed with bums and clusters of transients. (Meltzer, “Boulder Bans”, comments section)

It didn’t take long before Boulder’s liberal press also noticed this connection, and within the early stages of the ban’s enforcement it was increasingly obvious which specific populations were getting caught up in the city’s legal maneuver. In early August 2013 the Daily Camera ran an article headlined: “Boulder’s homeless feeling the squeeze on Pearl Street Mall: Transients disproportionately represented in ticketing for mall smoking.”

The article reported that in the first two months since police officially began enforcing the smoking ban, officers had issued 44 tickets to people for smoking on the Pearl Street Mall: “Of those who were issued tickets, 24 to 54 percent were qualified as transient or homeless according to police records”. The fact that they were being targeted was not lost on the “transient” individuals who spoke to the newspaper:

“It raises some diversity and sincerity questions," a transient who only identified himself only as Ed said of the smoking ban. Ed said that while the city can't simply kick the homeless off Pearl Street, he said the recent rules were an example of how they could still be targeted. "You get around that by restricting something a certain group of people do,” Ed said. (Byars)

1 Whilst online comments can present an “extreme” form of discourse, they are included here to give a sense of some of the rhetoric deployed around issues of “homelessness” and “transience” in Boulder.
Continuing its use of the term “transient” to discuss presumably anybody who appeared aberrant in the downtown area, and who might also smoke tobacco, the article also cited a Boulder attorney, David Harrison, who it said had “often represented transients.” Harrison claimed little doubt that the City had a specific target in mind when it enacted the new public polices:

"I think there's no question it affects them more than others...I'm sure there wasn't any direct comment that it might be a good way to keep the homeless out of the mall area, but that seems like an obvious result of passing that rule." … I think the city has certainly shown a willingness to pass rules and ordinances that have a disparate impact on the homeless," he said. "I think the city certainly has a desire to move the homeless population away from Pearl Street, and I think the downtown business owners likely also have that desire. (Byars)

The reporter then spoke to some Boulder residents who were in favor of the ban. All of them seemed to recognize the issue of smoking in public as very closely linked to “the transient problem.” Sean Maher, executive director of Downtown Boulder Inc., told the newspaper that whilst the new ordinance was never about the homeless, he still worried about the number of “transients” in the downtown area: "Some of the transients on the mall are very aggressive…It is an issue when merchants tell me customers purposely avoid their stretch of the mall 'cause they're scared." The appointed director of business interests for Downtown Boulder continued to offer a view of homelessness and mobility that is by now more than familiar. His comments reflect a widespread local belief that Boulder is known throughout the United States as a preferable place to be homeless, and therefore his city attracted vagrants from far and wide hoping to benefit from the generosity of locals:
Maher said that reputation and the large number of panhandling targets are two reasons for the homeless presence on Pearl Street. "I don't know of a place in the state with heavier foot traffic on a regular basis," Maher said. "Even if only one in 20 gives you anything, with this many people that's a pretty good ratio. Boulder has a reputation nationally as a very safe and comfortable place and an easy place to earn money that way… The police do a great job down here, though I do think they are stretched a little too thin. The biggest thing is when police are here and visible it has a deterrent effect." (Byars)

A number of Pearl Street merchants were also only too willing to corroborate the official views of downtown commerce, all of whom seemed to be able to report negative experiences with “homeless transients” at one time or another during their tenure on the Pearl Street Mall:

Chris Norris, who runs the Hat Cart on the mall just off 13th Street, said the transients are an "ongoing concern." "It's not so much their numbers but their behavior," Norris said. "Periodically a new population comes in that's more rowdy, or sometimes some drug passes through the population and you have people who are just messed up. 'I've had some try to steal, they come up to my customers bumming for change or just being drunk and gross. Just the other day I caught one trying to steal an $85 hat.'"

Lauren Gricci, who works at a software startup on Pearl Street, said she thinks it is especially concerning, having so many transients in an area that serves as one of the main tourist destinations in Boulder. "It freaks out tourists," she said. "We've had clients come from out of town who are staying at the St. Julien and they walk down the mall and they've commented about the transients." (Byars)

All of this demonstrates the massive political power that public opinion, and especially consolidated commercial interests, has to negatively shape the urban environment and daily experience of homeless people in a city like Boulder. Such power is currently held hostage to longstanding stereotypes of homelessness and cultural assumptions about the geography of mobility and poverty in the western United States. Nobody interviewed by
the *Daily Camera* was in any doubt that the smoking ban was really about the “transient” population, and even the political statements denying that there was a “homeless object” in mind during the drafting the ordinances seem unconvinced by their own rhetoric:

…Maher said they are not *trying* to force the homeless away from the mall, and that they are entitled to enjoy it just so long as they follow the same rules everyone else does. "The mall is a city park, it's open to everybody," he said. "But nobody has the right to destroy the experience for anybody else. Transients do need to follow the same rules as everybody else, and this year that includes no smoking." (Byars)

One reason that policies waging assaults on everyday life are so effective at implicitly targeting unsheltered populations, is that they take for granted that “transients” and the homeless are in fact *not* like everybody else at all. In a sense they are not wrong. Everyday life *is* very different when it must be lived constantly in shared space under the harsh glare of disapproving public opinion. It is maybe not as easy for a person suffering from addiction or mental illness to keep track of an ever-expanding collection of rules and laws designed specifically to make their life more difficult. They will likely get caught-out sooner or later, especially with a constant patrol of police and public waiting on their every wrong move. Without a safe place in which to leave their possessions, or a physical disability preventing them from moving far, it *does* become tougher to walk a few blocks for a nicotine fix, or to use the public facilities like toilets or phones which are fast being removed from downtown areas like Pearl Street.

The moment Boulder started to tighten its grip on public space in a move towards anti-homelessness is well documented due to the local media’s considerable attention to homeless issues. A profile of a homeless man which appeared in the *Boulder Weekly*
newspaper shortly after I arrived to start my fieldwork, suggests that by the close of 2012 the city’s clampdown was already having tangible effects on the local homeless population:

Dwarf says he usually sleeps somewhere next to the creek, under a tarp, taking his chances with getting ticketed by local cops enforcing Boulder’s anti-camping ordinance. “If you have a blanket under you, it is camping,” he says, adding that it seems to be OK to lie down with your gear, as long as there is nothing covering you. These days, after 11 p.m., even the homeless who are awake and upright are getting citations for trespassing, since the public parks are closed at night. Dwarf hasn’t gotten a ticket for sleeping next to the creek in a few months, but then again, some nights he just drinks coffee all night, reading at a bench that he likes near the St Julien Hotel. Some of his colleagues hang out at a local hookah bar that stays open until 4 a.m. The parks reopen at 5. (Dodge, “Bridge”)

In fact Boulder’s escalation in anti-homelessness policy had probably been gradually underway since around 2006 when a longstanding but under-enforced camping ban became active city policy. Then in early 2012 the city council voted to step up foot patrols from police and closed the public parks at night. As in other cities, some of the political will for this legislation came in the midst of the Occupy Boulder movement and as the 2011 protests died down a law quickly passed that made being in city parks between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. illegal. More support for anti-homelessness legislation however, was due to a sharp turn in public sentiment against visible homelessness in their city. It was clear too that the public seemed to be taking as their target one specific type of homeless person, in one particular area of the city. Discussing waning public sympathies for the homeless another local newspaper, the Daily Camera, quoted a Boulder resident whose frustrations had become clear:

Billy Roberts said he lived at Seventh Street and Arapahoe Avenue for seven years before leaving last year for far northeast Boulder. Ongoing negative interactions with homeless people were the main reason he moved.
"The trail was her personal toilet, and there was zero regard for the fact that there were strangers walking by," he said, describing an incident along Boulder Creek that he called "probably the last straw."

"It seemed like it got worse every year, and the groups got bigger," he said. "Downtown Boulder can still be an amazing place, but it got to the point where it was really stressful to be down there."
(Meltzer, “Boulder seeks balance”)

In direct response to mounting public grievances of this kind, City Manager Jane Brautigam, having used her rule-making authority to ban smoking on the “municipal campus” — an area encompassing Pearl Street downtown of around 5 square blocks where most pedestrian activity is concentrated, launched a further legal clamp down on public space. In early 2013 the City Council made “violating a city manager's rule” a crime and restored the possibility of jail time for first-time municipal offenders, something the council had abandoned the previous year after the court rapidly became clogged with dozens of homeless defendants opting for trials to challenge camping tickets. Around this time the City Council also considered new restrictions to target panhandling, and the Boulder City Attorney's Office asked for “exclusion orders” explicitly targeting three individual panhandlers with the goal of barring these “chronic offenders” from the municipal campus altogether.

By July of 2013 the courthouse lawn, for so long a popular daytime hangout for Boulder’s endemic homeless population, was all but empty aside from a few business people eating lunch. Much of this could be attributed to the combined affect of the anti-camping legislation which effectively outlawed lying down with your possessions in public space, and even more so, the new downtown smoking ban which was by mid-2013
being actively enforced by a tenacious police presence. On top of these municipal rules, further bans were newly enacted that year against dogs, bikes, and “pedestrian interference” in the downtown area. Some amenities such as telephones and benches had also disappeared, and water sprinklers were being turned on to grassy areas at night.

Of all the new anti-homelessness legislation to pass however, it was the heightened clampdown on camping, which was causing the most debate in Boulder. Unlike the city of Denver, which only enacted its camping ban in 2013, Boulder’s prohibition on public sleeping had actually been on the books for over two decades. Whilst it had rarely been aggressively enforced by the Boulder Police Department, some anti-camping legislation had long existed under both the municipal code and Boulder’s longstanding ‘open space’ ordinances – the combined effect of which left little scope for rough sleepers in a wide vicinity of the town:

“Camping is not allowed on Open Space and Mountain Parks, including using a vehicle as a residence. No tents or nets can be erected, with the one exception of the small Buckingham Campground at Fourth of July Trailhead, located in the mountains about one hour west of Boulder. Camping can have negative impacts to vegetation, wildlife and other park visitors. Campfires increase the danger of wildlife and campgrounds require increased maintenance and patrol. Human waste may jeopardize the environment.”

- City of Boulder, Open Space and Mountain Parks Regulations

As part of Boulder’s strict open space regulations, the original prohibition did probably genuinely have the preservation of Boulder’s environment in mind. Around 2005 however, the same legislation was becoming increasingly mobilized against homeless individuals in the downtown area, and by 2011 the BPD were using the ban to sweep up many of the homeless encampments that had occurred in the wake of the financial crisis.
of 2009. Much of this clampdown relied more heavily on Boulder’s revised municipal code, which had become far more specific in the ways it defined “camping” in the built environment. The combined impact of the two laws however, effectively made it illegal for anybody to rest outdoors at night within the city limits with any degree of protection, or within a wide area of green belt land encircling the city:

5-6-10. Camping or Lodging on Property Without Consent.

(a) No person shall camp within any park, parkway, recreation area, open space, or other city property.
(b) No person shall camp within any public property other than city property or any private property without first having obtained:
   (1) Permission of the authorized officer of such public property; or
   (2) Permission of the owner of private property….

(d) For purposes of this section, "camp" means to reside or dwell temporarily in a place, with shelter, and conduct activities of daily living, such as eating or sleeping, in such place. But the term does not include napping during the day or picnicking. The term "shelter" includes, without limitation, any cover or protection from the elements other than clothing. The phrase "during the day" means from one hour after sunrise until sunset…

- Boulder Revised code: (Chapter 5-6: Miscellaneous Offenses).

Back in 2009 after the city of Boulder first attempted to gradually enforce its camping ban, the ACLU of Colorado had issued an official challenge to the ordinance. The civil liberties organization appealed that.: “In the past five years, Boulder has energetically enforced the “no camping” ordinance against the city’s homeless population, prosecuting almost 2000 cases. Yet, Boulder’s primary homeless shelter accommodates only 160 persons, less than a quarter of the city’s estimated homeless population.” In 2010 however, one month after a brief civic moratorium was agreed upon, the city council did an about-turn and instructed the BPD to continue enforcing the ban. At this point the
specifics of the renewed ban became increasingly controversial, especially the policy’s stipulations as to what could be considered “camping” and what could not. The ACLU went into Boulder in support of a middle aged male client who had been tuned away from a full Boulder Shelter, then subsequently picked up and ticketed by police for being outside in his sleeping bag on a night when the temperature dropped to 11 degrees. Their client had then been found guilty of “camping” by Boulder’s Municipal Court based on the ruling that the sleeping bag constituted “shelter” and thus violated the camping ban. The ACLU stressed the absurdity of this point in a published appeal to the city council:

Mr. Madison’s case highlights both the absurdity and the cruelty of Boulder’s ordinance,” Silverstein continued. “Because the frost-covered sleeping bag was deemed to be ‘shelter,’ the ordinance makes our client a criminal. If our client had just slept in his clothes, he might have gotten frostbite or hypothermia, but he would have been found not guilty.

The Boulder District Court quickly rejected the ACLU’s appeal of the man’s conviction, prompting them to make a further appeal to the state supreme court. This appeal was eventually also declined. A statement released on the organization’s website noted that “…it is still an open question in Colorado whether or not cities such as Boulder, in what appears to be nothing more than an effort to rid the city of its homeless population, are permitted to criminalize activities that the homeless have no choice but to do, such as sleeping outdoors…” (ACLU).

A couple of years later it was a Boulder Criminal Defence Lawyer who once more took up the camping ban as an issue and at first his strong opposition gained some momentum in the city. In a letter to the Daily Camera on New Years’ Day 2012, Alexander Garlin described a “…standoff between our city’s homeless and the local
government.” The lawyer, who some homelessness service providers felt was engaged in his own *cause célèbre*, deployed the twin arguments of humanitarian concern and economic sense – pointing out that since 2010 Boulder’s conscientious jurors had voted “not guilty” in 78% of appeals to camping tickets, all at great expense to the local tax-payer, the efficiency of the courts, and while homeless lives were still being lost on the city streets. Especially controversial was Boulder’s new move to redefine camping as availing oneself of any shelter from the elements, a move that left significant scope for individual BPD officers to interpret the rules as they choose and to leverage them selectively against homeless individuals as they saw fit. Under this vague section of the ordinance a police officer could cite someone, move them along, or even arrest them for something as innocuous as sitting on a backpack in a public park. In this way a reputable teenage foreign exchange student picnicking in the park would likely remain under the radar of this law, whilst members of the downtown’s long-term homeless population would not. Garlin’s letter continued:

As to “public safety” concerns, it is legal under the anti-camping ordinance to sleep outside at night unless one uses "shelter" in addition to clothing worn. One seeking refuge from the elements with, for instance, a tarp or sleeping bag is a criminal, but another sleeping in a down coat is a law-abiding citizen. Common sense tells us that enforcement of this anti-camping ordinance does not protect public safety when it heightens the danger of a person literally freezing to death, a fate to which a few of Boulder’s homeless have succumbed in recent history.

Boulder is recognized for its humanity, compassion and intelligence. The city's anti-camping ordinance should be repealed or modified so it does not so disproportionately hurt its homeless citizens. Do the elected members of our City Council reflect the true soul of our city by making criminals of those who, in one of their many struggles for survival, may wrap themselves in a sleeping bag or blanket to make it through another cold Boulder night? (Garlin)
Of course one argument might be that the city was not so much as interested in the secondary business of collecting fines of a few hundred dollars from homeless individuals, as it was in utilizing aggressive policing as a mechanism to keep homeless people on the move at night, forcing them further away from residential and business areas and sweeping them far away from the municipal area. A useful gauge of more forceful public sentiments in the city was immediately provided in the multiple responses from *Daily Camera* readers to Garlin’s letter. Not surprisingly the discourse tended to focus on “transients” and expressed the typical “build it and they will come” view of homeless services that is familiar in Boulder:

“The transients are growing in numbers and are being encouraged to set up camp, **common sense tells us there will be more continuing to come here**…”

“Our little city is **overrun** with them because word gets out that our city council and manager can’t seem to enforce our laws on the books.”

“Those that think the anti-camping rules should be repealed obviously want to **turn Boulder into the go to place for the homeless**. We already provide plenty of service here for the homeless. We already don't deal with the illegal campsites here in town...I feel sorry for anyone that's homeless but we only enable them if we allow them to camp here. Enforce the rules already in place.” (Garlin, comments section)

Whilst these comments certainly represent some of the more hostile feelings expressed in the largely faceless forums of online newspaper message boards, their unifying themes should be pretty recognizable: a strong belief that the homeless of Boulder have drifted in from elsewhere, and will continue to be attracted by any expanded shelter services and lenient attitudes towards urban policy.
Interestingly, Keith and Ted from the Mountain Shelter take a fairly pragmatic view of the camping ban and it’s damage to homeless lives. I interview them in early July 2013 amidst an increasingly delicate climate of local anti-homelessness sentiment. Keith: “The camping ban has been in place for 25 years, so that’s nothing new. It got more publicity when the Occupy Boulder folks came in. A local lawyer decided to take it up as his cause for better or for worse. Denver just enacted its camping ban last year, so all those things came together to create publicity.” In his position as Shelter Director of Programs, responsible for presenting expansion plans to neighbors in Boulder, Ted Woods voices sympathy about the growing concerns over homelessness: “The city is always trying to balance the needs of the general population with compassion for the homeless population. I think people are sensitive to the homeless population but they also don’t want to be harassed with their kids when they’re walking down Pearl St mall. And those two things can exist together.” Keith’s position is that as long as the homeless and travelling kids make their court appearance they don’t have too many problems:

“Typically, if they show up in court, which is the big thing, then the fine usually gets reduced to community service. The challenge is most people don’t show up for their court date. If they don’t show up then a warrant goes out and if they get picked up then they automatically go to jail. Nineteen out of twenty times the case doesn’t go through because there’s been some kind of pre-trail hearing the client didn’t show up for even with representation. Then the whole process stops and the warrant goes out.”

This however, is exactly the damage an aggressively enforced camping ban is able to do to homeless lives in community like Boulder: Not only does renewed political focus on the existing ordinance now give local police the capacity to enforce rules repeatedly and aggressively against people with few other options, it also has the knock-on effect of
scooping precariously sheltered people into the justice system when they may have neither the money, living conditions, physical, or mental health, to effectively or responsibly deal with police or court summons in the manner that most housed citizens would.

In early 2013 a few more struggles between Boulder’s public and those advocating for improved homelessness services began to intensify. The first conflict had been simmering since late 2011 surrounding The Mountain Shelter’s proposed plans to build a new transitional housing facility in the north of the city, very near to the existing emergency shelter. This time the response was even more localized with a concerted offensive launched by a group calling itself the ‘North Boulder Alliance.” By February of 2012 the group were well organized with a website and highly vocal media presence stating opposition to proposed service expansion in their neighborhood. An open letter by representative Hugh Walton to the Camera in September of 2011 was entitled “Don’t concentrate the chronically homeless in one neighborhood.” The letter served as a manifesto for the alliance and began with a particular appeal to localism as well as a grievance that north Boulder was bearing the brunt of homeless services:

Boulder Housing Partners intends to build a new facility to house chronically homeless individuals next to the Mountain Homeless Shelter at 1175 Lee Hill Rd. BHP and its executive director Betsy Martens miss the point and mischaracterize North Boulder's opposition to this project. They have attempted to portray our opposition to his project as an example of "NIMBY" and some have even called NoBo residents "bigots." Nothing could be further from the truth.

The residents of North Boulder support the Mountain Homeless Shelter, one of the largest facilities of its kind in Colorado and have been actively involved in its ongoing success and tolerant of its impacts. Our opposition to this project is simply based upon the high number and concentration of homeless individuals this facility will bring to our community. Studies support our view that
concentrating so many of the county's homeless at the corner of Broadway and Lee Hill will create negative impacts upon the businesses, neighborhoods and families of our community. (Walton)

Whilst the ensuing civic conversation surrounding the North Boulder Alliance’s stand was tense and evoked some of the same negativity that marks anti-homelessness discourse focusing on the downtown, both the shelter and Boulder Housing Partners were careful to consult their neighbors and productive channels of communication were opened regarding the planned expansion. As the transitional housing development finally received the go-ahead in late 2013, both Ted and Keith viewed the dialogue with their north Boulder neighbors in a pragmatic light. Ted was quick to localize the issue even further and emphasized that maintaining good community relations north of downtown is of great importance to the shelter:

“The objection from our neighbors about the new building we’re working on, mostly has to do with not wanting it in their neighborhood, less than ‘oh we’re going to attract people to the greater Boulder area’. It’s very localized.”

“They feel that their local community here in north Boulder is carrying more water in terms of low income housing in general. I think that’s a very good argument – they bought in an area that was the least developed part of Boulder so it stands to reason that that would be the case. The shelter was here before they were in general… the old shelter predated 90% of the residential development in this area. So you could somewhat argue that they’ve invaded the homeless’ space…but you know, you understand, at their core is a pretty basic fear about their assets in the area and their safety and behavior issues and the safety of their kids, and there is nothing wrong with that…Most people in Boulder get it, but there are a small minority of very vocal people who don’t get it.”

Finally, in July of 2013 the Boulder Weekly carried a front page story entitled: “Boulder’s Soup Line, Groups: City wants feeding homeless out of sight.” This time the city’s housing and human services director Karen Rahn was thrust to the forefront of
squabbles between services providers and local businesses who complained that Saturday morning feeds downtown were hurting their interests because there were “too many homeless people in one spot.” Advocates had put on the free weekly meals for a number of years with the aim of filling-in for services such as the Mountain Shelter and Bridge House, both of which closed at weekends during the summer. There had been a rising number of private complaints made about the feeds in recent years during the public portion of city council meetings, but in the summer of 2013 a number of local businesses spoke out against the initiatives including the Cheesecake Factory and the Boulder Public Library whose premises were adjacent to the meal site. The verbal battle reached a peak when Rahm said the municipal campus had become an “unwelcoming and intimidating place to be.” Next a local police officer who was sympathetic to homeless issues unofficially warned organizers that the BPD had been ordered to disrupt the weekend meal times, warning them that “…cops were going to start cracking down and finding any excuse to write tickets for the most minor offenses, like littering” (BW, ‘soup lines’)

The advocacy group in charge of the efforts resisted, claiming the crackdown was just one more attempt by officials to sweep poverty out of sight and mind in downtown Boulder. City spokesperson Sarah Huntley was then forced into a rare and reluctant acknowledgment that there were in fact different groups at risk of being lumped together under such public opposition to “the downtown homeless”:

“City officials stop short of accusing the advocacy groups of attracting a criminal element, although Huntley says “there is some overlap” between those at the meals and the troublemakers. “I’m not sure the food programs become necessarily a magnet, it’s just there is large gathering of people, and combined with other things going on on campus, people are assuming it’s the homeless people who are actually contributing to that problem,” Rahn says. In fact Huntley says, it’s in the
group’s best interest to move so that they and the homeless they serve aren’t lumped in with the criminal element in the public’s mind. “The public perception is not to differentiate between the two,” she explains. “The community sees them all as one group, so one of the things the city is trying to do is to really support the homeless organizations who are helping the truly homeless people in need reclaim their identity…” (Dodge, “Soup lines”)

Such a tacit acknowledgment is highly significant amidst an official discourse in Boulder that for such a long time has been invested in maintaining as homogenous the blurry identities of the various visibly homeless groups who inhabit public space. For a city spokesperson to suddenly talk of “identity” and “public perception” regarding homelessness should not be underestimated, and even if in this case the motivations may appear potentially duplicitous, serious questions are raised regarding who exactly the City of Boulder consider the “criminal element” and the “truly homeless” to be. Therefore, in Chapter 5 of this study, as winter turned to spring, I set out to talk to people who might be coded in such discourses as “homeless” in the downtown area. The goal was to ascertain their stories around perceptions of homelessness, group identities, selective mobility, and what it was like living large proportions of their days on the streets of Boulder in 2013.
The Manifest Destiny of American anti-homeless campaigns

“We have worked closely with the police to let the selectively homeless know that we have genuine homeless problems in our city. We have shown that we do not tolerate them coming into the neighborhood, fighting, drinking and using drugs. They abuse our parks and our neighborhood.”


“By and large the homeless population that cities have is their very own. An indigenous homeless population had made it easier to invoke the tradition of localism in U.S social policy. Whatever their initial resistance, taxpayers have usually relented in the face of evidence that help for the homeless is help for their poorest neighbors” (28). Sociologist Joel Blau wrote this in 1992 on the cusp of an epochal change in urban culture, politics, and liberal thought that would essentially render such a claim almost impossible to make in the same way again. In 2014 in fact, the exact opposite is true: localism in U.S social policy is long deceased, killed by the forces of neoliberal globalization. In its place knowledge of homeless populations more closely resembles that old nineteenth century idea of a ‘wandering poor’ who are from somewhere else and simply want to go back there. The question of how this logic spread quite so radically and seamlessly in barely two decades, is a one that demands focused attention on the intertwined particularities of political, economic, social, and cultural structures across the spectrum of American life.

In the 21st century exaggerated notions of mobility and homelessness now show up most forcibly in the hardline urban policies and public discourses of municipalities in
western states such as California, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Washington, and Idaho. Successive waves of anti-homelessness have also hit many smaller satellite cities in the region, whose cultural identities are tied up with ‘movement,’ liberal progressivism, or a kind of affluent seasonal resort image. The political logic of anti-homelessness drove forth its own neoliberal frontier and in its wake did much to homogenize the cultural and civic attitudes underpinning western urban governance. Rather than spreading from east to west in the Turnerian sense, this frontier spread from large cities to mid sized cities to smaller towns, it spread from urban to rural, and from gated communities to the poorest neighborhoods. Whilst the onset of aggressively anti-homelessness policy was certainly aided through the same old discursive formations by which American poverty has historically been understood — organized around notions of indolence, individual failure, lifestyle-choice, and criminality — it also found in liberal western cities a readily positioned cultural figure of stereotyped mobility and freedom to exploit as its target. That the cultural image of young wanderers and mobile urban dropouts had slowly become ‘captured’ in political struggles over public space, should not be taken as incidental to the steady westward march of neoliberal urban policy. In fact mobility and freedom should be read as a key cultural tropes enabling the political logics of anti-homelessness sweeping across the nation to be repackaged and sold to a progressive western electorate right where they lived.

In A Brief History of Neoliberalism (2005) David Harvey traces the roots of this policy shift back to the “urban crisis” that was considered to have afflicted many U.S. cities in the 1960s (45). Economic restructuring and deindustrialization post WW2
combined with rapid suburbanization to ravage city centers across the nation. By the mid 1980s, most downtown districts in municipalities across the nation had lost their economic base and consequentially become hotbeds of racialized poverty. At first the solution to this crisis had been large-scale federal investment in public services and employment, but faced with a fiscal crisis in the early 1970s, President Nixon simply declared the urban crisis “over” and the public tap was turned off. Of course this did nothing to improve the conditions of marginalized inner city populations, many of whom had been displaced to run-down urban areas during the pre-Civil Rights era, and who were now struggling with endemic multi-generational poverty, social ills and high unemployment. What the retreat of public spending did do however, was to shift the power of urban America into the hands of private interests and in time, alter the political culture, governing structure, and urban landscape of the nation for good. In New York the financial institutions collaborated to plunge the city towards technical bankruptcy, forcing a bailout and then the restructuring of municipal institutions in their interest. In Harvey’s analysis what followed amounted to “…a coup by the financial institutions against the democratically elected government of New York City”: “They had first claim on city tax revenues in order to first pay off bondholders: whatever was left was left went for essential services. The effect was to curb the aspirations of the city’s powerful municipal unions, to implement wage freezies and cutbacks in public employment and social provision…” (45). The result of this restructuring was that public resources, and increasingly public space, began to be re-conceptualized as existing to serve the greater good of entrepreneurial capitalism, rather than the greater good of the people. Of course
the core belief that marks pure neoliberal ideology is that there is no meaningful
distinction to be made here — the best interests of the market are the best interests of the
public, and it was connections this belief enabled amongst previously disparate sections
of the American political spectrum that in part accounted for the tide of similar legislation
across the country.

As the past decades have overwhelmingly demonstrated, the main priority of
neoliberalism — what Harvey termed the “creation of a good business climate” — is at
some odds with the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, and especially
those who must live their daily lives amidst the contingencies of an urban space that fast
became a fiercely contested battleground in the conflict between private capital and
public interest — a conflict which was only ever going to have one victor: “Corporate
welfare substituted for people welfare” (47). By the 1990s the conditions were in place
for the wholesale hijacking of the public sphere, and, more perniciously, a creeping
cultural acquiescence on the part of liberal America that rendered much of the most
egregious social fallout of these policies largely invisible. Regarding New York at the
close of the decade, Harvey wrote:

City government was more and more construed as an entrepreneurial rather
than a social democratic or even managerial entity. Inter-urban competition
for investment capital transformed government into urban governance
through public-private partnerships. City business was increasingly
conducted behind closed doors, and the democratic and representational content
of local governance diminished. Working-class and ethnic-immigrant New
York was thrust back into the shadows, to be ravaged by racism and a crack
cocaine epidemic of epic proportions in the 1980s that left many young people
either dead, incarcerated, or homeless…(47).

The concerted political efforts to “clean up the streets” that began to take hold
during the late 1980s and early 1990’s in the bigger cities of the United States, quickly became praised for their efficacy and regarded as models for a new urbanism. New York especially was held aloft in policy circles as a paradigm of successfully implemented urban policy for the twenty-first century, and Mayor Giuliani, who presided over reforms in policing and public space, was personally heralded for improving New Yorkers’ “quality of life.” Giuliani’s lynchpin was his Police Strategy Number Five, which he published with then New York City Police Chief, William J. Bratton. Under the heading: “Reclaiming The Public Space’s of New York” — this policy manifesto was the precursor of “quality of life” ordinances that in following decades would reach nearly every city in America, and many more across the globe. Giuliani’s policy entailed a “zero-tolerance” attitude to policing that was squarely aimed at removing the symptoms of visible homelessness and social suffering from the streets, and therefore from public view. His much-vaunted underlying philosophy for this “new” activist style of urban governance was termed the “Broken Windows” theory, and held that visible signs of minor social degradation (such as broken windows, but also, broken people) had the effect of sanctioning and thus attracting much greater degradation and serious crime. This theory he explained fully in a 1997 USA Today editorial and Public Relations appeal entitled “How New York is becoming the safest big city in America”:

I am a firm believer in the theory that "minor" crimes and "quality-of-life" offenses are all part of the larger picture. The "broken window" theory of James Q. Wilson of Harvard University has been applied successfully in America's largest city. Wilson says a broken window that goes unrepaired is a visible sign that no one cares. It attracts additional vandalism, which soon escalates into serious crime.

Graffiti, blaring car radios, street prostitution, drag racing, and drunk driving,
low-level drug dealing, public drinking and urination, squeegee window cleaners, and other aggressive beggars are, in effect, society's "broken windows." They create an atmosphere conducive to more serious crime. If we allow quality-of-life offenses to run rampant, we might as well post a sign that says: "No one is in control here; anything goes."

In New York, we are working hard to fix our "broken windows."

Prioritized in this bleak view of urbanism were the aesthetics of the city, how the urban experience looked and felt to the mainstream, with very little regard given to the complex and marginal human lives the city also supported. Giuliani identified homeless people, panhandlers, prostitutes, squeegee cleaners, squatters, graffiti artists, reckless bicyclists, and unruly youth as major threats to urban order and the causes of urban decay. In doing this he entirely discounted the multiple causes of homelessness and extreme poverty as well as the failed liberal urban policies that ejected record numbers of vulnerable Americans onto the streets and into public view during the 1980s. Instead New York began to focus only on the distasteful, disturbing, or fear-inducing symptoms of destitution. By treating homeless bodies in public space as simply another sign of urban decay, literally as ‘broken’ objects, the new policy regime was able to methodically and actively sweep aberrant citizens out of sight and out of mind. Through the implementation of “zero tolerance” policing the theory essentially gave the city free rein, supported by a slew of petty ordinance, to go after homeless populations and street people at whim. As Wacquant has noted in Punishing The Poor (2009), the ‘Broken Windows theory’ never did have any scientific evidence in support of it, published in cultural magazine The Atlantic Monthly not in a peer-reviewed journal, and never receiving “…even the beginnings of an empirical verification since then.” Even its
author, ultra-conservative political scientist James Q. Wilson, has since claimed it was just a ‘metaphor’ (264). Despite the paradox that New York began to back away from the unpopular ‘zero-tolerance’ policing slogan in the very same moment as it spread the world over, the theory behind it remained seductive to liberals and conservatives alike as it provided a tangible scapegoat for the problems of their communities. For Harvey, the hardline urban policies were in fact as much an element of tacit class retribution as they were about transfer of power:

Redistribution through criminal violence became one of the few serious options for the poor, and the authorities responded by criminalizing whole communities of impoverished and marginalized populations. The victims were blamed, and Giuliani was to claim fame by taking revenge on behalf of an increasingly affluent Manhattan bourgeoisie tired of having to confront the effects of such devastation on their own doorsteps. (48)

The idea of ‘revenge’ offers one explanatory framework for the march westward of neoliberal urbanism, and its eventual entrenchment in centrist political and cultural logics. By the mid 1980s the signs of poverty and degradation had become hard to miss for most residents of urban America. Yet whilst the most apparent markers of urban decay such as graffiti, prostitution, small-time crime, drug dealing, and vacant properties were in many ways peripheral to the homeless, they were easily blamed on this newly visible population who had also been shunted into the public consciousness amidst urban renewal efforts and the changing landscape of America’s social institutions.

In *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996), Neil Smith convincingly argued that the rise of hardline urban policy was not in fact revenge from the right wing in the wake of tattered liberal urban policies of previous decades, but
rather it actually constituted revenge on the part of urban liberals whose support for social justice had waned in the face of their own economic insecurity: “The rallying cry of the revanchist city might well be: ‘Who lost the city? And on whom is revenge to be exacted?’” (227). Smith claimed that the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s had triggered anger and resentment amongst the white-middle classes for whom economic instability, and especially the skyrocketing price of housing, was a new and disorientating feeling. This anger was easily exploited through concentrated political appeals to the fear and paranoia that was fast becoming the defining characteristic of life in urban America. Therefore rather than focusing on issues of housing, employment, health or child care, the thrust of political attention was redirected onto issues of class, race, migration, labor struggles, and ultimately onto homeless people, whose treatment very much represented Smith’s litmus paper for the “revanchist city”:

Expressed in the physical, legal and rhetorical campaigns against scapegoats, identified in terms of class, race, gender, nationality, sexual preference, this reaction scripts everyday life, political administration and media representations of the contemporary US city with increasing intensity. The revanchist city is, to be sure, a dual and divided city of wealth and poverty.... But it is more. It is a divided city where the victors are increasingly defensive of their privilege, such as it is, and increasingly vicious defending it. The revanchist city is more than the dual city, in race and class terms. The benign neglect of “the other half,” so dominant in liberal rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s, has been superseded by a more active viciousness that attempts to criminalize a whole range of “behavior,” individually defined, and to blame the failure of post 1968 urban policy on the populations it was supposed to assist (227).

Smith also identified both media and cultural representations of the American city as playing a key role in whipping up paranoia in a middle class increasingly fearful of falling victims to crime. The climate of mediatized paranoia that defined this period, and
which continues today in turn lead to widespread support for specific policies aimed at
removing the perceived objects of fear from the spaces mainstream society inhabited:
“…crime in particular had become a central marker of the revanchist city, the more so as
the fears and realities of crime are desynchronized….” The imaginary of terror beginning
to govern urban life Smith took to represent a “revengeful reaction ... to a failed urban
optimism at the end of the 1980s” (217) as well as the “bankruptcy of liberal homeless
policy ...obvious at the national level during the 1980s…” but which “…was being
played out at the local level” by the end of the decade (223). The concept of the
“revanchist city” certainly explains the turn from the redistributive policies and anti-
poverty legislation that had characterized the 1960s, towards a discourse of aggressive
retaliation metered out on minorities and vulnerable populations today. Of course it was
also partly a discourse of revenge that laid the cultural groundwork for Giuliani’s “zero-
tolerance” attitudes towards policing which in time swept the nation, and frighteningly
quickly became the new common-sense way of “doing business” in urban America.

As in the East, the ‘clean up the streets’ initiatives gradually taking hold in
smaller Western urban centers today have tended to focus on coercively removing
aberrant bodies from sight through a host of legislation including anti-panhandling,
camping, or loitering ordinances, zoning, and the selective criminalization of every-day-
life. During the opening decades of the twenty first century, revanchism has now far
exceeded its original status as a moral backlash on the part of an insecure and terrified
middle class. It is now virtually impossible to find an American city that does not in some
way employ the logics of neoliberal urban governance in municipal legislation. Laws
against begging, panhandling, sitting, sleeping, or loitering on sidewalks and in other public spaces are now commonly used to render the urban environment unwelcoming for certain groups and to sanitize those public spaces most used by tourists, shoppers, the middle-classes, and the affluent. Much of this has been exacerbated as market pressures have forced sun-kissed Western cities to rebrand themselves as safe, attractive places in which to live in and invest. The upshot is that even the most liberal municipalities have gradually implemented incrementally harsher penalties on ‘undesirable’ elements they feel will scare away tourists, consumers or investors. Rather than embracing the innate diversity of urban life, downtown districts increasingly resemble the over-determined spaces common to malls and indoor shopping centers, cleansed as far as possible in order to minimize the spontaneous behaviors and social vagaries of the public realm. Municipal ordinances now dictate who is considered acceptable and who is not, criminalizing all behavior that may be offensive or unpleasant to the mainstream. Worse still, punitive and aggressive approaches to ‘undesirable’ citizens are now treated as common-sense measures and are embraced by business, politicians, and an urban culture which had all but forgotten the values of community and mutual support which birthed it. The injection of hostility into urban space has reached such creative degrees that it has entered the very architecture of built environments, even showing up in the routine procedural practices of small businesses: Ammonia is spread on the floors of transit stations at night to discourage sleeping, bright lights are left on in deserted public areas, loud music is used to discourage loitering and illicit activity outside convenience stores, sprinklers are directed at asphalt over night to prevent camping, benches are designed with cross slats to
render lying impossible, public amenities have vanished, and restaurants pour sawdust or
glass filings in with waste food to prevent any scavenging “dumpster divers” from
finding an edible morsel in their trash. In short, not only is there no longer anything
‘public’ about urban public space, but the space many people are forced to exist in is now
designed to prevent their comfortable presence and invested in their rapid removal.

Mike Davis, in his 1990 work *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, noted the gradual incorporation of ‘gated community’ style security measures into urban life. Underwritten by the same fear-mongering narrative of insecurity and terror that Neil Smith had noticed in New York, Davis viewed “post-liberal Los Angeles” as a city characterized by “the defense of luxury lifestyles” and the “proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous ‘armed response’” (223). On other words, social politics aside, citizens who had amassed property and wealth during the 1980s had become concerned mainly with preserving their comfortable lifestyles and were therefore extremely vulnerable to those pervasive cultural narratives circulating throughout culture suggesting they were surrounded by deviant people coming to take it all away. This embattled feeling swept throughout the West and resulted in a metaphorical “circling of the wagons” on the part of urbanites increasingly convinced of the hostility innate in their frontier environment. For Davis, this was a phenomenon born out in the changing architecture of Los Angeles itself: “This obsession with physical security systems, and, collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries, has become a zeitgeist of urban restructuring, a master narrative in the emerging built environment of the 1990s” (223). Although this zeitgeist may not have specifically taken
‘the homeless’ as its target, it was homeless people who became its worst casualties. It is vital to note that the fear of ‘Others’ that characterized the paranoia rampant in white society during the 1990s, whilst largely spurred on by mediatized panic regarding gangs, drugs, terrorists, and serial killers, inevitably fell squarely on the backs of the most vulnerable marginal denizens of urban life. Hysterical fear after all, once instigated, knows few rational boundaries. In this vein, Davis echoed Wacquant’s observation that there exists a significant disparity between the fear of endangerment and endangerment itself — especially in the psyches of the comfortable middle classes:

…fear proves itself”. The social perception of threat becomes a function of the security mobilization itself, not crime rates. Where there is an actual rising arc of street violence, as in Southcentral Los Angeles or Downtown Washington D.C., most of the carnage is self-contained with ethnic or class boundaries. Yet white middle-class imagination, absent from any first-hand knowledge of inner-city conditions, magnifies the perceived threat through a demonological lens…The media in this arena, whose function is to bury and obscure the daily economic violence of the city, ceaselessly through up specters of criminal underclasses…

(224)

With such a general, non-specific object of fear playing on the minds of urban Americans, it is little wonder that those with the least political or social recourse become scapegoated most absolutely. Populations already marked according to dominant urban sensibilities by their deviance or abhorrence quickly fell victims to vilifying narratives, as did populations assumed to be place-less, nomadic, or from ‘elsewhere.’ In the West especially, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the travellers, all fit neatly into this sweeping cultural criteria and the previous category of ‘social misfit’ immediately melted into something more darkly homogenous and pathological in urban discourse.
In ‘Imagining the Nomad: Mobility and the Postmodern Primitive’, Tim Cresswell viewed populations thought of as highly mobile to be especially well-placed for widespread cultural vilification due to what he termed “…vacuous generalizations to which the nomad has been subjected…” (378). For Cresswell the very problem of nomadism is implicit in the ambiguous terms in which is has been constructed in postmodern lexicon, an observation that gets to the heart of the conflicted stance we have seen ‘drifters’ take throughout the numerous popular cultural sites discussed in this chapter: “The postmodern nomad is a remarkably unsocial being – unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and geography. They are nomads who appear as entries on a census table, or dots on maps – abstract, dehistoricized and undifferentiated – a mobile mass” (377). Creswell’s suggests that, precisely because “…no or little attention is paid to the historical conditions which produce specific forms of movement…moving subjects – travellers, migrants and nomads – are all partially fixed by who they are” (378). This lens is absolutely critical to developing a more nuanced understanding of travellers and their unequivocal capture in cultural narratives — the explanation for their mobility is simply that they are mobile, and therefore it follows that the explanation for any behavior they may indulge in, positively or negatively valued, is the same. Furthermore, for Cresswell the problem of romanticizing mobility actually haunts the very social theory with which we have attempted to unpack nomadism and mobile others:

…dominant cultural groups tend to have a schizophrenic reaction to their marginalized others. On the one hand, they are a romanticized, and on the other, they are labeled deviant…Theorists appear to be no exception. Just as real-life nomads and semi-nomads are trampled on the one hand and glorified on the other
as romantic outcasts, free from the shackles of normality, metaphorical nomads are either a generalized threat to civilization or generalized heroic figures resisting the confines of a disciplinary society (378).

Whether in social theory, popular culture, or political discourse, nowhere is this ‘schizophrenia’ over mobility more clear than in the American west. Here in both myth and in reality the wide-open space beyond the boundaries of urban life is exclusively populated by conflicted nomads, marginal people who carry with them the capacity for untold destruction or potential.

Proving that all rugged white males go West eventually, having cleaned up New York and touted himself globally on the open market as a guru of urban management, Giuliani’s original “Super Cop” William J. Bratton was appointed Los Angeles Chief Of Police in 2002. In a clear case of neoliberal life imitating individualistic art, in his move west Bratton was of course following the same trails blazed by tough pioneering no-nonsense western sheriffs who made their own rules and whose “git her done” brand of rough justice has always been imagined on the lawless frontier of the far West. It is therefore necessary to proceed with our field of vision properly focused through a lens which Patricia Limerick urged in The Legacy of Conquest (1987) could productively frame all matters of the contemporary American West, buried as it is beneath an entire weight of cultural mythology:

Reorganized, the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences. In these terms, it had distinctive features as well as features it shares with the histories of other parts of the nation and the planet…. Deemphasize the frontier and its supposed end, conceive of the West as a place and not a process, and Western American history has a new look. (27)
Chapter 2:
A brief cultural history of the American Hobo

“Steve was invited to leave his home before his 14th birthday. (nuff said!) Having spent many hours listening to stories from the hobos, tramps, and bums who would come by his childhood home asking for work or just a handout; he reckoned he was ready for a life on the rails. So making up a "bindle…and not forgetting his guitar, he headed off into the sunset. Sound romantic? For the most part it was not! Sleeping ruff. Going hungry. Working for handouts. Eating at the missions. Riding the rails. Playing on street corners, for your small change and MANY a free stay in the county jails of America...and this is the "G" rated version!!” — Seasick Steve’s biography, Contact Music, 2011.

The “hobo” is uniquely positioned in American cultural history as a figure of white, male, liberty, independence, and mobility. At times the hobo has been positively valued in mainstream culture as a nostalgic object of escape, resilience, and adventure, this despite the fact that in reality his connections were more often to poverty, failure, economic instability, forced migration, and low skilled manual labor. Although at times blurred in historical discourse with other more ambiguous or negative constructions of American homelessness such as “the tramp”, “bum”, or “vagabond”, the cumulative weight of literature, film, music, and folklore attached to the hoboing ‘gentleman of the
road or rails’ is considerable, and his legacy as a romanticised icon of mobility is clearly identifiable still in the popular culture of today.

This chapter establishes the hobo’s enduring appeal as a dominant cultural construction, based in his male-ness, whiteness, itinerancy, and associations with work and adventure. I argue that the hobo’s considerable resilience as a caricature of American mobility and homelessness, points to his privileged access to mobility during his relatively brief appearance as a migrant on the national stage in the early twentieth century, but also to his enshrinement in a powerful dominant cultural narrative that has all but eclipsed the mobility and poverty of women, ethnic, and racial minorities at various times. The trope of the hobo is also inexorably connected to white American narratives of self-reliance, work and escape, and consequently the lore of this icon has tended to be held separate from migrant labor at large in the mainstream American imagination. Representations hinging on nineteenth century ideas regarding white resilience and a much-romanticised form of mobility have ensured that the hobo icon has generally been positively valued in the mainstream despite possessing many of the markers that tend to result in non-white Others becoming even further marginalized. Regardless of his failure to meet traditional iterations of success and status, as a result of his gender and racial privilege as well as his involvement in cherished cultural myths, the hobo in fact becomes uniquely positioned as a “white-other” with the potential to be deployed in popular culture, music, and literature in a remarkably wide range of ways — presented in turn as a nostalgic masculinist hero, transcendentalist wilderness survivor, or even as the embodiment of an alternative kind of American dream.
Nostalgia and the Vanishing American Hobo

In June 2007, a full page feature appeared in The Times of London headlined: “The Original Rolling Stone: Hobo-turned-bluesman- and now bemused star.” Pictured alongside was a white, bearded, septuagenarian American male cradling a battered guitar in his crudely tattooed arms. The man’s face was weather-beaten, his wiry frame clad in scruffy denim dungarees, red-and-white plaid work shirt and flat cap. “Seasick Steve,” real name Steve Wold, had recently stormed the UK music scene with a performance on the BBC and was to go on to enjoy commercial success in his home country over the next few years amidst a resurgent popular interest in ‘Americana’ music. The press on both sides of the Atlantic embraced the story of real-life vagrant turned international recording artist: “Steve lived rough all over America before the word homeless was invented,” the article stressed. Steve Wold’s overnight success rested largely on his perceived authenticity as a migratory American “hobo” — a legitimate drifter who had wandered the road and rails of the great American west for decades. The significance of this authenticity was not lost on Steve’s record company who took care to emphasize it in his promotional material: “What you really have here is Seasick Steve himself; a real American, trainhopping, jailbirding, cowboying, carnival working, migrant farm picking, occasional tramping, near-fatal heart attack surviving old hobo. The real deal!” (Contact Music)

However, and of surprisingly little detriment to his popularity, Seasick soon came under scrutiny of the more cynical representatives of the British press who disappointedly
announced that his backstory was largely a myth trading on an idealized and long-gone icon of American culture:

There's an advert that's all over commercial radio right now. "Hyuk hyuk, I'm Seasick Steve," it begins, "I've got a new record out, and I sure would appreciate it if you'd buy it ..." Someone in the Seasick Steve camp deserves a Best Marketing award. A couple of years ago, Seasick Steve -aged about 58– arrived fully formed, touting a vivid back-story about how he was taught to play guitar as a boy by a venerable Mississippi bluesman, ran away from home at 13 to ride the railroads and live as a hobo...A lot of people accepted this in good faith. Everyone loves to believe they've uncovered a piece of living history. But then, everything about Seasick Steve is calculated caricature. The other day, to celebrate their 10th anniversary, Google put their oldest available index online, from January 2001. A couple of clicks, and it emerges that – rather than jumping cargo trains like a latter-day Boxcar Willie – Steve Wold spent much of the 1990s running a recording studio in Olympia, wearing normal clothes and speaking in a non-Southern accent (Price, Independent).

Seasick is from the American west however, and his continued success even in spite of the fact that listeners know deep-down he is a record-company caricature designed to create a buzz, is real testimony to the endurance of some of the most powerful cultural myths surrounding homelessness in this region of the United States. These myths hold white men like Steve Wold to be the embodiment of mobility, work, transience, resilience, and heroism — representatives of the most “authentically American” freedoms of all.

Seasick was emblematic of an instantly recognizable figure of homelessness in the global imagination of America, and importantly in the American imagination itself. Forged amidst the very particular social conditions of rapid industrialization and heightened labor mobility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then enshrined through generations of literary and cultural representations, his ghost still haunts the avenues of American homeless policy. The image of ‘the hobo’ is of a
culturally white and typically male figure whose resonance persists in the national mythos long after his brief appearance as a caricature of displaced migrant workers. In many ways the demise of the ‘American Hobo’ has never been fully accepted by the national culture, and his specific characteristics of mobility and individuality continue to inform a public politics of homelessness in the United States with complex implications for those who live with inadequate shelter and resources in urban communities.

On October 8th 1959 a UPI dispatch was sent from Britt, Iowa, to the Los Angeles Times newspaper. It read:

59th Annual Hobo Convention.—Prosperity and government welfare programs are cutting into the ranks of the hoboes. This year only about fifty-five bona fide “professional tramps” swung off freight cars here for the 59th annual hobo convention. However, twenty thousand other persons were on hand for the free stew (“59th Annual Hobo Convention”).

Britt’s 'Hobo Convention' had been started in 1900 by a group of local businessmen who no doubt saw it as a money-spinning operation that would place their small town on the map. Happy to cash-in on the rich mythology of the hobo for a few days every summer, they took care not to become a permanent haven for all types of homeless. Writing of the convention in his history of the homeless in America, Down & Out & and on the Road (2002), Kenneth Kusmer notes that even at the height of its success the majority of attendees were middle-class people out for a day of entertainment and “at the end of the festivities the organizers politely but firmly told the small number of genuine tramps to leave town at once” (182). By all accounts, in fact, there were never very many “bona fide” hobos in attendance and by 1959 the authenticity of the convention as a gathering place for migrant workers was strongly bought into question, if indeed it had ever been
relevant to such a population in the first place. However, you don’t need authenticity in order to market a myth. In fact in the twenty-first century, Iowa’s annual Hobo Convention is still going strong. The website boasts a genuine hobo jungle containing “many former and current hobos,” and warns against the illegal dangers of riding freight trains—instead providing flight schedules for the local municipal airport. Visitors can even make a financial donation to the “hobos” using Paypal (Hobo FAQ).

While in 1959 the Britt convention organizers wondered in the *L.A. Times* if there were more than a handful of train-hopping migrants left to drive their annual party, in reality the hobo as an occasionally-working migratory train hopper had probably reached his peak by the mid 1920’s; gradually beat down by declining labor demands in Western agribusiness, mechanization, rail company consolidation and urban renewal efforts (Monkkonen, 4). The mass movement of Okies during the Great Depression, often taken as the heyday of migrant American train-hopping, was in reality only a temporary resurgence and the movement of families during this period tended to be unidirectional rather than transient, on the roads rather than the rails. Writing in her preface to Charles Elmer Fox’s memoir of this period, *Tales of an American Hobo* (1989), Lynne Adrian stated that it is “…a mark of how completely we have lost sight of the real hoboes that so many Americans regard the 1930’s as the heyday of the hobo” (1). For Kenneth Allsop too, in his cultural history *Hard Travellin’* (1967), the hobo in fact reached his “solstice” as early as 1927 when the railroads were consolidated and the car became the primary mode of American mobility. Between 1911 and 1967 the nation had surrendered over 40,000 miles of railroads and the trains that travelled on the remaining lines became more
technologically advanced and harder to “catch on the fly” (43). As well as the increasingly unattainable chances of free travel, the mechanization of agriculture meant that there was much less demand for migratory labor in the West during this period. What little labor opportunity remained in the fields was comfortably met by workers from the permanent settlements that sprung up with the urbanization of the old frontier, increasingly bolstered by immigrant migrant labor. Writing at the time, sociologist Nels Anderson stated in *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923): “Mining camps depending on a mobile labor force have since become mining towns with a permanent labor supply within walking distance” (29). What the depression did do, however, was to cement the already rich iconography of the “hobo” for a housed culture who have ever since employed his nomadism and romance as ways to understand the human fallout of the economic restructuring, crises, and withering social contracts that have since come to define the most visible aspects of American poverty.

In his seminal 1923 study of hobohemia, Nels Anderson posited a “multiple explanation” for hoboism as it was understood then:

No single cause can be found to explain how a man may be reduced to the status of a homeless, migratory, and casual laborer…Unemployment and seasonal work disorganize the routine of life of the individual worker and destroy regular habits of work but at the same time thousands of boys and men moved by wanderlust are eager to escape the monotony of stable and settled existence. No matter how perfect a social and economic order may yet be devised there will always remain certain “misfits”, the industrially inadequate, the unstable and egocentric, who will ever tend to conflict with constituted authority in industry, society, and government (85).

Ambiguous though Anderson’s definitions were, what is clear is that he regarded movement to be inherent in American poverty. One of the founding fathers of American
urban sociology, he also viewed “wanderlust” as a leading cause of homelessness and therefore an inevitable freedom those living outside the social order availed themselves of. Anderson, perhaps more than any scholar in American sociological history, devoted his career to understanding the causes of homelessness in the United States, even ‘going homeless’ himself as was the social science tradition of the time. However, as we shall see, he also remained torn as to the extent to which mobility was a cause, or an effect, of homelessness, and the ways in which he could best delineate these differences for a public eager for answers.

Conflicting and ambiguous constructions of homelessness, both literary and visual, have made up social responses to American poverty ever since burgeoning rail networks brought transient laborers to cities across the nation in the years following the Civil War. Equally ambiguous terms have long been associated with the ‘mobile homeless’ icon, and public attitudes towards issues of “homelessness” have historically ranged from derogatory to romantic and nostalgic. Tides of political, cultural and economic life have strongly influenced social attitudes towards the homeless, and constructions of poverty are necessarily open to diverse interpretations. The vernacular by which mainstream America has referred to the homeless has certainly never been consistent, and the language of poverty has undergone many revolutions. Many of the oldest derogatory names for homeless people still stubbornly remain. Where then, if anywhere, do social understandings fall regarding those blurry margins separating “the hobo”, “the bum”, “the tramp”, and how do they account for the type of historically idealized mobility American homelessness is so often associated with?
Confusion over definitions of homelessness is nothing new. The earliest formal attempt at categorizing “vagrancy” can be attributed to social reformer and self-proclaimed ‘hobo king’ Ben Reitman (1879-1942), who himself tramped at the close of the nineteenth century and whose formative distinction is recorded in Roger Burns 1987 biography:

A tramp is a man who doesn’t work, who apparently doesn’t want to work, who lives without working and who is constantly travelling. A hobo is a non-skilled, non-employed laborer without money, looking for work. A bum is man who hangs around a low class saloon and begs or earns a few pennies a day in order to obtain drink. He is usually an inebriate (44).

Despite these seemingly straightforward distinctions, all three terms and a host of others have referred to unsheltered people over the last century and have been largely interchangeable in American popular culture. This problem was one that Anderson made a concerted attempt to tackle by subdividing homeless men into at least five loose groups: 1). the seasonal worker, (2) the transient or occasional worker or hobo, (3) the tramp who “dreams and wanders” and works only when it is convenient, (4) the bum who seldom wanders and seldom works, and (5) the home guard who lives in Hobohemia and does not leave town (89). However when he attempted to solidify this thesis by interviewing tramps of the day, Anderson collected over fifty fine-grained definitions of homelessness ranging from the “moocher” or the “Yegg” (a roving desperado), to the “Bundle Stiff” or the “Flopper” who squatted on sidewalks in plain public view (100). Therefore perhaps the only assumption we can make with any degree of consistency is that the term “hobo” is generally agreed to have referred to a man who labored, migrated for opportunity, was
transient by choice or due to a strong dose of wanderlust, or who viewed himself as opposed to conventional society.

Prior to the 1870’s the homeless had remained largely unnoticed by most housed citizens. Loosely known as “vagrants,” “beggars,” or “tramps,” the disenfranchised population began to increase with the first signs of industrialization, and American society slowly started to respond in the form of overnight lodging and early philanthropic organizations (Kusmer, 3). Kusmer in fact traces the origins of the “bum” to the Civil War era when it was used as a derogatory name for foraging soldiers, “…derived from “bummer,” a soldier “…keen on the scent of rebels, or bacon, or silver spoons, or corn, or anything valuable”(37). In the post-bellum period the term slipped into mainstream usage and, perhaps as a direct result of the connection between veterans and mobile vagrancy, it was increasingly used to categorize men up until this point more commonly referred to as “tramps”. It was only with the end of the Civil War and the expansion of the railroads, however, that many veterans took to hopping trains in search of work and the phenomenon of migratory homelessness was fully thrust into the national attention. The later part of the nineteenth century not only marked the beginning of America’s long standing relationship between homelessness and returning military personnel, it was also the period in which many formative attitudes towards unsheltered citizens took hold and the most pervasive terms of poverty began to enter the language.

Almost straight away, those who sought an explanation for the spread of transient men across the nation advanced arguments that the homeless were predisposed to wandering, and somehow naturally used to surviving outside the bounds of society. After
1865 the most readily accepted way to understand these traits was in the context of displaced war veterans who had grown used to a nomadic existence and simply did not want to return to sedentary living. Kusmer traces the word “tramp” back to the Civil War through the memoirs of a Union soldier, John Billings, who spoke of small bands of soldiers going off “on a tramp” (37). In the years following the war the term seems to have entered the American vocabulary in reference to a particular subculture of mobile poor: “In 1871 Massachusetts state charity officials were using the term to refer to wandering vagabonds who roamed the rural areas of the commonwealth. By 1875 the term was being applied more specifically to railroad-riding vagrants, especially those of a violent disposition” (37). Early reactions of sedentary America to the legions of ragged men traversing the countryside were first of distaste, and then of fear, as the “tramp nuisance” turned into the “tramp scare.” Previously vague anti-vagrancy laws were ramped up considerably during the 1870’s and were designed to specifically target transients, permitting their incarceration on tenuous terms. Interestingly, as Kusmer notes, early “antitramp” legislation did in fact aim to “distinguish the wandering poor from the less mobile (and presumably less dangerous) local mendicant” (52). Despite the suggestion that localized begging was more likely to be tolerated, police stations and jails quickly filled with the wandering poor and homelessness became formatively linked with criminality in the American psyche.

Mobility at this juncture was still viewed as a disruption to the social fabric and a deviance not to be tolerated. General fears in society about the threat of strangers and mobility meant that an otherwise cherished cultural value took on potentially negative
associations. Tim Cresswell notes that the tramp became linked with spread of disease and that a fear of syphilis in particular fuelled the Tramp Scare of the 1870s: “Clearly, the non-address of ‘no-fixed-abode’ insinuated a looseness of morals and disconnection from normality. It was mobile people such as sailors, soldiers and tramps who were seen as the spreaders and even the causes of the disease. Of these it was hobos and tramps who were believed to have the highest incidence” (123). As feared as he became, the “tramp” seems to have occupied a cultural place all of his own during the late 1900’s as he was simultaneously romanced and revered, but also reviled.

As panic over homelessness spread, the public discourse turned towards dehumanization and was actively spurred on by the press and social commentators. In 1877 the dean of Yale Law School, Francis Wayland, proclaimed: “As we utter the word Tramp, there arises straightaway before us the spectacle of a lazy, shiftless, sauntering or swaggering, ill-conditioned, irreclaimable, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage” (DePastino, 4). As the late nineteenth century tramp fell subject to these forcefully negative sentiments, arrest and official harassment became the least of his problems. At the height of this first wave of marginalization, nothing short of an all out extermination of homeless populations was advocated in popular forums. Law-abiding citizens were encouraged to run tramps out of town with violent force, and suggestions went as far as flooding poorhouses to drown or flush out the occupants. An editorial in the Chicago Tribune reached a peak with its solution to vagrancy: “The simplest plan probably, where one is not a member of the Humane Society, is to put a little strychnine or arsenic in the meat and the supplies furnished the tramp…as a warning to other tramps
to keep out of the neighborhood” (4). Such discourse relied heavily on dehumanizing the mobile poor, and the tramp soon came to be regarded as nothing short of a biological threat—an infected body whose pestilence was not only incurable, but also highly contagious and immediately threatening to communities through which he passed.

Crucially, the categorization of the post-bellum homeless population as innately or biologically ‘predisposed’ to wandering coincided with the formation of early eugenics, and it is these primitive diagnoses which in many ways lie at the base of pervasive cultural discourses linking homelessness to mobility, albeit in more positive ways. In The Tramp in America (2001), Tim Cresswell collects the arguments of early eugenicists concerned with finding a hereditary explanation for dromomania (nomadism): “In these family histories, anything from headaches to drinking, to having crooked feet is considered evidence for the pathological nature of human wandering” (11).

However, no matter how deviant the homeless figure became in the public eye, no matter how vilified he was in mainstream discourse, there was always still the lingering suggestion that he was also in many ways the footloose embodiment of a subversive American dream. Cresswell observes that this tension can be traced back to a core American conflict between nomads and settled societies:

Knowledge about tramps from 1870 onwards was informed by a morally coded set of geographical suppositions about mobility. On the one hand the tramp’s mobility was seen as a clear indicator or the threat that he, or she, posed to respectable society. On the other, this mobility slotted quite nicely into an ideology that placed mobility right at the heart of the American identity (14).

The term “hobo” differed significantly from other prototype categories of American homelessness, “the tramp” or “the bum”, in that it emphasized a core diagnostic trait of
mobility, but also of labor. It also carried with it far fewer negative connotations. There are a number of ideas on the origins of the word “hobo.” In a 1972 article for American Speech, Jessie Lucke attempted a full etymology of the world and catalogued the most pervasive theories which variously regard the term as a corruption of ho [meward] bo [und], ho [mo] bo [nus], hoe boy, or perhaps the most widely believed and least likely, Ho! beau! Lucke held that the term was increasingly heard in rail yards towards the end of the 1880’s and slowly became used to mean train hopping vagrant workers.

In his heyday the case can be made that the hobo was primarily seen as a migrant worker who was prepared to travel long distances to undertake the most menial labor. This is a key distinction and one which those who self-identified as “hobos” have always been at pains to emphasize. Jeff Davis, President of the International Itinerant Workers Union, is credited with having made the succinct claim that: “Hoboes will work. Tramps won’t and bums can’t” (Fox, 3). Davis even secured himself a seat on the “American Road Congress” when he blew into an official meeting of the association in Detroit, proclaimed he was the “Hobo King of America,” and asked to be made a delegate on the basis of his strong work ethic. The New York Times reported his impassioned speech of October 2nd 1913:

I’ve just come in on the blind baggage from Indianapolis. I am interested in good roads as is every hobo. Don’t confuse hoboes with tramps, who disgrace our profession. The hobo wants work and is idle through no fault of his own. There are 300,000 hoboes in this country and we want good roads so it will be easier for us to find work. (NYT, 1913)

For veteran train hopper Charles Elmer Fox too, the hobo was nothing short of a vagrant elite, a “…forerunner of the migratory workers.” In his memoir Fox regarded tramps as
loafers and opportunists who lacked the discipline of “true hobos” and were not fit to ride the rails. He was even more unequivocal in his views on “bums,” who he refused to grant even the degree of mobility that the wider society associated with all vagrancy: “The bum is quite a different story, for the true bum is usually a town drunk who seldom if ever gets outside his hometown during his lifetime” (2). The derision with which the proud “hobo” viewed others who did not migrate or work is quite clear, demonstrating a strong idealizing of mobility in homelessness that was dear to many homeless subpopulations themselves in the early twentieth century. Fox continues his invective against “bums” at some length and his antipathy is telling:

They are usually found on streets and street corners mooching nickels and dimes from passersby or hanging around some cheap tavern mooching drinks from overly drunk or overly generous customers. These bums always have a sad story to tell, and many of them will even cry real tears while they are telling you about their mother dying with a heart attack, or their beloved wife of twenty-nine years, dying last week with cancer. If you aren’t careful you will be crying with them or taking a mortgage on your home so you can loan this poor unhappy man a few bucks in his hour of need (3).

In academic circles too, particularly the Chicago School of Sociology in which Anderson was working, “types” of homelessness were hotly debated in the first decades of the 1900’s as researchers struggled to keep up with the changing etymology of American inequality. Anderson himself disagreed with Ben Reitman’s aforementioned tripartite definition, instead developing a view of homelessness more closely aligned with the ideas of fellow Chicago sociologist, Alice W. Solenberger:

Almost all “tramps” are “homeless men” but by no means are all homeless men tramps. The homeless man may be an able-bodied workman without a family; he may be a runaway boy, a consumptive temporarily stranded on his way to a health resort, an irresponsible, feeble-minded, or insane man, but unless he is also a professional wanderer he is not a “tramp” (87).
Once again mobility is foregrounded as the most salient lifestyle marker necessary for admittance into an exclusive category that separates these white male icons of American poverty from everyone else.

The Hobo as Worker: Race, Gender, and Ideals of American Mobility

For Nels Anderson there was one more characteristic that set his “hobo” apart: labor. When he revisited his original study thirty-nine years later, his mind was made up: “A hobo is a migratory worker in the strict sense of the word. He works at whatever is convenient in the mills, the shops, the mines, the harvests, or any of the numerous jobs that come his way without regard for the times or the seasons…his living is primarily gained by work and that puts him in the hobo class” (On Hobos and Homelessness, 64).

As far as public attitudes were concerned at the turn of the century, ambiguous linguistic distinctions of homelessness were likely neither clear, nor particularly important, and the homeless remained loosely categorized by a number of names. However, the concept of a working poor, particularly one with the resilience to follow employment opportunities around the nation, did strike a chord and consequentially the homeless gradually began to be understood in new ways that focused on the independence, the resilience, or the freedom of their perceived lives of mobility, rather than simply their abjection or threat. To a large degree these new gentler pathologies were based in nostalgia for the vanishing frontier and a myth of mobility and individualism that appeared in stark contrast to the increasingly commercial trappings of urban American life. For Todd DePastino, writing
in *Citizen Hobo* (2002), the homeless man was ideally positioned as a kind of cultural-go-between at the turn of the century:

> If the term “hobo” was a language innovation used to describe this new species of homeless man, then “hobohemia,”…captured the countercultural aspects of life on the “wageworkers frontier.” Hoboes were bohemian not only because they were comparatively rootless, but also because they were transitional figures, straddling the residual working-class world of the nineteenth century and the emerging one of the twentieth (61).

The construction of the “hobo” created the linguistic and cultural space for homelessness to be portrayed as a kind of heroically American lifestyle choice, not despite its mobility, but *because* of it. This hinged absolutely on the notion that hobos were people prepared to love for work. As the century turned then, so too did public attitudes towards a perception of homelessness with more room to regard itinerant men as outlaws, rebels out-there in the West resisting the onset of industry and urbanization whilst representing core American ethics of work and travel. The subtly changing connotations of homelessness suggest that as society confronted the economic and social upheavals of the early twentieth century, the idea of a marginal subpopulation actively rejecting change and opting to live out their rebellion on the roads and railways, held some real cultural romance, and perhaps even some libertarian appeal. The main case against the tramp had been that he threatened social norms through his perceived hostility, disease and loose morals. The “hobo” and the “bum” however, don’t seem to have inspired the same degree of dehumanizing reactions in mainstream culture. The subversion of these icons tends to have been characterized mainly through laziness, aloof idealism, irregular work habits, or an absolute opposition to corporate servitude. We might see changing attitudes towards the homeless in the early 1900’s as in large part a result of socioeconomic conditions,
boom-bust cycles, and the establishment of an increasingly comfortable middle-class with time for nostalgia. As the center of post-industrial society grew more secure, the margins became less of a threat and could therefore be addressed in more tolerant ways. Concurrent with urbanization and the reinvention of homelessness as an idealistic national tradition, however, visible poverty also gradually began to take on new faces. In the first decades of the twentieth century just as the social and economic conditions which had once accounted for train-hopping migratory workers were shifting, such a mobile lifestyle became simultaneously less attainable but more vital to popular cultural representations of an American past.

It is worth pausing here to emphasize the extent to which ‘the hobo’ is culturally a white male figure, especially in the popular imagination, but to some degree historically as well. As Tim Cresswell has stated: “Most tramps of the late nineteenth century travelled alone either on trains or on foot. The majority were male, white and American born” (38). It is somewhat unusual in cultural history to make an argument against the diversity of a marginal group, and while there are a few accounts of black tramps and women hopping boxcars around the turn of the century, the vectors of maleness whiteness and mobility, and crucially their attendant privileges, have in this case produced a quietly homogenous icon of American poverty. It is this very homogeneity of the hobo construction that I argue accounts not only for his seemingly apolitical resilience in popular culture, but also his power to eclipse the realities and circumstances of far more diverse unsheltered populations today.
In *Walking to Work* (1984) Eric Monkkonen noted that very few black people tramped at the close of the 1800’s—partly because few southerners of any race tramped, partly because tramps were no longer the most oppressed citizens and, perhaps most importantly, because the migratory lifestyle promised much less chance to escape poverty for African Americans:

The absence of many black tramps indicates that to be forced to tramp meant that the individual had expectations of survival, some hope that work or welfare could be found at the destination. For black people in the late nineteenth century, these were not realistic expectations. Thus the massive black migration that had begun was from the South to established black communities in cities, in the South and North, but not out on the chancy tramp trail” (14).

Therefore most African American migration at this time tended to take the form of a one-time relocation to communities where the poverty and social conditions, whilst no better, were relatively fixed-in-place and thus less visible to wider and whiter society. Allsop also supported this view, noting that whilst hobo-jungles outside the south could at times be racially mixed, prejudice and racial violence were continuous threats for black men travelling the rails: “…a gulf of antagonism between black and white drifters” contributed to a “Negro desire to keep his boots in the dust he knows…” (285). He recounted the experiences of Johnston Scott a “…lithe Negro of thirty-three from Birmingham, Alabama…” who had originally left the south in a move of self-preservation after he was accused of harassing a white woman. Johnston spoke of carrying an open knife on trains due to attacks and despite conditions in the south, his short experience of hoboing had encouraged him to return home: “…I’m thinking seriously of going back to Birmingham. A Negro really can live better there now than up here in the North. You can walk down the street like a man. Chicago’s the most
prejudiced city I’ve known. It destroys your will power and self-confidence” (202).

Citing a 1964 United States Department of Commerce report for the Area Redevelopment Administration on “Negro-White Differences in Geographic Mobility”, Allsop also emphasized that the movement of blacks during the formative moments of America’s cultural affair with the hobo was in fact quite limited, and counter-intuitive: “…in light of the generally accepted notion that the Negro is, if not by nature, as the result of conditioning, rootless, casually wanton and shallow in family and emotional ties.” The report held that: “Negroes on the whole seem to have stronger emotional and family ties to their current place of residence than the white population…Negroes with steady jobs are considerably less likely to move than white workers who are continuously employed” (283). It remains that for blacks looking for work the road was an even more inhospitable and dangerous place — “…the scope for jobs was smaller, the black face was a more obvious target for firemen who turned their hoses on the riders on boxcar roofs, and for small town police watchful for vagrants” (284). Devoid of even the meager protections post-bellum southern society afforded to free blacks, serious forays into the hobo life were likely to see them murdered or arrested and turned over to satisfy convict labor demands.

Both Cresswell and Kusmer have suggested that vagrancy laws were commonly applied unequally to blacks and this may also account for the predominant whiteness associated with the hobo figure in popular culture. In 1886 Georgia’s Supreme Court stated that vagrancy laws should be enforced more strictly against the ‘colored’ population because they were thought to be more prone to idle and rootless lives.
Cresswell writes: “Vagrancy laws could be particularly severe when applied to black wanderers. Vagrancy and tramp laws in the Southern states were frequently used to sell black people into servitude, thus reintroducing slavery through the back door” (39). One of the few surveys conducted into the racial identity of homeless people at this time is furnished by Kusmer’s historical look at conviction records for vagrancy in Philadelphia from 1874-1875. He determined that blacks made up only 3.3 percent of male vagrants convicted during that year, and from this small sample concluded that while most were former slaves born in the south, this population was defined by a much higher degree of geographical fixity than were white vagrants: “None of the African Americans for whom such data is available had come to the city less than a week prior to their arrest (as was the case with one-forth of the white vagrants), and a far larger proportion than average had lived in the city at least two years. Almost four out of ten had resided in Philadelphia 10 years of more.” Kusmer’s history also outlined that, although ‘hobo jungles’ could be ethnically diverse, “…the “new” European immigrants seldom rode the freights, and Asian immigrants never did” (107).

The enduring whiteness of the popular hobo figure is all the more interesting in light of his definite historical intersection with other immigrant labor pools, especially migrant Mexican agricultural laborers at the close of the nineteenth century. The answer may in part be attributed to the significant weight of Euro-American folk culture that stemmed from the dustbowl years and the Great Depression in particular, whitewashing rural poverty in the west and focusing heavily on white ‘Oakies’ moving west to California’s promised land in order to renew their bankrupt American dreams. It is also
explained by the fraught immigration history of the American West and the patterns of mobility waves of anti-immigrant legislation encouraged amongst groups of migrant workers, as well as the racial logics with which white America has tended to view certain types of manual labor. Shifting labor demands, economic restructuring, tightening immigration policies, and xenophobic politics, changed the face of migrant labor numerous times during the critical period of 1870 to 1940 when the ‘hobo’ image became consolidated in popular culture. In 1870’s California particularly, short harvest cycles combined with heightened mobility due to the completion of transcontinental railroad networks to produce a highly visible migrant labor force comprised mainly of single white men who hopped trains west to work in the fields for intensive periods of fruit-picking. Prior to the mass migration of tenant farmers from Oklahoma to the west coast during the Great Depression, many white workers were directly recruited from the Midwest interior by union groups such as the Industrial Workers of the World to make up labor demands on the west coast. Once white migrants arrived in California, familiar patterns of labor conflict and ethnic tensions soon took hold. The heightened visibility of the white migrant worker contrasted with the cultural blind spots Hispanic and Asian laborers were confined to, underwritten by the virulent racist narratives that clung to immigrants at the time. The first waves of Oakies in California were outnumbered and to an extent pushed from employment markets by non-white migrant laborers whose jobs and communities were already established in California. The backlash quickly followed and much of the racist politics that underpinned ensuing shifts in ethnic migrant labor
pools relied upon the considerable momentum the white migrant worker had already established in popular culture as a figure of sympathy and American resilience:

The Chinese, whose labor had been crucial when the trans-continental railroad was under construction, were thought to be docile and compliant, and growers employed them in large numbers. After a series of anti-Chinese riots in the 1890s, however, growers were forced to end their reliance on Chinese labor. Japanese beat pickers were treated in similar way (Kusmer, 46).

The considerable antipathy towards Asian immigrant labor from displaced whites, especially amidst early union actions such as those of the IWW, combined with the relatively sedentary nature of early Chinese and Japanese community building on the west coast and accounts in part for their erasure from late nineteenth century folklore of migrant work. This narrative of historic visibility accounts for the powerful resonance in white America of the tragic dustbowl families who have been lauded in popular culture to the extent that they all but eclipsed other labor struggles on the west coast in the early twentieth century.

In a similar vein, whilst Mexican labor also fueled the booming production of the California fruit and vegetable industry, this group too quickly became the target of concerted political attacks. Crucially, while the nature of their agricultural work was surely mobile on a regional level, throughout the state and down the West coast, Mexican and Mexican-American populations retired to their own peripheral communities that had become a fixed and accepted phenomena of urban California by the turn of the century. Cresswell notes: “Mexican labor became increasingly important to the growers and was comparatively invisible as a more or less established part of the landscape…The Mexicans were only required for harvest times. During the remainder of the year they
lived on the outskirts of towns such as Fresno, Bakersfield and Los Angeles” (46). Once more there is a suggestion that the “invisibility” of poverty and migratory labor of non-whites, is related to the specific urban landscapes in which they are hidden.

Perhaps more than any other immigrant group, Mexican migrant workers have been subject to the full and continuous force of American immigration legislation that, taking political cues from ever-present white prejudice, has consistently pushed and pulled these populations across the nation’s southern border at the whims of labor demands and racist fear mongering. For this discussion, it is of utmost significance that one of the most concerted political removals of Mexican workers took place in the same moment that an enduring caricature of migrant labor became formed in the shape of the white American-born male. In 1930 a ‘voluntary repatriation’ campaign began that saw 150,000 laborers returned to Mexico within seven years (46). Importantly, this state attack on established immigrant labor occurred amidst a culture of growing sympathy, pathos even, for the white Oakies whose plight was beginning to be highlighted by activists, folksingers and journalist across the nation. Furthermore, the Oakies were visible to an extent non-white migrant laborers had never been. Cresswell writes: “Unlike the Mexican workforce, the Oakies did not disappear to the edges of the cities in non-harvest time. Instead they remained in the rural counties and became an embarrassment to the local communities and the state in general” (47).

The discourse of embarrassment is an important one in discussing public attitudes towards homelessness, but it is of course also a highly racialized one. It was really the 1939 publication of John Steinbeck’s popular dustbowl novel *The Grapes of Wrath* that
firmly tugged the public heartstrings and gave rise to an outpouring of concern and calls
to aid displaced and destitute citizens throughout the West. The novel sold 420,565
copies in its first year, but as a contemporary historian of the dust bowl migration noted,
empathy for Steinbeck’s migrants was to a large extent rooted in race, “because the
nation found intolerable for white Americans, conditions it considered normal for
Californian Mexicans or Negroes” (Kusmer, 223). This mixture of public sentiment
combined with the very real labor shortages miring Californian agriculture since the
depортation of large numbers of Mexican laborers, meant that the Oakies for a time took
their place in the fields where non-white laborers had previous toiled. Allsop explained
this away by saying:

During that decade an almost total change occurred in the labor pattern in rural
California. The Anglo-American took over from the Mexican who, displaced,
retreated across the border. The final external factor which crucially affected the
man from the Dust Bowl was the outbreak of World War II, when booming
defence factories – aircraft plants and shipyards – lifted him off the soil of the
Valleys, and the Mexican came back (382).

However it is more likely that despite the forced pushes and pulls of American
immigration and economic policy in the early twentieth century years leading up to the
Bracero program, the cultural erasure of non-white migrant workers has a more simple
explanation. That the historical Mexican and Mexican-American migrant laborers never
seriously upset the mythology of the American hobo is largely attributable to their
ethnicity and is further testimony to the extremely limited room twentieth century
national narratives had for non-white icons. It is also in part due to their serendipitous
collision in popular culture with the Oakies who were quickly enshrined in the national
memory of depression-era migration. The overarching history of white and non-white labor relations in the West is marked by fierce competition, prejudice and animosity, and by no means were the Oakies above any of this. Allsop recounts that by the end of the decade, the renewed prosperity of many dustbowl migrants relative to other more established laborers in the West was largely due to their willingness to cross picket lines. During a Mexican citrus worker strike in Southern California, 1941, Oakies enrolled as strikebreakers and “promptly attempted to drive the Mexicans from the fields” (383). Although this hardly resembles the socialistic work ethic populist writers such as Steinbeck portrayed coming out of the dust bowls, displaced white farmers from failing rural states in American Midwest did to an extent define their own mythos once in California, at the considerable expense of marginalized ethnic populations who industry had long been exploited in the region’s fields. In the end, although dustbowl migrants barely resembled the tramps or hoboes of previous decades, and their mobility was largely in one direction, in cars not on trains, it was their whiteness and association with stoic self-reliance that in many ways informed nascent caricatures of homelessness in the West and solidified the “hobo” icon in national popular culture.

Whilst the outgrowth of a culturally white icon of homelessness from this period can in some part be attributed to the hoboes’ historical whiteness and the mobility and visibility it afforded him, the overriding masculinity of this construction raises different questions regarding the representation of female transience. Although far less common, homelessness and migratory labor amongst women were nevertheless realities, albeit ones largely unnoticed in society. Once again we can attribute the obfuscation of female
homelessness even at this early stage to, amongst other things, a discrepancy in the terms used to identify poverty and gender. In her formative essay on the subject, “Sisters of the Road: Women Transients and Tramps”, Lynn Weiner notes that transient woman occupied a “marginal place in an already marginal culture” (172). The transient labor force had always been differentiated by sex in the eyes of housed society— male migrant workers were labeled as ‘hobos’ and ‘tramps’, whilst female transients were euphemistically referred to as “women adrift” (171). The undertones of sex, prostitution and ‘loose morals’ here are of course implicit, and once again point to a discourse of embarrassment that surrounds female homelessness when bought to the attention of a housed society. In much the same way as it was really the poverty of families that engendered much public handwringing during the dustbowl migrations, there is something jarring about the sight of women transients that disturbs cherished national myths of femininity and domesticity in ways that males vagrants do not. Weiner goes on to make a point that has clear echoes with the markedly differing cultural locations occupied by mobile black men compared to mobile white men: “Male tramps emblemized sharply different values about a man’s role in society. The ideas of freedom and independence which were anathema for women were idealized for men, and accounts of trampdom often exalted the wanderlust of the tramping male” (172). Cultural assumptions about ideal gender behaviors point towards a complex hierarchy of representations and attribute stigma to behaviors by females, which are seen as acceptable, noble, or even heroic when enacted by white males.
The category of female ‘hobo’ or ‘tramp’ is an especially problematic one because she subverts the overriding *masculinity* of these caricatures that accounted for much of their exaltation in popular culture in the first place. For the roots of this tension we need look to eugenicist arguments of the early twentieth century, which explicitly cast mobility and nomadism as a male preserve on biological grounds. Cresswell writes: “It is revealing, although not surprising, that the pathology of nomadism is said to reside only in the minds and bodies of men. Just as law had defined the tramp as male, so eugenics defined nomadic instincts as caused by genes linked to masculinity” (118). In fact eugenic aside, most casual commentators of hoboism during this period, including those who themselves tramped, focused on ‘wanderlust’ as an affliction primarily effecting young boys and men. Other more vague explanations of the time characterized mobility as something that “was in the blood” of young males and which could not be helped. In his essay “Tramping Workers, 1890-1920: A Subcultural View” John Schneider recounted the testimony of ‘Buffalo Scotty’ speaking of his own entry into the homeless life:

Well, when I was fifteen, a railroad was bein’ built ten miles north of the farm. I kept teasin’ Dad to let me take off to see it; but the more I teased, the tighter he froze. At last, one afternoon in August, I was mendin’ the fence in the lower cornfield, the wind kept bowin’ the engine’s whistle over the hills, an’ every time them whistles came I felt my own steam risin’. At last I quit work. I stood and listened. An’ about one minute later I was a hobo for life — wid legs cuttin’ air! (220)

These kinds of appeals to a romance of travel and a kind magnetism afforded by the American road are quite specifically masculinist, and continue to resonate across popular culture today. That women have been erased from these narratives suggests that ideas of
innate mobility amongst females are profoundly more unsettling to the status quo. As representations of homelessness often pivot on a core conflict between ideals of ‘home’ and ‘freedom,’ that the domestic space is culturally seen as feminine provides an important clue as to why constructions of female homelessness have tended to be marginalized, or spun in ways that de-emphasize mobility and instead focus on other pathological, and more place-based, traits.

Part of the answer here lies within the very tension between gendered mobility and its moral conflict with an urban society that must disavow mobility to preserve order. Nels Anderson understood geographical mobility as in direct conflict with place, and he felt that the liberation urban mobility afforded came with significantly higher costs for male transients: “The mobility of the city detaches and undomesticates the urban man. By it he is released from his primary group associations, the family or the neighborhood. With this independence comes a loss of loyalty. Urban man gains freedom, but the individualism he achieves is often at the cost of locus” (14). This is a point worth emphasizing: Mobility in this light is in direct conflict with cultural ideals of both home and community. To enjoy the heightened freedom of one of these ideals is to relinquish many protections afforded by the others. That mobility was so often considered threatening to the very structures of urban settlement meant that, as much as it was championed as a cultural freedom, it has also had to be qualified as a freedom only desirable for some. This resistance took the form of simple gender binaries — movement was valued for a certain type of American masculinity, but considered deviant and a threat to the domestic base of the nation when performed by females. Popular
representations from the time of females as transients or tramps are extremely hard to find, suggesting a cultural disavowal of the women who did make up the homeless population during the hobo’s rise to prominence. Cresswell writes:

The problematic existence of the female tramp and the attempts to produce knowledge about her were linked to a wider context of anxiety about women outside the home that pervaded nineteenth-and early twentieth century consciousness….women were firmly placed in the domestic, private sphere, while public and mobile space was considered masculine. The transgressions of women moving through public space called into question these associations. (88)

The highest estimates of the female tramp population came in the 1930s some time after the popular hobo icon had gathered momentum, when counts suggested as many as one-in-ten persons on the road were women. However, as Weiner notes, society defined these women according to far less romantic constructions, if it noticed them at all: “Women self-identified tramps were barely visible, drawing sporadic attention as “road sisters” at best and “hay bags” at worst. When they were noticed, it was with the recognition that they defied all contemporary standards of work and virtue…a most radical challenge to the social order” (172). Of course, one of the cultural blind spots that female homelessness has often been forced into is that of the “loose woman” or sex worker — and it is of no coincidence that the derogatory term “tramp” in modern parlance is used to refer to a “prostitute” or “slut”. The sexualization of women’s bodies is of consideration here, and it is notable that negative portrayals of women as ambiguously gendered, queer, or hyper-sexualized come far more easily than portrayals of them as simply ‘homeless’. Discursively too, there has long been made an erroneous claim in this culture that women do not fall into extreme poverty and homelessness as
easily because they can “always resort to prostitution” (Cresswell, 101). Clearly so too can men, but nevertheless this discourse continues today and is directly traceable to the early work cultural representations did to make female homelessness synonymous with sex work. Kusmer makes this connection and attributes moral discourses identifying ‘work’ and ‘mobility’ as masculine as reasons female homelessness remained largely unseen by a Victorian public: “At a time when concern about the “tramp menace” was widespread, public opinion failed to even acknowledge the existence of homeless women. This is ironic since, compared to men, a far higher proportion of homeless women were long-standing residents of the community. To all but the police, however, they remained largely invisible” (110). This discourse has strong resonance today as female homelessness falls into both physical and cultural blind spots largely based on “ways of seeing” that privilege masculinity, and often assume erroneously that women have ‘other options’ than to be homeless. As Passaro argued, these blind spots are only intensified by the systemic structures of social welfare in America which in fact use gender and race to perpetuate homelessness, insuring that “…only certain categories of people will remain homeless, thereby lulling most of the nation into apathy…” (106).

A final consideration we must make when interrogating the omission of women from popular heroic narratives of transience in the American West is that they added to their own invisibility though choices in dress and comportment, choices which were made with good reason. Cresswell notes that most commentators in the early twentieth century found the very idea of a female hobo impossible, and that the connection between hoboism and masculinity was explicit – one even going as far as to write “…show me a
lady hobo, and I’ll show you an angular bodied, flint eyed, masculine travesty upon her sex” (104). It is therefore of little surprise that cross-dressing and the performance of masculine traits marked the female homeless experience during this formative period, as they often do today. Consciously ascribing to masculine gender norms or playing down their sexuality is a valuable tool of self-preservation for women living on the streets at risk of sexual harassment and attack, and one which no doubt contributes to the pervasive stereotype of the exclusively male hobo. Weiner states this case in her essay on female tramps, adding that male dress was also historically a more practical choice for transient women who had to hop trains or undertake manual or agricultural labor. “Many women tramps differed most visibly from other women by the way they dressed. Many of them dressed in men’s clothes, and in fact tried to “pass” as men, which may account for their invisibility…” (176). The double-edged sword of female homelessness during the early part of the twentieth century is that social outrage was so absolute when confronted with the prospect of women on the road, that for those women who were homelessness there was an imperative to simultaneously hide their vagrancy at all costs.

None of this is to say that there weren’t significant numbers of females, African Americans, Latinos, or other minority groups, who were living homeless or migratory lives at this time. Clearly there were. It is however to argue that both the circumstances and crucially the geography of homelessness were different for blacks, migrant Latinos, and women. Underwritten by the cultural racism that continues to marginalize these minority narratives, these circumstantial and geographic differences begin to explain why the archetypal figure of migratory homelessness has so often been portrayed as a white
man. Furthermore, the structure of American society since 1870 has shaped a racial and gendered politics of homelessness that is based heavily upon bounded encounters between mainstream housed society and people whose appearance or behavior aligns with cultural preconceptions of ‘homeless’ — in the absence of these markers, be they gendered, racialized, or pathological, many homeless people are simply ‘not seen’.

This problematic however, also shows up concretely in the mechanisms of American social services provision to this day, with dire consequences for invisible females in need of shelter. Joanne Passaro, Ida Susser, and Teresa Gowan have all analyzed the gendering of poverty in detail, and their work demonstrates a far more complex reality on the streets than the simple “feminization of poverty” that began to be noticed in the early 1980s:

Homelessness is also experienced differently according to gender. Women lucky enough to keep their children from foster care are more likely to be assigned private rooms and services available in a rundown hotel. Men and women without children or separated from them find themselves assigned to large sex-segregated shelters. As a result homeless women without children excluded from services for women with children are likely to be the most brutalized group of all. They are subject to the miseries, deprivations, and dangers of homelessness and, above all and beyond this, to assault by men if they spend time alone on the streets. (Susser, 421)

This severe gender disparity is certainly supported by ethnographic data I will deploy later, and lies at the very core of my study as it contextualizes the actual problems of visibility for certain homeless groups. The gendering of poverty also illustrates how uneven cultural associations with freedom and mobility can shape a public politics of homelessness that leaves vulnerable people even more vulnerable. Above all it also
demonstrates just how critical the combined weight of cultural representations and urban encounters are to understanding homelessness in American.

My contention then, is twofold: Firstly, because white men enjoyed more actual freedom through their privileged mobility, cultural stereotypes have, under particular circumstances, emphasized freedom as a defining aspect of even failed white men. This is precisely because of the way white masculinity has been historically configured as heroic in the mainstream culture — only the trappings of domesticity, family, home, and career, therefore, can tie him down. The loss of these trappings therefore, and the ‘failure’ of a certain ideal of masculinity that holds provision for family as central, can simultaneously become viewed as an alternative type of ‘success,’ and an escape from the constraints that impeded his full realization of self-reliance and freedom through mobility.

The second part of my argument extends this same problematic to the ways that the economic and domestic ‘failure’ of people of color has been seen by whites according to a quite different set of assumptions about mobility. Of this formative period of national imagination sculpting, Cresswell writes: “It is clear that mobility meant something quite different to black people. They had been denied the freedom of movement that whites generally enjoyed.” He continues: “In addition, the movement of black people was seen by whites in quite different ways. The black presence in formerly white-only areas was seen as evidence for the end of white control and domination” (39). Whereas there has certainly always been something unsettlingly close-to-home in the image of a failed white male for white people in America — a society in which, deep down, they know they are better placed to succeed — the specter of racialized vagrancy in fact threatens to upset
national myths much more forcefully. After all, as the above discussion shows, the circumstances of failed white men have tended to be readily accepted in mainstream culture as either proud manifestations of an alternative American dream, or as social aberrances whose poverty and failure are pathetic and their own fault.

Beyond the cultural history that has worked to specify a popular image of migrant labor that over emphasizes whiteness and negates the clear racial diversity of migrant labor during the turn of the century, the enduring whiteness that defines the hobo construction points towards much deeper cultural ideologies which at core suggest that mobility on the part of white Americans continues to be viewed in very different ways to the mobility of ethnic minority groups. It is in fact this very idea which underlines the extent to which a discourse of ‘independence,’ ‘agency’, and ‘freedom’ as somehow embodied by the very mobility of white men, serves to further eclipse the marginal position occupied by invisible ethnic groups whose real mobility is historically produced specifically because of their diminished labor rights, outsider immigration status, and insecure working conditions that actively exploit their cheap labor. In short the equation of race and mobility amounts to something quite simple in the eyes of the dominant culture: mobility is regarded as a natural state for white American males, even failed white males, and its realization amounts to self-reliance, freedom and renewed opportunity. For racialized groups, failure is viewed unequivocally as a lack of mobility, social stagnancy, and dependency on state welfare. The assumption that, once in the United States, immigrant populations ‘don’t move’ for opportunity and instead become a burden on the state is apparent in immigration discourse which negates work ethic on the
part of non-whites and gives rise to racist stereotypes painting immigration as a societal burden. This in turn feeds into a cycle which further ‘proves’ the noble ideal of an American character based on the ability to reinvent oneself and move on to pastures new — traits which white men are culturally defined by.

The slippage in the ways gender and race shape public attitudes towards homelessness is important as there are two different conceptions at play, both deeply problematic, of failed masculinity and whiteness in tension with a host of racist pathologies aimed at non-white men whose ‘failure’ or threat is taken as implicit. One possibility here is that because culturally, maleness and whiteness are seen to afford the freedoms of mobility and rugged self-reliance even in poverty, and perhaps especially in poverty, whereas male-non-whiteness and poverty become immediately associated with threatening criminality, social stagnancy, domestic failure, or dependency on state welfare institutions. This could begin to offer one clue as to why, even in the face of daily evidence to the contrary, popular representations of homelessness and mobility still so often construct a ‘white other’ in the form of itinerant men whose fall from the dominant mainstream can nevertheless be understood as a kind of liberation or ‘reawakening’ into an alternative American dream. The result is what Eric Lott, writing in *Love & Theft* (1993) termed “hegemonic-self-assurance” (40) — all members of mainstream society, regardless of their race or class, are able to harbor an antipathy towards the image of an indolent, aggressive, unhygienic, feral, drunken, and de-politicized abject other. So often of course on the streets and in public discourses of American homelessness however, this negative is image is undoubtedly constructed as a black male. It remains that white males
in similar discourse stand to benefit from this hegemonic self-assurance as, depending on circumstances, their homelessness is at least more likely to be positively valued as a form of American freedom or individualism.

Treatments of similarly marginalized populations throughout American media history, suggest that before a benign caricature can be extracted from a sub-culture about which there are wider social sensitivities, a number of race, gender and class-based obstacles must first be navigated by the dominant culture. Anthony Harkins’ *Hillbilly* offers a cultural history of another subversive American icon whose whiteness provided the green light for decades of prejudicial image making. Throughout the twentieth century the Hillbilly served as a “continually negotiated mythic space through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to reconcile the past and present” (4). Harkins holds that the popular hillbilly image was positioned as a “white other”, hyper-imagined in race, age and gender, so as to legitimize a host of problematic deployments in popular culture:

The hillbilly’s whiteness, however nondefinitive, was also central to its longevity in popular media, for it allowed the image to serve as a seemingly apolitical site for often highly charged political struggles over the definition of race, class, gender norms and roles, as well as the nature of mass culture. Because producers could portray images of poverty, ignorance, and backwardness without raising cries of bigotry and racism from civil rights advocates and the black and minority communities, the crude and often negative hillbilly stereotype continued long after cultural producers had abandoned previously accepted yet equally offensive and racist stereotypes (8)

There are notable comparisons to be made between modern constructions of homelessness and the treatment of the hillbilly in popular culture. Both imaginings demonstrate the way in which American Others must be reduced into homogeneity before
a pervasive stereotype can be found. Whilst the hillbilly’s exploitation as stereotype was validated by the mainstream culture’s ideas of failed white masculinity in Appalachia, the relatively minimal white masculinity of homeless populations is in fact heavily

*overemphasized* in a range of cultural discourses which often focus disproportionately on homeless individuals conforming to the traditional “hobo” stereotype. Whether white male homelessness in America is being positively valued as it so often is in popular culture, or viewed as a personal failing does not much matter. Either way one result of the culture’s emphasis on this most visible minority experience of homelessness in urban America is that it even further marginalizes women, families, and those people whose ethnicity has not historically conformed to America’s “ideal” homeless person. The footloose hobo character in all his conflicted whiteness and masculinity remains a problematically potent American icon, seamlessly and silently conflated with homelessness-at-large. Notions of perpetual transience, individuality, conscious lifestyle choice, wilderness survival, and American wanderlust have absolutely permeated popular discourses of homelessness in American life. For evidence of this we must look only to popular culture’s long standing fascination with the figure of the footloose hobo and the caricature’s contribution to formative perceptions of a selective and mobile “homelessness” as, amongst other things, an especially American form of individualism, freedom, and transcendentalist escape.
“Hobo Lit”: formative literary tropes of American homelessness

In 1960 Jack Kerouac sounded the death knell for an enduring labor icon of individualism and mobility in an essay entitled “The Vanishing American Hobo.” The Beat writer was aggrieved by the encroachment of anti-vagrancy legislation, but he also blamed the obliteration of the hobo from the American landscape on his treatment in the popular press. Kerouac used the hobo image to conjure up an imagined America of bygone times when social values had room for an itinerant hero:

…children danced around the hobo, he wore huge and raggy clothes and always looked straight ahead indifferent to the children, and the families didnt mind the children playing with the hobo, it was a natural thing. But today mothers hold tight their children when the hobo passes through town because of what newspapers made the hobo to be- the rapist, the strangler, the child-eater. Stay away from strangers they’ll give you poison candy…– Today the hobo’s made to slink- everybody’s watching the cop heroes on TV (149).

That Kerouac chose to invoke this particular cultural icon as a nostalgic vehicle to deliver his lament for by-gone times is indicative of the elevated place the hobo had come to occupy in Beat-era fantasies of American mobility and freedom, as well as the caricature’s considerable appeal to counter-cultural movements as an ‘authentic’ object of white American masculinity. In fact at the outset of his essay, Kerouac takes some care to navigate the fine line between authenticity and pastiche: “I myself was a hobo but only of sorts, as you see, because I knew someday my literary efforts would be rewarded by social protection — I was not a real hobo with no hope ever except that secret eternal hope you get sleeping in empty boxcars…” (148). The idea of a ‘pure’ experience of poverty that defines itself through an absolute negation of hope as a necessary
precondition for some deeper profound realization of America, is to often be found at the base of the national Anglo-masculine literary cannon. Kerouac’s nostalgia is palpable in this essay, as he goes on to pronounce America the “motherland of bumdom” and grows highly critical of modern policing and the encroaching surveillance state — the combined effect of which he saw as the single biggest threat to an expression of national character that could only exist in the wild, untethered from society:

There’s something strange going on, you can’t even be alone any more in the primitive wilderness (‘primitive areas’ so-called) there’s always a helicopter comes and snoops around, you need camouflage. — Then they begin to demand that you observe strange aircraft for Civil Defense…As far as I’m concerned the only thing to do is sit in a room and get drunk and give up your hoboing and camping ambitions because their aint a sheriff or a fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you cook a little meal over some burning sticks in the tule brake or a hidden valley or anyplace any more because he has nothing to do but pick on what he sees out there on the landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station. (156)

Of courser the theme of camping is as present here as ever in debates about homelessness in the national imagination. The leading voice of disaffected white male hipsters however, was only the latest writer to flirt with homelessness as a mark of ‘American authenticity’ — for over a century even tenuous associations with tramping had immediately signified the iconoclasm, resilience, and individuality that young male literary types strive for. A nascent ‘hobo-lit’ canon which gathered momentum throughout late nineteenth century American writing had began to explicitly conflate prior transcendentalist concerns of nature and wilderness isolation, with urban homelessness, romantic rootlessness, self-imposed poverty, and the cultural antidote to rapid industrialization — the economic engine of which ironically owed much to actual
migrant labor. Nevertheless, nostalgic adventuring on the part of writers-hobos (or hobo-writers) became almost de rigueur for white men striving for literary fame. Such works variously eulogized the migrant hobo, appropriated his lifestyle as a source of poetic inspiration and idealism, or evoked the itinerant wanderer as symbolic of vanishing freedoms and mainstream society’s surrender to consumerism and suburban uniformity. This literature was produced both by writers who were homeless, and by writers who “went homeless” in order to have something to write about. The overriding Anglo-Saxon masculinity of this literature is significant because these specific canonical constructions continue to underwrite the most pervasive social attitudes that assume emphasized mobility and agency to be inherent aspects of homelessness in the United States. I will return to Kerouac again in time, but in surveying some of this formative canon it is important to note that the narrators of non-fictional accounts of tramping either make an explicit choice to adopt a transient ‘hobo’ lifestyle in order to write about their adventures, or their literary appeal is tied up with their status as a “true hobo.” Either way, we are confronted with some of the most stubborn pathologies associated with homelessness, as disenfranchisement becomes muddled with the rhetoric of carefree drifting and deliberate masculinist narratives of wilderness survival, camping, and independence.

While the ground for America’s literary fascination with homelessness may have been prepared by Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau, it is worth stressing that ideals of transcendentalism still held ‘home’ as a virtue, albeit a basic and isolated home where self-reliance was at a premium. The idealized mobility that was in some ways secondary
to the more lofty philosophical concerns of asceticism which concerned these writers of the 1850’s, was however to take its place at the absolute center of literary accounts of American wandering that were to follow towards the close of the century as the western frontier finally succumbed to sedentary urbanism and property rights. One of the first well know examples of this trend was Mark Twain’s account of his experience as a young man and vagabond searching for romance, fame and wealth in the West.

Twain’s travel memoir, *Roughing It* (1872), was quite strikingly ahead of the times in its indictment of an adolescent American dream and the clarity with which Twain saw through a burgeoning Western myth. Twain’s biography is book-ended by extended periods of nomadism; either spent roaming the West as a young writer, or traversing Europe and the Eastern United States as a jaded old man of letters. In the opening pages of *Roughing It*, America’s literary patriarch tells of the envy he felt as a “young and ignorant” man when his brother accepted a job placement in Nevada Territory: “Pretty soon he would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West…” he remembers thinking, “…and write home and tell us all about it, and be a hero” (49). What is remarkable about Twain’s tramping memoirs is that he barely once claims the categories of “homeless,” or “tramp,” instead travelling for its own sake and camping for the experience and health of it. Writing of the first half of the nineteenth century, this gives some testimony to the idea that, whilst mobility and travel may rest at the very foundations of culture in the American West, the conflation of these passions with homelessness and vagrancy did not come until later. For Twain camping in the western wilderness was primarily about
rejuvenation and working to experience the new culture of the nation in its very moment of formation. Of such an experience in California he wrote: “Three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, and give him an appetite like an alligator” (188). What he both searched for, and found, through his periods of nomadism was a birth of sorts, and it is arguably Twain more than his transcendentalist contemporaries whose work created the real literary space for American rootlessness to take on the conations of individual ‘rebirth’ and reinvention that it came to represent in the following century. As Twain clearly recognized himself, it was precisely his spell of literary nomadism that both enabled him to critically respond to the burgeoning mythology of the American West, but also ironically to create it.

Of course perhaps more than any other nineteenth century novel, it was Twain’s *Adventure’s of Huckleberry Finn* (1984) that helped to code the traveling lifestyle as an alternative form of American success and freedom. The novel also underscores racially differentiated access to mobility in the decades prior to the civil war, and takes us to the heart of a longstanding dominant American discourse which has valued certain types of white mobility as positive or adventuresome, while the mobility of non-white others is viewed as threatening or pathological. The cultural value of mobility as freedom is illustrated powerfully in the subtle dichotomy Twain set up between his young uneducated white narrator Huck, who escapes the Widow Douglas’ attempt to “civilize” him, and her black slave Jim, who escapes after hearing she plans to quite literally sell him down the river into even worse circumstances (55). For both characters movement and travelling symbolize freedom: if they stop or linger for too long in one place then
they risk capture. However, the stakes of potential capture are fundamentally different — for Huck detection means a return to the civilized domestic life he found so confining, whereas for Jim capture would mean punishment and potential death. Of course herein lies one of the novel’s central and most debated tensions, the conundrum Huck faces of how best to maintain his relative freedom without it coming at the expense of Jim’s absolute freedom. For David L. Smith, the racial discourse of the book is played out in Huck’s eventual “moral” decision: “The issue here is not just whether Huck should return a fugitive slave to its lawful owner. More fundamentally, Huck must decide whether to accept the conventional wisdom which defines “Negroes” as subhuman commodities, or the evidence of his own experience…” (371). Huck’s dilemma is heightened by a politics of identity — his light skin is unlikely to arouse suspicion that he is a runaway, whereas Jim’s dark skin certainly will. Twain’s treatment of nineteenth century identity politics is even more explicit when we consider that Huck Finn has faked his own death and his mobility is therefore cast as a “rebirth” of kinds. Jim’s rebirth as a “free” mobile subject of course, is to be much more fraught and it is American society which ensures he remains shackled to his former slave self. In fact as Jim protects Huck throughout the novel, even shielding the boy from the corpse of his alcoholic father, he increasingly takes on the role of father figure to the young white boy and through the relative freedoms their seized mobility affords them, both become “men” for the first time in quite different ways: Huck as he comes of age with the help of privileged Tom Sawyer, and Jim through his emancipation with the help of both white boys. It is undoubtedly only travelling and the promise of perpetual movement that can offer manhood to this
pair, across their racial divisions, and thus perpetual mobility is once again shown to be an alternative conception of success in American culture. At the close of Twain’s masterpiece, it is of no surprise that we find the trio on the verge of heading west:

And then Tom he talked along, and talked along, and says, le’s all three slide out of here, one of these nights, and get an outfit, and go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory, for a couple of weeks or two…But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it. I bean there before. (295-296)

The fact that Mark Twain had in fact began a narrative of “Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Injuns” in the summer of 1884 which he never finished, should be considerable testimony to fact that towards the end of the American literary patriarch’s own career chronicling the culture’s nascent dreams and freedoms, all roads were pointing west. (295)

Early American writers had long constructed the cowboy as a homeless itinerant laborer of an explicitly western landscape, and in time the figure of the ‘outlaw’ iconoclast was also to occupy the mythic space of the wider-open prairies and Great Plains that lay at the periphery of urban America’s psyche. However as the nation industrialized it was the ‘hobo autobiography’ that came to fill this specific niche in the literary market. Writing in *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (2004), John Allen counted approximately forty autobiographies of tramps (or “hobos”) published in the United States and England between 1890 and 1940. This short-lived but evocative and popular genre boomed during the Progressive era and, Allen notes, the popularity of the tramp coincided with the emergence of an American intellectual figure: “One way tramp autobiographies romanticized homelessness was by
representing the author as an intellectual, usually an observer of other tramps and the tramp lifestyle” (95). Part of the reasons for the shift during this period towards literary tastes seeking out more gritty or realistic subject matter, Allen attributes to a burgeoning publishing market that could, for the first time, to a small extent support writers who did not come from wealthy backgrounds or private patronage: “Victorian values and romantic conventions were rejected in favor of a more direct, realistic experience of life, which in turn led to an interest in those people who were already adept at such a lifestyle: outcasts, the down and out, and I would argue, tramps” (99). This is a key point for my argument as it suggests that, concomitant with the ‘settling’ of American life in the West, and amidst a new progressive national politics which valued intellectualism and a distinctly ‘American’ cultural identity (significantly, a white male one), the search for cultural authenticity turned away from an outmoded emulation of European ‘high culture’, and “down” instead towards the national underbelly with a mixture of fascination, titillation, and voyeuristic guilt. There, waiting to cater to these bourgeoisies urges, was the old figure of the tramping ‘hobo’ backed by a publishing industry thirsty for his adventuresome stories. The resulting canon of ‘hobo lit’ is in fact remarkably homogenous, realistic only within tight parameters, and yet retaining a strong romanticism that appealed to the dominant culture: “The writers minimized determinism by claiming that they became tramps by choice rather than necessity, and they romanticized their accounts with the inclusion of plenty of adventure and excitement” (101).
The most popular writer to openly portray the homeless condition as a desirable sort of ‘freedom’ was Jack London, who himself became infatuated by the lack of responsibilities the lifestyle seemed to promise. In his non-fiction work *The Road* (1907), London delivered a first person account of his tramping that is rich with hyperbole and a barely concealed love for the myth of the footloose and fancy-free homeless man. In this popular account London employed the terms hobo and tramp interchangeably as he vagabonded around the nation gleefully reveling in the folklore of migratory workers, and even marching with “General Coxey’s Army” — an organized labor movement that tramped to D.C. in 1894 with the goal of raising awareness of itinerant workers. However, as Allen remarks, London and other tramp writers in fact “undermined the intent and impact” of such serious movements through their romantic emphasis on individualism, nonconformity and independence as inherent to the homeless condition (98). For London the hobos were the noble survivors of an industrializing society and there was nothing more emblematic in his white-male view of America than a professional wanderer. London was also appalled at the treatment of his cultural icons in the court system, which he claimed shook his “patriotic American citizenship” (77). During his stint as a literary bum, London claimed he didn’t want to work, instead opting to beg and take handouts as he tramped for adventure and literary inspiration. Critically, amidst his obvious admiration for the “artistry” of hoboing, London justified his travels not only in terms of academic curiosity or sociological endeavor, but claimed some deep biological urge to roam: “I became a tramp— well, because of that life that was in me, of the wanderlust in my blood that would not let me rest” (152). Here then, is a formative
white-male literary figure who takes homelessness not only as a noble manifestation of core American freedoms, but also makes the claim that the specific *mobility* of an unsheltered life is essential to the national character, and in fact *biological* in the body-politic.

The most enduring problem of Jack London’s tramp writings (and many like them), and one which as we will come to see persists strongly in the present moment, is simply that they paint a rosy picture of fun and daring-do as part of being homelessness and rootless, whilst singularly failing to represent hardships or deliver any criticism of the dominant culture or political-economic structures. The overly optimistic tone of London’s wanderings, as well as a strong suggestion of self-importance and starry-eyed delusion, is hard to deny. In a chapter entitled “Road-Kids and Gay Cats” he describe his first encounter with a group of travelling youth: “A new world was calling to me in every word that was spoken — …And it all spelled Adventure. Very well; I would tackle this new world. I “lined” myself up alongside those road-kids. I was just as strong as any of them, just as quick, just as nervy, and my brain was just as good”(159). Shortly after this formative ‘experience’ of homelessness however, London goes from novice to a self-proclaimed “profesh” — nothing short of a born ‘native’ tramp with healthy amounts of wanderlust and resilience in his very blood:

> I was first a road-kid and then I was a profesh. Because I had started young, I practically skipped my Gay-Cat apprenticeship…in a short time I acquired the unmistakable airs and ear-marks of the blowed-in-the-glass profesh. And be it known, here and now, that the profesh are the aristocracy of The Road. They are the lords and masters, the aggressive men, the primordial noblemen, *blond beasts* so beloved of Nietzsche” (173).
As I have already mentioned there was a tendency on the part of literary markets around the time Jack London published *The Road* to cater towards a literate but working class urban public who wanted affirmation that there was an alternative and commonly attainable expression of American authenticity that would set their cultural identity apart. In this light it is little wonder that he is at pains to stress that his exemplars of homelessness are indeed “aggressive men” and “blonde beasts” — he was not only actively shaping a “homeless cultural identity” but also a national cultural identity. Once more we are confronted here with the overriding whiteness and masculinity that has been historically projected onto diverse unsheltered populations, as well as the cultural bedrock upon which are built problematic constructions of American homelessness as an idealized form of mobility and individualistic resilience.

Another formative representation Jack London offered was that of the homeless ‘grafter’ or conman, who would tell pretty much any story to get a handout or a free meal. This quality was one London was particularly proud of in himself, boasting in the opening chapter that: “…upon his ability to tell a good story depends the success of the beggar…I have often thought that to this training of my tramp days is due much of my success as a story-writer” (193). Here the connection is made explicit between literary authenticity and the perceived authenticity of self-reliance and survival promised by the hobo life. The suggestion that homelessness was somehow “training” for American life is often apparent in the self-construction of early hobo-literary figures in the early 1900’s. Allen notes it was common for tramp-autobiographers to maintain a degree of distance between themselves who they stressed were *observers* of tramps out to have an
‘experience’ but retaining a strong moral compass at all times, and a mass of actual vagrants they travelled with who could not necessarily be trusted.

Other popular accounts of tramping during this time broadly followed the homogenous pattern of white male mobility and romantic adventuring set by Jack London in *The Road*. A few writers worth certain inclusion in the canon of hobo lit include; J.H Crawford, *The Autobiography of A Tramp* (1900), Josiah Flynt, *My Life* (1907), Jim Tully, *Beggars For Life* (1908), Digit, *The Confessions of a Twentieth Century Hobo* (1924), John Brown, *I Was A Tramp*, (1934), and Charles Elmer Fox, *Tales of an American Hobo* (1989).² However, whilst the popularity of most accounts of train hopping and tramping was short-lived, confined to the opening decades of the twentieth century, along with *The Road*, one other in particular has resonated beyond this period. *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908) was penned by celebrated Welsh poet W.H. Davis early in his career, and told of his trips hopping trains across American at the close of the nineteenth century. Whilst Davis’ account was no less romanticized and sugar-coated than London’s, it was remarkable for a scene in which the author describes slipping whilst hopping a boxcar, and severing his foot beneath the train wheels. This piece of gory literary sensationalism, as well as the manner in which Davis calmly and stoically told of the accident, has continued to capture a great many imaginations up to the present day:

Sitting down in an upright position, I then began to examine myself, and now found that the right foot was severed from the ankle. This discovery did not shock me so much as the thoughts which quickly followed. For, as I could feel no pain, I

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² For a more exhaustive list of tramping autobiography from the Progressive era, see Allen: pp. 152.
I did not know but what my body was in several parts, and I was not satisfied until I examined every portion of it. (189-90)

As Allen writes, the idea of the European vagrant poet sitting down to smoke his pipe with his foot severed clean off is one which “…cannot be read as anything other than heroism in the romantic sense of the word…the ability of the tramp writers to romanticize their experience at its worst” (Allen, 106). As we shall come to see, there is ample evidence that the deep nostalgia and romanticism evoked by this ‘Supertramp’ in 1908 is retained in the popular culture of today.

It was also nostalgia that Jack Kerouac evoked throughout his own literary output, and which he mourned in his essay on the Vanishing American Hobo (1960). It goes without saying that themes of mobility and Western wandering came to define Kerouac’s literary career — and clearly On the Road (1957) represents the beat writer’s most enduring mythologizing of the footloose American ideal he saw so clearly in the second and third-hand homeless culture he himself had imbibed. He also revived the image of the spiritually-pure hobo explicitly once more in the Dharma Bums (1958). As Fried has noted, escapism and spirituality were the overriding themes with which Kerouac availed himself through the use of the hobo figure in much of his writing: “It is the search for this belief, for this release, that provides the real motive power for Kerouac’s hoboes. It is this desire to flee or turn away from the hideous realities of their times that distinguishes his fictional hoboes from those of earlier times” (Fried, 91) The enduring idea that selective homelessness could be a deliberately symbolic or spiritual choice, and therefore an alternative vision of America, gained much traction during the counter-cultural movement of the 1960’s. Ultimately much of the lore and romance surrounding
homelessness and mobility in the American West can be traced to the considerable work
devoted to representing a perceived lifestyle and
particular cultural brand of freedom, within very little political, social, or economic
context. As Allen notes: “Certain traits seem to underlie almost all of the tramp
autobiographies: an emphasis on tramping as an adventure or choice rather than a
necessity; an awareness on the writer’s part of being an author or intellectual; an
optimistic tone; and a lack of criticism of the cultural status quo” (100).

Whilst we might look elsewhere for contemporary cultural forms subtly evoking
the hobo and his literary formation, some modern literary texts continue to ask that old
nostalgic question that Kerouac and others posed — Where did all the hobos go? Quite
strikingly the genre hasn’t changed much since the days of London, Davis, Flynt, Fox,
Tully and others and the authors still concern themselves with the exact same
observations that John Allen noticed — adventure, choice, and an absence of social
critique. In fact if anything, given the cultural prevalence of roads, flight, and the
information superhighway in twenty-first century America, as well as the recent rapid
technological advancement of the surveillance security state, recent accounts of tramping
display even more of a starry-eyed nostalgia for an unfettered kind of mobility that is
barely a memory today. Standout examples include One More Train to Ride (2003) by
“Oats” (real name Clifford Williams), a academic and self-admitted’ hobo enthusiast who
continues to make the nostalgic case for a hobo culture being alive and well. Oats’ book
catalogues the poetry and assorted biographies of 15 “modern American hoboes,”
unsurprisingly hand-picked from the ranks of recreational idealists who still gather in
Britt, Idaho at the hobo convention once a year. Such accounts tend to be overly
romanticized and neither representative of a contemporary migratory-working
population, travelling kids at large, or the condition of modern day homelessness the
terminology and imagery inescapably evokes. At their worst, such accounts badly
perpetuate the stubborn assumptions we have seen time and again throughout this
chapter:

In the life stories, poems, and descriptions of hobo life in this book, you will
observe hoboes’ daily activities and witness their close encounters with death.
You will discover the unique features of vagabonds who have fallen in love with
the rails. Here are unforgettable pictures of distinctive people who have chosen to
live on the outside, both physically and socially. (Williams, 2003, 2).

This is clearly a great pitch for the book, rich in folkloric concern for preserving what the
author must assume to be a vanishing cultural type, but it is once again telling in its
euphoric categorization of modern hoboing as a conscious decision stemming only from a
love for the wide open space of the west in the American cultural imagination. Whilst
Oats is a self-admitted ‘arm-chair’ tramp and folklorist, both fictive and non-fictive tales
of tramping continue to be published. William Kennedy’s Pulitzer winning novel
Ironweed (1983) furnishes one of the more popular examples of the iconoclastic
homeless man in the nation’s literary imagination. Ironweed was set in Albany, New
York during the Great Depression and chronicled the struggles of alcoholic Francis
Phelan who had left his family and lived as a wandering vagrant since accidently killing
his infant son whilst drunk. The novel focuses on Frances attempt to return to Albany
after his time away, haunted by the memories of his past. The novel ends ambiguously
with Frances hopping a train out of town once more, whilst considering the possibility of
a “nice little room” and a stable life (227). Other more recent writings include The Last Great American Hobo (1993), or, Hobo: A Young Man’s Thoughts on Trains And Tramping in America (2002) by “Eddie Joe Cotton,” but they too are remarkable only for their homogeneity, nostalgia for times past, and absolute conformity to the “hobo lit” canon. They are however evidence that, even today, the place of the hobo as a white male cultural literary icon of freedom and mobility in the American West, is as secure as it has ever been.

“Play a train song”: Hobo utopia in popular music

Nowhere has America’s idealizing of homelessness extended so far into the mainstream culture as popular music. Many songs romancing the hobo lifestyle were recorded by men from the 1920s onwards who, in a commercial vein Seasick Steve would tap a century later, enjoyed significant authenticity from the myths they were able to create around their own hoboing days. The very metre of this quintessentially American music is itself imbued with the beat of mobility and wanderlust. The syncopations of railway and road are replicated in so much of the national folk-blues-country-rock cannon, and these rhythms have long been punctuated by train whistles, labor shouts, and field chants. Even before analyzing the narrative of many of these songs, something about the tone of the music suggests these are folk standards rooted in a cultural tradition of work and migration. These are not songs of static comfort, opulence, or luxury. Their aural appeal is that it screams mobility and travelling, evoking a culture of perpetual movement in ways few other mediums can. As Woody Guthrie wrote in
introduction to folk chronicler Alan Lomax’s collection: *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (1967): “If you’re so rich that you look down on these kinds of songs…I would suggest that you leave your pocketbook and wife and ice box and dog and catch out east on a west bound freight, and rattle over this United States for a year or so…” (19). Guthrie knew well what aficionados of American folk-country-blues have known ever since: this is not only the music of disenfranchisement, labor struggle, and “getting by” — it is the cultural sound of mobility, resilience, survival, and heroic escape. It is also heavily gendered and racialized. And if it was mobility Guthrie sensed in the songs Alan Lomax collected, it was frontier heroism, mobility and the cultural milieu of the American West that most attracted Lomax to Guthrie’s own ballads — a point he stressed in a 1960 interview:

Woody came up in a frontier place in Oklahoma, Injun territory, which was new country, in an oil boom. And everything was happening there. The town was full of Injuns, Mexicans, blacks, people from all over the country, and Woody lived in these honky-tonks, and he picked up his guitar and he learned how to make music that would make sense to all these folks…He made a new idiom that really represented the opening of this new Western frontier of new highways and power lines and Dust Bowl migrants and all that. It has the sound of movement in it. His guitar has the sound of a big truck going down the highway with the riders bouncing around in the front seat…

(Alan Lomax in Szwed, 2010)

Perhaps one of the first well-known songs explicitly connecting homelessness with a utopian vision of freedom was Harry McClintock’s “Big Rock Candy Mountain” (1928), which took as its inspiration a number of white itinerant songs of the era. The lyrics were frequently changed and eventually cleaned up into a popular children’s ditty
and tell of a ‘Promised Land” for homeless ‘hobo’ men where “the handouts grow on trees”:  

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains 
You never change your socks 
And the little streams of alcohol 
Come trickling down the rocks 
The brakemen have to tip their hats 
And the railway bulls are blind 
There's a lake of stew 
And of whiskey too 
You can paddle all around it 
In a big canoe 
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains 

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains, 
The jails are made of tin. 
And you can walk right out again, 
As soon as you are in. 
There ain't no short-handled shovels, 
No axes, saws nor picks, 
I'm bound to stay 
Where you sleep all day, 
Where they hung the jerk 
That invented work 
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains. 

This formative romancing of the hobo in mainstream culture is significant as we are presented with a caricature of homelessness whose charms are explicitly tied to his desire to enjoy the simple freedoms — in particular drink — promised by a life without the hassles of work, conformity and legal constraints. This trope can be found in another number of the day, “Hallelujah I’m a Bum”, which started life around 1897 as a folk song with author-unknown and was also recorded by McClintock in 1928 before being made into a popular musical film in 1933. The original song was actually a gentle satire on those who thought tramping was easy, but by the time it was re-recorded by Pete Seeger
in 1961, it’s lyrics had changed to praise an idealized (and decontextualized) type of American mobility:

Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin',
Hallelujah, ain't it fine?
Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin',
Down freedom's main line

In fact, this staple theme of folk, country, and nascent rock genres — (in time further bolstered by white mainstream culture’s wholesale appropriation of a traditional black cultural form, the blues) — grew serious momentum throughout the twentieth century and still thrives in the present day. Indeed, as we will come to see in the following chapter, popular cultural expressions of homelessness and mobility in the west could nowadays even be said to have their own soundtrack. The roots of American music’s love affair with homelessness began in the early nineteenth century, and no doubt grow out of the folk musical traditions of the itinerant laborers who rode the rails during this time. An exhaustive discussion of popular music artists championing American homelessness and rail mobility as an idealized freedom is well outside the scope of this dissertation, but a quick survey of just a few of the most popular numbers over the past century makes the point well: Jimmie Rodgers, “Waiting for a train” (1928), “Hobo Bill’s Last Ride” (1929), Hank Williams Sr. “Ramblin Man” (1951), Merle Haggard, “Hobo Bill”, “Where have all the hoboes gone?” (1972), Boxcar Willie (“America’s favorite hobo”), John Prine, “Billy the Bum” (1972) “Hobo Song” (1978), “Gypsy Lady and the Hobo” (1976), Bob Dylan, “I’m a Lonesome Hobo”, “Only a Hobo” (1961), “Lift My Jug (Song for Hub Cale)” (1999), The Hackensaw Boys, “Hobo” (2007), William Elliot

Time spent listening to this playlist, or the thousands of other songs it is representative of, reveals a strikingly solid theme that has barely changed at all over the past century: The figure of the homeless ‘hoboing’ man is served up as an instantly recognizable conduit for the desires and fantasies of a male-orientated society configured around the stifling responsibilities of work, family, conformity and routine. This theme is usually laid out quite explicitly and sincerely — satire and irony rarely seem to concern the hobo balladeer any longer. Connections to “homelessness” in these genres however, remain quite tacit, alluded to as they are through the more comfortable and politically ambiguous figure of the ‘hobo’ or ‘bum’.

Surely as well-known as any ‘hobo song’ is Roger Miller’s 1964 hit, “King of the Road.” The song, covered by many artists ranging from James Dean to R.E.M, is said to have been inspired by an encounter with a hobo outside an airport in Boise, ID, and tells of a vagabond who revels in the freedoms his life affords him even though he is poor — a “man of means by no means:”

Trailers for sale or rent
Rooms to let...fifty cents.
No phone, no pool, no pets
I ain't got no cigarettes
Ah, but..two hours of pushin' broom
Buys an eight by twelve four-bit room
I'm a man of means by no means
King of the road.

Third boxcar, midnight train
Destination...Bangor, Maine.
Old worn out suits and shoes,
I don't pay no union dues

Of course familiar tropes are hit upon here, the assertion of masculinist self-reliance and rugged survival (*literally* a “man of means by no means”), as well as a claim to individualism and social independence (“don’t pay no union dues”). Interestingly in 1965, as if to underscore the eternal opposition the hobo figure presents for traditional ideals of domesticity, family, and the institution of heterosexual marriage, Mary Taylor and Jody Miller re-worked "King of the Road" into a country hit called "Queen of the House" which emphasized the hardships of being a housewife.

Also typical of the sentiments in so many songs of the genre-crossing ‘hobo’ canon, is the late country star Chris LeDoux’s popular hit “Hobo Dreams” (1983). Even more an open statement of envy for the idealized lifestyle of a homeless drifter, in this song a middle-aged businessman with all the material trappings of conventional American success has a chance encounter with a hobo by the railroad tracks:

Pouring rain has grounded
All the planes out of Louisville, Kentucky
So I bought me a railway ticket
I had to close a deal in New Orleans
When a hobo by the track
Said he was going to ride the rails to Arizona
I had to fight the tears
That weld up in me

Cause a ragged old hobo
Is really better off than me
He ain't nothing but a hobo
But he's livin' his hobo dreams

I got a brand new car and a house a good 'ol job
In the suburbs of St. Louie
And the woman in the gateway to the west
She made me everything I am
But my three-piece suit is gettin' tight
The walls are closin' in down at the office
Lord I've been too cautious
With all my best laid plans

Said son you outta come along and watch
The eagle's fly in Arizona
You'll never see an eagle fly
With neon light reflecting off his wings
As he climbed into the rail car
His last words echoed back like crashing thunder
Lord if I was younger
Well I'd ride me a different train

The envy the businessman feels towards the homeless man is powerfully conveyed, as is his resentment at encountering a man who, despite his poverty and inferior social status, possesses a degree of independence, self-reliance and spontaneous autonomy that a successful businessman can only dream about. Ultimately the encounter emasculates our narrator and he decides he has wasted his life being conformist and responsible. The evocation of the “eagle’s fly” makes clear patriotic fantasies resting on connections between homelessness and freedom. That both the businessman’s life and wife are located in St. Louie, the ‘gateway to the west’, is also of critical importance for this discussion: he is eternally trapped just on the wrong side of a frontier of American freedom that only itinerancy and vagrancy can offer him — and yet this liberation remains just out of sight, alluding him forever in a west where his brand new car and fancy suit can never take him. A very similar more recent sentiment is expressed in the 2011 song “Hobo” by alt southern band The Departed: “I wish I was a hobo / stranger on
a train / well you never know what tomorrow might bring / you sleepin’ out in the gold / you might find yourself a pot of gold / wanna hear the wheels whine / rollin’ down the track / feel the sunshine on my back / see what I can find / going to leave it all far behind / going to ease my worried mind down the line. ” The untested and yet clear promise made by popular music to underfulfilled restless American males is one of escapism, individuality and the ultimate attainment of an idealized masculinity that that perceive their normal lives working to suppress in myriad ways. It is a promise only the cherished figure of homelessness can fully deliver, and it is a promise made in the roots of so much of America’s most popular music.

In search of those roots we must look to the massive resurgence of diverse culture forms from late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as their attendant politics of racial ‘crossover’, amidst the folk-blues revival leading up to the 1960’s and the counter-cultural movement which burst around it. When folk musician and socialist labor icon Woody Guthrie published his autobiography, *Bound For Glory* (1943), a few years after the end of the end of the depression, it was into a market already eager for hobo stories. Homelessness had risen to public conciseness ton such an extent that *The Hobo News*, a popular newspaper published in New York from 1936-1948, achieved a circulation of over 50,000 (*Van Whitlock*, 15). Guthrie, born in 1912, had been just a small child when the original hobo population reached its peak and his experiences of hoboing really came quite late-in-the-game. Nevertheless his lyrics, with their themes of mobility and itinerant labor, as well as his recorded memoirs of his depression-era train-hopping, reverberated through the 1950’s into the folk-blues revival when his influence...
extended directly to the early icons of rock music. The accidental upshot of this timely enshrinement of the hobo figure was that the idea of the migratory poor white American male became utterly entrenched across the spectrum of national cultural output. The appeal of Guthrie’s autobiographical tales of disenfranchisement and vagrancy is their humble tone of honesty and humility that sets them apart from most of their predecessors in the genre. *Bound for Glory*, as well as Guthrie’s numerous labor songs, in fact provide a fair and balanced portrayal of migration during the 1930’s, at least as experienced by single white men using railways as their primary mode of transportation. The folk singer observed a pervading work ethic and an optimistic belief in finding prosperity on the road amongst his fellow travellers, and it was this ideal of work and resilience that most marks his writings. One notable moment in his autobiography comes with Guthrie recounting a run-in with the police having jumped off a train outside a rural California town one rainy night, and shows the extent to which mobility was, even then, produced and *perpetuated* by an early version of ‘move along’ urban policies. After a quick exchange in which he convinces the skeptical cops that he is headed to ‘settle down’ in the mountains of Sonora and find work, they make him a backhanded offer, really an ultimatum in disguise:

“We’ll show you the road and see that you get out onto the main highway…”
“Yes. We try to treat an honest working man right when he comes through our little town here, either by accident or on purpose. We’re just a little, what you’d call, ‘cautious,’ you understand, because there is trouble going around, and you never know who is causing it, until you ask. We will have to ask you to get out in front of this car and start walking down this highway. And don’t look back — (238)

An hour later after the police have ‘walked him out,’ all the while cracking jokes at his expense, they drive back to town leaving him soaked and freezing in a cow field on the
prairie. However, despite the relative realism and tone of political agitation that shines through the harsh facts of Guthrie’s early years spent tramping, it was really the fantasies of mobility and footloose iconography that interested counter-cultural audiences during the sixties — and it was this nostalgia that cemented Woody Guthrie firmly in the mold of archetypal wandering American hobo, complete with a guitar and bindle stick.

In 1960 a young Bob Dylan received a copy of *Bound For Glory*, and immediately became obsessed with the figure of Woody Guthrie and the travelling hobo troubadour. It is testimony, in fact, to Dylan’s close reading of his idol’s road memoirs in all their bleak and gritty detail, that the counter-cultural singer’s own hobo songs are both far more realist than others in the genre, warning of the social inequalities rampant in society rather than using the hobo figure to evoke romance and pathos for a disappearing sense of American freedom. For a better appraisal of Dylan’s grasp on mobility and displacement as staple tropes of the genre he was inheriting, we might look to his lengthy ode to his hero, poem “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie,” which he recited live as a one-off performance in New York City’s Town Hall in 1963:

Yeah, you need something special all right  
You need a fast flyin' train on a tornado track  
To shoot you someplace and shoot you back  
You need a cyclone wind on a steam engine howler  
That's been banging and booming and blowing forever  
That knows yer troubles a hundred times over  
You need a Greyhound bus that don't bar no race  
That won't laugh at yer looks  
Your voice or your face

Dylan’s answer to the existential question posed by the American road in its many seductive incarnations was much more guarded therefore, focusing less on nostalgia and
more on questioning the existence of a type of freedom that was becoming a far more pressing conversation in the pre-civil rights era during which he came to prominence. However, in the white middle-class mainstream at least, the political use of the hobo by Dylan and other artists during the sixties to highlight labor rights and poverty further cemented the caricature as a national emblem of nostalgia, liberty, freedom and independence. In many ways therefore, the appropriation of homelessness by the political left at this time was simply the other side of the same coin. When the dust settled all that really remained once the counter-culture had evoked its politics of homelessness, was the same heavily masculinized construction of individualism whose connotations of mobility and freedom continued to obscure many of the realities of endemic homelessness in late twentieth century America.

The legacy of twentieth century homeless representations

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century especially, the mythos of American homelessness as idealized mobility and freedom became a powerful and popular commercial trope for the entertainment industry across seemingly every cultural site. The ‘hobo’ figure was elevated to the ranks of cultural icon during this period, and was quickly molded into a harmless and nostalgic figure with an ambiguous relationship to society that was often played for laughs. Increasingly popular culture configured homelessness as romantic, survivalist, or heroic, and a host of new representations began to emerge. For example, the emergence of the “comic tramp” as a cornerstone of vaudeville entertainment, as well as the succession of “hobo clowns” which followed
represents an important shift in the way the American public imagined homelessness. The caricatures of this tradition generally constructed the tramp as a happy-go-lucky buffoon who was blissfully free from the stresses of employment, home and the mundane irritations of everyday life. Stage characters such as Nat Will’s “Happy Tramp” or early newspaper cartoons such as “Weary Willie” and “Tired Tim” did much to soften the previously unsympathetic image of vagrant males, now coding them as resilient hard-working survivors of an industrializing landscape rather than inherently lazy loafers (see: DePastino, 153). Important cultural space was being carved out here for a view of homelessness as an inevitable feature of urban life that should not be taken too seriously, and was mainly the preserve of men whom for whatever reason choose to position themselves outside of conventional society. Kenneth Kusmer notes in Down And Out And On The Road (2002), that the comedic hook of the stage tramp was that regardless of his “poverty and poor treatment at the hands of others…he steadfastly maintained a genial outlook” (186).

Perhaps most famously Charlie Chaplin’s creation of the “Little Tramp” in 1914 best encapsulates the striking contradictions of homeless representations in cinema during the early twentieth century, and this construction did much to solidify cultural ideas of the individual homeless man as an independent and resilient survivor whose circumstance were his own deliberate choice. The aesthetic of Chaplin’s silent homeless man was at first one of a reasonably well-dressed gentleman who had enjoyed better times. Furthermore, his behavior and comic style suggested it was just a matter of time before his luck was to change as he blundered from one missed opportunity to another. The
ethics of work and tenacity that marked Chaplin’s portrayal pointed to the tramp’s central “American-ness” and much of his comedy stemmed from his portrayal as potentially better equipped to live outside the margins of ‘normal’ society, than within them. In The Tramp in America (2001) Tim Cresswell comments on Chaplin’s deliberate portrayal of a homeless figure whose attraction to mainstream culture was based in his implicit critique of it:

While clearly using the ascribed characteristics of worklessness and mobility, Chaplin made up a tramp who was far more complex than a two-dimensional caricature. His tramp’s activities are marked by a considerable pathos, a critical capacity to highlight the tyrannies of ‘normal life’ and a startling range of transformative energies. Chaplin played with the established knowledge of the tramp and transformed it into a positive, sympathetic and critical force (170).

The space in between The Tramp’s first feature length appearance in 1915 and Chaplin’s eventual retirement of the character in Modern Times (1936) is the story of the nation’s transformation from pre-industrial to industrial, rural to urban, and mobile to sedentary. With his swansong we see the Little Tramp struggling to survive in the modern industrial landscape, and our last sight of him is as he disappears down a winding highway into a movie sunset in the manner of so many iconic American figures. Through representations such as these, public discourse generally turned to characterize the homeless as harmless, or at worst vaguely rascally and to be tolerated at arms length. For an example of this subtle cultural shift we might look to those famous Norman Rockwell paintings from this era, the first published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1927 picturing a bucolic old hobo gentleman, serenely cooking a sausage over a fire with his fluffy pet dog and threatening no one. A few years later Rockwell furnished the nation with another popular tramp
image, cheekily fleeing with a stolen pie, pursued by a neighborhood terrier. The tramp-scare was officially over; instead making way for new, conflicted, and equally problematic representations of American homelessness.

A number of popular feature length films mythologizing hoboism appeared in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including *Emperor of the North* (1973) which told the adventures and toils of a rail riding hobo, as well as the movie adaptation of Kennedy’s well-liked novel, *Ironweed* (1987) starring Jack Nicholson and Meryl Steep as homeless protagonists struggling against anti-homelessness in depression-era Albany, New York. The general theme linking these cinematic works is once again, as it has been in literature and song, an emphasis on tramping as resilience in the face of adversity, rip-roaring adventure, or romantic lifestyle choice. Revivalist and recreational hobos too, have found their way into contemporary documentary film and mainstream media through phenomena such as the travelling “Hobo Film Festival,” whose organizers screen short films on boxcar life and argue that hoboing is “one of the most American things you can do.” *Riding the Rails* (2000), *Long Gone* (2003), and Sarah George’s *Catching Out* (2003), have attempted to document the phenomena of recreational, revivalist hobos and convey a message that their subjects are “not down and out wanderers” but “individuals who voluntarily approached the hobo lifestyle in pursuit of its most glamorous and romantic elements.” However, these more accurate glimpses into the resonance of hobo mythology are strictly independent ventures and find themselves swimming against a tide of the very “romantic elements” they attempt to dispel — romance perpetuated by the contemporary “hobo lit” discussed above.
Finally a couple of generations of American children grew up equating homelessness with adventure and mobility in the form of the long running and much loved television show, *The Littlest Hobo* (1963-1985), which featured an ownerless and ramblin’ hobo dog who travelled from town to town befriending and helping people in need. Once more constant mobility and freedom from society were being cast as enviable lifestyle choices for an impressionable demographic, many of whom would grow up to view both values as inherent markers of homelessness in U.S. society. As the show’s Wikipedia entry notes at some length, the “origin, motivation, and ultimate destination” of the Littlest Hobo was never explained. He moved, and therefore he was.

Ultimately throughout the two centuries of literature, film, and music outlined in this chapter, representations of the American hobo have remained remarkably consistent. Despite his historical reality as a relatively fleeting figure of disenfranchisement, failed domesticity, poverty, and migrant labor, ‘the hobo’ caricature has remained as one of the most stubborn archetypes of white masculinist self-reliance, mobility, and freedom in American popular culture. The enduring problem of the hobo is that his perceived cultural associations remain inexorably entwined in contemporary discourses of American homelessness as he continues to surface in the popular culture of today with considerable frequency.
Coda: Mad Men’s contemporary iteration of the “hobo mythos”

“The Hobo Code” is the 8th episode of the opening season of AMCs highly popular television drama series Mad Men, portraying the advertising world of 1960s New York. Screened in 2007, the episode portrays successful advertising executive and troubled family man Don Draper / Dick Whitman experiencing a flashback to his childhood in the 1930s Midwest. Ten-year-old Dick is digging in the garden with his parents when a hobo comes up to the garden fence and politely asks for a meal. Dick’s father first turns the man away but his mother insists they are Christians and invites the man in, offering him dinner on the proviso that she boils his clothes before he sit down. The hobo is archetypally white, male, and middle-aged, just like the Mad Men protagonist. Also, like Don he is from New York; a fact that is hammered home when Dick’s father opines that New Yorkers don’t know how to work and that’s why the man “took to the bum so easy”. The hobo admits he has little farming experience, but says he has worked many jobs and is willing to labor for his meal. Dick’s mother asks if he is a communist and when the man says ‘no’ she gives him a silver coin. Dicks father however takes the coin, promising to give it back to the hobo after he has completed some work. Later that evening the young Dick Whitman takes the hobo some blankets out to the barn where he is to sleep. Dick tells the hobo he is adopted, and the hobo extolls the virtues of life on the rails to the impressionable young boy:

“We all wish we were from some place else, believe me.”

“You don’t talk like a bum”

“I’m not. I’m a gentleman of the rails, for me every day is brand new. Every day is a brand new place, people, what have you…”
“So you have no home, that’s sad.”

“What’s at home? I had a family once, a wife, job, mortgage. I couldn’t sleep at night tied to all those things…then death came to find me, so one morning I freed myself with the clothes on my back. Goodbye! Now I sleep like a stone. Sometimes under the stars, the rain, the roof of a barn, but I sleep like a stone.”

The hobo then gives 10 year-old Dick a piece of chalk and teaches him the signs hobos use to communicate with each other. He tells him: “Don’t be scared kid, you ain’t a man yet.” The next day the hobo finishes working but Dick’s father refuses to give him the coin, instead telling him to get on his way. Young Dick runs after the hobo and watches him disappear from sight down the road. He checks the family’s gatepost where he finds carved the sign for ‘a dishonest man lives here.’ At the end of the flashback sequence we see the current Don Draper, approaching forty in New York with his own kids, work stresses, and a disintegrating marriage.

The significance of this scene and its relevance to a twenty-first century television audience is that once again that the homeless hobo is being used to signify a degree of escape, freedom, and devil-may-care drifting that the Don Draper’s of this world, as well as probably a vast majority of the show’s viewers, only dream about. Donald Draper’s failure as a dad is underlined in this scene as he remembers his own father figure’s shortcomings, both in the traditional paternal role but also according to the alternative moral ‘code’ taught to him by the wandering hobo. Throughout Mad Men Don Draper is portrayed as a man constantly torn between his outward successes as a high paid respected advertising genius with a beautiful wife and family, his traumatic past as an orphaned child bought up in a brothel, and his secret identity as a war deserter. For the
young Dick, and the older Don, the hoboing life represents a radically alternative type of
American success to the one he has achieved — a high power and high profile lifestyle
that throughout the show he sets about destroying for himself and those around him.
Once again the trope of the hobo is presented as another kind of American dream, in clear
tension with the one chased by most middle-class television viewers today, and painted as
morally dichotomous from the “dishonest” lives lead by men like Don and his father. The
hobo figure in Mad Men explicitly disavows the constraints of domesticity, home, and
career and instead chooses a life of freedom, self-reliance, work and willful mobility; the
full realization of this competing American dream.
Chapter 3:

Homelessness, Freedom & Wandering in the American Wilderness:

“It should not be denied... that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led west.” – Wallace Stegner, The American West As Living Space

In early September 2008, a U.S. Marine helicopter search team found the body of Evan Tanner, a well-known pioneer of Mixed Martial Arts and a former American Wrestling Champion, deep in the Californian desert near to the Arizona border. Tanner, 37, had died of extreme heat exposure after walking into the southwestern wilderness alone in search of adventure and spiritual clarity. Tanner’s own blog postings about his planned expedition are testimony to the type of white, rugged, individualist American masculinity that has for centuries found its ultimate validation in solo wilderness adventuring and is synonymous with expansive western landscapes. In the weeks before his death he wrote:

I began to imagine what might be found in the deep reaches of the untracked desert, it became an obsession of sorts. I'm hoping that very soon I'll be sitting out in the quiet of the desert beneath a deep blue midnight sky, listening to the calm desert breeze. The idea was motivated by...talk of treasure hunting and lost gold, and my own insatiable appetite for adventure and exploration. I began to
imagine what might be found in the deep reaches of the untracked desert. It became an obsession of sorts. "Treasure" doesn't necessarily refer to something material.

Today I ran to the store to pick up a few things, and with the lonesome, quiet desert thoughts on my mind, I couldn't help but be struck with their brutally stark contrast to my current surroundings, the amazing congestion in which we exist day to day. The landscape as far as I could see, crowded, choked, with me and the rest of the species, an almost writhing mass of organisms, fighting over space and resources ... And to think, there are still places in the world where man has not been, where he has left no footprints, where the mysteries stand secure, untouched by human eyes. I want to go to these places, the quiet, timeless, ageless places, and sit, letting silence and solitude be my teachers...I plan on going so deep into the desert, that any failure of my equipment, could cost me my life. *(Spike TV blog)*

Tanner’s celebrity amongst MMA fans was tied to his constant swing between exceptional fighting fitness and deep descents into alcoholism that would see him disappear from the circuit for extended periods of time. It was his well-documented demons that led many fans to question his planned trip into the desert before he went, and also to ponder whether his death had been deliberate in the days after his body was found. And yet it was also his perceived resilience which most resonated with traditional masculinist cultural narratives, especially when combined with Tanner’s own larger-than-life self-construction as part-fighter, part odd-jobbing roustabout, and part wilderness adventurer: "As an extreme ultimate fighter, practicing mixed martial arts, he really didn't define himself as being a fighter," his manager told Fox News. "He defined himself as being an adventurer, and he would fund his adventures through fighting". A quote on the front page of Tanner’s own website told a similar story that combined his love of adventuring with a consciously sculpted narrative of mobility and casual labor:
College dropout, adventurer, seeker, traveler, ditch digger, dishwasher, cable tech, concrete worker, steel worker, salad prep, busboy, ski resort security, ski resort rental shop technician. I've worked in a slaughterhouse. I've been a landscaper. I've done drywall, tile, countertops, wood flooring, roofing. I have been a plumber, worked as a bottle collector at a bar, a bouncer, a doorman, a head of a security team. I have been a basket room clerk, a carpenter, a framer building beach houses, a truss builder. I've lived on a farm. I've lived in the city. I've earned money mowing lawns, selling on eBay, and fighting. A teacher, a trainer, and a coach sometimes. There was a time when I was younger that I didn't know any better than to be a liar, a cheater, and a thief. I have since learned to despise those things. I have had great friendships. I have had great loves. I have been a lover, I have been a son, a brother, and a friend. And I was once a World Champion. (*Once I was a champion*)

This informal resume of *travelling to work* and *working to travel* is immediately familiar as a kind of American literary genre in and of itself. In historical context it is indicative of a very particular ideal of white American masculinity and freedom that continues to inform popular cultural expressions of mobility and opportunity in the present day. The canon of writings supporting such tales can be traced all the way back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau’s accounts of self-marginalization and solitude on their own transcendental frontiers, and it is common in the genre for each generation of fatalistic wilderness wanderers to explicitly evoke the ideals of their predecessors. For a kind of ontological literary statement of this cultural obsession with core American freedoms best expressed “in the wild”, then, we could do worse than look to Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it,
and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by
experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (16)

The promise, as clear in this extract as it is in contemporary accounts of adventuring, is
that there exists in the American wilderness an experience of liberation and spirituality
that will forever evade those trapped in cities and towns. Evan Tanner’s own blog post of
August 16th 2008, entitled “Treasure Hunting in the Desert”, made it clear that the
“treasure” to be found from his own wilderness experience would not necessarily be
“something material”, and seems to evoke Thoreau quite clearly — in indirect fashion
linking his blog writings to a long line of American writers with similar ideals in mind.
This was also a personality trait that Tanner’s manager understood well, telling Fox
News: "He always had this kind of concept of, well, it sharpens your senses by being on a
razor’s edge with your life actually on the line." The freedom promised by solitude and
wilderness survival therefore, lies in direct conflict with other cherished national
freedoms whose promises are explicitly tied to rights of property, settlement, and the
social and political sphere of a life lived amongst other people. It is within these
conflicting cultural ideas about mobility that we may begin to search for the roots of
many American assumptions about homelessness; assumptions which persistently
confuse extreme social, economic, and political disenfranchisement with hard-to-attain
national freedoms such as individualism, transcendentalism, and wanderlust.
**Into The Wild: A contemporary cultural case study**

*April 27th, 1992*

Greetings from Fairbanks! This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne...It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don’t ever hear from me again I want you to know you’re a great man. I now walk into the wild. Alex. — (Postcard received by Wayne Westerberg from “Alexander Supertramp”, *Into the Wild, 1996*)

A week before fighter Evan Tanner died of suspected heat exhaustion and dehydration in the California desert, he responded to fans’ growing concerns about his planned trip into the wilderness in a blog post of Aug. 27, 2008:

It seems some MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) websites have reported on the story, posting up that I might die out in the desert, or that it might be my greatest opponent yet, etc. Come on, guys. It's really common down in Southern California to go out to the off-road recreation areas in the desert about an hour away from LA and San Diego. So my plan is to go out to the desert, do some camping, ride the motorcycle, and shoot some guns. Sounds like a lot of fun to me. A lot of people do it. This isn't a version of 'Into the Wild.' *(Spike TV blog)*

Tanner was writing to play down the danger of a trip, the risks of which he had previously openly embraced. In an earlier blog posting he had written that any failure of equipment could cost him “…his life”. The concern of his fans’ however, no doubt spurred on by the popular fighter’s history of depression and substance abuse, had become heightened by what many saw as an obsessive connection the fighter felt with Christopher McCandless, the young protagonist of a recent popular Hollywood film, *Into the Wild*, directed by Sean Penn and based on a 1997 non-fiction book bearing the same name. The book’s author, John Krakauer, had painstakingly retold McCandless’s life
using the young man’s own extensive diary entries, as well as interviews with those who knew him. Both the film and the book told the true story of a young idealistic man from an affluent family who had abandoned home, surrendered his savings and possessions, and began roaming North America until his eventual death in the Alaskan wilderness at age 24, alone and cut off from society. To varying degrees the film and the book also both mythologized McCandless’s life and travels, in part lending his story the cultural power it has today. It was specifically Evan Tanner’s disclosure that he had been listening to the movie’s soundtrack in preparation for his trip that had raised red flags for many in his fan base. Tanner’s final blog posting sought to dispel this concern, even going as far as to explicitly distance himself from the tragic story of *Into the Wild*. In his tribute to Tanner, essayist Daniele Bolelli recalls this moment:

> In an eerie coincidence, Tanner tells he prepares for the trip while listening to a song by Eddie Vedder taken from the soundtrack of “Into the Wild”, the movie about the life of Christopher McCandless, a young man who, inspired by Thoreau’s writings, ventured out in the Alaskan wilderness and ended up dying there. After directly mentioning McCandless, Tanner reassures his fans that he has no intention of meeting the same end. Destiny, however, has different plans. Tanner will die exactly like McCandless: killed by the nature he loves so much. *(On the death of Evan Tanner)*

The connections these posts furnish us with are only the latest in a genesis of American wilderness wanderings that are linked through a number of well-loved and evocative popular cultural texts. Evan Tanner died listening to the songs Pearl Jam front man Eddie Vedder had been commissioned to write for the soundtrack to the film treatment of *Into the Wild*. Christopher McCandless himself, had been a devout acolyte of Henry David Thoreau, and perhaps even more so, of Jack London, with whom he was obsessed. When
his body was discovered in a disused Alaskan hunting shelter, a piece of wood found at the site bared a graffiti inscription in testimony to the original tramping American writer: “Jack London Is King” (Krakauer, 9). More graffiti scrawled on the metal walls of the rusted old bus also resonate specifically with the popular cultural history of homelessness given in the previous chapter, and incorporates lyrics from Christopher McCandless’s favorite song, ‘King of the Road’; that classic evocation of the charms of American mobility penned by Roger Miller in 1965:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH, NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD…(179)

In one more overt nod to his forbearers in the longstanding white male literary tradition of ‘going homeless’ in America, once on the road McCandless renamed himself “Alexander Supertramp” after another of his hobo heroes, W.H Davis, the Welsh poet who had lost his foot train hopping in the west and published a 1908 account of his tramping entitled The Autobiography of a Super-tramp. However, these connections are not so much eerie as Bolelli termed them, but rather they represent obvious cultural touchstones which might be familiar to any young American male interested in availing himself of the hyper-masculinity, rugged individualism, and freewheeling adventure the mythos of nomadism in the American West has always promised.

As well as making such rich connections to a national cultural memory of hoboism, what makes Into the Wild especially pertinent for this study is that both its written and cinematic incarnations work to conflate McCandless’ wilderness ramblings with contemporary homelessness. Under closer analysis the story feeds into a public
discourse still prone to confuse urban homelessness with cherished ideas of wilderness survival, spirituality, wanderlust, ‘experience,’ independent mobility, and the attainment of pure and authentically American freedoms. These commercially successful visual and literary texts, as well as popular fascination surrounding Christopher McCandless’s life, therefore serve as well as any cultural phenomena to illuminate the most stubborn tropes still surrounding homelessness in the U.S. today.

Christopher McCandless was from an affluent East Coast family and graduated from Emory University before he adopted the name “Alexander Supertramp” and struck out for his own American frontier. The young man had digested a classic literary canon rich with Thoreau, W.H Davies, and Jack London, whose stories of rootless wandering he idealized above all others. Without a word of warning to his parents he left home and vanished into that placeless population of American nomads who exist as ephemerally within the nation’s borders as they do concretely in its psyche. An author’s note at the outset of the book sets the scene for its protagonist’s wanderings (bold type is my own):

Immediately after graduating, with honors from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless dropped out of sight. He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a twenty-four-thousand-dollar saving account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet. And then invented a new life for himself, taking up residence on the margins of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. (Krakauer, author’s note)

That John Krakauer chooses in preface to his book, to position McCandless as ‘marginal’ or living on the margins is immediately telling, and in many ways it sets the tone for the rest of his version of the young man’s life, as well as some of the many ways in which the story has been received since. The idea that a white male from a relatively
privileged background can simply place himself ‘on the margins’ of U.S. society simply by leaving home, emptying his bank account and abandoning his car, is a constant and problematic theme throughout many discourses of homelessness, both public and political. To cast this problem in another, more concise, way: there exists a cultural belief in America that the ‘margins’ are somehow there to be experienced and entertained from time to time by those who desire a vacation away from society with all the relaxing benefits of transcendence, purity, and authenticity that marginal living promises. Such base assumptions not only suggest that marginality is a choice, and sometimes an enviable one, they also elide the many real and stifling experiences of actual marginality — racialized, gendered, sexualized, traumatized, physical, psychological, chemical, and mental — that simply can not be experienced at will, and often especially not by white males in America. However, such reflections do not seem to have concerned either Krakauer or McCandless, both in their own interwoven ways perpetuating far more myths than they challenge. In Supertramp’s own words, he was tramping the American west for one reason, and one reason only: “I’ve decided that I’m going to live this life for some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty of it is just too good to pass up” (92).

*Into The Wild* is certainly a work of painstaking research and investigative journalism that seeks to do its subject justice with the wide net it casts over possible interpretations of his life. Krakauer slowly pieces together what little he can about Christopher McCandless from journal entries and snatched interviews with those people he encountered on his rambles. We learn of a three year period spent hopping trains on the West Coast, canoeing down the Colorado River, walking roads in the southwest as a
‘leather tramp”, and a brief stint laboring in South Dakota, before he conceived of his grand trip to Alaska and what Krakauer presciently terms the “big-league wilds of the Last Frontier” (177). What is certain is that McCandless held a couple of things as antithetical to his experience of homelessness and mobility; one was his car which he abandoned in the desert at the outset of his wanderings, and the other was money which he seems to have actively despised even after giving his savings away in lump sum. In fact after working on a grain elevator for a couple of months and collecting an unwanted paycheck, he wrote to his former boss: “I’ve been tramping around Arizona for about a month now…Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal. I couldn’t make it now without money, however, as there is very little fruiting agriculture down here at this time” (33). It is clear that McCandless not only saw himself in the mold of the archetypal American hobo, but also that he was at pains to make these connections clear in his limited correspondence and his open desire for that same gritty realism of the road that London, Kerouac and others had identified.

Also apparent in McCandless’ journals are fleeting periods of urban destitution in California and Nevada. In between his Thoreauvian wanderings, McCandless seemed to join the ranks of the endemically homeless for a week or two at a time, perhaps staying in shelters, missions or oftentimes camping on the outskirts of town, before striking out for the wilderness once more. He also took part time service jobs during these periods, which he would work industriously at. Although constructed in somewhat less romantic terms than his wilderness yearnings, there is still a clear sense of heroism in these passages, as
if McCandless relished his own agency to be able to choose between urban and rural experiences of vagrancy at will. Through all his wanderings, right up to his final words etched on the walls of his bus-tomb in the Alaskan outback, McCandless wrote and took photographs incessantly. His journal entries are notable in that he always referred to himself in the third person, it seems trying to secure his own literary myth, or at least connect to those hobo writers whose tramping he so idolized. A period of skid-row-living in Las Vegas is described thus: “He lived on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos for several weeks. Vegas would not be the end of the story however. On May 10, itchy feet returned and Alex left his job in Vegas, retrieved his backpack, and hit the road again…” (37).

We may interpret these urban forays simply as an attempt to reconnect with society, gather resources, or the same yearning for human company many wilderness wanderers eventually succumb too. However, it must be noted that, as well as flirtations with urban poverty and homeless populations at large, McCandless also remained quite consciously peripheral to both the Rainbow family, a gathering of utopian idealists who travel and convene in the west every year, and “Slab City”, a semi-permanent desert squatter settlement of vagrants and survivalists with whom Supertramp stayed briefly. Although both are utterly synonymous with mobility and dropout-culture in the American west, that McCandless never fully bought into either one is again some testimony to the fact that he was far more concerned with the wilderness experience as an individualistic and transcendentalist endeavor, and not a community one.
These periods of “visible” poverty are most interesting when viewed alongside the rest of McCandless’ meanderings because we see two troublesome tropes of American homelessness, both of which cast poverty as a choice, one that can be opted out of at any time and exchanged for nomadism and the purity of America’s expansive outdoors. In one correspondence the young drifter writes:

Have been living on the streets of San Diego for the past week. First day I got here it rained like hell. The missions here suck and I’m getting preached to death. Not much happening in terms of jobs so I’m heading north tomorrow.

In a follow up letter to the same friend just a week later he had transformed himself from jobless urban derelict into a Jack London-esque countercultural hero:

Greetings from Seattle! I’m a hobo now! That’s right, I’m riding the rails now. What fun, I wish I had jumped trains earlier. The rails have some drawbacks, however. First is that one becomes absolutely filthy. Second is that one must tangle with these crazy bulls. I was sitting in a hotshot in L.A when a bull found me with his flashlight at about 10 PM. “Get outta there before I KILL ya!” screamed the bull… I got the last laugh though when I caught the same train 5 minutes later and rode it all the way to Oakland...(53)

These two letters as well as the space left between them for dramatic effect, shows McCandless deliberately casting himself in the very role of rugged individualistic American iconoclast that he held so dear. The narrative is complete with the same over-emphasis on agency and resilience that is often projected upon disenfranchised populations — ultimately deeming their failings to be their own. The difference, of course, is that McCandless is projecting these freedoms onto himself — purposefully appropriating the language and heroic-diary-style self-mythologizing that his literary heroes employed in their own accounts of elected homelessness. These extracts can be read as a conscious appeal by Alexander Supertramp to be seen in terms of the values of
authenticity and self-reliance he so cherished. The first extract sets up a timeless Western scenario, an uncomfortable conflict between the nomad and the sedentary society in which he finds himself. The next extract is an expression of freedom and escape, at once strongly tethered to a well-worn cultural narrative of mobility which must reiterate its charms whilst simultaneously emphasizing its hardships. In elevating himself so consciously to the company of his peripatetic literary heroes McCandless subscribes to his own sense of western myth much the same as did Kerouac, Davies and so many others before him. Krakauer is well aware of this literary genesis, and each chapter of the book begins with epigraphs from such writers — often taken from passages McCandless himself highlighted in his journals. One author, however, stands out above all mentioned in Into The Wild, not only for the considerable power he held over Alexander Supertramp’s decision making, but also for the almost resentful way in which Krakauer quite brutally dispatches with him:

McCandless had been infatuated with London since childhood. London’s fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world, his championing of the great unwashed — all of it mirrored McCandless’s passions. Mesmerized by London’s turgid portrayal of life in Alaska and the Yukon, McCandless…seemed to forget that they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London’s romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself has spent just a single winter in the North and that he’d died by his own hand on his Californian estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print (44).

The undeniable fact remains that the largely fictive giddiness Jack London had displayed for American tramping and wilderness wandering at the close of the nineteenth century, afflicted Christopher McCandless in the very same way 90 years later. Therefore what
seemed so obviously to be an exercise in vacuous myth mongering specific to one literary epoch, still somehow has the power to shape the culture and literary fantasies of another much later one.

Also prevalent throughout Krakauer’s telling of McCandless’ brief life are literary themes of ‘reinvention’ and ‘rebirth’ through mobility that we first see made explicit in the editorial preface to the book, and which certainly do shine through in many of the young man’s own diary entries and letters: “It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found. God it’s great to be alive!” (37) These are common enough emotions amongst masculinist wilderness nomads, and ones any outdoors person is perhaps likely to recognize in themselves. However, it is worth noting here that Krakauer first published an early version of his story in Outside Magazine, based out of Santa Fe, NM, and a stalwart publication of the western outdoors scene. This is significant not only because it implicated McCandless’s muddled homelessness squarely in an ‘extreme sports’ context, but also because it eventually held Into The Wild and its tragic protagonist up to critique by the hiking and climbing community which has tended to operate with the same ‘bigger is better’ logic of masculinist fatalism and adventuring that mirrors McCandless’ own attitude. However, this was also the first community to deride the mistakes of the young adventurer and therefore distance his idealism from real outdoors people who ‘knew what they were doing’. 

3 A similar discourse can be observed in the backlash of the western outdoors community against another Boulder, Colorado resident, Aron Ralston, who after a series of climbing mistakes became trapped under a rock in the Utah high country and had to amputate his own arm with a penknife in order to survive. His story was portrayed in the film 127 Hours (2010) and Rolston has frequently attracted a
Somewhere in Krakauer’s editorializing and narrative tone, however, it is apparent that the biographer himself does himself admire McCandless’ wanderings, even connecting personally to the idea that America’s wilderness offers a way of starting life over *tabula rasa* through the wholesale embracing of both mobility and asceticism. Plenty of evidence is offered that Krakauer understands Alexander Supertramp’s journey as an innately spiritual one, in conversation with that very same canon of American literature that his subject so badly wanted to belong to: “Unlike Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul” (183).

Nowhere, however, is this assertion more apparent than in Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen of the book, in which Krakauer devotes significant pages of his narrative to making explicit connections between himself as a young man and his narrative subject “As a youth I am told, I was willfully, self-absorbed, intermittently reckless, moody. I disappointed my father in the usual ways. Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley or corked fury and hunger to please” (134). This quite naked portrait of the author-as-a-young-man raises a number of questions about the powerful allure of McCandless’s story, even in light of his slow and agonizing death (a fact both the book and the film start with, rather than reveal later in the traditional chronological fashion preferred by Hollywood). Furthermore, the decision of the author to explicitly juxtapose McCandless’s life with his own autobiography, give clues as to a set of desires that may not only hint at the real motivations behind Krakauer’s dogged similar level of criticism to McCandless for his perceived hubris and naiveté that ‘serious’ wilderness adventurers hate to be associated with.
pursuit of this story, but also illuminate those stubborn cultural fantasies that account for the resonance of *Into The Wild* across many artistic and narrative sites, up to and including this dissertation: Whilst this chapter can certainly be read in the spirit in which I think it is intended; as a genuine self-reflexive attempt by Krakauer at performing empathy with his young biographical subject — an empathy seeking to narrow the gaps McCandless’ bizarre and controversial character necessarily opens — there is also plenty of room to interpret this as a tacit reaffirming of the author’s own masculinity, his own wilderness credentials, and ultimately his own white male American authenticity as roving writer and rugged outdoorsman. Much in these central pages therefore, is designed to inform the reader (who may likely have picked up the book due to some latent or not-so-latent wilderness desires of their own), of the author’s own credentials as an adventuring American male whose resume is also replete with numerous examples of conquering and taming the wild. This appeal for legitimacy comes through Krakauer’s repeated avowal that it was extreme mountaineering, more than anything else, which got him through his “thick postadolescent fog” before he, lucky to survive, came to more profound realizations about life and dreams: “Climbing mattered. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything…to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real” (134). Krakauer goes on to tell of how he used to devote his days to “…fantasizing about, and then undertaking, ascents of remote mountains in Alaska and Canada — obscure spires, steep and frightening…” (134). Of course, through a lengthy play-by-play account of his climb, in a narrative move undeniably consistent with the established cannon of white male adventure
literature, and in much the same way as both McCandless and Evan Tanner stressed the perils of their own trips in the days before they disappeared, Krakauer seems at pains to underline the implicit danger of his past adventuring. At one point he stresses the random nature of mortality through an open comparison between himself and Supertramp: “The fact that I survived my Alaska adventure and McCandless did not survive his was largely a matter of chance…”(155).

Interesting still, especially in light of the fieldwork component of my study, is that Krakauer locates himself against a very specific Western American landscape in his retelling of his youthful decision to head into the wilderness:

In 1977, while brooding on a Colorado barstool, picking unhappily at my existential scabs, I got it into my head to climb a mountain called the Devils Thumb…I was working then as an itinerant carpenter, framing condominiums in Boulder for 3.50 an hour. One afternoon, after nine hours of humping two-by-tens and driving sixteen-penny nails, I told my boss I was quitting…And then I climbed into my car and departed for Alaska. I was surprised, as always, by how easy the act of leaving was, and how good it felt. The world was suddenly rich with possibility. (136)

There is indeed an undeniably strange synthesis here between John Krakauer’s own casting of himself as a ‘hoboing’ itinerant laborer fleeing to Alaska in search of perceived adventure, and the circumstances under which his journalistic quarry went the same way 15 years later. Also, given that Krakauer’s labor is literally built into the urban environment of Boulder, Colorado — physically manifest in the very structures of condos which shelter residents of the city — it would be remiss not to mention here that this very study into the West’s unsheltered structures is in some ways born out of a reverence for that very same landscape. All of this is to say, that the mythos of the American West
remains so powerfully evocative, offering such a tangible, experiential, and seductive narrative, that its grip is often unavoidable even for those who see it coming.

Christopher McCandless’ own conflicted conceptions of homelessness were exacerbated by his self-perception as a privileged young man who had grown up ‘sheltered’ and materially wanting for nothing in a comfortable world of anodyne consumerism and banal social conformity. The natural degree of liberal middle-class guilt such self-perceptions can trigger manifested itself classically in his outrage at the unfairness and inequality of society, but also led him to romanticize the lives led by those who did not have what he had — or more accurately the lives he thought they could lead if only they realized the ‘true meaning’ of freedom. For all McCandless’ concern about homelessness and inequality, there is very little evidence he had ever thought about these problems critically or holistically, or that he’d even had much real exposure to disenfranchised lives beyond the standard resume of do-good soup-kitchen volunteerism that many middle-class students boast. In fact there is everything to suggest that as a young man his outrage at social inequality often announced itself in a weirdly paternalistic disposition, as if McCandless viewed himself as the one to ‘save’ disenfranchised people through motivational lectures and the positive affirmation of what he saw to be a pure form of life free of commercial trappings.

Discussions in the book of the young man’s early encounters with urban poverty, strongly suggest that McCandless actually saw the homelessness around him as simply a poor ‘lifestyle’ decision, circumstances chosen by people who were essentially squandering the wonderful opportunities their marginality could have offered them. His
friends recounted how while they were out at bars, Chris would often wander the streets chatting to homeless people and offering them food and earnest advice as to how they might “better their lives.” At times his one-man efforts at spiritual outreach took on extreme proportions: “On one occasion Chris picked up a homeless man from the streets of D.C., brought him home to leafy, affluent Annandale, and secretly set the guy up in the Airstream trailer his parents parked beside the garage. Walt and Billie never knew they were hosting a vagrant” (113). On another occasion a friend tells of McCandless picking him up and taking him downtown on a Friday night for what he thought would be a party:

“Instead, Chris parked down on Fourteenth Street, which at the time was a real bad part of town. Then he said, ‘You know Eric, you can read about this stuff, but you can’t understand it until you live it. Tonight that’s what we’re going to do.’ We spent the next four hours hanging out in creepy places, talking with pimps and hookers and lowlife. I was, like, scared” (114).

That particular night, like many others, ended with McCandless driving around with a bag of hamburgers handing them out to “smelly guys sleeping on grates” — but the sense is that this was not simply about feeding people, rather he had values to espouse. A running theme of these unsolicited moralistic interventions was money, and how life was far better and purer once financial concerns were renounced. McCandless’s self-image must have been tied to a strong belief that he was the one to ‘save’ others from their unhappy or meaningless lives, and his propensity to offer lengthy instructions to these ends only intensified with his wanderings. A postcard he sent to a much older man named Ron who had previously picked him up hitchhiking, is just littered with evidence of this compulsion:
I’d like to repeat the advice I gave you before, in that I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one piece of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit than a man with a secure future. The very basic core of man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure…Don’t settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon. (57).

These impertinent and intense efforts to inspire nomadism and asceticism in everybody he met, offer perhaps our best insight into the values McCandless saw embodied in an idealized ‘hobo’ lifestyle. Andy Horowitz, one of McCandless’ high school friends, mused in an interview he gave to John Krakauer: “Chris was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today’s society gives people” (174). It does certainly seem likely that an ambivalent view of capitalism, and a quite open loathing of hyper-consumerism, underpin much of the young wanderer’s considerable angst and distaste for society. Krakauer advances that even though his parents had in many ways themselves realized the American dream, rising from meager beginnings to a position of financial security, the teenaged McCandless “…believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil…” (115). It was the joint experience of mobility and poverty which McCandless most valued, and both are constant and conflicting themes throughout his story.

It is then, the subtle juxtaposing of urban poverty with nature wandering and wilderness survival, which very clearly illustrates that a deep cultural confusion regarding these two very different states is as alive and well today as ever it has been. Indeed, when
*Into the Wild* made it onto the big screen in 2007, director Sean Penn devoted a disproportional segment of his filmic masterpiece to emphasizing McCandless’ time on skid row. In what may have an attempt towards social awareness, the movie had its protagonist living alongside the “bona-fide homeless” before once more throwing up his hands in disgust at the material society he was attempting to flee and heading for untamed Alaska with nothing but a bag of rice and a .22 caliber rifle. The framing of this temporary and conscious plunge into ‘real homelessness’ for an idealistic young travelling kid appears natural, cautionary almost, as if living in proximity to genuine ‘bums, tramps, and winos’ is a rite-of-passage that itself signifies the transcendence of McCandless from privileged ivy-league college boy into archetypal white male American hero. Needless to say, however, that these are not options presented to the most marginal populations in America, who may be tied down, rooted in one place by addiction, physical and mental illness, extreme poverty or perhaps just a desire to secure transitional housing, employment and re-enter society in the same place as when they left it. As the fieldwork portion of this study will show, and as social science studies with America’s homeless have long maintained, for the most part people are homeless in the places they became homeless in (Blau, 4). Therefore the real problem these kinds of cultural narratives present is that for most individuals on the nation’s streets, a lifestyle of camping, hunting, fishing and self-reliance in the great outdoors would be, as it eventually was for McCandless and Tanner, tantamount to suicide.

In the same way as the original “Supertramp” mythos persisted despite W.H Davies’ himself having been severely disabled in a train-hopping accident, Alexander
Supertramp’s gradual and agonizing starvation in a derelict bus miles from all human warmth or comfort also remains a remarkably enticing alternative narrative of freedom and success. For many young people, *Into The Wild* has come to represent an optimistic tale of escape from a culture of hyper-consumerism and the ‘sheltered’ suburban existence of twenty-first century America. It was really the film’s portrayal of McCandless’ short life that once more propelled the concept of American wanderlust into the mainstream consciousness. Soon online communities emerged as gestation sites for the same old muddled discourses of homelessness and wilderness survival. A series of postings on internet message boards revealed an impressionable demographic of young people who, perhaps not as familiar with the literature McCandless himself had found so alluring, began to wrestle with the question of what it may be like to be without home in the United States. Some even took direct inspiration from the extreme form of anti-materialism practiced by McCandless:

(11/17/2008)

Ever Read “Into The Wild”? I am thinking about becoming homeless.

I am college educated, and really identify with Chris. Anyone have experience with this? Any suggestions? *(Lets Run)*

Perhaps detached from consumer culture and disillusioned with their own ‘sheltered’ upbringings in suburban America, for these young adults the lure of the open road appeared so powerful they discussed trading housing, family, stability, and ‘shelter’ for the explicitly “unsheltered” margins of society. Ensuing replies to message postings such as these tended to debate interpretations of McCandless’ life at some length, once
more highlighting the ambiguous connotations of homelessness in the leaps they made between scathing chastisement, cautious encouragement, and an outright misunderstanding of homelessness as outdoors experience rather than precarious social abandonment. Some of the following responses voiced in the faceless forums of cyberspace also demonstrate a strange attempt to “claim” the experience of poverty and homelessness in order to validate opinions:

(11/17 – 11/18, 2008)


It’s better to be homeless in an urban area. At least you won’t starve to death.

…coming from someone who was homeless and penniless for almost a full year, you want no part of it. It sounds all cute and romantic, but I can tell you that you are some upper middle class kid who will find himself in trouble really, really fast.

I think you need to read the ending again, it's not pleasant. Go on a hike, maybe a week long hike, but to go live in the wild, abandon your family and love ones, to pursue a calling is called irresponsible. Grow up.

Yeah. Through hike the Appalachian Trail. If you still want to be homeless, then go for it. The book (movie) had a good message, but it's a tough way to live (obviously).

Agreed...Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, if you have experience. If not, learn through reading, clubs and experience, then do some overnight trips before attempting something like the Colorado Trail, as it's "only" ~500 miles.

I don’t think it would be insulting to live like someone else so long as you were respectful and genuinely wanted to learn more about another lifestyle. (Lets Run)

However negative some of these comments are about the notion of “becoming homeless,” they retain a tacit suggestion that destitution is not only a chosen “lifestyle,”
but also that the issue continues to be viewed a problem of individual identity, rather than the structural fallout of a cycle of poverty, failing social contracts, and insecure housing. Apparent in this thread once again is the almost seamless confusion of homelessness with recreational backpacking, in this case along the Appalachian Trail. Most critically however, one line in particular haunts these online debates which seems to come back time and again whenever homelessness is discussed in general terms amongst housed citizens in the United States — indeed, it was one heard repeatedly in one form or another during the ethnographic work of this study:

I’m currently in Anchorage, AK and it’s actually astonishing to see how many homeless people are in this town… if I was homeless, I’d think Anchorage would be one of the worst places in the world to live. I’d go to Texas or Florida or California! (Let’s run)

Much of this stems from the same old conflicted cultural narrative that simultaneously romanticizes and stigmatizes visible homelessness. Throughout representations such as *Into The Wild* and its attendant discourse, there is a latent desire to “step into” the bodies of homeless people: “If I were homeless, I would…” Here is reflected a kind of weird survivalist minstrelsy, a commodification of poverty and disenfranchisement that has echoes in the connections Eric Lott made between American bohemia and early blackface performance. There are interesting parallels to be made here and elsewhere in Lott’s considerations of the white mainstream’s love affair with, and theft of, the black male body. The same logic used to interrogate the romantic understanding of these marginal populations can be used to address the phenomenon of comfortably housed, suburban, middle-class youth, who fantasize about a life of poverty,
freed from all possessions and the trappings of their privileged upbringings. There is a
tacit, Lott may say sexual, attraction for young men to the homeless as liberated father
figures, a motif we see in a number of discourses of urban poverty including
McCandless’s own. The fallout of this adolescent infatuation with the footloose and
fancy-free can be seen to linger well into adulthood as romantic conceptualizations of
“placeless” populations persist. This was a question Krakauer also pondered in a passage
exploring Alexander Supertramp’s uninterested and celibate sexuality:

Like not a few of those seduced by the wild, McCandless seems to have been
driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire. His yearning, in a sense,
was too powerful to be quenched by human contact. McCandless may have been
tempted by the succor offered by women, but it paled beside the prospect of rough
congress with nature, with the cosmos itself. And thus was he drawn north, to
Alaska. (66)

The troublesome question that McCandless poses for a cultural study of American
homelessness, therefore, is one of gender performance, representation and authenticity.
To what extent has homelessness become romanticized in mainstream culture in ways
which further disenfranchise those who are living it?

One obvious and tragic result of this rich tale of mobility, masculinity, and
idealism is that there continues to be those people whom, like Evan Tanner, fall victim to
the wanderlust and adventure McCandless inspires in them. In 2013 alone there were at
least two high profile examples of young males who, explicitly referencing Christopher
McCandless’s fatal trip into the wilderness, disappeared into the nation’s forests and
parks alone. A 19 year old young man from Oklahoma went missing alone in the Oregon
backcountry after watching the movie, while the body of an 18 year-old Arizonan,
Jonathan Croom, was found near his car in the same region. USA today reported:

“…Jonathan had been talking to a friend about Into the Wild and had said "that it would be great to just leave penniless and just work along the way and get resources like they did in the movie.” The fate of these young men is tragic evidence that little has changed since Jack London, Kerouac, Evan Tanner, or even McCandless set off on their expeditions of simulated homelessness. Even more tragic on a collective social level are the extremely high stakes the sly conflation of homelessness with voluntary outdoors experience can present in shaping public attitudes and a politics of poverty awareness in American cities currently undergoing aggressive anti-homelessness legislation.

The troublesome discourses I have traced through these chapters lead both directly to tragedy as in the case of the handful of McCandless-inspired adventurers who go missing every year, and indirectly to the much more complex tragedy of increased homelessness, prejudice, and immiseration in a society that, in large part due to its fraught cultural representations, simply does not have the political imagination to address the problem convincingly. The continued idealizing of poverty and mobility as a type of freedom or adventure holds significant implications for those citizens who find themselves falling through the ever-expanding gaps of U.S. society. Perhaps after all some closing words found scrawled inside Alexander Supertramp’s own journal best encapsulate the death-spin American culture and social policy are currently locked together in:

“HAVE LITERALLY BECOME TRAPPED IN THE WILD — NO GAME” (195).
As this study moves forward to consider myths of justice, morality and violence on the frontier, as well as the ways complex cultural treatments of homelessness underpin local knowledge and urban policy shifts, key questions begin to emerge: How do cultural conflations of homelessness with wanderlust, the wilderness, freedom and the mythos of the American West contrast with the image of “home” projected by anti-homelessness campaigns? What stakes do cultural representations present in shaping public perceptions of homelessness as a mobile problem in cities across the west today? And: How has the figure of the independent wanderer always been somehow present in American discourses of ‘home’ and community?
Chapter 4:

Westward Ho! : Heroes and Antiheroes on the American road

“More than “truth,” authenticity is associated with authority and originality, and it is under those later terms that history and representation in the American West so often meet in vexed ways, not only in the academy but in popular culture and national memory.” — Handley and Lewis, True West (2004)

"Go West, young man, go West. There is health in the country, and room away from our crowds of idlers and imbeciles." “That,” I said, “is very frank advice, but it is medicine easier given than taken. It is a wide country, but I do not know just where to go.” “It is all room away from the pavements...” — Josiah Bushnell Grinnell (alleged advice from Horace Greeley c.1833)

“You said that you wanted to put us upon reservation, to build our houses and make us medicine lodges. I do not want them. I was born on the prairie where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures and where everything drew a free breath. I want to die there and not within walls...the white man has the country which we loved, and we only wish to wander on the prairie until we die.” — Paruasemana (Ten Bears), Yamparika Comanche, Medicine Lodge Treaty 1867

There is something else powerful at work in enduring constructions of American homelessness as a mobile phenomenon. Related to the hobo figure and transcendentalist wilderness wanderers in many ways, the particular mythos of the American West has also conjured its own tropes of drifting, rugged, independent white males —with specific themes of justice, morality, and frontier violence that have long juxtaposed notions of ‘home’ and sedentary society. Born in the popular frontier narratives of the nineteenth century, then filtered through a genesis of Hollywood Westerns, this lone figure of hyper-
masculinity and rootlessness has been as hugely popular and influential in the American imagination as he has been deeply conflicted and ambiguous. His individualistic moral compass, whilst always pointed west, has never quite settled in one place and he is best recognized as a hero / antihero for every American age. Simultaneously feared, abhorred, fetishized, and emulated, his taciturn heroism and tough brand of morality are best enshrined in popular culture as the lone cowboy figure, riding out along the expansive prairies and into the sunset, never remaining in civilized society any longer than he has to. As an icon of mobility and brutal violence however, he is far harder to characterize. Indeed from the mid twentieth century onwards, American popular culture has perpetuated and subverted this trope of wandering masculinity and aggressive retribution in almost every way imaginable, and often in unlikely genres.

This chapter traces the long and complex genesis of the nomadic Western hero / antihero from Victorian dime-store novels, through his many incarnations in twentieth and twenty-first century cinema and popular culture. From the traditional rugged white individuals portrayed by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, to the more subversive treatments of the Western myth in police or crime films of the 1980s and 90s, close attention is given to the representations of nomadism, morality, and violence coalescing around this icon. Along the way he becomes both racialized and compromised in interesting ways, highlighting the enduring problem of whiteness in heroic representations of American masculinity and transience. The chapter is also bookended by detailed discussion of two contemporary violent drifters and their engagements on the American road, one fictional, and one somewhat less so.
Kai the homeless hitchhiker: one captured object of homeless policy

In February 2013 the latest viral phenomenon to pique sedentary America’s long-standing fascination with youthful mobility and footloose wandering in the west, came in the unlikely but instantly recognizable form of 24-year-old Caleb Lawrence McGillivary, popularly known as ‘Kai-the-hatchet-wielding-homeless-hitchhiker’. As the story went, ‘Kai’ was thumbing a ride out of Fresno, California, when the 40 year old man who was driving him suddenly broke down into a series of lurid confessions, proclaiming: “You know what, I’m Jesus Christ and I can do anything I fucking want to!” — and then deliberately drove his car at speed into a worker who was loading his truck by the side of the road, pinning the unfortunate man in agonizing pain between the two vehicles. The driver then exited his car and began threatening bystanders. What happened next is best reported in Kai’s own words, which he delivered during a rapid-fire, expletive-laden, nine-minute monologue, captured on film by a TV news reporter for local Fox affiliate KMPH:

Bam! And he smashed into this fuckin’ guy right there, pinned him in between that fuckin’ truck, and so I fuckin’, I hop out, I look over, the guy’s pinned there.

I mean, like, freight train riders know this, like, if you get pinned between something, do not fuckin’ move that shit, otherwise you bleed out. Like, motherfuckin’ I ran in, I grabbed the keys. He’s fuckin’ sitting there like nothing even happened…If he had started driving that car around again, man, there would have been a hell of a lot of bodies around here….and then fuckin’ buddy gets out and there’s these two women are trying to help him. He runs up and he grabs one of them, man. Like a guy that big can snap a woman’s neck like a pencil stick.

So I fuckin’ went up behind him with a hatchet. Smash. Smash. SUR-MASH…!

The video interview immediately spread throughout social media, propelled by Kai’s graphic reenactment of his violent act of heroism and the made-for-meme catchphrase: “Sur-mash!” Also a factor in his overnight celebrity was Kai’s combined appearance and
demeanor — good looking, white, and young, with an All-American healthy, outdoors
glow, yet simultaneously wild eyed, wild haired, and eccentric, carrying a large pack and
bedding role and moving with a nervous, skittish energy. A bandana holding his long
untamed mane from his eyes betrayed what looked like a marijuana joint protruding
beneath, and another burned in his hand for the duration of the interview. Kai’s speech
pattern too, was a curious mix; part laid-back west-coast surfer dude, part manic, sleep-
deprived road-tramp. Something in the way he nonchalantly recounted the horrific
violence suggested he was hardened by years of rough living, and he hinted at similarly
dark experiences in his past. The paradoxes of his misfit status were not lost on the
headline writers, who found it hard to describe him without the use of numerous
hyphenated descriptions conjoining various cultural archetypes — McGillivary was
dubbed everything from “Homeless-Surfer-Hitchhiker-Hatchet-Wielding-Guy” to
“skater-punk-drifter” or “bona-fide-hippie-hero” in mainstream media. His self-
presentations were also consciously evasive and ambiguous. He used interviews to
project an image of mysterious nomadism, claiming to prefer the company of “trees” to
people, and constructing a deliberate air of ascetic spirituality:

  Reporter: Can, can I get your name? And where you’re from, if you don’t mind.
  KAI: I’m Kai. Straight outta dog town.
  Reporter: Can I get the spelling . . .
  KAI: K A I
  Reporter: Do you have a last name?
  KAI: No, bro. I don’t have anything!
  Reporter: Where are you from originally? Are you from the Fresno area?
**KAI:** Sophia, West Virginia (*grins, gives exaggerated wink & nod to camera*)

**Reporter:** No kidding. How old are you?

**KAI:** (*shrugs*) I can’t call it.

(*KMPH, *Full Interview*)

This original news piece ended on a bleak note as Caleb cast himself as an individual alone on the margins of society, but it also offered clues as to the realities behind his performance in the time-honored role of western American road-hero: “I don’t have any family…As far as anyone I grew up with is concerned, I’m already dead.”

Having told the reporter he was from West Virgina, Caleb in fact turned out to be originally from Ontario and had lived on the road since he was a teenager having fled a children’s home following a fraught and abusive home life. In the words of Kai’s estranged father, his son had disappeared and “gone west” (*Nationalpost*). In a follow-up interview for KMPH a few days after the Fresno incident, Caleb elaborated on his ideas about home and the reason he had obfuscated his past: “… it’s about vibration bro, it’s being a part of everything. Like, when I say I’m from Sophia…I was pretty much raised by the TV, I was a latchkey kid…wandering around with no support, nobody around to help me out…there’s a lot of bad stuff that happened to me…I wanted to run away…”

The reporter was not going let the interview end on such a bum note, and instead praised “this home-free guy” before wrapping up in the optimistic manner typical of local color stories: “Kai is anything but trapped now…the most free spirit you will find…Did this guy save lives that Friday in Fresno, I guess we’ll never really know… but a guy who in the eyes of society has nothing, risked everything to try…and that is why much of the world considers him a hero…” (*KMPH*)
It was only when network television’s *Jimmy Kimmel Live* tracked the celebrity drifter down for an appearance on the popular talk show that ‘the real Kai’ began to come more into focus, as tellingly did the sorts of questions a dominant culture might have for a transient hero in 2013. After an introductory piece with the journalist who ‘found’ McGillivary, the interview was played for laughs and conducted in a mock car which Kimmel ‘drove’ down the highway as Kai hopped in:

*Kimmel:* So, they describe you in the video as ‘homeless’ — but you don’t like to use the word homeless right?

*Kai:* Home free — it’s the land of the free and the home of the brave!

*Kimmel:* You don’t want to have a home, correct?

*Kai:* What the hell you talking about? I am home!

*Kimmel:* I see, so anywhere you are is your home, that’s your philosophy?

*Kai:* Yeah.

Further questions probed Kai’s oppositional lifestyle and his dream of building a tree house. Of particular interest was his attitude towards material wealth and consumer goods as the host claimed to have donated the young man money only to watch him immediately give it away on the street: “Well yeah, I mean, the quickest way to devalue a currency is to stop believing in it.” At Kimmel’s suggestion that Kai sometimes “went into stores to take things and then give the things to poor people” — the celebrity hitchhiker became suddenly animated: “I jack *hella shit* from Wal-Mart and Target! … I’m talkin’ big grocery carts, at Safeway I fuckin’ walk out with two thirty-packs of Budweiser and I be like, hey ladies, want to come party? Then I hook ‘em up with some other dude and I’m like ‘hey, have a great life…”” A reoccurring theme of the short interview was an effort to understand the seemingly unfathomable choices of anti-
materialism that ‘Kai-the-hatchet-wielding-hitchhiker’ seemed to have made, and was now apparently advocating as a modern form of transcendentalism to a middle-American audience. Kimmel kept hammering this point: “Your philosophy on life is what?” “You enjoy your life I assume?” “Is that your dream…?” “I don’t know… it seems like you enjoy yourself…?” Each time Kai evaded the questions with a mixture of tangential ramblings and glib, non-committal remarks. The interview ended with the late-night host presenting the ‘homeless hitchhiker’ with a surfboard and wetsuit, and thanking him for “not killing me with a hatchet” (Kimmel Live).

However in a sad ongoing twist to the story, Kai was arrested three months later for the suspected beating to death of a 73 year old New Jersey attorney in the man’s home. It unfolded that Kai had met the older man the previous night in Times Square, and had gone back to his house for the night. In the days leading up to McGillivary’s capture by police at the Philadelphia Greyhound station, the national media leapt on what many felt was both the necessary downfall and inevitable conclusion of “hatchet-wielding” Kai’s instant-celebrity — taking care to remind viewers that the popular attorney was killed by “blunt force trauma” and that McGillivary “should be considered armed and dangerous.” One reporter stressed that police didn’t know where Kai was because he “was a hitchhiker who relied on the kindness and generosity of strangers for food and lodging” (CBS). Similar echoes of nineteenth-century tramp-phobia were stressed in official channels immediately following McGillivary’s arrest as almost a priori rationale for the suspicion that fell upon him. A spokesperson for the New Jersey Prosecutor Office listed “unsolved homicides” across the county, and claimed that while Kai was “not a suspect yet”: “…any time you get a drifter, and all of a sudden he’s being charged
with a homicide, it would be an irresponsibility for us not to look into that possibility” (ABC).

The attorney’s murder is as yet unresolved, but regardless, the tragedy of Kai’s story exists on multiple levels — he has attempted suicide at least once since being confined to jail. As his background in Canada was slowly laid out in the media, a history of mental, physical, and sexual abuse and a life spent in and out of children’s homes unfolded. This bought some context to a graphic Facebook post Kai made in the hours following the New Jersey attorney’s murder:

(Mediaite)

Kai’s narrative is one in which homoeroticism, fear, sex, and violent homophobia all have significant roles. American society’s already capricious notions of ‘justice’ and ‘punishment’ become even further complicated when tied to a sexualized discourse, and especially one of such visceral panic and hysteria over gay sex and an alleged rape. Roger Lancaster argues in Sex Panic And The Punitive State (2011) “…that sex panics have become an important part of modern crime panics and constitute the part that liberals and civil libertarians have been most reluctant to critically engage” (14). Of course the figure of Kai becomes a symbolic meeting ground where all kinds of fearful cultural discourses
of crime, mobility, homosexuality, abduction, and unjust violence, subtly meet with his previous associations with folk heroism, mobility, romance, freedom, and ‘deserved’ violence. It is worth noting that cultural assumptions about mobility are perfectly at home on either side of this fraught equation. This messy problem is further complicated by Kai’s high moral ambiguity in the first place, even before he was accused of murdering a lawyer whose house he had presumably willingly gone back to after a late night rendezvous in midtown Manhattan. As I discussed earlier, if drifting males on the American road are being positively valued, this discourse tends to be grounded in a masculine erotics of freedom and opportunity. As we saw clearly in the mass appeal Christopher McCandless’s story held for the mainstream, as well as the lure the hobo figure held for Don Draper and others, the freewheeling mobility of white men is taken in dominant culture to signify strong degrees of liberty, innocence, and a forbidden excitement: there is also an undeniable but tacit fetishizing of the young white drifter’s body as an object of desire and cultural innocence. In this respect “Kai the Homeless Hitchhiker” was no different. McGillivary’s fast rise to icon status in the digital age was in no small part due to his looks and sex appeal, and in contrast to his repeated repudiations of sexuality in television interviews like Kimmel Live, plenty of online discussion suggests he was very much received as a taboo object of erotic desire for all kinds of people. A look at the numerous Facebook pages set up to support Kai’s legal defense for example, reveal a kind of ongoing obsessive attraction for the character, especially after he was charged for a murder, publicly claiming a kind of ‘gay panic’ defense. Amidst shirtless photos of McGillivary and requests for his address in jail, are comments by women in their 50s explicitly fetishizing the young man as “wild and free,” beneath YouTube videos of Kai playing guitar are marriage proposals from young men
and woman, and his profile pictures instigate numerous declarations of love and admiring.

The relevant tragedy of Kai’s story for a discursive analysis of American mobility lies in the ability of the dominant culture to swing whimsically between outright fascination with nomadism as the embodiment of heroic American values, and a deeply held moral indictment of people who are perceived to live outside the margins of society in this way. At the center of this tension was the same question of “lifestyle choice” that has characterized debates about U.S homelessness since the mid-nineteenth century. Critically, the notion that Kai’s itinerant life resulted solely from his own deliberate free-will, not only went unquestioned in mainstream discourse, but it was actually actively and openly embraced as the nostalgic object of freedom, and the very reason for his heroic act. The media narrative reflexively took Kai’s explicit mobility to be the very quality that enabled him to be on the spot to see that rough western justice was metered out on the outskirts of Fresno that day. During Jimmy Kimmel Live! and his many other media appearances, you almost got the sense that it was a comfort for mainstream America to believe there were Kais out there in the west, living on the road, ready to pop up as the moral arbiters of outlaw retribution at any moment. This was also supported in Kai’s original words on the scene: “Good thing I was hitchhiking, yeah people say ‘don’t hitchhike,’ well here’s what happens — at least I was here.” That this version of heroism runs deep in the American psyche, can be seen no more clearly than in the chasm between social reactions to the two different violent acts Kai was implicated in, spanning just 3 months. On the one hand the act of bludgeoning somebody with a hatchet gained him instant accolades and praise when it happened in the liminal space of the western road, but the same alleged act was viewed as abhorrent and absolute proof of his deviance.
when delivered in the home of a sedentary member of East coast society. Granted the first of Kai’s victims did not die from his injuries, whilst the second man did, but there is more complexity behind the public outrage than simply perceived degrees of violence. The mobile lifestyle offered as the root explanation for McGillivary’s treatment as a modern American hero in the first instance, was used to vilify him as guilty of murder without trial in the second. In the same vein questions were not asked regarding the innocence of Kai’s original bludgeoning victim (who maintained it was in fact Kai who grabbed the wheel and crashed into the roadside worker) and neither were they asked regarding the ‘guilt’ of the slain 73 year-old New Jersey attorney, who in another context, may well have drawn uneasy questions for taking a vulnerable young man with a history of sexual abuse back to his home, thus confirming Lancaster’s theory that “sex panic” now constitutes an important part of social fears regarding crime because “…sex crimes are understood as being different from other types of crime, because they are viewed as being both uniquely horrific and uniquely widespread…” (14).

Crucial to this analysis is that during neither of the two media responses were the deeper questions asked about the real causes of Kai’s mobility, rooted as it was in his own traumatic history of abuse and neglect. Instead the cultural default was to treat his rootlessness as a fascinating, exotic, or deviant ‘choice’ that was broadly in line with common-sense ideas of homelessness. Media commentary consistently chose to eliminate from any explanation for Kai’s wandering both his background of abuse, or the signs of trauma and PTSD that would have been clear to anybody looking. The clues that were there from the start were all but ignored due to the dual valences of mobility that continuously proved to be the denominating factor offered in explanation for somebody like Kai. The way in which media discourse held Kai hostage according to the very
narrow idea of his mobility resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of “capture” with its logics of “…direct comparison and monopolistic appropriation” (444). In other words the very quality which made Kai ‘free’ and therefore fascinating also ‘captured’ him, both discursively and punitively as well: “The apparatus of capture constitutes a general space of comparison and a mobile center of appropriation. This is a white wall / black hole system…” (444).

The saga of Kai taken in its entirety only confirmed the established assumptions of middle-class America that there were legions of happy-to-be-homeless, mobile by choice, young, anarchistic drifters perpetually travelling the nation on the good will of others – and whilst their capacity for serendipitous heroism was not unknown – it was hugely outweighed by their much bigger capacity for criminality, thievery, substance abuse, dependency, and pathological violence. Crucially, Kai’s story thrust the concept of living “home-free” as opposed to “homeless” back into the spotlight where it was readily embraced by a mainstream culture who, unaware of the term’s common usage among generations of travelling youth to distinguish themselves from the urban poverty they encountered on the streets, merely saw it as confirmation of something they already knew: that homelessness was a lifestyle choice characterized by its freedom and mobility, enhanced by laziness, welfare leaching, and recreational drug usage, and perpetrated mainly by able-bodied young men who could be contributing to society, but had elected to live-off it instead. These deep-seated cultural anxieties not only accounted for the paradoxical nature of Kai’s media portrayal, but in many ways also for “Kai” himself – everything about McGillivary’s contorted cultural performance was designed to fit into the pre-existing narrative of heroic, ascetic, individualistic nomadism that American culture had ready for him. Sheltered behind this archetype, no doubt, he knew he would
be able to bury the traumatic root causes of his mobility, quietly, and safely where they
would remain unquestioned. Safe that is, until the glow of his heroism faded and his
actions gave the culture a new reason to understand his lifestyle according to its darker
logics of mobility.

The point to make here is that McGillivary was playing the role of the
individualist drifter with his own violent moral compass and distain for society, for a
media and a culture who were eagerly expecting it. This role was inscribed well over a
century ago as a central device in the creation of the Western Mythos. ‘Kai’s’ evasive
effort to remain anonymous, deliberately obscuring where he had come from and
countering any suggestion that he possessed either a home, a real name, or a family in his
past, all resemble an agreed upon cultural performance in which his role was already well
scripted and polished for public consumption. As a construct, ‘Kai-The-Hatchet-
Wielding-Hitchhiker’ was as much opposed to sedentary society and its narrow
materialistic brand of morality, as he was opposed to the violent outlaws he encountered
on the road. He just ‘did what he had to do’. The extent to which this was already an
implicit part of the narrative when the mainstream media first encountered Kai is
demonstrated by the speed at which they turned upon him the next time he allegedly ‘did
what he had to do’ — this time in the home of a New Jersey Attorney citing a ‘gay panic’
defence all-too-commonly heard in the continuing violence of American culture. As
Roger Lancaster underlines the stigma of homosexuality is that it has historically been
“associated with” and “defined as” a crime (17). This must also be considered when
analyzing Kai the Hitchhiker’s rapid cultural transition from ‘hero’ to ‘villain,’ seemingly
being denied the ‘antihero’ label on the way. Ultimately Kai’s fate was that his original
positive reception in national discourse always came with an expiry date. Once this
young drifter’s established mobility and violence met with sexualized panic and homophobia, infiltrating the safe domestic abode of an East Coast professional no less, mainstream America’s fascination with him came to an abrupt halt. Kai’s momentary subversion of competing national mythologies immediately gave way once more to a reordering of the same hegemonic discourses that usually surround mobility, homelessness, sex, and violence in this culture.

The tendency of American culture to attribute differential value judgments when matters of law, mobility and freedom are at stake, was noticed by historian Wallace Stegner in The American West as Living Space (1987): “Lawlessness, like wildness, is attractive, and we conceive the last remaining home of both to be the West.” In support of this point Stegner went on to tell of the killing of two Idaho game wardens by self-styled survivalist Claude Dallas after they caught him poaching:

…shot them and then finished them off with a bullet in the back of the head. In that act of unchivalrous violence Dallas was expressing more than an unwillingness to pay a little fine. For months, until he was captured early in 1987, he hid out in the deserts of Idaho and Nevada, protected by people all over the area. Why did they protect him? Because his belated frontiersman style, his total self-reliance and physical competence, his repudiation of any control, appealed to them more than murder repelled them or law enlisted their support. (75)

Dallas’ legend was boosted even further when he managed to escape jail and survive on the run again for a period of months. He was also trapped in much the same cultural predicament, as Kai would find himself caught in over two decades later. A folkloric hero to many in the West who applauded him for defending his right to live off the land, to others Dallas was a despicable and villainous outlaw. To everybody however, he was a self-reliant nomad whose life spent trapping, hunting, and living in the woods was ultimately in conflict with government and the state.
The real significance of these caricatures then, is that they neatly conform to a specific idea of homelessness and mobility in the West. This idea is buried deep in the American psyche and has undergone a specifically political reframing in recent years. It is an idea I argue is rapidly becoming the “de-facto object” of homeless policy in the region, even in progressive municipalities. Whilst the young, able, white male drifter has long been an established fixture on the boundless western landscape of the national imagination, existing for times alongside localized homelessness, cultural narratives have tended to hold him at least somewhat separate. Of course the degree to which this figure is imagined as standing apart from homelessness hinges upon a number of assumptions about contemporary homeless populations in American society: he is rural, not urban, western, not eastern, white, and not black. In the last decade however, precisely because of the way the assumed mobility of those like Kai is held hostage in mainstream media discourse, their image increasingly risks being appropriated as the face of homelessness in the American west. For young men like Kai the struggle becomes avoiding ‘capture’ at all costs by a culture stuck between strongly competing urges to idolize their nomadism, and also to stamp it out wherever it may live.

**Considering the nomad hero / antihero in popular culture**

The idea of the wandering violent hero according to which Kai was understood, and perhaps on a level understood himself, is of course a powerful trope in American culture. This is especially true in portrayals of the West where the literary and cinematic landscape is over-populated with rugged individualist men living outside the borders of law, home, settlement, and stability. In the year leading up to Kai’s fleeting appearance in the headlines, a violent Canadian ‘B movie’ called *Hobo With A Shotgun* (2011) had been
released and was quickly gaining cult status. I will return to the particulars of the film shortly, but needless to say it is not a particularly subtle story. Nevertheless, it was the most naked reemergence to date of a number of cultural logics coalescing around the hobo figure, and packaged for a young twenty-first century audience raised on “torture-porn” and gory horror flicks. The hero / antihero in the image of the mysterious drifter, however, has been through a number of cultural iterations since the Western myth first began to burrow into the national psyche in the late 1800s.

In The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century (1994), Patricia Limerick recounts a 1958 newspaper report regarding a mock gunfight put on at Disneyland’s Golden Horseshoe Frontier Saloon pitting Sheriff Lucky against notorious outlaw Black Bart. As the Sheriff approached the wounded bandit the reporter noted that a “tow-headed 5 year old wearing a cowboy suit and holding a cap pistol came running from the crowd,” asking “can I finish him off, sheriff, can I?” The sheriff gave his permission, the 5 year old fired, Black Bart convulsed and lay still, and then the boy dropped his gun and ran back to the crowd screaming: “Mommy, mommy! I didn’t mean to!” Resisting the more obvious analysis centering on masculinist initiation rights of gunplay and violence, Limerick’s reading of this story goes beyond symbolism and takes us straight to a core tension the frontier legacy presents in American culture:

Since the child wanted to kill Black Bart, and, with an impressive deference to authority, asked the sheriff for permission to kill him, then why would he make the claim, “I didn’t mean to”? His worries of intention and outcome were, in any case, soon ended: ‘His tears stopped a moment later, however, when he turned and saw Black Bart and Sheriff Lucky walking into the Golden Horseshoe to get ready for their next performance.’ Rather than feeling soothed, another sort of child might at that moment have conceived a long-range ambition to kill both Black Bart and Sheriff Lucky for their complicity in tricking him. (69)
Here is presented a classic dilemma of ‘heroism’ in the mythic American West that has played out across mainstream entertainment culture for over a century and remains unresolved today: Just who ‘is’ the good guy meant to be, if indeed ‘he’ can possibly exist at all? Whilst nuanced revisionist histories have successfully problematized the concept of heroism in both the liberal academy and in the more high-minded echelons of American literature, they have barely made a dent in popular narratives. That the Western frontier myth is a trick is clear, but it is also a trick that has been writ large so pervasively across the bulk of mainstream American cultural output that it would be lazy to ignore the fact that it has a reality of its own. In Limerick’s words: “…In the twentieth century…the image of the frontier balances precariously between too much reality and too little” (69). In other words the child-shootist of Limerick’s anecdote comes to realize he has been conned twice; firstly discovering in a moment of simulated violence that the lines between good and evil are far more blurry than he had been lead to believe, and secondly discovering that ultimately both the hero sheriff and the villainous outlaw were equally as complicit in a powerful illusion that had already shaped his young worldview. When confronted with the seductive fiction of the classic western narrative of course, this boy was far from the first or last American to be left standing tearfully in the dust, disabused of comfortable cultural illusions whilst dressed up in a cowboy suit he would soon grow out of.

It was seminal fiction at the heart of the Western myth including Owen Wister’s *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902) and Andy Adams’ *The Log of a Cowboy* (1903) which helped to enshrine the ‘Wild West’ as an ethnocentric space of boundless land, survival, transience, and retributive violence meted out by tough anonymous strangers who’d ride into town then ride out just as quickly. Clearly at the turn of the
century this fascination on the part of the mainstream reflected, amongst other things, a deep anxiety over the status in national narratives of the region’s indigenous inhabitants. Much of the anxiety surrounding “knowing” the Indian came from the fact that by the late 1800s the dominant culture had largely collapsed most tribes into a homogenous ‘Pan-Indian’ group of conquered ‘others,’ finally seeing Andrew Jackson’s aggressive removal policies to their logical conclusion. In The Legacy of Conquest (1987) Limerick urges us not to fall into the revisionist trend of historians “annoyed by the ethnocentricity of earlier frontier history” who as if by default took “the Indian side”: “…this impulse offers no escape from ethnocentricity; the very notion of “the Indian side to the story” requires one to hold resolutely to the Euro-American angle of vision, by which Indian diversity flattens out into one, simple story” (217). When considering the construction of the mythic frontier hero as a mobile and ambiguous character operating always in the moral grey areas between “right” and “wrong”, we would do well to meet him first in those same ethnocentric spaces he has most often inhabited. On the level of dominant cultural representation some things are certainly true of the conflicted stance white Americans in the West have taken towards ‘Native America.’ A special nostalgia was reserved by Euro-Americans for the Plains tribes in particular, who as well as being some of the last to succumb to U.S military and reservation policy thus cementing their status as proud ‘warriors’ in hegemonic versions of The West, were also oft-romanticized for their nomadic traditions and seasonal migrations. It is important that the “lone cowboy” of the plains, and the “plains Indians” have both been celebrated for their mobility: The heroic cowboy as a rugged individual, the resilient Indians of popular culture as a nomadic tribe holding onto their collective way of life in the face of massive odds. Therefore the heroic ‘wanderer’ construction as a foil to the ‘settler’ was from the very
outset a form of conflicted ethnocentrism and cultural appropriation that absolutely relied upon the blurring of “good” and “evil” in the classic western narrative. It was the mirage of mobility, and especially mobility promised by the seemingly boundless space of the Great Plains, which most contributed to this illusion.

The archetypal drifting individualist was such a favorite lynch-pin of Western films during the early twentieth century, that by the 1950s it was thoroughly embedded in the national, and global, imagination of the American West. British writer Richard Grant has argued in *Ghost Riders: Travels With American Nomads* (2003), that the combined weight of popular culture and *space* has kept the idea of nomadism alive in the region where it is now a tangible experience for many ‘twenty-first century’ wanderers, of whom the author counts himself one. Grant is well aware of his own investment in the myth of white-male rugged individuality, and the British writer goes to some lengths to identify something real in the culture of the West, or at least ‘made real’ by the very factors he identified.

In the West today there are huge tracts of land that remain outside the gridwork of fields and cities, and nomadic beliefs and behavior patterns have endured, as a kind of mutant, atavistic strain in the culture, lodged in folk memories and family traditions, and romanticized by popular culture. Who has not driven across the plains and imagined cowboys, Indians and roaming herds of buffalo? How many minds hold the image of John Wayne and a horse’s ass, receding into a celluloid sunset? (11)

For the dominant U.S mainstream culture it is doubtless true. Grant is also probably correct to identify John Wayne as one of the leading archetypes of the powerful narrative of freedom, rugged manliness, and a “no-bullshit” American attitude that seem to quickly come along for the ride whenever wandering is evoked in cultural discourse. In his 2001 short story *The Ghost of John Wayne* Chicana writer Ray Gonzalez plays on a San
Antonio joke that the spirit of the ‘Duke’ still returns to haunt the Alamo, the “beloved shrine” of his most famous movie battle. When a local psychic makes contact with the spirits of Mexican soldiers in one of the rooms, Gonzalez’s narrator ponders whether Wayne is in fact “checking the Mexicans to see if they were authentic enough for casting in his movie” (88). In many ways the ghost of John Wayne does haunt American culture as an arbiter of fake authenticity, as do Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Annie Oakley, and many other ghosts like him. It is not necessary to provide a catalogue of films in the Western genre in support of this point, as a good example will surely be there on whichever page falls open. We could however keep in mind the particulars of a mythos sold by the director John Ford during his prolific and influential output of Western films, as it these Richard Grant was surely remembering when he invoked the image of the lone drifting cowboy disappearing into the horizon.

From the 1930s onwards the lines between ‘hero’ and ‘outlaw’ slowly became blurred and the masked Lone Ranger figure was never far away with his own personalized brand of ethics and rough-justice. One leading example is the film *Stagecoach* (1939) in which John Wayne plays the “Ringo Kid,” an outlaw war veteran who evades capture and ‘escapes’ back onto the prairie with the girl and his freedom. The first of Ford’s films shot in Monument Valley on the Utah-Arizona border — what would be come the archetypal Hollywood Western landscape — *Stagecoach* was also remade as a television show almost fifty years later starring those other popular proponents of rugged American individualism and white male drifting, ‘Outlaw Country’ singers Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson. This saga is important because, as Michael Coyne notes in *Crowded Prairie: American National*
Identity in the Hollywood Western (1997), Stagecoach marks a rupture from treatments of the American hero in the “nation building” Westerns of the prewar era: “Stagecoach romanticized the fictitious outlaw hero; the nation-building epics embraced the Establishment hero. While Stagecoach, through its heroic outcasts, applauded the pioneer spirit from the bottom up, the epics celebrated the pioneer achievement from the top down…” (25). The key to subverting this particular element of the Western mythos of course was mobility; the drifter could be positively valued as heroic because of his nomadism even if he wasn’t doing particularly heroic things by any conventional definition of the time.

Later in John Wayne and John Ford’s collaboration The Searchers (1956) would blur the lines between hero and antihero even more. In this film Wayne played Ethan Edwards, a displaced Civil War veteran in search of a Comanche war party who killed his brother and abducted his young niece. Edwards, a vehement racist, eventually catches up with the girl who has by now married into the tribe. Preferring to see her dead than “living as an Indian” he attempts to shoot her but her adopted brother intervenes. Edwards then stalks and scalps the Comanche leader and this time re-abducts the girl, returning her to her Anglo family. With the ethnic balance restored and the myth safely preserved, John Wayne’s character is seen clutching his injured arm and slowly walking away into the sunset alone, his gradual disappearance framed in the cabin door in truly iconic Western fashion. As Glenn Frankel wrote of John Ford’s directing of The Searchers, he was “…a man who loved to create and manipulate myths, and as he grew older and more complex, he loved to challenge them as well, reaffirming the audience’s deepest conventional wisdom and then gently shattering it” (6). Indeed it is the ambiguous treatment of some of the core tropes of the Western mythos that makes the
film endlessly interesting. Just like the character he played 17 years earlier in *Stagecoach*,
the mobility and restless conflict of Wayne’s character is presented clearly as a product of
his uprooting during the Civil War, and his veteran status is very much used as tacit
explanation for his morally confused tramping lifestyle. It is also important to stress that
Ethan Edwards is portrayed neither as hero or antihero. All that is certain is that at the
film’s finale he is unable to exist in the domestic sphere he has struggled so hard to
repair, instead returning alone to the prairie and his drifting ways. Edwards’ nomadism
and restless self-reliance then, eventually trump all other versions of morality in the film.
Despite his apparent investment in the state and the expansion of ‘civilization over
savagery’, the only ‘state’ in which he can survive is that of perpetual motion and it is
this, which affords him his freedom. For Michael Coyne *The Searchers* and westerns of
its era were actually invested in portraying a broken form of American domesticity
against which their heroic nomadic protagonists could be contrasted:

> …an ever darkening representation of the nuclear family in the United
States…The conventional father figures…appear colorless and / or ineffectual
next to the dashing strangers who ride up to the porch. Their wives are each in
some measure tacitly dissatisfied…and in each film children, perhaps sensing
their mother’s frustration, are in awe of the glamorous loners who have bought
excitement into their humdrum lives…and element of dysfunction existed even
before a solitary horseman loomed on the horizon. (82)

Much the same as the adventuresome hobo has often been juxtaposed in popular culture
with the figure of the failed father and husband, the Don Draper figure struggling with an
all consuming career and unfulfilling domestic life, a similar trope was becoming
apparent in the frontier mythology of the 1950s. The idea of the footloose Western drifter
was at the core of this narrative, and as Coyne notes the film is really just a “fatalistic tale
of a loner who arrives in a pre-established social environment with some idea of finding a
niche therein.” The mobile Western hero / antiheros that emerged from this most popular
of twentieth century genres then were “alienated” and “displaced” patriarchs trying and failing to belong (80).

Even as the genre mutated in the late 1960s to include more iconoclastic takes on the West (and the Indian for a time all but disappeared from mainstream screens) the figure of the rugged white male drifter hero or antihero remained as strong as ever. Clint Eastwood’s film career, to give one example, is replete with such roles. As “The Man With No Name” in three of Sergio Leone’s hugely influential ‘Spaghetti Westerns’ he played the iconic stranger bristling and brooding on that increasingly fine line between traditional American morality and outright destructive violence. Perhaps the most clear of example of this trope however, is furnished by Eastwood’s character in Robert Daley’s *High Plains Drifter* (1973), made and shot in the California desert. Even the lore surrounding the film’s production is imbued with rugged white male individuality, Eastwood allegedly shunning Universal’s request to shoot in their own back lot instead driving around the West alone in his truck scouting for the ideal location. *High Plains Drifter* opens with the eponymous stranger on horseback appearing as if out of thin air in a desert haze. A small town appears by the shores of the lake, starkly contrasted against the expansive hostile landscape the lone rider has just survived. Riding past a sign bearing the town’s name, the drifter is first harassed and taunted by a group of threatening men in a saloon. None of the locals come to his aid and so when the men turn violent, The Stranger quickly dispatches them on his own. In case the audience simply takes this as the necessary act of a moral hero however, next he rapes a local woman who deliberately bumps into him and berates him in the street, slapping his cigarillo from his mouth. The Stranger learns that a corrupt group of gunfighters has recently murdered the town’s Marshall after he had learned that the mine was built on government ground, and
that the men from the saloon he killed were the mine’s new protectors. With the promise that he can have anything he wants, the town hires Eastwood’s character to protect them. From this point it quickly becomes clear that the hero is also an antihero, his moral compass flicking whichever way he feels and equally likely to wreak violent retribution on the weak towns people as are the outlaw gang who threatens their existence. By the end of the movie the drifter has indulged in an orgy of food, drink, sex, and bloodshed — literally painting the town red and renaming it HELL. Of course for the mobile archetypal anti-hero of the western genre, the sedentary trappings of home and hearth offered by small town life are akin to a living hell. Tasked with training the terrorized townsfolk to defend themselves, Eastwood’s drifter in fact kills a group of them who disagree with his methods. Winning the silent admiration of a number of citizens, including a dwarf named Mordecai whose fear of both the gunfighters and The Stranger is palpable, Eastwood’s protagonist kills the outlaws when they ride into town. The outlaw leader’s final words are met with stony silence: “Who are you?” The next day as The Stranger departs Mordecai remarks that he never knew his name. The Stranger replies cryptically: “Yes, you do.” The film ends with the timeless Western shot of lone horseman riding into the distance, The Stranger’s image absorbed by a desert mirage seemingly vanishing into the same thin air from whence he came. The West in such a guise is defined by mirages and illusions, one moment promising freedoms, the next threatening horrors. The figure of the drifter is central to both these promises, and it is therefore crucial to trace his discursive potentials in popular culture.

Western tropes mutated once more during the 1970s 1980s and 1990s and resurfaced in the form of cop, superhero, or science fiction movies. The same old principals were there; outlaws, renegade lawmen, savage ‘alien’ invaders, and whiter-
than-white heroes, but they typically portrayed a more clear-cut struggle of good versus evil than the later Westerns had. Often movies pitted a tough lawman versus a serial killer, terrorist, or criminal mastermind who were marked by their ‘other status’ — baddies at this time tended to be either foreign, racialized, mentally ill, ‘aliens’ bent on destruction, or otherwise inherently evil. Bad guys were also now marked by their constant movement and lack of a ‘home’ — nomad deviants who must be ‘caught,’ eradicated and incarcerated by the state as all costs, even the sacrifice of life and liberty on the part of the brave heroes whose job it was to bring them in. More often than not this job fell to another type of rugged-individualist, often a family man and repressed wanderer, struggling to surpass his wayward urges and antipathy for the social institutions he represented. Thus the renegade cop marked much of Hollywood’s output during late part of the twentieth century, bending the book to suit his own individualist purposes but never quite throwing it out altogether in his ultimate quest to bring the ‘bad guys’ to justice.

The first film in the successful Die Hard franchise is especially interesting to consider in this framework, as it deliberately referenced old cultural tropes letting the audience know they were really still watching a Western. In Die Hard (1988) Bruce Willis plays tough maverick New York cop John McClane whose distain for authority and protocol has put him in conflict with both his department and his family. Whilst on a trip west to Los Angeles McClane finds himself trapped on the upper floors of a skyscraper when terrorists take over the building during a Christmas party. Following a protracted guerilla battle during which McClane kills a number of the terrorists (who are vaguely coded as European, maybe East German), their leader Hans, played by Alan Rickman, speaks to McClane on the radio:
Hans: Who are you then?

McClane: Just a fly in the ointment Hans, a monkey in the wrench, a pain in the ass…

Hans: Mr. Mystery Guest…you have me at a loss, you know my name but who are you? Just another American who saw too many movies as a child, another orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he’s John Wayne, Rambo, Marshall Dillon…

McClane: I was always kind of partial to Roy Rogers actually. I really liked those sequin shirts…

Hans: Do you really think you have a chance against us, Mr. Cowboy?

McClane: *Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker.*

The famous catch phrase of the long running *Die Hard* series is borrowed from the folklore of cowboy culture in general, and in particular the twentieth century’s most famous television cowboy Roy Rogers. Of course McClane’s tongue-in-cheek joke is that Roy Rogers was no tough-guy, but rather a romantic troubadour and dandified cowpoke.

In the movie’s finale having killed most of the other terrorists, John McClane comes up against Hans in the inevitable standoff:

Hans: Still the cowboy Mr. McClane, Americans all alike- well this time John Wayne does not walk off into the sunset with Grace Kelly…

McClane: That’s Garry Cooper asshole.

Hans: Enough with the jokes

McClane: You’d have made a pretty good cowboy yourself Hans,

Hans: What was it you said to me? *Yippee-ki-yay…motherfucker.*

This classic Western showdown ends with Hans raising his gun to shoot McClane who shoots him first, ironically uttering a pay-off line borrowed from a Roy Rogers song wishing his partner luck on their travels: “Happy trails, Hans!”
That there was room created for such explicit Western tropes in the popular action hero movies of the nineties is interesting, as are the particular touchstones of rugged individualism they elected to deploy. In *Die Hard* the nomadic terrorist is ultimately destroyed by the maverick cop who in doing so is forgiven his previous transgressions and happily taken back by the wife he has just saved — but not before that fine line separating rugged hero and amoral antihero has been emphasized. Also interesting to note is that the German-born terrorist Hans is actually confusing John Wayne walking in to the sunset in *The Searchers*, with Garry Cooper’s character in the film *High Noon* (1952). In *High Noon*, Cooper played Marshall Kane, the lawman of a small town in New Mexico territory, who learns a vicious outlaw he imprisoned has escaped jail and is headed into town with a gang to have his vengeance. Kane’s first reaction is to take his wife and leave, but as he rides into the desert he realizes that the outlaw will always be on his tail and that by fleeing he has left his city vulnerable to the impending onslaught. He turns his horse and rides back with his pacifist wife to civilization to make his stand. After failing to enlist the support of any townspeople to fight the outlaws, Kane battles them alone and, having gunned them down, does indeed walk into the sunset with the girl and not alone in the manner of Wayne’s rugged individualists. As a result, *High Noon* quickly found itself at the center of political conflict and was widely criticized as a communist allegory for the process of “blacklisting” by the House of Un-American Activities. John Wayne himself hated the film and called it “one of the most un-American things” he’d seen in his “whole life” (Munn, 148). In the space between *The Searchers* and *High Noon* then, we have a classic Western conflict, that of individualism versus collectivism, the tribe versus the lone warrior, and nomadism versus settlement. It may well be considered heroic to ‘move’ but only if one has stood their ground first and
prevailed, like Cooper facing down the invading outlaw gang. Outside of these narrow
criteria, mobility is seen only as nomadism, and the shirking of social responsibilities. It
is seen as failure. In *Born Losers* (2005) Scott Sandage reminds us that it was in the late
nineteenth century that concepts of personal shortcomings came to greatly define the
national identity: “The “American sense” looked upon failure as a “moral sieve” that
trapped the loafer and passed the true man through. Such ideologies fixed blame squarely
on individual faults, not extenuating circumstances…” (17). The dual prong of this
analysis accounts for the varying treatment in cultural narratives of many of the
characters discussed in this chapter from Kai to Claude Dallas and the Ringo Kid.

During the late eighties and early nineties, Hollywood turned to an increasingly
grim portrayal of dystopian urbanism. Popular movies of this era often painted New York
and Los Angeles especially as terrifying places, blighted by spontaneous bursts of
aggression, violence, mutual suspicion, alienation, and horrific random crime. Once more
an exhaustive list is unnecessary for a reader even slightly familiar with American
popular culture from the past two decades and able to cast their memory over the litany of
movies portraying morally bereft mobsters, serial killers, terrorists, black and Latino
‘gangsters’, dirty white cops, vigilantes, drug dealers, sociopathic prison populations,
delinquent youth, welfare mothers, crack addicts, hustlers, con artists, and deviants of
every kind. To give one example in service of this point, it is worth considering the 1993
film *Falling Down*. This movie belongs in any discussion of heroism and antiheroism in
the West, and is perhaps one of the earliest open portrayals of the “angry white male” in
Hollywood film.

Set in the Los Angeles of its day, and in the same moment as Mayor Giuliani and
Chief of Police Bratton were busy getting tough on New York’s own underbelly, *Falling
*Down* opens with Michael Douglas’s unnamed protagonist stuck in a static L.A traffic jam on a sweltering hot summer day and growing increasingly frustrated. Douglas’s character is known only by his personalized license plate — “D-Fens”. We learn that he is a former civilian defense contractor who has just been laid off and as he looks out of his car window at the mindless humdrum of self-absorbed humanity, all wishing they were somewhere else, he reaches boiling point. D-Fens abandons his car in the lane of gridlocked vehicles, retrieves his briefcase from the trunk, and clad in the polyester white shirt-tie uniform of undervalued white American middle management, walks into the sprawling urban wasteland lining the highway. His first confrontation comes almost immediately when a menacing Latino gang accuse D-Fens of stepping on their turf — symbolically turning the tables of ‘quality of life’ ordinances back on white society: “…You’re trespassing on private property, loitering too.” At knifepoint they demand D-Fens opens his briefcase. After trying to reason with them that all he wants is to go home, he relents, reaches for his case and emerges with a baseball bat and proceeds to beat the young gangbangers with it, all the while chastising them. The opening confrontation of the film ends with D-Fens’ assertion: “I’m going home...Clear a path, I’m going home!” From this point on it is obvious that something inside D-Fens has snapped and he is about to unleash his white-male anger on anybody and everybody who gets in his way. As D-Fens continues his walk into the hostile “urban jungle” of south L.A, it is also clear that large-proportions of the movie-going middle-American public of 1993 are assumed to be on his side.

After smashing up the store of a Korean shopkeeper who refuses to give him change for a phone call, claiming to be “sticking up for his rights,” D-Fens fights off the Mexican gang when they try to kill him in a drive by shooting. Next he pulls a gun in a
fast-food restaurant demanding they remake his food to look like the menu pictures, wreaks his vengeance on a Nazi shopkeeper, a construction crew he accuses of wasting the city budget, and an elderly white male golfer who is rude to him. The story unravels that he is trying to reach the home of his estranged wife who is holding a birthday party for his young daughter and has refused him access in light of his recently erratic behavior. The old-timer cop who assigns himself to apprehending D-Fens is in his final day on the job before retirement, and takes a personal interest in finding the angry-white-male before he does damage to himself or to his family. Interestingly, whilst the veteran lawman does want to stop D-Fens for his own good, his lesser worry seems to be about what kind of revenge an increasingly volatile D-Fens may inflict on society at large. Of course the line between defending society and punishing it for its ills is kept ambiguous here. There remains throughout the film a tacit theme that the police are in some way sympathetic towards this white suburban guy’s one-man-stand against the deep seated urban decay blighting the close of the American century, and the non-contributing underclass who populate it.

Douglas’s character is portrayed as of the ‘old school,’ dismayed at the declining moral standards and vacuous consumer culture that mars the society in which his daughter will grow up. His moral compass is in fact never questioned in the film, perpetuating violence only on those who ‘deserve it’ and refusing to back down in the face of logic. Whilst the news media and elements of the police seem fearful that he will try to attack his ex-wife or daughter, the veteran cop believes correctly that this is untrue — he only wants to see his daughter one last time and give her a birthday gift. In the final standoff we are given an interesting variation on a theme as D-Fens reaches the west-facing pier on Venice beach and thus the Pacific Ocean and the metaphorical closing of
his own personal frontier. The veteran policeman catches up with him at the pier’s end, and with gun drawn, implores D-Fens to give himself up peaceably so that he can see his daughter grow up. D-Fens final realization is that of the archetypal beat-down white civil worker: “I’m the bad guy? How’d that happen? I did everything they told me to. Did you know I build missiles? I helped to protect America. You should be rewarded for that…they lied to me.” With an emotionless and resigning smile, D-Fens reaches deliberately beneath his jacket and implores the cop: “You know I got a gun…you want to draw? Come on, it’s perfect, a showdown between the sheriff and the bad guy? It’s beautiful…on three.” D-Fens then pulls what-looks like a handgun. In the same moment as he his shot dead by the cop we realize he is only holding a water pistol as he squeezes the trigger and shoots a final impotent jet of water. His final words: “I would have got you.”

_Falling Down_ is a wonderfully instructive insight into the cultural mechanisms at work behind the ‘zero-tolerance’ neoliberal policies that rose to prominence in the urban governance of the early 1990s, and is emblematic of texts Neil Smith likely had in mind when he noted the role of media representation in whipping up social fear surrounding the poor at this time. The narratives of exasperation, paranoia, instability, and the gradual ratcheting up of white _revanchism_ are all there, as is the bleak dystopian vision of American urbanism. Criticized for its protagonist’s violent treatment of minority subjects who were portrayed as ‘the problem,’ and despised by former civilian defense workers for their portrayal too, the movie’s “get out of jail card” played out in Public Relations was that it was a satire of the “angry-white-male stereotype” that the dominant culture was becoming aware of at the time. In terms of its discursive power of course, whether it was either taken as, or intended to be, a satire is largely irrelevant. As both a benchmark
and a reflection of prejudicial cultural assumptions underwriting the first waves of shifting policies in the West, *Falling Down* should take its place next to the dime store novels telling of horrific Indian massacres in the late 1800s, or the blackface minstrel forms which backlit segregation and white-supremacist terrorism in the South. The film is about embattled white masculinity, gradually inching nearer and nearer to full-blown failure, and both searching for and finding a culprit in the form of marginal(ized) others. In his final gesture of failed masculinity D-Fens fires his impotent water pistol symbolically and topples dead into the Pacific Ocean with a bullet in his heart. We as the audience are left certain that, in his eyes at least, this was a far more preferential way to go out than having to watch his daughter grow up in a society he despises.

In recent years pop cultural connections with homelessness have been more explicit, and the drifter-hero has began to return to entertainment screens in less ambiguous terms. The representation of racial minorities and homelessness in a conflicted but *positive* light is also beginning to enter the mainstream narrative, at least in a localized sense. As we shall see however, privileged *mobility* still appears to be off limits for everybody aside from the white male, and even he treads a fine line between hero and villain in popular culture. These shifts were propelled by a slew of equally unambiguous horror movies in the early 2000s, all set in the regional West and all in some way centering on the figure of inherently psychotic and largely motiveless white male hitchhikers. Notable here are *The Hitcher* (2007), which was set in New Mexico, and *The Hitchhiker* (2008), which was set in Utah. In 2003 the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise was remade and emphasized the horrors hidden along the American road. In 2006 another classic horror film *The Hills Have Eyes* was also remade. The film featured a family relocating from Ohio to California who get run off the road while driving
through rural New Mexico and are subsequently terrorized by a group of mutant people. Whilst these films had little direct reference to ‘homelessness’ per se, they did much to reinforce the already strong prejudices against people living on the road, a point Kai had been sure to stress in his original interview. They also did much to culturally re-code the West, and the desert in particular, as an unknown space of terror, fear, and marginal others. However, with the western road and extreme marginality firmly constructed as utterly deviant, the culture gradually began to more freely explore hegemonic representations of mobility and ‘rootlessness’ within the confines of urban life.

In 2008 Hollywood blockbuster Hancock opened with Will Smith sprawling inebriate on a Los Angeles park bench in the unmistakable shape of a black male experiencing visible homelessness. He is unshaven and dirty, mumbling incoherently and shouting aggressively at passersby while all the time a mournful blues number plays — the racialized sound of American disenfranchisement. The audience soon learns that Smith’s character is in fact a down-on-his luck superhero named ‘Hancock’. Smith’s character is soon rehabilitated by a white image-consultant who seizes the opportunity to revive both their floundering careers. The homeless imagery was quite explicit. This connection was not lost on one New York Times reviewer who proclaimed: “…the first homeless superhero in movies— Superbum!.”

Soon into the superhero spectacular “Hancock,” before the machinery has fully kicked in, and the story is still wreathed in blissful ambiguity, you see the star Will Smith sprawled on a Los Angeles bench. Dirty, dishevelled, in full distressed costume and character, and within easy sloshing reach of a bottle, he looks lost and alone, much like all the human detritus that washes up in every city and remains mostly unnoticed….Alas (bummer), though he can look the part, Hancock isn’t literally homeless, just rootless, troubled and bedeviled. (Dargis)

It is of course this very “blissful ambiguity” which enables both Smith’s portrayal, and the reviewer’s interpretation in which she defaults to explaining his real problem as
“rootlessness” and not “literally” homeless. Of course the logic here was that if he was “literally homeless” Hancock could hardly be a superhero, so instead he was understood as a highly mobile and dynamic potential hero who had only momentarily fallen into the stagnant trap of urban degradation in downtown Los Angeles — a trap that with the right amount of persuasion from his white “image consultant” (a flashy exemplar of neoliberal logics) he was able to “get his shit together” and fly out of. Whilst Smith is certainly “captured” when the audience encounters him, in the movie his homelessness is only suggested, and as such explained as the fleeting result of bad decisions. Even if Hancock’s “poverty” were acknowledged, it would soon be redeemed by his super-hero antics and eventual aesthetic transformation in the hands of mainstream society. Further context is furnished by the fact that Will Smith had made another film dealing with homelessness just two years prior. Whereas Hancock’s eventual mobility was that of a superhero and therefore physically unbound by the constraints of normal people, in The Pursuit of Happyness (sic) Smith played Chris Gardner who literally escapes homelessness through extreme upward mobility and the dogged pursuit of American values centering on tenacity and hard work in the face of adversity. With the ideals of a latter-day Willy Loman, Gardner charms and pushes his way into a prestigious internship at a high profile brokerage firm, thus proving the dream is alive and well.

Also in 2006 and also set in Los Angeles, an even more explicit construction of the homeless-hero came in the form of another black protagonist called Anthony Williams. Released by American McGee in 2006, Bad Day LA featured the first-ever destitute videogame star. Players found themselves “thrust behind the shopping cart of a homeless-man-turned-city-saving-crusader” as they experience an apocalyptic day in Los Angeles. Anthony Williams was characterized as a former Hollywood agent who has
rejected a successful and glamorous career to live on the streets and opt out of the society he despises. On the game’s title page a scrolling message reminded gamers of the voluntary nature of Anthony’s condition:

Anthony is homeless by choice. All he wants is to be left alone. But today, thanks to some unwelcome visitors to the city of Los Angeles, Anthony is going to be very, very unhappy. Zombie, terrorists, earthquakes, meteor showers and other natural disasters force Anthony to work with the society he hates to make it through a Bad Day in L.A.

The title was met with mainly terrible reviews, not for its worrying portrayal of homelessness however, but for its “abject failure” as a videogame. Although the simplistic plot is ostensibly cloaked in a poor satire of society and the culture of fear perpetuated by so many disaster movies, the choice of a black homeless man who has explicitly chosen his vagrant lifestyle in an attempt to escape an “image obsessed” culture is fascinating for a number of reasons, especially when juxtaposed with similar treatments of homelessness. It is important to note here that at no point is there any suggestion that Anthony is mobile — he is an L.A resident and, despite his professed loathing of the city, he is staying put. In fact the only mobility practiced by Anthony is his “downward mobility” which just as importantly we are told is a choice he has taken himself, and not an involuntary downward mobility like that of other homeless black men on L.A’s skid row. Furthermore, Anthony’s dialogue in the game constructs him as cynical, selfish, and apathetic to the destruction of the city around him. These personality traits are no doubt intended as a satirical critique of materialist L.A, and yet this able bodied and remarkably fit urban defender is also imbued with many of the more recognizable stereotypes of homeless people; hostility, substance abuse, and violent episodes. The confused construction of a “reluctant hero” who is brave and yet downright hostile to everybody he meets, and routinely demands drugs to feed his morphine
addiction, is once again enabled by the ambiguous connotations of homelessness, race, and mobility. In an interview with a national street newspaper, game producer American McGee neatly betrayed his own culturally learned prejudices with an explanation for his portrayal of a homeless lead character:

The choice came out of my initial thoughts about what sort of person would really be able to survive, alone, on the most apocalyptic day this side of Armageddon...And when you think about it, the homeless are the closest thing you’ve got to urban survivalists. The concept of ‘homeless by choice’ is something that is alien to most Americans who aren’t familiar with homelessness beyond throwing a quarter in a cup from time to time. This game is saying, ‘if you aren’t happy, you have other options...’ (Spare Change)

The naked construction here of black male as homeless hero certainly hinged entirely on the one main facet of Anthony’s marginal status that the game went to great lengths to emphasize: it was self-determined and local. To view “the homeless” as tough urban survivalists was clearly no stretch for either the makers or the consumers of this game. Herein is reflected a set of assumptions taken to their extreme and open logical conclusion that manifest more subtly but just as powerfully in so many forums homelessness is being discussed in American society.

That these mythic narratives now run more deeply than ever in popular imaginaries of the West, is only emphasized by the 2011 gore-flick and cult phenomenon Hobo With A Shotgun. Not taking itself seriously, the B-movie exploitation film starts with an elderly white male hobo played by Rutger Hauer riding the rails in a boxcar and looking dreamily out at the sun kissed boundless western landscape. ‘The Hobo,’ as he remains for the entire film, alights on the outskirts of a dystopian and lawless fictional city rising out of the desert. A sign reads “Hope City” but somebody has painted over it the words “Scum City.” An evil crime lord called The Drake rules with his bloodthirsty sons who terrorize the helpless population. A corrupt police force and morally bankrupt
citizenry contribute to extreme urban degradation and the Hobo finds Hope City rife with prostitution, rape, violence, and exploitation of all kinds. After witnessing a torture and the filming of a ‘bum fight’ pitting two homelessness men against each other for money, the lone Hobo sets about putting things right in the town, attacking and injuring two of The Drake’s sons. He then befriends a prostitute who aspires to be a schoolteacher — the quintessential “hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold” of the Western genre. She remarks to him: “You’re obviously not from around here?” His reply: “I’m not from anywhere.” From here on in the movie unfolds into an unsubtle gore-fest during which the Hobo succeeds in killing every bad guy in the city save for The Drake and the remaining leaders of the corrupt police force. In the eventual ‘Mexican standoff” made famous by the Spaghetti Western genre, we find the Hobo with his shotgun to the head of an injured Drake lying on the street. The cops in turn have their guns pointed at the Hobo with instructions to shoot him should he shoot The Drake. The townspeople however, inspired by the Hobo’s fight and woken out of their fearful state, show up and point their weapons at the police force. The Hobo however refuses to let the townspeople sacrifice themselves for him and shoots The Drake in the head, being gunned down himself in the process. The Drake’s last words to him: “You want to die for a town that never gave a fuck about you anyway?”

Hobo With A Shotgun is instructive in its deployment of the drifting hobo icon as a violent white male savior, especially when juxtaposed with The Searchers, the Pursuit of Happyness, and Bad Day LA. Whereas Anthony Williams was cast as reluctantly defending the city from its onslaught out of self preservation and frustration as much as anything else, the Hobo choose to save the city, willfully, because it was ‘the right thing’ to do and he even laid down his life in the process. The point here is that both characters
are framed by a *choice* of rootlessness. Whereas Williams’ poverty was clearly selective and a reaction to his stagnant urban life, we are not given any such explicit background about the *Hobo With A Shotgun*’s homelessness. Of course we do not need it because hoboism is widely understood to be choice, a self-determined selection of freedom and mobility over the trappings of urban society — a distinction emphasized by the dire conditions the Hobo discovers upon his arrival in Hope City. The rest is a clear and knowing rehashing of the genre made famous by *High Plains Drifter*, signaling its own insider ‘geek’ knowledge. It is worth acknowledging that the 1960s Spaghetti Westerns were very much the exploitation films of their time, far more violent and casually amoral than typical Hollywood Westerns. All of this however, can be condensed into a ‘G rated’ paraphrasing of The Drake’s incredulous final words to the Shotgun-Wielding-Hobo:

“You’ll lay your life on the line for a (society) that has never cared for you?” In the final analysis it seems that as long as the assumptions of freedom, choice, survival and mobility cling to homelessness in this culture, so will the suggestion of rugged independence and heroism.

Whether it be the celebration of Kai fending off roadside attackers with his hatchet, Marshall Kane defending his frontier town alone with his six-guns, or the Hobo with his shotgun sacrificing his life for the moral cleansing of the city, there is a serious and powerful conviction at work in the national psyche that the road is a place of individual freedom and therefore anybody associated with it is in someway the potential embodiment of an alternative and conscious American dream. The individualist white male figure emerging from this bloody mêlée of cultural anxieties, appropriation, and re-appropriation, is surely as complex as he is ambiguous.
In the end, whilst black homeless-by-choice males like Hancock or Anthony Williams were convinced to reluctantly ‘defend’ society by white appeals to their better nature (or to their addictions), or heroic white males like the Rutger Hauer’s Hobo gladly sacrifice their life to save a newly redeemed urban culture, there have also been many antiheroes like D-Fens who, when it came down to it, saw only one way out amidst the afflict ing red-mist of early nineties white male alienation and just like Butch and Sundance simply walked straight into the proverbial hail of bullets. However, where there is ambiguity there is also room for narrative exploitation. And so it is that we trace this complicated and highly racialized figure of mobility and ambivalent heroism into the avenues of policy debate in one city undergoing anti-homelessness in the contemporary American West.
Chapter 5:

“It’s not great social science, but it’s all we’ve got”: Imagining Homelessness, Community, & Transience in Boulder, Colorado

“People seeing the beauty of this valley will want to stay, and their staying will be the undoing of the beauty” — ‘Curse of the Boulder Valley,’ Chief Niwot of the Southern Arapaho upon meeting white settlers in 1853

“I mean, we’re in Boulder, it’s hard to tell if someone is legitimate just by how they look.” — white woman in Boulder on the homeless population (Entry on satirical public blog: ‘stay out of my Namaste space’ …AND other things said by white women in Boulder), April 2014

“Boulder is the worst dressed city in the country, I mean they all have really expensive clothes but everybody looks homeless…” — woman in a bar in Columbus, Ohio, 2013

In his 2001 essay “Making Up the Tramp: Towards a Critical Geosophy”, Tim Cresswell lays out three main theses for the nineteenth century construction of the American homeless man as an explicitly mobile figure:

1. That the tramp was “made-up” in the United States during the period 1870-1940.

2. That forms of knowledge that claimed to be about the tramp actually served to bring the tramp into existence.

3. That these forms of knowledge were themselves informed by a particular geographical imagination about the meanings of mobility. (166)
Although this is an argument of social construction, Cresswell contends that the problem of geography in American homelessness actually runs far deeper than just the “banal” claim “…that the tramp and the mobility of the tramp were socially produced” (166). Rather he urges us to focus on the social relations and interactions that have historically shaped not only the tramp’s world, but also more importantly, the worldviews of those who encountered him (167).

In this chapter I will accept Creswell’s challenge and deploy contemporary ethnographic fieldwork in order to assess how both the complex relations and the fleeting interactions people have with homelessness in a local community might mesh with the powerful legacy of homeless representations in American culture. If, as Cresswell and others have argued, imaginaries linking a kind of embodied mobility to the condition of homelessness date back to the late nineteenth century, the obvious danger in a city like Boulder is that homeless people continue to be portrayed as “transients”, “drifters”, or “vagabonds” and therefore are being both socially and politically regarded as objects to be moved along. Furthermore, the insidious invisibility faced by homeless populations in the age of neoliberal urban governance may in fact be bolstered by established cultural knowledge which has long imagined vulnerable populations to be highly mobile and thus not a local responsibility. By examining localized discourses of homelessness and mobility alongside cultural and historical representations, I will expose the high stakes of the culture’s ongoing acceptance of a social and political idea of homelessness that is not only erroneous and anachronistic, but ultimately is also damaging to urban communities and the precarious human lives lived on their streets.
Discursively homeless in Boulder: Bursting the Bubble

“*I’m not homeless right now. I might be when I get to where I’m going, but I’m not homeless right now.*” — 19-year-old traveller at a Greyhound bus stop in between Denver, Colorado and Kansas City, Missouri.

I find “Rob” panhandling at the intersection of Canyon and Broadway, near to Pearl Street, the main commercial thoroughfare downtown. It is mid January and the temperature has consistently dropped below freezing the past few nights. Rob, 31, has been standing on the corner waving hand painted cardboard placards all morning, hoping to catch a buck or some leftover food from drivers stopped at the lights: “I’ve been swapping signs” he tells me. “Yesterday I was rocking this one: ‘Need money for bus ticket’ – today, I’m going with: ‘Homeless need money for food.’” I give him $5 and he takes a few minutes break from his work to chat.

Rob is hitchhiking across America. He has been in Boulder just one week, travelling through on his way from Oklahoma. This is his third time in town and his longest stay to date. He has been “homeless and drifting” since he was 13. Originally from California, Rob is trying to get back to the west coast. He tells me he usually doesn’t stay in shelters because there are full of “crazy people,” preferring instead to camp or sleep rough wherever he can. Sometimes though, as happened yesterday, he wakes up indoors despite his best efforts: “Last night a cop, well I think it was a cop, woke me up on Pearl Street and took me to a warming shelter. I was pretty drunk, passed out on the wall over there so I guess that was pretty nice of him.”

Rob was lucky. Around this time every year a number of Boulder’s homeless succumb to the freezing temperatures that are typical at elevations this high in the Rocky Mountain west. At the time of writing, five homeless people have died outdoors in
Boulder this year. The *ad hoc* emergency warming shelters, set up in church and synagogue halls throughout town, are not always opened and when they are there is no guarantee a kind hearted officer will be on hand to help those who need into relative safety. Since Boulder’s controversial public camping ban has been ramped up in recent years, it is as likely that either the BPD or one of the city’s dedicated “open space officers” will rouse public sleepers with a $100 camping ticket and a mandatory court date. However, since last night Rob doesn’t *think* he was technically ‘covered’ as he lay comatose on Pearl Street mall – one of the more vague interpretations officials must charge in order to cite an individual under the anti-camping ordinance – his public sleeping arrangement would probably have remained within the parameters of Boulder law. Although he hasn’t heard much about this ban since he has only been in town a short time, in most towns he visits Rob just takes it for granted that camping in public areas is illegal. Even if it isn’t, he says the cops will usually find a reason to move you on anyway. The BPD did pick him up for something during a previous visit too, but he can’t remember quite why. That time they let him go with just a caution. If they hadn’t done, Rob says he would not be back in Boulder now since he doesn’t have money to pay for citation tickets and he “can’t risk a warrant.” In many ways Rob is the exception that proves the rule of anti-homelessness movements in the western U.S. Taken at face value his story is important to reflect upon if we are to begin to grasp any specific characteristics of individuals who present as visibly homeless on the streets of the region, as well as effect on the rapidly narrowing avenues of urban policy.

Of course Rob’s story is just one answer to the popular charge that homeless people readily travel for services and that transients come to liberal towns like Boulder in order to reap the benefits of an open welfare system. In fact although he does think that
the homeless services in Boulder are probably decent, Rob rejects the idea that services especially draw people to the city. His motivations are far more obvious:

“I heard weed was legal so I came for that. Sure, people learn the services are good when they get here, and that might make some stay longer or whatever, but I try not to use them mostly. People here do seem pretty nice, I get given lots of food. Really food's no problem here, people give me food. I want money for weed though. They smoke weed where you’re from?”

Another characteristic that makes Rob an interesting representative of stereotyped homelessness in the flesh, is that he is white, young, male, able-bodied, and above all highly mobile – an inveterate wanderer, terminally drifting from town to town in a persistent quest for drugs, alcohol, and most of all, freedom from the pressures of society and its institutions. He is open about both his addictions and his lifestyle, claiming to have been in the travelling game for some time, following opportunity wherever it may take him since entering the streets at a very young age. Although now a little older than many of the “travelling kids” – that nomadic tribe descending on Boulder in the summer months – Rob would not be out of place amongst that community of seasonal drifters either. In January however, he is actually something of an anomaly: a lone, wandering, independent, unaffiliated male, homeless and apparently willfully exposed to the elements of another harsh Colorado winter. When I make the point that the dead of winter is not the typical season for travelling folk like him to be in town, he agrees whole heartedly: “Yeah, I’m just going from A to B man. I’ve seen maybe 10 travelers in town right now. I met some kids on Pearl headed to California too, guys and a few girls, my age, bit younger.” When I ask how they’re getting around, he says that this time of year the few travellers are probably hitchhikers like him: “You used to be able to get free bus tickets but not many places give out bus tickets anymore. I only hopped a train once but I was drunk and ended up back where I started. Some people do it though.”
In reality Rob has very little to do with Boulder’s struggle against homelessness. I’ve been volunteering at the only night shelter in town for the past few weeks, and he has not been there once, not even for breakfast. In fact in the short week he has been here he has had no voluntary contact with local welfare support at all. He seems almost embarrassed to report that he was picked up by one of the more humanitarian Boulder police officers and transported to a warming station for the night. For the most part Rob doesn’t want anything to do with social services and he tells his story with a tone of fierce independence: “I don't like shelters because you gotta be out by 7am and in by 6pm. That doesn’t work for me. I like to keep my own schedule. And you can’t drink and smoke in the shelters, and people in there are dangerous.” Disinterested in availing himself of Boulder’s services despite the biting winter wind, Rob is more concerned with scraping together enough money to support his few vices and provide an escape route out of town as soon as possible. He does not want to stay in Boulder, Colorado.

Critically, there is very little about Rob’s public presence that suggests he is a local. The signs he holds explicitly state that he is a traveller raising funds for a bus ticket out. His chosen panhandling location also screams “here today, gone tomorrow” – a young single man carrying a large pack with all his belongings standing by the side of a busy road in a high profile area, not hidden from view in the shadows of welfare institutions like many of the local homeless this time of year. Despite all this however, in the minds of many affluent Boulder residents, Rob and those like him have come to represent the consistent and enduring face of their city’s ongoing struggle with “homeless “transients” – two terms often conflated seamlessly in the urban discourse of the American West. Furthermore, and probably unbeknownst to him, a caricatured version of Rob is also at risk of rapidly becoming the new political object of a rising tide of anti-
homeless sentiment in Boulder, Colorado, just another unfamiliar town he is simply passing through.

Establishing an ethnographic site

“So what do you think about this? I know there’s different kinds of homeless or whatever, but some of the fucking bums in this town, I swear I have never been anywhere so bad. They’re just everywhere, and they’re rude as shit. Like, is that normal? I know probably my perceptions are all based off the dropouts I see everyday on Pearl Street, but I fucking hate the homeless in this town.” – engineering graduate student, downtown bar, late at night, Boulder, 2013

Nowhere does Boulder’s privileged brand of healthful affluence and functional Euro-style urbanity become more apparent than on and around Pearl Street, the town’s most prominent commercial promenade. Along these six city blocks of bustling pedestrianized activity can be found high-end restaurants, boutique shops, bijou cocktail bars, and artsy coffee shops, often populated by people for whom work seems a decidedly secondary activity. Also consolidated in this area is much of Boulder’s prime real-estate stock, occupied by recognizable national brand names as well as locally owned shops. The area provides a pleasant urban environment through which people can meander and enjoy being out in public. Pearl Street is consciously family friendly, but it is also a meeting place for people to hang out; the walkways are typically dotted with a variety of food stands, buskers, magic acts, and children’s entertainers — many of whom draw large rapturous crowds on pleasant evenings. Importantly Pearl Street is also one of the only sites in the city where Boulder residents are very likely to encounter panhandling street people, buskers, homelessness: It is here they bare firsthand witness to their community’s visible inequalities. This is especially true of encounters with homelessness on foot, up close, and in shared public space. Aside from the area immediately
surrounding the CU Boulder campus, known locally as ‘the hill’ and also a site of some panhandling, for a majority of Boulder residents most encounters with homelessness are either mediated through their car windshield or during their weekend strolls down Pearl Street and through nearby parks. It is therefore in this downtown area that the ‘body’ is most on the line for Boulder residents when it comes to interactions with poverty in their otherwise idyllic town. It follows that Pearl Street mall has become the site of many battles in Boulder’s ongoing war between progressive urbanism, the city’s cultural urge to remain tolerant and bohemian, and the encroaching social degradation that many residents feel threatens to burst their bubble for good.

It was with this simple observation, and the questions it raised regarding a public attitude in the west that still views homelessness as a mobile problem, that the ethnographic portion of this study precedes. My goal was to understand the public and political discourse encounters with homelessness feed into, as well as the role of local media in framing certain experiences of homelessness. Detailed analysis of a town like Boulder during a moment of apparent rising anti-homeless sentiment, offers insight into the ways historical representations of homelessness in American society shape public attitudes and policy in previously tolerant areas. Having spent some previous summers in the city, my hypothesis was that municipal policies in Boulder, and public attitudes, both focus heavily on the most visible manifestations of a “mobile poor” and take their cues from un-questioned assumptions of transience that are part of a national cultural discourse of homelessness as well as a significant phenomena of urban experience in the city. My expectation was that these assumptions of mobility do much to render invisible the real structural concerns behind endemic local homelessness, and critically also produce an illusory object of homeless services and seasonal policy which limits
understanding of local unsheltered populations and feeds into a cycle by which homelessness continues to be viewed as a problem to be “moved along”.

In December of 2012 I started working volunteer shifts in Boulder homeless services in order to better understand the network of local providers and the issues faced by people living unsheltered and precarious lives in the area, as well as the challenges faced by those who advocate for homelessness in the county. Of Boulder’s network of privately funded welfare agencies, only one night shelter serves single adult men and women over the age of 18. The Mountain Shelter for the Homeless is also the most high profile service provider in the city, offering emergency shelter, basic medical care, food, and advocacy to those who qualify. As a residential resource, The Mountain Shelter only provides emergency overnight beds from the months of October through April, and is shut for nights during the late spring and summer. Of primary interest for my study was the displacement of this precarious population during the more temperate months, their heightened public visibility, as well as their proximity to the seasonal traveling populations who heavily occupy public space in Boulder during the summer. The rest of the year (spring, summer, and early fall) the shelter operates only as a day drop-in center, providing breakfast and other limited services for a few hours on weekday mornings.

During the long harsh winter months for which Colorado is famous, the Mountain Shelter allows single adults up to 90 days stay each. During the winter I started volunteering, the Rocky Mountains had already seen heavy snowfall. In Boulder, a city with an elevation of over 5400 feet, temperatures can drop dangerously low when the sun goes down. The capacity of the Mountain Shelter is 160 beds, the maximum allowed under the city’s zoning limitations. In recent years the numbers have never fallen short of absolute capacity. Every night the intake staff faces an unenviable task as lots are drawn
and people in need of beds are turned away into the cold. For those who do not make it in, options become even more limited out on Boulder’s streets. The task of preventing the inevitable fatalities due to exposure that occur every year, falls to an organization ran by past and current members of the homeless population: Boulder Outreach for Homeless Overflow – or “BOHO” for short. BOHO coordinates with a number of rotating churches and synagogues in the city whose floors become “warming shelters” on nights when the temperature drops below 34 degrees Fahrenheit. At most there might be up to 150 people packed into one of these church halls on a cold winter night. However, largely unsupervised, uncomfortable, and beset by violence and other problems, these are not a popular option for many. They are especially scary places for the single women I talked to, many reported feeling vulnerable in warming centers or avoided them at all costs. Needless to say therefore, the intake process at the only night shelter in town is typically a hectic affair as potential residents line up outside every night from 6pm in the hopes that they will make it to the warmth. I was privy to this process throughout the season as I worked by the main doors folding sheets, blankets, and pillowcases before handing them out to people lucky enough to make it inside.

The official intake policy for winter shelter is that women are prioritized and men must enter a lottery system for the remaining beds. During the winter I spent in the Boulder Shelter we sometimes had to turn away as many as 50 people a night. A recent estimate by the Daily Camera newspaper suggested there might be as many as several hundred people left to sleep outside during Boulder’s winter once local resources are exhausted (Garlin). Those residents who successfully make it inside are processed, provided with clean bedding, sanitary requirements and a hot meal, before being crowded into two large single-gender dormitories. A separate space is provided for transgender
residents.

A group of concerned citizens founded the Mountain Shelter for the Homeless in 1982, in direct response to the death of a homeless veteran from exposure on Boulder’s streets. Currently at its newest site towards the edge of town in north Boulder, the shelter is privately funded and relies almost entirely on financial support from community members, local businesses, and independent grants. Whilst working hard to maintain good relationships with the city and local agencies such as the Boulder Police Department and transit operator, the shelter represents an entirely independent and non-state approach to homeless service provision, that nevertheless shoulders much of the burden of the county’s escalating welfare needs. Whilst it is by no means unique in twenty-first century America for the responsibility of welfare provision to have shifted from state to private sector, there are a number of elements that make the Boulder Shelter a fascinating example of the possibilities and struggles a non-state homeless services agency faces.

There are many ways in which the particularities of Boulder and its cherished self-identity as a progressive bastion of the regional west shape the day-to-day running of its largest homeless shelter. If there is one thing that the city of Boulder does not struggle with it is volunteerism. The Mountain Shelter maintains a long waiting list for volunteer shifts and holds a number of very well attended “volunteer training orientations” every year. Needless to say this is not the norm in other cities throughout the United States, where homeless agencies tend to be understaffed, and may even supplement their volunteer help with members of church groups or people assigned state-mandated community service. In Boulder however, I found myself more often than not helping out with the less-oversubscribed 5am breakfast shifts, where I helped to prep meals and set
up the dining room with early risers in the community. On other occasions I managed to fill in on the more popular evening shifts, folding freshly laundered bedding and handing it out to residents, or manning the desk of donated toiletries and basic medicines. Another atypical aspect of emergency welfare services in Boulder was that in general, the food and supplies donated by the community are, as one man put it, “not too shabby.” This is in fact an important double-edged reality of homelessness in the city, and perceptions of “good living” amongst the homeless of Boulder surface in many of the more conflicted local attitudes. Nevertheless it is worth noting just once here that in my first week at the Boulder Shelter, we served 200 salmon fillets donated by a local organic supermarket for dinner one evening. Needless to say this is surely not a typical occurrence in most emergency food centers elsewhere in the contemporary United States.

The Mountain Shelter is also notably progressive in other ways. This is a “damp shelter” in that it allows people who have been drinking or taking drugs to stay as long as their behavior remains within the rules. This policy presents no small challenge for staff, volunteers, and residents alike. Such a common sense approach to working with a population for whom substance abuse may be both a cause and a symptom of their homelessness, lies in contrast to the national tapestry of moralistic private welfare provision in which many shelters are “dry” and exclude people under the influence. As one staff member put it: “If the shelter excluded people who were under the influence, it would exclude significant numbers of the homeless population.” Similarly, the Boulder shelter does not require a real name or ID check upon intake. Anybody can receive services under an alias with no questions asked about their background or criminal history. Once again this is largely unheard of in most welfare institutions — especially those for whom the dying drip of state funding remains a crucial lifeline. Executive
Director Keith Duncan is quick to note that such seemingly relaxed policies can attract scrutiny from the city if and when problems arise:

“Those policies get questioned a lot by clients, by the community. Historically though this organization has tried to keep the bar relatively low for admission, no ID required, we don’t breathalyse anybody who comes in, but on the other hand we have a pretty significant set of rules we ask people to abide by and we’re not shy about asking people to leave.”

Although the shelter does reach capacity and residents are limited in the number of nights they may reside, there is also a successful ‘transition program’ which is arguably where the real social work of The Mountain Shelter takes place. A small number of residents who are enrolled in the ‘Transition Program’ must demonstrate that they are working towards a source of income. They stay in separate semi-private dormitories for up to 9 months while they save for their own housing, and are expected to pay regularly into an account set aside for this purpose. The Transitional Program states amongst its goal that: “Clients have safe, temporary shelter; become more stable, and attain safe, sustainable housing upon exiting the program” (BSH). To this end existing residents are only admitted to available places upon meeting with a case manager and agreeing upon a set of goals for their transition into secure housing: “Transition Program residents work closely with shelter case managers to determine what has led them to homelessness, and what steps they must take to overcome their situation. Transition Program residents must live drug and alcohol free, pay a weekly program fee, and abide by a budget and savings plan” (BSH). When coupled with other community initiatives such as Boulder’s Housing First program, which helps find low-income housing options, and the shelter’s own long-term Transitional Housing system for those who’ve stayed their allotted 9 months, the resulting network is fallible and under-resourced, but still far surpasses most other efforts across the United States to alleviate homelessness in the
wake of an all-but retreated welfare state. Much of this success can in fact be attributed to
the strong community visions of those in Boulder’s private-welfare sector, as well as the
particular cultural, political, and economic conditions of the community itself, and a
brand of progressive liberal urbanism which has long held visible poverty and
homelessness to be all but unconscionable on its decidedly upper-middle class doorsteps.
Until recently at least, in Boulder the well-worn phrase familiar to frustrated social
welfare advocates everywhere, “Not-in-my-backyard”, had an entirely more encouraging
connotation.

A year round homeless population, captured at a Point-In-Time

“Is it true that we get people coming from all over because we got good homeless
services? I hear these rumors that we have so many homeless because they get
looked after pretty good here – like I heard if you get a psyche eval in Boulder
you get free bus tokens and stuff. Is that true?” — bus driver, female,
Boulder, February 2013

“Why don’t they just go out and talk to some farmer, do a bit of work for him, for
like 5 dollars a day and buy loads of noodles, and they'd be happy.” — student,
early twenties, male, downtown Boulder bar, 2013

“Pete” is in his late 60s and has been homeless in Boulder consistently for the past
15 years. He camps outside year round and has done so nearly every night for the last
decade. He is one of a small and loosely knit ‘old guard’ of homeless men in Boulder
who, while maintaining very minimal contact with services in the city, seem to remove
themselves from the local welfare network as far as possible. Increasingly they also seem
to be removing themselves from those most public sites where civic battles over
homelessness are likely to be fought. When he first became homeless after losing his construction job in town, Pete did try staying at the shelter but decided it wasn’t for him: “There are lots of ill people in that place, there’s nothing you can do to stay away from germs. At my age I can’t afford to get sick so I’m better off staying outside. I have good camping gear and a lockup I can stay in when it gets really cold.” He has little contact with the shelter community, but he does often go in at 7am on Tuesdays to get a hot breakfast. Tuesday is the day they serve pancakes. Those mornings Pete sometimes has to wake at 5am in order to walk the distance into town. Once at breakfast he keeps himself to himself. Pete is tall, wiry, and incredibly fit for his age: “Yeah. I walk every day man, sometimes 5, 10 miles depending on where I’m camping at. I move around.” He used to drink “pretty heavily” but doesn’t anymore. In 15 years sleeping rough in Boulder, Pete says he has only had two camping tickets. Both citations came in the last year. He is adamant that the Boulder Police Department has become more aggressive, aggressively enforcing the camping ban even to the point of raiding homeless encampments further and further towards the city limits. He tells me police recently disturbed a friend of his one night, accused the man of assaulting an officer, and sent him to prison for a year:

“Out where I stay by the train tracks the police have started coming out at night looking for people to book. I’m sober now but the drunks particularly are vulnerable. Police seek them out, wake them up, then accuse them of assaulting an officer knowing they can’t defend themselves against those kind of accusations. Then they book these guys and say “assaults on police are up by so many 100's.” Then they get more funding and weapons and patrols.”

Pete wants to get a lawsuit filed against the BPD on the part of his buddy, but says he struggles with no easy access to email or legal help. He’s currently looking out for people with the knowhow to launch such an appeal.
A few weeks later Pete introduces me to another small group of men, all younger than he is, who also prefer to sleep outdoors year round. He tells me they have found a solution to both the city’s anti-camping ordinance and the Open Space and Mountains regulations, both of which combine to effectively prevent them from camping anywhere within forty miles of Boulder. These men explain that they camp together on private farmland on the edge of town. They struck up a deal with the rancher who lets them stay on his land for free in return for some odd jobs and keeping a watch for intruders at night. In true ‘hobo’ fashion, the rancher’s only provisos are that they work a little for him, and remain quiet, clean, and respectful. This, they say, is their best way to stay out of reach of the law and avoiding tickets: “It pisses the cops off, but they can’t touch us on private land. They’ll harass us walking sometimes, but they can’t do shit about it.” For his part Pete values his solitude, so he camps alone elsewhere, risking brushes with the Boulder Police Department and whoever else might come along.

All these men represent an invisible demographic of homelessness in Boulder that is rarely seen or considered. As a 15-year veteran of the streets, Pete has likely lived in the city longer than a large proportion of Boulder’s residents, many of whom are ironically transient themselves in the way that middle-class career professionals of the twenty-first so often are. Pete was raised in Colorado and has lived here most of his life. Most Boulder residents however, probably walk past Pete and people like him every day without seeing them as “homeless,” and certainly not regarding them as the object of anti-homeless sentiments in the community. Pete is quiet, unassuming, tanned, healthful, cleanly dressed, groomed, and highly articulate. He is also white and male. Aside from perhaps his well-kempt long hair and short grey beard, as well as the large and relatively new REI backpack he carries with him at all times, there is nothing about him that
screams “homeless” in the culturally pejorative sense. He likes it this way and seems perfectly ordered in his daily routines, which include reading at the public library, popping into town for a shower in the Rec center, or to get food, supplies, and to chat with friends down on Pearl Street. Pete stops short of describing his homelessness as a “choice”, but he gives the impression that he is happier outside and free from as many institutional pressures as possible. In many ways however, despite flying some way beneath the political and cultural radar of Boulder’s “homeless problem” — avoiding institutional welfare and remaining as inconspicuous as possible — it is his very invisibility that makes Pete and others like him a tacitly political object of erasure, in whose discursive absence, Boulder’s anti-homelessness proponents have been free to choose their objects elsewhere.

There is a well-worn joke told in various forms around Boulder, Colorado that: “Everybody looks homeless.” Perhaps it is because of the causal, outdoorsy fashion that is all but a uniform in the city; perhaps it is because of the keen climbing, hiking, and biking community whose aesthetic tends to be “dirt bag” and “granola”; or the ski-bum college students whose look is more “hippy”; or it could be due to the actual aging hippies who came in the seventies and still comprise a significant cultural presence in the town. Regardless the perceived local wisdom is that it’s tough to tell who is homeless and who isn’t in this city. For evidence of this observation we may look at the popular satirical blog “‘Stay Out of my Namaste Space’ — and other things said by white women in Boulder’, to a posting of April 2014 allegedly overheard in public specifically regarding the homeless population: “I mean, we’re in Boulder, it’s hard to tell if someone is legitimate just by how they look.” In a similar vein, upon returning briefly from fieldwork I was once told by a woman in a bar in Ohio that: “Boulder is the worst dressed
city in the country, I mean they all have really expensive clothes but everybody looks homeless…” She was entirely unaware of my object of study or the reason for my stay in Colorado.

As wrong-headed as these opinions may be, there is in fact a serious discussion to be had about the cultural distance between stereotyped notions of homelessness, and the actual public presence of unsheltered people in an affluent and outdoorsy town like Boulder. A subtle cultural camouflaging of the more abject traits traditionally assumed to be exterior markers of American poverty has of course been underway for some time in the United States, where consumer culture, charity, and a surplus of mass-produced clothing has partly “sanitized” the realities facing people without home. The result is that an under-informed public who still perceive homelessness according to traditional cultural logics of “rags” and “filth,” tend not to see a large proportion of the homelessness they encounter. The politics of this conundrum are implicit, but none-the-less serious: Localized inequality often doesn’t appear as dire as it actually is. Boulder, a destination city rich with outdoors enthusiasts and “gear head” culture, arguably presents a particularly pernicious example of this problem. In Boulder thrift stores and clothing drives regularly fill with state-of-the art hiking clothing, lightly used down puffer jackets, and last season’s top of the range ski-wear. Here equipment is valued as a mark of social status. As one man using the Bridge House drop-in services downtown remarked: “Boulder is the only town where you’ll see a $3000 bike on top of a $200 car.” Boulder’s obsession with outdoors ‘lifestyle gear’ as a marker of class and prosperity can be insidious. On more than one occasion, middle-class residents remarked to me something to the effect that they had recently seen a “…homeless person panhandling in a brand new Arcteryx jacket,” as if possession of such fancy technical mountain clothing
precluded their worthiness of welfare, charity, or empathy for living outdoors during a harsh winter. The tone of some such remarks may even have suggested that a quality jacket called into question the wearer’s very status as “homeless” – coding their situation at best as an individual choice, and at worst a wholesale scam.⁴

Of course in reality we live in a society in which aggressive marketing campaigns tout seasonal “improvements” in style and technical function, effectively condemning plenty of perfectly good high-end clothing to the bargain bins and donation boxes. This is perfectly well understood by people trying to conceal the stigma of their homelessness, and in a climate like the Rocky Mountain west, some decent camping equipment can quite literally mean the difference between life and death for unsheltered individuals. One morning in February for example, I talked to a sometime shelter resident in his early forties who was holding a cardboard sign on Broadway Avenue downtown. It read: “Wanted: Camping gear: tent, sleeping bags, jacket, stove. Anything gratefully accepted.” He said he was trying to gather enough gear for himself and his girlfriend to get out of town and spend spring in the mountains near Longmont where they could camp undisturbed on Forestry Service land. In his first few days holding the sign he had received brand new sleeping bags, a Northface down jacket, some outdoor eating utensils, REI dehydrated meals, and a good pair of hiking boots, all thrown to him by drivers who presumably had these items kicking about in the back of their vehicles. With this equipment the homeless couple were able to plan a spring retreat into the hills when

The Mountain Shelter closed its doors for the season and, he hoped, avoid camping

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⁴ There is a strong cultural trope of the “pretend homeless panhandler” in the U.S. Such apocryphal figures are imagined in many cities and are widely thought to make large tax-free incomes off their scams. Media dedication to “busting” fake panhandlers in their expensive homes and cars does not help: See for example John Stossel’s recent assertion on Fox & Friends: “I heard that some people beg for a living and make big bucks - $80,000 a year in some cases…you really shouldn’t give to these street people” (Mediate).
citations and other dangers threatening rough sleepers in the city. This is a reality of homelessness in Boulder that very few see, and it is a discourse anti-homelessness advocates and proponents of minimizing services are happy to keep subdued.

Counting Boulder’s homeless: An annual exercise in futility

“Homeless Determination”

5

It is not your job to determine if a respondent is homeless – homelessness will be determined when the surveys are analyzed.

— 2013 Point-In-Time Homeless Count Training manual

“We don’t like to use the word ‘homeless’ much, but we have to.”

— An organizer of the 2013 Point-In-Time count, Colorado, 2013.

I begin my analysis of Boulder’s year-round “homeless” population with a caveat: Homelessness is a condition which people experience, and not an identity as it is so often spoken of in the United States. To refer to “the homeless” or even to “homeless people” is not just inaccurate, it in fact comes with the cumulative weight of negative, misguided, and dehumanizing cultural representations which this dissertation has sought to underline throughout previous chapters. This is not a politically correct bugbear or lofty anti-essentialist rhetorical move, it is a real and observable problem that both informs and influences the very landscape of social welfare in this society. When we talk of ‘homeless people’ we unavoidably talk in absolute terms about individuals who are experiencing a complex host of social phenomena about which nothing is absolute.
Nothing is absolute that is, except our cultural urge to categorize the experience of these people in meaningful terms, as well as our repeated and tragic failures to do so.

A central problematic of this study is that most official attempts at producing meaningful statistics with the intent of influencing homelessness policy have so many catastrophic flaws in methodological approach, scope, and practical application that they are all but useless to local service providers. Worse, inaccurate statistics also carry with them the potential for considerable discursive harm and misinterpretation as they conveniently fill significant vacuums in mainstream America’s understanding of homelessness. Nevertheless it is equally important to establish as much as possible the general characteristics of those people assumed to be using services in Boulder according to the only official data available, and thus by the terms of the only information that has any political weight for decision making surrounding social welfare on a local and regional level — information that, as we shall see, also fits neatly into all kinds of media discourses of homelessness.

In January of 2013 I personally participated in administering Boulder’s annual homelessness count in multiple institutions across the city. I am therefore well positioned to comment on the particular limitations of such data, as well as to appraise its real-world relevance to service provision according to follow up interviews I conducted with shelter staff. Along with participant observation of the annual homeless counts in Boulder County, other observations presented here concerning the makeup and experience of Boulder’s perennial homeless population may be anecdotal, garnered from informal conversations on the streets, taken from publicly available information, or excerpted from formal interviews conducted with service providers and others familiar with the issue. It is important in opening to establish that, contrary to popular local beliefs, there absolutely
is a large, diverse, consistent, year-round population of people who experience homelessness in the city of Boulder. According to the only available statistics, this population broadly mirrors the demographics of other such populations throughout the United States and every year the regional counts report constancies with national trends. The question that remains is: Why do so many resident of Boulder seem to imagine that the local homeless population is from somewhere else, drawn to their ideal town by a host of controllable factors? Lingering suggestions that Boulder in some way experiences a particularly unique phenomenon of homelessness, either in terms of access to services, the perceived conditions of local homeless people, numbers, seasonality, behavior, mobility, or identity, are all fascinating and raise the deeper questions of representation and visibility that this dissertation is primarily concerned with.

Problems inherent in attempts to quantify homelessness are discussed in detail by geographer Christine Jocoy in her paper: “Counting the homeless: the culture of quantification in American social policy” (2013). Whilst Jocoy is appropriately concerned with the almost blind degree of “cultural authority” afforded to numerical facts in social policy, as well as the disconnect she observes between the faithful production of statistics and their actual implementation in social policy, I am more interested in the ways in which statistics feed into a larger discourse that helps construct a political image of homelessness. My worry is that this image reverberates on a local and regional level, and beyond. Jocoy writes:

“The direct link assumed to exist between count data analysis and policy and program evaluation is weakly specified and poorly evidenced. The federal government’s focus on standardization of data collection for annual comparisons of places across the U.S. diverts attention away from critical reflection on local interpretation and responses to the data” (398).
From the perspective of institutional welfare provision, my firsthand experience of a similar quantification process fundamentally supports Jocoy’s assertions. One service provider after another spoke of their mistrust in official figures and I similarly found that concrete rationale for the surveys were largely missing or vague at best. In discussing this primary problem however, I wish to build on Jocoy’s analysis and draw attention to some further gaps inherent in municipal attempts to “count” homelessness. The gaps I am interested in are the harder-to-grasp grey discursive spaces carved out between how homelessness appears according to the numbers, how it is talked about and understood in local discourse, and how it actually is for people living significant portions of their lives in regulated public space.

If, as Jocoy strongly claims, the links between count data and planning are indeed dislocated, then that is certainly one troublesome aspect of quantification culture as an excess of time and energy are expended producing data rather than interpreting it for policy amelioration. However, my claim goes further to suggest that it is precisely this disconnect between official statistics and the daily realities of homelessness that enable some of the more considerable blind spots to exist. It is in these blind spots that powerful misrepresentations of homelessness are able to thrive and where this culture nurtures the stereotyped caricature of homelessness we have traced everywhere throughout this study. This same old stereotype based on established historical ideas of vagrancy, mobility, and independence in the American West is now culturally positioned to elide values of localism, welfare, and community altogether. It is this simplified representation of homelessness, formed in the absence of any usable knowledge of actual homelessness, which most aids neoliberal urban policies of control and erasure to encroach with diminished political resistance even in a tolerant and socially aware town like Boulder.
By highlighting the ways in which limited quantitative data is actually produced on a city and countywide level through one such problematic survey process, I will highlight contrasts between the figures and the qualitative analysis of homelessness in the city I have conducted across a number of different sites and a longer period of time.

The Mountain Shelter also maintains its own private statistics concerning the intake of residents. From its perspective as the only full-service provider for single adults in the city, the institution estimates that around one third of its residents are “situationally homeless” at any one time, meaning that the conditions of their current homelessness are temporary and impermanent as opposed to endemic and entrenched. Of these a high number stay on average for an absolute maximum of 2 weeks before finding an alternative housing option. Many stay for much less time. As directors of the shelter, Keith Duncan and Ted Woods are the first to acknowledge that between the official data and their own efforts to log residents’ basic information at intake, even they remain largely in the dark about the demographics of homelessness in Boulder:

“We really know so little about our folks. We’ll have 150 or 200 people at our door. For overnight services over the course of the year, 20% of them will spend one night and go somewhere else. Does that mean they’re solving their local situation or they’re regional, or they’re connecting with family, or getting money sent and are moving on to some kind of regional or relational support, or are they just passing through…who knows? We don’t have any opportunity to get close to the situation. I think making assumptions about it is a very tricky business…”

Ted and Keith can however comment on easily observable trends in the core population of the Boulder Shelter. For example in November of 2012 the shelter was quite obviously experiencing a sharp increase in female residents. By Christmas that year 36% of people using the shelter services were women, whereas in previous years the ratio of females to males had been a constant 25% to 75%. Reasons for such a sudden increase
in Boulder’s female shelter residents however, were less obvious. As Keith told me: “It’s anybody’s guess.” However, as shelter policy gives priority to women during intake it is important to stress that the knock-on effect of such an increase was that potentially 9% more single adult men than before were unable to secure shelter beds, and were instead forced to spend nights in alternative arrangements, warming shelters, or on the streets where their visibility to the public is heightened as well as their risk of exposure, violence, or legal problems. As Joanne Passaro reminded us such seemingly small shifts in policy and demographics can have significant implications for the ways in which homelessness is popularly perceived, especially homeless men: “Homeless street people are men and women in gender crisis. For homeless men, this crisis usually relates to the culturally contradictory position they occupy – they are viewed both as hypermasculinized and emasculated.” (2). Because men are often imagined to be immune to some of the risks and abuses of daily homelessness, they also cast a less sympathetic figure in full public view. An increase of single homeless men struggling to survive in public space is more likely to be met with a wave of anti-homeless sentiment than with the sympathy and outrage that the visible homelessness of women and families can engender. If anything, here is illustrated the critical importance of producing effective knowledge about homelessness and the people who experience it, as well as the inherently dangerous politics of disseminating knowledge which is less than effective, misrepresentative, or just plain false.

The frustration with which even service providers readily acknowledge the gaps inherent in knowing the local homeless population cannot be emphasized enough. It is also a vitally important point to stress as we move towards considering some of the ways in which average citizens form knowledge concerning homelessness in their town. This is
a bind which both Ted and Keith stress on more than one occasion during the course of our interview: “The data in this industry is really poor…We can tell you really accurately what’s going on here, and so can the rescue mission in downtown Denver, but once you get past the agency and try to look at this on a regional or even more difficult, on a national basis, then the data becomes really challenging.”

Aside from data gathered by individual service providers therefore, the only source of official information pertaining to homelessness in the area comes from the annual ‘Point-in-Time’ counts — a significant undertaking that sees surveys administered to people using services in participating welfare institutions. The bulk of the 2013 survey was conducted over a 48-hour period from January 29th – 30th and consisted of 27 separate questions offering participants a selection of fixed multiple-choice answers. I volunteered to administer the surveys at 4 different sites in the city of Boulder with the goal of better understanding exactly how demographics on American homelessness are produced. The Point-in-Time (PIT) counts in northern Colorado are coordinated by the Metropolitan Denver Homeless Initiative through volunteers and are broadly representative of the methods and data analysis deployed in similar counts throughout the United States. In the following pages I will outline a sampling of some of the more relevant data sets contained in the surveys from 2012 and 2013, as well as engaging in some discussion of the ways in which the survey was undertaken from my perspective as a volunteer on the ground.

After a brief and basic training orientation at the Boulder center for Community Services, I was assigned to administer surveys at Bridge House, a morning-only drop in center in downtown Boulder where clients can grab breakfast, advice and legal aid, the Mountain Shelter where I usually volunteered during the evening intake, the People’s
Clinic which delivers free healthcare for low income families near downtown, and at the United Methodist Church in south Boulder during one of their weekly ‘community dinners’. As a thank you for answering survey questions, which took around 5 minutes to complete, participants were given a brown-paper ‘incentive’ bag, prepared by school children and containing such items as hats, gloves, toothbrushes, razors, and an assortment of cheap snacks, including taffy and chewy pine nuts which proved to be a problem for very many of the respondents suffering from poor dental repair. A version of the survey count was provided in Spanish too, but the person who administered it said it was littered with translation errors. Before I go into an extended critique of the PIT process and its failure at providing a useful representation of homelessness, it is important to stress that the limitations of such efforts at quantitative analysis are explicitly acknowledged in preface to the publication of the 2013 data itself: “NOTE: The one consistent finding in all research on homelessness is that surveys undercount homeless populations. People may enter and leave homelessness throughout the year – the Point-In-Time Survey is an approximate one day snap shot of homelessness in metro Denver.” This nevertheless raises a number of important questions: Why conduct the counts on one day? Why is it always a day in January? How useful can a “one day snap shot” pretend to be, especially given the considerable effort required in order to capture it? And perhaps most importantly: How representative is one day in January of a complex social welfare problem that is defined by its perennial, ephemeral, endemic, and reoccurring nature? Is it in fact misrepresentative, and if so, what discursive violence does it potentially inflict? Added to these are other important questions I found myself asking whilst working as participant in the 2013 count: Why were we tasked with surveying in some particular locations and not in others? What happens if people aren’t
using services, as so many precarious populations do not? How do you count a problem that is so often marked by the very human urge to hide poverty and suffering, often in plain sight? How do you count what you cannot see?

The first obvious problem with the P.I.T is that the Colorado count always takes place in late January, as indeed homeless counts do in most municipalities across the U.S. In the coldest months of the year a societal failing marked by its invisibility is rendered even more invisible as at-risk people are forced to retreat into temporary, substandard, or downright dangerous living situations in order to survive the perilous winter months. Whereas a homeless count conducted in July may at least have the small virtue of heightened public visibility of unsheltered people, a survey conducted in January would effectively have to probe the deepest, darkest, recesses of the urban landscape in order to begin to claim an accurate assessment of people living in precarious housing situations. I heard of no good reason for conducting the annual homeless surveys in late January, but yet all the service providers I spoke to cite the timing of the counts as the primary reason to be suspicious of data they provide. January of all months is when shelter and service resources are under the most pressure and emergency beds are hard to secure. In response unsheltered people are forced to adapt in any way they can and their options tend to be few. Whilst these adaptations may take many forms, all have invisibility in common as people are driven further from public view in an attempt to survive the winter. These impossible-to-quantify retreats may include: illegally squatting in abandoned homes, renting cheap motel rooms between friends pooling incomes or benefit checks, resuming an abusive relationship in order to maintain shelter, moving in with relatives in another city, sleeping in a car, lockup, or place of work, or even retreating into the hills and camping for the long winter as a surprising number of Boulder’s endemic homeless seem
to do. These retreats and more are common amongst precariously sheltered and homeless populations, and they render a count conducted across welfare institutions during one week of the year badly misrepresentative of both the scope and cyclical nature of the problem.

Aside from its questionable timing, the other clear failing of the Point-in-Time Count, is that it is also a Point-in-Place count. The under resourced, under staffed surveys are not able to scour the urban landscape for unsheltered people, even if such an endeavor would promise more accurate results. However the fact that they are mainly conducted ‘on site’ in participating service providers, poses another problem. Not only does this presuppose that significant numbers of people experiencing homelessness access social service regularly, it also absolutely misses contact with the most vulnerable individuals who have withdrawn from society, community, and welfare intuitions entirely. Whilst in Boulder, outreach workers from the shelter did try to administer surveys one evening as they walked the parks, creeks, and alleys where some of their more far-gone clients are often found, such an effort can only pretend to scratch the surface of this most at-risk population of entrenched homeless people. Furthermore, without official permission even many of the more obvious public institutions and spaces where at-risk people may be located were largely off limits to the count. Whilst the logistically difficult task of conducting a survey outside the public library was at least attempted, in January many individuals seek quiet refuge inside the stacks and the prospect of interrupting library patrons’ reading to ask “excuse me, are you homeless?” is clearly unworkable. Likewise many of the more obvious refuges the university campus provides to unsheltered people during the freezing months were off limits. The refurbished student center at CU Boulder has especially been noted in recent years as a site of conflict between the university and
homeless people who spend winter days there keeping warm by the fireplaces, and yet counts rarely probe such public spaces. (Anas)

Perhaps most egregious in this catalog of forced blind spots however was that, having permitted public counts in previous years, in 2013 members of the Downtown Boulder Business Association voted not to support the survey process and actively blocked it from taking place on Pearl Street — simultaneously the most public and most visible site of panhandling homeless individuals in the city. Of course this suggests local business interests may have actually come to prefer that the identities of Boulder’s homeless population remain ambiguous, easily characterized as dropouts and out-of-towners attracted to Pearl Street by the prospect of free-handouts. If is this is the case, the Point-in-Time Count could only threaten to upset this narrative despite its many problems.

The shortcomings of the survey process also were not lost on many of those working to administer the count, and some volunteers expressed frustration with the way questions were worded. After a few hours approaching shelter residents during intake one volunteer expressed her disdain for governmental surveys and especially the blunt manner in which the questionnaire demanded of interviewees: “Are you homeless now?” This volunteer reported she would like to see empty categories on the forms in order to let people self-identify as “homeless” or otherwise. Her feeling was that the survey presupposed a very narrow definition of “homeless” which did not accurately describe the circumstances of many of the people she interviewed on that given evening. Indeed the stark lack of any critical reflection demonstrated in the very rigid categories dreamt up by the architects of the P.I.T survey, was noted by a number of the volunteers and service providers I spoke too. One member of staff at a survey site I worked on was more
direct in her view of the homeless counts: “These questions are ridiculous. I don’t trust people in government offices who have never spoken to anybody ever.”

As directors of the Mountain Shelter, Keith and Ted face a balancing act. The private organization faces very real pressures to maintain its strong community ties and secure local good-will. As Keith points out the public funding they receive is small but gratefully received: “The city support is 3 or 4 percent of our budget. Important, but…”

When asked if they give much credibility to the annual PIT counts, however, they deliver a hesitant but unanimous response: “No”:

“It’s the only data point we have that tries to determine the scope of the problem on a regional basis, so that’s the data point we use because it’s the only one we have, but those of us who have watched it being administered know that it’s not very reliable data…. It’s totally dependent on who we can find, and how many volunteers we have, and who is participating this year, and the weather…it’s not great social science but it’s the only thing we’ve got.”

Certainly the reservations Keith and Ted harbor regarding the relevance of the numbers produced by PIT counts were immediately obvious to me as a volunteer tasked with administering the count within the prescribed spatial and temporal boundaries. Two other Boulder service providers whom I spoke with earlier in the year also expressed similar reservations with the annual counting process: “Well, it's just one day in January. Things change.”

It was survey respondents themselves however, who most heavily bemoaned the makeup of the survey. Many I interviewed felt that the survey format was unable to grasp either the nuances of their service needs or housing situation at that “point in time.” People did indeed wrestle with the survey bluntly asking: “Are you homeless” – instead often going into lengthy fine-grained explanations of their situation and listing a catalog of events that led them to service institutions on this occasion. The category of “homeless” when reduced to such an absolute and bureaucratic definition carried too
much stigma for some survey takers to identify with. The feeling amongst many people was that the official survey was not designed with them in mind, and at times individuals seemed quite resentful of its attempts to categorize them as somebody in need of services at all – even as they stood in line for shelter beds, medicine, or food. One woman in her fifties, a long time resident of Boulder and a keen community member, said she had recently lost her job and was staying a few nights in the shelter until she was able to find a better option. When asked to take the P.I.T survey she balked at the idea that she might be thought of as “homeless” but did admit that the past week staying in the shelter had “changed her view of homeless people.”

This kind of sentiment was echoed by a number of middle class single women especially, seemingly the most rapidly growing demographic of people seeking services in Boulder. One woman was surprised how many of her fellow shelter residents were well educated, noting with a degree of surprise that she had met “registered nurses, teachers, intelligent and kind people.” Another man in his mid-fifties who I spoke to during the count at the United Methodist community dinner said that he identified as a member of the “working poor” and had managed to scrape by with odd jobs “avoiding being homeless” since coming to Boulder as a “Dead Head” in the late 1980s. He was in fact quite categorical in his dislike of “the homeless” — describing them as “junkies” and “bums.” He did however admit that he was “practicing to be homeless” himself and knew it was “never far away.” This man came to the free meal times for the sense of community, to meet friends, and because it took some strain off his weekly budget which he met with sporadic pay checks and small benefit payments. The trend here is reminiscent of a common reason for avoiding shelter services often expressed on the streets by people who would themselves likely be diagnosed as “homeless” by most
popular definitions. Usually a variation on: “I don’t stay at shelters, they are full of
homeless people!” So stigmatized has become America’s cultural association with the
term “homeless,” that it is now often actively disavowed by the very people it could be
used to categorize. Ultimately the picture that begins to emerge is simply one of people
who need shelter, and attempts to categorize, subcategorize, or divide them quickly run
into difficulties.

Other folks felt that the survey questions didn’t begin to address some of the
biggest issues they faced on the streets. I heard numerous complaints about the city’s
warming shelters — the emergency centers for people who don’t make it inside on nights
when temperatures drop below 34 degrees Fahrenheit. These were almost universally
described as “dangerous, unsupervised, and unsafe.” Another repeated observation was
that while access to food and basic services in Boulder was not a problem, people had no
forum in which to complain about issues with the Boulder Police Department or the city
laws and ordinances they felt were being used selectively against them. As he finished his
survey, one male in his thirties expressed a common feeling amongst people who use
Boulder’s services:

“Getting food in Boulder is not our problem, you have to try pretty damn hard to
starve here. We get loads of food. People are nice. Our problem is the police and
harassment and getting housing and jobs. You can't get any proper sleep in that
shelter and then work a full 9 to 5 day. I’d like to see anybody try it.”

Indeed the Point-in-Time survey was devoid of any questions about policing or the
relationship of the target population to local law enforcement, and many people noted
that no free space was provided in which to air any such grievances of their own.
Conspicuously absent too were survey questions regarding the network of city ordinances
such as the camping ban or open space regulations; controversial measures which are
well known to disproportionately impact the lives of homeless people in the area and receive significant coverage in the local press.

During my three days working to administer the count a number of individuals raised issues of police harassment and brutality they had experienced while camping. Although there was no room on the official paperwork to document their concerns, I heard reports of people being woken up and physically harassed while they slept, having their gear taken and trashed, and even having their tents sprayed with mace and slashed while they camped near to the Boulder creek. Whilst many weren’t certain who was behind the destruction of their property, they were certain that it was the BPD and “open space officers” who regularly swept them out of public parks after dark. One individual at the community meal first refused point blank to take the survey, and then an hour later handed me a copy of the form on which he had scrawled his own alternative answers in block capitals. In the box that asked the “race and ethnicity” of respondents he had written ‘HUMAN.’ His other responses did not fit into the pre-ascribed survey boxes ether. His emotions spoke for themselves:

8. **Do you or any adult in your household have any of the following?**

   . Serious mental illness
   . Serious medical or physical condition
   . Alcohol or drugs abuse
   . Developmental disability
   . HIV/ AIDS
   . Other – describe

   **BLUNT FORCE TRAUMA- BAD BAD COPS**
11. If you are homeless now, how long have you been homeless this time?

. I am NOT homeless now
. Less than one month
. More than one month but less than 1 year
. 1 to 3 years
. More than 3 years

COPS HELPED! THE ENTIRE LAST 6 YEARS!
THE POLICE BEAT MY FEET WHILE HANDCUFFED– ATTEMPTED MURDER

14. Are you homeless because of domestic violence?

POLICE VIOLENCE OF INHUMAN PROPORTIONS IT REALLY HURT A LOT!

Whatever the truth behind his extreme grievances, it was clear in many less extreme cases too that the Point-In-Time count did not begin to address the problems that most interviewees consider of paramount importance to their lives on the streets.

The issue of policing and harassment is a difficult one in Boulder. It is especially difficult to broach in interview with social workers and shelter management who must maintain a diplomatic balance and working relationship with the BPD and other city authorities. It is also to be somewhat expected that vulnerable populations feel victimized by local authorities and many harbor a general antipathy for police especially, as it is this agency above all others which regulates the space in which they spend a disproportionate
amount of their time. By and large the line from service providers is that the police in Boulder are doing their job in an exemplary fashion. One staff member expressed her belief that the police picked people up for camping for their own good on cold nights in response to “public pressure” and concern for their safety. When pushed about how much she believed this she admitted that there were a lot of “asshole cops” in Boulder. The truth is that I heard multiple tales of both ‘good cops’ and ‘bad cops’ and this balance seemed to be echoed by Keith Duncan, Executive Director of the Mountain Shelter: “We have a long standing relationship with the Boulder police that we value. They do a fantastic job. They generally don’t go looking for camps, they get complaints of people making a mess and give a warning before they go in and break it up.” Ted Woods followed up: “That’s the department policy, some individual officers might get heavy-handed.” In some contrast Jefferson Dodge, a journalist for the Boulder Weekly newspaper, the local publication most involved in holding the BPD to account, was more than happy to give his view of the legal situation for Boulder’s homeless:

“There is no reason we’ve seen to suggest the council’s anti-camping ordinance isn’t motivated by a feeling that they need to protect our nice town and sweep away undesirables from businesses. Boulder is liberal but what we’re seeing is a backlash from businesses. The “clean up Boulder” thing is down to an urge from the Pearl Street association who don’t like homeless people hanging in front of their business, and they’re using the police and these ordinances to do it.”

From Jeff’s perspective as a reporter who writes about homelessness issues, the police in Boulder stay pretty quiet on such matters. Interestingly he attributes much of the BPD’s perceived heavy-handedness to the fact that Boulder’s high house prices force police to live in nearby communities and travel in everyday to enforce laws in a town they can’t afford to reside in. For Jeff this dynamic can only breed a feeling of mutual resentment and mistrust between the police and local people, and he feels that the homeless are
especially vulnerable to this. What is certain is that despite the reticence of service providers to badmouth the BPD, in 2013 relations between the Boulder community and their police department probably reached an all time low.

2012 ended with numerous reports of police misconduct with half of Boulder’s current and former police officers facing criminal charges ranging from DUIs to attempted murder ("Misconduct"). Then there was massive public outrage on New Year’s Day when two Boulder police officers were suspended for the illegal shooting and butchering of a large beloved trophy bull elk in an upscale neighborhood. In the following months Boulder Mayor Matt Appelbaum walked a fine line between the electorate and his police force, and was repeatedly quoted as saying he suspected that each incident was the result of individual factors that don't reflect a “department-wide cultural problem”: “I think this is just an unfortunate confluence of events, but I think it's important for the community to know that. We're the voice of the community. We need to look at the erosion of public confidence” (“Misconduct”). The high profile elk-poaching scandal epitomized a terrible spell for the BPD and, eighteen months later, both former officers were prosecuted and charged with felonies. The incident also drew plenty of ridicule from the city’s blue-collar Colorado neighbors who found it hilarious when appalled Boulder residents organized a candlelit vigil, and then a memorial, for the departed elk (Hughes). In the face of such evident mistreatment of the famously protected wildlife population of Boulder however, it would be quite callous not to lend serious credence to complaints of BPD abuse quietly emanating from the much less protected homeless population of Boulder — a dehumanized community for whom candlelit vigils are rarely so well attended. What is certain is that people living on the streets of Boulder have many opinions to share about police excess and the increasingly selective
enforcement of Boulder’s increasingly aggressive municipal code, and that the only official survey purporting to hold their best interests at heart has neither the space nor the desire to hear them.

“Everyone comes from somewhere”:
Assessing assumptions of mobile homelessness in Boulder, Colorado

“Why don’t they just get out of Boulder? If I was homeless here I’d head straight for San Diego and sleep on the beach.” – consumer affairs specialist, male, thirties, north Boulder, 2013

“I’ve been prepared to move for opportunities in my life – why do they stay here? Are they just stubborn? They need to get out and move somewhere else where they can afford to live.” – sales assistant, female, mid-twenties, downtown, 2013

One piece of data that my participation in the annual Point-in-Time count had promised was at least a tentative impression of where Boulder’s homeless population might be from. It was clear from my survey of local media, as well as my conversations with residents of the city, that the popular imagination often constructed Boulder’s homeless as a largely transient group of footloose vagrants who were drawn to Boulder by its permissive social attitude and good services. Generally speaking this local imagination also tended to view homelessness in the town as heightened during the spring and summer months when the travelling kids showed up, and it seemed that many residents knew little to nothing of a year round homeless population in the city. The claim that an emphasized mobility is projected onto homeless individuals in the United States is central to this study, and therefore the chance to be part of an official count promised some potentially invaluable data.

At first glance the wording of the survey appeared to offer four distinct opportunities to at least partly ascertain if respondents had been living in Boulder when
they began to access social services, or if they had recently moved to the area — whether prior to their need for welfare provisions or because of it. I was especially interested in questions probing the regional movement of people seeking services in Boulder, as well as their last “permanent” address:

17. Where did you spend the night of Monday, January 28th, 2013?
20. In what city / town did you spend the night of Monday, January 28th, 2013
21. In what county did you spend the night of Monday, January 28th, 2013
22. IF IN COLORADO, what was the last City and County you consider to be your permanent place to live?⁵ (PIT)

During my training for the Point-in-Time count I had enquired lightly about these questions and whether the organizers thought that many homeless people in Boulder County would be from elsewhere. The response was unequivocal: “Oh yeah, many will be from out of town.” It was their first time working with issues of homelessness. When I asked the same organizer again a few days after the survey had been completed, she noted: “I actually only met two people who weren't from Boulder. It was surprising.” Indeed from my anecdotal experience administering the survey, I also had only spoken with two interviewees who identified as being from out of town. One had been in Boulder a while prior to becoming homeless. The other was a young guy of barely nineteen who was waiting for a court date in Colorado and had been forced to travel from his home in Montana without money or accommodation. Beyond this I did speak to numerous individuals who, whilst having become homeless in Boulder, originally came from other

⁵ In publication the survey later added an addendum to this question which suggests that even regional mobility remains an under theorized and undetermined marker of homelessness in official channels: “While these data provide us with some information about people migrating across counties, we are making some assumptions about migration. The definition of “last permanent residence” is likely to be interpreted differently across respondents.
towns around Colorado and the Front Range. Usually they had moved to Boulder for a partner or a job, one or the other of which had not worked out. I did interview one woman who had come 10 miles from neighboring Longmont because she had “heard services were better here.” Another man was from Denver but working jobs in Boulder. He said he was sending money to his kids while mainly staying in cheap ‘Single Occupancy Residence’ hotels and $30 motel rooms he found on Priceline. When this got expensive, he occasionally supplemented nights with free stays at the shelter unbeknownst to his family. Interestingly if there was any mobility reported on a local level it was because Denver is perceived as being a particularly dangerous and harsh place to be on the streets, and not because Boulder or its neighboring communities were though as especially safe or pleasant ones. For the most part however, anecdotally at least, the majority of Boulder’s situationaly homeless are very much a local population to one degree or another. When it comes down to it they are all just simply people in need of shelter. Certainly they are also a population for whom the town of Boulder and its local community present their best chances of escaping homelessness and getting back on their feet.

An early and somewhat unforeseen revelation in my research was that, in the absence of any trustworthy data offering a wider perspective on the problem, even those who work to alleviate the symptoms of homelessness on a daily basis rarely claim to have accurate knowledge of its scope. Rather, it became clear from conversations with shelter volunteers and even the case management staff who work with unsheltered people, that a lot of their knowledge of homeless populations is also based on general assumptions and cultural common sense. This certainly goes some way to explaining the popular assumptions of mobility amongst homeless populations that are so persistent in the
western United States, as the geographic origin and migration of precarious people remains by its very nature one of the most difficult and ambiguous patterns to establish. In lieu of official knowledge therefore, folk knowledge can often prevail. One volunteer, aware that I was researching local attitudes towards homelessness, approached me with a few of his own questions as we were making breakfast one morning. The exchange was awkward as he was clearly trying to take care to maintain a political correctness imperative in polite liberal conversation on such topics. He also assumed I had answers which I did not: “…so, this is a really good shelter right? I'm trying to think how to phrase this so I don't sound like a tool. The food here is really good right? So, is that, like, an incentive for people, to you know, not like they want to be homeless right? …But is it an incentive for them to stay here longer.” This fairly standard assumption operates on the idea that the free hot meals served up in welfare institutions are themselves enough to “encourage” homelessness, “keep people homeless” and even to “attract” homeless people to a place. Upon learning of my project a friend’s colleague posed a slight less delicate version of this same question at a work drinks function I’d crashed: “I’m not trying to sound like an asshole but how much do you think all this food and services, you know, kind of keep people homeless – you know – if you don’t have to work to get food then, why work?” Those who work in and around homeless services are not necessarily immune to these stereotypes either. An off duty staff member one night asserted with a degree of some certainty the stubborn old belief that “…people do pretend to be homeless to make money panhandling.” Another social worker was quite sure that “people do come to Boulder to be homeless,” as was a professional clinical psychologist I talked to in a bar who told me that Boulder attracted homeless people due to its great services. He didn’t “…work with the homeless, but had friends who did.” Further informal conversations
with intake staff at Boulder services regarding the perceived mobility of the local homeless population turned up similar guess work: “I think most people I deal with are generally from the area” came one response.

_Boulder Weekly_ journalist and homeless advocate, Jefferson Dodge, who in 2013 was actively trying to push Boulder’s homelessness to the forefront of his paper’s news agenda, told me he had very little idea where the local homeless population came from: “Anecdotally I hear people come out of Denver to Boulder for services. They can get food and there are warming shelters here – but like I said, it’s just anecdotal, I haven’t got any data on this.” Jeff did perceive there to be a strong community of homeless people in Boulder, many of whom have known each other for a long time. He recently attended a memorial service for a man who had died on Boulder’s streets – and assumes from his work that there is a core of homeless people who are long time Boulder residents.

Between the lack of information regarding how often individuals actually _do_ travel to Boulder for services, as well as the very real practical redundancy of defining what it really means to be ‘transient’ or ‘resident’ in any one place anyway, it is not at all easy to appraise the relative truth of these statements. We can however note that they represent widely held common sense beliefs that many people have regarding homelessness and that, given the dearth of useful statistics in American social services, it should not be surprising that they are also beliefs held by people working at the sharp end of homelessness issues.

As Director of the Mountain Shelter for the Homeless, Keith encounters these stereotypes a lot. Once again however, he claims very little perspective on the degree to which such assumptions are rooted in truth or merely reflective of how little knowledge
we really have of homelessness. If Keith had to guess, he thinks service driven mobility amongst homeless populations is over emphasized:

“I think these kind of attitudes are across the board. I think the thought that Boulder attracts people here is a common one, but I think it is also common that most communities think that way. You go to L.A., and they say: ‘Huh – people come here from all over much more than they do to Boulder. Great places tend to attract people. But in reality that’s not as big a force as people think. But it’s interesting that people think that. And it’s not just here. If you go to Denver they complain that we don’t have enough services so they attract people from Boulder to Denver.”

Director of Programs, Ted Woods, perhaps best sums up the question of how much homeless people actually do travel. Ultimately he sees it as a non-question. When I ask whether he feels significant numbers of people travel back and forth between Denver and Boulder for services, he eschews a ‘yes / no’ answer and is instead quick to underline the ultimate futility of worrying whether people in need of social services are resident in a particular place or not:

“In almost any city that has any kind of service level, you hear that from the city council or from whomever, that we’re attracting people here.

“Maybe they do. We don’t really know. We don’t have the data. We know it happens. My guess is it happens less than most people think. But that’s just based on my experience. We don’t really have the information to say one-way or the other.

“But even that question – what constitutes a resident? If you moved here in your RV and it’s been parked over here for 3 months, are you a resident? If you came here last week and have been camping out on the creek? Are you a resident now? That’s the real challenge of trying to determine who came from here and who didn’t. Everyone comes from somewhere”

Against such a foggy and ambiguous quantitative background therefore, this study’s overriding concern with the cultural and political representation of homelessness comes quite clearly back into focus. This is a point on which Keith Duncan agrees. Whilst he is typically suspicious of categorical attempts to subdivide the population his
organization serves, he offers an important insight into the real power cultural
representations hold for the imagination of local homelessness:

“…the perception around homelessness is driven by this stereotypical sort of
unaffiliated adult male homeless person when in fact the majority of the
homeless are families and married couples with kids, so they’re not really
dictating people’s perceptions of the homeless, but that’s the major part of
homelessness in the country and locally. So the point about people staying where
they become homeless I think that is especially true for those homeless. If you
wanted to section off a small part of the homeless community and suggest they
were transient, then you might have an argument, but the people who are
situationally homeless who are by far the majority and are affiliated with the
family are not nearly as transient… it seems, but the statistics and
information is very loosey-goosey.”

Keith’s point raises significant questions regarding the ethical responsibility of
media organizations in shaping discourses of local homelessness, as well as the very real
and separate phenomena of young seasonal travellers in the American West who might in
some way embody all the characteristics that Boulder’s homeless population are often
imagined to possess, but very rarely actually do. After all it is precisely when we are
faced with “loosey goosey” information that cultural representations are at their most
powerful.

For what they are worth, here are some selected findings about homelessness in
the greater Denver Metropolitan area garnered from the Point-In-Time Count I helped
conduct during the week of January 28, 2013 and published by the MDHI and
stakeholders. I have selected and edited the published findings for relevance. The MDHI
defines homelessness by a range of standard social scientific descriptors including
“sleeping in place not meant for human habitation”, “staying temporarily with family or
friends while looking for a permanent place to live”, “sleeping in an emergency shelter or
safe haven”, and “being discharged from an institution with 14 days and having no
subsequent residence identified…”:
• **Homeless incidence:** On Monday, January 28, 2013 there were **11,167 homeless men, women, and children** counted in the seven county Metro Denver area. The number only includes people who filed out a survey and their family members and we know this to be an undercount.

• **Families** Homeless persons are much more likely to be living in households with children: **62 percent** with children versus **38 percent without children.**

• Respondents reporting where they were last housed versus where they were homeless on the night of January 28, 2013, **indicates a migration across seven county area which increases housing and service burdens on several metro area cities and counties.**

• **Denver County** (and not Boulder County) has the **highest proportion of chronically homeless** respondents who reported another location as their last permanent residence.

• In Boulder County **52.1%** of all respondents reported spending the Monday night in the nearby city of **Longmont**, as opposed to **33% who reported spending it in Boulder.**

• Just **5%** of respondents who reported their **last permanent address was in Boulder County** spent Monday night in a county other than Boulder.

• On average, **one-third or fewer respondents who spent Monday night in a county different from their county of last permanent residence** were newly homeless.

• **63% of people reported as homeless in the city of Boulder are ‘Caucasian’**, as opposed to **54% in Boulder County**, and just **47% across the entire Denver metro Area.**

• Across the 7 county Denver Metro area **whites are substantially under-represented** and **African American and Native Americans are substantially over-represented** among the homeless population.

Whilst they may indeed not represent “great social science,” these snippets do combine to paint an interesting picture of homelessness in northern Colorado. Despite the
many problems with the collection of this type of data and the almost blanket opinion of service providers that we should not give too much credibility to Point-In-Time counts, even the surveys appear to suggest that people experiencing homelessness in Colorado’s front range do not migrate in significant numbers. When small numbers of respondents do report having traveled between municipalities, it is usually only on a very localized scale and they are rarely people who are newly homeless. From this we might ascertain that whilst members of the long term or endemically homeless population may indeed sometimes move short distances between towns to maintain social or kinship networks, or for job opportunities, these are very rarely movements in search of better social welfare services or charity. Of great interest here too (although the publication does not acknowledge this fact at all) is that the ethnic makeup of the region’s homeless population may also offer the best indicator that, as the whitest city in the area, Boulder’s homeless population is in fact largely its own – comprised more heavily of white people who fell into homelessness in the city and not elsewhere. Therefore, if we can say anything it is that the 2013 Point-In-Time data supports the numerous assertions I have outlined above that suggest ideas of widespread mobility amongst “homeless people” for services and lifestyle are consistently overemphasized in both our cultural and political discourse.

Ultimately the best thing that can be said of the annual Point-In-Time homeless counts is that they are primarily an advocacy tool, but not an especially useful one. The publishers of the count data certainly seem aware of many of their own methodological shortcomings but continue to produce and publish the data regardless. It is however the very fact that vaguely inaccurate data is published at all that is of most interest as we move forward, because it is at precisely this point that the information enters urban
discourse and media outlets. In a cultural and political climate where “wrong figures” are better than “no figures” and even “bad social science” carries conations of accuracy, we cannot underestimate the potential power of any data with a hint of authority to it. Whilst the counts are in reality only one of many representations of homelessness in the city, they are constantly at risk of being taken as the representation of homelessness in the city.

In lieu of other powerful stories of Boulder’s year round homelessness, Point-In-Time data can shape knowledge of homelessness in various competing ways, and ultimately inform urban policies affecting people in need of shelter.

These observations frame a second question regarding attitudes towards homelessness in Boulder and the regional American west. This question demands we consider the many fine-grained nuances of homelessness as it is being represented both locally and nationally. Given that for the most part homelessness advocates, homeless people themselves, and even the official data suggests that this is generally a less mobile population which rarely travels far in any significant numbers – and that Boulder’s year round homeless population is no different – how then do such strong cultural myths prevail which continue to heavily project transience onto homeless people in the American West?

Media discourse & public attitudes to Boulder’s homeless

Between the two main newspapers in town, the Boulder Weekly and the Daily Camera, issues of homelessness in Boulder receive a lot of coverage. The topic is also prolifically discussed on private blogs, message boards, on the CU Boulder campus, and in pretty much any forum where civic life in the city is up for debate. During the first week I arrived in Boulder, one story in particular was dominating local conversations. A
young couple living rough on the city’s streets had become the unwitting topic of public debate, middle class handwringing, and some little controversy due to a colorful write up they received in the Boulder Weekly. Their particular situation gave rise to a heightened public discourse and effectively encapsulated a good many of the tensions surrounding homelessness in the city today.

Chris Weaver, 30, and Lexi Weaver, 25, had been living together on the streets of Boulder for a few years. In mid 2012 Lexi had become pregnant and by late November she was just weeks away from giving birth. Around the time journalist Joel Dyer began drawing attention to Lexi and Chris’s situation, the couple were still camping under a bridge near to the downtown area. Writing in the pages of the Boulder Weekly – a popular free local newspaper with a strong social agenda and online presence – Dyer described the prospects of giving birth outside during the onset of Colorado winter for an embarrassed and outraged Boulder public:

Wednesday, November 21, 2012

‘A hand up’ for homeless Boulder couple

Lexi Weaver’s due date is two weeks away, and for now, she’s still living on the street

The Weaver family is running out of time. And with a new addition due any day, things are getting pretty desperate. For Lexi, Chris and their two dogs, CJ and Mayday, there’s no room at the inn — at least no room that a homeless family like them can afford right now, even though they are saving every penny they can and trying to find work. Despite their efforts, a manger is starting to sound like a viable option.

As it stands right now, Lexi will be giving birth sometime in the next 10 to 20 days. She’s due in early December. That’s a pretty scary proposition for a 25-year-old woman living on the streets of Boulder in December when temperatures typically drop into the teens or single digits every night. Lexi hopes her child will be born with a roof over his or her head. She also wants her husband Chris by her
side holding her hand, but the pair will need their luck to change for that to happen. They could use some help. “Not a handout, a hand up,” says Chris.

Few of us can even imagine what it must be like to be eight and a half months pregnant and sleeping on the cold, hard ground in winter, worrying continuously about what’s going to happen when the time finally comes, when the contractions are for real. And that torment isn’t Lexi and Chris’ only concern. It’s just another worry heaped on top of what to eat, how to keep safe and where to sleep so that the City of Boulder doesn’t write them a ticket for illegal camping, a ticket they can ill afford, especially now. (Dyer)

Writing at the end of a year in which Boulder’s escalating legal assault on public camping had become a hot button issue, Dyer’s story worked hard to humanize the homeless couple. The news story devoted paragraphs to their backgrounds, love for each other, and dreams for the future. It also emphasized their desire to find work and take care of their child. Dyer hit the Christmas metaphors pretty hard too, evoking a Christian nativity story as any good reporter would when faced with such a human-interest piece in late November. Writing in “Home Truths: Media Representations of homelessness” of his time as a reporter in Britain of the 1980s, Steve Platt noted that editors’ calls for this standard trope of newspaper story telling would always begin in late October:

“They’d…reach a peak just before Christmas when almost everyone in publishing seemed to be searching for that classic ‘No room at the inn’ tale through which to tug at their reader’s heartstrings…Soon…a new generation of direct action-orientated homeless advocates learnt how to exploit the situation to their own advantage” (106)

Whilst Dyer’s piece appeared to be part journalistic intrigue, part local advocacy, it also seemed invested in painting the homeless family in as normative terms as possible, perhaps in an appeal to Boulder’s middle class readership. He describes a traditionally gendered nuclear family going through hard times, reporting that “having bounced around foster homes in Utah” Lexi had originally come to Boulder three years ago to
She met Chris hanging out on the Pearl Street Mall and liked him immediately. “He was really funny and nice,” she recalls. After checking with other friends who told her that Chris was a good guy and wouldn’t hurt her, Lexi decided to camp with Chris. She thought she could trust him and she knew she would be safer camping with him, and she was.” With the expectant couple cast in a local love story set on Boulder’s very own streets, Dyer’s article then listed the difficulties the young pair faced finding pre-natal services and their struggle to stay together in the face of gender segregated welfare agencies, institutional rules, and increasingly negative local attitudes towards the homeless:

It’s easy to be judgmental. The couple hears the disapproving words and feels the condemnatory stares all the time. They’ve been told they shouldn’t be having a baby, and worse. Lexi says she’s been told she should abort her child or give it up for adoption because she’s homeless. It seems people in Boulder aren’t shy with their opinions. She says she also gets told that she should get away from Chris; just leave him because he isn’t providing for her. To hear the pair describe it, Boulder’s sidewalk inquisition tends to be long on advice and short on understanding…

Lexi has chosen to live outdoors for years. And while she says that she loves nature and the calming and artistic aspects it brings to her life, her choice is more a matter of her survival. Lexi has dreams, bad dreams. “When I sleep inside,” she says. “I wake up screaming and have to get outside. I dream about women being raped and beaten, murdered. It’s terrible, blood everywhere. Even after I wake up I can smell and taste the blood, it’s so real.” Lexi says the dreams are so frequent and horrific when she lives indoors that she decided years ago to just stay outside, on the street. She says she can handle the dreams better now that she’s with Chris. He calms her. (Dyer)

Dyer also subtly reached for more localized community connections, drawing on the homeless duo’s love of the outdoors, dogs, employment history in local businesses, and their preference for freshly sourced local food — all themes close to the hearts and identities of many Boulderites:

Chris is a pretty big guy. He’s 30 years old, a few inches north of six feet, with a dry sense of humor and a laugh that makes you want to join in. He grew up in
Florida and he, too, has a pretty strained relationship with his family. Chris has had a variety of jobs in his life, including construction work and serving as a sous chef, which he says he really enjoys. Like Lexi, he embraces living outdoors, albeit for somewhat different reasons. He doesn’t have nightmares.

“I like living outdoors most of the time,” he says. “I like to say I’m home-free, not homeless.”

It’s fair to say that both Chris and Lexi are free spirits. Both are artists and sell their work on the street. They prefer selling art to panhandling. They say they like giving people something positive and beautiful. Lexi also reads poems and has worked with kids, leading reading groups and teaching crafts. The couple also shares a love for traveling. They still get around a fair amount, only now they do their sojourns as a family, including the dogs...

In a perfect world, Chris and Lexi dream that one day their family, including their soon-to-arrive child, will travel the country in a food truck selling healthy dish they’ll prepare using fresh local ingredients from the region they’re visiting at the time... (Dyer)

The above excerpt is interesting to consider because whilst undoubtedly well-meaning in its attempt at pathos, it also unwittingly reifies some of the more pernicious stereotypes which cast American homeless as a free-wheeling lifestyle choice, utterly decontextualized and decoupled from the complexities of individual circumstance, social relations, poverty, and suffering. The article stresses the couple’s dreams of mobility and itinerant living in an intuitively kind but ultimately patronizing gesture. This is meant to communicate something to the effect of: “Look! This poor homeless couple have dreams too, just like you and I do!” In reality however, in the complex realms of media representation, the well-intentioned narrative angle opted for here only serves to bolster negative stereotypes. In other words, dreams of mobility and escape have a drastically different value for a comfortably housed middle-class newspaper reader on his office lunch break, than they do for a young couple, excluded from life-giving social services during their fifth consecutive winter on the same city streets. The result is a confusing and all-too-common discourse which, through its under critical attention to the very real
and muddy ethics implicit in representing precarious lives, quite by accident ends up hindering as much as it helps.

In the same vein the description of Chris’s self-identification as “home free” instead of “homeless” is particularly worth noting here, and curiously in many ways works against the weight of the considerable work the journalist does to foster empathy for the young couple; pregnant, cold, and vulnerable in the midst of Boulder’s affluence. This is a delicate point, but whilst self-descriptors such as “home-free” are common amongst people identified in the mainstream as “home-less,” they must be met critically and sensitively as very human reactions to a host of difficult and stultifying situations. For somebody on the streets self-identifying as “home-free” might be empowering, a refusal to claim victim status, and an active disavowal of a heavily stigmatized social category — a stigma they probably learned themselves prior to becoming homeless. The problem is that such statements are not met with the same context in the avenues of middle class discourse on social issues, and this is precisely because American middle-class discourse has always on some level suspected that ‘selective homelessness’ might be a fun form of escape and a shirking of the serious responsibilities that keep our own boring lives rooted in one place. In the case of Chris therefore, Dyer’s inclusion of such a descriptor not only undermines the thrust of his advocacy for Lexi and her unborn child, it also elides the very real circumstances of Chris’s life and relationships which actually do keep him on the streets regardless of whether he wishes to be there or not. Of course when Dyer took up the couple’s story and represented it in print to a local audience, neither Chris nor Lexi wanted to be “home free” or “home-less” at all. Rather they were stuck in a very real and dire predicament, seemingly excluded from services as a
combined result of their mutually supportive relationship and Lexi’s need to preserve her fragile mental and physical health.

The coverage fulfilled its goal and triggered an outpouring of support for the young couple rooted in public shame that an expectant mother could find herself in such a predicament in their affluent community. Lexi and Chris were given temporary housing and the resources they needed, and in early December Lexi gave birth to a healthy baby girl. The liberal concern was of course predictably speckled with plenty of negativity from readers, with some online commentators questioning the couple’s suitability to have a baby in no uncertain terms:

“These seem to be 2 people who cannot handle the fact that they may have to do things they do not want. They are homeless totally by choice. They decided not to get an abortion by choice. And now, even though there are options available where the child can have a roof over his head, they are not going to take advantage of it because they don't want to be separated?”
(Dyer, comments section)

However whilst these negative comments and others like them are two-a-penny, I am much more interested that the tropes of “choice” and “mobility” actually surfaced even in the views left by more concerned commentators who held the couple’s best interests foremost:

“Most importantly I want to express my support for this couple. People have the right and freedom to live as they choose. I am for minimal government involvement (next to none) in to the lives of individuals, couples and families. There should be a large enough umbrella that allows for a wide variety of differences. I want to support this couples’ freedom and wish them all the best and offer this family blessings in their life together.”
(Dyer, comments section)

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6 Internet message boards, whilst not considered scientific, here give an impression of a local conversation surrounding homeless in Boulder. Such comments are generally recognized as ‘extreme’ or unfiltered but I contend that in a relatively small community such as Boulder, they make up an important part of the discourse surrounding homelessness and ‘transients’.
A neat example of how themes of “liberty” and “choice” are as haunting in liberal and civil libertarian American discourses of homelessness, as they might often thought to be in conservative ones.

Most telling however, was an expression by Tom Cummins of the group “Americans 4 Social Justice” who spearheaded the couple’s case. Boulder Weekly reporter Jefferson Dodge quoted Cummins in a follow up article reporting on the birth and expressing concern that the more negative online comments had upset Chris and Lexi: “The online comments ‘shook them up big-time. I thought they were going to pull a runner,’ Cummins said, referring to the likelihood that the couple would leave town. ‘But luckily the baby came a little early, so they didn’t have time to plan it’” (Dodge, Dec 6).

It seemed that despite widespread coverage that Chris and Lexi had called Boulder home for multiple years, and their recent attainment of badly needed housing and resources for their baby, both the journalist and the advocate felt comfortable speculating in print that the couple might be some kind of flight risk — an assumption clearly based on the embedded notion that to be homeless is to be mobile. In fact, a day later somebody claiming to be friend of Chris and Lexi’s posted in reply to the follow-up article seriously refuting Cummins’ assertion that the couple had ever even considered moving on: “I just got off the phone with the baby’s father, and he told me he was not even aware of the negative comments in the original article. Chris also stated that they had no intention of “running” anywhere. It sounds like someone is projecting his own concerns onto this young couple…” (Dodge, “Baby girl”, comments section). The default belief that a couple like the Weavers must be predisposed to nomadism or dromomania and therefore might startle like wild animals and run for the hills with their newborn in tow, is indeed
“projected” by such discourse. This deft degree of conjecture shows just how deeply entrenched the myth of a wandering poor still is in the culture of the American west.

Overall here is a good example of a typically liberal discourse advocating for the support and welfare of homeless people, which ultimately backfires due to widespread naïveté surrounding the ways in which homelessness is historically and culturally represented in this society. My call is for a far more critically developed and nuanced ethics of representation that is not only badly lacking in our current media establishment, but also in the dominant culture’s most well-meaning approaches to a lot of social issues.

From the perspective of local service providers however, there were more issues with Dyer’s coverage of the story than just questions of subtle misrepresentation. Keith Duncan describes the Mountain Shelter’s relationship with local media as “typical,” but he sees significant differences in the ways in which the two major publications in town cover homelessness issues: “The Weekly is very different to the Camera. The Weekly has an agenda and they go out and they write about the things they want, the Camera’s agenda is to sell newspapers. As long as you know that, our relationship with the media is fine.” However, in the case of the coverage of the Weaver’s plight during Christmas of 2012, Keith believes the media did the local services network a disservice:

“One of the first in the series was about a couple who were about to have a baby. We weren’t one of the providers for that woman but I know providers in town were quite upset with the portrayal, that the story was about how this poor woman wasn’t getting any services for her child which was ABSOLUTELY counter to the reality on the ground just from a simple resource point of view. The one thing we do quite an OK job with for women who are pregnant, is healthcare. You really have to be quite dislocated from the system not to get help. And the tenure of the story unfortunately didn’t reflect that at all. So it’s a perfect example of why you have to take anything written about the homeless in the media with a pinch of salt.”
Keith Duncan is acutely aware that the core population the Boulder Shelter serves, as well as his volunteers and staff, all operate in the court of public opinion and their work is in many ways hostage to shifts in local attitudes. It is true that the popular Boulder media wields considerable power to sculpt community perspectives on homelessness and whenever the papers cover such issues, as they frequently do, it takes little time for the message boards to fill with strongly held views and ideas about “Boulder’s homeless problem.”

One reporter who seems to take an especially keen interest in covering local homelessness issues is Boulder Weekly journalist Jefferson Dodge. The first of Dodge’s significant forays into the subject came in January of 2011 with an article entitled: “Boulder County’s Homeless: They’re not necessarily who you think they are.” In this early article the journalist expressly set out to subvert some of the more stereotypical notions surrounding the city’s homeless population. Citing data from the previous years’ ‘Point-In-Time Counts’ as well as from local welfare advocates the piece began by sketching the most pervasive public perspective of homeless people in the city. Dodge’s opening vignette described a textbook everyday encounter with a homeless man by a Boulder roadside, safely mediated through a car windshield:

    When most of us think of the homeless, we picture the bearded scroungy old man on the corner, holding a hand-scrawled message on cardboard. Sitting in our nice warm car, we probably avoid eye contact, thinking he’s probably just some guy who took the bus from Denver or somewhere else in hopes of making some cash from rich Boulder types. He’ll probably just spend it on booze anyway…McDonald’s is surely hiring, so he could get a job if he wanted to, we think. Then the red light turns green and we drive on…

    (Dodge, “County’s Homeless”)

Dodge then went on to stress that, contrary to this popular opinion, the vast majority of Boulder’s homeless population were in fact long term members of the community. The
journalist’s decision to lead by attacking Boulder’s widespread assumptions of mobility amongst the homeless population was a bold opening gambit, and it gives us insight into how default attitudes towards homelessness have been historically formed in the city:

…the stereotype isn’t entirely accurate. Local experts say most of Boulder County’s homeless are not standing on the street corners. They are not visible to most of us. Many of them are families and young people, and they live here, not just in Denver…According to the ‘Point-in-Time Homeless Count,’ last conducted in 2009, almost 27 percent of the homeless in the Denver Metro Area were children under the age of 18. The 2007 survey put the number of homeless people living in Boulder County at about 1,200, and 82 percent of those said they had been living in the community before they lost their housing. Local experts say those numbers have likely increased, given the state of the economy and the loss of low-wage jobs… (Dodge, “County’s Homeless”)

As well as leveraging the PIT counts, Dodge’s 2011 article also quoted a number of local service providers, all of whom noted a similar gap between the popular image of homelessness in Boulder and the daily reality of people living on its streets. Joy Eckstine, director of the Carriage House (a downtown daytime drop-in center which has since been renamed ‘Bridge House’), was especially clear on this point. Eckstine stressed that the “image of the dirty, alcoholic, middle-aged white guy” represents “only 10 percent or 20 percent of the homeless population.” She then employed the same metaphor that Ted from the Mountain Shelter would echo to me a few years later: “That’s the tip of the iceberg…That’s the part of the iceberg you see.” Dodge then noted that, according to the PIT, 60% of homelessness in the county is actually made up of local families, a group heavily comprised of women and children fleeing domestic violence. He ended the article quoting Eckstine once more to dispel more pervasive assumptions about local homeless people – the same stubborn misconceptions I would later hear continuously propagated by Boulder residents from all walks of life, and even by some service providers:

One of the biggest misconceptions…is that the homeless in Boulder County aren’t from here. She points to a Carriage House survey of homeless people in which 50
percent of respondents said their last place of residence was in Boulder County. The idea that most homeless people take a bus here from Denver or elsewhere is simply misleading, Eckstine says, noting that it is costly for a homeless person to travel by bus between Boulder and Denver. (Dodge, “County’s Homeless”)

Indeed it is costly: in 2013 a return ticket between the two neighboring Front Range cities was $10 – not an easy sum to come by for most people trying to get by on the streets:

“Contrary to the myth that homeless people can make a pretty penny by begging, the Carriage House survey of its clients found that the average monthly income among homeless was $219” (Dodge, “County’s Homeless”). Overall Jefferson Dodge’s early attempt to tackle the misrepresentation of homelessness in the pages of the Boulder Weekly was a refreshing and interesting departure from the standard media portrayals of homelessness, most of which all too often focus heavily on that “tip of the iceberg”. The Bridge House advocate’s reliance on data taken from the ‘Point-in-Time Count’ as well as individual service provider statistics once more highlights the extent to which these inexact and ambiguous quantitative sources can be simultaneously rejected and politically mobilized by those close to the issue — deployed to fit whatever message is at hand.

When I spoke to Jefferson Dodge in early 2013 he had recently embarked on a new series of planned color articles which would sporadically profile individual people in Boulder’s loose-knit homeless community with the goal of “giving a human face” to the problem. Impressed by the 2011 article and having read some of his work, I was especially interested in what kind of human Dodge would select to be the “face of homelessness.” The first profile had appeared on the front page of the Weekly’s January 3rd 2013 edition, and took as its focus a local middle-aged homeless man called Ron Bauer – nicknamed “Dwarf”. The newspaper’s cover featured a full-page photograph of “Dwarf” who was wrapped up in warm layers with a scraggily grey beard and the
ubiquitous marijuana joint protruding from behind his ear. The photo was headlined:

“Life Under the Bridge.” The article inside began:

Someone lives under the Boulder Public Library bridge that spans the creek, and he’s not a troll. He’s a Dwarf. Or at least that’s the nickname given to Ron Bauer, whose stature, graying goatee and hooded, weathered, leathery face fit the description. He has a surprising twinkle in his crystal blue eyes for someone who has lived on the streets for 32 years. (Dodge, “Bridge”)

Dodge’s profile piece went on to describe Ron Bauer as a popular father figure to Boulder’s downtown homeless network, somebody who knew “the scene,” and had “…only been in Boulder about four years — this time.” Dodge also continued the tradition of such redemptive stories focusing on the homeless and formerly homeless, reporting that “Dwarf” no longer drank or took hard drugs apart from “pot and the occasional mushroom or acid trip”: “Anything you’ve gotta puke to get high, there’s no reason to do.” Then emphasizing Ron’s ethical attitude towards Boulder’s limited service provision, as well as his resilience and self reliance, Dodge reported that the homeless man possessed “military grade” winter gear and camped outside year round to be with his dogs: “Besides…he gets claustrophobic behind walls unless they are part of a tent, and he doesn’t need to be in a homeless shelter or warming center. “I’ve got the gear for it,” he says of sleeping outside in the winter. “If I go inside, I take the place of someone who doesn’t have the gear for it.” When asked why he wasn’t working currently, Ron’s stance was made clear, as was his ability to make money on the streets:

He says he’d look for a job, but he has trouble dealing with people and their attitudes. Dwarf says he’d prefer to just be with his dogs, reading. He likes Westerns. Besides, his monthly disability check would get docked if he had additional income.

One day, a stranger gave him an envelope containing $325. He spent about $100 of it on dog food. As for the rest of the money? “I ate on it and kept myself in tobacco for a few days,” Dwarf says. (Dodge, “Bridge”)
Ultimately the Boulder Weekly’s opening selection of interviewee for a planned series of profiles designed to “humanize” the local homeless population portrayed an able-bodied middle-aged bearded white male who dabbles with drug use, spends his days hanging out, socializing, and reading in the public park, resiliently camped outdoors year round with little need of local welfare services, claims not to take a job out of preference, and had been drifting across the country as a transient for 32 years, returning to Boulder repeatedly for the sense of community he feels amongst his fellow homeless people.

It is clear that by emphasizing Ron’s pride, self-reliance, and sense of community, the intention was to paint a sympathetic picture of the very person often most demonized in public space and who, the conventional logic goes, demonizes the rest of the homeless population. However, due to an under critical awareness regarding the politics inherent in portraying any homeless individual who will inevitably be taken as representative of “the whole of homelessness” in a locale, Dodge’s piece still does nothing to shed light on those actual faces confined to the shadows of homelessness – women, children, families, undocumented workers and invisible minorities. Despite the fact that through his work this journalist was previously privy to the explicit knowledge that an unaffiliated white middle-aged male such as “Dwarf” represented a minority experience of homelessness in Boulder, Dodge’s opening article nevertheless confines the estimated 60% of people who don’t look like his subject to even further invisibility. In its well-meaning attempt to humanize one homeless man, in reality the article may have inadvertently succeeded in further dehumanizing and stigmatizing the homeless population at large. The reasons for this skewed representation are complicated, but when I talk to Jeff Dodge it is clear that he is motivated by good intentions to evoke sympathy and understanding for the plight of Boulder’s homeless. It could then, simply be that he is reporting what he sees, and what
we all see most often is the very caricature of homelessness that we are looking for — a historical caricature that has tended to look a lot like ‘Dwarf’. More cynically, it could also be that on some level the colorful story of somebody like free-wheelin’ Ron Bauer, a recognizable local personality precisely because of his high visibility, is infinitely more interesting to a middle-class urbane readership on their lunch break than would be, say, the harrowing story of a Latina migrant mother and children shunned by the state, or an African-American woman escaping the daily abuse of her alcoholic veteran husband, who suffers from severe PTSD. Perhaps the feel-good tale of Dwarf in his little world under the bridge simply shifts more papers and brings in more advertising money for the Boulder Weekly. I gently asked Jefferson Dodge something to this effect and was left with the definite impression that whilst he did care strongly about using his journalism to better represent the homeless population of Boulder, he just wasn’t very sure how best to do this. By his own admission, he had little detailed knowledge of the problem and therefore of the potential power his colorfully sketched human interests pieces may end up having, positive or otherwise. I asked whether, when he selects people to write about, he is mindful of existing cultural stereotypes. He replied that he would like to find homeless women and children to work against the dominant images, but as yet has only talked to “the bearded guy who lives under the bridge.” Dodge is however very wary not to be accused of “glorifying homelessness” and says he is planning more pieces. He asks whether I know of anybody he could interview.

A year later Jeff Dodge had written just two more profiles of local homeless people before taking a university lecturing job and, in March of 2014, retiring from full time reporting for the paper. The first piece chronicled the life of “Onesimus” – a middle-aged bearded white man and self-styled homeless mystic who was now living in the
transitional program at the Boulder Shelter having drifted around the Front Range for many years. Dodge described him as a “transient.” The second piece entitled “Terminally Homeless in Boulder” documented the struggles of Jason Balousek who was living with kidney disease on the streets. Dodge’s highly empathetic description of Jason’s considerable pain and suffering was not well received in the comments below his online article however. The top poster “PW” vehemently called into question the veracity of Dodge’s story before linking to an article from news outlet KSL Salt Lake about gangs of fake panhandlers entitled: “Business of Begging: The real stories behind Utah panhandling”:

So wait let me get this Straight: your reporter talks to a panhandler for 15 minutes, doesn't do a single lick of investigative work…and just takes a panhandler's sob story as the unvarnished truth and actually reports that garbage as NEWS?...
Oh and hey here's a great article from across the mountains in Utah where they actually know how to do an investigative story. Guess what? Panhandling is a major business. (Dodge, “Terminally”, comments section)

Another more compassionate reader called “Diana” claimed to have worked in homeless services for a long time, expressed how much she liked Dodge’s reporting before asking a series of questions that once more take us to the heart of some of the most pernicious misconceptions about homeless and mobility in liberal urban discourse:

I do wonder if the homeless population have asked for shelter and temporary housing and wonder why they found Boulder to be a place for panhandling? I've worked with the homeless for 15 yrs and most flock to capital cities because that's where they find community and another thing is because they aren't as judged as they would be if they were in Cherry Hills or in Centennial. What makes Boulder and Denver so appealing since everywhere in Colorado is snowy? I am also sad that the homeless cannot have welfare or Medicaid or food stamps. It's pretty baffling, but still...why Boulder? Is it because everyone is pro-liberal? (Dodge, “Terminally,” comments section)

The thrust of my argument remains clear: With the publication of Jefferson Dodge’s third and final profile of a homeless white middle-aged male on the streets of Boulder, we can
be left in little doubt that even if such discursive constructions of homeless are positively received, those twin ghosts of mobility and free-choice that continue to haunt ideas of homelessness in the American West render them deeply and complexly problematic as either political advocacy or cultural representation.

For his part, shelter director Keith Duncan is clear in his view of the Boulder Weekly’s brand of color journalism: “You know if the Weekly is in front of me and asked me what I thought I’d probably caution them to be more careful about things they assume to be true, I’ve read stuff about people who I know quite a bit about and it can be a little dizzying to consider how different a story about a specific person can be as opposed to…” He tails off with a shrug. For the average Boulder reader who does not know nearly as much about local homelessness or the people dealing with it however, the question of media discourse is of course far more than dizzying; it is in fact a high stakes game of cultural representation in which even the best intentions can end up unwittingly perpetuating some of the most enduring and pernicious historical misconceptions of homelessness in the American West.
Conclusion

Local Transients: Static mobility in America’s “Homeless Mecca”

“It was funny, there was this, not super-bummy dude, but kinda scraggily and begger-ish young guy you know? These three girls crossed the road and he was like ‘daaaaaamn - I don’t know why I ever leave this town! … And I was like – ‘me neither man!’” – college student, Boulder bus depot, 2013

A small news snippet in the Colorado Daily from December 21, 2012 reported the rising need for Boulder Outreach for Homeless Overflow services that winter. The tiny piece described the group’s mission thus: “BOHO finds and coordinates shelters for Boulder transients unable to get a bed at the Mountain Shelter for the Homeless.” In fact although the term “transient” by its very definition connotes somebody who does not remain in one place for long, at times it is actually being deployed at cross purposes with itself. One curious example from Daily Camera writer Mitchell Byars came in June of 2013 in an article entitled: “Boulder homeless feeling the squeeze on Pearl Street Mall: Transients disproportionately represented in ticketing for mall smoking.” Having used both terms interchangeably in the heading and subheading, any doubt as to the extent to which the newspaper’s editorial views “homeless” and “transients” as one and the same in Boulder was removed in the quite remarkable lead paragraph to Byars’ story:
On a sunny spring day, **local transient** Jerry Rosen stands on the Pearl Street Mall selling copies of "The Voice," a newsletter produced by the homeless. For Rosen, **it's always been his spot.** "It's a great nice setup," Rosen said of the mall. For many **transients**, the combination of heavy foot traffic, food and nearby resources make Pearl Street an ideal spot to spend the day.

But, with the implementation of a smoking ban that in its first two months has seen more than half of its violations committed by **transients**, some **homeless** think the city and downtown business are trying to make life a little less comfortable for them in the hope they move off of the highly visible tourist destination. (Byars)

The strange idea of a “local transient” is fascinating as the report manages to simultaneously construct Rosen as both a mainstay fixture of Boulder’s downtown scene (having held his vending spot “always”) but *also* as a temporary, ephemeral, drifting non-community member. Mobility is implied in the very referents used to discuss homeless people. Coverage of homelessness issues in this manner implicitly *deny* fixed belonging or place to the people they portray, while at the same time emphasizing that they represent an enduring and permanent ‘problem’ of public space. Such a confused message can only occur if there are quite serious disconnects between the way homeless individuals are perceived versus perceptions of an amorphous group of ‘homeless people’ at large. The tendency of news outlets to prefer individual representations of homelessness was discussed by Steve Platt in his 1999 essay “Home Truths: Media Representations of homelessness”:

…any full…consideration of the subject needs to go beyond the individual. Each person’s individual circumstances are different; each person individually may have a greater or lesser degree of responsibility for their own situation. But social, economic, and political forces override the individual. Homelessness when it comes down to it, is a social problem, not an individual one. With the best will in the world, this presents a problem for the popular media, which is always better at telling an individual story rather than providing meaningful social analysis. (116)
It is abundantly clear from a survey of Boulder media and the ways in which it shapes a local discourse and politics of homelessness, that “meaningful social analysis” is not their game. Indeed it shouldn’t be. What does emerge however, is an urgent need for improved critical awareness of ways in which homelessness is being represented in American culture, and what kind of ethics media outlets might consider when weighing in on a social issue defined by a history of misrepresentation, stereotype, and invisibility. Ultimately the choice of a term like ‘transient’ in a supposedly impartial news report communicates almost subliminally that the homeless population is made up of footloose drifters and serves to actively reinforce stereotypes of a wandering poor, whilst tacitly suggesting that they are also here to stay. Here to stay that is, unless something can be done about them. Media representations of homelessness risk significant complicity in both the spatial and temporal tricks that cast homelessness as mobile and temporary, and ultimately may push the people suffering it further to the margins of their communities.

Perhaps the best evidence however, that Boulder does in fact have plenty of room in its civic imagination for the construct of “local transients,” came in the form of two articles published just 15 months apart to the day, both in the Daily Camera, both written by the same staff journalist – Erica Meltzer – and both at polar opposites of any debate that may exist in the American west regarding the widespread movement of homeless populations. The first report appeared in May of 2013 discussing data from an internal count by the Bridge House service provider downtown. It was headlined:

Survey:
“More than half of Boulder homeless who sought help at center were new to city”
The second article by Meltzer then appeared in the same publication in August of 2014, discussing data from the 2013 Point-In-Time count in which I myself participated. Impossibly, this one was headlined:

**Special Report:**

Survey: More than half of Boulder's homeless lived here before they lost housing. Service providers say 7% report coming to Boulder for services.

Somewhere between these two vastly dissonant portrayals of localism and homelessness in the city, is represented the best data that exists on the subject of mobility in northern Colorado’s social services. It is no real surprise however, that the two surveys are in such direct competition with each other. The first survey came from a sampling of 417 people who used the Bridge house day drop in center between April and October. Meltzer explained the spring and summer findings:

Asked where they lived prior to becoming homeless, 31 percent said they lived in other parts of Colorado and 32 percent said they came from another state. The other 37 percent are from Boulder or Boulder County. Asked how long they had lived in Boulder, 52 percent said less than six months. Another 38 percent had lived here more than a year.

Bridge House Executive Director Isabel McDevitt said she knows the information is potentially controversial, as there has been ongoing debate in Boulder about whether offering services for the homeless draws more homeless people to Boulder. However, McDevitt said she wanted to be transparent about what the intake survey found. “It’s a community question,” she said. "Do you care where people lived before they became homeless or do you care what someone is doing to get out of homelessness?” (Meltzer, “New to city”)

Of course two main factors render the results of this survey skewed towards finding large numbers of mobile young people utilizing daytime services in Boulder. 1). The intake
figures were gathered during late spring and summer, April to October, the *exact* period during which the Mountain Shelter closes as an emergency provider and the *exact* season during which the migrant youth and rainbow gatherers arrive in downtown Boulder. 2). Bridge House is situated squarely in the middle of downtown Boulder, and as a result it is the only basic provider within easy walking distance for the most visible population of travellers who base themselves around the public parks and Pearl Street. As Keith and Ted pointed out the location of The Mountain Shelter to the north of the city is difficult to get to for services, and thus they see very few of the travelling kids for breakfast during the limited summer hours. It is also worth considering that unlike the main shelter and other agencies in the city offering full welfare services, Bridge House does an important but basic line in sanitary supplies, showers, coffee, bagels, and local information – *precisely* what many of the travelling youth do require from time to time whilst largely remaining self-sufficient within their small communal tribes. Needless to say however, none of these considerations were met in the spectacular and sustained discourse that met the 2013 *Daily Camera* article, a record 89 comments, most of which could be encapsulated quite effectively by the top comment on the newspaper’s website which simply read: “This comes as a shock to whom?” Further outpourings however, were far more clear about the extent to which this survey was simply evidence of what everybody already knew about Boulder’s capacity to attract America’s homeless from far and wide: (Meltzer, “New to City”, comments section)

    Wow, **build it and they will come?**

    **Move along…**

    **Go to Boulder for lots of free stuff.**

    This place is a **bum's paradise**…
Many responses to the article from Boulder residents expressed support for policies such as homelessness budget cuts and restricting services to people from out of town, and even to openly forcing the “transient” population to move along. A common discursive thread here is a strong belief that being homeless in a town like Boulder is “ideal” or “living the dream.” (“New to City”)

Meltzer’s first “survey” article from 2013 also quoted Karen Rahn, Boulder’s director of housing and human services, and City Councilwoman Lisa Morzel. Both remained diplomatic without doing much to ease the severe PR problem it was clear had befallen all people experiencing homelessness on their city’s streets. Morzel in fact even managed to fan the flames of public ire with a few well-chosen terms, saying that whilst the numbers surprised her she didn’t “…want the city serving as a "mecca” for the homeless: “I would want to drill down into this a little more and find out why people are coming from another state and coming to Colorado," she said. "Did they come here for the social services? Did they come here for opportunities? Did they come here for the weather?" (“New to city”)

There is an undeniably mobile and youthful object of shifting homeless policy in the city of Boulder that is doing untold discursive damage in this previously tolerant community. Boulder’s reverence for open space preservation, rules drawn up in the nineteenth century to protect wildlife, were now being used to push both wildlife and an other dehumanized population out of town and back up into the high plains and mountains with the elk where many people now thought they belonged.

After Bridge House’s 2013 survey suggesting many of their clients were from out-of-town, rather confusingly Meltzer’s next article in the Daily Camera 15 months later cited data from the new Point-In-Time counts claiming that “over half” of people seeking services in the city were in fact Boulder residents at the time they lost their
housing and became homeless. Of course this survey data was not collected during the summer or spring as Bridge House’s count had been, but rather during early February when I myself had personally helped to administer the surveys over a number of days and different sites around town, and for what it may be worth, to over 4 times as many people. Meltzer however delivered these new results without even an acknowledgment of the previous year’s conflicting Bridge House survey or her report on it, and certainly with no mention that the season and location of the counts may in any way have accounted for the significantly differing outcomes. This time the report deftly noted that just 7% of people claimed to have come to Boulder for services:

One of the perennial questions in Boulder is whether the services the community provides attract more homeless people, leading to a need for yet more services. Some people have suggested that such services be restricted to those who lived in Boulder before they became homeless. A few communities have incorporated residency requirements into their prioritization matrices, but most do not. (Meltzer, “More than half”)

As if this was not confusing enough for a local readership who had just recently been told the exact opposite regarding homelessness in their community, Meltzer continued to muddle her message by first interviewing a long term Boulder resident who had been homeless for just a few years, but was apparently relishing his new life on the streets of his old community:

In Boulder, the distinction is often made between "transients" and "homeless," but not everyone drinking outside came from elsewhere. "Why does every story about homelessness have to be a tear-jerker?" one homeless man asked a Daily Camera reporter as he hung out last week in the "horseshoe," where the west end of the Boulder High School campus meets the Boulder Creek bike path. "We're not sad. We know where the liquor store is." The man, who goes by Swan, said he has lived in Boulder since the mid-1980s, but he's been homeless only for the last few years. ("More than half")

Next Meltzer gave her readers “Rennee” – the same part-time shelter resident who had been interviewed in previous stories for both the Camera and the Weekly and who seems
all too happy to offer a representative face of homelessness in Boulder whenever a journalist needs one:

A homeless woman who said she wanted to be called Renee said services were one factor that drew her to Boulder. She had been homeless and housed, on and off, in Florida and Texas, for years, and she was sick of the heat. She had lived in Colorado before, during a happier time in her life. She has a sister in Estes Park with whom she hopes to reconcile. And yes, she did an Internet search and found that Boulder has a shelter and other resources for homeless people. "Not a lot of places even have a shelter," she said. Renee has lived in Boulder for four years now. When asked how she would respond to those who say homeless people flock to Boulder for the services, and that the community should consider doing less or restricting services to people who became homeless here, Renee calls that "petty." "It's a free country," she said. "I can move where I want to. And there is the Internet. That's not going away. Nobody asks them (Boulder's housed residents) why they moved here." (Meltzer, "More than half")

It is also worth mentioning that, whether distinguishing between “transients” and “homeless” or not, the idea that poor people come to Boulder for much the same reasons as do affluent ones seems to be quite a politically neutral assumption in the city. At a 2013 fundraising event for another one of the local service providers, I raise this point regarding the perceived motivations of mobility of the homeless in conversation with a couple of the staff, both of whom work mornings at a day services center near downtown.

It is mid-summer and I start by asking where many of the more familiar faces have gone whom I recognized from earlier in the year when I worked at the shelter:

“Shelter residents sleep out this time of year, and they get camping tickets and they go to jail. There is a year round woman's shelter, some may go to Denver but equally we’ve heard rumors of some organizations busing people from Denver and saying 'try Boulder' – and they don't get beds here so they stay out on the streets. This time of year we also get lots of traveling kids. It depends often on where the rainbow gathering was. It was just up in Montana this year.” “Most travellers come because it's a nice place to be in the summer, the same reason you and I came here.” (Meltzer, “More than half”)

This seems to be the unclear and largely unanswerable conclusion of most questions of mobility and homelessness in Boulder. As sociologists such as Joel Blau have claimed of
endemic homeless populations at large, it is probable that very few people who fall into Boulder’s year-round homeless population enjoy much mobility at all, aside from perhaps some minimal circulation amongst neighboring towns. What is certain however is that very many genuinely mobile younger nomads do come through the city. Moreover the homelessness of these groups may be to a degree “performative” and “selective”, or conversely, just as dire as any individual who lives year round on the streets in one place.

**Home Free: the mobile objects of Boulder’s anti-homelessness**

**“The Local homeless”:**

I meet Jim and Beth in July on Pearl Street. They are sat on the pavement by a wall on the west end of the pedestrianized section holding a sign together that reads: “Fuck money, got food?” They are in their late teens or very early twenties and both are painfully skinny. I buy us all $2 hotdogs from a nearby street vendor and we sit and chat a while. Jim tells me the hotdogs are “the first thing we’ve eaten in days” and as they wolf down their lunch he throws a piece of meat down for two equally skinny dogs at their feet: “We just got back from New Mexico where we rescued these two guys. Well, she got back, she’s from Boulder – I call it home now too though.” It’s not obvious what being “from Boulder” really means to them, but as we talk it becomes clear that although Jim and Beth bear all the obvious hallmarks of young transients, they actually see themselves as very separate from the ‘oogles’, ‘gutter punks’ and travelling Rainbow kids, young nomadic groups who have descended on the city in large numbers these past few months as they do every spring. When I ask why they think so many travelling kids come to Boulder this time of year they are both in agreement: “Because Boulder is known as a pot town, simple as that. Easy to find, easy to smoke, tolerant. The Rainbow gathering has just ended up in Montana y’know, so a lot of kids just got into town. They
hang out by the library with the old hippy dudes who do acid.”

In fact because of the seasonal influx of homeless-esque groups Jim and Beth have taken to camping in Nederland for the summer and hitchhiking the 18 miles into Boulder to “earn a buck” when they need it. They say that the commute is quite easy and they generally don’t wait long to get a ride. At least this arrangement keeps them free of fines and out of jail. There are no laws against camping in Nederland so they avoid the tickets that are being handed out with increasing zeal by the BPD. The big downside is that they always get into town too late to use any of the day services in Boulder such as Bridge House or The Source, which provides food or medical needs to people under 24 but only in the early morning. There is a food bank in Nederland but it is aimed at low-income families with cooking facilities and doesn’t really work for them. Instead they come in to Boulder most days to try to eat, but on occasions like today finding enough food can be a struggle. Jim thinks opportunities for local homeless kids like them have diminished in recent years, partly because of increasingly negative attitudes towards the punks and travelling kids who hang out around downtown: “Ten years ago they’d say if you’re going hungry in Boulder, you don’t want to eat. Now it ain’t the same. These fucking people won’t give you shit. Sometimes they walk past with leftovers and you ask them for it and they say ‘no, I can’t’ and then you see them throw it in the fucking trash can down the street.”

Beth used to stay at the Mountain Shelter some nights but since meeting Jim they’ve camped out so they can stay together. She thinks many of the “Boulder homeless” who she knows for a fact stayed in the shelter until it closed in May have by now either gone elsewhere or also retreated to the peripheries of town and beyond: “Lots of people get tickets and are in and out of jail for the summer, missed their court dates
and couldn’t pay the fine. Lots have probably left but they’ll be back in the fall.” For their part the couple haven’t had much trouble with the police in Boulder, but they attribute this to the fact they are always sure to leave the city limits before nighttime. Soon they would like to go to Missoula, Montana because they hear “it’s like Boulder was back in the day.” They say they’ll always come back to Boulder because “it is home” but in their minds there is little doubt that things have been slowly changing for some time.

“The Transients”:

Rob and Jen have been travelling and sleeping rough for a year as part of their honeymoon. They are both 22. They are aiming for the west coast, as Jen has never seen the ocean. Rob was born and raised in Britain and says he did a short stint in the British army. New in town they claim little contact with the Boulder homeless population but Rob makes the distinction between travelling kids and “homeless” as if it is second nature. He prefers the term “Ho-bum’ or just simply “traveller.” He turns to a group of scruffy kids in their late teens and early twenties nearby: “What would you say the ratio of travelling kids to homeless people is right now here? Sixty / Forty? Seventy / Thirty?” His girlfriend Jen has spent time in Boulder before and isn’t especially enjoying her experience this summer: “The police are bad in Boulder now, they hassle people all the time. Apart from this one Hispanic cop who cuts us slack. He’ll buy us food, tell people where they can camp you know? Where we can smoke weed without getting caught. Most of them though are assholes.” Rob says that the extent to which the travelling kids utilize local services depends on the individual but generally they prefer to keep contact with local agencies to a minimum: “Some are like ‘fuck the system, I don’t need it’ and
then lots of people will just use them for what they need. I go down to The Source ‘cause I’m under 24.” Generally the group he hangs with prefers not to go inside but they will go to the day centers sometimes to get showers and basic needs. They say they are having a hard time panhandling for food in Boulder this summer so only use the drop in services and churches in order to eat as donations from passers by are not as plentiful as they used to be. Before they stopped in Boulder, Rob and Jen were in Denver for a few weeks but left after they lost an expensive tent, swept up as part of that city’s new camping ban.

Kevin is from California, in his young twenties with a full beard and long hair. We are both sheltering from a heavy summer rainstorm under a shop awning. At first he mistakes me for a traveller as well and offers me hit on a joint he is smoking. We look on as a bunch of “Boulder yuppies” run past into the shop to escape the weather: “These people disgust me. They won’t even give you food. I’ve seen them throw perfectly good food away instead of just giving it to someone. I was hoping to get out today. I’ve been here a month but then this rain started and I can’t get the dollars together for a bus ticket or to get food in me.” Kevin’s plan is to catch a bus to nearby Lafayette and then hop a train to California. He says lots of the travelling kids hop trains in the summer. This time he came to Colorado for the Bluegrass festival in Telluride in the south of the state, but got stranded in Boulder after the van he was hitching in broke. He has been travelling in this manner for five years. His sentiments about Boulder are familiar and they leave a lasting impression: “Boulder used to be OK but a bunch of bad people blew it up – broke stuff, pissed the cops off. I try to be respectful.”

This is something Ted Woods also ponders from his position as director of programs at the shelter, and he knows Boulder is becoming less tolerant of all kinds of visible poverty. He tells me that the dynamic between Boulder and a nearby town like
Golden is absolutely striking because he sees not a single homeless person or travelling kid on the streets there: “I have no firsthand knowledge of how they interact with the homeless there but they don’t seem to have any that I can see. This tip of the iceberg that you refer to around the municipal campus and the library, they don’t seem to have that AT ALL.” As Ted explains, Golden is twenty miles away, situated exactly the same in the mountains as Boulder, and a very wealthy community with a very vibrant downtown area: “It’s as close to a mirror image of Boulder as you can probably imagine and they don’t have any problems, so why?” Ted only has guesses, but they’re ones which once again remind us that the extent to which an urban area experiences visible homelessness is really only a construct, an illusion based on a particular set of interactions and social relations that are in many ways out of everybody’s control:

“I would guess the police are a little stricter, I would imagine their ordinances are stricter. I would imagine they don’t have any services that really attend to that tip of the iceberg; I would imagine they have service for families in low income, and they have zero tolerance for things like camping. It’s very hard to imagine that panhandling is not illegal in Golden, you would see it if it wasn’t. That would be the big unraveling from an order of needs point of view, how much of Boulder’s homeless population, especially this tip-of-the-iceberg population, really is coming here to satisfy their basic needs, and does it creep into the higher-order needs? If you had harder policing, would it shrink, who the hell knows? There’s no way we’ll figure it out until someone wants to figure it out by trial and error.”

Later in the summer of 2013 a group of colorfully dressed travelling kids have congregated in the middle of the busiest stretch of Pearl Street. Some have recently come from Montana’s Rainbow Gathering, hitchhiking down to Colorado or travelling in car convoys. They sit around a large elaborate hand-painted cardboard sign which reads: “Positive Vibration Manifestation Station” and a smaller one which reads: “Free Cigarette Co-op.” I donate a handful of month-old *American Spirits* to their cause and they invite me to sit down. There are six of them, all from different places around the
country — Florida, Tucson, Brooklyn. They met each other either at the Rainbow gathering or in Boulder this summer. The two females are 19 years of age, and the four males with them are between 20 and 22. Between them they have been in Boulder for no less than two weeks, but no more than a month. Amongst the communal initiatives they have enacted in the middle of the street is a “Bench & Breakfast” station. The idea is that if anybody needs a place to sleep during the day they can lie under the bench in a sleeping bag while the other members of the group sit around them, hiding them from view with legs and backpacks — out of sight of both the police and the public. When they wake, the group gives them a breakfast of whatever they have. In this way the group can take shifts at sleeping during the daylight hours and avoid the tickets that come at night. This is a direct response to the somewhat murky stipulations of the camping ban which, in its even more vague form as uncertain folklore and hearsay amongst the street kids, bans lying down in public only if under cover such as a tarp or sleeping bag.

This group are adamant however that they did not come to Boulder for the services or charity, but rather for much the same reasons as the affluent middle classes are drawn to the city — it’s a “cool town”, “chill”, and “beautiful.” Interestingly they report that, if anything, people are more charitable in other parts of the country. Their feeling is that handouts don’t come easily in Boulder and as a result they are happier depending on each other and the wider community of travellers for most of their day-to-day needs. They’ve heard things used to be better, but this summer they report very little sympathy from the Boulder public as far as their prospects go for “spanging” (spare-changing) or begging food. One young man elaborates:

“Although in Florida they got nothing, no services or stuff like that, people are much nicer than here – they give you everything you need. In most places I can just sit outside Walmart with a sign like this and I’ll always get fed. In Boulder people don’t give a shit, they just walk past. They also got a bunch of laws now
that make things tougher than it has been.”

Nevertheless, despite the lack of public sympathy, individual acts of kindness, and a few tickets between them for smoking or camping, the group generally thinks Boulder is still a better place to be on the streets than many cities, largely it seems due to Colorado’s new relaxed attitude towards “weed” which, having been widely available in medicinal form for some years, this summer is on the verge of absolute legalization. For travelling kids used to having their smoking habits scrutinized by municipal authorities, this change in legislation is significant. Perhaps marijuana legislation is not really enough to bring them to Colorado, but it may certainly be enough to keep them here a while. As one girl tells me: “Boulder is a trap.” Whatever else is going on right now, in the minds of many Boulder citizens who look around their downtown area this summer, something is working.

**Homeless In Your Backyard: Unseen problems**

In August 2014 an article appeared in the Daily Camera headlined: “Boulder seeks balance in homeless solutions: Enforcement reduces homeless on municipal campus, but most agree long-term solution is more housing.” It began with an observation of life in Boulder’s public space during the most recent summer:

“For the first summer in years, the lawn between the Boulder Main Public Library and the city's Municipal Building is essentially free of drum circles and pot smoke. On a recent weekday afternoon, a woman played with two babies on a picnic blanket and a group of older children battled with foam swords. But there was no one else in sight." I wondered if someone loaded them on vans,” said Chris Mitchell, a formerly homeless man who works in community outreach through FEED, which organizes outdoor meals, and with Hope Church.”

One prolific and highly outspoken commentator in the city is called Max Weller. Max runs a blog called the “Homeless Philosopher” and boasts quite a wide readership.
Although he himself came to Boulder from Missouri, and has been on the streets and in and out of shelters in town since 2002, his crusade is very much against the “transients” at whom he is regularly outraged for what he sees as their irresponsible and drunken behavior. He had this to say following the *Daily Camera*’s August 2014 piece: “When you donate to Bridge House or Mountain Shelter for the Homeless, both of which steadfastly refuse to prioritize shelter or services for Boulder County’s own homeless people, you are supporting the status quo: The transients and their apologists / enablers aren’t even grateful for the bounty they receive . . .” (Homeless Philosopher). Famously inconsistent and ornery though he may be, from his “burrow” in North Boulder where he nowadays camps for most of the year, Max is certainly only too aware that in the eyes of most of Boulder he too is a “a local transient.” As a twelve-year veteran of the Boulder homeless community however, this is both a stigma and a label that he seems to invest a great deal of his time and energy to fighting as often and as aggressively as possible.

Certainly the feeling amongst many on the street by the summer of 2013 is that the Boulder cops have become more aggressive at enforcing the urban codes since the spring, and this is in response to the influx of travellers. There are unconfirmed reports of tent slashing and of cops breaking up camps in the trees by the Boulder creek. I speak to one of the few shelter residents I recognize still around on Pearl Street during the summer days. Aged 63 she says she has few options but when she can spends nights in the women only shelter during the months the Mountain Shelter is shut. She came to Boulder from a nearby town last February after “running from being a victim of crime.” She tells me many of the new street kids call her “Momma” and she expresses concern for their situation this summer:
“A bunch of these young people came up to me the other day because somebody had torn down their camp. Wherever they were camping. I don’t know if was cops or just somebody didn’t want ‘em there but they lost all their gear. One of them said whoever it was even tore down the bushes where they were hiding. They’re only 19 some of these kids.”

Whether such claims are true is hard to say, but I certainly here them enough from the young travellers. What is certain is that the police do now routinely sweep people from the Pearl Street area and the parks at night. One immediately interesting result of this clampdown is that the homeless are being forced to camp further down the canyon and into the foothills beyond the city limits and the reach of the municipal codes. Boulder Weekly journalist, Jefferson Dodge, tells me he has noticed this trend in his journalistic attempts to interview members of the homeless community, as they have become harder and harder to find at night: “What’s going to happen is that people will get driven up the canyon in the summer by the camping ban and the cops will follow. That’s going to be a big fire hazard. The first wildfire we have the homeless will get the blame.” Fortunately the summer of 2014 was a relatively wet one for Colorado, but in an area prone to devastating natural disasters this is literally a public policy tinderbox waiting to ignite.

Interestingly the summer folklore of Pearl Street’s “dropout culture” is actually working against the camping ban, and often in ways residents would not be at all happy about if they were to realize. By June when the bulk of the Rainbow kids and travellers arrive, the informal street networks are already in full thrust and full of information on how to keep out of trouble and get around the ban. The result is that a small number of individual travellers arriving earlier in the spring, as well as Boulder’s own endemic homeless population, are far more likely to suffer the brunt of legal ramifications instead of the young groups of drifters and Rainbow kids the clampdown is debatably designed to
deter. This however, is not the only unknown ramification of Boulder’s gradual squeezing of its public space.

The Rainbow travellers I speak to at their “positive manifestation station” are not especially well versed in the legal situation of downtown Boulder quite yet, having only been in town less than 2 weeks. They have heard that a smoking ticket comes with a $100 fine, a camping ticket with a $500 fine, and being caught smoking dope on Pearl Street could cost between $700 and $1000. The only one of their wider group who does seem sure is “Sam” from New York who has been cited twice this summer already, once for smoking and once for camping:

“I usually don’t hold a hundred bucks in a year, so I’ve got to start getting some cash together here soon. I have to get that money together any way I can, that’s for sure. One thing though, I’m definitely going to show up for court because this state is wayyyy too cool not to be able to come back here for some bullshit like smoking. A guy I know is doing a few days in jail right now for a smoking violation in fact. He just got an asshole cop.”

The way Sam’s tone hushes on “any way I can” leaves the impression that he may well resort to minor illegal measures in order to pay his fines to Boulder’s municipal court. This is a knock-on effect local residents surely do not consider a potential consequence of the city’s aggressive policing policy for homeless kids. However, the more garden furniture or store merchandise that goes missing in order to make ready cash for communal groups who otherwise seem quite happy to live without it, the more we may start to wonder if the political urge to criminalize homelessness is actually working in more ways than just one. As I sit with the group, a BPD officer comes up from behind and a few of them scatter. The young man from Arizona is a little slow on the uptake and scrambles to put a cigarette out on his shoe a moment too late. The cop orders him to stand up and takes him to the edge of Pearl Street to read him the act. I stay sitting and
observe the situation from afar. After a few moments the kid returns to the bench with just a warning this time. It is the same policeman I have watched all week, typically strolling within sight of the young transient groups until something they do grabs his attention. There is of course little doubt that he is watching these kids especially, and on more than one occasion I have observed older, better dressed people and unwitting tourists pass him freely on bikes, with dogs, and even smoking cigars – all ostensibly outlawed on the downtown municipal campus. As the communal travelling kids adapt however, and the affluent tourists are allowed to fly beneath the legal radar, only Boulder’s endemic homeless population will be left to incur the legal wrath of these municipal ordinances enforced by a police force with a new job to do.

The most fascinating adaptation to anti-homelessness however is already underway, and is explained to me a few weeks later by “Ben” – a travelling male in his early-twenties. Ben carries a sign that says: “Travelling: Need Green.” Originally from Boston, he has been drifting on and off for three years and has visited Boulder before during summers. I chat to him in between songs as he sits busking on a wall with a small group of local Boulder street kids he just met. This year Ben arrived in Boulder just 3 weeks ago having hitchhiked and shared a van with a bunch of friends he met on the road. He tells me he has already picked up a trespassing ticket in Boulder after hearing that a particular rooftop on Pearl Street was safe to sleep on. When he showed up after dark up the cops were there waiting: “Really though getting busted for trespassing is not much different to me than getting a camping ticket. One of those is worth $100 or 3 days in jail too…. so…you know?” For the most part he views Boulder as a fairly typical town through which to travel for a few weeks or a month of summer, not bad but certainly not the “hippy bum paradise” that many local people seem to imagine it is: “Boulder, you
can eat but it’s got harder to make money from playing guitar than it used to be.”

Next to Ben sits “Dozer”. Dozer is in his late twenties and identifies as a “full time Boulder street-kid.” He says he has been in the city for the past 10 years, living on the streets on and off or in other temporary arrangements. Born in Boulder his family then moved to Prescott, Arizona but he left after a “disagreement over his sexuality”. He says he has seen much change over recent years on Boulder’s streets: “Things have got much tougher. People won’t give food and money any more. It used to be pretty chill on the streets here but now the police are all pissed.” Since I’m talking to Ben and fairly scruffy myself, he presumes I too an a Rainbow traveller and he addresses me as such: “Yeah, there are a lot of you right now but we got to put up with this shit all year.”

The extent to which the city’s assault on public space is in fact ironically pushing some of their target population into private space becomes clear in discussion with these two young men. Ben tells me lots of travelling kids have actually begun avoiding tickets by sleeping in private gardens, climbing fences and leaving in the early hours before the occupants wake. He says it makes more sense to risk a far more unlikely trespassing ticket and get a relatively safe and easy night’s sleep away from the jurisdiction of the police and other urban hazards such as drunks and marauding college kids. For young women sleeping outdoors especially, sneaking onto private property is considered a far safer option. I hear that the best way around the camping ban is to find a garden with heavy foliage, sneak in around 11pm when it is dark, unfold a sleeping bag in the undergrowth, and then sneak out at daybreak as soon as you hear the birds sing. This is a strategy Dozer has tried before on numerous occasions, but this summer he says he has himself an “even sweeter setup”:

“I’ve got myself a private squat now, in this kind of summer house shed-type deal, so I’m okay. The owners seem pretty oblivious to the fact that I’m there
and I’ve been there a while. If they catch me they’ll probably call the police and if I don’t get out I could get a trespassing ticket which is only a bit worse than a camping one, but I don’t think they will and it’s less likely I’ll get caught than if I was camping.”

The importance of these anecdotes cannot be underestimated as they effectively demonstrate ways in which the sustained legal assault on public space, a key hallmark of neoliberal urban governance, is in fact now being subverted by incursions into private space and a retreat away from an unsustainable urban environment. The great irony of course is that anti-homelessness campaigns based on the well-established sentiment “Not-in-My-Backyard”, may now actually be driving some marginalized people quite literally into backyards and even more proximate to local residents. These incursions are in fact being made by the very people most vulnerable to the traps set by aggressive neoliberal urban governance, the homeless and the rootless, and the very populations the shifts in the urban policy of places like Boulder, Colorado and Arcata, California were expressly designed to chase away. That these unsheltered groups are instead being chased back into private space in the absence of a former public sphere can only be a sign of what may be to come. Soon urban policy will likely respond to these direct violations of the core principals of property, interests which neoliberal regimes have always claimed to hold above all else. For now however people like Ben and Dozer are happy playing the lower stakes game of covert and deliberate trespassing in a last ditch attempt to remove themselves from the many dangers of a hostile twenty first century public space which they know does not have their best interests at heart.

Ultimately many of the travelling kids may be real “transients” but this does not mean they have a safe place to go to when their journey ends. Many of the young drifters I talked to were certainly running from some circumstances, whether they be to do with family or mental health troubles, or just an inability to exist within societal institutions.
An Australian 20 year old called Dennis whom I briefly spoke with towards the end of the summer corroborated this theory. After completing his own conventional backpacking tour of the U.S. and Canada, staying in hotels financed with his gap-year savings, he had become interested in the population of travelling kids and the lifestyle they live. When he ran out of money to be a tourist any longer, he had dipped into these communal groups for a while to see where they might take him for the rest of his summer vacation in the United States. Within a month, he’d ended up in a car headed for Boulder: “We don’t have anything really like this in Oz. A lot of these kids probably do have homes to go to somewhere I think, but a lot probably don’t. For some it’s not that easy to go home anymore you know?” Dennis still had his credit card for emergencies and was planning on flying back to Australia at the end of the month.

Surveys and the data sets they relied upon have often painted a picture of drifters clogging up the waiting rooms of Boulder’s welfare agencies. This is a misrepresentation. The travelling populations in fact tend not to overuse local services, in part because they typically come to town in summer when there are far fewer services to use. It therefore matters vastly the time of year service providers or the city attempt to gather statistics on both populations, especially if both populations are inevitably allowed to bleed together in an increasingly hostile local discourse. As we have seen, a summer count in a year round day center such as Bridge House turns up vastly different answers regarding origin and travel of homeless folks than does a count in January conducted in an emergency night shelter. Both have severe shortcomings, but this is unfortunately a level of misrepresentation that remains under the radar of most of the Boulder population, many officials and service providers included. As Ted Woods told me earlier he would “like to think” residents of the city were “sophisticated enough” to be able to differentiate
between the local homeless and the seasonal travellers, but he wasn’t sure they were.

Evoking once more the adventuresome noble footloose ‘hobo’ of Don Draper’s childhood, the preference instead is that the local homeless population is regarded as a largely homogenous mass of movable degenerates and idle loafers. Suggestions that different realities of unsheltered living might exist become buried under a cultural weight of complex representations, mediated through popular culture, but also borne out in the bounded and sterilized urban experiences our society affords us. As the experiences of both local and travelling populations in Boulder demonstrate, the “homeless” construct is instead now reduced to a simple policy object: This object is inexorably colored by the worst amongst them, and characterized only by a pathological propensity to travel and a brazen and exploitative opportunism.

**Vacations in “Cardboard City” and other problems of representation**

Formulating his concept of the “Revanchist City,” Neil Smith saw more than just a social trend or political-economic inevitability beneath the clampdowns and backlashes of urban America against the poorest and most disenfranchised members in society. Rather he regarded the vengeance tearing through the nation’s cities in the late 1980s as a specific cultural continuation of a Western frontier logic underpinned by core national anxieties concerning the “cleansing” of the past and remaking of America in a new image:

> “Extermination,” George Custer declared in 1865, eleven years before his last stand in the Dakotas, “is the only true policy we can adopt toward the political leaders of the [Sioux] rebellion.” “Then, and not till then,” he concluded, “may the avenging angel sheathe his sword, and our country will emerge from this struggle regenerated”…The ‘regeneration’ of the fin-de-millénaire city is premised on a similar agenda of extermination. There are now too many reports of homeless people being set upon or set alight to record them as freak attacks by
rogue citizens. If Custer’s brand of extermination is now less than polite, even in the revanchist city, homeless people suffer symbolic extermination and erasure that may leave them alive but struggling on a daily basis to create a life with any quality at all…(230)

This connection Smith made between aggressive legislation aimed at poor and unsheltered people in the late twentieth century American city, and the frontier of the mid nineteenth century is really a critical claim that mainstream culture in American needs to imagine itself against dehumanized oppositional Others. In the early nineties marginalized, criminalized, racialized, and stigmatized Others were not only regarded in the mainstream as the political enemies of urban redevelopment and commerce, their innate deviance was thought to be impeding the creation of a “good business climate” — the main goal of neoliberalism. This for Smith did not much differ from political and social urges towards the end of the 1800s to once and for all eradicate the troublesome Plains tribes and with them the impediments they presented to a settler society taking possession of Western land and resources. Fresh from the traumas of national civil war, this settler society was also badly in need of a new cultural imagination and a unified identity with no room for such disruptions. This need was effectively met by the formation of a strong Western Mythos in popular culture. Neither of these visions held any room for social bodies outside of the mythos, people whose memory or actual physical presence would threaten the supremacy of cherished national narratives. Therefore at both points in American history the culture and society became invested in forms of tacit erasure, both in representation and in physical space, with the end result of removing people who did not fit the narrative even further beyond the margins.

It is also worth remembering that, as Patricia Limerick has noted, the very idea of “welfare dependency” has roots in nineteenth century debates over Indian policy.
Limerick writes: “Federal funds meant federal supervision, which then meant compromised autonomy for the recipient…. Conservatives in the 1980s, lamenting the quagmire of welfare, sounded as if they had cribbed their language and sentiments from the Indian reformers of the 1800s” (Legacy, 211). The cultural roots of conflicts over welfare that emerged ahead of neoliberal policy turns were in many ways preconfigured in the nineteenth century American West, and as such they had all along been quietly backlit by the same image of the rugged white heroic individual, self-reliant and highly mobile, disappearing into the mirages and illusions of the dominant culture before anybody could really pin him down. By evoking these same culturally cherished ideas of individualism and independence then, “clean up the streets” policies have worked so well because they were able to draw the liberal focus away from the complex structural economic failings and political withdrawals which exacerbated homelessness, and thrust it instead on a cultural ‘object’ that was both a recognizable and a disagreeable phenomena of urban life. A cultural climate of mediatized fear, racism, and white revanchism propelled these policies onwards into the twenty-first century. The more apolitical a light the “object of U.S. homeless policy” could be shaded in, the tighter the stranglehold neoliberal urban governance was able to gain. In the American West there is little more apolitical and universally accepted than the cultural value of mobility, space, freedom, and masculinist wilderness adventuring.

That this trend towards the vilification and forced removal of homeless populations has taken such strong hold in more conservative urban centers and suburbia is less interesting, in part because these locales have never especially welcomed outsiders or deviations from the norm and this were ripe for market driven policy shifts. A 2008 paper by Geographers Vincent J. Del Casino Jr and Christine Jocoy argued that historical
constructions of homelessness were tied to a discourse of “chronic homelessness” and that “…this chronic subjectivity has been constructed to meet a conservative, neoliberal agenda” (192). However, the more critically important point to make is that anti-homelessness can just as easily take hold in the most progressive American communities despite their identity as tolerant counter-cultural bastions. In fact so insidious is the culture of U.S. anti-homelessness at this juncture that it is even possible for many progressive urban communities like Boulder to effectively maintain their cultural image whilst further marginalizing both their own local indigent population, as well as any other undesirables who might arrive in town. Such an impressive trick can only be achieved through an appeal to some of the most illusory representations of American class, race, gender, and regional identities. Indeed the most striking commonalities to be found across the many cultural representations of homelessness discussed throughout this study, as well as the century-old discourse underwriting them, raise more significant questions regarding political and class based assumptions of anti-homelessness in the United States: Is the longstanding cultural fascination with homelessness as an idealized experience of freedom and nomadism class specific? Can this culturally idealized form of homelessness-as-freedom in fact be better understood as an affliction of liberal, affluent, educated elites — those same demographics who have had the most impact on shaping social policies and progressive discourse on a regional and national level?

I would certainly argue that whilst U.S. conservatism holds its twin babies of “individualism” and “self-reliance” the closest, the cultural location homelessness has come to occupy for middle-class American liberals and progressives alike in many ways represents their one chance at flirtation with a version of American individualism and self-reliance that is usually absolutely denied to them. Therefore not only do the anti-
homelessness campaigns of today support Neil Smith’s original claim which I drew upon in Chapter One that the new urbanism is in fact a sign of revenge and fear on the part of liberals, they also betray a neat irony in the political and cultural landscape of U.S. welfare reform. The cultural complicity of liberals and progressives in anti-homelessness also bolsters calls from Joanne Passaro and others for a “contingent” and “contextual” “class-based” approach to social inequality (107). As Passaro argues, whilst ironically class-based affirmative action is a tenant of the extreme right in America, it is also clear that intentionality matters little in social policy and therefore a refocusing on class might address the situation “directly” rather than through the “mystifying discourses of race and gender” (107). Indeed, whilst private charity and church welfare has traditionally been most consolidated in areas where conservative social values are strongest, as liberal and progressive America concedes to anti-homelessness and the political control of all public space, even the old religiously affiliated private safety nets are rarely available to people who need them. Here Boulder serves as an exception and not the rule, but a more thorough ethnographic consideration of the intensely complex cultural and moral bedrock upon which American welfare reforms occur might well aim to understand the extent to which even the much bemoaned erosion of mainstream American Christian values of charity and community exacerbates the situation.

Today the blanket political faith in what Jocoy termed “quantification culture” in social services, is also a massive boon to processes of neoliberal urban governance despite the fact that few close to the issues of poverty and homelessness give these methods much credence at all. The already ambiguous cultural discourses of homelessness and service provision in the United States are in fact only further complicated by a political and media establishment that freely peddles utterly
decontextualized quantitative data surrounding the makeup and circumstances of all homeless populations. As we saw in Boulder by the time such data usually reaches a public audience it has already been sculpted and presented in such misrepresentative ways that the reality of homelessness on a local or regional level becomes further obscured. At worst the conflicting discourse arising from an under critical cultural acceptance of quantification in social services in fact merely serves to replicate the far wider problems of stereotype and visibility that have haunted American homeless policy since the Civil War, and once more demonstrate the need for investigation into the attitudes of the “un-homeless” majority whose values and perspectives do much to shape categories of homelessness. In the absence of ethical representations in our media however, and with few nuanced conversations in this culture that make clear the erasures and obfuscations that really characterize urban homelessness in the 21st century, we are left instead to rely upon a weight of produced cultural knowledge that continues to repeatedly cast homelessness as a choice, an experience, an adventure, or even a transcendentalist form of authenticity that places unsheltered people closer to the core of national mythologies.

For evidence of quite how far the misrepresentation problem of U.S homelessness has extended into the very places it should not have, we need only look close to home for it is on America’s college campuses where some of the most egregious ideas of homelessness are fostered. A November 2013 event on the campus of Ohio State University calling itself “Cardboard City” urged students to build temporary cardboard shelters on the main campus in a fund raising effort for a local food bank. Betrayed here in one university-sponsored initiative are some of most serious cultural misapprehensions of homelessness. “Cardboard City” epitomizes ways in which the myth of experiential
poverty is being encouraged amidst liberal institutional assumptions that one-off exercises in survival shelter building and camping can afford young participants any useful knowledge about poverty and homelessness in contemporary society. As well meaning as such efforts might be, the intensely problematic wording of the campaign publicity website and the tropes this venture relied upon are worth highlighting: (bold type my own)

Cardboard City is a new and unique opportunity for students at The Ohio State University to give back! Participants will collect sponsorship's (sic) totaling to at least $50 during the weeks leading up to Cardboard City, where they will spend one evening experiencing how it feels to be homeless. Cardboard City is guaranteed to be an eyeopening (sic), as well as fun filled evening with the opportunity to hear from guest speakers, take part in hunger related service projects, and most importantly construct a cardboard "home" on the oval to spend the night in!

The extreme uncoupling of the condition of homelessness from its many social and institutional contexts, as well as the shrinking of the discourse into a frighteningly narrow appeal to “feeling” and temporary “experience,” speaks to the most entrenched misunderstandings of extreme poverty and precarious housing that there are. Echoes are to Jack London’s emphasis on “fun” as a primary motivator for his own voluntary tramping vacations, as well as to the wilderness survival and camping culture perpetuated by Alexander Supertramp’s travels and others discussed throughout this study. For years in fact “alternative spring break” university programs have focused on giving students a do-good experience of homelessness through an “urban plunge” or the even more patronizing “homeless challenge.” The idea is that students spend a few days sleeping rough in groups or staying in shelters in a major American city in order to “experience” what homelessness is like. The charitable view of these naïve but well-meaning initiatives is that they have the ultimate goal of empathy and expanding otherwise
“sheltered” young peoples’ worldviews through quite literally “un-sheltering” them. One such website urges students to “…leave the comfort of the suburbs and the safety of the small town and experience ministry in the inner city” (“urban plunge”). A more informed and critical view is that they are ill conceived and patronizing, concerned more with offsetting middle-class white liberal guilt and expanding student resumes rather than horizons. As Katherine Borland and Abigail Adams have recently discussed, types of “voluntourism” and travel-for-service experience are an increasingly popular option for middle class liberals with an eye on social change (2013). One former participant of an urban plunge in Washington D.C who since had an epiphany and came to regard his alternative spring break under a more critical lens, recorded his views in a 2010 article for Street Roots news:

> See, for me, it had been a game. That was my motivation: adventure. I love camping, and camping is little more than voluntary exposure to the elements of nature. To me, homelessness was like urban camping, as much about feeling alive in my vulnerability as it was about the hot shower waiting for me on the other side… But when it was over, I felt like I had done little more than put on a hobo costume. (Funke)

This testimony of youthful naiveté has its roots in much of the popular culture discussed throughout this study. For young urban plungers and everybody else who still puts on their “hobo costumes,” the idea of American homelessness continues to be reduced simply to an outdoors experience rather than critically addressed as a structural problem and a complex form of social abandonment. A suitably lucid and forceful warning against envying the perceived freedoms afforded by a life on the margins was delivered by Eric Monkkonen in 1984:

> Tramping is not now, nor was it ever, a pleasant form of life. Unfortunately, experiencing life on the literal margins did not necessarily allow the participant to get any closer to the essence of life itself. Tramps were not creating a Thoreauvean experience by “driving life into a corner.”… It is unfair to see
tramps as having a privileged perspective on the rest of society, for this mode of
tramping in ultimately patronizing way. To tell those unfairly exploited by a social and
economic system that they have benefited, is akin to congratulating the victim of a crime for his or her remarkable
and expanding experience. (Monkkonen, 4)

Ultimately it is useful for large sections of sedentary society to imagine a
perpetually transient poor comprised of peripatetic young white men, and it this utility
that at least partially accounts for the timelessness of such mythology. These attitudes not
only fail to recognize the absolutely crippling conditions of extreme poverty; they also
surface more sinisterly in urban policies and planning decisions that directly affect the
lives of unsheltered people by ironically encouraging them to move “back home.” The
most recognizable characteristics of the former migratory poor have been consistently
projected onto modern day homeless populations. The continued romancing of
homelessness as a subversive or heroic lifestyle choice contributes to a false belief in
widespread transience amongst the nation’s most disenfranchised citizens, and
legitimizes draconian policies designed to make urban areas as hostile as possible to
rough sleepers. As usual the ones who suffer most are families, children, women, the
infirm, the elderly, politically and socially excluded ethnic and racialized minorities —
people for whom actual mobility is often greatly compromised. The tragic imperative of
neoliberal urban policy is that it again emphasizes those oldest and most unquestioned of
American ideals — independence, individuality, self-reliance, personal freedom — only
now it uses them as prima facie qualities by which marginal populations can be
diagnosed according to their most visible symptoms. Alternatively the causes and
realities of their homelessness are simply being rendered invisible altogether. The catch is
that mired in its representative dimension, much current knowledge about homelessness
further excludes unsheltered persons, misrecognizes both the causes and consequences of
homelessness, and deeply impinges upon the experience and possibilities of people lacking secure shelter.

The ethnographic component of this study, both in the shelter and also on the streets with local homeless and transient populations, shows that there are many complex realities to homelessness that cannot be reduced to a single image or idea. Indeed as I have shown in this conclusion, policy efforts focusing on one such single imagined image of homelessness are starting to backfire as that wall between public and private spheres is breached once more. It is clear from my work in Boulder that definitions such as ‘local’ or ‘travelling’ are of little use to social service providers, and neither should they be to politicians, social scientists, local authorities, or resident populations — all of whose perspectives of homelessness are necessarily obstructed. Wherever these distinctions are being used, their discursive potential must be fully and critically interrogated against the multi-dimensional realities of all unsheltered lives. We must learn to be highly critical of all fixed categorizations of “homeless people” and to view such attempts suspiciously as a futile endeavor risking powerful misinterpretations that can quickly turn attitudes even more heavily against people without shelter. Through listening to those who work at the crux of social welfare provision and themselves resist fixed distinctions between ‘types’ of homeless populations, it is most important to foster a wider realization that homeless populations are not so much ‘populations’ as they are simply people who are in need of shelter and services. This need might be due to many factors, but it is an immediate one. It is also present in only one place at a time.
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