

# “Once I’m there I can find out where I am” Place Making and the Homeless Geographies of a Downtown Toronto Street Kid Community

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## Article abstract

Contemporary folklorists working on place have increasingly highlighted power and conflict as key aspects of spatial construction and the concomitant identity formation this practice provides. Utilizing this perspective and building on the work of social geographers’ research on the homeless I document the ways in which urban spatial regimes structure everyday practices of a street kid community in downtown Toronto. Utilizing the distinction between prime and marginal space to build an ecological map of the urban landscape I argue that my research participants’ utilization of de Certeau’s tactic of temporal manipulation claim public microsites for subsistence practices but reproduce their own esoteric subculture within marginal or refuse spaces that constitute a distinct backstage which rarely appears in the literature.

## “ONCE I’M THERE I CAN FIND OUT WHERE I AM”

*Place Making and the Homeless Geographies of a Downtown Toronto Street Kid Community*

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During the summer of 2000 I spent nearly all my waking hours as a participant observer of a non-shelter using, loose-knit street kid community. My chief field site was Queen West, a neighbourhood I know well, shops I’ve visited often and parks I’ve played in, but now it was as if I had never been here before (figure 1). The street was no longer a medium for moving from consumption point to consumption point but a pattern of microsites where you can sit and beg; there are corners of Grange Park where no one will bother you during the day and others where you might sleep through the night in relative safety. Alleys, rooftops, doorways, overpasses and fire escapes form an invisible matrix, a geography of homelessness that initiates must learn if they have any hope of surviving on the street. As Gerald Pocius notes: “knowing where to place yourself... [is] the fundamental framework for so much of everyday life” (1991: 24). This paper discusses some aspects of the spatial order of my research participants, their place making exercises, narratives about space, and the role of urban spatial exclusion in defining the very structure of contemporary youth homelessness.

Lisa Gabbert and Paul Jordan-Smith’s expansive introduction to a *Western Folklore* special issue on space and place testifies to the vitality and contested nature of spatial studies in folklore (2007). Tracing a path through the literature, the authors note that space and place emerged out of folklore’s birth in regional studies as a way of defining the bounded, homogeneous and unique nature of these places (217-18). Using the emergence of postmodern theory in geography, Gabbert and Jordan-Smith go on to argue that most contemporary work has reformulated space and place from the earlier neo-Romantic conception of place and community to one where “[s]pace was reconceptualized from a common sense model...

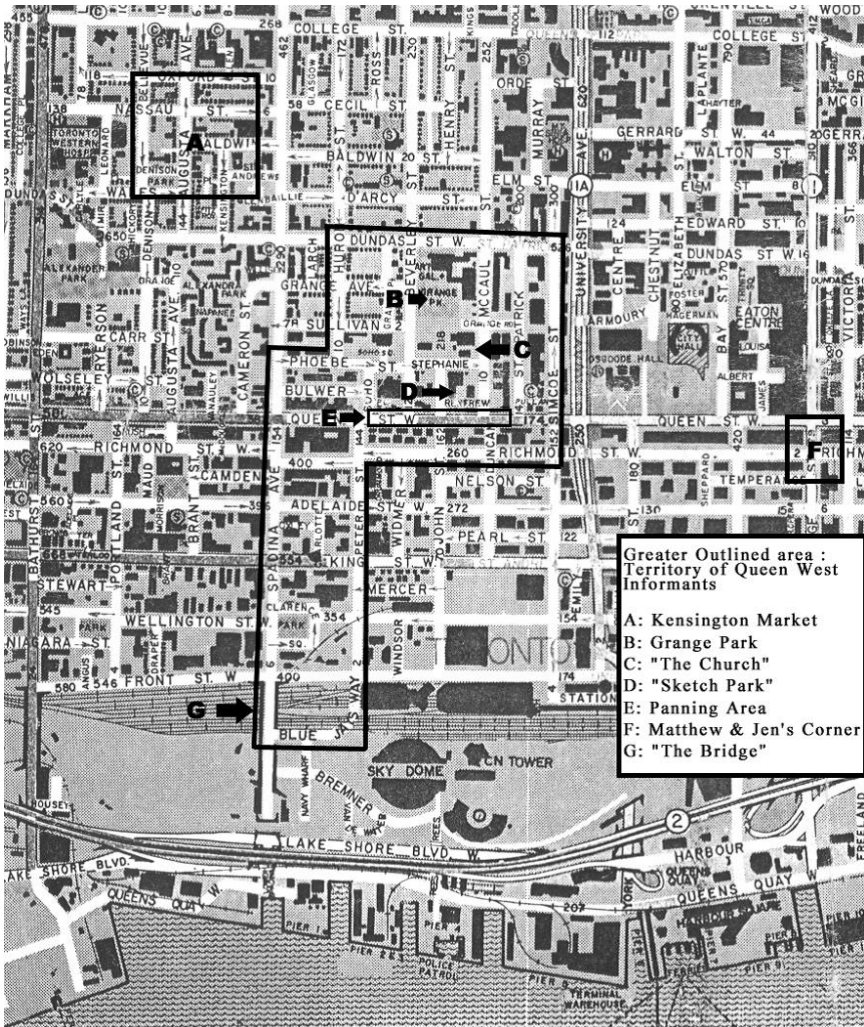


Figure 1. Key places within fieldwork setting.

to an essential element in the construction of social life and intricately implicated in the (re) production of power and ideology” (218). The shift here is principally to a processual model that emphasizes spatial production, conflict, intersection and “differential power geometries” and, as such, problematizes the very concept of “place,” reducing it to mode of discourse about space – a kind of claims-making exercise (220). Recently, a general consensus of orientation (if not of theory, methodology or even a shared technical language) has emerged in the handful of contemporary studies on space and place: “[H]ow particular places come to be constructed, who

gets to do the constructing, and in what kinds of contexts" (222).

"Differential power geographies" lies at the heart of a diverse range of scholars who have explored the spatial nature of homelessness. The spatial turn across several disciplines in the 1990s, as noted by Gabbert and Jordon-Smith, draws on post-structural social geography (Lefebvre 1974; Foucault 1984; de Certeau 1984; Soja 1989) and was particularly productive for research into the contemporary expression of extreme poverty and homelessness. Anticipated by the work of Duncan (1979), the general scope and perspective of those working on space, place and homelessness is summarized by Talmadge Wright:

Urban spaces are not "neutral" backdrops to individual actions of the poor, but socially produced disciplinary spaces within which one is expected to act according to a status defined by others, a status communicated by specific appearances and locations, by the visual comportment of bodies. Homeless street identities... emerge from the complex negotiations over the meaning of urban space within which homeless persons find themselves.... [C]onceptualizing urban space as an active relationship between city authoritative power and individuals is crucial for understanding how homeless street identities are constructed, resisted, and reconstructed. (1997: 6-7)

Several different and competing schema have been developed to understand the socio-spatial order of the city. Wright suggests three: pleasure space, functional space, refuse/marginal space, which Julia Wardaugh productively simplifies into the binary prime/marginal. Wardaugh posits that the homeless' spatial knowledge is predicated first, by "the value which settled communities ascribe to particular places" (1996: 704). Marginal space is simply the absence of the affective content ascribed to prime spaces by the housed public: "[T]hose that are of residential, commercial, recreational or other use to settled citizens, or else those that have symbolic value to them in that they represent order and civility" (704). Prime spaces are easily identified as anything the housed population feels it is or ought to be using. Street kids *appear* to utilize prime spaces for the majority of their subsistence practices (begging on sidewalks and drug selling in parks) but as I will argue, if we micronize the spatial scale we can see that sidewalks and parks both contain marginal microsites like disused doorways and the unpopular corners of parks. These are distinct insofar as the street kid is open to the gaze of the housed. Whereas macro-marginal space are more closed or private, varying from large areas like the post-industrial brownlands or transportation ribbon that separates downtown Toronto from Lake Ontario. Making a distinction between these forms

of marginal space not only improves Wright and Wardaugh's scheme but will allow me to distinguish between modes of identity construction and its spatial component. Outside the scope of this paper but necessary to mention, time changes spatial meaning. For example, evening begging can occur in the doorways to closed shops. As I will note in the concluding section, gentrification has reduced both macro- and micro-marginal spaces in my research area and, as a hypothesis, limited the subsistence capacity for various homeless communities. Finally, most authors agree that the homeless are socially stigmatized through their association with spatial stigmatization. Little work, however, has been done on how subcultural inversion of social hierarchies creates esoteric valorization of these socio-spatial orders in order to create a positive (oppositional) identity for non-shelter and service using street kids, something which I will briefly demonstrate in the latter half of this paper (Rowe and Wolch 1990; Kidd and Evans 2011: 762-766).

My own thesis for this article is largely derived from Wright's overarching perspective but emphasizes the urban ecology and micronizes some of the spatial relationships: through the tactic of perambulation and the careful reading of the urban ecology,<sup>1</sup> street kids' adaptive utilization of space creates, over time, patterns of use which constitute a shared geography of homelessness within, and through which, larger socio-cultural practices and identity formation are embedded; thus, creating a "dynamic simultaneity" between social processes and spatial form (Massey 1994: 3).

My fieldwork was carried out through participant observation during the hours my research participants were awake from May until the first week of September. I was a known researcher. Fieldnotes and various jottings were kept, although where recording would disrupt the social scene I would often reconstruct these events in my fieldnotes within 24 hours. I also conducted many sessions of audio recordings. These were unstructured and generally conversational. Participants were recruited through other street kids or by simply walking up to them and inviting them to join. Although asked for money on several occasions, I did not pay for information. In total I had eighteen primary research participants and an equal number of peripheral participants. Participants in this study reflect the wide diversity of the street

1. The term ecology is used here in reference to the work of Tim Ingold who argues that an ecology is both a natural (biological) and cultural (symbolic) system within which human survival is a combination of environmental and cultural processes (2000: 3-5). It is roughly analogous with folklorists' utilization of the concept "landscape" (Tuan 1970; Ryden 1993) but attempts to more finely integrate the biophysical world with cultural interpretations of the world itself.

kid population: shelter users, social service rejecters, travelling gutter punks, runaways, precariously housed and street involved youth. My participants' community was primarily an informal peer network, composed largely of loose relational ties, structured around monistic or dyadic nodal points (Fleisher 1995; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Johnson *et al.* 2005: 234). It was fluid, dynamic and, significant to this paper, transient.

Those who adopt a spatial perspective are initially engaged in a two-part project: understand and catalogue the constituent parts of the spatial disciplinary machine that is the urban landscape; second, collect and interpret data on how street kids navigate this terrain. In the Toronto context, Susan Ruddick's (2002) critique of the criminalization of the poor by Bill 82 ("The Safe Streets Act") is an example of the former. While several studies of street labouring (O'Grady *et al.* 1998; Hagan and McCarthy 1997) or policing the homeless (Gaetz, O'Grady and Buccieri 2011) give glimpses into the actual lives of homeless youth, recent work by Kristy Buccieri (2013), which traces the movements of interviewees over 24 hours concentrates on transience as a key tactic for street kids as well as the meaning of certain places – some of which overlap the geographic territory of this study. While significant and important contributions to the field, each of these studies is limited by its overreliance on interview or survey data collection from shelter users. Likewise, a lack of ethnographically informed information means that conclusions are not tested against researchers' own observations of practices. One brief example from Buccieri's work should suffice; she notes that parks are important for homeless youth. As I will note, she is certainly correct; however, street kids do not use parks, they use particular places within parks which I call marginal microsites. Other reasons to revisit my data from 2000 and 2001 are, as Buccieri's study indicates, the locations under investigation and the social and political conflict over the homeless remains significant (Gaetz *et al.* 2013). Given the value and lack of ethnographically informed analysis of the daily life of street kids, the work fills a lacuna in the scholarship. Given that ethnology is a cumulative and comparative process both temporally and spatially, an ethnographic study documenting the place making of street kids in a specific geography preserves the folk history and practices of that time/space which will inform future research. Finally, thick descriptions documenting key microsite utilization need to be established if we are to understand one of the primary challenges to homeless subsistence: gentrification.

## Transience, Identity and Place

My research area around Queen West is roughly contained within a territory circumscribed by Front St. to the south, College to the north, University to the east and Bathurst to the west. It is a geography constructed out of my participants' shared sense of their own "neighbourhood" or, more precisely, a geography which their daily routines made familiar through repetition and patterns of use. As I will explore in more detail below, street kids' occupation of this space is best thought of as transient movements through various marginal microsites that exist within the normative spatial order of the housed. Not all of my participants shared this territory equally and some had recourse to places outside of this relatively small area, while female street kids were less likely to use alleys or parks unaccompanied; however, all of my participants closely identified with this geography and a tight association between people and places developed. Kole, a former street kid and now outreach worker, recounting his early days on the streets of Toronto, documents a territory roughly analogous to my research site and provides important clues to street kid spaces:

First was just meeting people – they never took me to any services they just took me to where – I didn't even know where—to go and pan. I guess it was just slowly finding out – I used to panhandle at Queen and John, in front of the Queen Street Market and then I would sleep behind the Queen Street Market: I didn't travel very far [laughter]. And then I... slowly work my way... I slowly did Queen Street.... Just from travelling in the neighbourhood I would walk through the alleys and I would know all the little side streets. And it just got bigger and bigger and I knew everything that was in where I was...

The first aspect of Kole's narrative highlights the interrelationship between street skills and spatial knowledge, wherein vernacular geographies are one of the skills that are acquired through the rough tutelage of becoming a street kid. It is no accident that Kole's circling gyre of greater and greater spatial knowledge corresponds to his increasing competence as a street kid.

KE, an experienced travelling male street kid from British Columbia, echoed Kole when he told me about his early experience in Toronto:

Well last time I came down here I hit the Much Music building and that's where the good panning was so when I got into Toronto [this time] I said [to my ride] "Where's the Much Music Building?" "Why the fuck would you want to go there?" I'm like, "[I'm a] street kid with a dog, trust me,

that's where I want to go." Once I'm there I can find out where I am.

KE's paradoxical statement, "Once I'm there I can find out where I am," exposes the deeply esoteric and emic understanding of space that permeates all aspects of street kid existence. Of course he can only find that place by accessing the traditional geographic knowledge held by street kids themselves. Thus do social networks and spaces become interlocking systems of socio-cultural production. Rare, and confined to two older, experienced female street kids who lived and worked in the area under discussion, was a custodial sense of place as a form of "home", akin to Yi Fu Tuan's "concretion of value" within which one can dwell (1977: 12) or Kidd and Evans' observation that "for those on the streets for longer periods, home experienced as a largely internalized construct" (2011: 766). As TT, an experienced female street kid who was picking up garbage while leaving Sketch Park told me one evening: "Kids these days don't have any respect. When I started out on the street we picked up after ourselves, looked after our places and these kids throw garbage all over the place, drop needles everywhere."

The movement which creates this shared geography is largely the result of a tactical response to spatial exclusion and the need to exploit various resources (Ruddick 2002; Bucci 2013). In order to survive under this regime street kids adopt a tactical orientation which utilizes time against space to exploit interstitial gaps in normative space, as well as the temporally dependent ambiguities in the built environment. The relationship between time, space, strategies and tactics was addressed by de Certeau, who argues:

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of proper locus. The space of tactics is the space of other. Thus it must play on and within a terrain imposed on it... It takes advantage of opportunities and depends on them, without any base where it could stockpile its winnings... Strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the establishment of place offers to the erosion of time; tactics on the clever utilization of time. (quoted in Ruddick 1996: 59)

De Certeauian tactics are the central ethic of street kid communities and explain why their place making is transitory and temporal. As I noted, they adopt and exploit gaps in the spatial order (marginal microsites) by reading the prime/marginal hegemonic discourse but at the cost of ceaseless wandering and a conscious minimizing of physical resources. The "place" becomes not physical but the pattern of this temporally informed perambulation. As Ruddick notes: "It is exactly through the precarious and transitory use of spaces that the homeless gain a relative permanence in



particular places... their day-to-day employment of tactics... confound the strategies of production and control of spaces” (1996: 59).

Queen West<sup>2</sup> exists as a material order, “a body of possibilities” and a specific ecology (urban landscape) out of which contextually variant techniques of survival emerge (de Certeau 1984, 106-107).<sup>3</sup> As Tim Ingold explains: “Skills are not transmitted from generation to generation but are regrown in each....[T]he study of skill demands a perspective which situates the practitioner... in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings” (2000: 5). Thus, street kids are not spread evenly across the city but exist in these ecological niches with particular histories, resources, opportunities and spatial configurations. The fact that gentrification over the last ten years is reducing the amount of marginal space and even heterotopic space will be taken up in the conclusion.

Queen Street is a well-known stop in what Ruddick has called “the runaway circuit” (1996: 95-98) whose history and configuration is intimately entwined with ethnicity, religion, race and occupational identity, of which, only a small sketch can be suggested here. Its earlier manifestation as a predominantly residential neighbourhood is encoded in many of the structures that make up the streetscape: three-storey, brick-facade Victorian buildings. The building stock of the area forms an important physical environment for street youth. The relatively small scale of the buildings (two and three storeys) and the tendency to include backside, two-story high additions with exposed fire escapes means that the ecology of Queen West is as much vertical as horizontal. This configuration significantly increases both the area of habitation and differential spatial access (through choke points like fire escapes) to various territories (see figure 2). These sorts of material features tend to be treated (when they are noticed at all) by the housed population as marginal spaces and, therefore, their concentration and particular configuration around Queen West provides a spatial network of marginal microsities that can be temporarily utilized by street kids for their various subsistence and emic/esoteric practices. Likewise, access points

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2. On the social history of the neighbourhood see: Klein 2000; Heibert 1993, 1995.
  3. The distinction here is a fine one but important. Research on the homeless has tended to treat the continuity of the subculture as natural, arising either out of mechanistic responses to external conditions or simplistic acculturation models (see: Finkelstein 2000; Hagan and McCarthy 1997). There has been almost no appreciation of the ways in which homelessness is recreated through a constant and dialogic interplay between the environment and the socio-cultural groups that inhabit it.



Figure 2. Fire escape. Photo by John Bodner.

that differentiate one space from another (a fire escape versus a park lawn) can create increased safety, social hierarchy through spatial control, and the formation of tight social bonds through cohabitation.

This section of Queen Street is a place for the consumption of nonessential consumer goods via walking and given (at the time of this study) that the streetscape's facades are deeply textured and provide several recessed spaces that create interstitial and loosely defined microsites accommodating a number of street practices, including panhandling (panning) (figure 3). Here we can see the utility of micronization by briefly examining panhandling spots.

In order to lessen the socio-spatial violation that panning appears to cause, street kids are adept at exploiting the interstices within normative socio-spatial order; specifically they exploit marginal microsites embedded along the streetscape itself to construct panning spots. Along the two blocks of Queen Street that made up my participant's primary panning scene, there were five prime areas (one available after five o'clock) and two or three less desirable locations. A good panning site is in a high pedestrian traffic area, slightly recessed from the street itself and allows room for a backpack and at least one other person. Most importantly these



Figure 3. Queen Street. Photo by John Bodner.



Figure 4. K- and Elf's panning spot. Photo by John Bodner.

spaces allow normal pedestrian flow, thus reducing the risk of appearing as unpredictable strangers, while still making themselves and their appeals visible. A travelling couple of crusty punks from the western United States, K- and Elf's panning spot was one of the best along the strip: a Victorian era, raised and recessed doorway that offered both good visibility from the street and shelter from wind, rain and sun (see figure 4). The door itself was never used and therefore caused no conflict with the neighbouring business. In 2005 the doorway was renovated by new owners who completely obliterated its historic configuration, creating a mean little door at street level. Over the last decade façade changes along Queen (between Peter and Spadina) have been remarkably consistent and clearly represent a technique for discouraging begging as the area has gentrified: flattening of the façade and all blank wall space by incorporating floor to ceiling windows which project the interior private space onto the sidewalk, thus largely removing these marginal microsites. Moreover, because marginal microsites mean street kids are open to the gaze of others, their bodies, out of place and stigmatized by the spaces they occupy, remain potentially disruptive and threatening (Ruddick 2002; Wright 1997).

The small park north of Renfrew Avenue and bordering St. Patrick's Square, known ironically to my research participants as "Sketch Park," provides another example of microsite spatial tactics. Briefly, the park is used primarily by people eating a quick lunch purchased in the market, as a hangout site by housed street-involved youth and by local street kids. The overlapping uses of the park, however, do not overlap spatially or, in

some cases, temporally; rather, street kids utilize specific areas of the park and the housed public, others. This arrangement is reinforced through the spatial order of the park itself, where physical features reinforce its patterns of use. In the simplest terms the park is divided into two distinct areas. The one closest to the back doors of the market is treated as an extension of the commercial space through the use of fixed features like benches and the decorative raised flower bed. The space is clearly separated from the rest of the park by a large raised round bed/border, flanking shrubs and the arc of the brick path. Street kids occupied the undifferentiated green space of the park and, because of the houses along St. Patrick's Square, my participants favoured the westernmost edge, its abandoned Victorian warehouse and accompanying laneway. So clear were these boundaries to my participants that street kids rarely even cut through the benched area, choosing instead to move through the western walkway along St. Patrick's Market and then join their companions along the road or step over the concrete embankment to join their friends. The effect of these daily routines was to create two populations moving around each other in patterns that, as de Certeau (1984) noted, actualize the material boundaries inherent in the park itself. Recent condo development has increased the level of surveillance by the housed and likely disrupted this arrangement.

One way to understand the relationship between space and identity is to introduce the dramaturgic argument and utilize Erving Goffman's (1959) insights into the nature of front and back stages. For Goffman, the front stage is the space in which a performance of self, for others, is given and is distinguished from the back stage by the existence of an audience which is distinct from the performer's group; thus, the setting is largely determined by intergroup (exoteric) social engagement, set within a particular spatial frame (settings) and its concomitant props (1959: 107-108). Conversely, the backstage is a segregated region wherein the individual or group conduct the "dirty work" of preparing the front stage performance through esoteric and emic activities based on intragroup norms and expectations – all, or some of which, may destroy the carefully crafted performance enacted front stage (1959: 112-114). From this simple outline it is clear that the street is the primary front stage of street kid life.

This front-stage existence was reflected in street kids' common use of fictive spaces to explain and order their novel socio-spatial existence. For example, Hippy Chic (a recent arrival from the East Coast where she was periodically homeless) responded to my invitation to participate in this research by saying: "well, welcome to my living room, have a seat." The

seat was a doorway and the living room, which she indicated with a sweep of her hand, the streetscape. It is no accident that the "living room," in domestic spatial order, is a quasi-public space, most often configured and utilized to perform the public face of the family to its visitors.

The difficulty of negotiating identity within a spatial regime that afforded so few backstage locations was attested to on the few occasions my participants were forced to violate the normative rules of front-stage activities. One afternoon Chuck was dry shaving with a disposable razor in a panning spot and was overtly stared at by a pedestrian. His loud rebuttal to the silent rebuke was "Please stop watching me shave. Fuck man, I don't go into your house and watch you shave – at fifteen inches from your face. Fuck man." While a clever inversion, the comment does not dispel the socio-spatial violation Chuck was committing, especially since there is a something akin to taboo in our culture of displaying the "dirty work" of body preparation on the front stage (Wright 1997). The difficulty of conforming actions/display to scene/setting was also the result of displaying subculture affiliation and membership to other street kids, while being viewed by the street as a whole. For example, my participants' adoption of clothing (punk aesthetic), companion animals (Pit Bull and Rottweiler dogs), body adornment (piercings, tattoos) and hairstyles corresponds to esoteric group norms and were on display in front-stage settings. The display of subculturally specific aesthetics in this setting was interpreted by some members of the housed population as aggressive and offensive (Ruddick 2002; Herman and Mosher 2002).

Group norms in front-stage places are especially important and more conservative than might be anticipated because, during the day, the street is primarily a work site. Static begging (panning) is a complex symbolic activity in which part of the technique lies in the performance of labour itself: what Goffman (1959) calls "make work" and Abrahams (1978), "performing services." The exoteric interactions between housed pedestrians and street kids was such that my participants carefully orchestrated their behaviour to counteract negative stereotypes that defined them as dangerous, shiftless and members of the undeserving poor. While panning on the street, or merely hanging out, my participants were surprisingly deferential to the housed public, hyperbolically polite in their use of formal greetings (sir, miss, ma'am) and circumspect regarding activities that they understood as troubling to pedestrians (drug/alcohol use, rambunctious play, offensive language, etc.). For example, Kole said that he enjoyed opening doors for "little old ladies" just to shock them with his politeness. The overall

performance, therefore, was predicated on a second-order esoteric reading of the housed public's impression of street kids themselves and my participants attempted to construct a presentation of self that conformed to the poverty script of the "deserving poor" (Wardaugh 1996; Warner and Butler 1996).

The front-stage identity and the performances it allows is clearly a dialogic and hybrid balancing act between street kids' subculture identity priorities and the housed public's definition of acceptable identities. The policing of these restrictive and generally conservative norms was common. For example Alex, a travelling street kid from Quebec took an inordinately long time to integrate himself into my participants' loose community when, on his first night in town, high on PCP, he was nearly killed when he stumbled into the road. Likewise, Donovan was chastised by a female panning partner for loudly insulting a young woman who refused both his solicitation for alms and his sexual advances:

Donovan: ... you smelly cunt!

Unknown woman: You can't say that shit. Say it to yourself. You'll have the police down here. You can't go yelling at people.

In the unknown female street kid's rationale we find the final arbiter of the need to manage identity performances in front-stage spaces: the final guarantors of the middle-class control of the spatial definitions are only a phone call away. In contrast backstage (marginal space) provides an opportunity for the creation of differential subculture identities and the expression of esoteric socio-cultural forms.

### **Under the Bridge**

The sole example of a primarily backstage, private sphere—private from both the housed public and other street kids – existed for the relatively small number of shanty dwellers *under the bridge*. The "bridge" was, in fact, an overpass for Spadina Avenue to cross the Canadian National Railways' rail lines south of Front Street and was known to my participants as "the bridge" or "under the bridge." They never used the term "shanty" as I have but they did, as I will document, consider the place a distinct and unique area of habitation. Like the "functional places" documented by Wright, the rail and highway corridor along Lake Ontario is a traditional marginal landscape that, for most of the history of Toronto, was a travel corridor for rail and road and the site of light industry and warehouses (1997). As such, this territory was largely ceded to the homeless and other marginal



Figures 5 and 6. Under the bridge. Photos by John Bodner.

populations since it did not overlap with the housed public's use.<sup>4</sup> Various "in-fill" condominium projects have dramatically changed the area surrounding the shanty but at the time of this research the transformation in land use was only beginning, with three condominiums built beside the large sports arena that dominated the area south of the tracks. In fact, the construction area surrounding the development provided useful building

4. These landscapes are policed but infrequently. Certainly the police knew of the shanty; the fact that its inhabitants were allowed to use the space supports the hypothesis that certain spaces are ceded to the homeless as well as the thesis that use patterns of the housed population influence policing practices.



material for my participants, specifically skids and plastic cladding.

As you can see in figures 5 and 6, the shanty at the time of these photographs is empty. This was the result of a cataclysmic fire (more below). The space below the bridge is approximately 6.7m wide and 24.3m long (162m<sup>2</sup>). Both ends were closed by large chain-link fences, of which only the west gate remained intact. Prior to the fire, the east gate fence was modified by tearing apart the chain link to make a space large enough for one person to pass through at the southern most gatepost.<sup>5</sup> Following its modification, the fences, once meant to keep people out, were reincorporated by street kids to act as a symbolic barrier and a means of creating spatial differentiation. Like all barriers, the fence served to symbolically delimit membership through spatial order, making clear through material objects what and who is inside (and who belongs inside) from what and who are outside. Most importantly, it was street kids themselves who controlled the space, built its basic infrastructure and determined, through customary practices, who could gain access.

This place making was unique in my fieldwork site but, rather than exceptional, some aspects of the shanty underpin key features of street kid culture. Susan Ruddick notes that, “a distinct sense of self is manifest in the creation and maintenance of distinct spaces.” Speaking about punk squatters she went on to observe: “[T]heir ability to define and control space was central to their self-definition as punks rather than as homeless youth in need of services” (1996: 100). Given that my participants partially define themselves and their subculture in opposition to service (specifically shelter) using homeless youth, their continuity as a community relies upon finding and retaining street-based spaces under their tenure – not only as an act of survival but as particular places which both allow the creation of subcultures and reinforce, through their spatial configuration, the priorities of the group itself.

It is no accident that a subculture which defines itself primarily through material and symbolic association with “the street” finds a location roofed and sheltered by an actual street isomorphic with its own identity. As I will explain in more detail below, in this space street kids controlled membership, created their own rules and norms, engaged in esoteric recreational activities and spoke in a language (both verbal and kinesic) with each other in ways meaningful to the group itself and dissimilar from their negotiated identities in front-stage and prime landscapes like the

5. In figure five only the gate remains. The remainder of the fence was destroyed by firefighters.

street or parks. And importantly, they did not have to conduct the kind of identity work that would make them service worthy to various agencies (Snow and Anderson 1987; Passaro 1996).

Membership rules for the shanty provide a brief example of this isomorphism. KE explained one technique of moving in: "Well you just walk in there. If they don't beat you up you stay." Two important aspects are touched on in this brief but laconic statement. First, street kids themselves control access and, thus, their socio-cultural priorities are expressed through the complex dance of membership and acceptance. Through this dance one site in the cultural re-creation and continuity of street kid culture is created. This system contrasts sharply with both the street and shelters, where youth acquiesce (not without resistance) to others, their priorities and fundamentally their power (Wagner 1993: 4). Second, the very technique of membership expresses foundational elements in the ideal street kid identity: being hardcore and self-reliant (Bodner 2009; Kidd and Evans 2011). Briefly, there exists an ideal street kid identity around which the generally fluid individual performances and subgroup identities stand in an uneasy relationship. This identity stresses self-reliance, hypermasculinity, violence and subcultural inverted "pecking order of deviance," significantly around various cultural texts (body displays, drugs, vandalism, etc.) (Dear and Wolch 1987, Ruddick 1996). Therefore, KE's observation of trial by ordeal is both a pragmatic description of one system and a performance of fealty to the ideal subculture identity.

A second mode of incorporation is to secure an invitation from an established occupant of the space. This was the experience of K- and Elf who spent their first night under a different overpass.

K-: We spent the first night down there. Slept under a highway. It was ok. We can go back there whenever.

Elf: Yea but it was wet. The rain just blew in.

K-: Yea but it was ok.

Me: When did you move into the shanty?

K-: We met H- and she told us about it so we moved over there. [The shanty is] dirty and stinks.

Elf: It's dry.

K-: It's disgusting.

For K- and Elf, their connection with H- provided the invitation to move to the shanty. Despite its drawbacks, the bridge has obvious advantages over other sleeping sites.

It is no accident that K- and Elf had an easy incorporation into the shanty since H- was the acknowledged matriarch of the space. She once told me she policed the place: "I threw a guy out" because, she said, he was "acting stupid." As the longest continuous inhabitant she could sponsor individuals through her personal authority and even took on the role of assigning vacant shanties to particular individuals. This was also important to her sense of safety in the shanty: "I know everybody here. It's good now. I like it when I know everybody." For a slight, unattached, heroin-addicted female, living in an inaccessible and largely unpoliced area of the city, being surrounded by people you know and feel comfortable with is a vital part of personal security.

It is from H-, as well, that I noted a distinct narrative genre rarely found among my other participants or in other contexts. Many of the property and membership rules of the shanty are embedded in a kind of conversationally situated oral history, which local street kids like H- used to socialize new members and negotiate their own social position. The relationship between narrators, their position within historic time and the structure of folk history in the shanty is akin to Briggs' historic discourses study in Córdoba: "The past... stands as a communicative resource, providing a setting and an expressive pattern for discussions that transform both past and present" (1988: 99). Unlike the old men of Córdoba, street kids lack a larger aesthetic of ritualistic historic discourse performance but that does not mean that history is not contested and utilized. As the following discussion documents, H- self-consciously sets herself within the historic past and uses it to defend and reflect on present circumstances. At the time of the exchange both K- and Elf are seeking her advice and knowledge because of a potential conflict over their shanty that took place the day before. Even though they are the same age as H-, her position, both as a local and a shanty dweller, allows her to speak with authority on matters historic. At the same time she uses her role as the keeper and performer of historic knowledge to secure her own social position within the group. Moreover, through creation and maintenance of a different kind of space, the shanty allows H- to construct a different identity than the marginalized heroin-addicted drug-runner street kid she was often identified as; providing another example of Massey's "dynamic simultaneity" through which social relations and space co-create each other (1994).

K-: I don't want any trouble.

H-: Fuck him.

K-: Murray said he made that house. I said there was no one in there before we moved in. I don't want-

H-: Fuck him. Is that what he said? He said he built that house? That's shit. Stan built that house and Murray moved in after he left.

K-: Yea.

H-: Murray [hasn't] been around. Fuck him.

The result is that K- and Elf kept the shanty. I did not meet Murray under the bridge during my visits and it appears that he did not move in after failing to secure his old house. Without H-'s historic knowledge, Murray's property claims might have worked because shanties operate under a property system based on known ownership. For example, the builder of a house (the shanty itself) would have some claim to the structure even after a long absence. In a different conversation H- told me a brief history of her house: "Bob built my house. I fixed it up but I had it from him when he left." In this account it is first Bob's house and now H-'s, through restoration and habitation. Those who are currently using a shanty still have some claim to them, thus K- and Elf, even though they left the research site for three weeks at one point, still held tenure to their individual shanty and reclaimed it (briefly) upon their return. This system stands in contrast to the tactical and adaptive uses of marginal microsites within primary spaces, like doorways and park areas with their ethic of open use. Ownership and use of individuals shanties, therefore, is far less fluid and relies upon historically embedded patterns of use/construction: builders are at the top of the hierarchy; then those they pass their property on to as a kind of inheritance; and last, current occupants who do not know the lineage of the structures. Obviously this system relies on historic knowledge and transmission and, thus, historic discourses lie at the heart of the shanty itself. Like the rules of panning spots or drug selling areas, I have here presented an ideal ethic of the shanty system and it is unlikely to be stable or routinely enforced over time.

Older street kids will often engage in less utilitarian narratives of the past than those above, but much of the performance remains didactic. For example, in the following exchange I asked about the history of the shanty and three experienced street kids cooperatively reconstruct a history of the space.

Jacob: The squat's [shanty] been here forever, ever since they built the thing [railway and overpass].

H-: I came here in February, April.

TT: She means two years ago, not [this] year.

H-: Yea and all the houses were down at that end [west end] and there were two right there [indicating north wall close to where we were sitting]. But there was this big rain in May. Two days. And it flooded all the way from that [west] end and flooded them out. One of them [shanties] kept standing but those two guys pulled it down.

Me: Who built these?

TT: X built the end one and Y built that one there.

Much of the contemporary configuration of the space under the bridge is the result of this particular flood. Moreover, the flood washed away the material culture history of the shanty, one that now exists only in the memory of some of my participants. We cannot discount the fact that by placing themselves within this historic narrative, H-, TT and Jacob are laying claim to being experienced street kids and custodians of the shanty in general.

If the flood reconfigured the shanty under the bridge we must turn our attention to the contemporary physical layout of the space and how it was used. Before the fire there were five shanties built against the solid concrete wall on the south side of the bridge. Importantly, the ground is highest against the south wall. Because of openings on both ends, the shanties and most of the activity were clustered toward the centre of the bridge, slightly more toward the east fence than the west owing to large pools of water that formed around the west end from the overpass embankment run-off. The shanties occupied a total area of 29.7m<sup>2</sup> or about 18 percent of the total space under the bridge.

The rest of the space was used in a number of different ways. Sleeping outside the shanties on found cardboard was confined to the south wall, generally toward the west end but close to the shanties themselves when it rained. People tended to crowd toward the centre and east end because the west opening was also used as a urinal and the embankment outside the gate on that end was used for defecation. Directly in front of the shanties was a collection of materials that formed a sitting area: two chairs, one couch, and two mattresses (one on top of the other) were arranged around

a lidless, upside down seaman's trunk that acted as a table. All of the items were salvaged and long past decrepit. From the sitting area to the western fence, a midden, sometimes 0.6m deep and 0.9m wide, was mounded against the north half-wall (occupying roughly 6% of the total space).

The overall configuration and use patterns of the shanty denote clear spatial differentiation. Besides the use of the western embankment as a toilet there was no evidence of street kid presence outside the two useless fences enclosing the overpass. The eastern fence was the front door, with a clear space of approximately 3.5m before the centre of habitation was reached. Here the main socializing space was created against the north half-wall and the shanties and sleeping spaces were against the south. Gradually the space toward the western fence or what we should recognize as the "back" of the space, transitioned into a refuse area, uninhabited and largely uninhabitable.

To say that area under the bridge was filthy would be an understatement. The furniture was barely recognizable as such; in the heat of the afternoon, the stench of garbage and urine was overpowering and a large number of used syringes were scattered around the socializing area and midden heap. Combining this with the loose silty dirt, clinging mud and constant dust thrown up by the speeding trains, a patina of dirt clung to any available surface. Strikingly, two areas were kept clear of refuse and as clean as possible: the area in front of the east gate and in front of the shanties themselves. Pragmatically, these are transit areas but, in practice, there are also underlying reasons and/or practices involved. The large open area by the gate has the effect of forcing anyone entering the space to be openly observable by those already under the bridge. Thus people need to cross a double barrier of fence/gate and courtyard, creating a differentiation of space (from outside to inside) that opened the individual to the gaze of others (establishing social roles as inhabitants, visitors or strangers). The area in front of the shanties is likewise a transit zone but a clearer explanation for its uncluttered nature can be found in the vernacular property laws of my participants, in which each shanty is understood as owned by an individual. This spatial distinction has already been encountered in some of the narratives where people identify individual shanties as their "home" or "house," while the entire area sheltered by the overpass is merely "under the bridge" or "the bridge." As such, the houses are private property. No one goes into one without permission and a certain amount of nonessential property is left within them when street kids go out for the day (spare bedding, some clothing, food, but only items that one could afford to have

stolen). The areas directly in front of the homes are analogous to front yards and are subject to similar property rules as normative households, although the halo of ownership does not extend far (a metre or less).

Private areas were kept clean out of respect (or fear) of their owners but common areas tended toward, but did not degrade into, absolute squalor since there was a recognized disposal area toward the back of the overpass. Overall the spatial order and subsequent social practices therein, largely reflects the loose social bonds between street kids themselves. Where an individual can control their immediate environment, they do so; however, rigid norms (sharps disposal), coordinated group activities (refuse removal) or stable leadership (enforcing a set of practices), were rare in environments of common use. Likewise, since this was a backstage area, nearly wholly controlled and populated by street kids, there were no external, normative forces acting on their behaviour. Thus, garbage disposal according to a vernacular spatial system was not defined as “littering”; graffiti was art, rather than vandalism; and drinking, drug use and partying were not hooliganism but recreation.

Understanding the role of seemingly destructive entertainment in street kids’ lives requires augmenting Ruddick’s earlier observations on the value of homeless place making by including Narváez’ incorporation of Barthes’ concept “jouissance” and Bahktin’s “carnival” to argue for the recognition of the power of pleasure in folk practices:

The intentional collective pleasures... were at once evasive, i.e. pleasures in which the sociocultural is sidestepped in favour of sensory-biological indulgence, and *subversive*, i.e. antagonistic pleasures that display the social consciousness of a subordinated group engages in rebellious acts against dominance and dominators. (1994: 275 italics in original)

That these pleasurable practices have to be hidden from the public in marginal, backstage places is one of the key interlocking features of street kid place making and displays, most powerfully, the asymmetrical power relations that structure much of their lives. That many of their activities are destructive, harmful to themselves and others has been well noted in the literature on homelessness and health; what has been largely ignored, or bowdlerized from the record, is that these practices are framed by my participants as pleasurable and, as such, the implications of pleasure, its ability to make place and to act as a non-productive mode of counter-hegemonic practice has been underappreciated. Reincorporating this central insight sidesteps a pathological model of my participants’ activities

to expose the generative nature of seemingly antithetical practices.<sup>6</sup>

The fire that destroyed the shanty occurred on August 12<sup>th</sup> while I was away from the research area for a day. When I returned, the street and my participants were abuzz with the news. Predictably, rumours were circulating and a great deal of time was spent discussing who started the fire. At the same time I was surprised to discover K- and Elf back in their regular panning spot. Both had left the scene with TT two weeks previously to take up residence in a squat outside my research area. They had returned after the squat was raided by the police. We sat and talked a bit and almost immediately the conversation turned to the fire. After a brief discussion of the topic K- leaned towards me and motioned for me, conspiratorially, to do the same; half whispering he said: "I did it." I resumed my original position in the doorway, staring hard at him, trying to figure out if this was yet another joke or catch which he did so regularly to tease and test me. K- stared back, smiling; he nodded his head, tapped his chest with his hand and mouthed "I did it." "No fucking way" I said, both shocked and starting to believe him. I turned quickly to Elf and she nodded her head but without the look of satisfaction and devilish joy that was plastered all over K-'s face.

Me: You're fucking crazy.

K-: What? It was fun. The place needed to burn. It was a dump.

Me: No. Someone could have been killed. These guys are going to kill you if they find out.

K-: No one was there.

Me: That's fucked.

K-: [Seeing I am actually upset he changes his tone from bravado to explanatory] There was no one there. I checked out all the houses and there was no one's stuff there. So I burned it down.

Me: That's still fucked.

K-: The place was a dump. Parvo<sup>7</sup> and junkie needles everywhere. The

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6. While outside the scope of this paper, augmenting my argument with folklorists' work on "dark play" would provide a stronger theoretical basis in how subcultures define and then play with the frames surrounding the production of pleasure (Miller 2012, Sutton-Smith 1997).
  7. There was a common story told initially by Scoot that a friend of his got "Parvo"



place stank. I cleaned it up.

Despite his subterfuge, K– was unrepentant, but I was nervous for him. The hunt was on and the names of several suspects were being bandied about by my participants (although none of them were individuals in my research group). I was so nervous for K– and Elf that the above exchange was not recorded in my notebook but only after returning home did I recreate the conversation in a fieldnotes journal that never went into the field itself. Over the next two days, as various narratives and proto-narratives were transmitted orally through rumour and gossip, a general group consensus among my participants developed.<sup>8</sup> Surprising to me at the time, a large number of individuals mimicked K–’s argument that the fire was a good thing and the shanty had decayed to the point of being intolerable.<sup>9</sup> My participants pointed out the filth, needles, disease, stench and mountains of garbage as proof for their position. Even Chuck, who had invested time and money in repairing a house, appeared less concerned than I anticipated, being more thankful that he slept somewhere else that night with all of his possessions. This near uniformity of opinion should not, however, be

from under the bridge because it was filthy and street kids let their dogs defecate everywhere. This story was commonly believed and transmitted as part of the tales about the shanty after the fire. Dog (parvovirus) and Human (Parvovirus B19, “Fifth Disease”) are non-transferable across species and, while canine parvovirus is transmitted through feces and is a hearty virus, the human version is most often transmitted through saliva and mucus between individuals in close contact.

8. The nature of rumour and gossip is complex and can only be briefly sketched. The general sociological perspective adopted here is that rumour and gossip are vehicles for group problem solving based on unregulated (folk) transmission of unsubstantiated information (Rosnow and Fine 1976: 11). The differentiation between the two is not so much in their formal features, although some distinctions can be made between rumour as depersonalized event-based information and gossip as interpersonal and information about known individuals. Likewise, rumour is almost always unsubstantiated information whereas gossip is a combination of rumour and substantiated fact. Finally, Abrahams (1970) notes that both exist in complex esoteric taxonomies involving performance, aesthetics, text and context. The relationship between the context of rumour and gossip, and what we might call “narrative,” is likewise ambiguous primarily because, being an accretionary process, rumour and gossip are part of the stuff of narrative formation itself; therefore, both narrative, proto-narrative and fact-statements co-mingle in a confusing sea of face-to-face verbal transmission (on narrative and ambiguous genres see: Oring 1986: 121-122; Victor 1993: 72-73; De Vos 1996: 6).
9. This creates a problem for classifying K–’s vandalism under Cohen’s (1973) four-part system (acquisitive, tactical, vindictive, malicious). Clearly K–’s joy at the act suggests malicious vandalism, the “actions enjoyed for their own sake”; however, there is no space in Cohen’s schema for constructive vandalism and little language through which to understand the esoteric meaning of his actions.

overstated, since many of my local participants, those who had a history and attachment to the shanty, had disappeared from the research site: H—back to her home state, and TT had not returned after the shuttering of the squat north of Bloor Street. What remained of my participants were mainly travelling and more recent street kids, a group less likely to identify with the shanty. There is the possibility, however, that just as transience is the central tactic of their urban adaptive survival system, street kids adopt a general aesthetic and ethic of transience to all aspects of their lives and invest neither money, emotional nor cultural capital in very much, least of all garbage-strewn shanties.

This is not to say that my participants approved of the arsonist and most agreed that he (it was always assumed the person was male) could have killed someone. A fair amount of investigation was underway in the two days after the fire as people attempted to determine alibis. It was during this time I assumed K— would eventually be caught, someone would have seen him enter the shanty or he would have no proof of where he slept that evening or, as likely, he would brag to someone he thought he could trust. Meanwhile a second hypothesis and evidence stream was added to the rumours and gossip flowing through the streets: cops had been seen on the bridge shortly before the fire. By the third day after the fire this information was widely known and this piece of unsubstantiated evidence (it was credited to several different street kids, most of whom I only tangentially knew) had accreted around itself other facts and became a proto-narrative (something slightly more substantive than a rumour but lacking anything like a narrative structure) which was taken up by my participants as the sole explanation for the fire: the cops started it. It is unlikely that K— would have ever been caught but it is also true that, despite what little threat there was, K— was saved by, and the very instrument of, a contemporary rumour-legend. Months later, after active fieldwork was over and during supplemental interviews with outreach workers or chance meetings with old participants, I heard the rumour-legend again in basically its original form, thus attesting to its general acceptance (transmission and perpetuation over time) by the larger street kid community.

As a rumour, the tale is largely a statement of fact, embedded in, expounded and tested through conversation, rather than through a narrative sequence of events (Victor 1993: 72-73; De Vos 1996). The core is the simple statement, "the cops burned down the bridge." However, this kernel is set within a series of brief supporting narratives, for example, naming a witness to the cop car on the overpass and what s/he (the witnesses

varied) saw. The key part of this evidence is that when the person saw the police, they did not see any smoke and the cops were obviously watching over the shanty. My participants would then either claim to have seen the smoke from afar or to have talked with someone who saw it. From these bare bones the unwitnessed events in the middle were fleshed out: the police came by stealth in the night, set the fire without bothering to check and see if anyone was sleeping; all under the pretence of creating an excuse to clean out the site with bulldozers. Here, of course, conspiracy theory and rumour-legend overlap to create what, from an exoteric perspective, appears to be a fatal flaw in the narrative: why construct an elaborate and dangerous (to life and property) plan simply to evict individuals who have no rights of habitation.<sup>10</sup> When I asked my participants this question, they often seemed baffled by my ignorance and usually replied that the cops hate street kids and do not care if they killed one of them.

To understand the validity the rumour-legend attained among my participants, one must understand two key points. The first point is to recognize that this rumour-legend did not stand alone but was connected to a host of similar tales which, taken as a whole, formed a dense network of narratives that both express and validate the antagonistic relationship between the police and street kids (Bodner 2003). This antagonism was augmented with the passage of Bill 81 in 1999 which defined street kids as a criminal threat to be managed by the police and the courts (Herman and Mosher 2002). Thus the police were the “threatening figures” that haunted the margins of my participants’ world and a host of narratives were transmitted that supported this view (Widdowson 1977). As I have argued elsewhere, the second point to consider is that the tales are used heuristically. The tendency of street youth, whose community is large and relatively stable, is to believe they control the marginal spaces they occupy. The rumour-legend is used, in part, by experienced street kids to highlight the tenuous grip that street youth have on the spaces they occupy. Furthermore, it suggests that others, with far more power can use these self-same marginal zones to terrorize them. In essence, the narrative reinforces the way that power is inscribed geographically: those without power occupy the topography of margins and move only within these restricted zones; those with power occupy primary spaces but may also exert control over

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10. At this point the unnecessary complexity of the tale and deep esoteric knowledge necessary to comprehend the character of the police ascribed to their actions suggests its close affinity to conspiracy theories, which are themselves a subset of informal knowledge production (along with rumour, gossip and contemporary legend) (Birchall 2006).

and utilize marginal areas.

As the post-fire photograph clearly demonstrates, the shanty would not remain uninhabited for long. While my active fieldwork ended in 2001, by 2003 there was evidence of intense habitation, as the *Ontario Coalition Against Poverty* attempted to pressure the government to install port-potties to improve sanitation on the site.

The destruction of the shanty can be read as a metaphor for the nature of my participants' tactical transience. In order to build any place at all they must build something that does not and cannot last. If "place" itself is a practice through which we construct ourselves, then the fundamental core of street kid culture is nomadic movement with only the diachronic pattern giving any sense of the practice itself. And while this description may be accurate, what is lost is the exhaustion and creeping hopelessness that eternal transience produced in my research participants. Enforced wandering is a common motif in folk narratives, a key dark nightmare of the housed population.<sup>11</sup> That aspects of the housed population actively create the same condition for the homeless proves, once again, that we manufacture our own folk demons.

The utilitarian value of spatial studies of homelessness is that they clearly provide better targeting of services. As several authors have pointed out, since the era of skid row neighbourhoods, the clustering of services can trap the homeless into a dependent geography which ultimately augments their own stigmatization through a process already outlined in this paper. That being said, as homeless geographies change, services must also shift and change. This observation is not, however, novel to front-line social service workers who know their charges well and keep a close eye on changes within the homeless population.

A more troubling element that this research exposes is the corrosive element of gentrification to street kids. A whole subset of studies on homelessness and gentrification exist; here it is enough to note that gentrification, through various discourses and practices, is a system of spatial exclusion. This exclusion can be overt through laws and policing or, in this case, the subtle transformation of some of the underpinning spaces for an entire street ecosystem. This matters to many of my research participants because they reject social services and the various identity performances

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11. The Wandering Jew (Q502.1) is an obvious choice but Stith Thompson's motif index is full of wanderings as punishment, section Q 200-399 and the subsection of wandering revenants (E501) contain several examples.

they demand. Likewise, insofar as they can, they create subculturally appropriate traditional subsistence practices that support and protect their loose-knit community. When they can no longer do that, there are worse places and practices to which the desperately poor will turn (Ruddick 1996). And while no one suggests that being on the streets is preferable to other options, the streets are and will remain a refuge for some; understanding their deep structure, how they are exploited to support the homeless and how they change over time may open up new ways of thinking about the street itself and what we consider “services” that the homeless need.

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