Right to the Tent City: The Struggle Over Urban Space in Fresno, California

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Abstract

Through interviews, archival research, and fieldwork conducted in Fresno, California, this research explores how and why officials spatially control homeless communities, and how homeless people have resisted these controls. Drawing from the theories of Henri Lefebvre, I argue that encampments in Fresno enabled homeless people to assert their right to the city, and challenged the production of urban capitalist space by defying the norms of profit, surveillance, and homogeneity. Part One of the thesis focuses on the relationship between city’s effort to destroy the encampments and its need to attract investment; Part Two focuses on the assignment of homeless individuals to secluded and highly governed spaces; and Part Three focuses on stigma as a product of homogenous urban space. Each section highlights the ways in which homeless people have resisted official policies and representations.
RIGHT TO THE TENT CITY:
THE STRUGGLE OVER URBAN SPACE IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

by
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Introduction

We’re just pushing people around … We just want to push them and move them from one place to another.
—Board member, Fresno Madera Continuum of Care

They’re trying to herd us all together and then scatter us.
—Fresno camper

If you view Fresno from above with online satellite imagery, you will see tiny clusters of blue and grey squares just east of the Golden State Highway. These are the roofs of hundreds of makeshift houses that once packed this strip of land. Go west a few blocks, and zoom in below the tangle of overpasses. You will find yourself inside a tent city. There is a bearded man sitting in a faded blue overcoat next to a row of tents. His face is pixelated to protect his identity, but the sign posted above him is as clear as day: NO CAMPING OR LOITERING. Down here, there are about a hundred tents lining the street. See clothes drying on the barbed-wire fence, a few half-open tent-flaps, a dog standing next to an old Christmas tree, a man trudging down the road in jeans and a baseball cap.

A few hundred feet north, another tent city lines the sidewalk. Here, makeshift plywood houses outnumber the tents. One home is constructed from cement blocks and PVC pipe and fitted with a metal door with a doorknob and lock. Another house is spray painted “KEEP OUT.” Follow the row of homes, and you will see living rooms sprawling into the streets, couches and chairs and groups of men in jackets and hats crowded around trashcan fires. It must have been winter when these images were taken. Next door, an old black man with a white beard and red shoes is smoking a cigarette and staring at the

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1 From personal interview, August 2013.
2 From c blove (2013).
camera. A white woman stands holding a broom next to a baby carriage. Another man is flipping off the camera.

Homeless encampments have a long history in the US, from the “jungles” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression (DePastino, 2003; Mitchell, 2012a). During times of crisis, they have provided poor people a space to build self-made shelters and communities. In recent decades, the widespread presence of urban street encampments has again reemerged. The popular press calls them “tent cities,” a phrase that captures the way in which campers residing in tents have created their own form of urbanism across the nation. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty found that the number of urban encampments has increased since the 2008 housing crisis, with family and child homelessness on the rise (Hunter, Linden-Retek, Shebaya, & Halpert, 2014). Based on a review of news reports, the authors identified more than one-hundred camps in cities across the nation.

For more than a decade, downtown Fresno has been home to several large and highly visible tent cities. Over the years, local officials have implemented a number of policies toward them. City Hall has pushed for periodic and aggressive eviction campaigns as part of its aim to revitalize downtown Fresno, while simultaneously developing sanctioned and heavily surveilled encampments throughout the city. Meanwhile, the Continuum of Care—an association of public and private agencies—has sought to keep local shelters afloat in the midst of political hostility towards the homeless. Recently, the Fresno Housing Authority adopted the Housing First model of homelessness management, and began forging alliances with private developers to provide monitored housing to a fraction of Fresno’s homeless population. In each of these
moments, officials dispersed homeless communities and assigned homeless individuals to various governed spaces. But homeless people have not passively accepted eviction or sequestration and have waged a tireless campaign to assert their right to camp in the city.

With little over half a million people and an economy based mostly in agriculture, Fresno is a medium-sized city struggling with widespread poverty. For more than a decade, hundreds of people have continued to camp in highly visible downtown spaces despite periodic eviction campaigns. Very little research has explored the nature of homelessness in small or mid-sized cities. Indeed, Bell and Jayne (2006) argue that most urban theory focuses on large metropolitan areas and obscures the unique dynamics of small cities. In particular, scholars have not fully explored how ongoing and localized economic depression affects city policy towards the homeless. Furthermore, the literature on homeless encampments has tended to focus on camps that are small, movable, and often hidden in interstitial urban spaces (Rowe & Wolch, 1990; Ruddick, 1996; Wright, 1997; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Gowan, 2010). As such, Fresno is an important site for studying homelessness because of its size, economic conditions, and the sheer scope and endurance of its encampments. It thus provides an opportunity to explore the politics of homelessness under circumstances that have not been thoroughly studied.

Herbert (2009) argued that for qualitative geography to expand existing theory, a case study must either defy or reaffirm current understandings. The situation in Fresno does both. Geographers have argued that over the past several decades, large metropolitan areas in the U.S. have engaged in a punitive politics of homeless criminalization and removal (Davis, 1990; Smith 1996; Mitchell, 1997). In many ways, Fresno represents an exaggeration of this trend. Its campaign against the homeless has
been particularly aggressive in part because officials view downtown revitalization as essential to the city’s tenuous economic survival. Yet homelessness in Fresno is also anomalous. DeVerteuil, May, and Von Mahs (2009) argued that the literature on punitive cities often treats homeless people as passive victims of political economic forces. Yet in urging scholars to explore the compassionate aspect of homelessness management, they continued to represent homeless people as subjects of larger institutional processes. In Fresno, the homeless have been anything but passive. By asserting their right to camp, homeless Fresnans have maintained a visible downtown presence for years. Drawing from the example of Fresno, I propose an understanding of homeless politics as the result of struggle between competing interests, including homeless people’s demand for their right to the city. As Henri Lefebvre wrote, a new space “can never be brought about by any particular group; it must of necessity result from relationships between groups” (1991, p. 380). Thus, punitive urban space is not simply the result of official plans but should be understood as the result of struggle.

**The Production of Space**

This research seeks to explore how and why Fresno officials spatially control homeless people and how homeless people have resisted these controls. I argue that encampments challenge the production of urban capitalist space in Fresno because they defy norms of profit, surveillance, and homogeneity. Throughout the thesis, I engage with Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, as well as the literatures on neoliberal cities, the politics of visibility, sanitation, and the geography of homelessness.
For Lefebvre, space is the product of social relations, rather than an inert stage upon which people and objects move. Lefebvre wrote that space “is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things” (1991, p. 83). Drawing from Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish—according to which commodities are viewed as objects rather than products of exploitation—Lefebvre argued that fetishism also ignores relations of domination that underlie the production of space. He wrote that “space commands bodies” (1991, p. 143) and is produced by dominant groups for precisely that end. But fetishized space is impossible to critique or change. As I argue in this thesis, the media in Fresno often represented the spatial control of the homeless as natural and necessary, thus erasing social relationships of exclusion, surveillance, and forced conformity. In resistance to fetishism, Lefebvre argued that an analysis of the production of space is essential to any critical or revolutionary project.

For Lefebvre, social space is diverse: “We are confronted not by one social space but by many—indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces” (1991, p. 86). Spaces are not distinct terrains with limited boundaries but overlapping and conflicting movements and arrangements. Yet among this multiplicity, each society tends to produce its own dominant space. Lefebvre argued that under capitalism, the dominant form of space has become increasingly abstract. Marx (1992) saw abstraction as a result of capitalist exchange. He argued that capitalism treats labor as a generalized quantity of potential economic value and the diverse objects of the world as equivalent commodities exchanged on the market. Lefebvre saw abstraction as one of the essential problems of capitalist society. He wrote: “There is a violence intrinsic to abstraction … It manifests itself from the moment any action introduces the rational into the real, from the outside,
by means of tools which strike, slice and cut” (1991, p. 289). Thus abstraction forces
diverse and complicated realities into neat categories that aid in the process of exchange.
Lefebvre went beyond Marx’s critique to argue that capitalism creates abstract space. In
Fresno three particular qualities of abstract space— profitability, surveillance and
homogeneity— lie at the heart of homeless politics.

Lefebvre wrote that above all, abstract space must be conducive to profit. Under
capitalism, commodities are objects produced for the sake of profit. They are assigned a
unit of equivalence to ensure their exchangeability on the market. Marx (1992) called this
unit exchange value and argued that it tends to subsume the use value of objects. Thus a
diverse satisfactions and experiences become valued only to the extent that the objects
that caused them are exchanged for profit. For Lefebvre, capitalism does not only turn
objects into commodities but also commodifies space. He saw abstract space as a
“medium of exchange” in which use value is eliminated and “the world of commodities is
deployed, along with all that it entails: accumulation and growth, calculation, planning,
programming” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 307). As space becomes a vessel for profit, the sensual
experience of it is attached to a price. In the capitalist city, the quest for profit comes to
dominate urban planning, and people are increasingly forced to pay money simply to
enjoy space. For example, in 1993 Seattle banned people from sitting on public
sidewalks, but created an exception for those who were patrons at nearby cafés (Mitchell,
1997). In many U.S. cities, the use of public space is clearly tied to consumption
practices.

In Part One of this thesis, I argue that the need for profitable spaces has driven
the politics of eviction in Fresno. In particular, neoliberal governance—in which markets
dominate society—further deepens the role of profit in shaping the city. **Chapter One** outlines the history of revitalization in Fresno in the context of neoliberal hostility to the homeless. The homeless do not pay to occupy space, and officials view them as offending legitimate consumers and reducing the exchange value of the city. Thus, they see homeless eviction as essential to the city’s economic survival. Yet by asserting their right to camp, homeless Fresnans have resisted the commodification of urban space and demanded a right to use space without the requirement of money. In **Chapter Two**, I argue that neoliberal cities increasingly assign homeless governance to private shelter operators and housing developers. In Fresno, shelter operators view homeless encampments as hurting their rates of attendance and thus diminishing their ability to apply for funding, while housing developers view them as a potential asset through which to garner federal subsidies. As such, shelters and developers enter into a paradoxical relationship with the homeless, in which they simultaneously provide spaces of care while also aggressively championing encampment evictions. Both chapters show how the neoliberal drive for profit has led to a politics of eviction in Fresno.

Lefebvre also argued that abstract space is easily surveilled and that it renders people and spaces more visible to the state. Abstract space “locates specificities, places or localities, both in order to control them and in order to make them negotiable” (1991, p. 282). It is rooted in the dominance of the visual realm and made “with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and whatever is contained by them” (1991, p. 75). This visual space is easily read, such that “nothing in it escapes the surveillance of power” (1991, p. 147). Lefebvre expanded on state surveillance in his essay, “Space and the State,” and wrote that rational organization of space “allows the
State to introduce its presence, control, and surveillance in the most isolated corners” (2009, p. 227). Thus, abstract space is rooted not only in the need for profit but also in the state’s need for visibility and surveillance.

In Part Two of this thesis, I argue that officials, in promoting surveillance and control, remove homeless people from the city at large and assign them to secluded and highly governed spaces in the city. In Chapter Three, I argue that shelters and permanent housing facilities in Fresno are dominated and surveilled spaces in which homeless people are not free to control their own daily rhythms and movements. In contrast, homeless people actively produce the space of the encampment, thereby creating self-made homes. This fact reframes encampments as more akin to informal housing and challenges commonsense understandings of homelessness. In Chapter Four, I discuss the nationwide phenomenon of sanctioned tent cities, arguing that they are highly governed spaces more aptly termed “tent wards.” I examine several tent wards in Fresno in order to shed light on their development. Drawing from Lefebvre and others who have theorized visibility, I argue that the city paradoxically surveils homeless people to render them visible, while also rendering them invisible to the consuming public. Thus Fresno’s goal of producing legible and easily surveilled city spaces has resulted in seclusion of homeless people in highly governed spaces.

But abstract space is not only profitable and surveilled—it is also homogenous. Lefebvre argued that because equivalent spaces are more easily quantified and exchanged, capitalism molds a diverse array of spaces to fit the uniform logic of exchange. Taken to its extreme, it creates a series of identical houses, streets, and storefronts. As Lefebvre wrote, “The need for comparability has been met by the
production of virtually identical ‘cells’ … This is the triumph of homogeneity” (1991, p. 337). But homogenous spaces often perpetuate homogenous lifestyles and norms. Lefebvre wrote that when people live and work in homogenous buildings, they are encouraged to adopt a “normalized lifestyle” (1991, p. 338). Capitalist space prefers expressions of difference that are mediated by planned consumption and exchangeability, rather than spontaneous and subjective impulse. To fit the mold, people consume homogenous commodities and occupy homogenous places. In short, capitalism is linked to conformity.

In Part Three of this thesis, I focus on the ideological stigma that lies at the heart of spatial control of the homeless in Fresno. I argue that stigma results from the official representation of downtown Fresno as a homogenous urban space. Because Fresno’s homeless encampments do not conform to the norms of capitalist space, officials represent them as filthy, ugly, criminal, crazy, and thus worthy of eviction and seclusion. In Chapter Five, I argue that while officials represent downtown Fresno as clean, uniform, new and attractive to consumers, they represent encampments as filthy, ugly spaces that should be removed. Yet homeless campers have resisted stigmatizing representations by highlighting their lack of sanitation facilities and demanding the de-commodification of urban infrastructure. In addition, campers have promoted alternative aesthetics by creating diverse structures out of recycled materials and championing the self-made home as a work of art. In Chapter Six, I argue that officials also appeal to representations of the homeless as mentally ill and criminal and seek to spatially seclude them in institutions and jails. In response, homeless campers resisted official representations of homeless criminality by highlighting the ways in which the police
themselves are perpetrators of violence and brutality. Homeless campers also resisted medicalization by championing their mental illness as an alternative, often empowering way of understanding the world. In all of these instances, homeless Fresnans championed their right to difference in the face of capitalist conformity.

It is important to note that in referencing capitalist space, I am not removing political space from the picture. Lefebvre argued that abstract space emerged historically from the marriage of capital and state power, as the bourgeoisie came to use the state as a means to promote their own class interests. Lefebvre viewed abstract space as “determined economically by capital, dominated socially by the bourgeoisie, and ruled politically by the state” (1991, p. 227). Thus, both political power and market relations create abstract space. Increasingly under neoliberalism, political power is diverted to the scale of the city instead of the nation, and the distinction between government and market begins to blur (Theodore, Peck, & Brenner, 2011). In this thesis, I focus on the scale of the city and treat Fresno as a space that is mutually created by the municipal government and a host of private agencies. In Fresno, local government is bound by the requirements of the market, just as the market is controlled by local government.

Furthermore, in referencing economic forces, I do not denigrate the importance of ideology. Indeed, an analysis of Fresno policy toward the homeless makes it impossible to separate structural economic change from ideological conceptions on the ground. In Fresno, the need to grow the local economy is intrinsically tied to stigma against the homeless and the conception that homeless encampments hinder investment. Yet Lefebvre (1991) critiqued theories of ideology and discourse for undervaluing the importance of material, everyday spatial practice. He understood that ideas and material
conditions are inextricably intertwined, and characterized space as the marriage of representations and everyday material practices. In addition, his conception of ideology was sensitive to power differences, and he distinguished between representations imposed on the world by dominant groups, and those imagined by everyday people.

Lefebvre uses the concept of “representations of space” to signify the way dominant groups understand space. Representations of space are conceived of by planners, bureaucrats, and others with the power to impose their blueprints upon the world. Lefebvre promoted the struggle against such representations. He wrote: “representations of space, which confuse matters precisely because they offer an already clarified picture, must be dispelled” (1991, pp. 188-9). In Fresno, stigma against homeless encampments is tied to a representation of them as filthy, ugly, criminal and crazy. Revitalization stems from a representation of downtown Fresno as potentially profitable and normatively homogenous. And shelters, housing facilities, tent wards, and jails emerge from representations of homeless spaces as tolerable only if they are easily surveilled, segregated, and invisible to the consuming public.

In contrast to representations of space, Lefebvre urged the importance of understandings of space by those who use and inhabit it. He called these “representational spaces.” They are the ideals, visions, and dreams of everyday people, and Lefebvre viewed them as “linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, and also to art” (1991, p. 33). Unlike representations of space, they are not subject to the requirements of logic or internal cohesion and are fluid and untethered to societal norms.

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3 Lefebvre also referred to representational spaces as lived spaces, or spaces of representation. Additionally, he referred to representations of space as conceived spaces. For the sake of clarity, I will use the phrases “representational space” and “representations of space” throughout the course of this thesis.
Thus, although space is actively produced through social relations of domination, it is also a realm to contest existing power structures. Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* hints at his larger call for an end to capitalist space and the creation of a new space. An understanding of the production of space adds nuance to his writings on the right to the city, to which I now turn.

**The Right to the City**

Throughout this thesis, I discuss how homeless people have resisted profit-seeking, surveillance, and homogeneity by asserting their right to the city. Lefebvre developed the right to the city theory in response to the rise of capitalist urbanization. He worried capitalist growth would swallow the diverse spaces of the city, creating a homogenous and stifling urban landscape in which space itself is the ultimate object of exchange. He saw planners, bureaucrats, and technocrats as the primary producers of urban space, creating everything “pasteurized, everything hygienic and deodorized” (Lefebvre, 1971, pp. 196-198). Right to the city scholars have argued that the problem of urbanization has worsened in the last several decades as cities have adopted neoliberal ideologies in which economic interests reign supreme (Mayer, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Mitchell, 1997).

In defiance against the commodification of urban space, the right to the city emerges from the chaos and unpredictability of the street. It is the urban dweller's “cry and demand” to reclaim city space from the powerful economic forces that control it. It does not demand inclusion in an unequal and exploitative system, but rather a complete overhaul of the system itself (Mayer, 2012). Although the right to the city has been
interpreted as a movement of the working classes (Purcell, 2002), Lefebvre wrote that the “working class” includes all who are “dispossessed of the city” (1996, p. 179). As such, I understand the right to the city as emerging from the demands of all who are dispossessed. This broader category includes those who are thrust out of the workforce and deprived of the city—those who do not have access to capital, housing, infrastructure, or urban space. This understanding extends the scope for theorizing urban revolutionary potential and more accurately reflects Lefebvre’s vision of a city created by and for all inhabitants. Marcuse (2009) argued for a similarly expansive interpretation of who claims the right to the city. He urged that the right belongs to the culturally alienated, as well as the materially deprived—“those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted” (2009, p. 190).

Capitalist urbanization affects the homeless in unique and horrifying ways. Throughout the 1980s in America, a growing trend toward gentrification coincided with the passage of anti-homeless laws and a greater policing of the homeless (Mitchell, 1997). As I will argue in this thesis, the homeless are often subject to extreme forms of dispossession and thus have a great stake in reclaiming urban space. In Fresno, the homeless have responded to city policy by protesting, refusing to move, erecting highly visible encampments on the steps of City Hall, and building alternative structures and neighborhoods. But they have also responded ideologically, by promoting positive representations of the camps, of homelessness aesthetics, and of homeless ways of seeing. Both should be understood as expressions of the homeless struggle for a right to the city. Thus, I argue that the right to the city is not just about reclaiming material urban...
space but about resisting dominant representations of space. A discussion of homeless resistance, and the right to the city, is woven throughout this thesis.

Homeless Fresnans did not label their own struggle a “right to the city” movement, and many homeless people I spoke with did not characterize themselves as activists. Indeed, the constant threat of eviction posed challenges to ongoing political practice. When people are concerned with everyday survival, it is difficult to pay attention to larger structural issues or engage in sustained activism. In a moment of brutal honesty, an activist I interviewed expressed frustration with working alongside the homeless. She told me:

They can’t see outside of the immediate—by the end of this week, I have to get something taken care of, or else I’m going to jail. To them, that’s all that’s there at the moment. And so you’re talking about organizing a rally two weeks down the road. They can’t get involved in that, because they’ve got something more pressing going on... It’s a huge problem... I see the homeless as being the most powerless group there is.

Many homeless Fresnans had to attend to immediate needs before they could concentrate on political projects, yet their immediate concerns—shelter, sanitation, medicine—were often the result of political exclusion. Thus, homeless struggles in Fresno were fraught with the difficulty of getting long-term movements off the ground.

Homeless activism in Fresno was also not independent from other local movements. Homeless Fresnans allied with a wide array of local activists, including faith-based volunteers, anarchists, legal advocates, artists, journalists, and members of the local Occupy Fresno movement. Similarly, homeless struggles were not monolithic. Every encampment faced its own unique difficulties and displayed its own internal power dynamics. Homeless camps were often divided by racial tensions and gender hierarchies. In 2009, Fresno’s two largest encampments were divided along racial lines. One middle-
aged homeless black man told me, “you know you got your groups … mostly [the homeless] hang with their own kind.” A young white woman described the situation on the streets as a race war between white, Asian, and Hispanic street gangs. She also described street culture as highly patriarchal, and all of the homeless women I interviewed spoke of their fear of sexual violence on the streets.

Despite these internal divisions, several common themes repeatedly emerged from my discussions with homeless Fresnans. People living in encampments were united in their struggle against conformity and insisted on alternative and empowering representations of homeless spaces, aesthetics, ethics, and ways of seeing. Although the people I spoke with did not choose poverty and material deprivation, they often elected to live in encampments rather than shelters or monitored housing facilities. They saw tent cities as providing a respite from dominant ideological frameworks and space for nonconforming identities. They articulated a right to self-defined community, infrastructural access, and an end to evictions, medicalization, and police brutality. In each of these moments they challenged the smooth functioning of capitalist urban growth. In short, they demanded their right to the city.

I adopt the right to the city framework because the stories I heard on the streets match Lefebvre’s vision of the demand for uncommodified urban spaces. But my interactions with the homeless also shaped and nuanced my own understanding of the right to the city. Purcell (2002) interpreted the right to the city as a right to appropriate urban space and participate centrally in its continued production. But the homeless in Fresno did not simply advocate for participation and re-appropriation. They also advocated against stigma. Thus, the right to the city is not only a material struggle but is
fundamentally about the right to self-representation. It is the right to resist dominant representations of space and create new representational spaces. The homeless in Fresno were united in resisting official representations and plans and demanding the right to be different. I do my best, in this thesis, to accurately capture their demands.
Part I: Profit
Chapter One: Revitalization

Don't come to Fresno if you’re homeless
and don't go telling all your friends.
Don’t you go begging or sleeping in the streets …
Please come to Fresno if you’re wealthy.
If you like taking people’s homes,
if you love war and stealing from the poor,
welcome home my friend.

—Fresno protest song⁴

I met Mike Rhodes⁵ soon after I arrived in Fresno. We talked for hours in his office, stacked high with toilet paper donations for the homeless and copies of the left-leaning Community Alliance newspaper. He had been editing the paper for more than a decade and published countless stories and photographs of the evictions. One image depicted a man standing in front of his tent, squinting at the camera. Behind him, a large homemade banner read, “IF NOT HERE, WHERE?” (Rhodes, 2012e). The sign became an emblem for the anti-eviction movement, as it captured the desperation of having no space in the city. That afternoon, I asked Mike Rhodes the same question I asked everyone—why do you think the city bulldozes the encampments? His answer was simple: “They really want to develop downtown into more of a vibrant business center than it is . . . I think it’s primarily a money-driven initiative.” In my conversations with others, this explanation was reiterated over and over again.

Fresno is sandwiched between two urban powerhouses—the San Francisco Bay Area and Metropolitan Los Angeles—and must compete aggressively to attract capital. For several years, the city has teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. Thus, the struggle to

⁴ From Lira (2012).
⁵ Several of the people interviewed for this project elected to remain anonymous. As such, efforts have been made to protect their identity and many of the names included here are pseudonyms.
revitalize downtown underpins the city’s spatial politics. In particular, officials repeatedly told me they aimed to turn downtown Fresno into a “destination.” In the process, the city has destroyed countless homeless encampments. This prompted homeless communities and activist allies to wage an ongoing battle with the city over their right to camp. In the following section, I trace a history of spaces for the homeless in U.S. cities and how they have been affected by the pressures of revitalization. I then introduce the geography of homelessness in Fresno, and provide an account of Fresno’s revitalization and evictions. Finally, I discuss the history of homeless resistance movements in the US, and homeless Fresnans’ struggle for a right to the city that is free from monetary obligations.

**Homeless Spaces and Revitalization**

During the depression of the late 1800s, homeless “tramps” resided in urban centers across the country. These neighborhoods often spanned several square miles of property adjacent to towering central business districts, railroad yards, docks and major thoroughfares (DePastino, 2003). Homeless residents, if they could afford it, paid a few pennies to sleep on bar-room floors, in hammocks, or in cubicle hotels, while they looked for work elsewhere. By the 1900s these neighborhoods—called “main stems”—were packed with employment agencies, barbershops, saloons, cheap temporary lodging houses, vaudeville houses, and secondhand stores. Chicago earned the title “Hobo Capital of America” and was home to anywhere from 30,000 to 75,000 migratory laborers, depending on the season (DePastino, 2003, p. 72). The main stem kept hobos separated from more settled middle and working classes. However, within these neighborhoods, homeless migratory workers could remain relatively free from police harassment and
move at will without prompting arrest. In the main stem, “tramping workers” were numerous enough to easily outmaneuver the police (Schneider, 1986, p. 183).

By the 1920s, the main stem neighborhoods of the “great hobo era” began to decline. The mechanization of farms and factories, coupled with dwindling railroad construction, led to a loss of seasonal migratory labor. As work opportunities dwindled, so did the cheap temporary accommodations and employment agencies that had at one time been the central heartbeat of main stem neighborhoods (Schneider, 1986). These changes gave way to a “smaller, more stationary population of odd-jobbers and the handicapped and misfits for whom the main stem had always been a haven” (Schneider, 1986, p. 175). With the decline of the main stem, skid row was born.

By 1950 skid row had lost its romanticized place in the American imagination and began to look more like the “fragmented and vulnerable” neighborhoods of today (Schneider, 1986, p. 169). The homeless skid row occupant was seen primarily as “a hopeless alcoholic, enslaved by his addiction to the point where he was totally unproductive” (Schneider, 1986, p. 179). Skid rows were home to smaller, less mobile communities that had fewer opportunities to shape the landscape of the neighborhood. With fewer numbers, homeless men could no longer resist police aggression. Beginning in the 1960s, cities began enforcing vagrancy laws with a greater vigor than in the past (Hopper, 2003).

In the post-war era, state welfare kept homeless populations relatively low. But in the 1970s, neoliberal policies of limited government and free markets led to deeper and more entrenched urban poverty (Gowan, 2010). The neoliberal political narrative culminated with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Throughout his tenure, Reagan
systematically dismantled almost a century of antipoverty programs (Gowan, 2010; Piven & Cloward, 1982). The federal government abandoned the political welfare paradigm in favor of “rollback” neoliberalism, which demanded the deregulation and destruction of welfare institutions (Peck & Tickel, 2002, p. 384). Cuts in welfare and housing assistance contributed to an explosion of urban homeless populations in the 1980s (Kasinitz, 1986).

The city itself has been an important site of neoliberal change. Theodore et al. (2011, p. 21) argued that cities are “critical nodes” in the scalar politics of neoliberalization. Geographers have traced a marked shift in the U.S. urban landscape since the industrial era, as cities increasingly sought economic growth and redevelopment. With the growth of these “entrepreneurial cities,” local governments sought to attract capital by actively advertising and selling the urban landscape (Hall & Hubbard, 1996). They abandoned the public service model in favor of increased local economic development (Logan & Molotch, 2005; Cox & Mair, 1988) and became more concerned with attracting jobs and investors than providing welfare (Hall & Hubbard, 1996). They emphasized, above all, “urban revitalization, reinvestment, and rejuvenation” (Theodore, et al., 2011, p. 24). Mayer (2012) argued that the commodification of urban space has deepened in the last several decades as cities across the U.S. compete with each other to attract capital.

To improve their image, entrepreneurial cities engage in a range of practices to reduce the “visible presence” of marginalized groups (MacLeod, 2002, p. 602). In seeking to present themselves as playgrounds for the upwardly mobile, they outlaw homeless behaviors such as panhandling, pushing shopping carts, and sitting on sidewalks (Mair, 1986). In the 1990s in particular, cities began funneling funding for the
homeless into greater efforts to police homeless behaviors and began engaging in aggressive arrest campaigns and property sweeps (Mitchell, 1997). The removal of homeless people from urban centers continued throughout the 1990s as cities across the nation competed with each other to attract investment, pushing for “extravagant convention centers, downtown tourist amusements, up-market, gentrified restaurant and bar districts” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 304). These processes increasingly pushed homeless people into the margins of the urban landscape.

In particular, the entrepreneurial city viewed skid row as a threat to urban renewal. Skid rows were seen as unattractive areas that inhibited economic growth (Schneider, 1986, p. 180). With revitalization, sidewalks in skid rows were valued as pedestrian promenades ripe for the development of new “legitimate” businesses catering to middle-class populations (Schneider, 1986). As skid rows became the latest frontier for urban renewal projects, spaces for homeless people in the urban landscape continued to disappear (Schneider, 1986). As Lefebvre predicted, capitalist urbanism increasingly turned the city into a commodity to be bought and sold, excluding all who could not afford it.

**Homelessness in Fresno, California**

Fresno sits in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley, the most agriculturally productive region in the United States (Cone, 1997). Despite its productivity, Fresno is home to some of the nation’s poorest communities and is often referred to as the “Appalachia of the West.” Nearly one in five Fresnans work in agriculture, and an even larger part of the workforce packs, processes, and transports agricultural products. In
2009, Fresno’s unemployment rate reached 15.5 percent (“California Healthcare,” 2009). A 2010 study found that Fresno's district ranked lowest in the nation on resident “well-being,” based on a combined assessment of health, education, and income (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2011). In 2011, one in four Fresnans lived at or below the poverty line, and Fresno trailed only the border town of McAllen, Texas, as the most impoverished city in the nation (Bishaw, 2012).

Geographers have argued that unemployment and concentrated poverty are necessary to the workings of capitalism (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1986). Capitalist economies are marked by production for private profit. Yet production varies over time and often requires a new influx of labor. As such, capitalist societies must maintain an unemployed labor pool from which to hire workers when necessary. Urban poverty in particular satisfies the need for a surplus labor force (Harvey, 2010). Further, poverty is not spatially neutral, and uneven development is a persistent feature of capitalist economies (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1986). Impoverished areas are necessary to provide cheap labor and low rents so that production can yield higher profits. The agricultural lands of central California, in particular, have experienced a long history of uneven development and inequality (see generally Henderson, 2003; Mitchell, 1996; Mitchell, 2012b). Thus, homelessness in Fresno is intrinsically tied to geographically concentrated poverty and unemployment in central California.

Harvey (2010, p. 237) argued that under capitalism, cities have historically exploited rural peripheries, while in the contemporary era, there is a “growing antagonism based on the internal differentiation within metropolitan areas.” Fresno displays both dynamics. It is simultaneously a city and a periphery, in that it is a center of
commerce that relies on agricultural exports to wealthy markets elsewhere. Indeed, Kovacs (2010) argued that Fresno is a unique hybrid of both rural and urban forms. Yet it also displays internal uneven development, as it is home to some of the most extreme pockets of poverty in the nation. In 2005, Fresno ranked number one on a list of cities with the most concentrated urban poverty (Berube & Katz, 2005). Thus, exploitation in Fresno takes place on two scales—at the level of the city itself in relation to more affluent cities, as well as between neighborhoods and districts.

Much of Fresno’s poverty is concentrated in the downtown neighborhoods. The skid row district is on the southern edge of the downtown, in the historic Chinatown neighborhood.

Figure 1. From Cytron (2009), based on census data from 2000.

**Figure 1** shows a map of Fresno, with the darkest shades indicating census tracts where
the more than 40% of residents live at or below the national poverty rate. Downtown Fresno is in the south, bounded by the triangular intersection of the city’s three major highways. As Figure 1 indicates, it is one of the most impoverished areas of the city. In interviews and casual conversations, Fresnans often lamented that the city has no downtown— it has no urban center for middle-class shopping, recreation, and socializing. As one councilmember told me: “In downtown, unfortunately, many of the neighborhoods here are shot … Business is dried up because they can’t get anybody to come down here anymore.” Other people described the downtown neighborhoods as “floundering” and “a mess.”

In contrast, the wealthiest areas of Fresno border the San Joaquin River Parkway on the far northern edge of the city. In Figure 1, the light shading in the north represents census tracts where the poverty rate is below the national average. Fresno’s wealthy and middle class residents shop and spend their leisure time in the River Park Shopping Center near the river. Because the downtown area has failed to attract middle-class shoppers, this “uptown” shopping center has only grown in recent years. Many of the people I interviewed spoke about urban sprawl moving north and about businesses and housing developments expanding northward.

Housing is a major problem for low-income Fresnans, who were hit particularly hard by the housing boom prior to 2008. Between 2001 and 2005, Fresno’s housing stock appreciated by 143%, more than twice the national average (Cytron, 2009). This eroded housing affordability for both renters and owners such that by 2006, only 39% of Fresno residents could afford to buy a house. The “bust” phase of the housing bubble was also devastating:
As of the fall of 2008, Fresno ranked 12th in the nation in terms of year over year house price depreciation, with prices falling by nearly 18 percent. The implications of the recent declines in house values, coupled with the concomitant rise in foreclosure, are still unfolding. (Cytron, 2009, p. 11)

One implication has been overcrowding in cheap and poorly maintained apartments (Cytron, 2009).

Considering these factors, it is not surprising that Fresno is home to an unusually large homeless population. In 2011, based on a volunteer-led count that took place over 24 hours, local agencies reported a population of 5,106 homeless people in the larger Fresno area (“Fresno Madera,” 2011). But such snapshot data have been critiqued for drastically undercounting homeless populations (Edin, 1992). In 2010, Fresno officials admitted that in addition to all those counted by surveys, “we probably have another 10,500 or so individuals who are also doubled up, or living in places not meant for human habitation, maybe sleeping in their cars” (Fresno City Hall, 2010d). One activist told me that several homeless Fresnans staying in a city-funded warming shelter were never counted on the morning of the survey. Nonetheless, based on these conservative numbers, Fresno had the second highest rate of homelessness in the nation in 2011 (National Alliance, 2012).

By 2013, although the official number had decreased slightly, 84% of Fresno’s homeless population remained unsheltered at night (“Fresno Madera,” 2013). Consultants hired to evaluate Fresno’s shelter system found that Fresno is the largest community in the nation without a “come-as-you-are” homeless emergency homeless shelter. They wrote, “Relative to other similar sized communities, Fresno has few homeless service providers and programs, and most services are overloaded” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 6). In 2006, a district court found that there were only 203 beds
available on any given night, leaving more than 98% of the homeless population unsheltered. In addition, beds are often only available in exchange for compliance with religious activities or drug treatment (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006). Thus Fresno is unique not only in the sheer size of its homeless population but also in the limited nature of its nighttime shelter options.

For more than a decade, homeless people have taken refuge in sprawling encampments concentrated mostly in the skid row area in the southern corner of downtown. Following the 2008 recession, Fresno’s camps briefly captivated the nation, and countless news stories described the plight of out-of-work waitresses and truckers who lived in large-scale encampments on abandoned lots, underneath highway overpasses, on canal banks, and along skid row sidewalks. Although the exact date of its inception is unknown, an encampment colloquially referred to as “New Jack City” traces its beginning to earlier encampments in the city’s abandoned rail-yards. References to homeless camps in this area can be found dating back to 2002 (National Coalition, 2010). A second encampment, referred to by residents alternately as Little Tijuana and Taco Flats, emerged on an adjacent property in 2007. Five other encampments dotted the city’s downtown area.

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Figure 2. The location of 2012 homeless encampments in Fresno, California: 1) the Canal Bank Encampment, 2) the F Street Encampment, 3) the Golden State Off-Ramp Encampment, 4) the Ray Polk Encampment, 5) the Santa Clara Encampment, 6) the Santa Fe Street Encampment, and 7) the Hill. This map was created by Mike Rhodes (using a base map from Google) and used with his permission.

Figure 2 shows the location of seven of Fresno’s largest homeless encampments in 2012. Three of the camps are clustered around Fresno’s two largest homeless service facilities, the Poverello House and the Rescue Mission. Some formation of these encampments has existed on and off for the past decade in and around these neighborhoods. One homeless man told me this heavy presence of homelessness in the downtown area would make revitalization impossible: “They can’t revitalize downtown Fresno … I mean who wants to live like that? Party with a bunch of homeless people?” When I asked him what the city should do, he said there was no solution—there were no jobs and no shelters, and the city was just going to “lock them all up.” Thus, he saw that
revitalization required the removal and control of homeless people, and this is precisely what the government in Fresno sought to do.

**Revitalization in Fresno: A Spatial Chronology**

We’d all like to wave a magic wand and make [homelessness] go away.\(^7\)
—Fresno City Council member

Fresno has long been a city in crisis. As Theodore, et al. noted, neoliberalism operates “more often than not under conditions of crisis” (2011, p. 18). Thus, Fresno can be seen as a city ripe for neoliberal reform. Indeed, officials viewed revitalization as imperative to the city’s economic survival. Because of the northward development and the perceived loss of a vibrant middle-class downtown, Fresno officials have struggled for more than a decade to implement a massive downtown redevelopment project.

In 2000, the city elected former NFL football player and Hollywood actor Alan Autry as mayor (McEwan, 2000) after he promised to spend $25 million on the creation of an artificial lake in the downtown area (McEwan & Wasserman, 2000). Autry was later blamed for redevelopment efforts that by 2010 would leave the city on the brink of bankruptcy, including a $5 million sports complex that “went belly up” (Bullock, 2010), a $28 million renovation of a museum that closed due to financial trouble (Benjamin, 2011), and a $30 million downtown parking garage. *The Fresno Bee*, Fresno's largest print news source, called these projects “handout[s] for a developer” (McEwan, 2010). As one activist told me, “Developers have had the city in their back pockets all along … Nobody has ever been held accountable for those huge debacles that took millions of dollars out of the economy.”

\(^7\) From personal interview, July 2013.
As part of Fresno's revitalization project, city officials have passed a number of laws in an attempt to move homeless people out of the downtown areas. Fresno municipal code prevents anyone from panhandling at a bus stop, on a bus, in a public parking lot, within 50 feet of an ATM, at a queue, or outside a restaurant. Violators are subject to six months in prison and a $1000 fine. The law states that such panhandling threatens “significant government interests by diminishing access to and enjoyment of public places, [and] threatening the commercial well being of local businesses” (Fresno Municipal Code § 9-2608). In 2006, the city passed a “shopping cart ordinance” that made pushing a shopping cart a crime punishable by $1000 in fines and up to one year in jail (Rhodes, 2006b; Fresno Municipal Code § 9-31). It was in this climate that the city encouraged the Fresno Police Department to implement its maverick policy of bulldozing homeless encampments. Over the course of a two-year period beginning in 2005, the city conducted at least 50 such sweeps. After each sweep, homeless people built new encampments. By 2006, the city was bulldozing a particular encampment on E Street in downtown Fresno every two weeks (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006).

The evictions were devastating for Fresno’s homeless. Massive bulldozers came at odd hours and crushed everything in the tent cities, including animals. On one occasion, a man narrowly escaped being bulldozed along with his tent. Often, the police prevented people who were present from recovering their possessions (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006). One resident was physically forced to leave his tent behind as it was loaded into a dump truck. He told a local reporter: "My medicine was in that tent, everything I owned was in that tent and they just destroyed it" (Rhodes, 2006a). On another occasion, a Fresno police officer pushed a homeless woman’s shopping cart into
an irrigation canal of rushing water. The woman, who lived on a breathing machine due to severe asthma, had to attempt to replace her identification, birth certificate, and medical records to requalify for disability (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006). The city also confiscated a disabled homeless woman’s wheelchair and left her sleeping outdoors without shelter or blankets. As a result, she slipped into a coma for two weeks. When police destroyed her property on a second occasion, they threatened to taser her husband if he interfered (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006).

Many of the evictions have been documented in online videos. One video depicts a woman sitting on her couch with her dog in the morning light, watching as bulldozers destroy her home. A sign on one of the structures says, “America please help they are taking my nothings,” while another says, “All property here is valuable. Do not destroy” (c blove, 2014). Another woman stands behind the tarp of her constructed home, surveying the wreckage around her. She says:

The only thing I did was lose my job ... I ended up here and I’m trying to make the best of it and take what they throw away to build a home, to build a life, to give me a foundation so that I can one day be with them again. And they come out here with their clean clothes and their gloves and no smiles ... and they’re stepping on my friend’s home. (c blove, 2014)

After an eviction, one man told me he was forced to sleep on the sidewalk with nothing but a blanket he borrowed from a friend. A woman told me her friend who made a living doing bike repairs lost twelve bikes and countless tools. The city's policies resulted in hundreds of similar personal tragedies. Yet homeless Fresnans were not passive victims, and their struggles are part of a long tradition of homeless resistance.
A History of Homeless Resistance

During the “great hobo era,” homeless seasonal laborers formed a unique subculture that resisted the world of working-class America. Hobos rejected the stifling routines and unfair conditions of factory and office labor. Many saw homelessness as a strategy for “minimizing wage dependency and insulating oneself against exploitation” (DePastino, 2003, p. 69). Many also adopted a sense of pride in their minimalistic and migratory lifestyles. According to one study, 70% of migratory workers expressed no desire to leave the life of the “floater” (DePastino, 2003, p. 69).

In addition to the main stem, homeless migratory workers sought shelter in urban encampments “strategically located outside the immediate purview of local officials and residents but close to running water and railroad division points” (DePastino, 2003, p. 70). Dubbed “jungles,” these camps were small and impermanent settlements on the margins of the city. The hobo ethic of reciprocity “found its most striking expression in these legendary hobo ‘jungles,’ with one observer calling them ‘marvels of cooperation.’ It was here that hoboes ate, bathed, washed their clothes, and ‘shared in the camaraderie of the road’” (DePastino, 2003, p. 70). Literature on hoboing often portrays the jungle as a utopian vision of cooperation. As DePastino (2003, p. 70) wrote:

Indeed it sometimes was [utopian], in the sense that bohemian communities experiment with forms of living that deviate from despoiled norms. But the cooperative structure of jungle camps and hobo life in general derived more from necessity than from a shared romance of the road. Put simply, hoboes lacked the support networks usually available to residentially stable workers. In a world of strangers, migrants drew upon their class experiences to improvise new forms of obligation and mutual aid.

This spirit of community was fertile ground for resistance movements. In the spring of 1894, 1500 homeless members of the Industrial Army movement endured
insufferable heat, freezing cold, and hostile authorities as they hopped trains, rode rivers, and tramped across the country to petition Congress for unemployment relief. Many contingents demanded transportation, shelter, and food from public authorities and commandeered entire trains along the way (DePastino, 2003). This uprising marked the beginning of the “new subculture of western hobo labor” (DePastino, 2003, p. 6). The Industrial Army itself was little more than an association of “glorified” hobo jungles (DePastino, 2003, p. 70). With the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905, for the first time the hobo became a significant political figure. The IWW created a radical discourse of homelessness, in which employers’ greed was to blame for extreme poverty. The organization succeeded in recruiting thousands of homeless people every year into their “One Big Union.” By the turn of the 20th century, the IWW adopted the song “Hallelujah, I'm a Bum” as its unofficial anthem (DePastino, 2003).

Don Mitchell (2012a) argued that homeless jungles of the late-19th and early-20th centuries created a lasting impression in the public imagination of homeless spaces as threatening to the status quo. During World War I, the state sought to eliminate the “subversive potential” of the jungle by bringing tramping workers into more visible city spaces (Mitchell, 2012a, p. 286). Yet again in the 1930s, new homeless encampments emerged as millions of people lost their jobs in the Great Depression, and official tolerance of homeless colonies became the norm (Hopper, 2003). It became popular for homeless people to name encampments “Hoovervilles” to mock the failed policies of President Herbert Hoover (Gowan, 2010). Mitchell (2012a, p. 288) described the Hoovervilles as part of the era of the “tramp scare,” exhibiting the same radical potential as the jungles:
Squatters built shacks in New York's Central Park, and other Hoovervilles climbed up the banks of the Harlem River (to which they would return in the 1980s). In California, shacktowns filled empty lots in all the major cities; encampments of tents, wooden or cardboard boxes and brush filled the river bottoms and irrigation ditch banks in the agricultural countryside.

The Hoovervilles possessed “the potential to unleash a new and scary politics” (Mitchell, 2012a, p. 288).

As with jungles and Hoovervilles, tent cities today provide access to unpoliced space and an opportunity for people to voice their unique political and social demands (Mitchell, 2012a). Ruddick (1996) argued that tent cities automatically insert themselves into the political discourse by occupying urban spaces designed for other users. She highlighted the role that homeless people play in shaping their own geographies, arguing that the impermanence and movability of tent cities stands in opposition to the various mythologies of homelessness, as campgrounds “continue to form in unlikely and unwanted places” (Ruddick, 1996, p. 55). Homeless people are able to survive precisely because of the existence of the “interstitial” spaces that tent cities occupy:

The abandoned, in between, and un-surveilled spaces of the city—whether publicly or privately owned—together with the relatively benign Skid Row, provided the very conditions of possibility for being for 'men without property' . . . under bridges, in abandoned lots still waiting redevelopment, on the grounds of old factories, in the scrub and silt of the rivers that run through town . . . These interstitial spaces become, for homeless people, absolutely central. (Mitchell, 2012a, pp. 282-284)

Tent cities also promote politicized discourses on homelessness. Gowan (2010, pp. 86-87) called this discourse “system talk” and argued that in San Francisco’s homeless encampments, “The survival of strong, coherent system-talk on the street was highly dependent on the existence of alternative street spaces . . . where [homeless people] could congregate away from . . . the stigmatizing gaze of the housed.” Often,
homeless people living in tent cities identify larger economic and political structures as the root cause of homelessness (Gowan, 2010).

Over the past several years, tent cities have been sites of active political mobilization across the nation. In 2006, campers in St. Petersburg, Florida formed “Operation Coming Up” in protest against the lack of available shelter. Homeless campers demanded public bathrooms, safe places to sleep, and an end to arrests for life-sustaining needs (Hunter et al., 2014). When the encampment was disbanded, residents re-pitched their tents as an act of protest. Hunter et al., (2014, pp. 55-56) wrote about the camp:

> From the beginning, activists and homeless persons have made clear that tents were not suitable alternatives to permanent housing. They were, rather, a form of protest and, often, a necessity given the condition of the shelter system … Tent cities offered homeless persons a form of visible protest, group solidarity, self-determination, and safety in numbers.

Similarly, after a tent city in Sacramento was razed to the ground in 2009, homeless people marched through the city demanding their right to camp (Mitchell, 2012a). That same year in Providence, Rhode Island, homeless organizers founded the Hope City encampment to “create a system of ‘peer-to-peer advocacy,’” to make homelessness more visible, and to protest “the lack of availability of shelter space and the restrictions placed on people’s ability to access them” (Hunter et al., 2014, p. 16). In Seattle, Nickelsville was named after Mayor Nickells, who implemented aggressive homeless sweeps. As the National Coalition for the Homeless (2010, pp. 28-30) reported:

> Nickelodeons, as they call themselves, write letters to the city and state government officials advocating for their rights to camp . . . The Nickelsville community is a unique space of protest and their resistance to disband through continued efforts has raised awareness of Seattle’s homeless issues.
Like their predecessors in the early-20th century, contemporary encampments have enabled homeless people to challenge to the status quo.

**Push Back: Fresno Campers Rebuild and Bring an Action**

It’s impossible to collaborate with a bulldozer.
—Fresno Reverend Chris Breedlove

In Fresno, as in encampments elsewhere, homeless campers were not passive victims of city evictions. Homeless Fresnans pushed back against the city’s attempts to revitalize by continually rebuilding encampments and asserting their right to city spaces. As one homeless woman said about those who opposed the encampments:

The way I see it, this is mainly a homeless area. You got stuff that is mainly just the Mission, the Pov. You got the freeway. You got a bunch of fields. This is for the homeless … So basically I think it’s stupid that you come in and build a house over here and then complain about everything. Well, you in a homeless area. If you don’t like it, either you move or talk to the city of Fresno and have them create a place for us, a camp. Because people don’t like to move far away from where they come to every day.

In her eyes, the skid row area of Fresno belonged to the homeless. It was the area where homeless services were located and not a site for development. Thus, other city residents had to accommodate the encampments. This conception defies notions of private ownership and revitalization and instead treats urban space as a product of communal inhabitance.

Homeless Fresnans also used the law as a tool of resistance and allied with advocates to make a case for their legal right to the city. In 2006, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of 350 documented victims of the

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8 From Bedoian (2013).
9 The Rescue Mission and Poverello House.
sweeps, alleging that the city of Fresno and the State of California violated the plaintiffs' due process rights and their right against unreasonable search and seizure (National Coalition, 2010). It was the largest class action lawsuit ever filed on behalf of the homeless. Homeless Fresnans testified about the losses they incurred during evictions and the fact that they had nowhere else to be in the city. During the hearings, the courtroom was packed with homeless activists (Rhodes, 2006d).

In May 2008, a U.S. District Court judge issued a permanent injunction against the arbitrary destruction of homeless people's property and ordered the defendants to pay $2.3 million in damages (National Coalition, 2010). The court found that the “irreparable harm from the City’s practices also includes the harm to homeless people’s security and dignity” (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, p. 88). In the wake of the lawsuit, the sweeps slowed down, and tent city residents enjoyed a temporary reprieve. In 2008, Mayor Autry officially admitted defeat, saying that the city’s policy toward the homeless had “failed” and that it was the “most expensive and ineffective, discompassionate way to address the homeless situation” (Rhodes, 2008a).

New Developments: Elections, Business Districts, Roads and Lofts

In 2008, Autry endorsed businesswoman Ashley Swearengin to replace him as mayor (Boyles, 2008). Swearengin had a long resume of achievements in the world of business. She was the former director of the Office of Community and Economic Development at Fresno State University, had been appointed to the California Commission for Economic Development, and served as a board member on the Fresno Business Council (“Governor appoints,” 2008). When Swearengin won the election, she
made downtown development the top priority of her administration. As one activist told me:

People were very excited about her because they thought she would be good for business. She would help the economy . . . So I think that was one reason why she got elected very easily and also re-elected. And then of course they liked the idea that she was in favor of downtown revitalization . . . I think that’s one of the reasons the city has been more or less persecuting the homeless.

After the collapse of a proposed $400 million commercial-residential project in the heart of downtown, Swearengin pushed for the creation of a downtown Property-based Business Improvement District (PBID), giving a $56,000 loan to supporters of the proposed district to help pay for consultants (Hostetter, 2009). The PBID has been at the forefront of efforts to change the downtown landscape. The head of the PBID explained her goal:

The business community needs to look at downtown as important. The community needs to value downtown and start to come back and check things out … We definitely need a no camping ordinance. We need a “no sit on the sidewalk” policy. There shouldn’t be lying down in public rights of way. And the city needs to make a commitment, and they have, that this encampment, when they clean it up this time, that they’re not gonna allow them to come back . . . Because yes, the homeless people have rights, but there are property owners. Literally there are people sleeping on their property, and defecating on their property. And their values go down.

In addition to the PBID, Swearengin also developed new public entities to oversee revitalization efforts, one of which was the Downtown and Community Revitalization Department (Hostetter, 2009). Craig Sharton, director of the department, said in a television interview that his goal was to attract people to come into the city from outside Fresno “to get the things, whether that’s goods or fashion or music.” To do so, he said,

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10 Incidentally, after the Fresno Redevelopment Agency was dissolved due to a statewide initiative against wasteful redevelopment agency funding, a series of contracts were discovered revealing that the agency owed City Hall $60 million in unpaid contracts (Hostetter, 2012a).
“We write the rules so that the things we want to have happen are very easy, very clear, and that’s what investment likes. Capital goes where there is clarity” (Fresno City Hall, 2010c). As of 2011, there were at least 15 redevelopment agencies in Fresno County (Hostetter, 2012a), including the now-defunct Fresno Redevelopment Agency, created to replace “blight” and “eyesores” with “shopping, entertainment” and “business attraction” opportunities (Fresno Redevelopment Agency, 2013).

Not long after Swearengin took office, she began a public relations campaign aimed at improving Fresno’s sinking reputation. USA Today featured on article on the city’s ongoing effort to rebrand itself:

For decades, Fresno has been a punch line, a city maligned on the national stage for everything from its smog and crime, to its hot weather and reputation as a bastion of the un-hip. The city is fighting back, starting with a $1.2 million marketing campaign with the slogan: "Be World-Class. Be Fresno." The campaign, in part a response to the down economy that made promoting the city more important than ever, is geared toward creating a brand identity for the city for both business travelers and tourists … Fresno has tried to fight back before. In 2006, the city spent $120,000 on a public relations campaign … There has been a flurry of other slogans and branding efforts, including "Fresno: Smile when you say that" (2000) and "Fresno: The New Frontier" (2004). (Gibbons, 2009)

But the “Be Fresno” slogan wasn’t sticking. Instead, Fresno’s tent cities were gaining increasing attention in several national and international news sources. The negative press did not promote the image Swearengin wanted to present of Fresno as an attractive site for business. She responded by cracking down on the homeless. In May 2009, Swearengin pledged in her State of the City address to shut down Taco Flat and New Jack City within six weeks (Clemings, 2009; National Coalition, 2010). The next month city police came into the tent cities with bulldozers and razed them to the ground.

11 See Footnote 6.
(National Coalition, 2010). In pushing for revitalization, Swearengin sought to recreate downtown Fresno as a site of consumption, growth, and profit. Homeless encampments did not fit her vision for the future. Yet homeless Fresnans continued to resist the commodification of the city.

In early 2010, dozens of homeless activists rallied against the city's efforts to fence off a lot after clearing out a tent city from the site. Several residents refused to move from the site. Activists spoke out against government policies that lined the pockets of wealthy developers (Borkert, 2010). By late that evening, yielding to resident pressure, the city abandoned its plans to fence off the area. The same month, about 50 homeless men and women marched from their encampment to the courthouse to protest an attempted eviction. At a hearing on the city's efforts to obtain a restraining order against the activists, the courtroom was filled with homeless people and their supporters, waving small American flags (Rhodes, 2010).

That same year, the city passed a law making it illegal to panhandle in medians (Lloyd & Benjamin, 2010; Fresno Municipal Code § 14-2501). Meanwhile, Swearengin funneled her time and money into a campaign to bring a new road into the heart of downtown. Despite the characterization of downtown as completely devoid of business, it was in fact home to an outdoor pedestrian shopping center—the historic Fulton Mall—that catered mostly to low-income, Hispanic residents (or, as one person described it to me—"those cheap Mexican stores down over there.") Swearengin pushed an effort to destroy the Fulton Mall and install a road for vehicular traffic that would attract middle-class shoppers away from the River Park Mall on the north side of the city. The following is an excerpt from my field notes that described the contrast between the two spaces:
I lost the turnoff and found myself inside the Fulton Street Mall— the famous and highly contested outdoor pedestrian mall— an entire area of downtown blocked to traffic. Biking through, I saw tiny Mexican dress shops, dollar stores, a vibrant low income economy, and mostly homeless people shading themselves under the trees … The River Park Mall on the north side of town— everyone says it’s the prototype that the mayor wants downtown to become. It was upscale— like Disneyland with manufactured lawns and trees and fountains … You can sit in a beautiful setting and eat a few pieces of sushi for $20, if $20 doesn’t mean that much to you.

Thus, the goal of revitalization was not to create more business, but to replace low-income businesses with high-end boutiques perceived to generate more revenue.  

Developers caught on to the mayor’s new model. In the climate of revitalization, housing developments began popping up in downtown neighborhoods where land prices were cheap. One of Fresno’s largest developers shifted its focus from neighborhoods in the north to the downtown area. Its website stated that it was “revitalizing downtown Fresno” by its commitment “to providing a true live – work – play lifestyle” (Granville Urban Development, 2013b). One of the most prominent of its new developments is the “Fulton Village” project. The Fulton Village website boasts:

Living Upscale Downtown has never looked so good! Fulton Village is a new class of contemporary-chic lifestyle now available in the Mural District of downtown Fresno … Steps from all of the hip and edgy art galleries, Fulton Village is sure to please those who crave the metropolitan lifestyle. (Granville Urban Development, 2013a)

The complex is targeting a population that wants a more “edgy” urban experience and has the ability to pay big bucks for it. In a nearby complex owned by the same developer, rents are as high as $2,600 per month for a two-bedroom apartment. Yet another nearby downtown complex is ironically called the “Vagabond Lofts.” Thus, the developer

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12 Incidentally, the shopping center in Fresno bears the same name as the Fulton Mall pedestrian shopping center in Brooklyn that was subject to very similar processes of gentrification and high-end development. For a vivid account of the story of Brooklyn’s Fulton Mall, see the film *My Brooklyn* by Kelley Anderson.
appropriates a romanticized vision of edgy homeless drifters, while simultaneously contributing to the removal of homeless people who live in the downtown area.

Although gentrification is normally understood as a process that displaces the housed poor, one Fresno activist characterized the removal of homeless encampments from downtown Fresno as a form of gentrification:

They’re gonna push a lot [of homeless people] out. They have pushed a lot out when they closed the encampments. They’re just spread out all over the town. Basically the revitalization is a move towards gentrification, which is get rid of the people who are not rich and replace them with rich people … Gentrification is not a good thing.

In a candid moment, a local councilman I interviewed also expressed ambivalence about downtown gentrification:

I don’t think gentrifications is the answer to revitalizing neighborhoods. So it remains to be seen whether that’s a good thing or not. Rich, trendy, whites moving into a neighborhood like that, I think it displaces the affordable housing, and it has its other effects. But the idea is that the administration wants to bring these downtown neighborhoods back to life.

Thus, although removing the poor was not necessarily a politically popular outcome, it was seen as necessary to bringing the downtown area “back to life.” In this sense, healthy neighborhoods are associated not only with improved housing stock and infrastructure, but also with the removal of low-income people.

Mayor Swearengin spent much of her June 2011 State of the City address discussing the successes of downtown revitalization. She cited the new lofts popping up all over downtown and improved ticket sales for the Fresno Grizzlies baseball team (City of Fresno, 2011a). In 2012, her third annual “State of Downtown” address entitled “Play. Work. Live” was accompanied by a slide presentation with images of hip young Fresnans out drinking and sleek professionals at work (State of the Downtown, 2012). This
language is almost identical to that used in other cities. Seattle’s one-time City Attorney argued that homelessness creates a “psychology of fear that has killed other formerly great cities because people do not want to shop, work, play or live in such an environment” (Sidrin, 1993, emphasis added). Similarly, Teir (1998, p. 256) argued that in the wake of its anti-homeless campaign, “Las Vegas is bringing people back to its downtown” by making it a more desirable place to “live, work, recreate, and shop.” In Fresno, the mayor was selling the city using the standard language of U.S. anti-homeless campaigns. Predictably, the homeless encampments that dotted the downtown landscape were absent from her sales pitch. In the style of her predecessor, she would continue to pour millions of taxpayer dollars into downtown redevelopment while simultaneously driving the poorest homeless Fresnans from downtown encampments.

In 2012, Swearengin said that the root of the challenge was to “maintain public order among people who insist on their rights but ignore the rights of others” (Hostetter, 2012b). Thus, she viewed homelessness as a battle of competing rights—the right of businesses to cater to middle-class and wealthy shoppers and the homeless right to the city.

**Pushing Back Again: Survival and Beyond**

In response to Swearengin’s administration, homeless Fresnans sought to protect their tent cities from destruction. In two incidents in 2010 and 2011, tent city residents simply refused to move when police told them to (Borkert, 2010; Rhodes, 2011a). In both cases, the city yielded to resident pressure and abandoned its plans to destroy the camps. Again in 2011, on the eve of massive tent city demolition, homeless Fresnans and their
allies held a press conference at Fresno City Hall calling on the mayor to abandon the planned evictions (Rhodes, 2011a). The city went ahead with its plan, despite the opposition. Campers engaged in a face-off with police officers and bulldozers. They linked arms, sang songs, and stood for hours around the encampment. Protesters blocked the bulldozers, shouting “Whose street? Our street!” Protesters held signs that said “QUIT IT NOW” and “YOU CAN’T STOP US.” A homeless veteran displayed an upside-down American flag on his home to represent “a sign of distress for Americans who are afraid for their lives” (Guy & Lloyd, 2011; Rhodes, 2011b). Eventually, the police promised that if protesters moved to an adjacent lot, they would be allowed to stay. When they moved, however, the police immediately threatened them with arrest. Thus, political negotiations with the city became nearly impossible because concessions were not honored.

Despite this difficulty, homeless Fresnans continued their campaign for safe and legal campsites, specifically demanding legislation that would allow encampments to remain autonomous and self-governing (Rhodes, 2012d). In 2012, homeless Fresnans filed another spate of lawsuits in the District Court against the city of Fresno arising out of continued tent city destruction (Rhodes, 2012f). The lawsuits are ongoing as I write, in Summer 2014. For the homeless in Fresno, the right to the city includes the right to simply exist in the city. Absent their ongoing struggle, Fresno’s tent city residents risk being bulldozed out of existence.

In light of the struggle to simply exist in the city, it is tempting to conclude that Fresno tent city residents mobilize only because they must do so to survive. But, as I explore in further chapters, the resistance emerging from Fresno tent cities goes above
and beyond demands for the right to a legal campsite. It includes such problems as police brutality, lack of sanitation infrastructure, and repressive shelter spaces. These demands indicate that tent city residents have organized for larger urban changes that surpass the requirements of basic survival.

Homeless Fresnans have also protested against the inequity of redevelopment. In 2012, homeless activists allied with Occupy Fresno in a shared struggle against downtown revitalization. Fresno’s Occupy movement was one of the longest-lasting Occupy movements in the U.S. and established a downtown encampment in Courthouse Park, where both homeless and non-homeless activists lived for more than seven months. In 2012, homeless Fresnans marched alongside Occupy activists from Granite Park to the Chukchansi baseball stadium, where they erected tents spray-painted with the slogans: “IF NOT HERE, THEN WHERE?!” and “PLAY BALL.” Granite Park was a prime example of Fresno’s failed downtown development projects. The park, now just a fenced-in patch of dry grass, left the city $6 million in debt and costs $100,000 a year just to maintain (Saucedo, 2013). During the protest, activists hung a massive banner on the fence that stated “TAXPAYER’S PARK.” Chukchansi Stadium was another great expense to the city. Homeless activists and Occupy protesters held hands around the stadium in a symbol of solidarity. Not only were they demanding that the land be made available for camping, but they also highlighted the injustice of expensive redevelopment projects. As the Community Alliance reported, “This large lot at Granite Park could be used to house Fresno’s homeless in a safe and legal campsite. There is plenty of land here where the homeless could live safely and have basic public services (restrooms, drinking water, and
trash pick up) that everyone else in the city takes for granted” (Rhodes, 2012g). The protest highlighted the inequity of downtown development.

**When a Windfall Becomes a Disaster**

Yet the homeless struggle for the right to the city was fraught with setbacks. By the time I arrived in Fresno in 2013, ten years of ongoing evictions had drastically changed the landscape of homeless encampments. Many homeless people had been driven away from the downtown area because of the difficulty of constantly having to rebuild. People who remained tended to be those who were the most dependent on services, and could not survive elsewhere. As communities were successfully eroded, the right to the city became more and more tenuous.

Just before I left Fresno in August 2013, the city unrolled an aggressive, unprecedented plan to eliminate every single encampment in Fresno, particularly focusing on the skid row area. It spent $141,000 just to destroy the three downtown encampments (Hostetter, 2014) and developed a “taskforce” that would ensure that the homeless could not set up camp again. On a nationally broadcast news program, one homeless Fresnan said:

All of our friends and neighbors that were there are just scattered from this alley to that alley and I haven’t been able to be in contact with any of them except one … They can’t sit there for more than five minutes without the taskforce shoving them off … They pushed us out of the city to go to the county and now the county is overflowing with homeless people and they don’t know what to do with us, and so they’re pushing back. There’s nowhere for us to live. (Homelessness Marathon, 2014)

Several activists surmised that this plan was related to the $90 billion dollar high-speed rail project that was set to begin in the coming years. The rail line is slated to be
constructed first in Fresno and then work its way south and north. Local planners had identified Chinatown—Fresno’s skid row district—as a prime site to locate the station. The project is predicted to drastically change the landscape of the impoverished Central Valley, as people will be able to live in Fresno and commute to San Francisco or Los Angeles in close to an hour (California High-Speed Rail Authority, 2012). Many people I spoke with were afraid that the project would turn their city into a suburb of Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Yet for city officials, the rail line promised exactly the kind of financial influx they were desperate to attract. Mike Rhodes identified the high-speed rail plan as a primary factor in the evictions of the homeless: “[By evicting the homeless], they’re setting the stage for that larger role that the downtown area might play with the high-speed rail.” Much of the property in Chinatown is owned by Stephen Roscoe, a high-profile developer who is also heavily involved in local homelessness politics. Simultaneously, Roscoe was appointed by the California governor to sit on the California High-Speed Rail Authority board that oversees statewide planning for the installation of the rail line. As the only member of the board from the San Joaquin Valley, he single-handedly represents the interests of Fresno. When I met with him, he explained his interest in homelessness and revitalization in Fresno:

We need to grow our economy here, so I think the net effect of homelessness here is far more severe than it is in a city that’s already got other assets or attributes which draw people. In my mind, to make revitalization a success, we need to make downtown Fresno a destination. We have not been able, to this point, to identify a workable model for making that connection—make it a destination. And without dealing with the homeless problem I think it’s simply makes it even more difficult.
His role as both a mover and shaker in homeless politics and beneficiary of skid row development placed him in a unique position of power in relation to the downtown encampments. Thus his view of homelessness as a challenge to economic growth was highly influential in determining the future of Fresno homeless politics.

After the 2013 sweeps, the city began constant enforcement of its anti-camping ordinance, and people could no longer regroup and set up camp elsewhere. The city destroyed the Canal Bank encampment, one of the few camps that was left relatively unscathed in prior evictions. Everyone was forced to leave. A woman named Peaches whom I met there ended up building a small camp by herself in a vacant lot on the far edges of the city. No-one knows where many of the others are living. As one Fresno Housing official told me, the sweeps make their job of providing services to the homeless much more difficult. And without the community, safety, and relative stability of encampments, homeless struggles are at risk of fading into isolation and invisibility.

**Conclusion**

It is far too simple to conclude that Fresno officials and developers are only interested in squeezing money out of the downtown landscape and plowing through homeless encampments in the process. Many of the officials I spoke with expressed nuanced and thoughtful views on homeless politics. A woman at the Fresno Housing Authority told me in no uncertain terms that she did not believe in criminalizing homelessness, although she saw no alternative to the city’s ongoing evictions. A council member told me he saw no other solution. His constituents who lived in poor neighborhoods often complained about the “hobos,” “winos” and “crackheads” in the
area. He said, “So that’s what people in the neighborhood think of the homeless.” He saw it as his duty help create safe, clean neighborhoods for the residents of his district, and part of that task was to remove the homeless. The high concentration of homelessness in impoverished neighborhoods negatively affected local residents who—like public officials—wanted their neighborhoods to be “revitalized.” Thus, evictions are not simply the ambition of greedy politicians but flow from the multiple economic and political pressures that Fresno must address.

Fresno is a city that must develop to survive and thus leaps at any chance to attract investment to its tattered downtown neighborhoods. As Stephen Roscoe told me, the city does not have the cultural capital of larger cities and cannot claim to be a “destination” for tourists or investors. Thus, Fresno’s bulldozing practices must be viewed in light of larger processes of neoliberalism and urban capitalist development. Fresno is struggling to stay afloat in one of the most impoverished regions in the U.S. Its poverty is the product of capitalist processes of uneven development and exploitation. If Fresno is to overcome its economic stagnation, it must produce spaces that are conducive to profit, and must treat space as a valuable commodity.

Despite this, the history of mobilization in Fresno's tent cities indicates that encampments allow residents to resist an increasingly commodified urban landscape. As revitalization forges ahead, homeless communities produce their own sub-cities to survive in an increasingly commodified downtown. In demanding a right to space, tent city residents counter the official narrative of the entrepreneurial city. They resist not only official bulldozing plans but also the larger structures of capitalism. Fresno’s tent
cities insist that space is not a commodity to be bought and sold and that the city is not an asset to be privately owned.
Chapter Two: Privatization

Homelessness is a business now.
—Alphonso Williams, Fresno camper

[Heaven] has to be better than this, right?
If nothing else the poverty pimps won’t be there.
—Fresno poet Dixie Salazar

One afternoon toward the end of my research, I met an exasperated community organizer over lunch. She was fed up with the “poverty pimps” who crafted homeless policy and was moving to Northern California in just a few days. At the end of our meeting, she handed me a thick stack of papers that represented her years of research into the tangled web of homelessness funding. I have lugged those papers with me across the country more than once. In reviewing the various plans and budgets, meeting notes, and newspaper clippings, it was difficult to discern who crafted policy, who funded it, and how funds were dispersed. Yet one theme surfaced repeatedly: homeless management goes far beyond the confines of City Hall. The homeless in Fresno are not simply governed by elected officials but also by a host of shelter operators and developers primarily concerned with the success of their respective organizations.

DeVerteuil, et al. (2009) promoted “homeless management” as a framework for thinking through the geographies of homelessness and argued that it is a complex, nuanced system of institutions that are often accommodating as well as punitive. The authors urged geographers to move beyond a punitive framework to examine the myriad spaces of care and compassion that homeless people move through in the city. In an

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13 From Mike Rhodes (2008).
14 From Salazar (2013).
earlier article, DeVerteuil (2006, p. 119) admitted that shelters and service providers, although not clearly punitive or revanchist, are part of the larger task “of relieving prime urban areas of their troublesome populations.” In this chapter, I move beyond DeVerteuil, et al.’s framework to argue that homeless management is increasingly marked by neoliberal modes of privatized governance, such that institutions of care actively create the punitive landscape in Fresno. Simply put, the city was not the only force driving evictions in Fresno. Shelters promoted bulldozing practices to ensure future funding opportunities and city approval, and developers turned Housing First initiatives into redevelopment and “de-encampment” projects. Under neoliberal schemes of homeless management, these private institutions mimicked the punitive politics that have traditionally emerged from police departments and mayoral offices.

Privatized Poverty Governance

Although “actually existing neoliberalism” plays out differently in different contexts, it is possible to discern several underlying patterns in neoliberal practice (Theodore et al., 2011). In particular, the age of neoliberal policy has been marked by the shift from state to private governance: “Businesses and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and settling regulatory frameworks” (Harvey, 2005, pp. 76-77; see generally Dixit, 2007; Read, 2009). Under neoliberalism, the boundary between states and markets begins to blur (Theodore et al., 2011). Foucault argued that neoliberal markets become “a sort of permanent economic tribunal confronting government” (2008, p. 247) and that the “law of the market” replaces rights with individual economic
interests. All human differences “are effaced as one relation; that of economic self-interest, or competition” (Read, 2009, p. 35). Thus, the law of competitive individual gain comes to govern society.

Under neoliberalism, the marketplace itself governs poverty alleviation. In the “rollout” phase of neoliberal poverty governance, welfare programs are replaced by privatized models rooted in notions of capital gain. Globally, the poor constitute a particularly lucrative market, as poverty relief grants are funneled into private corporations and microloans for the poor come with astronomical interest rates (Gates, 2008; Roy, 2010). As Roy (2010) noted in the context of international poverty alleviation schemes, the poor become objectified — they are seen as “assets” that can be captured through marketized models. Harvey (2005, p. 156) wrote that in the United States, privatized welfare programs amount to a “vast redirection of public moneys for corporate benefit.” As Funiciello (1993) argued in a scathing indictment of the welfare system, the U.S. poverty industry diverts public funds to a vast and bloated nonprofit sector. U.S. homeless management systems are similarly tied to the logic of neoliberal poverty governance (Willse, 2010).

As in most U.S. cities, Fresno’s “Continuum of Care” is the primary mechanism for homeless management. It is composed of organizations that collectively request and allocate funding and work to create a comprehensive vision for homeless management. On the Continuum, private corporations and nonprofits outnumber government officials. In particular, the Continuum includes six developers and banks, as well as the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, the Fresno Redevelopment Agency, and twenty-nine nonprofits (Continuum of Care, 2012). Historically, there has been a revolving door in employment
between shelters, business interests, and government offices. The following section traces the way in which private shelters have sought to eradicate homeless encampments in the interest of ensuring their continued existence.

**The Shelter Industrial Complex**

The social services thrive on [homelessness]. They make a business out of it … And we still sit in the same place. They get millions of dollars, and we get nothing. Something is very wrong with that picture. —Alphonso Williams, Fresno camper.\(^{15}\)

As I discuss in Chapter Three, homeless people who take refuge in shelters are often subject to a high degree of surveillance and control. Yet in Fresno, homeless people living *outside* the shelter system, on city streets and in encampments, are also subject to spatial control by homeless shelters. For years, officials at local homeless shelters and service providers have successfully lobbied the city to bulldoze the homeless encampments that surround their facilities, in part due to the perception that encampments are a financial liability.

Until recently, shelters were seen as the only alternative to living on the streets, in jails, or in prisons. In 1987 the McKinney Act stimulated the growth of a massive “bureaucratic structure for the management of homelessness” (Gowan, 2010, p. 48). Efforts to create a constitutional right to housing were later overturned, and activists' triumph in the passage of the McKinney Act spawned a “homeless archipelago” (Gowan, 2010, p. 47). Over the course of a ten-year period, the number of homeless agencies in the U.S. multiplied tenfold (Gowan, 2010). Competition for federal funds lead to what many activists have called the “the shelter industrial complex” (INCITE!, 2007; Contes, 

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\(^{15}\) From Rhodes (2008b).
Contes, Foster, Price, Miller, & Lewis, 2009). Samira Kawash (1998, p. 331) argued that “entrepreneurs willing to cash in on the economy of poverty scored big in the 1980s, a boom period for shelter constructions.” Shelter providers have historically engaged in a hostile relationship with street people, perceiving them “as not wanting to follow the rules against alcohol or be in at certain hours” (Wright, 1997, p. 247). In Fresno, this manifested in surprising ways.

Poverello House is Fresno’s primary homeless service provider, providing free meals three times a day and hosting an outdoor shelter (National Coalition, 2010). It was started in 1973 by Mike McGarvin, whose self-published autobiography Papa Mike described his long climb out of poverty, drugs, and violence (McGarvin, 2003). It is known on the streets simply as “the Pov.” One shelter operator described its modest beginnings:

Mike McGarvin would take sandwiches out on his days off and deliver them. And then other people got involved, and they started to have soup kitchens where they’d put up tables and they’d serve chili … And then somebody donated … what’s currently the Poverello House— an old blood bank, not a window in it. Eventually, Jim Connell, a former stockbroker, took over as CEO. A friend had asked him to run it for a year, and he ended up doing it for 23.

Poverello has encouraged a contentious relationship between shelter staff and street populations and has repeatedly targeted tent cities that develop in front of its property. In 2003, a community of homeless people formed a tent city on a former junkyard adjacent to the Poverello House (City of Fresno, 2007). Poverello posted signs in the area warning residents of a “cleanup.” At the request of the shelter, police officers and sanitation workers dismantled the encampment. During testimony for the Kincaid case, Jim Connell described the destruction of homeless people’s bicycles and shopping
carts as “compassionate” (Rhodes 2006d). In 2011, police told residents of an encampment near the Poverello House that they needed to clear out by 5pm because the shelter had complained. This time, Poverello House banned all campers from using their services. Yet residents refused to move. Eventually, the shelter yielded to the protesters, and the tent city was able to endure (Rhodes, 2011a).

By 2013, the shelter was surrounded by three of Fresno's seven street encampments. Jim Connell explained why he wanted the encampments removed:

We’ve seen the number of people coming for services, particularly at the women’s center and the clinic, go down dramatically this year. And the anecdotal evidence is that particularly the women and children are afraid to go through that gauntlet to get in here. So it is affecting our services … I’ve had several meetings with the mayor and different people in the administration and they say they plan on cleaning it up at some point in time … Our mission is to serve the poor, whether they’re homeless or not homeless, and to provide meals, clothing, medical care. Our mission is not to solve the problem of homelessness. People sometimes get confused about that.

In short, Connell sought to remove the encampments to enable the shelter’s larger mission of serving the poor. My conversation with Connell was interrupted when he received a phone call from the City Manager to set up a meeting about the encampments. As a local advocate later told me, “The Poverello House is about to make a move to force all those people to leave. And they have close connections with City Hall. I think they could pretty much get the police or whatever to do what the need to do.”

Sherry Oliver is a no-nonsense woman who has devoted her life to working for the poor. She runs a day shelter for women located near the Poverello House. When I spoke with her, she espoused a similarly negative view of the encampments surrounding the facility and also encouraged the evictions. She lamented that many of her clientele,
mostly the housed poor, had stopped coming since the encampments developed around the property:

So you don’t see nearly the families anymore that you used to because I think they just don’t want to come through that maze … Obviously you don’t want this encampment to be located here. That’s hurting your services and your ability to provide them. … It’s a dilemma, because yes people need their freedom and they have a right to live, but the impact on everybody else is very difficult.

She was worried that the shelter’s summer programs might be cancelled due to low attendance and saw the homeless people living in encampments as hardened criminals. The only time she ever passed the encampments was from the safety of a moving car. She said:

You take your life in your hands to walk down F Street right now… I’m not sure where some of these people came from, but I do know that they burn the surface off the copper wire and so forth right out here, and we’ve called the fire department a couple of times because of that. Even the firefighters don’t like to come.

When I asked what she thought about how the city was handling homelessness, she expressed great frustration and asked me to turn off my recorder so she could speak honestly about the city. Back on the record, she told me she had been lobbying the city to remove the encampments for quite some time and said that “hopefully, things will move now that they’ve gotten the message that it is violent out there.” Thus, she saw that the very existence of her organization was threatened by the presence of homeless encampments.

The Fresno Rescue Mission was founded in 1949 as an evangelical Christian organization and is currently headed by Larry Arce, a probation officer turned reverend (Alexander, 1992). Over the years, the Mission has directed and funded a series of private evictions. In 2006, Rescue Mission employees, armed with a fork lift and dumpster,
destroyed a nearby encampment on public property. One woman, who was barred from
the local women’s shelter because she was schizophrenic, lost her new tent and had
nowhere to sleep that night. When activists tried to retrieve the tent from the Mission’s
dumpster, Arce called the police and accused the activists of stealing. In 2007, Rescue
Mission crews dismantled a Christmas display that several homeless people had erected.
One homeless woman said, “after that I put up a sign of a big heart on the fence and the
words ‘love each other’ and ‘forgive’ but they came out and stole those too” (Rhodes
2007c). During testimony for the Kincaid case, Arce admitted his “disciples” destroyed
people's property even when they left their carts on the street to stand in line at the
Mission for a meal (Rhodes 2008c). In 2008, six homeless Fresnans sued the Mission
over the evictions (Rhodes, 2008c). The complaint described a particular incident in
which the Mission destroyed a couple’s tent containing their bedding, clothing, jewelry,
family photos, birth certificates and other documents:

[The plaintiff ] asked Arce if he could get his property back and Arce responded
“No, but you can get off my property.” During his conversation with Arce, [the
plaintiff] started to experience chest pains due to his heart condition.
Unfortunately, his heart medication was one of the items that the “Disciples” had
taken and thrown away. (Rhodes, 2008c)

In 2007, Arce had been the driving force behind a proposal to officially
criminalize camping city-wide. I spoke with Arce about why he supported the evictions.
He said:

Me and Jim Connell worked on a comprehensive project. If you’re going to have
homeless and you’re going to have those that are out on the streets, and those that
are going to be camping out, let’s do something more comprehensively that’s a
funnel thing. Where the city would pass an ordinance and say you cannot camp
out willy nilly anywhere you want to, in front of people’s houses, in front of
businesses out on the streets … Things have turned upside down. They’re
controlling instead of us controlling and saying— hey we’re not going to allow
you to do that. That’s not the way people live. You need to get into a program,
you need to get your life together … From my opinion the city is walking on eggshells, they’ve lost their backbone in enforcing the ordinances.

Thus, Arce claimed he promoted evictions because he rejected “the way people live” in the encampments. He was pleased when Fresno’s Police Chief, who is also a Rescue Mission board member, began pushing aggressively for evictions in 2013.

Local shelter operators were also hostile to people from the community who provided aid to those living in the encampments. As Sherry Oliver put it:

People feel like they’re helping them, so where we used to have tents and very temporary things, people are building structures, they’re wooden, and that just compounds the problem around us … And then the wood and stuff, that just makes it worse for us to try and provide services. And I understand other people’s perspective. They don’t realize what we’re trying to do, and to have the encampment right on our doorstep precludes people that would like to come for services that aren’t homeless, because of the fear element.

Larry Arce discouraged aid to the homeless because he saw them as unproductive citizens:

I tried to tell the church, are you really helping? Are you really doing something that’s going to help this individual become somebody productive who helps society? Or are you just making him a leech who just takes and takes and takes but never gives back. That’s not how God wants us to live.

The resentment of direct aid to the homeless was also coupled with encouragement of donations to the shelters themselves. In an interview with local news, Gregory Barfield, the city’s Homeless Prevention and Policy Manager, discouraged people from bringing food, tents, and clothing to homeless encampments and said that “the best way really to help an individual is to really donate and provide services or financial resources to agencies . . . When people understand that there is a process that is in place and you know where your dollar is going to, it’s much better” (Fresno City Hall, 2010b). He also characterized panhandlers as swindlers, saying they “can make $50, $60
a day. It’s much easier than doing something else . . . You don’t know who really is in need, over someone who is just using that particular intersection for their own gain.”

Barfield described giving money to panhandlers as “feeding the problem” and encouraged the community to instead contribute through “established channels” (Fresno City Hall, 2010b). Similarly, a commissioned advisory report on homeless management in Fresno stated that:

Unearned cash is very enabling and does not engage homeless individuals in job and skills training which is needed to end homelessness. Additionally, more often than not, cash is not used for food and housing but is instead used to buy drugs and alcohol which further perpetuates the homeless cycle ... Furthermore, most panhandlers are not truly homeless but are preying on the good nature of citizens to get tax free dollars. (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 32)

Stephen Roscoe told me an anecdote about becoming angry with his friend for giving cash to a homeless man:

It doesn’t serve any real useful purpose to be handing money out on the street corners. Some people will tell you that 90% of the money that is handed out ends up being used to drugs, alcohol, or whatever … If you want to do that, go give it to the Poverello House. Give them a dollar, even if it’s just a dollar, but at least it’ll get used in a way that really will help.

This emphasis on only giving money to non-profits reinforces the neoliberal logic of privatized solutions to poverty, rather than community based involvement. It reinforces the notion that homeless people are “problems” to be solved through the mechanism of private agencies, and treats compassion as the domain private institutions, rather than communal engagement. At the national level, a similar logic underlies the promotion of private and competitive welfare agencies over and above direct aid for the poor (Funiciello, 1993).

During the period of increased shelterization in the U.S., new shelters found it increasingly difficult to open. In Phoenix, Arizona, neighborhood associations
vehemently opposed shelter placement ever since the city’s first large scale shelter was opened in 1983 (Brinegar, 2003). Over and over again, shelter site proposals have resulted in public outcry that scholars have termed “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome. Districts often implement zoning measures to prevent shelters from locating anywhere but the inner city’s most powerless and impoverished neighborhoods. In Columbus, Ohio, after several unsuccessful attempts to locate a homeless shelter, the mayor's office announced a plan “to bus the homeless out of the city each night” (Mair, 1986, p. 356). In response to public resistance to homeless shelters, New York City built its men’s shelter on an “isolated and unpopulated” island (Kasinitz, 1986, p. 250). Takahashi (1998) argued that NIMBYism is the inescapable result of the capitalist mode of production. With shelters and SROs disappearing and skid row storefronts being snapped up for sale to developers, shelters themselves have felt the squeeze of the entrepreneurial city.

In Fresno, shelter operators repeatedly told me that their existence was tenuous. The city saw downtown shelters as a magnet for the homeless and occasionally threatened to remove the shelters altogether. This exacerbated the hostile relationship between shelter operators and street encampments. Mike Rhodes told me that he had seen “constant proposals for moving the Poverello and the Rescue Mission even further south of the downtown area.” When I asked Jim Connell if he was worried about the city’s push to revitalize downtown, he said, “That’s the city’s attitude—the reason we have the problem out there is because we’re here. Bruce Rudd, the city manager, that’s his opinion. They wouldn’t be there if we weren’t here.” Arce told a similar story:

Years ago they wanted to move us from here because they were building the Chukchansi stadium . . . but they were saying that if we’re going to have this we
need to get rid of all the homeless. We can’t have them here. They’ll be out here in the front. They’ll be accosting people. They’ll be begging. All kinds of perceived things were going to happen so they were blaming us—that we had to leave, we couldn’t be here, we had to get out of the way.

Thus Arce’s stance against encampments was not simply rooted in his view of the homeless as leeches and social failures. It was also rooted in the bottom line of his organization—if the city saw that his shelter was surrounded by street encampments, the Mission would be targeted for removal along with the encampments. For Connell, the concern was not simply that his numbers were declining but also that the camps threatened the continued existence of his organization.

Not only is local government a threat, it is also a vital source of funding for homeless service providers. This provides an incentive for non-profits to toe the line. One activist argued that by outsourcing money for the homeless to private agencies, the county was able to co-opt organizations that might otherwise oppose the politics of bulldozing. She said: “They won't stand up against the county ... because they'll lose the contract. So it's a real interesting cooption of what might be the way of opposition ... It has to do with this conservative outsourcing of things.” As Gowan (2010) wrote, under a system of competition for government funds, radical activists across the nation are in danger of morphing into homeless managers. Similarly, Funiciello (1993, p. 252) argued that charities in general are "driven by the logic of self-perpetuation, which almost without fail leads to a relentless pursuit of government contracts and donated dollars." As such, these organizations are often prevented from pushing for radical goals.

On the street, many homeless people I talked to expressed frustration at the shelter system’s hostility to street encampments. As Alphonso Williams, a prominent homeless activist, asked in desperation on a local television broadcast, “why do the agencies
pressure people instead of being kind?” (KNXT1, 2012). Yet many homeless people also understood the problem in economic terms. Several homeless people told me that the problem of homelessness in Fresno was rooted in the quest for money and power and that the shelters themselves were simply interested in money. One homeless man who had worked for the Rescue Mission for years lamented the day that Larry Arce took over management: “It’s all about how much can he put in his pocket ... I’ve seen him make wheeling deals ... Where’s the rest of the money going? It’s going in his freakin’ pocket.” Another man said, “I think a lot of funds and donation money comes here for the homeless and we don’t see it.” In an article for the Community Alliance, a homeless woman critiqued the local service providers:

Let me define poverty pimp. It is someone (or a group of someones) who makes a profit off of the existence of poor people. Usually, the profit is tremendous, and the yield to actually helping poor people is meager at best ... Homelessness is created deliberately because poverty, after all, is nationally a multibillion dollar business. (Tennison, 2011)

Yet this encouragement of eviction, and discouragement of aid, is not simply the result of hostility toward the homeless. It is the outcome of privatized homeless management in which non-profits must focus on maintaining their own financial solvency. Rather than truly tackling the problems of homelessness, shelters have to keep their numbers up to apply for continued funding and fend off city attempts to remove them. Although Jim Connell urged the city to bulldoze the encampments surrounding his shelter, at the end of our interview he engaged in a very surprising reflection:

Homelessness in this country is a societal problem and it’s going to require a societal answer, not some individual answer. We’re gonna need a change in attitude in the country about people who are poor. We’re seeing the divide between the haves and the have nots get wider in this country and I think that’s exacerbating the problem of the poor and the homeless ... I think we need to change people’s attitude about being poor and homeless and it may not
necessarily be their fault. … It has to do with the development of the materialistic society that we are. You’re worth what you have, and if you don’t have anything, you’re not worth anything.

Connell promoted a punitive politics of spatial control, while simultaneously maintaining a stance of care, compassion, and equity. He elegantly articulated the problems of stigma toward the poor and the problems of a materialist society. Yet the nature of his organization— as a private institution in need of funding and government support—demanded punitive action.

Developers First

Shelters are not the only private actors who influence eviction policies in Fresno. The Housing Authority, Fresno’s HUD-funded agency, works closely with developers in promoting Housing First initiatives and eviction practices. Housing First is a nationwide plan for homelessness management that dispenses with treatment prerequisites and aims at immediately securing housing for homeless people (Tsemberis, 2010; Willse, 2010). In the last decade it has become the primary model promoted by HUD, the Interagency Council on Homelessness, and municipal governments across the nation (Willse, 2010). Housing First promotes an ambitious vision to end chronic homelessness in the next ten years, and by 2010 more than 400 counties and cities had implemented “ten year plans” to end homelessness through adopting the Housing First framework (Tsemberis, 2010).

Much of the academic literature on Housing First focuses on reducing the various costs associated with “chronically homeless” individuals (Willse, 2010). Willse (2010, p. 171) argued that Housing First treats the homeless as economic liabilities and is rooted in the neoliberal goal of achieving cost-effectiveness, rather than truly ending homelessness.
Yet homelessness literature has not yet examined the trend in Housing First that treats the homeless as *assets* to be captured by the market. This section traces the way Housing First has been used in Fresno as a tool for redevelopment, private profit, and homeless eviction.

Housing First initiatives offer municipalities the potential to receive federal funding (Del Casino & Jocoy, 2008). Many cities have used these funds to develop and construct new apartment complexes for the homeless. Since 2007, the Corporation for Supportive Housing has created more than 150,000 new units of supportive housing nationwide (Usichgov, 2012a) while focusing “on the specific needs of developers” (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2011). Tsemberis (2010, pp. 39-40) described new constructions as popular with developers because “the development and construction of these projects is labor-intensive, expensive and time-consuming” (Tsemberis 2010, pp. 39-40). In short, an army of developers stands to benefit from Housing First funding.

In the late 1990’s, Fresno was home to one of the largest municipal corruption investigations in the U.S. (Arax, 1995). For decades, developers had routinely bribed councilmembers to rezone cheap farm land for housing development. The practice was so blatant that one lobbyist drove a car with the license plate “REZONE,” inspiring agents to name their six-year federal investigation “Operation Rezone.” After the case was finished, concerns about corruption remained, as housing development in Fresno is so lucrative that the "temptation to corrupt the system is almost overwhelming” (Boren, 2002). Today, instead of turning farmland into suburban housing, many developers have

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16 In recent years, Housing First funds paid private developers to build 62 new units in New Jersey (Recca-Ryan, 2012); 60 in Santa Barbara (Pearson, 2012); 500 in Denver (Parvensky, 2012); and 9,000 in New York City (Morgenstern, 2012).
shifted their focus to downtown revitalization.\textsuperscript{17} After Fresno rolled out its Housing First initiative, a new stream of government money was injected into downtown development.

In 2008, with an influx of federal grants, Fresno adopted its Ten-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness under the Housing First model. The plan called for a strategy of securing long-term housing for 941 chronically homeless persons over a ten-year period (Culhane & Metraux, 2010). Formerly homeless tenants were required to pay a portion of their income in rent. In 2008, the city appointed Gregory Barfield as its first Homeless Prevention and Policy Manager, charged with implementing the 10 Year Plan. By 2013, Fresno had nearly reached its goal, having housed 752 people ("Fresno Madera," 2013). However, Fresno’s Housing First program was not immune to ideologies of neoliberal poverty governance that stress private economic growth.

As a result of its Housing First initiative, Fresno was able to secure millions of dollars in federal stimulus funds. In an interview for the local news, Barfield described the program as “a way for us to gather funds and then re-grant those to agencies that are in our community . . . we were granted $3 million for 3 years of federal stimulus funds” (Fresno City Hall, 2010d). This was no small sum for Fresno’s cash-strapped municipal government, as it represented nearly three percent of the overall budget that year. In 2013, a deficit of just a few million dollars forced the city to implement massive layoffs and cutbacks (Haagenson, 2013; City of Fresno, 2013a). As Stephen Roscoe said, “the initial motivation [to adopt the Housing First model] was the recognition that we had a homeless problem but we didn’t have the resources that were available.” Mike Rhodes

\textsuperscript{17} Craig Scharton, the current director of Downtown and Community Revitalization Department and the so-called “revitalization czar,” was a council member at the time of Operation Rezone. Although he was never convicted, a key witness accused Sharton of receiving more favors that anyone else (Hostetter, 2013).
put it more cynically: “[The ten year plan] was never really meant to end homelessness. The intention was to position groups to apply for funding from HUD.” With Housing First, homelessness was increasingly framed as an opportunity to bring in money.

In 2012, the city had earmarked 4.5 million dollars of Housing Authority funds for the development and operation of housing for the homeless. It sought to create three new housing developments — Renaissance at Trinity, Renaissance at Alta Monte, and Renaissance at Santa Clara (Usichgov, 2012b). The projects collectively cost $23.5 million dollars (Prince, 2012). The primary achievement of the model was the construction of the largest of the three housing projects, Renaissance at Santa Clara. After evaluating only two proposals, the Housing Authority selected a developer for the project (“Minutes,” 2010). The contract prohibited the developer from acting as an “agent,” “consultant,” or “appointed official” of the city (City of Fresno, 2011b, pp. 15, 18). Nonetheless, the CEO of the development company was Stephen Roscoe, the very same man who chaired the committee that allocated federal funding through the Ten Year Plan (City of Fresno, 2008). He was also the Executive Director of Fresno First Steps Home, a non-profit the city created to solicit private money for homeless management. Roscoe also served on the board of Fresno’s PBID that hired “ambassadors” to police homeless people in downtown Fresno. In addition to the money paid to the contractor, the architects, consultants, and lawyers, his development company was awarded $1,115,400. Yet because homelessness management had been handed to private agencies, Roscoe was not considered a government agent, and his conflict of interest was perfectly legal.

In an interview, he spoke about his role in developing the Renaissance projects:

Initially it was our idea, because we’re in the development business … It’s a perfect example of the benefits of a public private partnership … We know how
to develop, we know how to wield our way through City Hall, we know the process, we know how to build things, we know how to put financing packages together. We just don’t know how to do that, or we don’t have the capacity to do it in the kind of arena that’s necessary when you’re looking for a subsidy.

Thus, Roscoe initially proposed the development to local government officials and later benefited from their ability to bring in subsidies. Public-private partnerships such as these are a hallmark of neoliberal governance (Theodore et al., 2011). Roscoe and others lauded public-private development as a model for the future.

For all its rhetoric of cost-effectiveness, Housing First in Fresno was proving to be very expensive. Yet funds were only used to house a small fraction of Fresno’s homeless population in expensive apartments, while benefiting private developers. The total bill for the Renaissance complex, not including costs for rent subsidies or services, was more than $10 million, amounting to $145,029 for each cramped 340-square foot studio apartment (City of Fresno, 2011b). To provide similar housing for the homeless Fresnans counted by the conservative 2011 census would cost the city more than three and half times its entire budget for 2012 (Rhodes, 2012a; Alexander, 2012). According to data on local housing prices, the median listing price for such an apartment in Fresno is $24,140, just over 16% of the actual amount paid (“Fresno Home Prices,” 2014). Local activists and homeless people protested the high cost of the apartment, pointing out that downtown Fresno was dotted with countless vacant buildings which could be renovated and utilized at a much lower cost, to house many more people. Yet that proposal would cut developers out of the picture, and officials never treated it as an option. As one activist told me, “permanent housing isn't affordable housing ... It’s to the benefit of—who?—developers and builders. They get the money. It's subsidized by the federal government. They get paid.”
A story about a CEO allocating welfare money to his own corporation might have been shocking news in another era. But it becomes politics as usual in the neoliberal era and cannot be dismissed as a case of local corruption. This process took place entirely above board, and there was no complaint from federal granting agencies or official calls for accountability. As Theodore et al. noted (2011, p. 22), neoliberalization is marked by “incorporation of elite business interests in local development” and “creation of new opportunities for speculative investment in central-city real estate.” Thus, the Renaissance housing project in Fresno is not an anomaly — it is part and parcel of the nationwide shift to privatized poverty management and real estate investment.

In addition to funding development, government housing provision is also used as a tool to remove homeless encampments. In a 2012 report on how to “humanely displace” homeless people living in encampments, Tremoulet and Bassett (2012, p. 37) advocate a “carrot” and “stick” approach, where potential housing is offered as an incentive and police violence is a deterrent. Willse (2010, p. 173) noted that police departments and businesses involved in Housing First plans “eagerly endorse the effort to remove unsheltered individuals from public view.” In Fresno, the officials who spearheaded Housing First also pushed strenuously for evictions.

In 2011, the mayor’s office issued a press release applauding a recent spate of evictions and highlighting the approval of federal officials: “In conjunction with the completion of the cleanup, the top federal official in charge of addressing homelessness today commended the City and its partners for working to provide a long-term solution for homeless individuals” (City of Fresno, 2011c). Preston Prince, the CEO of the Fresno Housing Authority, met with the Executive Director of the United States Inter-Agency...
Council on Homelessness. A Housing Authority report stated that their discussion revolved around logistics of the “de-encampment processes” ("Boards," 2013). As one local advocate summed it up:

The city was told that they need to focus on housing rather than on services to people who are homeless. There were meetings with the city and some representatives from the Obama administration … They got the clear message that if they got rid of the encampments, that more money would be forthcoming from the Obama administration to deal with homeless issues. … I think the city’s policy has been largely determined by what they perceive to be their ability to get federal funding.

The city argued that eviction was part of the larger Housing First initiative. A 2013 press release stated that:

City of Fresno officials today announced plans to clear a number of illegal structures as part of a collaborative, community-wide effort focused on strategies to prevent and end homelessness. The City’s enforcement efforts will better allow existing service providers to care for Fresno’s most vulnerable individuals. … The collaborative effort follows the Housing First Model, a successful strategy that focuses on housing individuals first and then providing services as needed. (City of Fresno, 2013b)

Upon Swearengin’s request, the Housing Authority assisted in the “de-encampment” of several tent cities. A Housing Authority memorandum states that “the de-encampment process …. provides an interim and partial component to a larger, longer term community solution being developed based on the Housing First philosophy” ("Boards," 2013, p. 17).

Although Housing First targets only a fraction of the homeless population, the city implies that all who are evicted from camps will be moved into subsidized housing. In describing the success of the Housing First program, Barfield noted that the city’s largest homeless encampment was now gone, suggesting that everyone had been successfully housed. Yet city funds were used to destroy homeless encampments prior to
construction of new houses (Fresno City Hall, 2010d). Thus, people left the encampment because the city had bulldozed their tents and shanties, not because they had been moved into housing. The fantasy that the city will provide housing for all homeless Fresnans serves as a pretext for bulldozing practices. In reality, Housing First in Fresno only targets the “chronically” homeless, and most people will likely never receive a housing voucher. As one homeless man told me about the Renaissance project, “I think that’s kind of a waste of money, to tell you the truth … because you don’t even have maybe a handful of homeless people just in there.”

Housing First is also seen as a strategy for revitalization. Barfield described Fresno’s encampments as a “blight and an eyesore” (Fresno City Hall, 2010a) — exactly the phrase the Fresno Redevelopment Agency used to describe what must be removed to make room for “shopping, entertainment” and “business attraction” opportunities (Fresno Redevelopment Agency, 2013). Indeed, the Renaissance at Santa Clara was constructed in the very spot where a tent city once stood. Preston Prince, the CEO of the Fresno Housing Authority, is also a director of the Economic Development Corporation, whose mission is “to market Fresno County as the premiere location for business prosperity” (Economic Development Corporation, 2009). Prince boasted that one of the top achievements of the Renaissance at Santa Clara was “Private sector partnerships for revitalization of business districts” (Prince, 2012). He said the name “renaissance” was chosen to reflect that the developments are “a renaissance within the neighborhood” (Usichgov, 2012b). In listing the successes of Housing First, Prince said, “we closed a homeless encampment” (Usichgov, 2012b). Thus, in advocating for Fresno’s Housing First program, Barfield and Prince both touted the disappearance of tent cities as part of
the program’s success. This language demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between Housing First and punitive policies of tent city destruction.

Fresno is a prime example of how Housing First is rooted in neoliberal ideologies that replace poverty alleviation with private economic gain. Seemingly “compassionate” Housing First policies and brutal bulldozing practices mutually promote the neoliberal goal of redeveloping downtown Fresno.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, homeless Fresnans have engaged in an ongoing battle against tent city destruction and have formed a robust protest movement. But recently, they have turned their attention to the failures of privatized homeless management. In April 2008, people gathered in Fresno for a Veteran’s Earth Day event. Longtime homeless resident Alphonso Williams gave an impassioned speech:

There’s a lot of money being spent in Fresno. Too much money. And nobody is getting off the streets. They’re still in shelters. They’re still in programs. They’re still in boarding houses. And nobody has a home. Millions and millions and millions of dollars have been given to Fresno, and nothing has been out there to show for it. Absolutely nothing. People living in the bluffs, off the money that’s been given. People got their new cars. People got their CEO jobs, with a big salary. Homeless people are still homeless . . . I want to know why. Where did the money go? Who got it? . . . Homelessness is a business now . . . There’s something wrong with that picture. (Mike Rhodes, 2008)

DeVerteuil et al. (2009) urged that homeless management is not only punitive, but also compassionate. The authors view shelters and housing facilities as alternatives to models of homeless management that aim at policing public streets. But as Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2010) noted, neoliberalism is so entrenched that it is often impossible to shift into new modes of governance. In this way, institutions devoted to
compassion and care for the homeless become stuck in a neoliberal paradigm of promoting their own private interests. As Willse wrote, “The management of housing insecurity is itself an economic enterprise … An actual elimination of housing insecurity and deprivation would also mean an end to the service and knowledge industries proliferating around managing and studying populations living without shelter” (2010, pp. 174-175).

Fresno has struggled to overcome its reputation as a brutal city, but brutal neoliberal policies continue, as private institutions come to shape the direction of Fresno homeless politics. These institutions uphold the largely compassionate mission of providing housing and shelter, yet they have defaulted to marketized modes of governance that characterize homeless people as assets and liabilities, rather than human beings. Although shelters and housing developers in Fresno are interested in maintaining their own fiscal health, this is not simply a story of the failure of homeless management in Fresno. Rather, officials in Fresno are scrambling to deal with the problem of large-scale homelessness and poverty. Unfortunately, the models available are rooted in privatization, competitive funding, and profit, rather than compassion or care for the homeless.
Part II: Surveillance
A few weeks into my time in Fresno, a woman named Peaches invited me to visit her encampment. To get there, I followed the railroad tracks just west of the highway. On the other side of the overpass, the path opened up into a sloping hill. To my left was a fenced-in warehouse, with about 20 tents and makeshift shanties leaning against the fence. To the right was the railroad track. In front of me was an irrigation canal, and looming on the other side was the grey hulk of a factory filling up the sky. From the road, this camp was completely invisible.

Peaches’ house was protected by a western wall made of leafy tree limbs stacked several feet high to protect against the harsh winds that blew off the canal. In front was a tall fence made from bundles of twisted branches. The house was elevated three feet off the ground. She built it that way to keep out the rats and insects and give the dogs a place to keep cool in the shade. It was about 200 square feet inside, with flooring made out of pallets and flat pieces of wood. She had a mattress, two chairs, a dresser with drawers, and a closet with clothes on hangers. She had mounted a set of ornate candleholders on one wall, opposite several silver masks in the shape of skulls. The floor was strewn with candles, cigarette packs, hand-written letters and clothes. As we spoke, Peaches gestured to the ceiling, which was constructed of ropes and tarps and relied entirely on tension. She told me it was a “living sculpture.” If the wind dislodged one rope, the house would collapse, so she was constantly tightening and retying them like the sails of a ship.

Peaches did not want to live in a normal apartment. Her friend offered her a place where she would have a shower and a bathroom, but she refused. As her friend said: “She
has to live outside.” At the camp, she had a portable toilet and could bathe easily in the canal. She also swore the water was clean enough to drink.

It was 110 degrees the day I visited, and a few hours into our conversation, I was getting overheated. We walked down to the canal, just one out of more than a dozen that cross the city as they make their way out into the fields. Peaches jumped in, cannonball style. She told me there used to be shopping carts and trash in there, but she cleared it all out. She also carved a small beach for the dogs to wade. I peered in and entered the swift, cool waters.

In policy and scholarly literature on homelessness in the US, the “unsheltered” homeless person is often portrayed as someone who sleeps in the open air, on a park bench or the sidewalk, with only a newspaper or a blanket for protection. Yet this notion of homelessness is inappropriate to understanding the phenomenon of homeless encampments. Since the 1990s, large-scale encampments have reemerged in cities across the nation. Loftus-Farren (2011, p. 1039) characterized tent cities in the U.S. as akin to shantytowns in the Global South and argued that they provide “a relatively affordable temporary housing option.” Indeed, people living in similar housing conditions in Mumbai are considered informally housed rather than homeless (McFarlane, 2008). As Bransford (2009) argued about Fresno’s homeless encampments, "In any other country, these threadbare villages would be called slums, but in the U.S., the preferred term is tent city, a label that implies that they are just a temporary phenomenon." As people live collectively in tents and shanties, the right to the city becomes a struggle for the right to the encampment, rather than a demand for the provision of traditional physical shelter.
Despite this, policy often treats all homeless people as equally unsheltered, whether they reside in a community of tents and shanties or sleep in the open on a sidewalk.

In Fresno, tent city residents often rejected shelters and housing projects and championed a notion of the encampment as home. In seeking to explain why many tent city residents in Fresno prefer self-made homes, this chapter explores the disciplinary history of shelter options in the U.S., and Fresno’s current systems. Finally, I argue that encampments challenge the category of “homelessness,” as many people viewed their encampments as collective, non-commodified neighborhoods. Thus, the policy-driven focus on a right to housing and shelter undermines more radical demands for the right to home.

**Shelters as Spaces of Control**

Sanctioned spaces for the homeless have remained similarly restrictive across time. The institutional shelters of the early 1900s were highly institutionalized settings, aimed at the redemption of the homeless man (Hopper, 2003; Schnieder, 1986). Investigators at the time described shelterization as the “gradual debilitation among shelter residents brought on by the daily experience of living with a thousand other discouraged men in a cold institutional setting” (Schneider, 1986, p. 175). Like their early counterparts, modern shelters often represent the extreme manifestation of ordered and policed space. Gowan (2010, pp. 55-56) argued that:

Shelters of the mid-1980s were gradually professionalized and incorporated into a network of micro surveillance, where clients are fingerprinted on entry and compelled to construct their problems as bad behavior . . . [Shelters demand] submission to medications, twelve-step doctrine, and housing-readiness programs.
Shelters tend to emphasize discipline and control, often undermining a resident’s need for autonomy, privacy, freedom (Wright, 1997) and personal dignity (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). As reported in a 1982 survey, New York City shelter residents rated prisons superior to shelters as a form of shelter (Crystal & Goldstein, 1982). Stark (1994) argued that the homeless shelter is akin to Erving Goffman's concept of the total institution, a place where people “lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961, p. xiii). The recent turn to permanent housing, instead of shelter, has created similarly controlled spaces. Scholars have argued that Housing First vouchers are often accompanied by increased surveillance and control of homeless people (Willse, 2010; Hennigan, 2013). Funiciello (1993) argued that the welfare system in general is a “tyranny of kindness” rooted in the belief that poor people, to succeed, must be forced into submission.

For these reasons, homeless people often reject institutional shelter and housing options. In the early-20th century, the shelter system symbolized degradation and loss of freedom to many homeless people. Hobo culture rejected the shelter system and despised those who took shelter in missions or welfare agencies. “Mission beggar” and “mission stiff” were common derisive references to the unpopular outsiders who turned to shelters for support (DePastino, 2003, p. 89). In the 1960s, skid row residents often considered shelters the least desirable living conditions available, lacking privacy and safety and usually requiring they attend evangelical religious services (Rossi, 1989). Hunter et al. (2014, p. 3) wrote that the heavy disciplinary culture of modern shelters often conflicts with residents’ practical day-to-day needs and that encampments provide a more autonomous alternative:
The shelter system often does not meet the needs of homeless individuals, especially over the longer term. For example, inability to accommodate couples; requiring families to separate; safety concerns; restrictions on storing belongings; and opening and closing times that conflict with work schedules can deter individuals and families from shelters. In some instances, tent cities can offer individuals and families autonomy, community, security, and privacy in places where shelters have not been able to create such environments.

This is not to say that the shelter and permanent housing facilities are uniformly oppressive. Scholars have argued that shelters and service centers often provide spaces of care and refuge from the streets (DeVerteuil et al., 2009). Indeed, many homeless people in Fresno sought out vouchers to get into government housing and preferred a highly regulated life to the dangers of the streets. Nonetheless, many people also saw their encampments as homes and preferred them over the stifling conditions of shelters and housing facilities. Sirah (2013) described how residents at a Chapel Hill men’s shelter struggled to establish a sense of home while having little control over their physical environment or daily routine. One resident told him that shelters “are not healthy to make home” while other men described home as a “something achieved through struggle, a place to work towards, a future once they leave the shelter” (2013, p. 21). Thus, physical shelter is not enough. The right to the city includes the right to home, not just housing.

It should be reiterated that Fresno has no true emergency shelter system. To get a bed, homeless adults have agree to enter a drug treatment program or get on the list for a domestic violence shelter. In the past, the Rescue Mission was the only true emergency shelter for men. It had two residential treatment centers that provided counseling, Bible-study, and “behavioral courses.” Overnight guests had to pass a TB test, shower during a designated hour, go to sleep by 10pm, and wake up at 5:30am. They were not allowed to
keep their property with them and had to leave the shelter between the hours of 7am and 5pm (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, p. 10). As one homeless man described it to me:

Every night they have different church groups that come over there and praise God and teach the Bible. You sit in there until about 8:30, for like an hour and a half or maybe an hour, and then you go eat, and then you go upstairs and you go to bed. Gets you up at 6:00 in the morning, gets you breakfast, and then you’re outta there.

This regimented schedule, combined with aid and religious training, is not uncommon to Rescue Missions across the nation (Fagan, 1987; Hackworth, 2010).

Yet when Larry Arce took over the Mission several years ago, its open door policy quickly ended. Arce drastically revamped the program and began requiring all residents to conform to a strict Bible-based drug treatment program. Arce told me that once he initiated the new program and “got rid of the deadbeats,” shelter residency was drastically reduced. He described the transformation process:

We made a whole change here, a transformation, here in our Mission . . . I said okay, we’re doing something wrong because we’re perpetuating these guys’ lifestyles . . . All the guys that had jobs, had money, getting retirement, social security Medicare, Medicaid. We said well you shouldn’t even be here, so you’re out. They were mad, they were angry. And so after we had done all the assessments, I had 15 guys out here as opposed to 200 guys . . . They’re here for a year, and then six months of aftercare. We continue to test them and monitor them.

Arce also described the Mission’s program for women with children:

A mother can come in and be in a secure location, being observed 24/7, having all the programming … that she needs and learning how to have boundaries . . . It’s more than just putting them in a place for shelter. One of the things about us that’s different— we don’t believe in just giving. There has to be some accountability. We don’t believe in just perpetuating their lifestyle, perpetuating the problem. If you’re going to come here, you need to have the mindset that you’re going to want to get your life together, and reintroduce yourself back to society.

Arce argued that strict control was necessary to prevent and contain rebellion, and his primary goal was fostering conformity to societal norms. He saw homelessness and drug
addiction as a form of sin: “You rebelled against society. You rebelled against your family. You rebelled against God. You want to do your own thing. You don’t want nobody to tell you what to do. And that’s sin.” Thus, shelter at Fresno’s Rescue Mission was attached to submission to religious norms. As a local poet wrote about the Rescue Mission:

I gave in—
for a six-inch plate
at the Mission
—Jesus Saves
it said on the outside
on the inside, nobody
got a plate till they bowed
down— in surrender. (Salazar, 2013)

The mission also oversees an outdoor jail facility and partners with the police department to commit intoxicated men for a 24-hour period, including during sweltering hot summers and freezing winters. Local activists have called this site a “drunk tank” and a “concentration camp” (Rhodes, 2004). One activist who had previously worked in a drug treatment facility told me, “There have been times when the Rescue Mission has people detox in their parking lot with no supervision, and people [can] die because of that.” Although the Mission represents an extreme manifestation of control, Fresno’s other shelter options are similarly paternalistic.

The Poverello House only provided shelter to those who stayed in a monitored outdoor encampment or entered a drug treatment program. Most of the people staying at the shelter were completing jail diversion requirements. Connell described the program:

It’s a pretty structured program. They have homework they have to do…. They’re assigned a job … They have a jail sentence hanging over their head, which gives them a little encouragement to stay in the program … You’ve got to start training them, re-socializing them. You get up in the morning. You brush your teeth. You make your bed. They’ve lost all those disciplines. If your job starts at 8 o’clock,
you're there are 8 o’clock. It’s sort of a retraining process and them taking responsibility for their lives.

In homage to the “broken windows” theory of policing, Jim Connell compares homeless people to broken windows in the monthly shelter newsletter:

Fixing a broken windowpane may seem inconsequential, but it helps make the neighborhood a better place. Fixing broken lives and souls may also seem to be a futile endeavor, but each life rescued from ruin means one less story of despair contributing to the overall corrosion of a city. (Connell, 2008)

In aiming to help people who are suffering, Connell simultaneously objectifies them as “broken lives” that destroy the value of the city.

Shelters for women are similarly regulated. Sherry Oliver told me that the women’s shelter “shouldn’t just be a handout organization,” so she turned it into an educational center in addition to a shelter. The only other shelter for homeless women in Fresno is notoriously difficult to get into. For women who do not pass the strict intake exam, options are few and far between.

As a result of these policies, many homeless Fresnans reject shelters “as too confining and conformist” (Hostetter, 2008). A resident of Fresno's New Jack City encampment opted to leave the Rescue Mission because “the limitations of that place were driving him nuts” (Saunders, 2009). A homeless man I interviewed told me, “I could never go stay in that Mission because they force certain things on you … You have to do this. You have to do that. I’m not with that.” Another homeless woman told me, “They should just call it a damn program. It shouldn't be the Fresno Rescue Mission no more. You want to kick the homeless out. Then you want to be disrespectful to them.” Another man had stayed away from shelters entirely and said, “that seems demoralizing or something. Degrading. Not that I’m saying I’m better than anyone else, but … it’s
nasty.” During the 2013 Point in Time Count, volunteers asked 419 homeless Fresnans if they trusted a particular agency or organization. Only 10% indicated that they trusted a trusted a local shelter, and fewer than 20% listed any agency at all. The report found that this data this “suggests that this population is being missed by providers” but did not make any further mention of the issue (“Fresno Madera,” 2013, p. 29).

Many people told me they could not live in shelters or permanent housing facilities because their pets and families were not allowed. Scholars have noted the deep mutual bonds that develop in homeless encampments (Rowe & Wolch, 1990; Amster, 2008) as well as the importance of animals to many who live on the streets (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Kidd & Kidd, 1994). Indeed, one study found that more than 90% of homeless people with pets would refuse housing in which their animals were not allowed (Singer, Hart, & Zasloff, 1995). Fresno is no different. This deep attachment to animals and to family and animals on the street plays a key role in the rejection of housing. As one local advocate put it:

It’s really difficult to get [homeless people] to get an apartment because they have such a strong community out on the street. It’s like asking them to leave home to get an apartment. And of course they all have stray dogs. Most of the apartments won’t allow that. And then you just plunk someone in an apartment where he doesn’t know anyone. It’s really hard for them to stay.

Several people I spoke with in Fresno resented the fact that permanent housing facilities were not set up to accommodate homeless families. As one woman said: “They used it for singles … It should’ve been for couples and families.” Shelters were also hostile to families and pets. Pamela Kincaid, a prominent homeless activist, chose to live in a tent city because the women’s shelter did not allow her to keep her dog (Kincaid, 2006). Another woman chose to live in a tent city because the shelter did not allow her to stay
with her husband (Clay, 2006). Peaches’ neighbor told me she had looked into staying at a women’s shelter, but it would not accept her cat and had no place for her to lock up her bike. When she tried to stay at the Poverello House, she was forced to sleep separately from her 11-year-old grandson and chose instead to stay in her car.

Many people described Fresno’s Housing First project as highly restrictive. One homeless man told me that the Renaissance project was “just like monitoring the homeless.” A homeless woman told me:

They got stricter rules than the [sanctioned encampments]. You get a visitor three times a year. They do room checks, random room checks. There’s so many rules in there, you can’t, we can’t just go in there and visit a friend without them coming and getting us, and we can’t leave unless they walk us out.

Apartments contained long lists of rules. The complex was surrounded by high metal fencing, and a security guard manned the locked outer door. At least 40 security cameras lined the building, at every hallway and entrance (Rhodes, 2012a). This securitization left many homeless Fresnans skeptical of permanent housing.

Many homeless people also reported that it was not uncommon for the Housing Authority to issue vouchers for particularly squalid apartment complexes. One formerly homeless man described his new subsidized apartment as scary and dangerous. Another man told me that his life spiraled out of control after he was placed in an apartment: “They moved me over to this other apartment. Drug infested people, alcohol, drugs, prostitutes everywhere around. I ended up in the hospital because my depression was so bad I wanted to commit suicide.” His description of people being “put” into apartments illuminates the passive role homeless people are encouraged to play when receiving subsidized housing. Being “moved” from an encampment and “put” into a substandard
apartment complex is a far cry from Lefebvre’s vision of a dispossessed public
demanding their right to urban space.

For many, traditional housing is simply not an option. One homeless woman I
interviewed told me that she and her boyfriend had a hard time getting an apartment on
their own because most landlords required a rental background: “They’re too strict …
We’d never really rented a place of our own.” For people who are undocumented, have a
criminal background, or bad credit, such restrictions are often a barrier to obtaining
housing. Oftentimes, the barrier is simply that rents are too high. Alphonso Williams, a
prominent homeless activist, said that even though he saved up first and last month’s rent,
“getting a house is very hard … I can’t find a place for some reason. Five hundred dollars
a month isn’t enough … That’s something that’s got to change” (KNXT1, 2012). He
lamented that the wages at the local temp agency were too low to afford housing:
“There’s a large percentage of people who go to Labor Ready, and work for a living, 40
dollars a day, and you can’t go no place for 40 dollars a day. You can’t do it” (Rhodes
2008b). Because of the difficulty of obtaining housing, many people see only two
options: to wait for the remote possibility of obtaining a housing voucher or pay inflated
rates— up to several hundred dollars a week— for a room in one of the crime-ridden
SRO hotels that line Highway 99.

For some people, life inside a house is more violent than life on the streets. One
woman told me she preferred sleeping on the streets, because in public she had protection
from her abusive partner: “I was ok with sleeping in the open, because in the open I
figured, hey, people will help me out if I got into a fight … I believe I was safer being
homeless than I was with him in a home, because there’s less he could do in public.” For
people experiencing domestic abuse, a four-walled house or apartment can become a place of violence and isolation (Warrington, 2001; Meth, 2003). Meth (2003, p. 321) argued that for victims of domestic violence, formal material space “offers both protection (locking doors and windows, hiding in a secure room), but it also introduces the reality of isolation and abuse in seclusion.” Thus, although living on the street is dangerous, it is often preferable to a violent household.

In Fresno, shelters and permanent housing facilities were alienating spaces. For Marx (1992), the act of laboring under capitalism alienates people from themselves, as their energy is harnessed for the production of profit, rather than for their own ends. Alienation, then, is the loss of control over one’s own creative capacity. Lefebvre argued that under capitalism, space also becomes alienating because people are forced to purchase it rather than create it themselves. The homeless, with little to no purchasing power, are thrust out of property markets and deprived of the ability to choose their living arrangements. Meanwhile, shelters and permanent housing facilities prevent them from exerting control over their surroundings and movements in space. In short, homeless people in Fresno are not alienated by exploitative labor conditions but by capitalist space. Yet, as the following section argues, homeless Fresnans are able to exert a degree of control over space by building self-made homes in the encampments. In this way, they avoid the trap of alienation and assert their right to the city.

**Encampment as Home**

To many people I spoke with in Fresno, their tent was a source of comfort and a home on the streets. One woman told me she was terrified when she first became
homeless, and it was not until she “put up this little tent” that she began to feel comfortable living on the streets. Another woman expressed a similar sentiment:

> People out here consider their tents or their wooden buildings their home … This is something that people are doing for years … That’s their shelter. That’s the only way to beat the heat, the winters, and stuff like that. … Don’t just assume that their home is garbage because you see a little bit of garbage around it, or just because it’s not like your home. We’re just trying to survive. It may be a crappier version than what you’re used to. But it’s a home. That’s how they get by. That’s how they’re safe. It’s comforting to them … Just because your home is better and you think ours is garbage, doesn’t mean it isn’t a home … When I was staying in a tent, that was my safety, especially when I was by myself … There was a tent. There was walls. I had some protection.

Her description of the fabric of her tent as “walls” indicates an alternative conception of housing. For her, the right to housing did not necessarily translate into a demand for permanent concrete structures, glass windows, or monthly rental payments. Many people noted that the absence of middle-class amenities did not undermine the fact that their tents and shanties were homes. Peaches described her encampment as a “neighborhood” even though “it’s not a usual neighborhood. We don’t have yards and lawns and alarm systems and stuff like that.” Another homeless woman said, “Just because you in a house house doesn’t mean nothing … Just because [other people’s] home is nice, it has air conditioning, a heater, and they have carpet and stuff like that, and plenty of room, that doesn’t mean what they have out there isn’t a home.” Yet housing policy in Fresno focuses on a limited definition of housing, effectively ignoring the homes that people have erected across the city.

Despite the constant evictions, many homeless Fresnans struggled to create comfortable domestic spaces within tent cities. New Jack City and Taco Flat were comprised of tents as well as shanties made of wood, tarp, and other recycled materials (National Coalition, 2010). Many homes had functioning roofs, clean interiors, and
paintings hanging on walls (Saunders, 2009). Another encampment—The Hill—was entirely comprised of “well-built” wooden structures and even had a two-story building. One reporter described Taco Flat as a vibrant example of informal urbanism:

The people in Taco Flat are extremely self-reliant, and their homes reflect that. They’re made from a very eclectic mixture of salvaged material. I saw everything from shipping pallets to going out of business signs and Bollywood film posters. They have oftentimes separate rooms for sleeping, cooking and relaxation, and fenced in yards for their pets. You can see that people are really trying to reclaim a kind of personal space that has been denied to them in the mainstream housing market and in homeless shelters. (Chan & Whittaker, 2009)

In 2009, a homeless man who was also a construction worker built several sheds for himself and friends. He called his encampment a “neighborhood of homeless”:

We built shacks. We started with one. And someone else needed a place to stay and before you know it, we had about fifteen of them all in a row. We picked up the trash. Cut the grass. Cleaned up the area. It turned into a real beautiful spot for taking care of each other. (Riddell, 2009, p. 137)

Another man described his home in the camps:

I had a twelve man tent. I had couch, coffee table. I tried to make myself as comfortable as possible. I had carpet on the floor. I had it on top of pallets with plywood so when it rained it didn’t get wet … I had a gas burner, a stove … You just take it one day at a time … We looked out for one another.

Scholars have argued that the very act of building a home creates a domestic space that resists dominant representations. Drawing from Lefebvre’s concept of the counter space, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005) argued that Palestinian women resist continual demolitions by struggling to re-create a sense of home. She argued that they build “counter-spaces of safety” by collecting bits of furniture and memorabilia that remain amongst the rubble to physically and metaphorically reconstruct the family home (2005, p. 110). In Fresno, homeless campers continually rebuilt their homes after each
successive demolition. As one homeless woman told me, “You’re going to keep tearing down their stuff, they’re going to keep putting it back up.”

For many homeless people, personal identity and social status are wrapped up in their rootedness in stable social networks (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Without the social networks of the tent city, homeless populations are often at risk of “total material and emotional devastation” (Rowe & Wolch, 1990, p. 201). Often in encampments, community members take turns providing security and protection for each other (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Residents of “Love City” in Los Angeles, California, appropriated the pedestrian spaces of public sidewalks to create a community that was vital to their survival in the harsh world of skid row (Rowe & Wolch, 1990). Similarly, in Sacramento’s highly publicized tent cities, communities exhibited a high degree of self-governance and mutual care (Mitchell, 2012a). As Rowe & Wolch argued, the key to improved material conditions for homeless people is “the provision of safe, neutral space where [they] can socialize, eat, leave belongings, and plan their ongoing activities” (1990, p. 202).

Fresno's tent cities allowed for the creation of stable community (Kaufmann, 2012). Several community members shared blood relations and long relationships stretching over years of life on the streets (National Coalition, 2010). In New Jack City, neighbors looked after one another and took turns watching over each other's property (National Coalition, 2010; Saunders, 2009). Little Tijuana displayed similar community cooperation. Residents ate in the cantina, a space where communal meals were cooked and served to all residents (National Coalition, 2010). As the National Coalition for the Homeless found in its report on Pacific Coast tent cities:
There was always coffee going in the afternoons and there was drinking in the evenings . . . While there was no governing committee or camp leader, there was a core group of members who coordinated the food who also took an active role in organizing the community. Little Tijuana had a mayor that was looked to among the community’s members to settle disputes and organize actions. (National Coalition, 2010)

Virginia Garcia said of her tent city neighbors: "They want to be around other people. They feel safer" (Hostetter, 2008). Ray Polk, a local homeless minister, said the homeless community “saved [his] life” (TakePart, 2012). Another resident described how tent city neighbors take care of each other: “If you don't got a tent, and we got an extra one, we'll make sure you have one and a mattress to sleep on” (Dr. Jean Kennedy, 2011). While I was in the encampments, I witnessed people giving away their last pair of socks and sharing what little food they had. One man told me that the homeless had to take care of each other, because they could not rely on anyone but themselves: “As long as [people] have their fucking comfortable job and little fucking comfortable apartment or a house, they could give a shit … We’re on our own. Plain and simple. We look out for each other.” Often, people’s only recourse for survival was the mutual support of their friends.

One camper credited her neighbors with saving her life:

I am 62, and I had a heart problem with the heat this last summer, and if it hadn’t have been for my neighbors, I might have perished because they poured cold water over me and brought me back to … three times … Until I was found and went to [this] camp, that’s the only time during my homeless time that I felt at home and I felt safe. (Homelessness Marathon, 2014)

As one homeless man told me, after he lost everything when his tent was destroyed, he was able to survive through the night because his friend gave him a blanket.

An NPR news story on the canal bank encampment referred to one woman as the “mayor” of the community (Siegler, 2013). Peaches also played a similar role. She often
cooked communal meals for her neighbors and took in people who needed help. I wrote
the following in my notes after spending an afternoon with her at the camp:

Peaches is cooking something over a small fire in the center of her yard. Next to it
is a pot of boiling water. We sit on the couch in front of it ... She has started to
tell me a story and before I know it, she is crying into her hands. The man who
used to live behind her tent had a skin condition that left lesions all over his body.
He came to her one day with a swollen head, beat up and bloodied. And so she
took him in. They lived together for a while, and he told her—“if I were younger,
I’d ask you to be my wife. But since I’m not, I’m going to ask you to be my
daughter.” The man died the next day. At this point Peaches is sobbing. I put my
sweaty arm around her. She wipes her face and cracks a joke.

Later, when we were wading in the canal, a man named Johnny appeared:

He points to the distance, where we see a young woman walking along the tracks
... As she approaches, I see her face is completely blank, mouth slack. Johnny
says he found her in the park, and that she doesn’t know how she got there or who
she is. He wants Peaches to take her in, and Peaches sighs, relenting ... Peaches
asks if I want to stay the night, but I shake my head ... I say goodbye and mount
my bike. Peaches calls after me—“be kind to yourself, so you can pass it on to
others.”

Peaches, and others like her, continually adopted people who found themselves on the
streets. This mutual care is not only a source of emotional well-being but a means of
survival in the tenuous life of extreme poverty and deprivation. Meanwhile, shelters and
housing facilities, by focusing on individuals, destroyed this communal aspect of the
encampments.

The right to the city includes the right of people to define for themselves what
constitutes a home. Kellett and Moore (2003, p. 126) stressed the need to examine
homelessness in the “wider processes of home-making and belonging in society.” They
suggested that possessing a tangible structure called home, no matter how insecure or
poorly constructed, creates a sense of autonomy, freedom, and well-being on the streets.

In the international context, Tipple and Speak (2006) urged the importance of a personal
sense of home in distinguishing between homelessness and inadequate shelter. They wrote:

We believe that it is at least conceptually appropriate to try to differentiate between living in informal settlements, and other forms of homelessness, especially street-homelessness … At the heart of this discussion is the difference between people who feel themselves to be, and are regarded as being, without a home, and those with a home which is seen to be inadequate.

Notions of home are highly contested and cannot be regarded as neutral. Geographers have argued that home is “both a thing and an idea” (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001, p. 68). Others conceptualize the home as attachment to place and sense of belonging (Johnston, Gregory, & Smith, 1994). Gregson and Lowe (1995, p. 226) urged the importance of considering “how and why a particular ideology of home maintains its hegemonic position and how this might be contested through alternative interpretations.”

According to HUD, the homeless are those who lack “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (Federal Register, 2011). Yet this ignores the subjectivity of conceptions of home. Many people living in encampments consider their housing adequate and see the threat of government eviction as the only thing preventing it from being truly “fixed” and “regular”. Thus, in this sense, home is the ability to occupy a particular space and exert a modicum of control over it, without the threat of surveillance or eviction. In Lefebvre’s terms, home implies the ability to produce space. In this sense, home is less alienating than other city spaces.

Many of the people I spoke with in Fresno refused the category “homeless” altogether. As Watson and Austerberry (1986) and Kellett and Moore (2003) argued, homelessness should be understood as a continuum, not as a binary category. The word “homeless” assumes a false dichotomy between the housed poor who struggle to pay rent
and those who do not pay for housing. It paints the homeless as members of a category of stigmatized “others,” rather than as people who are experiencing one aspect of the pervasive condition of poverty. Many people simply cannot pay rent, and others make a strategic decision not to pay rent so they can afford other life expenses. Nearly three decades ago, Hopper, Susser, and Conover (1985) argued that homelessness was no longer a coherent “organizing construct,” as homeless shelters were increasingly used by the working poor. Indeed, often the label of homelessness, in and of itself, contributes to stigmatization and marginalization (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). To frame the problem instead as a lack of a right to the city rewrites the common understanding of people living in homeless encampments such that they no longer belong to the category of the “homeless other” but rather suffer from the same deprivations as all who are dispossessed of the city.

Many homeless movements have championed a new conception of the homeless as houseless (Gibson, 2013). Countless “houseless” bloggers actively resist the label of homelessness. In 2013, a formerly homeless man filmed the documentary Houseless about the lives of people living on the streets of Santa Barbara (Manhattan & Williams, 2013). In an article on the meaning of home for the “houseless,” Kidd and Evans (2001, p. 753) wrote that a woman taking part in the research “explained that calling her homeless was wrong … She felt that she had a home and had fought extremely hard to find a sense of home. She experienced my calling her homeless as an oppressive kind of action, an action that took something away from her.”

Lefebvre (1991) understood that words can trap ideas—and therefore spaces—into rigid and predetermined categories. The word “homelessness” is such a trap, and I struggled in this thesis over the decision to use it. I chose to use the word because it implies a powerful social construct. It captures the processes and ideologies that define people without houses and that shape social practices toward them. Yet, beyond the word “homelessness,” I understand campers in Fresno as people who struggle to establish and maintain a sense of home without paying to occupy space. In a sense, campers in Fresno engage with home not as a commodity but as a social relationship with space. In this way, I reframe the right to the city for the homeless as a struggle for space, rather than housing or shelter.

**Conclusion: Beyond the Right to Housing and Shelter**

In activist circles, the right to the city has been used to advocate for housing rights for the homeless (Olds, 1998; Right to the City, 2013). The World Charter for the Right to the City affirms that all homeless people have a “right to adequate housing” and advocates for shelters as a provisional measure (World Social Forum, 2005, p. 8). In academia, scholars have continually advocated for a fundamental right to shelter and housing (Langdon, 1985; Ellickson, 1992; Michelman, 1970; Hartman, 1998; Bratt, Stone, & Hartman, 2006). Although the right to housing and shelter are imperative, they are not sufficient to ending homelessness. In some cases the right to housing and shelter can be used to promote the forced placement of homeless people into controlled spaces. Notably, the World Charter for the Right to the City did not include a right to refuse government housing.
As Engels (1935) observed in *The Housing Question*, bourgeoisie housing reform ignores the problem of capitalist inequality. By focusing solely on housing in isolation from larger demands, advocates undermine the radical potential of the right to the city. As Mitchell (2003, pp. 19-21) urged, the right to housing is not enough:

> The right to the city implies the right to uses of city spaces, the right to inhabit ... a place to sleep, a place to urinate and defecate without asking someone else’s permission, a place to relax, and place from which to venture forth ... the right to inhabit the city, thus demands more than just houses and apartments: it demands the redevelopment of the city in a manner responsive to the needs, desires, and pleasure of its inhabitants, especially its oppressed inhabitants.

The “right to housing” formulation reduces the right to inhabit the city to a mere right to a *habitat* that often takes an individualized, monetized, or highly governed form. Pindell (2006, p. 439) expresses a similar sentiment. He wrote that the right to the city “is not as pithy as guaranteeing all persons shelter.”

Lefebvre argued that buildings—in contrast to monuments—are an expression of abstract space: “Buildings, the homogeneous matrix of capitalistic space, successfully combine the object of control by power with the object of commercial exchange” (1991, p. 227). Housing facilities and shelter complexes fall into this category of pre-made structures. In contrast, Lefebvre viewed self-made homes as an alternative form of the production of space. He argued that simply by residing in space, bodies produce their own “places of abode” (1991, p. 193). Lefebvre assigned the simple act of “dwelling” great importance. He wrote that “the dwelling passes everywhere for a special, still sacred, quasi-religious and in fact almost absolute space ... dwelling stands opposed to wandering existence” (1991, p. 121). By remaining in place rather than yielding to the city’s pressure to constantly move, homeless people build “places of abode” in the city. But the capitalist state seeks to establish control over those who fall outside capitalist
norms. In creating shelter options for the homeless, Fresno seeks to integrate homeless people into controlled spaces, rather than allowing space for self-made communities to flourish. Thus, Fresno is not simply dispersing the homeless but also making it impossible for people to live anywhere but governed or privately owned spaces. In these circumstances, the right to housing and shelter can *deny* the homeless their right to inhabit the city.

Most importantly, the right to the city must encompass the demands emerging from the streets. In Fresno, homeless campers have consistently demanded their right to create their own self-built structures and communities without the threat of eviction. By demanding their right to camp, homeless Fresnans are enacting other rights as well: their right to use space without conforming to the bonds of monetary exchange, their right to live collectively, and their right to define for themselves what constitutes the meaning of home. In short, they are enacting their right to the city.
Chapter Four: Tent Wards

The great strength of the organic tent cities were their bottom-up nature and their organization, in which homeless individuals could find community and autonomy ... City authorities betrayed this vision when they appropriated the tent city model and turned it into a regimented, top-down solution.

—Hunter et al. (2014)

One encampment in Fresno is far more regimented than the rest. Viewed from above with satellite imagery, it looks like a series of squares arranged in neat rows. The entire property is fenced in. From the ground, it is like an army barracks, with a massive tin-roofed warehouse flanked on either side by nearly seventy tools sheds. This is the Village of Hope, Fresno’s sanctioned and controlled encampment. It stands in stark contrast to the illegal tent cities clustered just outside the fence.

In recent years, cities across the nation have sanctioned homeless encampments as an alternative to eviction. In this chapter, I argue that this new trend in homeless management is not simply a cost-effective alternative to shelters and housing but also a means by which cities control and surveil homeless communities. In the first section, I draw on secondary literature to argue that most sanctioned encampments in the U.S. are characterized by screening and management, isolation and seclusion, and rigid discipline. I describe these encampments as “tent wards” to reflect their heavily guarded, institutionalized character and assert some tentative conclusions about the function of the tent ward in simultaneously making the homeless visible to the state and invisible to the consuming public. Then, through an analysis of interviews with officials who developed and proposed several tent wards in Fresno, I examine the processes and ideologies that
underlie the formation of such spaces and argue that campers have opposed tent wards for precisely the same reasons the government creates them.

**Tent Wards: A Strategy for (In)visibility**

The concept of the “ward” connotes multiple meanings. It is a spatial term that can be used to describe a section of a hospital or prison. It also connotes a territorial division of a city. In its archaic usage, the ward indicates a space enclosed by the walls of a fortress. Thus, the word captures the geographic quality of spatial separation. Yet it is also a verb used to denote the action of watching over and protecting a particular place. When the term is used to describe people, it similarly connotes an element of visual surveillance but also of care and paternalism. The “ward of the state” is a person deemed incapable of exercising independent ownership of her own life, who is thus subject to the authority and safekeeping of the warden. Thus, the word implies spatial separation, surveillance, control, but also care. As I show in what follows, these multiple meanings all capture some aspect of the sanctioned encampment.

As outlined in Chapter Three, shelters have not only provided homeless people with protection but have also sought to seclude and control various forms of homeless autonomy. The rise of the tent ward is the latest manifestation in this tradition and mimics in particular the transient work camps of the Great Depression. As Hoovervilles became a staple of the urban landscape, the government responded by instituting an aggressive policy of homeless containment (Mitchell, 2012a). In 1933, Congress created the Federal Transient Service (Starr, 1996), and local authorities began to set up federally funded transient camps for homeless migrant families (Gowan, 2010). These encampments were
designed to “eliminate the tramps” and also to restore homeless “self-respect” through a routine of hard work (Crouse, 1986, p. 153). By 1934, there were 189 federally funded camps across the country, including 28 in California alone (Crouse, 1986). Camps were often replete with army-type barracks, running water, and sewage facilities. Authorities guaranteed that men would be subject to “strict discipline” at all times (Crouse, 1986, p. 154). Thus, these camps were simultaneously highly controlled and spatially isolated but also designed with the paternalistic aim of restoring the “tramp” to the status of a working person.

In response to the rise of large-scale homeless encampments in the past several decades, cities across the United States have again turned to sanctioned encampments. These institutionalized tent cities operate like shelters but are comprised of tents or outdoor sheds. They are often fenced in and heavily policed (Mitchell, 2012a). Local governments have implemented a variety of strategies to control sanctioned encampments, including relocating them to more palatable locations, issuing individualized permits to approved residents, and revising local zoning ordinances. Cities that amend local law to accommodate encampments disallow any “ad hoc” or autonomous tent city formation (Loftus-Farren, 2011, p. 1070) and often require tent cities to have a supporting host agency and pre-approved city permits. In addition, laws tolerating tent city formation require encampments to conform to health and safety regulations and mandate “public meetings with adjoining neighborhoods, notification of schools, population limitations, security, screening, and codes of conduct” (Loftus-Farren, 2011, p. 1071). In the following pages, I describe how these trends have played out in cities across the nation.
Perhaps the most common feature of tent wards is that they are not managed by homeless communities, but by an outside authority.19 Another common feature of many sanctioned encampments is strict screening to control who can and cannot gain residency. At Pinella’s Hope in St. Petersburg, Florida, residents are typically referred to the facility by a team of police officers and social workers. Before admission, residents must undergo a breathalyzer test, background test, and detailed screening. Those who display a “motivational level toward achieving self-sufficiency” are more likely to pass the screening (Hunter et al., 2014, p. 49). In two Washington cities, municipal code requires that sponsor agencies obtain identification from residents and conduct background checks (Lynnwood Municipal Code §21-74; Spokane Municipal Code §10-08C). Kelly (2008) described the process by which residents of an encampment in Ontario, California, were evicted for lack of documentation:

Large, often confused, crowds formed ragged lines behind police barricades where officers handed out color-coded wristbands. Blue meant they were from Ontario and could remain. Orange indicated they had to provide more proof to avoid ejection, and white meant they had a week to leave.

As with management requirements, management and screening practices highlight the implicit goal of disrupting homeless communities and filtering out unwanted members.

Sanctioned encampment are often fenced in and highly surveilled. In 1994, Los Angeles sought to turn a vacant lot east of skid row into an outdoor camping area. Officials described it as a “fenced-in urban campground where up to 800 people could take showers and sleep on a lawn” (Rowe & Wolch, 1994, p. B7). Some argued that the

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19 Private agencies run camps in Ventura and Ontario, California, and St. Petersburg, Florida, while a second camp in St. Petersburg is managed by the County Sheriff’s Department (National Coalition, 2010; Hunter et al., 2014). In Spokane, municipal law requires an outside manager for all sanctioned encampments (Spokane Municipal Code §10-08C).
camp was a wretched excuse for shelter, while a UCLA professor called it “a first step on a slippery slope to concentration camps” (Takahashi, 1998, p. 141). In response to critiques that the proposal sought to fence in the homeless, local government instead created a “service/resting area” (Takahashi, 1998, p. 141). Similarly, when a tent city developed in Reno in 2008, the city responded by fencing in and securitizing the property. In both Lynwood and Spokane, Washington, municipal code mandates six-foot fencing around the perimeter of all sanctioned encampments, as well as constant surveillance (Lynnwood Municipal Code §21-74; Spokane Municipal Code §10-08C). To be officially condoned, homeless communities must be surrounded by a physical boundary that simultaneously contains them while making them less visible to outsiders.

In addition to fencing, many cities have resorted to isolation as a strategy to contain and conceal tent cities. Although Portland’s Dignity Village is lauded as a high-functioning autonomous encampment, it was forced to relocate to a fenced-in composting facility seven miles from downtown, squeezed between a state prison and the Portland International Airport. Although the camp is self-governing, its isolation makes it difficult for residents to access jobs and social services (National Coalition, 2010). Nearly two miles from the nearest convenience store and a 40-minute bus ride from downtown, the site was unacceptable to many campers. One camper called it a "concentration camp" (Verhovek, 2001). St. Petersburg’s two sanctioned encampments are similarly isolated. Pinellas Hope is located 10 miles from the downtown area, in an industrial manufacturing zone located on swampland (Hunter et al., 2014). Many residents walk the 10-mile trek each day into downtown St. Petersburg. Safe Harbor, a second encampment, is located 15 miles from downtown and even further from other areas of Pinellas County. Thus,
residents “face significant challenges in finding transportation to make appointments and interviews” (Hunter et al., 2014, p. 54). Similarly, Ontario’s camp, which housed 450 residents at its peak, remains tucked between abandoned orchards and the Ontario airport, on the edges of the city (National Coalition, 2010). In Washington, municipalities often write spatial separation into the local code. Lacey’s law mandates “visual separation and buffering” from “sensitive land use activities,” including schools (Lacey Municipal Code §16-64), and in Spokane, sanctioned encampments are not allowed to locate near libraries, parks, daycare centers, or other encampments (Spokane Municipal Code §10-08C). This spatial isolation relieves local governments of the problems of NIMBYism, as it makes homeless communities largely invisible to the public eye.

Similarly, sanctioned encampments are often designed to be temporary and moveable. In 2009, a tent ward in Reno was designed to be short-lived. When 150 people set up camp in the city, officials fenced in the property and let the camp stand for a few months before evicting its residents. As Pollock (2009) wrote, “It was merely a temporary solution to what may prove to be a long-term problem.” Relocation is another tactic for spatially controlling homeless communities. In Seattle, Lynnwood, Spokane, and Thurston County, Washington, encampments are forced to change location every few months (National Coalition, 2010; Lynnwood Municipal Code §21-74; Spokane Municipal Code §10-08C). The physical form of the tent ward is far more flexible than the immovable structure of the shelter. Thus, it can be easily dismantled or relocated and creates new possibilities for spatial control of the homeless.

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of sanctioned encampments is the strict enforcement of rules and regulations. At Pinellas Hope, residents have assigned chores,
must post their daily location (on or off the campground) on a public monitoring board each morning, must wear a wristband at all times, and are checked for substances upon each re-entry (Hunter et al., 2014). Residents must also meet with a caseworker on a regular basis and are subject to eviction if they create a disturbance. Pinella’s Hope has been touted as a success, and nearby communities are considering similar models. The sanctioned encampment in River Haven, California, has set time limits on residencies and requires its residents to see a case-manager every 90 days to demonstrate “an honest plan to end their homelessness” (National Coalition, 2010, p. 62). The program does not allow drugs or alcohol and requires residents to attend frequent meetings. In Reno’s sanctioned tent city, the government implemented a series of rules and regulations and required that residents “register with the camp, and that they check in with city officials on a weekly basis regarding their progress in finding jobs and other housing options” (Loftus-Farren, 2011, p. 1072). Ontario’s camp is notorious for its heavily disciplinary character. Inside, identical army tents were arranged in ordered rows, and private security guards monitored residents around the clock. The city established a strict set of rules, including a ban on drugs, alcohol, and pets (National Coalition, 2010). Campers were issued ID cards every 90 days if they complied with these rules and showed “promise and desire to find a job and acquire housing” (National Coalition, 2010, p. 56). They were required to carry their ID cards at all times and were not allowed to bring visitors inside. Sanford (2009) wrote that one camper described the camp as “a prison.” Another woman said of the required wristbands: "They are tagging us because we are homeless … It feels like a concentration camp" (Kelly, 2008). The tent ward’s heavy emphasis on control and
rehabilitation assumes that the homeless are an unruly population in need of strict
discipline and control.

An even starker model combines sanctioned encampments with criminal
institutions. In 2011, a facility called Safe Harbor opened in St. Petersberg. It was created
by the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Department and is strictly administered by a
combination of Sherriff’s teams, private security guards, and police officers. Safe Harbor
serves as both a shelter and a jail diversion program. Under threat of arrest, homeless
residents are given the option to enter Safe Harbor to avoid jail time. However, because
homeless people are routinely profiled and targeted for arrest, the diversion program
“becomes primarily a means to remove homeless individuals from the streets” (Hunter et
al., 2014, p. 53). The facility is located in a former jail, on a concrete block surrounded
by high-fences and wiring. It includes an outdoor component with 100 mattresses
arranged underneath a roof overhang. The facility has a number of correctional rules, as
well as near-constant surveillance and lack of privacy.20 Not surprisingly, local homeless
people and advocates have criticized Safe Harbor for its jail-like conditions and refer to it
colloquially as a “jail-ter.” Hunter et al. (2014, p. 56) argued that:

Correctionalized shelters such as Pinellas Safe Harbor in some ways provide less
dignity than even the older models, with strict curfews, relocations to isolated jail
properties far from city centers, and a general perception of homeless persons as
criminals ... Correctionalized shelters provide a framework in which police can
threaten homeless individuals with arrest in order to remove them from the
community.

20 Individuals who enter the program initially sleep outside and, through complying with rules and case
management schedules, are able to graduate to a mattress on the floor of a large, adjacent indoor area.
Residents who live outside are restricted in the number of showers they can take. All residents must abide
by an 8pm curfew and undergo burdensome sign-out procedures before leaving. If residents break rules,
they are either evicted or relegated back to the outdoor mats. This can be for such trivial offenses as
“failing to clean one’s space ... using more than one towel when taking a shower and failing to put away
one’s mat quickly enough in the morning” (Hunter et al., 2014, p. 54).
In Key West, officials followed a similar model. They transformed the downtown area into a panhandling-free zone and sent homeless violators to Stock Island’s tent ward, conveniently located next to the county jail. The facility is governed by strict rules that hinder any opportunity for homeless activism (Longley, 2006). It is also miles from downtown, near a landfill dubbed “Mount Trashmore” (Carlson, 2004). Thus, the city channels homeless people who would otherwise be destined for jail into a sanctioned encampment that, in many ways, resembles a jail. Yet the tent ward is used to justify this increasing criminalization, as arrestees are seen as “sheltered” rather than jailed.

With such a history of discipline and spatial control, sanctioned encampments must be distinguished from self-governing tent cities. It is important to note that sanctioned encampments often provide amenities that illegal tent cities do not—sanitation infrastructure, access to regular meals, and security. Sanctioned camps also create opportunities for residents to access much-needed services, such as healthcare or counseling. The concept of the “tent ward” enables precisely this understanding, in that it captures the dual qualities of care and protection on the one hand and surveillance, control and segregation on the other. Ultimately, however, cities are driven to produce the space of the tent ward to negotiate the contradictory politics of homeless visibility.

Foucault argued that modern society increasingly surveils its citizens, seeking to make every person visible. He thought that modern societies were “entering an age of the infinite examination” (1995, p. 189) in which visibility becomes “a trap” (1995, p. 200). As James Scott noted, states are particularly troubled by mobile populations because they defy the “classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (1998, p. 2). Thus, the state seeks to make its citizens sedentary and visible, which in
some circumstances requires “a policy of rounding up undesirable minorities” (Scott, 1998, p. 4). As Scott wrote, the state seeks to make people visible in part to control them and to prevent dissent.

The homeless in particular are invisible to the state because they are often not marked in public records or permanently located in space. Casper and Moore (2009) wrote that in an increasingly surveilled society, some people actively seek invisibility. The homeless people I interviewed in Fresno often told me that they set up camp in hidden spaces so that they could avoid detection by police. One camp was wedged between the train tracks and a thick stretch of oleander bushes, entirely hidden from view. Several other camps bordered canal embankments tucked underneath large overpasses.

Peaches told me the following about her encampment:

City council has even stated that they want us out of view. They know that they can’t execute or completely erase homelessness, so if there’s going to be homelessness, they would at least like us to be out of view. This is out of view as far as we can be. We’re close to the outskirts ...This is not a public walk. It’s not right in front of a mall. There’s not a school right here. So what choices would we have to make?

The city nonetheless destroyed Peaches’ encampment while championing the creation of a tent ward. Just as in the early-20th century, the state sought to bring tramping workers into more visible city spaces (Mitchell, 2012a), the modern tent ward accomplishes the same goal by requiring all homeless people be housed in a single fenced-in and surveilled facility.

Yet society simultaneously seeks to make the homeless invisible. Nobert Elias argued that modern society increasingly seeks to distance and conceal that which it views as offensive or undesirable. Elias wrote, “It will be seen again and again how characteristic of the whole process that we call civilization is this movement of
segregation, this hiding ‘behind the scenes’ of what has become distasteful” (2000, p. 103). Lefebvre argued that “visible boundaries, such as walls or enclosures in general, give rise for their part to an appearance of separation between spaces” (1991, p. 87). In particular, they separate the visually acceptable realm of the outside from the hidden world of private life. Lefebvre wrote, “a facade admits certain acts to the realm of what is visible … Many other acts, by contrast, it condemns to obscenity: these occur behind the facade” (1991, p. 99). Tent wards are consistently hidden behind high fencing in neighborhoods far from the public eye. In this way, forced invisibility is a mechanism of power rooted in stigmatizing representations of the homeless as obscene or distasteful.

Yet homeless people who do not have access to shelter must live their private lives in highly visible public spaces (Mitchell, 1997). In Fresno, homeless people often struggled to make the problems of inequality and poverty more visible to the public. Hunter et al. (2014) wrote that illegal tent cities have offered homeless communities a form of visible protest in cities across the nation. Yet homeless visibility is anathema to urban revitalization, and homeless people are increasingly removed from public space because they offend consumer sensibilities (Kawash, 1998). Thus, homeless people are constantly pushed into secluded and invisible spaces. In many cities this has translated into the practice of quarantining the homeless in distant tent wards.

Visibility can be both empowering and disempowering. Star and Strauss wrote that “on the one hand, visibility can mean legitimacy, rescue from obscurity or other aspects of exploitation. On the other, visibility can create … opportunities for surveillance” (1999, pp. 10-11). Homelessness presents a unique case because the homeless are simultaneously made visible to the state yet marginalized and erased from
public life. While the city seeks to make the homeless more visible to itself through seclusion and surveillance, it also seeks to make them less visible to the consuming public through relocation, isolation, and fencing. In response, the homeless have been forced to negotiate the contradictory politics of homeless visibility— they must seek invisible space to survive but also need visibility to publicly challenge the larger social conditions that have led to their homelessness. The following section traces the history of that struggle in Fresno, drawing from interviews with local officials, activists, and homeless Fresnans.

**Fresno’s Tent Wards**

In 2003, Fresno dismantled an encampment that had developed on a junkyard adjacent to the Poverello House (National Coalition, 2010). A year later, the shelter collaborated with Fresno officials to create a controlled encampment — the Village of Hope — on the same piece of property. It was comprised of tents arranged in rows and surrounded by a high fence. The city re-zoned the property as a campground, bypassing building codes that required running water, weather-safe materials, and fixed sanitation. Over time, tents were replaced with tool sheds, each containing two cots and sleeping bags (National Coalition, 2010). At the Village, residents cannot keep pets, are subject to random property searches, and have to abide by restrictions on romantic partnering. They must leave early in the morning and if they return too late in the evening, are locked out of their sheds (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006). Nonetheless, the project provided people with security and allowed homeless residents to maintain a semblance of self-governance.
The Village was touted as a success and as “mutually supportive” and “self governing” community (Levine & Glassel, 2004).

In 2007, the city council voted to create a second encampment on the shelter’s property. Several council members expressed concerns over the temporary nature of the proposed solution. Others stressed that this option was “better than no option” and that it was a “compassionate first step” (City Council, 2007a). Under the agreement, the Community of Hope was born, with Poverello House to receive a $10,000 per month for operating costs (National Coalition, 2010). The Community affords residents fewer opportunities for self-governance than the Village. The Poverello House maintains “absolute control” over the Community (City of Fresno, 2007) and mandates a ban on drugs, alcohol, flames, candles, incense, smoking in non-designated areas, tampering with smoke detectors, and maintaining an “untidy space” (City of Fresno, 2007). Shelter staff confront residents who “cannot function” due to substance abuse or who are deemed to be a danger to themselves and require two shifts of security each week to “motivate residents” (National Coalition, 2010).

Both encampments sit adjacent to each other on the same property and are referred to collectively as “the villages.” In 2013, I spoke with officials who were involved in the creation of these facilities to get a sense of how and why they were developed. Jim Connell, the executive director of the Poverello House, told me about his role in the creation of the villages:

In an effort to get the illegal encampment cleaned up, I said we could fence off an area and put tents in there for those that were willing to agree to some sort of rules. And so what we did was we gathered those people together and said, “Look, we’ll do this, but you people have to be involved.”
He told me the villages close during the day “to encourage people to get out and go find a job, do something.” As detailed in Chapter Two, Connell was opposed to street encampments from the beginning. His language illuminates his perceived authority to “gather people together” and implies that homeless people will not “do something” with their lives unless they are forced. Robert Levine, a psychology professor and board member of the Poverello House, helped oversee the management of the villages. In an article he wrote about the process, Levine concludes with a series of questions:

Should residents be required to demonstrate progress toward finding jobs and/or stable housing? Should there be absolute limits—say 90 days or one year—on stays? And, if so, what will happen to the lifers? In a new experiment, residents will be required to come up with an individual development plan for the next six months. The effects of this requirement will be closely monitored. With winter coming, Poverello House is currently replacing the tents with more durable and weather-resistant structures. Even this, however, raises questions: Will more comfortable quarters discourage residents from moving forward? (Levine & Glassel, 2004)

Levine’s hesitance to provide residents a modicum of comfort implies that homeless people might rise above their conditions if they are uncomfortable enough to want something better. For both Connell and Levine, their benefaction was tinged with authority and paternalism. These sentiments—although grounded in care and compassion—are also rooted in the idea that homelessness is the result of individual failures, rather than poverty and inequality.

Sherry Oliver saw housing as an impossible expense and supported the creation of a sanctioned camp. Her vision also involved top-down organization, and she praised Professor Levine’s organizational efforts in directing “the social organization” of the villages. She envisioned similar management for any new sanctioned camp and described currently existing encampments as criminal and dangerous. Thus, she advocated
organization from experts—in this case, a university professor—rather than provision of amenities and an end to evictions. As with Connell and Levine, she saw self-made homeless communities as incapable of creating positive social organization.

Oliver also identified location as a key aspect of any proposed encampment and saw spatial segregation as a strategy to prevent certain neighborhoods from bearing the burden of homeless neighbors:

It is an issue of location, because obviously you don’t want this encampment to be located here. That’s hurting your services and your ability to provide them. And then I think that becomes a problem for whatever neighborhood it’s located in. Back here, if you look down G Street and across the bridge, and up here, it’s right in people’s back yards.

Thus, Oliver envisioned a camp remote from residential areas so that no-one’s “backyard” would be affected by its presence. The official camps should not only be regulated but also invisible and spatially predetermined.

In 2007 several city officials advocated for the creation of a 30,000 square-foot tent ward in an industrial neighborhood south of downtown. The lot had no access to shade and was fenced in on all sides. The mayor envisioned an encampment that would be monitored by the county. Simultaneously, the city proposed an ordinance to ban camping. At the city council meeting debating both proposals, councilmember Jerry Duncan characterized the camping ban as “a consequence to people not wanting to become productive citizens” (City Council, 2007b). On a local conservative talk radio show, he announced that the proposal’s goal was to remove all encampments from the downtown area and contain Fresno's homeless on a plot of land where they would not be as visible (Rhodes, 2007e). Not only was the plan aimed at making homelessness invisible, but it also was a consequence for people who failed to conform to notions of
capitalist productivity. The council did not simply frame the plan as a means for sheltering people but also as a way to punish them and render them invisible to the consuming public.

The Assistant City Manager asked Mike Rhodes if he could get homeless people to relocate to the property. Rhodes described the first time he saw it:

It’s pretty desolate area. And so the place had a fence around it all. There was no shade, and there was like just tons of goat head thorns, which are these really harsh thorns that, you step on them, you know it ...Why would anybody go there, and live in the hot sun? There’s no shade. There’s no services. There’s nothing there.

As with many tent wards in cities across the nation, officials predetermined the location of the camp without consulting homeless communities. The location was distant from visible downtown spaces, as well as the services that are essential to homeless survival. This predetermined and remote siting is yet another manifestation of the spatial control of the homeless. Yet the plan was vehemently rejected by nearby industrial businesses, as well as by local homeless people, and it fizzled before it was ever built.

Larry Arce at the Rescue Mission was one of the driving forces behind the proposal for the remote sanctioned camp. When I asked about his vision for Fresno homelessness, he told me the following:

We’ll designate that area. If you want to camp out, you don’t want to go into a program, you have to go here. But also what our intent was, the only place you can go to, we’ll concentrate services there, like probation, parole, court services, social security, all the different things that the homeless need . . . And then the intent is to funnel them into a program. You can only be there so long, but in the meantime while you’re here, we’re making an assessment of putting you into a program.

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21 In recalling the Assistant City Manager’s request, Rhodes said, “What do I look like to you—the pied piper of the homeless?”
Thus, Arce’s vision involved criminalization of homelessness, such that homeless people would have only one place to go in the city, where management and criminal justice systems could “funnel” them into various programs. He viewed the tent ward as an instrument by which the city could filter the complex and illegible crowd that resides in homeless encampments into different spaces of surveillance and containment. According to his vision, the criminals would go to jail, the mentally ill to institutions, and the addicts into programs.

In Summer 2013, the city again floated plans to build a remote tent city south of the downtown area, immediately adjacent to the railroad tracks and a recycling facility. The neighborhood was a thirty-minute walk from services and had few sidewalks or pedestrian pathways. The site itself was completely fenced in, had no shade, and was riddled with thorns. It seemed to be a repeat of the 2007 plan.

Meanwhile, Fresno also sought to create a homeless campus, following the model of St. Petersburg’s “jail-ter” and San Antonio’s Haven for Hope, which includes a concrete area for hundreds of homeless people to sleep on mats in the open air (Hayward, 2011). In 2013, the Fresno Business Council and other agencies recruited consultants to evaluate homeless management in Fresno. They paid the CEO of Haven for Hope, along with a private agency, to produce an advisory report.22 The consultants recommended that Fresno unite homeless services with the criminal justice system (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014). The project would be located near the jail to maximize jail diversion efforts and bring homeless individuals into “365 days-a-year programming” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 9). It would include intensive screening and “low-demand

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22 Incidentally, the CEO of Haven for Hope has been referred to as a “homelessness guru” and had travelled around the nation advising cities on how to deal with homeless populations (Dunwoody, 2014).
shelter” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 22). In particular, the report recommends that:

A physical fencing barrier needs to line the facility. If possible, foliage or other screening should be integrated within the fencing system to create a visually aesthetic barrier. Additionally, the structures within the come-as-you-are center need to be laid out in such a way as to create positive ergonomic flow and defensible space. (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 23)

The report also explicitly recommends a model of reward and punishment and states, “Too often there are no consequences for negative behavior of individuals. Unfortunately, this sends a message that bad behavior is acceptable. Within the transformational process, it is critical to have swift and proportionate consequences” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 32). Fresno officials traveled to San Antonio to learn from the model, and several officials told me it was the direction Fresno planned for the future. Again, the proposed tent ward was rooted in the quest for homeless sequestration, both as a means of surveillance and invisibility.

Yet the government was not a monolith, and two officials I spoke with opposed the San Antonio model. A manager at the Fresno Housing Authority told me she did not believe in “warehousing the homeless.” Another official with the county said of the proposal:

We're not going to allow anybody to be anywhere else but right here ... What I'm afraid of is we become complacent, if we don't have to see people anymore … We're not going to incorporate them into society. We’re gonna house them over here in this one district and it's policed and there's barbed wire on top and there's people with guns that don't let you out of there ... It just makes it easier to push the problem aside.23

23 She compared the initiative to the South African science fiction film District Nine in which a reviled alien population arrives in Johannesburg, and authorities seek to place them in a distant and highly surveilled encampment.
Yet both officials also rejected the notion of legalizing currently existing encampments so they yielded to the dominant ideology that supported the tent ward model.

Sanctioned encampments often do not appeal to homeless people as a viable option for shelter. Even when city-developed encampments provide superior access to amenities and food, homeless people often prefer self-organized encampments for the “community, autonomy, and privacy” they afford residents (Wright, 1997, p. 249). As Ehrenreich (2009) wrote of Ontario’s encampment, “The rules were infantalizing … More than a third of those permitted to stay in the [encampment] have left for good.” In Fresno, the situation was no different. Despite the lack of alternative shelter, in Summer 2006, the occupancy rate at the villages was only 50-60% (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006). When I asked Jim Connell about the low occupancy, he speculated that it was because residents were not allowed to use drugs. He did not indicate that the desire for autonomy might also be a compelling reason.

LoriAnne Tennison, a onetime resident of the Community of Hope, identified herself as an activist against homeless management in Fresno. She recalled that every evening, shelter staff would open the door to her shed to make sure she was there. When she asked staff to knock first, they refused. Staff also took away extra sleeping bags she had procured to protect herself against the cold and threatened to kick out any resident seen interacting with “street people,” including their own family members (Tennison, 2011). In an article published in the Community Alliance called “Surviving the Village,” Tennison (2011) wrote that the village rules are “meant to take away whatever personal

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24 He also cited the low occupancy rate to defend the evictions of illegal camps, arguing that campers choose to be homeless because they do not want to comply with rules against drugs and alcohol (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, pp. 34-35; Rhodes 2006d).
power that a person may possess, to destroy the ability of self-determination.” Ultimately, she was kicked out for failing to be present for the 4:30am Point in Time Count. She wrote: “I am now one of those ‘bad people’ who live on the street and sleep in a tent.”

Another homeless man I spoke with told me, “I couldn’t stay there. I had sources of going there, but I had to have my own tent. I like to come and go as I please … They kick you out in the morning and you can’t come back till a certain time in the day.” The villages also had the power to kick people out permanently. A 21 year-old pregnant woman told me that she was recently forced to leave:

They said because me being pregnant, I’m considered a health risk. So at six months I had to leave … It’s not necessarily [that I wanted to have] a baby in the shed. It’s just keeping stable until you get somewhere to go, which I didn’t even have the chance to.

Another woman who stayed there told me she was dissatisfied with its disciplinary character. The “warden” was hostile when she expressed a desire to publish articles in the Community Alliance. A homeless man who lived at the villages told me he had to “break down” to follow the pervasive rules: “There’s rules everywhere. You just got to learn and break down and follow the rules. And if you don’t do that, you’re bye-bye. You’re back out there.” As Mike Rhodes said, “It’s not really a home where you can go to and live. It’s not yours. You can’t go there anytime. You can’t do what you want.” As discussed in Chapter Three, “home” implies the ability to control one’s own space. Even though sanctioned encampments provided security, aid, or access to sanitation, they did not provide a sense of home.

Homeless Fresnans publicly voiced their opposition to the creation of tent wards in Fresno. In 2007, tent city residents spoke out at a City Council meeting against the proposed 30,000 square foot encampment. Speaking before the Council, Alphonso
Williams said, “you are trying to put people into a concentration camp … I’d rather be in jail than a concentration camp” (Rhodes, 2007e). Cynthia Greene, who at the time lived in the G Street Encampment, spoke against the anti-camping ordinance, saying “if this ordinance is passed it will be challenged. It was challenged in Los Angeles and they had to back down because it is not good for the people.” (Rhodes, 2007e).

A local activist movement in Fresno allied with homeless Fresnans to demand the right to camp without surveillance or relocation. Activists pushed for the creation of sanctioned homeless communities where residents could come and go as they pleased. One camper said what people need most is a “someplace that they can go 24/7 without worrying about having to leave” (KNXT1, 2012). In addition to creating new encampments, the movement demanded legalization of currently existing campsites. Mike Rhodes, one of the pioneers of the movement for legal campsites, expressed his vision: “People aren’t going to all go and live in one large encampment. If you go around, you’ll see that each of the encampments are unique and they’re different. Every one has some unique aspect to it.” Thus, he saw the need for multiple sites, to reflect the diversity of Fresno’s homeless communities. Activists repeatedly affirmed that the camps should be more like homes than institutions.

Yet officials I spoke with were consistently opposed to the notion of legalizing existing campsites. A local councilman saw it as an impossible project:

Because of liability, the city would probably have to have a fence around it. The city would probably regulate who came in and went out. The city would probably have to have police officers there, or security people there. And there’s one thing I know about homeless, is they don’t go where police officers and security people are. So I think it’s a non-starter.
He saw securitization and fencing as necessities because of “liability,” yet he knew that it was ultimately not a solution local campers would accept. Stephen Roscoe similarly rejected the possibility of legalizing existing encampments:

How do you go about setting the standards which would be acceptable within the campsite, and at the same time not infringe upon the rights of the other people who are not a part of the camp who just happen to be living around there? As strongly as I advocate and believe in trying to help homeless people, you’ve got to feel just as strongly for those people who aren’t homeless. They have rights also.

Thus, he viewed the homeless as infringing on the rights of housed residents and businesses to be free from the nuisance of nearby encampments. He articulated, several times throughout our conversation, his vision of a right to be free from homeless externalities and the duty of homeless people to respect that right.

Jim Connell also shared his thoughts on legalized camping: “Some people came up with the idea of sort of a legalized campground … It really doesn’t work because it degenerates into what we’ve got going on now. The whole criminal element taking control of it.” When I asked him what distinguished an illegal encampment from the villages, he said, “We control sort of the element that goes in there. That’s the piece we control with the villages. We keep out the criminal element.” Thus, he viewed management and screening as necessary components of any successful homeless community. Robert Levine articulated a similar rationale:

The shantytown began innocently enough but, by December, was plagued by violence, drugs, prostitution, open fires and filth. The police and Poverello House decided to tear down the shantytown and to simultaneously create an alternative facility for those willing to obey the law. (Levine & Glassel, 2004)

His description of street encampments as filthy and violent implies that homeless self-governance is a dangerous enterprise and that a competent caretaker must intervene to protect the community from itself.
The government’s push for tent wards sheds light on its opposition to tent cities—Fresno officials do not criminalize camping because they view tents as inadequate housing, but rather because illegal encampments provide collective, unpoliced space. The urge to control was intertwined with the urge to provide people with a safe place to sleep at night, with food, and access to care. Admittedly, tent wards often do provide these amenities. Yet they simultaneously deny the homeless the ability to produce their own spaces or create a sense of home.

Conclusion

While cities seek to produce urban space that is easily surveilled, autonomous homeless communities threaten this goal. U.S. cities have dealt with self-made encampments either by destroying them or co-opting them completely. These co-opted tent cities, reminiscent of federal transient camps during the Great Depression, are more appropriately termed tent wards, as they often undermine residents’ freedom and are aimed at controlling homeless populations. Simultaneously, however, they function as spaces of care and protection. Like other U.S. cities, Fresno does not tolerate self-made homeless encampments. Officials in Fresno told me they sought to create sanctioned encampments to control and surveil the homeless and also to place them in more palatable—and invisible—locations. Thus, the creation of tent wards shows that homelessness itself is not the problem that the city seeks to address, and neither is living in tents. Rather, homeless visibility is a threat to property values and revitalization efforts, while homeless invisibility is a threat to the status quo.
Part III: Homogeneity
Chapter Five: Dirty and Ugly

The class struggle has the capacity to differentiate, to generate differences which are not intrinsic to economic growth.
—Henri Lefebvre

It was August 2013, and the city was about to reveal its latest eviction plan at City Hall. The postmodern, futuristic building takes up two square blocks of Fresno’s scruffy downtown and is often referred to locally as “The Spaceship.” When I arrived, the exterior seemed nearly impenetrable, with a soaring glass facade and metal roof, and doors tucked underneath a concrete staircase. Inside, the security guard’s desk was dwarfed by the massive interior and high vaulted ceilings. Homeless men and women walked up and down the sidewalks just outside the building. But the security guards ensured that they were not welcome inside the very place where officials sought to determine their future.

I wandered the halls until I found a room crowded with people and television cameras. Almost everyone wore a suit, and the women wore heels. The city manager was at the front of the room standing behind a podium, flanked on either side by the police chief, the head of the housing authority, and about twenty other homeless management officials. The city manager introduced his plan to destroy homeless encampments to reduce “blight” in the community. He focused on removing the problem of homeless structures and only referred to homeless people once, to stress the importance of “getting

people off the street.” In effect, he argued that homeless people were only tolerable if they were not permanently or visibly located in space.

Lefebvre wrote that under capitalism, space becomes a product. As such, it must be uniform and easily reproduced for exchange on the market. He argued that the forces of capitalist space seek to eliminate all differences, to “grind down and crush everything before them, with space performing the function of a plane, a bulldozer or a tank” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 285). Not only is capitalist space homogenous, it is also rooted in the predominance of the visible. Lefebvre wrote that capitalist spaces “are made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and whatever is contained by them … We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images” (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 75-76). Lefebvre argued that the dominance of the visual realm is accompanied by a hyper-sanitized vision of space. The dominant producers of abstract space engage in an “onslaught of hygiene and asepticism” (1991, p. 197) and seek to render everything “pasteurized, everything hygienic and deodorized” (Merrifield, 2006, p. 90, citing Lefebvre, 1971, p. 198). Despite struggles to assert difference, Lefebvre wrote that “the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences … centrality and normality will be tested as to the limits of their power to integrate, to recuperate, or to destroy whatever has transgressed” (1991, p. 373).

In Fresno, officials argued that bulldozing was necessary because camps were filthy and unattractive. As Mary Douglas argued in her seminal analysis of pollution and taboo, filth is a social construct designed to arrange objects in space, and dirt can be understood as “matter out of place” (1966, p. 165). Echoing Douglas, Lefebvre understood the “obscene” as that which is spatially prohibited. He wrote that the
obscenity results from social practice in which “exclusion from the scene is pronounced silently by space itself” (1991, p. 226). Accordingly, the notion of the homeless as unpleasant is fundamentally rooted in spatial norms. When homeless communities are in visible downtown spaces, they are considered out of place and therefore “dirty” and “ugly.” In Lefebvre’s terms, they do not conform to the visible uniformity of the city. It is only when they are safely within the confines of the shelter, house, or tent ward that they become aesthetically tolerable.

This chapter traces representations of sanitation and aesthetics in official circles, as well as within homeless encampments. I argue that the homeless in Fresno have struggled for a right to alternative and non-commodified forms of waste infrastructure and have championed alternative notions of aesthetics by turning urban waste into art. In this light, Fresno's spatial control of the homeless derives from its perceived need to produce a sanitized and aesthetically homogenous downtown space. In turn, homeless encampments assert their right to difference as part and parcel of their right to the city.

Sanitation, Aesthetics, and Spatial Control in Fresno

Officials in Fresno relied on a discourse of sanitation to justify bulldozing practices. In defense of the Kincaid case, the city argued the evictions were necessary to address “health and sanitation” concerns (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, pp. 5, 63). Again in a press release praising the evictions, the city wrote, “The cleanup efforts are being conducted to address health and safety concerns” (City of Fresno, 2011c). Local news media agreed. In an editorial, The Fresno Bee opined, “The city of Fresno is doing the right thing by clearing the multiple homeless encampments in or near downtown. These
camps are filthy, unhealthy, dangerous and a blight on surrounding neighbors and businesses” (“After Camps,” 2013).

In Fresno, local news media, public officials, and service providers downplayed the violence of the evictions by describing the encampments as trash. Reporting on the evictions, The Fresno Bee described how “city sanitation crews scooped up piles of trash from about a dozen homeless encampments” (Galvan, 2006). The story entirely ignored the shanties, tents, and countless personal possessions that were destroyed. One shelter operator told me it was “absurd” that the homeless claimed they lost valuable possessions in the evictions. In discussing the lawsuit against the city, Larry Arce described the evictions as “trash” pick-ups:

You got all this trash and mess, so when the city came in, they started picking up all this stuff and throwing it away. Well, the ACLU came in and said, “They’re throwing away your stuff. They can’t do that.” Even though it’s trash, and everybody knows it’s trash . . . People were saying, “They threw away my passport. They threw away my driver’s license. They threw away cherished mementos. They threw away my teeth. They threw away family ashes.” And that’s so untrue … It just became a huge shanty town. Just one horrific mess.

The Fresno Bee quoted another local homeless service provider stating: “The trash is what you would see in Third-World countries … This is truly a health hazard to our community” (Lee, 2013a). In describing the encampments as simply piles of “trash,” these service providers assumed that it was impossible for homeless people to have valuable or cherished possessions.

Official city policy also represented the encampments as composed of trash. In the Kincaid decision, the court found that “the City’s policy is that any property that is not physically attended to by its owner is considered abandoned and is defined by the City as ‘trash’” (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, p. 13). This representation is recognized
on the streets. One young homeless woman said the city treats the camps “like a dumpster that people live in … They don’t see it as somebody’s home. They see it as garbage that was just put together. Trash.”

Not only did were the encampments portrayed as useless trash, they were often described as disgusting. In defense of the Kincaid lawsuit, the city claimed, “The areas where homeless individuals live typically reek of urine and feces … human sewage, syringes, used condoms, rotting food, and piles of trash and debris” (Kincaid et al. v. Fresno, 2006, p. 13). In 2012, a local TV station ran a story called “Filthy homeless encampment stinking up Fresno” (“Filthy Homeless,” 2012), and the same day, The Bee blasted a similarly inflammatory headline on its front page— “Homeless encampment in Fresno a filthy, stinky eyesore” (Jiminez, 2012). In another story, local news reported, “Some call it disgusting, others say it’s just plain wrong, and is a biohazard that is out of control” (Rosales, 2013).

As a corollary to this representation of disgusting trash, the word “clean-up” has become common parlance for eviction in Fresno (see generally Kincaid et al. v Fresno, 2006; City of Fresno, 2012; Lee, 2013a). As the head of one homeless shelter told me, he encouraged the city to “clean up” the encampment that had become a “gauntlet” in front of his shelter. Yet in reality, he was urging the city to demolish people’s homes. After the city bulldozed all of the downtown camps in 2006, the city’s largest newspaper— The Fresno Bee—ran the headline: “Cleaning house - Fresno crews descend on downtown area to tidy up a haven for homeless.” The Community Alliance reported that one police officer said of the raids: “The homeless people that live here are the luckiest homeless in Fresno. They have maid service. We come out and clean up for them about every other
week” (Rhodes, 2006a). By replacing the words “bulldoze” or “demolish” with the unoffending phrase “clean up,” officials concealed the violence of the evictions and portrayed them as sanitary and helpful.

In addition to concealing the violence of the evictions, the representation of disgusting trash places blame for unsanitary conditions squarely on the shoulders of the homeless and ignores their lack of access to sanitation infrastructure. In one article, The Fresno Bee quoted a local resident saying “I don't mind if they stay there, if only they cleaned up after themselves” (Galvan, 2006). Another article quoted a neighborhood resident saying “I'm sorry they're homeless, but that doesn't mean you have to be a slob” (Jiminez, 2012). When I asked a local councilman what he thought about the evictions, he responded, “you've seen the filth, you’ve seen the vermin, the feces”— and then told me the story of a business owner who had photographed a homeless man defecating:

I think he probably just finished [defecating] when they came out and took his picture. And the guy’s standing there … The body is defiant but the eyes are embarrassed… That alley is in jeopardy, because homeless people go, and they camp out there. And it comes with the filth and the public health problems that they bring with them … They use the bathroom and they relieve themselves in the corner of the building … As a councilmember I say, I don’t care about the homeless, we need to make sure that this guy’s business is safe and clean.

He assumed that the man photographed was defecating because of a personal vendetta against the business owner and blamed the “unhygienic” practices of homeless Fresnans for making them unpopular amongst his electorate. Yet he did not mention the option of providing a place for homeless people to go to the bathroom and instead indicated that he had no choice but to vote against the homeless to get re-elected.
In a particularly unrestrained moment, Larry Arce blamed the homeless for their dirtiness and criticized the city for not being more “proactive” in removing them from downtown:

[The homeless] didn’t care about all the trash being strewn all over the street . . . People from all out of town come here . . . What do they see? Nothing but shanty towns. I’ve had missionaries that come here and say, “I’ve been to Africa. I’ve been to other countries . . . This is the same thing that I’ve seen in other countries, and this is America. And you have opportunities . . . and they still live that way?” . . . We haven’t taken the bull by the horns, and get a backbone, and say we’re not going to allow you to do this . . . If a person is homeless and doesn’t want to do anything for himself, and wants to continue to live that way, perpetuate that lifestyle . . . You have to be more proactive and say we’re not going to allow you to do this.

Arce blamed the homeless for their conditions and did not mention the lack of access to trash or sanitation services.

Homeless people were also described as visually unappealing. As one homeless man said, “People don't like it when they see you on the street like that because it bothers them” (Chaderjian, 2014). Another homeless woman said, “Most people don’t want to look at us” (Bedoian, 2013). Arce complained that even after homeless people were placed in housing:

A lot of them look like they just got out of bed, unkempt, no shave, no haircuts, wearing their same dirty clothes. They don’t bother to iron them. They don’t bother to clean them . . . So now you filled up all of downtown with those kinds of people.

He told me that he had once “hosed down” a homeless man who came to his shelter: “It was horrible. He stunk . . . He was living like a troll up on one of the bridges.” This characterization of a man as a “troll” who needed to be “hosed down” reveals the power that stigma has to turn human beings into objects of disgust and violence against them into “cleanliness.” In Fresno, dirty appearance was also used as a way of counting the
homeless. During the 2011 Point in Time Count, surveyors identified people as homeless if they had “dirty clothes” or looked “disheveled” (“Fresno Madera,” 2011). A homeless woman I spoke with recognized that the fact if she “looked” homeless, it would hurt her chances at panhandling:

I was a rare person on the streets. Another reason people wanted to protect me was because I have my looks still. I have all my teeth … I would shower in McDonald’s. That’s how I’d do it— I’d go in with my little makeup packet and stuff. Wash my hair in the sink, sponge bath, or birdbath or whatever, and get as put together looking as I could. And when you’ve got all dirty clothes sometimes that’s really difficult … Whenever we got a hotel we’d use that time to hand wash all of our things … If I’m looking put together then I’ll feel better about myself then I’ll have more game.

She said people don’t “want to be viewed as homeless, more as people,” and went out of her way to keep clean and apply makeup to have better chances at panhandling.

The visual appearance of homeless encampments was of central concern to those who encouraged evictions. As Fresno sought to turn its downtown into a “destination,” officials increasingly relied on a discourse of homeless blight to justify removing homeless people from public space. As one local activist put it, “They would like [the homeless] to be gone. They’re a blight … that doesn’t make your city look good … [The mayor] is more concerned with how things look than with making a difference.” In a report on the encampments, a local news anchor said, “There’s no question-- the homeless camps in and around downtown Fresno are an eyesore.” The report then cut to an interview of a local man saying, “That’s like tent city over there. I mean, ugly. Ugly” (MYNEWSWORLD1, 2013). A Youtube video depicted an interview of a homeless woman on the day that her encampment was demolished. She said, “we’re like the ugly stepchildren that nobody wants, and it sucks to be in this orphanage … It’s not a sin to not be rich or pretty” (c blove, 2013).
The city’s ban on shopping carts was also represented in terms of neatness and visual uniformity. As one police sergeant said, the shopping cart ordinance was passed in part “because carts on the street overflowing with stuff are ugly” (“Fresno Shopping Cart,” 2014). After the homeless task force was developed in 2013, a Youtube video captured Police Chief Jerry Dyer speaking to a group of homeless people: “We’re trying the best we can to keep things clean and organized. We need the sidewalks, the dirt, and the streets to be clear. You guys can line your carts up in single file” (Yosemitebear62, 2009). One homeless man said of the shopping cart ordinance: “We pack them real neat-neat … and as long as we park them neat and free of trash, we have no problem” (The Life Project, 2012). This illuminates the city’s aesthetic aims in passing the shopping cart ordinance: it tolerated shopping carts so long as they were not “cluttered” or out of place.

Downtown revitalization plans emphasized the visual and aesthetic aspect of urban transformation. As Fresno’s 2010 budget stated, Fresno’s PBID was developed to “make the Fulton Mall more attractive. Downtown revitalization will also create a façade improvement program that will incentivize property owners to make and maintain significant improvements to the appearance of their buildings” (City of Fresno, 2010, p. 14). The head of Fresno’s PBID said that one of the primary purposes of the organization is “streetscape enhancement.” As such, it hired “an ambassador crew . . . to move people along. So it really is an eyes and ears on the street” (Fresno City Hall, 2010e). One of the PBID ambassadors told me, “We definitely have plans here to try to make the Fulton Mall and downtown more attractive to everyone . . . otherwise you’re going to miss out on customers.” Yet his understanding of “everyone” did not include those who were perceived to hinder economic growth.
Similarly, support for the construction of Fresno’s tent ward relied on an aesthetic of uniformity. As Larry Arce said, “They can set up an encampment in a way where everything is more uniform, more structured instead of just little shanties and boarded up places, but have something that’s presentable, and decent.” A homeless woman I spoke with also understood that the city was “tired of looking at” the encampments and wanted to “make little bitty rooms out of wood that look all the same.” An advisory report on homeless management in Fresno states in its proposal for a sanctioned camp: “Safety, health and hygiene are all negatively impacted by dirty, soiled and cluttered environments … All areas need to be organized neatly and uncluttered ... and should not smell dirty and soiled” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 23). Thus, notions of visual uniformity and the removal of filth and “clutter” were essential to the spatial control of the homeless in Fresno.

The Struggle for Infrastructure

Geographers often characterize urban infrastructure as a defining feature of modern life (Edwards, 2003; Graham & Marvin, 2001). Larkin (2013, p. 337) argued that infrastructure creates a sense of modernity—“a process by which the body, as much as the mind, apprehends what it is to be modern, mutable, and progressive.” Infrastructure is often assumed to be a system in the background of modern life, only noticeable when it fails (Edwards, 2003; Star, 1999). Particularly since the mid-twentieth century, infrastructural networks have become part of a taken-for-granted world of everyday urban life (Greenberg & Garver, 1998).

Yet under capitalism, certain infrastructures operate for profit, and many people cannot afford to access the benefits that they provide. Gandy (2005, p. 42) wrote that this
is particularly marked in the case of global access to sanitation, as “the numbers of people without adequate access to safe drinking water or effective sanitation have grown inexorably over the last quarter century.” Much of the literature on modern sanitation infrastructure looks at informal settlements in the Global South. In 2003, less than one third of people living in cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America had access to what the UN calls “good quality sanitation,” and as many as 100 million people were forced to defecate in the open (UN Habitat, 2003, p. xvii). Pindell (2006) noted that in Brazilian favelas, even after legislation significantly expanded the right of people to own homes in illegal settlements, many people still suffer from a lack of infrastructural services. Thus, even as cities make progress on the right to housing, infrastructural access lags far behind.

Scholars have noted that infrastructural inequality is often culturally marginalizing (Gandy, 2005; McFarlane & Rutherford, 2008). As Edwards wrote, “belonging to a culture means, in part, having fluency in its infrastructures … in this sense, infrastructures constitute society” (2003, pp. 189-190). Infrastructures commit people to a pre-made system of order, control, and regularity. Gandy (2005, p. 25) calls these networks a concrete manifestation of “normative universalism.” Thus, exclusion from infrastructural access can lead to exclusion from societal norms.

The normativity of infrastructural access is particularly marked with regards to the management of urban waste. Historically, colonial sanitation infrastructure was often linked to racialized discourses of disgust at the colonial “other” (McFarlane & Rutherford, 2008; Kooy & Bakker, 2008). Discourses about “promiscuous defecation” encouraged a “massive, ceaseless disinfection” of colonial cities, demanding control and
quarantine (Anderson, 1995, p. 641). Similarly, in European cities, as private indoor bathrooms became the 19th-century bourgeoisie norm, “the smell of human excrement … was to be indicative of disorder, decay and physical repulsion” (Gandy, 1999, p. 32). This repulsion became associated with those who could not afford access to sanitation infrastructure.

Colonial categories of hygiene persist today. Chatterjee (2004) noted the ways in which people living in informal housing in India are treated as second-class citizens. McFarlane (2008, p. 91) argued that people in Mumbai’s informal settlements are often depicted as “problem” rather than “citizen.” He wrote:

The view peddled in the media and among many neighbourhood improvement groups is often that it is their fault that sanitation is the way it is, and if things don’t improve then it is they who are to blame … ‘Slums’ remain populations outside of the sphere of citizenship, outside of discourses of rights, and remain in the view of these officials and many others in the city a necessary scourge on visions of the modern, clean and ordered city. (2008, pp. 105-6)

These discourses often contribute to policies of spatial control and exclusion. Gandy (1999) documents how people without access to sanitation in 19th-century European cities were increasingly pushed into marginalized spaces. In modern-day Mumbai, public-health discourses are associated with the increasing occurrence of slum demolition. As Chatterjee (2004, p. 140) wrote, “many middle class neighbourhood organisations in Mumbai… interpret the sanitising of urban space through a logic of demolition rather than one of improvement of informal settlements.” In the winter of 2005, an estimated 90,000 huts were torn down in Mumbai, leaving around 350,000 people homeless (McFarlane, 2008). Similarly, Operation Drive Out Rubbish in Zimbabwe left as many as one million people homeless. The government argued that in
destroying people’s homes, it was simply clearing out the “rubbish” (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2005).

Yet lack of infrastructural access does not only affect people living in the Global South. For homeless people living in the U.S., inadequate infrastructure often represents exclusion and marginalization. The fact that homeless people cannot access sanitation infrastructure leads to a stigmatizing representation of homeless people as “crazies” who choose to openly defecate in public. Burnes and Baum argued that homelessness is not primarily about poverty, because poor people “do not urinate or defecate in public places” (as quoted in Mitchell, 2003, pp. 202–203). De Venanzi (2008) explained perceptions of the homeless by arguing that society views poor hygiene as a rejection of convention. With regards to the homeless, this view ignores the unequal access to infrastructure that often prevents compliance with sanitary norms.

The notion that homeless people defecate in public is often used to support their removal from public space. Ed Koch, onetime mayor of New York City, said in support of an anti-loitering law: “These homeless people, you can tell who they are. They're sitting on the floor, occasionally defecating, urinating” (Dunlap, 1988). In San Diego, a campaign to remove homeless people from public space was sparked because local business people were tired of their “constant defecating, urinating” (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006, p. 162). Tremoulet and Bassett (2012, p. 17) argued that “humane displacement” of homeless encampments is often necessary because “the site has significant health and sanitation issues as a result of its current use. When the current hazards are cleared, the problem is likely to reoccur because there are no resources to address sanitation needs on an ongoing basis.” The authors characterized lack of sanitation as a reason to destroy
homeless encampments and the provision of sanitation infrastructure as an impossible option.

Mitchell (1995, p. 118) noted that for the homeless, public space is the only space to “go to the bathroom, sleep, drink, or make love.” Yet these private activities become illegitimate when they are performed in public space. As Kohn (2004, p. 129) wrote:

Many people feel disgust when they see someone sleeping, washing, or relieving themselves in a park or alley … If an individual has no private place to perform intimate bodily functions, these will have to be performed in public or they will not be performed at all. The latter, however, is not an option, because they are functions intrinsic to life itself.

Although Mitchell and Kohn center their analyses on the lack of access to private space, in many homeless encampments across the nation, people have been able to establish a small realm of privacy within a tent or shanty. In these circumstances, it is not a lack of access to private space, but rather a lack of infrastructural access that denies the homeless their right to the city.

In Fresno, and elsewhere, homeless campers have demanded greater access to urban infrastructural services. Watters (2012, p. 272) described a homeless resistance movement that emerged in response to a “sanitation crisis” in a riverbed encampment in Sacramento, California. As part of his research, Watters conducted an informal survey of local business owners and community members to get a sense of their attitudes toward the homeless. Most people he interviewed saw the homeless as “shameless” and “filthy” for urinating and defecating in public (2012, p. 83). Yet people living in the encampment had to walk a mile and a half to the nearest drinking fountains to get water, and it was nearly impossible for them to find a place to shower. People also had no access to toilets
because there were no nearby public restrooms, and local businesses refused to allow
them to use their facilities. Watters wrote:

This situation leaves little choice for many of the homeless except to use the
outdoors to relieve themselves, and that is not without concern. One camper
shared, “I have, on occasion encountered difficulties with the need to take care of
my bodily functions. You can’t let anyone see you … It is very stressful.” (2012,
pp. 271-2)

In response to this crisis, local homeless people started an advocacy group to install
portable toilets in the encampment. After a flood destroyed the toilets, “a campaign of
harassment was launched by the county officials, rangers and eventually the local media
to get all the homeless off the American River Parkway” (2012, p. 272). When campers
again installed toilets, the city removed them after complaints of “a homeless
infrastructure” on the river (2012, p. 275). In response, one camper took it upon himself
to create a “sanitary toilet system” that involved collecting waste from a makeshift toilet.
He said of the experience: “It’s a difficult job but someone’s got to do it and it is
worthwhile, absolutely…The women really appreciate it. We all do because we are re-
humanized, because we’re not just thrown aside” (2012, p. 276). Watters wrote that local
authorities “purposely resisted attempts to provide improved sanitation … and the dreaded
homeless infrastructure they seek to avoid” (2012, p. 278). Thus, the struggle over
homeless rights in Sacramento became a struggle over access to sanitation infrastructure.

In Fresno, campers’ demands were similarly centered on sanitation. Tent city
residents often placed a high value on maintaining a clean space. One activist told me
about a shanty in which a woman had constructed a separate room for showering and
going to the bathroom. Another camper said of her community: “The streets have been
kept cleaner than they’ve been in two decades, believe it or not. Who does that? We do.
We sweep the drains. We clean the drains. We keep the trash up out of the street” (Dr. Jean Kennedy, 2011). Similarly, another homeless woman said after she was evicted: “We kept our camps clean. We had front yards, fences, parking stalls for bikes and grocery carts. We even participated in keeping the whole area around us clean” (Homelessness Marathon, 2014). As Wright (1997, p. 255) argued, for homeless street people, the very act of creating a clean and comfortable place to sleep “contributes to the redefinition of that space, especially in the eyes of authorities who wish to maintain a 'proper' version of space.” This creation of clean spaces challenges the city's representation of street camps as unhygienic and worthy of destruction. One homeless woman insisted that the homeless make sure that the portable toilet in their encampment remained clean. In describing her use of Circle K mini-mart bathrooms, she said, “I left it better than when it was when I went in there.”

Personal hygiene was also a high priority for many of the homeless people I spoke with. One young woman explained that although she did not like to steal for money, “it got to the point sometimes where you’re just like— I want to stay in a hotel room. I want a bath.” Another woman said the thing she missed the most living on the streets was easy access to showers. Her biggest hope was to get “back into a four-walled situation where I can have a shower whenever I want to. I’ll probably be in the shower for like two weeks.” Another man described himself as a “hygienist freak” and said that made it especially difficult to be homeless. When his tent was destroyed in an eviction, his first concern was how he would take a shower and change before going to work the next morning. Another homeless woman presented hygiene as one of the necessities of life on the streets: “Say you were on the streets. What are you going to do? … You going to
build up on some clothes, some hygiene, get some food, straighten up.” The right to the
city is not just material but also seeks to reshape representations of urban life. By
representing themselves as hygienic, the homeless in Fresno sought to dismantle the
representation of filth that underlies evictions.

One homeless woman articulated the connection between the representation of
filth and the evictions and advocated for improvements to the encampments as an
alternative to eviction:

If there’s something about it you don’t like—you say it’s too nasty, too dirty—
find a way to clean it up … If there’s a problem with garbage or anything like
that, find a way to work it out … But don’t just take our stuff away because you
don’t agree with it or you don’t like it, and leave us with nothing.

Her vision involved improvements to the camps to clean up the garbage, rather than out-
and-out evictions. Another homeless woman shared her sentiments:

It would also help if they could make public dumpsters. Everybody— stores and
houses— they all have their garbage cans and there’s dumpsters and stuff but
there’s no public dumpsters. There’s no place that we can legally go and throw
our garbage. (c blove, 2013)

She recognized that trash pickup services were available only for money and saw public
dumpsters as an important part of city services. Another homeless man similarly
advocated for the provision of dumpsters and articulated the difficulty of obtaining
employment for people without access to sanitation:

They should put big dumpsters out here for the homeless … How they gonna find
a job and how they gonna keep a job living out there? You got to get your rest,
you got to have your hygienes right, you got to shower, and your clothing got to
be organized.

Thus, many people identified the lack of sanitation infrastructure and trash services as the
primary obstacle in their daily life.
In Fresno the struggle for sanitation went above and beyond representations and took the form of continued political action. In 2007, homeless activists and allies demanded the installation of toilets and trash facilities for Fresno's largest tent city. The Police Department issued a memo urging the city not to install toilets because of fear of crime occurring inside the facilities. Several council members voiced similar concerns (Rhodes, 2007b). The city ignored the need for sanitation infrastructure in favor of its dual policy of evictions and housing vouchers. As Mike Rhodes said of the city’s policy:

Many of those people that got the initial vouchers have since found themselves back on the street. But in the meantime the City of Fresno insists that that is their only policy on dealing with the homeless— that they are not going to provide any resources for their immediate needs, or mid-term needs. What we wanted them to do is to provide immediately portable toilets and trash bins and drinking water right where they are so that they could survive … But this city will do nothing on the immediate front. They totally refuse to help the homeless where they are … And to me, it’s just the right thing to do because everybody should have the dignity and respect of a place to go to the bathroom, and drinking water, and a place to throw their trash … Their policy has been to evict people, move them on from place to place and not provide any basic services for them while they’re out there.

Another activist lamented, “You bring in trash containers and Porta-Potties— it’s gonna make life much better. But again the city isn’t very cooperative with that.”

At the urging of a councilmember who voiced concerns about local business interests, the measure passed, and the city installed three portable toilets in one encampment. As an odd corollary, the mayor at the time insisted on hiring a private security force to monitor the toilets 24 hours a day, costing the City $13,000 per month (Rhodes, 2007d). As one activist told me, the city finally acquiesced because “it took pressure off the neighboring businesses and residential area … And that lasted for a while, and they eventually dismantled it, and they kicked everybody out of that encampment, and they hauled that stuff away, and they never did it again.”
Again in 2011, after the toilets were removed, more than a hundred people camped out overnight at City Hall to demand trash bins, portable toilets, and fresh drinking water for Fresno tent cities (Williams, 2011). Alphonso Williams, a local homeless activist, wrote about the event in the local Community Alliance newspaper:

> Of our three requests—for trash bins, portable toilets and fresh drinking water—we hope to at least have a trash bin in place at the Santa Clara and E street encampment by the time you read this … Homeless advocates, along with advocates who are homeless, came from as far away as Sacramento, San Jose, Merced and San Francisco in support of this Human Rights Day event and to join the Fresno advocates and supporters of the action to request that the City of Fresno provide trash bins, portable toilets and fresh drinking water at the homeless encampments in downtown Fresno as mandated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Williams, 2011)

Williams characterized sanitation infrastructure as a fundamental human right. This time, the city did not respond, and the homeless took another tactic.

In conjunction with homeless Fresnans, a local activist movement organized a group that periodically helped to clean trash in the encampments. They raised money to install and service four dumpsters and ten portable toilets at encampments across town. The Community Alliance reported on the effort:

> Because the City of Fresno has refused to help provide the homeless with drinking water, trash bins or portable toilets, it has become necessary for individuals and groups to do more. Spokespersons for the city say they are focusing on finding housing for the homeless and don’t want to be distracted by providing services for the thousands of homeless people living in the city. They acknowledge that there are more than 4,000 chronically homeless people in Fresno and point to the Renaissance housing projects that house a little more than 100 persons as an example of their contribution to end homelessness (Rhodes, 2013).

The city provided aid only when it aligned with their vision for downtown revitalization. Yet the community funded infrastructure was a timely intervention. One homeless man called the portable toilets in his camp a “blessing.” He said, "It's very helpful, especially
for the ladies” (Lee, 2013b). Another woman described the portable toilet that had been installed in her encampment as “heaven sent.” Lefebvre understood that the right to the city was the creation of urban space not as an object of exchange but as an *oeuvre*—a creative collaboration. By building alternative infrastructures in the encampments, homeless Fresnans and activists collectively created the city as an *oeuvre* that reflected their own interests and demands.

Yet the city refused to service the community-funded trash bins, arguing that the homeless would sue them if they did any cleanups. As the Assistant City Manager said, “we have gone out and cleaned up what people perceive and we agree is junk. We end up being on the end of lawsuit, claiming that we threw away someone's personal valuable processions” (Rosales, 2013). Again, the city argued that the encampments *themselves* were trash, which made it impossible to clean trash within the encampments. As one activist told me “they cite, we don’t pick up the trash, because you guys sue us every time we do. As if that was the same thing—picking up the trash was the same as bulldozing encampments. And the citizens in general probably don’t know the difference.” Another advocate said, “If we can help keep the encampments clean without destroying homeless people’s property, why can't the city do the same thing?”

But the portable toilets were insufficient to meet the needs of homeless Fresnans. As one local advocate said, the portable toilets were “totally inadequate. There needs to be probably three times that many. But it’s something that does take the edge off of it a little bit.” But other options were few and far between. The local Rescue Mission shut down its shelter and refused to let people take showers unless they were enrolled full-time in its drug treatment program. One homeless woman told me that the Mission
refused to let her use their bathroom even when she was pregnant. “I went over there one time. I told them—Can I use the bathroom real quick? I’m pregnant, I have to go. They told me no. To where I had to go outside.” Another woman told me that every time she wanted to use the bathroom, she had to make sure she had enough money to purchase something from the local mini-mart or risk not being allowed to use its facilities. Homeless people also purchased food to use the restrooms in McDonald’s, yet on one of these occasions an incident sparked a struggle.

In 2007, Sherri Williams, a disabled homeless woman, was arrested for attempting to use a McDonald’s bathroom. The manager told her to leave because she “wasn’t purchasing anything” (Rhodes, 2007f). Thus McDonald’s advocated a position in which sanitation provision was only available in exchange for money. In response, Sherri asserted that she had a right to use the bathroom. An officer at the scene called for backup and gave Sherri a citation for “interfering with business.” The Community Alliance reported on the event: “There were at least three police cruisers on the scene and six or seven officers involved to sort out the alleged crime of a homeless woman needing to use the bathroom” (Rhodes, 2007f). Days later, about a dozen homeless people and advocate allies staged a protest in front of the McDonalds. They held signs that read “McDiscrimination,” “I’m Not Lovin’ It,” “Homeless Go Home,” and “Normal People Only” (Rhodes, 2007g). Sherri said that she hoped the protest would result in McDonald’s allowing homeless people to use the restroom. A local homeless man at the protest said, “McDonald’s has started discriminating against the homeless and handicapped people … we are going to make this public” (Rhodes, 2007g). Protesters asserted that sanitation was a fundamental human right and should be accessible to all
people regardless of ability to pay. The right to the city resists the commodification of public space. In the context of the struggle for sanitation infrastructure in Fresno, the homeless demanded that McDonald’s restrooms belong to all residents of the city, regardless of their ability to pay.

In struggling for infrastructure in the encampments, campers are also struggling for their right to home. The UN defines adequate housing as including access to infrastructural services. Gandy (2005, p. 28) argued that the modern home has become more than just a structure but is a part of an integrated system of “networks, pipes and wires that enable the modern city to function.” Similarly, Lefebvre understood the structure of the house as a network of flows, as a “machine analogous to an active body” (1991, p. 93). This understanding reframes the struggle for home as a struggle for greater access to infrastructure. Similarly, the built form of the city itself can be understood as a system of infrastructures. The struggle for the right to the city is the struggle for the city, in its entirety, including its vast network of infrastructural amenities. To truly inhabit the city, as Lefebvre urged, the homeless in Fresno are seeking to reclaim sanitation infrastructure for all urban inhabitants. As Mitchell (2003, p. 19) wrote, the right to the city includes “a place to urinate and defecate without asking someone else’s permission.”

The right to the city is the right to co-create urban space as an oeuvre that reflects the practices and desires of all urban dwellers. It emerges when those dispossessed of urban space reclaim the city from the forces of capital that seek to control it. People in encampments make worlds but need access to infrastructure to do so. Homeless people in Fresno have created an oeuvre in the camps by building alternative infrastructures that reflect their needs and demands. But the right to the city is not isolated or segmented. It
allows the dispossessed to reclaim “the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 34). Purcell (2002) argued that the right includes the right to participate centrally in the production of urban space. The right to the oeuvre is the right to be central in making the city, which requires not just access to infrastructure but the ability to direct it. Thus, the creation of alternative infrastructures in the camps only goes so far. But the homeless in Fresno do not just make infrastructure with the camps: they demand a new framework of uncommodified space by protesting against privatized bathrooms. In resisting commodification and privatization of urban infrastructure, they sought to redefine the city at large.

Resisting the Visual Norm

In a 2013 Youtube video called “extreme homeless makeover!” a comedian walked up to a homeless man and asked if he wanted a job (VitalyzdTv, 2013). The comedian generously offered him a shower, haircut, and new clothes, and the homeless man basked in his newfound employability. The video received nearly eight million views and was praised by the Huffington Post as an act of charity that would raise awareness about the plight of homelessness (Barness, 2014). The same year, another video showed time-lapse footage of a homeless man receiving a professional salon haircut, dye job, and shave. At the end, the man was wearing a crisp suit and tie. The video then cut to a blank screen and flashed the words—“Since filming, Jim has taken control of his life” (RobBlissCreative, 2013). The video was viewed more than 18.5 million times and received heavy national press (see generally Memmott, 2013; Goldman, 2013). Yet two weeks after it was released, local news media reported that Jim had “reverted back to his old ways” and was arrested for trespassing. In an interview
from jail, Jim responded to his new celebrity, saying that he was simply a “poster child” and that his appearance “matters nothing” (WOOD TV 8, 2013).

These videos are part of a wider trend. In the last five years, countless people have posted “homeless makeover” videos on Youtube. One video, sponsored by a dental clinic, depicted a homeless woman receiving dentures to replace her missing teeth. It concluded with heartwarming music accompanied by the words, “from bad to beautiful” (PressOn Veneers, 2014). In a spoof on the theme, another video depicted a homeless man being hosed down at a car wash so that he can look clean for a job interview (MakeoverMission, 2009). The videos focused on aesthetic transformation as a means to employment and eventual housing. Underlying them is the implication that homelessness is a problem of personal appearance and that a new look will help transform people into upstanding citizens capable of work.

In the last decade, scholars have focused on the inherently visual aspect of identity construction. Echoing Lefebvre, Linda Alcoff argued that the visible realm has come to dominate society such that “the reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked” (2005, p. 1). Similarly, Saldanha (2006, p. 11) argued for a materialist conception of race that embraces the observable differences between people, in what he calls the “a racialized visual regime.” For Alcoff and Saldhana, racial identity is not simply rooted in epistemological formations but is also fundamentally linked to observable characteristics or traits. Thus racism, at its core, contains a visual component. Notions of beauty, in particular, are used to reinforce oppressive race and gender norms (Banks, 2000; Bordo, 2003). When beauty is defined by dominant groups, the label “ugly” becomes a powerful tool.
Just as racial identity is often marked on the body, class identity, for the homeless, is often perceived as a set of visual traits, including poor dental hygiene and disheveled appearance (Daly, Newton, & Batchelor, 2008). Moreover, these traits have historically been labeled ugly. Schweik (2007, p. 59) wrote that “ugly laws” of the late-19th century prohibited people from panhandling if they were “‘diseased, maimed, mutilated or deformed in any way, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object.’” Under these laws, “unsightliness” was an offense only committed by the poor (2007, p. 64). Although the “ugly laws” have since been repealed, cities continue to target the homeless for “offending the senses” of elite and middle classes (Mair, 1986, p. 359) and disrupting “the visual orderliness” of the city (Wright, 1997, p. 233). In 1981, the Supreme Court echoed the ugly laws in a landmark free-speech decision. The case stemmed from a “Reaganville” erected by homeless protesters in a park immediately opposite the White House. The National Park Service denied protesters’ request for camping permits, sparking a series of court battles. Writing for the Supreme Court, Justice White stated that homeless camps are “inimical” to the government’s “substantial interest in maintaining the parks in the heart of our Capital in an attractive and intact condition, readily available to the millions of people who wish to see and enjoy them” (Clark v. Community, 1984). With that, the Court determined that campers undermined the park’s “attractive” condition and carved out an exception to the First Amendment on the grounds of aesthetics. Needless to say, the notion of the homeless as ugly has deep roots in U.S. culture and history, and as the recent “homeless makeover” trend suggests, ugliness is understood to be a cause rather than an effect of homelessness.
Fresno’s various policies toward the homeless are undergirded by an effort to reduce their visible “ugliness.” Shelters and permanent housing facilities effectively quarantine the homeless and render them invisible to the public eye. Revitalization and evictions are aimed downtown beautification. But officials rarely described what it means to be “visibly” homeless or what visual characteristics they prefer to see in the city. They simply sought to create a visual landscape that was conducive to investment and consumption. In short, they ascribed to a capitalist aesthetic in which beauty was whatever the market deemed beautiful. As Lefebvre (1991) argued, the capitalist city seeks to produce urban space that is easily marketed and thus rooted in visual norms that valorize commodification and exchangeability.

When I first visited Fresno’s skid row, I also toured a newly constructed loft in a recently revitalized neighborhood. The visceral contrast between these two spaces revealed a fundamentally aesthetic aspect of the politics of revitalization in Fresno. The following is an excerpt of my notes from that day:

A strange neighborhood, down there, in the southern corner of downtown. Large industrial buildings—massive and windowless. An old decrepit theater—The Azteca—practically covered in cobwebs, letters falling off the signs ... Further down there are a few abandoned homes—sinking front porches, collapsing roofs, chipped paint barely clinging on.

On my way back, I toured a loft in the gentrified part of downtown:

A woman showed me the rooms—she described them as “downtown chic”—granite countertops, polished blond wood cabinets and dark wood floors. Balconies all across, high ceilings and exposed brick ... The city’s revitalization efforts are focused—openly—on beautifying downtown. This anti-ugly campaign is essentially an anti-poverty campaign.

In the revitalized area, each building was nearly identical, as were the interiors of the units. Everything was newly constructed. In contrast, the areas that had not been
revitalized included a diverse collection of old and dilapidated structures. Just as Lefebvre predicts about urban capitalism generally, revitalization in Fresno followed a visual aesthetic of constant new production and homogeneity.

In Fresno, the urban aesthetic of revitalization was rooted in the primacy of exchange value and the need for homogenous space. Yet in encampments, unlike in shelters and housing facilities, homeless Fresnans were able to create their own spaces. In doing so they promoted an alternative aesthetic that created value out of non-commodified materials and diverse structures. Through art, homeless campers produced new representations of space. Lefebvre saw art as one of the primary media for creating representational spaces and resisting the dominance of spaces of representation. He wrote: “In sharp contrast to the rationalism of the ‘principle of economy’ ... waste, play, struggle, art ... are themselves a necessity” (1991, p. 177). He saw self-made homes as a material appropriation of space and a form of art and representation: “an appropriated space resembles a work of art … Peasant houses and villages speak: they recount … the lives of those who built and inhabited them” (1991, p. 146).

By challenging the dominant visual norms in Fresno, homeless encampments also challenge the dominant understanding of waste. In modern capitalism, the ever-increasing need for growth and production compels a burgeoning culture of consumption and waste. Yet campers reappropriated what officials viewed as “trash” to build encampments and infused the city’s waste with a new use value separate from the demands of the market. By referring to the encampments as trash, officials were not only rejecting the homeless aesthetic but also implying that any object that is not paid for is valueless. By appropriating these “valueless” objects, homeless campers reinfused them with use value
and challenged the capitalist tendency to reduce all value to a unit of exchange. As one homeless woman said of her encampment,

> What everybody throws away, we find a way to use it so there’s less garbage in the dumps. So the city should be happy for that. There’s nobody having to do anything for it. We’re taking what you want to throw away and making something out of it. And that should be a good thing. (c blove, 2013)

In embracing the beauty of found materials, homeless communities also resisted the capitalist aesthetic that equates beauty with newness and homogeneity. Peaches’ house was an example of this aesthetic. She proudly informed me that everything she owned, including chairs and tables and couches, was salvaged from the dumpster. Her house itself was pieced together from a variety of found materials. Her outer gate was a removable wooden plank. A giant four-foot Barbie doll floated just above it, wedged in between two branches like a sentinel. The doll wore a Darth Vader helmet and fairy’s wings made from wire and gauze. In front of the gate was a painted bell the size of a watermelon for guests to ring. When I asked Peaches about it, she said the doll represented Alice who fell down the hole into Wonderland. She told me she made art to articulate things she could not otherwise say. Like so many of the encampments, her home itself was a work of art, blending pop culture with found materials. She referred to it as her “living sculpture.” Mid-way through our conversation, Peaches showed me a set of matching stuffed bears she had found. She wanted to take a magic marker and dress them up, to decorate the house for 4th of July. In this sense, her home was an expression of her own aesthetic, in a way that shelters or previously manufactured homes never could be.

The first time I saw the encampments, I was surprised at the beauty of one structure in particular. I scribbled the following hasty description in my notebook:
Makeshift homes with giant stuffed bears, posters with beautiful Mexican women holding beers, American flags, a sign for Mayor Swearengin just underneath another that says “danger—high voltage.” Many dogs tied to ropes, many beautiful colors of blue tarps contrasted against red or pink quilts, an interior with clean couch and bed, Virgin Mary on the wall ... At the end of the row [of homes] was Polk’s homeless memorial. They say first impressions are important. My first impression was that it was beautiful—so well constructed. White wood—and a large white board with writing. I couldn’t make out anything except—“was Jesus homeless?” White chairs arranged in a row, a podium. Next door was a house with SpongeBob posters out on the walls.

Ray Polk was a local minister who has lived on the streets of Fresno for fifteen years. He created a church underneath a highway underpass, with a recycled pulpit, chairs, and a massive sign—Homeless Ministries—made out of old paper cups inserted into a chain link fence. As the minister of the church, Polk maintains a homeless memorial to honor the “120-something” homeless Fresnans who have died since he began the project. Polk made each plaque out of old plywood that he painted white and onto which he carefully inscribed each person’s name in black paint—Hustle, Mother, Big Sue. Each plaque was decorated with old stuffed bears or plastic flowers. Polk emphasized that the space provided comfort and purpose for the homeless community, saying they “feel more comfortable they can pay tribute to the individual that they loved” (TakePart, 2012).

Polk made his living as a recycler. I never did end up sitting down with him for an interview because each day, he would spend long hours collecting materials to recycle, despite the intense Fresno heat. In a television interview, he emphasized the self-made nature of his homeless church and the power of simply cleaning and maintaining a memorial plaque:

You got a lot of people that died a bad life … Mona, cancer. Her sister comes by here every day. She recycles. And she always stops here and sheds tears and cleans off her sister’s plaque and puts something on there … What’s so fascinating about this church—you got all these big churches with their air conditioning—what you got out here is the mighty wind. The mighty wind. The
spirit. And when I built this pulpit I didn’t realize that this is my church. It’s for me to get up there and get a word. This is just the homeless ministry, and all denominations is welcome here. Everyone welcome. Everyone is welcome here. (TakePart, 2012)

Like Peaches, Polk was able to create his own space as work of art, outside the confines of the shelter system and beyond the demands of capitalist aesthetics. This creation of aesthetically pleasant spaces challenged the city's representation of street camps as unattractive and worthy of destruction. Several people told me that the city was particularly hesitant to bulldoze Polk’s church, although they ultimately dismantled it on several occasions, and on several occasions, Polk rebuilt it again.

Polk and Peaches were not alone in developing an alternative aesthetic. Bransford (2009) described Fresno’s Taco Flat as a place where “fresh-cut Christmas tree boughs hung on the walls for decoration” and “old Glory flies from improvised flagpoles.” One man gained recognition for living in a home he dug ten feet under the ground, with multiple living chambers to stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter. He rejected the consumer life, and described himself as “self-sustaining, self-sufficient” (Rhodes, 2007i). Most people in the camps constructed and decorated their homes according to their own aesthetic and most often reused material waste. As such, Fresno’s encampments were marked by their radical diversity, and no two structures were alike. By building spaces of difference in the city, they challenged the rule of capitalist uniformity.

But homeless aesthetics in Fresno went above and beyond home construction. One woman said of her encampment: “You're gonna find musicians out here, artists, writers” (Dr. Jean Kennedy, 2011). One homeless man made a living by making gift baskets out of found materials that included printouts of his own poetry. He said of his
poetry: “I've done a lot of things in my life, and there's nothing I enjoy more and I hope to really give people things they can relate to and feel” (“We Are Fresno,” 2014). James Tyner, Fresno’s current “Poet Laureate,” wrote a poem about his own experience of homelessness. He published it in the Hobo Camp Review, a journal of “hobo” poetry and fiction:

I’ve been
here a week, and the street
is comfortable now. I don’t mind
the dirt, rocks poking through
flannel, newspaper bedding
and the sirens, they’re music
now, eyes growing heavy
with the howls, blues and reds
reflecting off of puddles, off of glass. (Tyner, 2014)

In writing “the street is comfortable now,” Tyner alludes to something deeper—he was forced to adopt a new aesthetic so the life on the streets could be tolerable. Another homeless artist used graffiti as his primary expression and city spaces as his canvas. Yet he only gained mainstream recognition when he gave up graffiti and began to attend Fresno State University to major in art (Mumma, 2014). His website—“Deviant Art”—featured a painting of motels along the highway where homeless Fresnans often seek refuge. The painting depicted a dark night and motel signs casting red and yellow reflections off the wet, black asphalt. The caption read: “This is a painting of a dark forgotten area of Fresno that is riddled with drug abuse, poverty, broken families, and prostitution. Never forgotten by those whose wounds are caused by this place, and swept under the rug by mainstream societies busy lives on the freeway passing it” (Rocker, 2014). By depicting this “forgotten” place, the artist promoted an aesthetic that resists the invisibility of homelessness.
Alternative aesthetics offer something for capitalist society to reflect on and challenge the assumptions of capitalist norms. Kidd (2009) characterizes homeless art as a form of “outsider art” rooted in revolt against dominant norms and resistance to social integration. Outsider art is created by people who are self-taught and living on the margins of society. Kidd wrote that:

[Outsider art is] done largely for oneself and for the pleasure of creation, as something palliative, passionate, that gives meaning to life, that is spontaneous, and that appears to create a visual language to communicate with the self. (2009, p. 353)

One of the most celebrated outsider artists, Lee Godie, was homeless for nearly thirty years and sold her drawings on the steps of the Chicago art institute. Although there is little academic literature on homeless art, Kidd wrote that art is a topic that resonates strongly among homeless communities. He pointed to multiple forums and zines for the distribution of homeless art, as well as various art-based intervention projects. He wrote that such outsider art provides a “view of culture from the outside,” stemming from the introspection of those who are excluded from social norms. The position of the outsider affords homeless artists “a unique vision … that can provide insight into aspects of our world and experience to which we are blinded through immersion” (Kidd, 2009, p. 359). Kidd (2009) urged that art can be one of the most powerful forces for understanding across difference.

Lefebvre also championed art as source of opposition, difference, and representational spaces. In Fresno, homeless aesthetics were expressed in the construction of homes, as well as in other creative endeavors. These aesthetics stem from “outsider” norms, resist homeless invisibility, and promote notions of beauty that are rooted in the reuse of waste and radical diversity, rather than commodification and uniformity. By
championing alternative aesthetics, homeless Fresnans are championing their right to be different.

**Conclusion: The Right to Difference**

Lefebvre understood that difference would naturally emerge to resist the homogeneity of capitalist space and saw the tension between difference and uniformity as one of the underlying contradictions of capitalist space. He wrote that because capitalist space “tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52). Thus, he championed “the right to be different” in the face of the homogenizing force of capitalist space (1991, p. 64). The right to difference is rooted in everyday concrete struggles of those who are excluded and who must resist the domination of property norms:

The ‘right to difference’ is a formal designation for something that may be achieved through practical action, through effective struggle—namely, concrete differences. The right to difference implies no entitlements that do not have to be bitterly fought for. This is a ‘right’ whose only justification lies in its content; it is thus diametrically opposed to the right of property. (1991, pp. 397-8)

Lefebvre saw the struggle emerging primarily from communities that are excluded from the spoils of capitalism. Indeed, he highlights shantytowns as a source of the struggle to assert difference:

What is different is, to begin with, what is excluded: the edges of the city, shanty towns … The vast shanty towns of Latin America … sometimes so effectively order their space—houses, walls, public spaces—as to elicit a nervous admiration. Appropriation of a remarkably high order is to be found here. The spontaneous architecture and planning … prove greatly superior to the organization of space by specialists. (1991, pp. 373-4)
In Fresno, homeless encampments similarly produced their own architectural norms and systems of order. In doing so, they resisted the pressure to capitalize on urban space and transform the city into a commodity to be sold on the market.

Under capitalism, spaces that fail to please the senses of middle-class consumers are viewed as anathema to the production of profit. Thus, homeless Fresnans were rejected for not conforming to capitalist notions of aesthetics. Yet campers resisted stigmatizing representations of encampments as dirty and ugly. They highlighted the political economic reality of waste and championed a representation of the encampments as sanitary. They created alternative infrastructures in the camps and sought to de-commodify existing infrastructure. In doing so, they struggled for a non-capitalized means of dealing with unwanted waste. Similarly, they re-infused the waste of capitalist society with use value by reusing old materials to build art as well as homes. Through art, they promoted an alternative aesthetic that exists outside the realm of exchange and that stands in stark contrast to the dominant aesthetics of commodification and homogeneity.

In all of these instances, homeless Fresnans were asserting their right to difference and an alternative to spatial norms rooted in property relations and exchange.
Chapter Six: Crazy and Criminal

We need to educate people so that they understand that not all homeless people are alcoholics, that not all homeless people are drug addicts, that not all homeless people are derelicts. You know, we have people with intelligence out there . . . The politicians, the corporate media, they do not explain this to the general public. They explain the alcoholics. They explain the drug addicts. They explain the people with mental problems.

—Alphonso Williams, homeless Fresnan

Willow is a young homeless woman who hears voices almost every night. We sat for hours one afternoon on the sidewalk in front of McDonald’s, smoking and getting harassed by passersby. She was 19 years old at the time, with pale eye shadow underneath thick brows and heavy mascara. A small gap in her teeth made her look childish, despite the cigarette hanging from her lips. At the age of 15, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and depression and became addicted to methamphetamines not long after. She told me that her drug use exaggerated the voices in her head: “Especially being on the streets, it’s hard to differentiate sometimes from your voices— because they can get really, really loud— to actual people. You stay up all night— is there someone around the corner or is this my head talking?”

Years ago, Willow had been in treatment for addiction and mental illness. She told me she used to practice Wicca, a tradition rooted in the notion of a magical and non-rational universe. But her drug treatment required submission to a Biblical God and conformity to “normal” society. After this experience, she rejected treatment in favor of the freedom of the streets and drug-induced altered consciousness.

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26 From Mike Rhodes (2008).
Foucault (1981) argued that in 17th-century Europe, the response to madness was separation and exclusion in institutions. Society thought that the mad had chosen to reject reason and deserved punishment and confinement. It was not until the end of the 18th century that madness became an illness to be cured and institutions became places of treatment. Yet Foucault saw modern institutions as controlling and repressive spaces that erased and denied the voices of those deemed insane. Foucault argued that throughout much of history, the “immense discourse of the madman was taken for mere noise” (1981, p. 53). To be mad was to be beyond comprehension.

This chapter analyzes the official representations of mental illness and drug addiction that accompanied the spatial politics of Fresno homelessness, as well as representations of illness and addiction within homeless communities. I argue that the homeless contest individualistic explanations of homelessness, police brutality, and criminalization and the psychoanalytic notion of mental illness as a disease that must be treated.

**Representations and Flawed Data**

The representation of the homeless as mentally ill and deviant has been used historically to remove people from public space and place them in institutions and jails. In the early-20th century, the non-acquisitive ethic that had taken root in hobo subculture began to alarm middle-class observers who considered hobo culture deviant and subversive (DePastino, 2003). In response, the state sought to bring tramping workers into the shelter system (Mitchell, 2012a). These shelters engaged in a rhetoric of homeless redemption and often characterized homelessness as the result of the “faulty coping skills of those whom it affects” (Hopper, 2003, p. 46). New York City’s first
Municipal Lodging House aimed at the “rehabilitation of the homeless man” (Hopper, 2003, p. 36). Gowan argued that this was an important moment in the development of “sin talk,” a rhetoric rooted in the assumption homelessness is the natural result of a wayward and sinful life (Gowan, 2010). Similarly, during the Great Depression, private shelters began to fear the radical talk that was circulating in the homeless community, and the Salvation Army implemented rules against political discussion (Starr, 1996, p. 226).

The explosion of the shelter system in the 1980s was again coupled with a stigmatizing discourse of homelessness. This time, shelters characterized the homeless as a fundamentally ill and addicted population. Gowan refers to this discourse as “sick talk” and wrote that in San Francisco’s shelter system, “social workers treat [homeless men] as chaotic addicts, doctors diagnose them as depressives” (2010, p. 9). Lyon-Callo (2000) argued that shelters often engage in a medicalized discourse and refuse to house those who do not comply with counseling requirements. In short, the institutionalization of the homeless in shelters became the new answer to what was increasingly seen as a problem of individual pathology.

The criminalization of homelessness has been similarly surrounded with representations of the homeless as mentally ill and deviant. In San Francisco in the 1990s, anti-homeless campaigns took the form of the “Matrix,” a joint program of law enforcement that aimed to heavily enforce almost two-dozen city ordinances to remove homeless people from the streets (MacDonald, 1995). Writing in defense of the Matrix program, MacDonald (1995, p. 2) described the homeless as miscreants to be dealt with by “tough cop,” militaristic policies. During the same period, the New York Daily News
blasted a headline proclaiming “Get the Violent Crazies Off Our Streets” (Barr, 2001, p. 62). Like San Francisco, New York would channel funding for the homelessness into the criminal justice system (Barr, 2001). As a result, countless mentally ill people were arrested for minor offenses and returned to the streets upon their release without recourse to any means of shelter, financial assistance, or psychiatric support (Barr, 2001).

During this period, the popular imagination regarded homeless people in a similar light. In the 1980s, it was “the handicapped and misfits” who came to represent the new face of American skid rows (Schneider, 1986, p. 175). The homeless skid row occupant was seen primarily as “a hopeless alcoholic, enslaved by his addiction to the point where he was totally unproductive” (Schneider, 1986, p. 179). More recent survey data indicate that housed people often perceive the homeless as mentally ill despite having no evidence to support these perceptions (Knecht & Martinez, 2009; Phelan, et al., 1997). Thus, the “homeless psychotic” has become a stubborn and persistent representation in society, rooted in biases rather than empirical data.

This narrative has also taken root in social science research on the homeless. In *A Nation in Denial*, Baum and Burnes (1993) argued that homelessness is a result of mental illness, not poverty or lack of housing. Snow, Anderson, and Koegel (1994, p. 462) show that the vast majority of post-1980s research on the subject characterizes the homeless as “a highly crippled, dysfunctional population.” These studies find that between 65%-85% of the homeless population suffers from addiction and/or disability. Yet Snow et al. (1994) argued that this characterization is distorted and that the distortion rests in key methodological problems within research on homelessness. The authors argued that it is difficult to gather accurate data on the homeless and nearly impossible to isolate mental
illness as a cause or an effect of homelessness. Indeed, the very nature of the survey yields inflated data on mental illness amongst the homeless. The authors reveal how the information garnered from popular “single encounter” interviews only captures a momentary glimpse of a subject’s reality and that longitudinal studies are needed to properly assess the changing nature of a person’s mental health (1994, p. 464). They argued that standardized questionnaires take a single aspect of a person’s behavior (i.e. disheveled appearance or depressive tendencies) and isolate it from the larger context of that person’s life. Yet depression is often a perfectly natural response to life on the streets and disheveledness often a strategy for homeless women to avoid sexual assault (Snow et al., 1994). Snow et al. called for a more holistic picture of homeless individuals that includes childhood experiences and current levels of social support.

Fresno reflects many of the national trends. Officials claimed that the camps had to be removed because campers were mentally ill, drug addicted, and criminal. According to official data, a whopping 60.9% of Fresno’s homeless population is chronically addicted to substances, and 34.9% is severely mentally ill (“Fresno Madera,” 2013). These numbers were based on more than 400 surveys taken by a team of volunteers. Yet the methods underlying data on homeless addiction and mental illness were far from impeccable, as untrained volunteers were tasked with making snap judgments about homeless people’s mental health after speaking with them for only a few minutes. Surveyors were trained to follow safety rules and sent into the streets before sunrise for three consecutive days (“Fresno Madera,” 2013). I accompanied a team of surveyors on one of these mornings. We stalked up and down a homeless encampment in downtown
Fresno, in pairs and groups, armed with clipboards and paperwork. The interviews each took less than five minutes.

The intrusive and militarized nature of the survey made it difficult to have an honest conversation with the people we interviewed. Two armed officers accompanied our team of a dozen or so volunteer surveyors. We were encouraged to stay together in groups for our own safety. Homeless people were often woken from a slumber to find several volunteer surveyors standing over them with clipboards in hand. The Point in Time Count report indicated that “the homeless would get nervous upon approach and start packing up to leave their area.” The proposed solution was to conduct outreach before surveys “to reassure new volunteers that were notably hesitant about approaching a sleeping homeless person” (“Fresno Madera,” 2013, p. 31). Notably, outreach did not aim at easing the fears of homeless participants, but at emboldening interviewers to more confidently solicit surveys. This likely reinforced homeless subjects’ anxiety and their belief that survey participation was mandatory. Our artificial and armed presence in the homeless encampments yielded data of an entirely different nature than the rich and candid stories that homeless men and women told me when I went into the camps without a clipboard and unaccompanied by an officer. As Peaches said, “the homeless don’t like it” when people show up with clipboards to study them.

My partner that morning was a woman who had worked for a juvenile detention center for most of her adult life and had just transferred to a shelter for homeless youth. She immediately took control of the survey process and told me not to stand too close to the homeless, as she had been trained to maintain distance for her own safety. I watched as she expertly conducted the surveys. She often filled out answers without asking
questions. The form used to conduct the interviews instructed volunteers to ask people a series of questions and then make an impromptu evaluation of their mental health. The form asked: “Surveyor, do you detect signs or symptoms of severe, persistent mental illness?” (“Fresno Madera,” 2013, p. 46). One woman I interviewed said she had no history of mental illness. Nonetheless, my partner indicated that I should check the box marked “severely mentally ill” on her form. My partner told me later that after years of doing these surveys, she was good at distinguishing who was crazy. Thus, she had no qualms about answering the survey according to her own personal, immediate judgment about the mental state of participants.

National and local housing policy also encourages the homeless to exaggerate or over-report their own mental illness to receive housing. Under a directive from HUD, Fresno’s permanent supportive housing program gave priority to those who were determined to have severe mental illness or drug addiction. In Fresno, housing vouchers are rare. Thus, those living on the street understand that only the disabled received housing. To encourage people to participate, volunteers in Fresno advertise the survey as means of getting housing vouchers. Some of the people I surveyed made sure to tell me that they were mentally and physically disabled and indicated that this fact should give them priority for housing vouchers. In an interview for my research, one woman described the most prominent permanent housing facility in Fresno as a place “for handicapped, mental” people. Another woman told me that to apply for county-based aid she had to book an appointment with a psychiatrist, so “they can tell them that I’m bipolar.” Although she suffered from severe physical illness, she understood that a bipolar diagnosis would “help with the social security too. Because they would rather do
it on my mental issues.” Thus, in addition to volunteers potentially misreporting issues of mental health, those living on the streets had incentive to highlight or exaggerate their own mental illness to receive aid.

This incentive is reflected in the data, which show a marked increase in “severely mentally ill” and “chronically addicted” unsheltered people after 2012, when permanent supportive housing had become known on the streets as a place for the “handicapped” and “mental.” Although the overall homeless population decreased, the number of severely mentally ill people increased more than fivefold. In contrast, the data on sheltered homelessness reflect a different trend. Figure 3 shows that unsheltered mentally ill and addicted populations skyrocketed after 2012, while the sheltered populations declined slightly. Notably, people staying in shelters are not subject to ad-hoc surveys because they are monitored by shelter staff who report the numbers every year based on ongoing personal interactions. The volatile street numbers, in conjunction with the timing of Fresno’s voucher program, undermine the reliability of the data in Fresno.
Figure 3. Severe mental illness and chronic substance abuse among Fresno homeless. From the Fresno-Madera Continuum of Care Point in Time Counts, 2009 through 2013.

In interpreting the data, officials ignored the rapid spike in the numbers and instead focused on the finding that the vast majority of homeless Fresnans are either mentally ill or drug addicted. Shelter operators in Fresno often cited mental illness and drug addiction as the primary reason why people end up living on the streets. The executive director of Fresno’s only shelter for homeless women guessed that “85%” of her homeless clientele “are mentally ill or addicted or both.” When I asked her why they ended up on the streets, she said it was because of mental illness and addiction. The executive directors of the two other homeless shelters in Fresno both told the same story.
Blaming the Individual

Aside from being rooted in biases and unreliable data, these medicalized representations also blame the problem of homelessness on individual failures. As Lyon-Callo (2000) argued, the focus on personal problems depoliticizes the issue of homelessness and ignores structural and economic factors. Yet mental illness and addiction are themselves highly political and affect poor and rich people in very different ways. Clark and Drake (1994, p. 147) wrote that:

Caring for a relative with mental illness can present a significant economic burden to families. Families are often saddled with large bills for their relative's psychiatric treatment and also spend a substantial amount on basic living expenses … They may lose paid time from work or be prevented from working altogether.

Thus, wealthy and middle-class families are often better equipped to handle the economic burden of caring for a mentally ill or addicted family member. Yet poor and working class families are already struggling with low wages, periodic unemployment, poor working conditions, and high rental payments. Mental illness and addiction among the poor can more easily slide into eviction, homelessness, and an entrenched cycle of depression and self-medication. Indeed, the stress of simply coping with chronic poverty often contributes to higher rates of addiction and mental illness amongst the poor (McLoyd, & Wilson, 1991).

In Fresno, the poor suffer from an extreme lack of mental health services. Healthcare Atlas (2011) calls Fresno “a medically underserved area,” specifically lacking in mental health services. As of 2013, there were no transitional housing facilities or emergency shelters that specifically targeted mentally ill homeless populations (“Fresno Madera,” 2013). Thus, many mentally ill homeless Fresnans find themselves either living...
on the streets or housed in institutions that are not equipped to serve them—including Bible-based drug treatment facilities, emergency shelters, and jails.

Fresno also has a problem of discharging people to the streets. In 2009, the county of Fresno shut down its mental health crisis stabilization unit, and patients were released as a result. Advocates charged that hospitals have inadequate discharge plans, and as a result, many mentally ill people end up in emergency rooms (Anderson, 2010). In 2009, a homeless man was released from a Fresno hospital at midnight with no discharge plan and assaulted soon after (Branco, 2011). In 2011, Fresno’s first “medical respite center” opened to provide homeless people with a place to recuperate after being discharged from the hospital. But the center provides only eight beds for men and two beds for women, out of a homeless population of thousands (Arce, 2011).

On the street, people recognize the lack of services. As one homeless man told me, the facilities are understaffed and the employees are underpaid. He said he regretted not getting treatment for his depression, but the one time he sought mental health assistance, the psychiatrist had yelled at him: “It was some weird shit. She got fuckin’ mad at me . . . I should’ve complained about it. Instead I never went back. And so, that way I lose out on getting help.” People also told me about the practice of “dumping” people in the encampments. One woman told me, “It’s known on the street that the mental hospital drops the nuts off at Roeding Park. They drop them off in their hospital gear. The ambulance opens their doors and goes, All right. We’re done with you. See you later. That’s what they do.” Another woman said:

We see it every other week— the state comes out here and just drops off one of these mentally ill people because they don’t have the money, don’t have the funds, to take care of them. They just come out and just drop them off. In this last few weeks we’ve had probably eight new people.
This is not only a Fresno phenomenon. DeVerteuil (2003) argued that the practice of “dumping” mental patients increased in cities in the U.S. after federal mental health cutbacks that began in the 1970s.

A 2014 report on Fresno homeless management called the mental health care system “broken” and “a mess.” As a result of drastic cuts to mental health care since 2002, emergency rooms and jails in Fresno have taken on the role of housing mentally ill and detoxing homeless people (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014). The jail is so overcrowded it had to plan for a major expansion, and the emergency hospital department in downtown Fresno is the busiest in California and the 15th busiest in the U.S. (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014). Clients are “shuffled back-and-forth from crisis stabilization services to the emergency rooms to the jail and to any other agencies that might be able to handle them” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 4). The report finds that “The hospital emergency rooms and the Fresno County Jail have become the de facto alternatives to treatment. The deterioration of the mental health continuum of care has been a major factor in the overloading of the criminal justice and emergency health service systems” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 14). Indeed, one homeless man said he warned Fresno officials that when the encampments were destroyed, the emergency rooms would be filled: “I was informed about two weeks later Fresno Community Hospital, on two separate nights, had to lock the doors for fear of the Fire Department citing them for overcrowding” (KNXT1, 2012).

Despite the extreme lack of mental health care and drug treatment for the poor, many officials in Fresno view the homeless as a population that chooses to be on the streets, not a population that has been abandoned by lack of medical services. In defense
of the *Kincaid* lawsuit, the city asserted that homelessness in Fresno is a choice, as evidenced by the existence of available shelter (*Kincaid et al. v. Fresno*, 2006). In conversations, Fresno officials tended to focus on personal choice, lifestyle, and refusal to accept help, rather than on the serious lack of mental health services. As the CEO of the downtown business association told me:

> You always have your really chronically homeless, your most difficult cases, your drug addictions and your mentally unstable individuals. Those two populations are really hard to handle because they don’t want help. Pretty much everybody else that wants the help, the city has put a lot of resources into getting them permanent supportive housing and connecting them to the right resources.

A local councilman expressed similar sentiment: “I believe that the services are there for people who wish to clean up and find work and get a place … The stumbling block is … they don’t want services.” Similarly, the founder of the Poverello House wrote an article in the shelter newsletter in which he explicitly blamed homeless individuals and not economic conditions:

> As I’ve said countless times, homeless people are, for the most part . . . mentally ill or dependent on drugs. It’s their afflictions, mingled with countless personal choices, that land them on the streets. Homelessness is a problem of both the soul and psyche, and only secondarily of economics. (*McGarvin*, 2008)

Sherry Oliver went so far as to say that many people who lived in the encampments were not actually poor. She said, “I think that’s a hard thing for people to understand—they’re not all destitute, financially.”

Over and over again, officials sought to frame homelessness as a problem of deviant individuals, rather than social structures. As one activist lamented, “The idea that you could ignore [homeless people] and pretend that it's all about their individual failure is very strange to me … You need to take the system on, I think, and that doesn't happen here. It gets all individualized.” Instead of identifying the reality of extreme poverty and
lack of services, officials represented homelessness as a failure to conform to capitalist norms of privitized housing. Instead of taking on the “system,” they labeled the homeless crazy and criminal and handed over to the custody of jails and institutions.

Yet tent city residents resisted these representations. In 2011, official surveys showed that 62% of homeless respondents attributed their homelessness to loss of job or income or benefits, “overwhelming expense,” eviction or foreclosure, while only 1% of survey respondents identified a mental health condition as the primary cause of homelessness (“Fresno Madera,” 2011). The surveys reflect that official representations of homelessness do not align with homeless self-perception. In a poem she read in 2007 at the annual Fresno Homeless Memorial, formerly homeless poet Annabella Uxmal characterized homelessness as a result of social inequity:

The homeless are the factory workers that were laid off, the homeless is your neighbor that just went through a divorce. They are the people who lost their INS papers . . . The homeless are the people that lost their transportation to get to work . . . They are the people who lost their properties to lenders . . . The homeless are many, the homeless have many faces. (Rhodes, 2007h)

Uxmal situates homelessness in the context of poverty, job loss, and foreclosure, thereby highlighting structural causes and countering the representation of the homeless as a sick population. Simultaneously, she understands that the “homeless are many” and have “many faces”, thus rejecting blanket generalizations about homeless pathology.

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27 21% cited incarceration, drug or alcohol problems, 17% violence or family problems, and 4% medical problems as the source of their homelessness.
Crime, Punishment and Resistance

Business as usual—
two cops are beating a homeless man,
one holds him down
while the other punches his face.
—Fresno poet Dixie Salazar

Toward the end of the 1980s, the increase of anti-homeless laws in cities across the nation created a new replacement for the traditional shelter system: the criminal justice system was now, in many cities, the primary government entity in charge of managing the homeless. Although crimes rates have steadily declined since the mid-1990s, jail and prison incarceration rates have exploded. Scholars argued that the lack of correlation between incarceration rates and crime rates indicates that jails and prisons no longer function as a form of crime prevention but as “rabble management” and shelter for the mentally ill and homeless (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008, p. 272). The majority of jail inmates suffer from mental illness or addiction (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008). Criminologists have argued that as a result of federal deinstitutionalization policies, the criminal justice system is “fast becoming a misplaced substitute for community mental health and substance abuse treatment” (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008, p. 276). Research over the last 20 years has documented increased incarceration among homeless populations in general, with as many as 70% of the total homeless population having experienced incarceration (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008). Although the homeless make up less than 1% of the total population, the Bureau of Justice has found that 12% of jail detainees were homelessness in the year preceding their arrest (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008). Homeless arrestees were “significantly less likely than domiciled arrestees to be

28 From Salazar (2013).
jailed for a violent crime . . . and about twice as likely to be arrested for order maintenance offenses” (Fitzpatrick & Myrstol, 2008, p. 284). In many ways, the jail has become the new primary site for homeless management.

Towards the end of my stay in Fresno, homeless drug addiction was increasingly understood through the lens of law enforcement. As Jim Connell told me:

What the police tell us is there are a couple of drug gangs that are fighting over the drug trade in the encampments … That encampment out there, if I had to guess, is 98% there because of drugs … Even if you could house everybody who’s amenable to housing, you’re still going to have a certain population left on the street that’s the criminal and addictive element and the criminal justice system has to deal with those people.

Sherry Oliver echoed a similar sentiment. During our conversation, she was uneasy when I told her about the interviews I was doing in the camps. She said, “I wouldn’t want to walk down the middle of that street. I drive down there because I want to see what’s going on. Now I doubt that they’d harm us because they know who we are. But I certainly wouldn’t carry a purse.” She then proceeded to pull something out of her pocket. “I was going to show you something,” she said. It was her keychain, to which she had affixed a small crack pipe. “Somebody left it someplace. So you know I think that speaks to where we’re at.” Both Sherry Oliver and Jim Connell associated drug use with violence and advocated for drug addicts to be dealt with by the criminal justice system.

In Fresno, many of the homeless people I interviewed resisted the characterization of the homeless as a criminal population. As one woman said, “They think we’re all drug addicts … We’re all individual people, you know. There’s assholes in every group, but we’re not here by choice.” Another homeless woman said of the evictions: “They say that this is all happening because of all the crimes and all the drugs and all of that. Well, we’re not even into that” (thefresnobee, 2013). Nonetheless, drug addiction is indeed a
problem for homeless communities in Fresno. The National Drug Intelligence Center has found that the Central Valley is “the primary methamphetamine production area, not only in California but also in the United States” (“United States,” 2010, p. 5). Between 2005 and 2009, law enforcement agencies seized more than 1,000 methamphetamine laboratories in the region. Local methamphetamine prices have fallen drastically with the rise in production, and addiction rates are high throughout the region (“United States,” 2010). Many homeless Fresnans told me that drug addiction is an issue in the camps. Yet the official understanding of drug addiction is interpreted through the lens of crime and punishment, such that drug users are labeled as criminals and crime is used as an excuse to destroy the camps.

In July 2013, a man was shot and killed near the encampments. Although neither of the suspects were homeless, the city argued that the homeless encampments were the source of the violence. The Fresno Bee later argued that, “The murder in the Santa Clara camp last year was a tipping point. City officials said the camps had to be razed because they were public-safety hazards to homeless and non-homeless alike. No one can ever again suggest otherwise” (Hostetter, 2014). After the shooting, Fresno police began an aggressive arrest campaign in the encampments. The city issued a press release stating that the camps were riddled with criminal activity, as there had been 82 arrests over the past several weeks. Yet when I spoke with the police chief, he told me that many of the arrests were for outstanding warrants and parole violations. Among the people arrested for violent crimes, only one of them lived at the encampments.
Nonetheless, the police chief argued during the city’s August 2013 press conference that many people living in the camps were not actually homeless but were simply gang members hiding from the police:

“There is a misperception that people at the encampments are simply folks who are down on their luck … The reality is that gang members and other criminals have moved there and are taking advantage of the people who are truly homeless.” (Hastings, 2013)

Thus, the city furthered a contradictory message that the homeless were simultaneously victims being preyed upon by gangs and violent gang members who were predators themselves. In 2014, an advisory report on homeless management in Fresno parroted the official view of the encampments as criminal and dangerous:

“Fresno’s encampments resemble the impoverished shantytowns of Africa and Latin America … There are several indictors [sic] that the encampments are one of the most (if not the most) violent homeless populations in the United States. Stabbings, shootings and arson fires are routine occurrences within these encampments.” (“Fresno Restoration Project,” 2014, p. 6)

Snow, Baker and Anderson (1989) argued that the perception of the homeless as dangerous and violent is not uncommon. Nonetheless, homeless people are no more violent than the population at large, and most homeless arrests are for the crime of public intoxication (Snow et al., 1989). In Fresno, despite the fact that most homeless people were only guilty of the crime of self-medicating, the city interpreted addiction through the logic of demolition, rather than improved treatment. The lifestyle of drug and alcohol addiction is labeled criminal not simply because it is self-destructive but because it prevents people from conforming to capitalist practices of labor and consumption. As Lefebvre argued, all that is different must be erased. In this way, the homeless who engage in drug use are funneled into highly controlled spaces. Not only did the city
announce that it would destroy every encampment in the city, but it also set up a “task force” to prevent anyone from camping in the future.

Fresno’s police department has historically been a powerful force in the city. In 2012, nearly 80% of Fresno’s budget went to public safety, most which went to the police department (Hostetter, 2012c). Advocates have also complained that community block grant money for the homeless was rerouted to the police department for evictions (Rhodes, 2007a). In 2013, the police department was quickly becoming a primary driver behind Fresno’s eviction policies. Simultaneously, it was involved in the Continuum of Care, along with four other law enforcement and corrections agencies (Continuum of Care, 2012).

The department has also been notorious for its history of violence and has defended multiple lawsuits for police brutality. After calls for the FPD to hire an independent auditor, the city hired an auditor with no subpoena power and quashed his report for several months for unspecified editing (Stone, 2012). In particular, police profiling and violence against the homeless was not unusual. One man who recently landed a spot in the Renaissance housing project told me that the police had followed him on his bike. When he told them he was not homeless, they apologized and left him alone. Another homeless woman told me that her friend had been kicked in the back by a police officer. Yet another homeless man told me that he was pulled over by the police for looking homeless:

He just wanted to pull me over, once he’s seen who I was … You don’t know how the police were in the 70s in this town … They were corrupt big time. … They use their guns too much … There was deaths here. Wrongful deaths.
An activist told me she was afraid to spend the night at the camps because of police violence:

I don’t trust the cops … They used to take their guys who had just come through training, and I don’t know whether it was initiation or what it was, but they would go out to a homeless encampment with baseball bats and just have a field day beating people up. Now that’s what I’ve heard … In the wintertime … they were spraying [homeless people] down with hoses early in the morning. There’s always rogue cops and I’ve heard different horrible things that have happened with the cops here.

Another activist told me that he had to file suit against the city simply to get the names of police officers who had abused a homeless man: “We sued them because they wouldn’t reveal the names of the officers who beat up a homeless guy … The city attorney’s office dragged its feet for, I think it took a couple of years … For something that should have taken 15 minutes.”

The police would also frequently surveil the encampments. On the first afternoon that I visited Peaches, an officer was parked in his car just next to the encampment for hours, and another man in plain clothes with dark glasses watched from the opposite side of the tracks. Peaches’ neighbor, a 60-something year old woman, said she had gotten used to the frequent surveillance: “I don’t care if he’s up there or not. Let’s moon him.” She laughed. When I asked if she thought the city should be doing anything differently, she said: “What they could do is just back off. Don’t give us tickets for crossing a railroad.”

Many homeless people also saw the evictions as a form of police brutality. A 2012 Youtube video depicted Sharen “Big Sue” Bobbitt standing near the point where Golden State Highway meets the Yosemite Freeway overpass. It was the middle of winter, and behind her was the wreckage of what was once a sprawling tent city. She
struggled to speak above the sound of barking dogs, merging cars, and a crowd of people who had just lost their homes. Moments earlier, police officers and sanitation workers had loaded everyone’s things onto a dump truck. Big Sue spoke out against the violence of the eviction:

> It looked like they were getting off on this little activity today. And there were times when certain officers were standing around watching people grab their poor little blankets and stuff that took them two weeks to collect—and they got off on it. They need to go and have psychological evaluation because I do not want them policing the streets in that kind of a state of mind when they think it’s funny to fuck with somebody. (Big Sueable, 2012)

In the background another woman said, “And they took all the wood.” Big Sue responded: “They took your wood? Oh that’s a pisser.” The camera shut off, and the interview was over. Those were the last words Big Sue would ever say on film (Rhodes, 2012b). Thirteen days after the city destroyed her encampment, she froze to death on the sidewalk in front of the Poverello House (Rhodes, 2012b). Big Sue’s friends set up a memorial on the spot where she died, marked with flowers, trinkets, and teddy bears. Yet with firewood, tents, and bedding so frequently destroyed, a homeless couple burned the teddy bears on one particularly cold night, in an attempt to stay warm (McGarvin, 2012).

With below-freezing temperatures in December, many people saw wintertime evictions as a particularly brutal form of police aggression.

Homeless people are much more likely than other populations to be victims of violence. In Fresno, a third of those interviewed for the 2011 Point in Time Count had been victim of an attack since becoming homeless (“Fresno Madera,” 2011). Many campers wished that the police would work to prevent violent crimes against the homeless, rather than either ignore the camps entirely or seek to destroy them. As
Peaches’ neighbor said: “I mean they should monitor stuff … Find the culprit but don’t take it out on everybody.” Another woman said:

If when we call for help, they came, that would be a large improvement … Because it’s true that you go ahead and call the cops, they’re not coming out here for you. They don’t want to, they’re scared to or they don’t believe in what we’re needing help with. (c blove, 2013)

But homeless crime was treated differently than all other crime in the city, in that it was used as an excuse for neighborhood destruction. As Mike Rhodes said:

There’s crime in probably every neighborhood in Fresno. You go out to River Park, which is the big mall up in north Fresno, you know, people are stealing cars and shoplifting, and the solution there isn’t to bulldoze it. Why— because you have a poor neighborhood here, that your solution is to bulldoze it and destroy everybody’s property?

Yet homeless people continually resisted police brutality through action on the ground. In 2006, over 100 homeless people and activists erected a tent city on the steps of Fresno City Hall and marched through downtown Fresno as part of a rally against police brutality. A local anarchist collective hung a banner that read “ARM THE HOMELESS” (Rhodes, 2006c). In 2009, two police officers were caught on camera beating a homeless man in the face while he lay on the ground, unarmed and limp. For the first time, the video caught on film the recurring police brutality against the homeless. In response, local community groups and homeless activists held a press conference at Fresno City Hall to protest the beating (Rhodes, 2009). These events indicate that Fresno’s tent city residents are concerned with more than just survival and the right to space but also with combating violence and brutality. In the face of incredible stigma, they flipped official representations to focus on brutal police practices rather than homeless individuals.
Against Medicalization

Sociologist Avery Gordon critiques standard social science and psychoanalysis for excluding the complicated, messy nuances of life. To Gordon, what social science views as “real” is actually just a record of “powerful fiction” that obtains legitimacy and authority by excluding other fictions (1997, p. 38). In contesting traditional psychology, Gordon draws from Sabina Spielrein, a trained psychoanalyst who also happened to be schizophrenic. To Spielrein, schizophrenia was not “isolation from the world and the impossibility of being understood, but rather, a way of understanding the world and expressing oneself” (as quoted in Gordon, 1997, p. 39). Thus, Spielrein’s psychoanalytical method was fundamentally influenced by her “illness”—her own complicated and unscientific way of seeing the world. Through this understanding, mental illnesses that are described as disabilities can actually lead to an expression of unauthorized and unruly discourses. But traditional psychology and social science employ “abstract” and “professionalized” questions (Gordon, 1997, p. 40) that exclude these alternative epistemologies.

The goal of mainstream psychoanalysis is to face up to “reality” and let go of any distortions or fantasies. In contrast, Avery Gordon rejected the notion of a singular reality. She views fantasy, instead of an escape, as a world of uncanny possibilities that is ripe with transformative power. She recounted the way that Spielrein dealt with fantasy in her own life. Once, when Spielrein saw herself reflected in the mirror as a wolf, she spoke with the wolf and through her interaction, was positively transformed. Gordon wrote that the world of social science is built precisely to “ward off the mythological”
(1997: 46), whereas Spielrein was open to alternative ways of knowing and able to find power in her visions.

Willow, the young woman I spoke with outside McDonald’s, found a similar power in her hallucinations. Prior to entering a domestic violence shelter, she lived on the streets with her abusive ex-boyfriend, who was a much older man. During that time, she was also physically and sexually attacked more than once by other men. She spoke of her ex-boyfriend as a “fairytale lover” who took her into new realities:

My last boyfriend sent me into a whole different reality. He convinced me that he was supernatural, that there are magical powers out there … So I never knew if this dude was like, a werewolf protecting me from a whole bunch of vampires or some shit … I was thoroughly convinced that this man had stopped aging at 29. And I was cool with that. This motherfucker tells me he was 200 years old and I probably would’ve been like, okay … I saw his face warp many a time.

As a young homeless woman, she relied on a much older man for her survival on the streets. Thus, it became preferable to view her partner through a magical lens, in which he became a werewolf who never aged, instead of an older man who controlled and abused her. The dangers of other men on the street became the magical “vampires” of her alternative reality. When she stepped outside the drug-induced world of fantasy, she often spiraled into depression.

Willow’s story is not a happy one. For many who are excluded from the benefits of purchasing power, life becomes so difficult that only an alternative reality is tolerable. Willow used drugs as a way of entering into alternate, and preferable, realities. She told me when she was not high, she was plagued by self-hatred and convinced that she was a bad person. Her bipolar disorder, over which she had no control, only reinforced her hallucinations. And yet her ability to tolerate life through the power of fantasy presents a stark contrast to the medicalized notion that fantasy must be repressed. Lefebvre argued
that abstract space molds lived bodily experience into legible categories. Thus, suffering is represented as a deficiency—depression, bipolar disorder, addiction. But in the encampments, the lived experience of suffering resists labels. The label “crazy” is transformed into the lived experience of pain and the release offered by fantasy.

Social science and medical notions of mental illness often focus on repressing people’s experience of alternative realities, deprecating the value of their visions, and forcing them into the permitted world of rationalism, wage work, and compliance. Alvin Gouldner argued that social science research assumes the value of the “normal world,” while “denying, deprecating, or ignoring the potency or value of . . . an unpermitted world” (1971, p. 485). He saw that, more often than not, it is powerful social objects that are seen as normal and good. Gordon (1997) argued that narrow psychoanalytical categories of normal and abnormal are rooted in a sociological method that represses the possibility for a more sensuous knowledge. The labeling of “normal” and “abnormal” is precisely what Gordon sought to move away from, to make room for other types of knowing.

Willow distinguished between “homeless world”—where rules do not apply and reality is malleable—and the “normal world” of oppressive work routines and hierarchies. In homeless world, she could “lie in the grass all day” whereas in “normal life … you have a job and stuff and you have to worry about breaking the rules … getting up every morning and going to work.” She described homelessness as an alternate reality:

The reality of homeless is that it’s a totally different reality. And it is. If we do need help, we need help out of one reality into the popular one … Homeless people will …stay in their reality, because that’s the one they’re accepted in. If they try and go get a job or something, they’re going to be looked down on. But in homeless world you can be a king or you can be a queen … It is a totally different world … It can be like a magic little kingdom.
She saw her alternative reality as no less real than the official and “normal” world she rejected. Her mental illness that was an asset in “homeless world” was a disadvantage in “normal” society:

I actually do have a mood disorder … I’m incredibly impulsive … I do a lot better at being homeless, panhandling, stealing, doing drugs, than I do with normal things. Normal jobs are hard for me to hold on to, usually, because they’re boring. I don’t like routine.

Willow’s alternative reality stands in stark contrast to the normal world from which she was excluded because of her drug addiction and mental illness. Thus, the constraints of “normalcy”—which include wage labor and rent payments—prevented Willow from fulfilling the requirements of the domiciled world. Yet she reflected toward the end of our conversation: “Just because you did things right based on society’s views doesn’t mean you’re a good person … The good people would be looking out for everyone, as opposed to just the people who they’ll benefit from.” She challenged the legitimacy of the social rules under which she was labeled a criminal and a deviant.

On my last day in Fresno, I met a schizophrenic woman who described her episodes as spiritual openings into new ways of being. She rejected the ideology of the medical-welfare system that described her episodes as symptoms of a disease. Nonetheless, she played the “disability card” to receive government aid. In this way, she negotiated the requirements of the “normal” world to receive aid, while maintaining a belief in the power of her visions.

Official narratives of mental illness also privilege rational thought over passion and emotion. In contrast, psychiatrist Sabina Spielrein promoted a very different understanding of love and emotion. To her, emotion is not pathology but “a prerequisite
to sensuous knowledge” (Gordon, 1997, p. 45). Spielrein’s understanding of love, and of mental illness, sheds light on many of insights Peaches shared with me during our afternoon spent together in the camps.

Peaches was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and borderline multiple personality disorder. As detailed in Chapter Three, she practiced an ethic of mutual care in her relationships with other people. In our conversation, she highlighted the communal aspects of homelessness, saying “it’s not about me as an individual. It’s about us as a community. Homelessness is a community.” She saw her ability to care for others as emerging from her unique emotional sensitivities. To her, mental illness was not a biological problem but a hyper-sensitivity to other people’s pain and a heightened ability to empathize:

It wasn’t that I had a chemical imbalance where my brain was overshooting all this chemical that made me too emotional … I always felt that depending on where I was at, I was sensitive to other people’s emotions. Because more often than not, if I was feeling overwhelming sorrow, if I went outside my door and looked I would find somebody nearby that was hurting … I don’t know what it is. It’s just the world is crying, and it’s using me to get it out.

This understanding of her “illness” freed her from the stigma of chemical, biological explanations. Her ability to empathize, which had been characterized as pathological, was actually a unique power and an alternative form of knowledge.

Peaches also identified loss of love, and loss of hope, as the greatest challenge for many homeless people. She heard many friends attribute their homelessness to “a loss of someone that they love.” As she put it:

If they think that something that great, something that touched them that deep, can still be taken from them, then anything else could be. So what does anything really matter? It’s better to not believe or care or be that connected to something. That way, when it goes, it’s just another day.
This shutting down one’s capacity to love—as a defense mechanism in the face of so much loss—was the greatest tragedy a homeless person could experience. It denied them the liberating potential of emotionality. As Peaches said:

I’ve had some really analytical friends. I’ve had some friends that are so much into their thought that they lack in their emotion … because that’s how they learned to protect themselves or whatever. My father used to say it too. That everything is originally a thought. So if you start to cry, you thought you were going to cry. You made yourself cry. So I don’t want to hear it that your feelings were hurt . . . because your brain has control over that.

Peaches began to cry as she recounted the story of her father, a stoic and rational man who rarely demonstrated affection. One day, later in his life, he experienced an emotional breakdown:

All of a sudden he’s standing in the hallway in his underwear . . . and his face is swollen and red and he’s just crying. I says, Dad what happened? What happened? Just tell me what happened. And he cried for like an hour . . . I told him, You’ve lived your whole life not being emotional, so those gates were bound to get over-flooded sooner or later … And he gave me a hug. He never hugged me like that before. He goes … You’re way stronger than I could ever wish to be. To think that you’ve lived your whole life like this, especially with me hounding you, telling you that you have control over it … That’s the best compliment I’ve ever had in my whole life.

In Peaches’ view, her father repressed his own feelings and saw them in others as a lack of control. Yet he was finally able to recognize the power and strength of Peaches’ emotions by experiencing emotion himself. This emotional knowledge liberated him from his repressive relationship with himself and with his daughter. In recounting this story, Peaches advocated a representation in which her emotionality—a symptom of her “disease”—was in fact a powerful interpersonal ability. In this way, she resisted the characterization of her mental illness as a stigmatized condition.

Another young homeless woman told me her emotional volatility was an asset on the streets. She said her illness made it difficult to stay in the women’s shelter: “I’m
bipolar, okay … so my temper will set off real quick … They’re gonna kick me out and then I’ll be by myself.” Yet when I asked how she stayed safe on the streets, she referred to herself as Miss Badass and said her temper protects her. Thus, her temperament that prevented her from complying with the rules of sheltered life simultaneously kept her safe on the streets.

The homeless people I interviewed often saw their own hallucinations and passions as alternative forms of knowledge and resources rather than liabilities. Yet the dominant psychoanalytic paradigm labels these abilities as disabilities and views control and repression as preferable to fantasy and emotional sensitivity. In Fresno, this translated into a logic of eviction and institutionalization, which made things worse for people with mental illness. As one woman said after her home was destroyed:

I don't fit in anywhere else. This is the only place I really fit in. And I figured as long as I was leaving everybody alone, they’d leave me alone … You say you’re trying to help homeless people … You think this is helping my illness? I’m freaking out. (Bedoian, 2013)

As Mike Rhodes said of the evictions, “The human potential that exists in all of us, homeless people included, is being wasted … Somebody with a mental health problem, they’re not going to get better if you beat them and make them sleep in the gutter.”

Like Gordon and Spielrein, Lefebvre rejected the abstraction of sensual bodily experience. He saw that abstract space dominates real, lived, gestural, sensual experience and reduces it to concepts, words, and lines on a sheet of paper. In this sense, the body becomes trapped in ideas about the body. Lefebvre urged for the uprising of the body—of “underground, lateral labyrinthine—even uterine or feminine—realities” (1991, p. 201). In short, Lefebvre urged the breakdown of representations and the resurgence of lived
experience. He argued that spaces of sensual pleasure, leisure, and festival resist the abstraction of space.

But this is not a story about the romance of life of the streets. Fresno encampments were often spaces of bodily pain, torment, and the lived experience of struggle, deprivation, and exclusion. Despite their preference for encampments over highly governed spaces, nearly everyone I spoke to in Fresno described life on the streets as an experience marked by suffering. As one homeless woman said, “basically another word for all of this is just Hell.” Another man reiterated her sentiment: “We’re living on Hell on earth right now. Plain and simple. That’s the whole majority of this whole entire thing. Because this is a living H-E-L-L.” But resistance to abstraction is not only to be found in the pleasant aspects of lived experience. It is to be found in all experiences that resist exchange, commodification, visibility, and normalization. It is to be found in the spaces forcibly excluded from abstract space, as well as the spaces of pleasure, art, and festival. Although homeless Fresnans championed alternative representations of themselves and of the space of the encampment, they nonetheless had to face the daily, grinding reality of exclusion from capitalist space.

**Conclusion**

The homeless in Fresno are a diverse community united by the common experience of extreme material deprivation. Yet policy makers continue to obfuscate the role of poverty, instead arguing that homelessness is the result of mental illness and poor choices. This perception of the homeless psychotic and deviant serves only to deny systemic marginalization, while seeking to highlight the personal failures of people who
live on the streets. In Fresno, it is also used to justify a politics of eviction and institutionalization. Yet the dominant paradigm toward mental illness and drug addiction excludes alternative knowledge of the streets and thrusts people into spaces where emotion and fantasy must be regulated and controlled. In Lefebvre’s terms, the medicalization and criminalization of homelessness stifles the right to difference. While society seeks to “rehabilitate” people and force them to conform to capitalist norms, homeless Fresnans have asserted a counter narrative of campers as victims of police violence rather than criminals and of mental illness as an alternative form of knowledge.
Conclusion

Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space. Indeed, it is that struggle alone which prevents abstract space from taking over the whole planet and papering over all differences.

—Henri Lefebvre29

In this thesis, I have argued that homeless encampments necessarily challenge the production of capitalist space. Henri Lefebvre argued that capitalist cities seek to produce space that is conducive to profit, easily surveilled, and homogenous. In Fresno, these three goals resulted in the dispersal of tent cities and the concentration of homeless people in a series of surveilled and controlled spaces. Yet homeless people have pushed back by creating alternative spatial practices and representational spaces and demanding their right to the city.

In Part One, I argued that neoliberalism reduces the world to economic terms and treats human beings as assets or liabilities. The story of homelessness in Fresno is in part the story of the city’s attempt to remove homeless people as a liability and to harness them as asset. Urban space— and Fresno’s downtown in particular— presents an opportunity for investment, capital growth, and profit. The downtown area is alternatively viewed as a capitalist frontier ripe for investment and consumption or a blighted area that keeps Fresno mired in poverty. Homelessness presents a similar dynamic of both problem and promise. Homeless encampments are viewed as a liability for lowering the exchange value of downtown space. Simultaneously, homeless people in shelters and housing facilities are seen as assets that enable the continued flow of government funding for

29 From Lefebvre (1991, p. 46). Lefebvre argued against all forms of domination. Thus, I do not interpret this quote as denigrating struggles not rooted in class but rather as a reminder of the importance of all struggles against domination and homogenization.
housing developments. Thus, officials seek to integrate homeless people into the
capitalist system and remove any trace of non-conforming homeless communities. The
drive for profit underlies this process. All the while, homeless Fresnans struggle for a
right to space that is not tied to the exchange of money.

In addition to bulldozing encampments, Fresno has developed a complex
apparatus of shelters, housing facilities, and tent wards that prevent the homeless from
asserting their right to space and autonomy. In Part Two of this thesis, I showed how
Fresno officials promoted the creation of these highly controlled spaces to render
homeless people more visible to the government. Shelters and housing facilities regulate
residents’ daily movements and living arrangements, while tent wards seclude the
homeless in distant spaces that are invisible to the consuming public. They also achieve
the dual goal of controlling people while providing them with aid and protection. In
response, the homeless struggled for control over their own living spaces. They promoted
a representation of self-governed encampments as communal neighborhoods and tents
and shanties as homes. In asserting their right to the city, the homeless are asserting a
right to home, rather than just shelter or housing, and challenging the very category of
homelessness.

Finally, in Part Three, I sought to untangle the complex relationship between
stigma and economic forces. I argued that stigmatizing representations of homeless
encampments are rooted in homeless people’s failure to conform to the norms of
capitalist space. Rather than accepting a universe of difference, capitalism seeks to create
norms and standards by which everything is measured. Just as exchange value stamps
objects with a universal unit of equivalence, capitalist space does the same to people. It
prefers those who most benefit from the smooth functioning of the system, who celebrate and reproduce capitalist labor and consumption. It also prefers the appearance of certain spaces, and officials in Fresno sought to create downtown spaces that were sanitized, uniform, new, and attractive to consumers. The homeless, who often do not labor for capital or pay to occupy space, were labeled deviant, mentally ill, addicted, and criminal. For failing to reside in uniform buildings attached to commodified infrastructures, they were represented as unsanitary and unattractive. For these reasons, officials argued that the homeless had to be removed, relocated, and fixed. Yet homeless campers resisted these representations in several ways. They reversed the label of criminality by focusing instead on the violent and brutal practices of the law enforcement officers and challenged the label of mental illness by championing it as an alternative form of knowledge. They promoted representations of encampments as hygienic and beautiful, sought alternative, non-commodified sanitation infrastructures to manage waste, and built spaces infused with art made from recycled materials. In doing so, they promoted their right to the city as both an ideological and material practice.

But just as the homeless resist capitalism, capitalism also continues to create homelessness. The market cannot employ every person, and thus it leaves in its wake a group of people who do not receive a wage. It also permanently excludes those who are deemed to be non-productive and attaches various labels – disability, mental illness, addiction, crime—to blame them for their exclusion. In turn, people who do not receive a wage are excluded from obtaining a legal right to space, in the form of home ownership or tenancy. In short, capitalist space is available only in exchange for money, and money
is available only in exchange for labor, which is in limited supply. Thus, homelessness—and spacelessness—become an inevitable byproduct of capitalist forces.

Several people in Fresno noted that the problem of homelessness was not going to end anytime soon. Even if every person were housed today, the market would inevitably create homelessness again tomorrow. As Mike Rhodes said about social services, “People need to eat, please do need drug rehab, but it’s not going to end homelessness in itself. It just maintains that paradigm.” An excerpt from my field notes described a particularly poignant moment during a meeting of activists seeking to obtain toilet paper donations for the homeless:

*There was a moment when we all became acutely aware of the small scale of our endeavor. So when we ask the chain stores to donate 1,000 [toilet paper] rolls a month— how many months are we asking for? Someone joked—until there is no homelessness. There was a pause in the conversation— almost an embarrassing collective understanding of the sheer scope of this problem—a vision of it stretching on into infinity.*

I witnessed a similar moment during a conversation with three people who lived at the camps:

F: The point of fact is I’m getting out of here.

S: That’s what I’m saying, see. But that’s one less person on the streets. What about everybody else? You going to take us with you? … It's still a concern, whether you leave, whether I leave, it’s still a concern out here.

F: That’s what I’m getting at.

B: Every day, someone becomes homeless.

Both groups recognized that, without tackling the underlying problems that lead to the poverty, joblessness and eviction, no amount of aid or will “solve” the problem of homelessness.
Yet, Lefebvre understood that that which is excluded inevitably produces its own space and argued that difference is endemic to the nature of capitalism. He wrote, “certain deviant or diverted spaces, though initially subordinate, show distinct evidence of a true productive capacity” (1991, p. 383). Homeless Fresnans are able to survive their exclusion by building tent cities. In doing so they create alternative ways of living in opposition to the capitalist system. Tent cities necessarily resist the forces of commodification because they do not pay to occupy space. Homeless Fresnans also persist in promoting alternative representations and asserting their right to difference. Their very survival, then, is a threat to capitalist norms. In an ironic twist, capitalism produces the very same homeless communities that challenge the production of capitalist space. Thus, homelessness can be understood as one of the internal contradictions of capitalism.

This is not a story about how homeless people are good and politicians, shelter operators and developers are bad. Rather, it is a story that reveals the devastating roles people play in response to social pressures. Officials played the role of commodifying the city to grow the local economy and destroying people’s tents and shanties in the process. Shelter operators and developers played the paradoxical role of creating spaces of care for the homeless while simultaneously gaining profit off homelessness. And homeless Fresnans played the role of demanding their right to the city. They did not freely elect to be activists but were thrust into activism because their extreme poverty rendered them incompatible with capitalist space.

But this is also not a story about the monolith of capitalism. Gibson and Graham (2006) famously asserted that to engage with capitalism as a frame of reference is to reify
it as a pervasive “thing” in the world. Lefebvre acknowledged that the world is much more complex than any frame of reference imposed upon it, and he struggled against the repressive force of abstraction. Indeed, he lamented the tendency of revolutionary despair to reify the system as all-powerful. Life is a multiplicity of moments and forms, and to include them all under the umbrella of capitalism is to fall into the same trap of abstraction that he struggled against. As such, Lefebvre characterized abstract space as a dominant tendency, rather than a pervasive or fixed category. In this vein, I refer to “capitalism” because it is a dominant representation of the world with an associated set of material practices and not because it is a universal thing.

In *Capital, Volume One*, Marx never once used the word “capitalism.” Rather, he wrote about “capital” as a relational and self-perpetuating process in which value is derived from exploitation. In addition, he did not see capital, labor, or commodities as things that have always existed. Rather, he saw that when society represents these abstractions as real, it also produces them in the world. In this sense, dominant representations are self-fulfilling prophecies. Rather than abandoning the categories of classical political economy, Marx used them against themselves. He saw that critical analysis must tackle head on the categories that reproduce exploitation, exclusion and domination, rather than avoiding them for fear of reinforcing their power. Nonetheless, following Gibson and Graham’s call, it is important to avoid the trap of treating these categories as fixed or universal and to seek out the spaces where they do not apply. The primary intervention of this thesis is its observation that capitalist space is not complete—there are ruptures, fissures, and points of struggle where even those most
excluded from capitalism are able to create an alternative space. The homeless in Fresno,
by demanding their right to the city, do just that.
Appendix: A Note on Method

As a kid, I used to ditch school and climb down the steep banks of the dry riverbeds in my hometown. Other people also took refuge there and left evidence of their lives scattered across the grass. Once, I found a tunnel carved out of a patch of creosote bushes, strewn with miniature whisky bottles. Hidden by bamboo and slender arching trees, someone had erected a makeshift living room out of a dilapidated orange couch and folding chairs arranged in a circle.

Years later, I discovered a similar community near my home in southern California. On the northern edge of the Buena Vista Lagoon, the road falls off at a steep incline to a sunken forest of sycamore, oak and palm trees bordered by hundreds of yards of cattails. One morning, I parted the leafy curtain and descended down the slippery slope to the bottom. The pale trunk of a sycamore stood in the center of a clearing. There were bits of bright blue sky visible between the branches, and the five-pointed leaves of the sycamore were shot through with sunshine, creating patterns of brilliant light and pale green shadow below.

A small stream ran muddy in some places and clear in others, and someone had erected a tent on the other side, next to a cluster of flowers and a red wagon. The tent flap was open, and I could see a thick novel resting on a sleeping bag inside. I followed a pathway deeper into the trees, dodging low-growing branches and spiders' webs, and arrived at a second clearing surrounded by palm trees and makeshift shelters. Another pathway led even deeper still, and I eventually came to a clearing stacked several feet high with boxes covered in tarp. To my left was a bicycle leaning against a dense wall of
cattails. A narrow opening led to a series of pathways that zigzagged through the marshes like veins. I realized I had stumbled upon something radical—a community that existed almost entirely under the radar. It was from these experiences that I became captivated by tent cities. From the beginning, this thesis has been an intimate project rooted in my own experiences.

I undertook this project because I wanted to know why Fresno spatially controls the homeless. In seeking to answer that question, I relied primarily on interviews conducted over a two-month period. I wanted to interview people in positions of power to get a sense of their perspective on evictions and shelters. I reached out to countless city, county, and agency officials via email and telephone, and I interviewed every person who agreed to speak with me. Prior to arriving in Fresno, I had developed a personal connection with Mike Rhodes, and he introduced me to a group of homeless rights activists. Interviews with activists helped me to get a sense of resistance to city policy and also to make connections with people who lived in the camps. I did not want to simply tell a story of the homeless as passive objects of government power, and thus it was imperative to interview homeless people and incorporate their understandings into my research.

Out of the 24 people I interviewed, nine were officials involved in homeless management, eight were homeless, and seven were homeless rights activists. During interviews, I asked participants about their views on homeless spaces and homeless politics. I also consulted two key media sources—the Community Alliance Newspaper, which has tracked homeless politics for the last decade, and Fresno’s largest newspaper, The Fresno Bee. I read NGO and government policy reports, as well as documents in
legal cases filed on behalf of homeless Fresnans against the city. Finally, I spent hours observing official meetings and press conferences, partaking in survey processes, volunteering for local shelters, chatting with people at encampments, and participating in activist meetings and volunteer activities. During analysis, I read and re-read notes of my observations, archival documents, and interview transcriptions, looking for themes that appeared repeatedly and relationships between them.

This project is based solely on qualitative analysis of interviews, notes, and documents. Such analysis relies on intimate and subjective interpretations and is thus heavily impacted by the researcher’s own knowledge and position (Kwan & Ding, 2008; Cresswell, 2007). Further, this research is not politically neutral. It follows a tradition of critical geography that seeks not only to interpret the world but to change it (Harvey, 2001; Katz, 2004; Mitchell, 2004). As a product of both qualitative and critical inquiry, this research is shot through at every level with my own political convictions and plagued by my stigmas and emotions. Donna Haraway (1988) argued against the pretense that a researcher’s perspective can arrive at universal truth. She urged researchers not to abandon the search for truth but to instead promote situated, partial, and embodied knowledge. In this vein, scholars have critically examined their own positions in relation to the power dynamics of their work (Rose, 1997; Pratt, 2000). In an effort to achieve a more accountable and transparent analysis, this appendix will be an exposé of my stigmas, emotions, political biases, and methodological errors. The following section explores how my desire to overcome stigma led to a tendency to romanticize homelessness. I then show how my political affiliations led to an alienated and often disparaging interpretation of official motivations. Finally, I show how homeless research
participants corrected my methodological errors and how I sought to incorporate their corrections into this project.

**Stigma and Emotion**

People with homes often view the homeless as undesirable and deviant. Based on a survey of more than 1,500 people, Link et al. (1995) found that 72% of people attributed homelessness to irresponsible behavior and 62% to laziness. A majority also responded that it is only natural to be afraid of homeless people (Link et al., 1995). The authors wrote: “Most Americans believe that homeless people make neighborhoods worse, spoil parks for families and children, hurt local business by their presence, and threaten the quality of life in our nation’s cities” (1995, p. 546). Popular representations reaffirm these fears. American cinema bombards the public with images of the homeless as filthy, disheveled lunatics, and winos (Fuller, 1999; Brigham, 1996). We see, over and over again on the big screen, the old man whose clothes are stiff with filth, whose beard is ragged, whose fingers are caked with dirt. He looks up at us from below, where he sits on the pavement. 30 Indeed, the very words we use to describe people living on the streets—derelict, deadbeat, scavenger, bag lady, tramp, vagabond, vagrant, hobo—reflect a long history of stigma.

Although it is difficult to identify how social stigma has impacted my research, I cannot claim to be immune to its effects. Gillian Rose (1997) warned that unconscious fantasies, fears, and stigmas might impact research in unknowable ways. Research is also

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30 In a particularly dehumanizing representation, David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive* portrays a person living in an alley behind a dumpster as a dirt-encrusted, monstrous being who terrifies one of the film’s protagonists in a recurring nightmare.
inevitably an emotional process, and geographers are increasingly paying attention to the emotional and affective dimensions of doing qualitative research (Davies & Dwyer, 2007). I cannot deny that my emotions and stigmas shaped this project. The best I can do is confess my conscious emotions and stigmas against the homeless and assert some tentative conclusions about how this might have affected this project.

I grew up in a white, middle-class family of five. Homelessness seemed outside my world of possible paths. When disaster hits, middle-class safety nets are forgiving. Thus, in my mid-20s, unemployed and recently divorced, I returned home to live with my parents. Without them, I would not have had a place to stay. Later, when members of my family faced chronic illness and unemployment, homeownership was a barrier against the streets.

Given this class background, most of my interactions with the homeless take place during the act of giving and are inflected with a sense of middle-class remoteness and guilt. Throughout my life, I have passed hundreds of panhandlers on the streets. Just this morning, I saw several people sitting on the sidewalk in my peripheral vision. On occasion I say hello and part with a dollar or some change. But most times, I pass quickly and avoid eye contact. If I look without offering cash, I feel uncomfortable. When I lived in Oakland, I became well acquainted with a man who panhandled the same corner every morning. I would often stop and chat and felt good about being his friend. But sometimes, I was in a rush and had no change, and on those days I sometimes wished he was not there.

As a young adult, I interned at an eviction defense clinic and assisted people who cycled in and out of homelessness. Yet both in my legal work and in my occasional
handouts, I was often not motivated by a feeling of solidarity but by a sense of charity. I did not have homeless friends or family, and I had never experienced homelessness myself. I wanted to know homelessness only from the comfort of my domiciled life.

My memories of the homeless are also marked by lurking feelings of fear. When I was a child, a man named Frank slept on an old mattress in my parent’s garage for a few months. He was Tohono O’odham, a Vietnam veteran, and alcoholic. I avoided talking with him. One day, we heard that Frank died on the pavement. I felt gloomy and embarrassed— I’m sorry I was scared of you. I’m sorry you’re dead. Once, I gave a man small change, and he became enraged at the paltry offering. On another occasion, a man threatened to kill me after I refused to give anything. On a bus in New Orleans, a homeless man yelled that I did not understand the devastation of life on the streets. I have had countless negative encounters with middle-class strangers yet never associated them with middle-class society as whole. Yet, perhaps because of internalized social stigma, these brief and circumstantial encounters left a lingering impression of fear that I associated with homeless people in general.

Recently, during a conversation with an elderly homeless woman, I found myself repulsed by the smell of her unwashed body. Once, on a drunken New Year’s Eve, I embraced every homeless stranger I saw on Market Street in San Francisco. The fact that I saw this simple human touch as an act of daring is testament to my underlying rejection of their bodies. The fact that I assumed they wanted hugs speaks to my denial of their agency.

The homeless hold up a mirror to society. They force us to reaffirm the status quo by condemning them as misfits or admitting that the system has failed. For some, this
causes guilt to rise up under the skin. Occasionally, during the holidays, we apply salve to the guilty conscience through the fervor of charitable activity—canned goods for the local homeless shelter, dollar bills handed out like leaflets advertising our benevolence. Yet for many, the homeless remain a symbol of failure (Link et al., 1995; Phelan, et al., 1997). Despite this societal scorn, there is no homeless civil rights movement, no homeless memorial, no homeless history day. Recalling my own memories, I can see that the homeless most often occupy my consciousness not as human beings but as potent reminders of my race and class privilege. They are distant reminders of my own guilt, fear, and disgust. Meanwhile, homeless encampments remain in my memory as a romanticized vision of homeless of a secret underground community from which I was a stranger. I am sure that these experiences, and the desire to assuage my guilt, have undergirded the entirety of this project.

In Fresno, the exploitative nature of the research relationship often brought my guilt to the surface. In one interview, Ben, a 54-year-old white man, was particularly distressed by recounting his own journey with joblessness and mental illness:

There’s too much pressure, man. I feel a lot of pressure. About to have a heart attack. I’m serious. I’m stressed out over having a job. I haven’t had a job in months . . . It’s pretty discouraging. Go all my life, and have nothing to show for it . . . I try not to think about it. Just live day to day. Try not to be in the past, but that always gets thrown in your face, you know . . . I’ve already been diagnosed with depression . . . I don’t really want to talk about it all . . . It’s really a bad subject actually.

As he wiped tears from face, his expression remained stoic. I apologized for bringing up bad feelings, and he joked, yeah—you really ruined my day. It was the only time he laughed during the whole interview. When I arrived home later, I wrote the following in my notes:
Today I asked Ben about some of the most intimate details of his life—things that he told me he likes to suppress, that he doesn’t like to think about. I felt like I just left him standing there, when I said goodbye, when I shook his hand, professional, after that intense morning together, him pouring out his soul to me ... Driving home, I cried in the car ... I felt as though I was using him.

I was aware of what Stacey (1991) has described as the inherently exploitative nature of qualitative research, and these experiences left me with a searing guilt.

Similarly, although several people told me to visit before I left town, my final days were rushed, and I did not say goodbye. One homeless man called me a few times after I left Fresno, but I failed to keep in touch. Thus, I completely severed ties with people who had opened themselves to me. I found out not long after I left Fresno that every single encampment in the city had been razed to the ground. Everyone I met had lost everything. I felt strangely distant and paralyzed. There was nothing I could do. My relationships with the people I had met in Fresno were rooted in my academic pursuits rather than spontaneous human connection, and I knew I would not live in Fresno permanently. Indeed, the very designation of the “field” as distinct from “home” cemented my status as an outsider (Clifford, 1997; Katz, 1994; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Rose (1997, p. 314) argued that the inevitable distance between researched and researcher “makes feeling connected to the researched a political and ethical error.” As Haraway (1988) urged, in theorizing from the vantage point of the subjugated, the researcher must not pretend to be the subjugated. Yet this inevitable distance reinforces the illusion that the researcher is a detached and neutral observer. The experience of leaving “the field” also reinforced an already-wide chasm between myself and the homeless people I came to know in Fresno.
I also experienced fear in Fresno encampments. When I first arrived, I was shocked at the state of the camps. I had read stories about people at the 2009 camps electing mayors, hosting collective meals, and maintaining clean and organized spaces. When I arrived, however, the first homeless people I saw were sprawling, shirtless, and limp across the sidewalk. The next time I came to the camps, I was with a group of community volunteers who distributed water and toilet paper every week. That day, I met many people with glazed eyes and slack faces, who grabbed the bottles of water out of my hands. Fights erupted around me. I felt nervous and out of place. That feeling would haunt me again on occasion as I came into the camps. Once, a man called out to me as I biked past the camps. He seemed enraged that I did not respond to his sexual advances.

I recall two other moments of fear in Fresno encampments. To speak with Peaches and her neighbor, I had to visit their particularly isolated encampment by myself. Several people advised against it, and it took me days to build up the nerve. Toward the end of my time in Fresno, I headed to another unknown encampment alone, after getting the news that it was about to be destroyed by the canal authorities. I had never been there before and did not know what to expect. At the time, the rhetoric of criminality in the camps was heating up. There had been a recent shooting and a spate of arrests. The following is an excerpt from my notes:

Another encampment was being destroyed. I was nervous when I arrived—saw a few scraggly tents on one side of the embankment. Was this what was leftover after the destruction? I contemplated leaving my purse in the car, but I needed my phone in case something happened. After all of ______’s talk of the criminality in the camps, and the article in the Bee about the shooting, my heart began pounding as I walked towards the tent. Two black guys and a Hispanic guy were there, staring at me as I approached. At this point it was too late to turn around. I asked if they knew about the city coming around. The other side, one man said. They all looked at me more with curiosity than anything else. One man asked if I had a few quarters and I told him no. The truth was I didn't know, but I didn't feel
Clearly, I had many experiences in which I was surprised by my own fear and stigma, and by the benign, often friendly interactions I had with people I met in the camps.

The guilt, distance, and fear I experienced in Fresno affected the nature of my research, as well as the conclusions I arrived at. In some ways, these stigmas helped me to understand and interact with officials and elites in Fresno. My own middle-class experiences allowed me to contextualize and understand the stigmas of middle-class and elite participants. Had I not grown up exposed to the incredible stigma of homelessness, I would not have been able to sit by quietly while some participants told me that the homeless were filthy, criminal deadbeats. The fact that this rhetoric about the homeless was unsurprising is testament to my own prior exposure to deep-seated social stigma. Yet in Fresno, my own personal stigma toward the homeless began to crack, as I engaged in intimate and lengthy conversations with people about their own experiences on the streets. Thus, I entered into a contradictory space, in which I simultaneously turned a critical gaze on social stigma, while pretending in the world of officials that I was unaffected by the hateful speech they often espoused. This schizophrenic feeling intersected with my own political opposition to inequality and stigma against those who do not conform to dominant norms.

Yet my distance from the homeless people I met in Fresno was something I struggled to deny. As such, I found myself projecting a different identity when I was in shelters and encampments than when I spoke with officials. Clifford (1997, p. 203) argued that “cultural cross dressing” as part of the research process has the potential to exoticize participants. In the encampments, I made sure to wear baggy clothing and no
makeup or jewelry. In this effort, I was conforming to stereotypes of the homeless as unglamorous and yielding to my own desire to “fit in.” I was also assuming that I was more likely to be sexualized in homeless circles than elsewhere. These assumptions belie unconscious and conscious stigma against homeless populations as “other.”

My internalized stigma also resulted in a deep-seated denial of certain experiences I had in Fresno. I went out of my way to ignore the qualities that inspired fear and disgust within me and hesitated to say anything that resembled the words of the establishment. This resulted in a growing romanticism of homelessness and a denial that there might be a grain of truth in the words of the officials, who were so often convinced that the homeless were dangerous and crazy. Indeed, many of the people I met casually did seem intoxicated, and on occasion I did feel threatened by homeless people I met in Fresno. For what they are worth, the latest numbers indicate that 71% of the unsheltered homeless population in Fresno are chronically addicted (“Fresno Madera,” 2013). Many people I spoke with blamed Fresno’s unusually large homeless population on the fact that the city has one of the highest rates of methamphetamine consumption in the nation. Indeed, many homeless people I spoke with characterized homelessness as a problem of addiction, not poverty.

Yet I ignored this evidence in part because it was an anomaly amongst overwhelming evidence of poverty and dispossession, but also because of my desire to distance myself from my own stigmas. Scholars have argued that the focus on homeless addiction ignores structural inequality and is often based on exaggerated and inaccurate data (Snow et al., 1994). With this repertoire of critique in mind, I found that official numbers of mental illness and addiction in Fresno were rooted in flawed survey methods,
as I explored in Chapter Six. Had I not been eager to resist individualized explanations of homelessness, perhaps I would not have looked at these numbers with a critical eye. Perhaps I would have explored how addiction exacerbates problems in the lives of the homeless or dug even deeper to reject the very notion that addiction equals failure. In short, my desire to escape my own stigma toward the homeless resulted in a simplification of homeless politics.

Yet, to interpret mental illness and addiction as the primary factors in homelessness in Fresno is also to espouse a specific political viewpoint. Both interpretations are laden with assumptions and baggage. In a world of competing visions of reality, the researcher must ask herself—what is the likely political outcome of the knowledge I am producing? Individualized explanations of homelessness have dire political implications for homeless people already subject to criminalization and societal blame. Thus, I saw this as an explanation that should be struggled against, and my political goals have driven this research project from the beginning.

**Bringing Politics into Research**

I knew before arriving in Fresno where my allegiances lay. Just as I went to Fresno carrying middle-class stigma toward the homeless, I went with a political opposition to the city’s policies of evicting the homeless. Politically, I was on the side of the disempowered. I had read countless stories in the activist press about the city’s bulldozing campaign and was interested in Fresno because of the particularly violent nature of its policy toward the homeless. I saw it as an important site for intervention. I also viewed anti-homeless politics as part of a larger web of class-based subjugation that I sought to struggle against.
While in Fresno, I interviewed eight officials, including a city councilman, a county analyst, a senior manager for the Fresno Housing Authority, the head of the downtown Property-based Business Improvement District (PBID), the executive directors of Fresno’s three largest homeless service providers, and a private developer who constructed housing for the homeless. Several of these people chaired committees dedicated to homeless relief. They described themselves as collaborating in the project of ending homelessness, through a combination of punitive and charitable practices. Many of their actions could have easily been read as compassionate. But prior to arriving in Fresno, I had read multiple accounts of the medicalized and repressive nature of homeless service provision (Lyon-Callo, 2000; Gowan, 2010) as well as stories in the activist press about how the homeless in Fresno reject the shelter system as authoritarian. I had come to Fresno expecting repressive politics.

This, combined with my position as a student researcher, cemented my “outsider” status amongst officials I interviewed. Just as I had “cross-dressed” when entering the camps, I made sure to dress the part when entering the world of Fresno politics. I spoke in the language of officials and did not express my own political sentiments during interviews. Without this level of adaptation to the cultural norms of homeless management, I likely would not have gained access. Indeed, on one occasion, I was mistaken for a homeless client and received hostile treatment as a result. At the Poverello House, non-homeless guests enter through an alleyway next to a private parking lot. The entire complex is heavily guarded by a team of men wearing orange vests and walkie-talkies. One afternoon, I arrived at the back entrance on my bicycle, wearing shorts, a baggy T-shirt, and no makeup. One of the security guards told me in no uncertain terms
that clients were not welcome in the alley and that I had to leave. From that day forward, on the days that I “looked homeless,” I would have to enter through the front entrance along with hundreds of other people. Yet on the day I arrived to interview the head of the shelter, I was driving a car, and wearing pants, a blazer, and makeup. I entered into the exact same alleyway and was politely escorted into a back office, where I was offered bottled water and a seat. Thus, my ability to “dress the part” enabled me to access the world of shelter operators and officials in a way that I could not have if I were actually homeless. I felt as though I were navigating two worlds—one in which I was treated with humanity and another in which I was a faceless client.

Thereafter, when officials described the homeless as mentally ill, addicted, or filthy, I sat by quietly. When one official told me the homeless either had to get out of town or accept assistance, I refrained from reminding her that assistance was only available to a fraction of the homeless population. In one conversation in particular, it was difficult not to reveal my opposition. The executive director of a religious shelter told me that the homeless needed strict rules and religious discipline, and homeless women should be “observed 24/7” and learn “how to have boundaries.” When he told me that the homeless rejected his rules, I did not tell him that I rejected his rules also. I bit my tongue when he described homeless people as “infidels,” “deadbeats,” and “leeches.” What was the effect of not voicing difficult questions and of feigning agreement? Perhaps it allowed him to speak without mincing his words. If my biases had been apparent, his discourse might have been masked behind a pretense to caring.

I made the mistake in my first official interview of indicating my sympathy
toward homeless Fresnans. I asked the director of the downtown PBID where homeless people would go if there was a total ban on camping and shortly thereafter asked what she thought of a Homeless Bill of Rights that was before the California Assembly. She became visibly upset, and said:

I think that would be absolutely horrible ... It’s the perfect way to ensure that businesses will all go away and close, and that city centers will all cease to exist. So if that’s what you want for our future, go ahead and let anyone do whatever they want in public. And then we’ll have all kinds of people just squatting— right here.

She pointed out the window of the cafe, to a table where people in business suits were drinking coffees. Then, just twenty minutes into our scheduled interview, she abruptly announced that she had to leave. In future interviews, I was more careful. I was determined not to let on where my sentiments lay.

Scholars have noted the difficulty of interviewing elite populations. England (2002, p. 206) argued that elites have the power to insulate themselves from “unwanted intrusions.” Often, in interviews with elites, researchers find themselves in a disempowered position in which they have to put up with long waits, cancellations, and hasty interviews. In Fresno, almost every official I met with kept me waiting for at least half an hour, often in a waiting room outside a closed office. One official no-showed for an appointment. Another left the interview after only twenty minutes. On one occasion, a developer kept me waiting in his office at the top of the tallest building in Fresno, with wall to ceiling windows, and an expanse of satiny carpets. Finally, when I was ushered into his chambers and produced the official consent form, he became instantly suspicious. He asked if I had interviewed any other officials and began to call people, asking about me. I was just about to leave, when he agreed to conduct the interview without signing
the consent form. It was clear that he was a man who was used to calling the shots. He controlled the tenor of the interview entirely, and only afterwards did he agreed to sign the form. I left the interview feeling disempowered and deflated, which only hardened my invisible stance against elites in Fresno.

Mullings (1999) described the difficult task of interviewing corporate employers while simultaneously seeking access to workers at the same company. She had to strike a fine balance between ingratiating herself with elites who were often difficult to interview without alienating workers who often held opposing interests. In my case, all too often, the fact that I interviewed activists and homeless Fresnans made it that much more difficult to access Fresno officials. I developed a reputation at City Hall for being an activist. In qualitative work, data are often collected in the settings where the issues unfold. In my case, I often interviewed homeless people on the streets or in encampments, activists in their homes, and officials in their offices. This made for a more intimate experience with homeless people and a more formal experience with officials. Similarly, when I arrived in Fresno, I first began interviewing a few local activists whom I had known previously through friends and family. They put me in touch with homeless people. In contrast, I emailed officials to formally request interviews. This gave me an “insider” status amongst the activist community and, to a certain extent, amongst the homeless. In contrast, email recruitment reinforced my outsider status in official circles.

City officials exercised their authority by refusing to speak with me. The onetime “homeless czar” of Fresno initially agreed to speak with me and then retracted after consulting the city attorney. The city was in the midst of defending lawsuits filed by
homeless campers whose property had been destroyed in evictions. The one city councilmember who agreed to an interview admitted that the mayor had instructed everyone in the council and in her office to avoid me at all costs. He was later reprimanded for speaking with me. Despite several attempts at getting through to other city officials, I never had any success. My contact in the city council alerted me to a press conference, and when I showed up, the Assistant City Attorney complained about my presence. She said I should not be there and that I was with the American Civil Liberties Union, the same civil-rights organization that had filed suit against the city. For city officials, this was the worst indictment.

Moments of silence and refusals to speak can be revealing, but they are also difficult to interpret (Hyams, 2004; Davies & Dwyer, 2008). What can I glean from the city’s refusal to speak? On the surface it seems to indicate that the city was afraid of accountability and transparency. If officials would not speak with a master’s student, with whom would they speak? By the same token, it might have been a cold, calculated legal strategy in light of the ongoing lawsuits against the city or simply based in their assessment of me as an anti-eviction activist. In interpreting the city’s refusal to speak, the only conclusion I can draw is the fact of the silence itself—and the fact that city policy around homeless in Fresno is cloaked in silences. But city officials were not simply silent-- the City Attorney actively sought to prevent me from having any access to officials. Such iron-clad defenses reveal something of the fraught nature of homeless politics in Fresno.

In Fresno, my political leanings resulted in a one-sided analysis in which the perspective of elites became alien and unsympathetic. Officials’ refusal to speak with me
only cemented this distance. Yet this bias must be situated in a political context. The city constantly disseminates its perspective through press releases, speeches, and official reports, and the goal of this project is not to reinforce already powerful voices. Rather, the goal of this project has been, from the beginning, to work against the myriad ways in which homeless voices are silenced every day in Fresno.

**Getting Called Out**

This exercise in reflexivity does not actually *redress* any of the problems I identified with my research methods. Indeed, Rose (1997) argued that the search for reflexivity often perpetuates the myth of stable, knowable facts about power and identity. She proposes the expression of *uncertainty* as an alternative reflexive practice. If researchers translate the language of subjects into academic language, then reflexivity should involve looking for errors in translation. It should also embrace the unpredictability of how research shapes identity and how readers interpret meaning. Following Rose’s call, feminists have engaged in an exploration of their own fallibility (see generally Pratt, 2000).

Winders (2001) explores her own experience of learning from the opposition of someone who was not directly involved in the research. Like Winders, I was influenced by the experience of getting called out by homeless people who were not participants in the project. When I interned at an eviction defense clinic, I worked with clients who were in and out of homelessness. My job was to filter their stories into a list of legally appropriate facts. Once, a woman stormed out of the clinic after I indicated her landlord’s religious beliefs were not legally relevant. I knew I was denying the emotional details of
clients’ lives, but the law inevitably edits life into a flat and simplistic terrain. It was only later that I would learn that interviewing runs the same risk. The first interview I ever conducted was years before I began this research. In 2011, I was volunteering for a homeless shelter and was tasked with interviewing a man there who was about to die. The experience has influenced my research project in innumerable ways, and I remember it vividly.

The shelter was an unmarked warehouse just off a highway in Tucson, Arizona. The man—I will call him John—sat at the edge of his bed in the back corner of the huge cement room. He wore a collared flannel shirt and a silver crew cut and was hooked up to an oxygen tank. His eyes were misted over with cataracts, and his hands shook as he signed the consent form. He told me he had been a street kid in New York City. When I asked how he ended up living on the streets, he leaned in close, fixed me with his opaque eyes, and told me to stop making assumptions. He had not lived on the streets since he was a child, but he had been working a well-paid job changing bulbs on the top of radio tower until he got leukemia. It was not the only time John would correct me during our conversation.

After more than an hour, John stood up and steadied himself against the wall. He needed some fresh air. I stopped the tape recorder and stepped outside with him into the early morning light. A summer storm had passed through the night before, leaving everything clean and wet. He asked what I was going to write about. I told him it was for the newsletter, and the shelter wanted a story about how they helped him. He said I should write something more interesting. And with the tape recorder off, he began to tell me a story. On the last day of high school, instead of going to the prom, he and his
friends went to a French restaurant, where a man played softly on the piano and the walls were made of fish tanks. It was the first time he had seen kissing fish. He sat there all night, sipping fancy drinks and watching the fish kiss each other. As John told me this story, he smiled for the first time that morning. He died a week later, and I never ended up sending his story to my supervisor.

I wanted to write about the shelter, but John wanted to tell the story of the kissing fish. I assumed he had been on the streets his whole life, but he called me out for making assumptions. His life was not defined by homelessness. He was not a homeless person—he was a man, rich with memory and spirit too big for any story about a shelter. The experience reminded me of representing tenants and pretending their lives were defined by eviction. Instead, John taught me to look for the places where people resist me, to hone in my desire to control, and to let a story unfold. In addition to highlighting their own subjectivity, researchers must be open to being corrected by research participants.

In Fresno, I got called out repeatedly for using the category of homelessness. Homelessness is often not a useful category. John had almost nothing in common with the panhandler I knew in Oakland or the man who lived in my parent’s garage. Yet I uncritically accepted “homelessness” as a blanket category to describe their lives. In Fresno, people often told me they were not homeless, that their tents were their homes or that homeless people are not a singular group. I ultimately integrated these insights into my analysis, and in Chapter Three I argue against the uncritical use of the word homelessness. In this regard, research participants were my most influential guides and expanded my theoretical compass beyond the narrow and elite confines of academia. Despite this, my research project began with the assumption that
homelessness is a coherent category, and I have still not found a way to write about encampments without “homelessness” as a framing concept. This trouble is not one I have been able to successfully address, other than to engage “homelessness” as a category that captures the social processes and ideologies imposed on those who are excluded from the housing market.

Finally, in my interviews of homeless Fresnans, people often displayed a lack of interest in talking about politics and preferred to speak to me about the intimate details of their lives. Although I generally followed a rigid script in my interviews of officials, in conversations with homeless people, I rarely stuck to a script and interviews usually morphed into a series of stories. Many people told me about their fathers, children, and failed relationships. Many people cried during interviews. Many people were completely uninterested in politics, shelters, and evictions. Their voices, and their opposition to my insistence on a political story, guided the direction of this entire project. Slowly, it became a project more about intimacy, emotion, home, and difference, and less a story about powerful institutions. Slowly, I began to envision homeless resistance as not just a political economic project, but an intimate one, and a struggle for emotional recognition and respect.

Conclusion

As a middle-class white woman interviewing the homeless and observing homeless politics in Fresno, I inevitably projected myself onto this analysis. My own stigmas and emotions toward the homeless resulted in an often romanticized vision of homeless encampments in Fresno, a strange desire to hide my outsider status, and a political denial of homeless mental illness and addiction. Similarly, my political
opposition to evictions placed me squarely in the position of an outsider amongst Fresno officials, a position that I often sought to conceal not to bias participants’ responses. I often sought to conceal my outsider status by “cross-dressing” in different venues and amongst different groups. Yet this reflection does not change the fact that my own biases are heavily implicated in this research. Perhaps the experiences in Fresno that most redeemed my analysis were the moments when participants forced me to rethink my own assumptions. By repeatedly objecting to the word “homelessness” and to my overemphasis on political life in Fresno, participants forced me to rethink my use of blunt categories and nuance my understanding of political struggle. This work would have been much more superficial without their persistent guidance and willingness to counter my approach.
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