

# Picturing homelessness

A glossary of perceptions

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## Keywords

homelessness, photography, perception, research, creativity

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These photo essays speak to the conditions of homelessness in several urban settings in North America in rich, imaginative ways. Through intricate mosaics of photographs and text, the four essays convey singular aspects of living on the streets, in single-room-occupancy hotels (SROs), and in makeshift camps. They are embedded with a complex array of ideas and perspectives, which might be best attended to through teasing out certain key concepts and orientations – articulating a glossary of perceptions, as it were.

## Creativity

The photographs in each of the four photo essays, along with their accompanying narratives, powerfully illustrate the creative dimensions of those living ‘in the rough’ or in shelters and SROs. ‘We don’t have a lot of flowers where I live so we painted some on the wall’, says Randy of the photograph he took of the Downtown Eastside SRO where he resided. Those imagined flowers, painted in vibrant colors, stand a few feet away from a bunch of green flowers set within a pot, near a picnic table. This play between the virtual and the actual, the phantasmic and the tangible, speaks to the ways in which people shape their surroundings and create a sense of a home-like structure in places that they cannot fully name as their

homes in any lasting or collective sense: 'home-like' is better than no home at all. An element of poiesis, of generative fashioning (Desjarlais 2012, 2016), courses through the appearance of many of these photographs. Pieces of cardboard become a staircase. A tent or tree-fort structure serves as a house. Artificial flowers are yet flowers. The people implied in the images work and rework the conditions of their lives. They seek out resources, fashion their surroundings, and act in generative ways in their lives. These imaginative, willful efforts are a far cry from the idea that homeless people come to a 'down and out' stance of utter abjection, passivity, and helplessness.

## Evidence

The photographs and the accompanying commentaries serve as evidence of the implications and consequences of poverty, despondency, and homelessness. Each image acts to evince certain features of the lives being considered, in quite tangible or altogether mysterious ways, as with a teddy bear found in one wooded encampment, or with the pillow whose embroidered lettering begins with the words, 'A Mom – Shelters you when things are bad . . .' Meanwhile, certain images provide clues to a former or current encampment, hidden in the density of leaves or woods. Other signs might indicate an outsider's trespass into a settler's camp. From the perspective of policing protocols established by the state, evidence can also be construed in the legal sense, as concrete indications of wrongdoing. The semiotic technologies of photography and evidence go hand in hand, in charged, crosscutting ways.

## Document

The need or desire to document can be a powerful one. In his photo essay 'Invisible Places', Justin Langille candidly writes of how he felt he had to document the historic levels of chronic poverty he had witnessed as a social services worker and a photographer – 'to bear witness', in other words. As he surveyed vacated sites along the Thames River in London, Ontario, he kept the ethics of documentation in mind: 'By documenting the spaces and structures that people had left behind, rather than the faces or bodies of people themselves, I was able to avoid reproducing some of the most familiar and clichéd images of urban poverty and tropes of objectification'. The other essays similarly imply efforts to document, to witness, and 'to explore visually', as Travis Hedwig and Rebecca Barker put it in their essay. Words and images serve as a means to document certain aspects of the world. The anthropological imperative is to document the lives of others. Any efforts at documentation always carry a politics, and thus an ethics. What are the best, most effective ways to document the lives of people considered homeless? What forms of documentation (statistical, medical, governmental, legal, visual, ethnographic) do more harm than good?

## Habitation

Near to a sink in a busy room, a flower is set within a collection of personal possessions – ‘in the middle of all this hoarding, a bit of hope, a flower’, observes Jenny, about a photograph included in Surita Parashar’s photo essay. In the abandoned camps that Hedwig and Barker visited in Anchorage, Alaska, they similarly found ‘evidence of home making’, such as the artificial potted flowers they saw hanging at the opening of one tent. As Hedwig and Barker note, their photographic images demonstrate ‘some of the ways in which the individuals who inhabit camps across the city actively construct their worlds and create a sense of home and place’. In all of the photo essays, the implied subjects of the photographs cultivate the spaces they inhabit in order to establish a sense of being ‘at home’. These creative, shape-shifting endeavors suggest the need that perhaps all people have: to establish a sense of dwelling, to ‘carve out spaces’, or to inhabit a structured enclosure within which one can sleep at night or seek a sense of comfort, safety, and privacy. Being ‘at home’ entails more than just a material structure that protects a resident from the elements, however. As Parashar notes, the images in her photo essay (and in the other three essays in this collection, I might add) convey that a sense of being ‘at home’ is also tied to ‘social connection, routine, personal dignity, pride, and sense of belonging’. Being at home implies a structure of significance, connection, placement, purpose. The photographs are themselves encampments of a particular sort, for they pull together forms and create the sense of a home for an image or an assemblage of images.

## Image

One way to situate the four essays is to think of them as part of an emerging focus in the social sciences and the humanities more generally on images – a concern for ‘image as method’. To draw from the abstract for a recent symposium titled by that phrase:

While recent years have seen an opening up within anthropology of the limits and potentialities of ethnographic description, with increasing use being made of photographic and filmic images in particular, considerably less attention has been paid to the question of whether images, broadly conceived, might present not just a supplementary means of conveying ethnographic insights, but a radically different way of imagining and arriving at them. What would an imagistic – as opposed to a more conventionally discursive or didactic – anthropological mode of knowing

necessitate? What forms might this take, and what kinds of worlds – of sensation and memory, perception and experience – might it open onto?<sup>1</sup>

Recent work in anthropology has sought to set ethnography on a terrain wherein empiricism, storytelling, fiction, autobiography, dream, even hallucination blur uneasily into one another. As anthropologist Lisa Stevenson (2014, 11, 14) puts it, what gives images their distinctive power is their ability to ‘express without formulating’ – their tendency, in other words, to ‘drag the world along with them’. The four photo essays here invoke images that express without formulating. They drag along thoughts and possibilities with them, often in spectral ways. W. J. T. Mitchell (2015) writes that an image ‘may be thought of as an immaterial entity, a ghostly, phantasmatic appearance that comes to light or comes to life (which may be the same thing) in a material support’. The photographic images entail ghostly, phantasmic appearances of the lives of homeless individuals, as do the materials depicted in the photographs. The material supports of the lives nearly at hand are evident in the photos, while the users of those materials remain unseen. This is image as method, matter, trace, phantasm.

## Language

Each word that is associated with the imagery of homelessness counts for a lot. Down and out. Disordered. Unsafe. Unwanted. Unkempt. Violent. Dangerous. Messed up. Hobo. Loner. Vagabond. Junky. Drug user. Drunkard. Alcoholic. Crazy. Mentally ill. Schizophrenic. Destitute. Impoverished. Helpless. Chronic inebriates. At risk. Vulnerable. Survivor. Heroic. Street youth. Street smarts. The words that a person or institution uses, be it through the course of everyday speech or thought, or within the prose of newspapers or academic discourse, gives form to certain perspectives and understandings. They affect lives. They set people apart from others. To write ethnographically about homelessness is to tread a charged field of meanings and implications, wherein each word is fraught with significance and a potential violence of representation. An author needs to find the right words, and invoke the right tone, when portraying conditions of poverty, displacement, and homelessness. The same responsibility for representation holds for visual images of the homeless and homelessness. The authors of the photo essays manage this responsibility in commendable ways. It’s clear that they are highly attentive to the impact that certain words and images can have. They go about the work of representation in careful, politically aware

1 ‘Image as Method’, a symposium at The Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University in May 2016 (<http://heymancenter.org/events/the-society-of-fellows-in-the-humanities-presents-image-as-method/>). The language quoted is drawn from the abstract for this symposium, written by Brian Goldstone and Robert Desjarlais. See also Romero 2015.

terms. Indeed, there is a tentativeness to the language and images involved, apparently out of caution for harming anyone's life through indelicate words or images. There is lasting value in a poetics of restraint.

## Materiality

There is a steadfast materiality to being homeless, be it the hard facts that come with camping out in an urban woods, sleeping on a cot in a shelter, or sharing a grungy bathroom in a SRO. In touching on the ontology of homelessness, as it were, the photo essays as a whole keenly show the material conditions that underlie the phenomenal conditions of living without a permanent residence. It may be that the fact that so few actual human bodies are shown in the photographs (the human figure being a perennial subject of photography since its inception in the nineteenth century) helps to underscore the material, existential conditions at work in the lives of those unseen bodies. The gritty sheen of particular material elements are evident in many of the images: cardboard, injection drug use gear, a lawn chair, blanket, towel, wire casings, fabrics, tent canopies, tree limbs, clothes, and clothes hangers. These material forces convey certain elements of homelessness, as do the images more generally. They range from the 'materiality of the ruin' that David Nelson and his co-authors consider through their work with StreetLife Communities in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – threadbare shoes, a striped shirt, teddy bear in leaves – to the necessary components of a make-shift domicile – the matter of a roof, bedding. As with the photographic images, the materials paradoxically hold an acute sense of absence: they point to the unseen users of the materials at hand, who might have been there, in that place, wielding those materials, just that morning or through the previous summer. The concrete materiality graphically apparent in the photographs is thus in play with a sense of the immaterial, ghostly aura of actions that once occurred in a particular place. Each settled place is a haunt of presence and absence.

## Narrative

So many narratives swirl about the idea and particular histories of homelessness. The word 'homeless' itself carries a tacit narrative, often mythic in form. These narratives come into play, implicitly or overtly, whenever one sees someone panhandling on a street or sleeping under a highway overpass. They can also inform how a so-called homeless person might relate to, and makes sense of, his or her life – as when the Downtown Eastside residents that Parashar writes of internalize the 'dominant narratives about SROs and their inhabitants'. Politically forceful cultural narratives about homeless people, which commonly circulate in political discourses and media representations, tend to singularize the experience of homelessness, and either create a sensational portrait of hard luck and misery or blame the victim of poverty and marginalization. The authors of the photo essays rightly note the need

to counter the ubiquity of such narratives by providing alternatives. Much the same holds for people considered homeless. In Parashar's photo essay, Dan, one of the men asked to take photographs of his life, created a narrative out of a set of documents related to the recent course of his life. These items, categorized in a before-and-after mode of 'unstable' and 'stable', included used cigarette butts, bus tickets, unemployment cheques and actual paycheques, and a virtual scale to signify key changes in his life related to his moving into more stable housing. These graphic markers of a life help to establish a narrative of Dan's own making, through a veritable *bio-graphy* – as does his photograph, in itself. What biographies would those living on the street or woods or residing in a shelter or SRO give to their lives? What words would they use? What terms would be included in their own glossaries of perception? How might we expand the vocabularies of homelessness? The photographs taken by people living with HIV in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, conveyed in Parashar's essay, suggest some new vocabularies for living on the margins. 'Where do I go if I can't be here?' asks Valerie in her photograph of, apparently, a street-side residence being taken down under the authority of the police. 'This is not social housing', remarks Dan, cuttingly, in his photograph of a shopping cart affixed with that statement. A new vocabulary can counter, or altogether negate, older, more conventional terms.

## Objectification

To 'objectify' can mean: to express (something abstract) in a concrete form, to present or regard as an object, or to degrade to the status of a mere object. Several of the authors invoke the term 'objectification' in a cautionary way, justifiably noting how certain images can contribute to narrow, negative representations of people considered homeless. These images can arrive in the form of statistics, verbal or written language, or visual media. It's apparent that this concern for the dangers of objectification is one of the main reasons that almost all of the photographs in the four photo essays do not include portrayals of human figures. Photographs of homeless bodies or faces carry too great a risk, it seems, for portraying the subjects involved in potentially sensationalistic, negative, or objectifying terms. And yet it could be asked how far this restraint should go. Should any and all images that picture the physical figures of homeless people be considered problematic? It's clear that certain images, such as those that show drug use or bodily wounds, risk sensational portraiture. Other scenes, of begging or of sleeping on cardboard mattresses near a bank ATM, would repeat stereotypic tropes of homelessness. And yet: could quiet, carefully rendered, nonsensational portraits of homeless individuals or families serve to convey the lives at hand in respectful ways – in terms, that is, that sustain the dignity and complex humanity of those portrayed?

## Optics

Optics, defined specifically, is the science that studies light and the way light affects and is affected by other forces. In a more metaphorical sense, the term optics can relate to the way a person or a collective perceives a certain situation. In the four essays, each of the photographs entails a particular ‘optics’ toward its subject matter. The lens of the camera, like the lens of an eye, influences what we see and do not see. In Parashar’s essay, the photographs and commentary by Randy, who tries to contend with the untamed disorder and crafted order in his SRO room, speak well to the vectors of vision. ‘You don’t see that’, Randy explained of his clothes neatly arranged in the closets in the room. ‘You don’t see that part’. He then turned to the photograph of the soiled sink, under which live some mice, and said, ‘You just see this shit that is there – and it’s never going to go away’. The intractable presence of the scat that never goes away relates to something noted by theorists of photography: that photographs retain, through the indexical means of their *photo-graphs*, sheer particles noticed by the camera and seared into a photographic negative. The photographs in the essays carry this intractable, incidental artifact of the work of photography. Elements are conveyed within the frame of a photograph – the can of Raid insecticide, half turned toward another can; the foam around the pipes by the sink; the dirt on a damp blanket. Each photograph carries a particular optics, what is seen, how it is seen, what goes unseen. A photographer embodies a particular optics of perception. Immanuel Levinas (1969, 23) once wrote that ‘ethics is an optics’. Any optics, in turn, entails an ethics.

## Photo essay

A photo essay, most often, is an essay or short article consisting of text and numerous photographs. Each of the essays in this collection fits this criterion, for each consists of an intricate weaving of image and text. The words that border and complement the photographic images work well all around. Images alone would not be sufficient. Indeed, presenting photographs alone, without any interpretive or explanatory frame, might lend a certain cast to the presentations, in which the lives of those under consideration would take on a mysterious, sensationalistic aura of plight and difference. The texts help a reader to make sense of the contexts in which the photographs were taken, as well the authors’ own positionings in relation to their subjects (see Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). As the four photo essays stand now, a consistent, reflective thought is seeded into the images. This thought has the effect of making the images more reflective and more complex in nature than if they stood on their own.

## Tactility

Tactility can be defined as: the capability of being felt or touch, or responsiveness to stimulation of the sense of touch. Such a term immediately comes to mind in viewing the photographs in each of the four essays. A mind's eye reaches out and touches the striped shirt, torn and soiled. Fingers wish to touch the damp faux fur of a child's discarded teddy bear. Flattened cardboard, tent canopies, wire casings, the snow on the crest of shirts hung from the wintry branch of a tree, a shopping cart crammed with possessions: each material image calls out for a tactile, haptic engagement. Homelessness is so often a tactile affair – the sensations, sights, and sounds of living on a street or in a provisional residence can be nearly overwhelming (see Desjarlais 1997). They constitute the conditions of a life. The photographs well convey the tactility of being homeless.

## Voice

The photographic and textual 'voice' apparent in each of the photo essays, respectively, works in relation, tacitly or overtly, to voices related to the subjects of the photographs. Those voices either take on a direct language, or they hover about the images and texts in an apparitional form, as when a man called Richard tells Langille that he does not want to be photographed. In the essay by Parashar, one of the main methods of her approach entails 'Photovoice methods', in which community researchers were trained to take photographs of their homes and neighbourhoods using disposable cameras. This method offers an uncommon optics into the lifeworlds of those taking the photographs. 'In need of Mercy – Valerie'; 'The bathroom shared by seventy residents – Lora'; 'This is where I had to wash my hands and dishes – Valerie'; photos and accompanying captions such as these imply a precise visual voice remarking on the lives involved, beyond an outside researcher's observations. Then again, these voices are re-articulated by the research scientist who has organized the materials within the larger frame and discourse of the essay. In all, the array of voices in all of the essays, be they image-based or conveyed through language, speaks to the charged and quixotic challenges involved when it comes to picturing homelessness.

## About the author

Robert Desjarlais is an anthropologist who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College. Publications of his include *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists* (University of California Press, 2003), and *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). He is currently working on a research and writing project that attends to themes of photography, memory, perception, and the politics of surveillance and violence in Europe.



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