

A STONE IN THE BROOK:
AESTHETICS OF HOME IN THE NARRATIVES, MEMORY, AND ARTS OF
HOMELESS PERSONS FROM A SOUTHERN SHELTER COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

KIRANDEEP SINGH SIRAH: A Stone in the Brook:
Aesthetics of Home in the Narratives, Memory, and Arts of Homeless
Persons from a Southern Shelter Community
(Under the direction of Dr. Glenn Hinson)

The Inter-Faith Council (IFC), the organization that runs the emergency homeless shelter for men in Chapel Hill, this year marks its golden anniversary. This important anniversary offers the organization an opportunity to reflect on its role in providing emergency shelter for homeless persons. This thesis explores the diverse aesthetic dimensions of home and the ways residents of the shelter establish a sense of place, identity, belonging, and community, and examines how memories, arts, and narratives can help us to better understand how home is crafted in the mind, through imagination, and through physical manifestations in and around the shelter. This work also offers recommendations for how men from this shelter, its supporters, and the wider community might go further in fostering a sense of home as IFC begins to build a new emergency men's homeless shelter in Chapel Hill. Although focused on specific narratives of residents of one shelter community in the South, the project aims to reverse the invisibility of homeless persons by connecting notions of home to the wider community of displaced persons throughout an ever-changing world.

DEDICATION

For my friend Johnny Payne

and for all the people of the world who live life beyond labels.

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A Stone in the Brook

The shelter is like a stone in the brook that weighs water all around it; it's enough for someone to step on the brook and pass carefully without falling in.

—John, a resident of the Chapel Hill Men's Shelter

Home

Home is where you go when the day never seems to end—
running the hill with games of hide-and-go-seek,
riding your bike until the street lights come on,
walking in the house and get the wind of the chicken,
looking at the butter running down on the cornbread,
the greens that you have to eat
before you can get the ice cream.

Then comes the bath, and hearing your mother say,
“Make sure you clean behind your ears.”

Home is where you become you—
the lessons of life,
saying “thank you” and “please”—
where you feel love that no one can take away.

Yes, you can say home is where your heart is.

It is not just a house.

It is what goes on in the house that makes it home.

You can even say home is love.

— Dennis, a Talking Sidewalks workshop participant

Introduction

Home to me is getting to know the real me and from the heart.

— Gary, a Talking Sidewalks workshop participant

I first met Johnny sitting on a bench beside a Carrboro market that I often frequent. Johnny is an elderly man who was staying at Chapel Hill's men's homeless shelter, a community I have steadily come to know through my participatory research over the past year. While many conversations with people that I meet in this affluent, liberal academic community tend to remain on a surface level, my conversation with Johnny developed rapidly, based on honest cultural exchanges that we seemed to share. After our first meeting, I met with Johnny regularly at the shelter, where we would sit outside, smoke cigarettes, and talk about the world around us. We talked about our personal circumstances and struggles. One day, I invited Johnny to join me for lunch, as I was interested in asking him about his ideas of home and the experience of home among those who found themselves caught in homelessness.

I began our conversation by asking questions about shelter life and how Johnny crafted a sense of home for himself as a shelter resident. Looking back at our conversations, I now realize that I was trying to elicit a response that matched *my* ideas of home, one that pointed to the physical ways in which he

crafted a home in the spaces that he used, slept in, and lived. However, Johnny kept telling me about other aspects of his life. He'd speak about his knee disability, his desire to move away from Chapel Hill and to a different community, and his preference for distancing himself from the shelter and its residents. Johnny told me about his past and about the era he grew up in. He spoke about the food he cooked and the family and friends he once had, about his life in the past and the life he wanted for his future. As Johnny spoke, it seemed that he was attempting to distance himself from the shelter; his speech seemed to become more natural, even exuberant. He would share funny moments. One day, after a more formal interview, I turned off my recorder and we sat on a bench to smoke. He started to tell me how the trees nearby reminded him of a place up in the Black Mountains, a mountain range in Yancey and Buncombe counties. Through these shared moments and through Johnny's stories about the people and places that he had connected to in his life, I started to think more about the ways Johnny imagined, crafted, and revealed what home really meant for him. It was in one of these conversations that he called me his only friend.

What Johnny was doing was, in fact, answering my questions, but in his own unique way. In so doing, he began to challenge, unpack, and broaden my own understanding of home. Johnny spoke about a feeling of groundedness that was revealed through remembrance and memories: "I never thought I'd be a baker, making 300,000 cookies and cobblers, but I was really good at it"; "I was well liked"; "I really enjoy playing golf"; "It would be beautiful, the colors changing; we could see the mountains up there. It's just beautiful in the summer time"; "I

was real good up there.” In statements like these, Johnny was talking about home not solely as a physical place, but as a feeling of comfort and a place of imagination.

When I started to awaken to these ideas, I began to listen more attentively to Johnny, allowing myself to take fuller notice of the ways these conversations were expanding my own concepts of home. From that point, deeper intangible notions of home started to resonate with me, with my own story, and with this ethnographic enquiry. I began to see beyond my preconceptions, and became more attuned to new ideas about the non-physical ways in which home is made. Johnny's stories seemed to offer a way for him to talk through and make sense of his personal challenges, and perhaps counter the internalized stigma of homelessness. It became evident that these conversations were moving beyond just a dialogic experience for both of us. They became a way to help bring to the fore, and into the expressive realm of conversation, a construction of possible identities. In these conversations, new and possible life directions were beginning to unfold.

One day Johnny told me “*Until I get out of the shelter, I will not be comfortable—until I can get a place and start drawing money. Wherever I end up, I want to go back to Black Mountain.*” On Thanksgiving Day, I went to find Johnny at the shelter to share in a Thanksgiving meal with him. Once there, I heard from other men that he had now left the shelter. Someone said that he had gone back up to the mountains. Having no way of contacting Johnny, I felt a sense of

personal loss, and wished I had come to see him sooner. As his friend, I can only hope that he has now found a sense of home.

In this thesis I look at issues of home, identity, and place. I explore how homeless persons craft and develop notions of home by transforming their physical reality, crafting physical incarnations of home in and outside the shelter and around the liminal spaces and peripheral places of comfort. I also explore how home is realized through performativity, and how narratives provide an expressive realm through which men at the shelter form a self and group identity, negotiate survival and resistance strategies, and develop a sense of home.

Methodology and Purpose

The conversations I had with Johnny and other men at the Inter-faith Council (IFC) homeless men's emergency shelter not only revealed new aesthetic dimensions about the notion of home, but also helped me to gain a deeper understanding of my responsibilities as a folklorist ethnographer. These interactions started to challenge my preconceptions about the politics of folklore; I began to understand that folklore is not so much a tangible facet of our lives, used in different guises that represent who we are, but is rather whatever expressive realms individuals and communities infuse with cultural meaning and through which they give voice to the issues central to their lives and their identities, especially pertaining to home. As such, my own definitions of folklore moved from something I saw as rather static to something more emergent, ever changing, and dynamic, something that requires delicate and careful negotiation in enquiry and engagement in order not to do harm or create disruption in

people's lives. This idea leads me to Patricia Sawin's account of her conversations with Bessie Eldreth. Sawin's book *Listening for a Life*, which Sawin describes as a "dialogic ethnography," explores stories and how people use them to construct an identity and a potential new life direction.¹ Johnny would often repeat his stories to me, as if to suggest the dialogical construction of a personal identity and the working out of his potential choices and life direction. Had our conversational exchanges influenced Johnny's decision to leave the shelter and return to the Black Mountains? This possibility became important as I continued to spend time initiating and participating in conversations with other men at the shelter. This dialogue made me think about the role of conversations, the way I went about this project, and what purpose it served.

A dichotomy exists between notions of home and homelessness. Such notions become complex and intangible concepts revealed through diverse aesthetic life dimensions. On the one hand, the powerful narratives relating to the stigma of homelessness are ever present for men who are forced to carry the societal label of homelessness. On the other hand, ideas pertaining to aesthetics of home, memories of home, and a homeless person's desire to establish himself in a state of security and to form solidarity with others are evident in the ways the men skillfully navigate through day-to-day challenges. Men I have met seemed to

¹ Patricia Sawin, *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004).

want to find ways to craft a sense of belonging, community, and recognition, and to develop a verbal articulation to help them navigate this difficult path.

Through my interactions with men at Chapel Hill's homeless men's shelter, I have discovered how ethnography itself can become a homeless story, a story without a home. Ethnography, for me, is venturing into the unknown, taking on the challenge of becoming accepted and recognized, a process of finding place, and therefore one that requires a kind of homelessness on the part of the ethnographer. This journey is especially relevant for me as a non-resident alien and an outsider who, in a sense, also struggles to call where I live "home." I realize that Johnny's story, and for that matter many of the other stories of men I have met at the shelter, are not entirely unlike my own, and are not entirely unlike the stories of most other people I meet—including homeless people and people with homes, students and professors alike. The men I met at the shelter told me how they just want to be accepted, to be understood, to feel valued, safe, and happy; I share similar aspirations. I see my ethnographic journey as a means to earn my validation with those whom I engage. In that sense, I also am in search of home.²

Men I have met describe homelessness as being the state arrived at "when someone gives up." These men do not want to give up. Instead, for them, the crafting of home becomes about survival, resistance, a search for belonging,

² Throughout this thesis I offer (in italics) personal reflections on my role as ethnographer and the ways my conversations with my consultants remind me of my own past as it pertains to notions of home.

and a way to cope with and transcend the mundane. Moreover, it is to live life with fullness and meaning. The pursuit of these ends suggests to me that “homelessness” and the label of “homeless persons” are misnomers.

My conversations with Johnny made me realize that if I am to do justice to the stories that men from this shelter community tell me, I must broaden the ways I look at them in order to understand what they have to say about homelessness, the search for home, notions of home, and self-discovery. Thinking about how notions of home may vary widely among individuals in a single community labeled as homeless, I started to think about ways my own ethnographic enquiry might actually be useful in building community, as well as ways I might inadvertently do divisive harm.

In his article “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore,” Richard Bauman argues that folklore “may be as much an instrument of conflict as a mechanism of social solidarity.”³ Bauman posits that folklore may be used for more than one function: it can serve to either affirm or disrupt a community. Bauman’s move from “special groups” to “special relationships” resonates with me in his assertion that “folklore is a function of shared identity.” Therefore I am more than just a participant observer; instead, I am an integral factor in this shared cultural experience and exchange, where my own special relationship with men in the community has become a key component of this ethnographic study. For me, the project is as much about the process, the shared moments of

³ Richard Bauman, “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore” *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 38.

interaction and conversation, as it is about what I might have produced, such as this Folklore master's thesis, by the time I graduate and move away from Chapel Hill, and the project formally ends.

I have been engaged with this community for over a year now, and I sense that my role has shifted and changed into one with a greater responsibility to act in support of and speak out for the men and this community. While my own understanding of home has broadened through my interactions with men at the shelter, at the same time, I have become more aware of the subtle and overt ways the men express their identities, as well as the ways the men are perceived, labeled, and imagined across the society of Chapel Hill, a place that some of these men claim as home.

In collecting stories, I have sought to meet men in their spaces—in places where they want to meet. However, I have also suggested new places, such as cafes, restaurants, bars, and museums, in order to share in new experiences, including experiences of food, art, digital photography and spoken- and written-word poetry. In these shared spaces, I have often offered my own stories in order to engage in two-way conversational exchange and to build positive relationships with the shelter's men. I have observed and participated in conversations in the shelter in English and Spanish; with documented and undocumented persons; with African American, European American, Latin American, and Caribbean men; with church affiliated persons, chef volunteers, and veterans of the American war in Vietnam; with recent returnees from US foreign wars, ex-military service men, and younger residents who have now left the shelter to join the military. The men

I have met represent a diverse cross-section of previous professions and skill sets. Some of the men are skilled manual contract workers; some are from working-class and middle-class backgrounds; some have been employed and others have been self-employed. Many of the men I met with repeatedly—those who became more formal consultants to this project, such as Johnny, J.F., and Gary—are around 55 to 60 years of age.⁴ I have also spoken to younger men in their early and mid-twenties and thirties. I have withheld the names and stories of some of the men in this project in order to respect their privacy. Some men preferred not to be included out of personal choice. In this thesis I also have withheld the names of individuals in cases when I was unable to determine whether the individual was aware of how I would use the material.

Now that I have been working at the shelter for over a year, I have been engaging in shelter life longer than many of the men who reside there. I have gained access into the men's lives through their stories—in some cases perhaps more access than the social workers at the shelter, who have demanding caseloads. Recently, the director of the Inter-Faith Council (the organization that runs the Chapel Hill shelters), whom I met just over a year ago, invited me in to meet with him and the IFC board president, to share what I had learnt over the

⁴ For the most part I have used first names, first and last initials, and, in some cases, pseudonyms to refer to consultants in this thesis. I have done this out of respect for personal privacy and in order not to bring too much direct attention to specific individuals unless I could be certain that that was what they wanted. In my conversations with many of the men I met, interaction was based on first names only, and remained so through our meetings. Therefore, it felt only right to remain as close as I could to these original conversations. In many cases I refer to "men I have met" in order to offer a level of anonymity, as some of these men remain members of this community.

year with them. In this meeting, I felt they both became the ethnographers and I the storyteller, offering vignettes and stories to give a portrait of the men's lives, and attempting to tell the truth as I saw it. This meeting is one example of how, in my role as folklorist ethnographer, issues of representation have become increasingly important. In thinking about how ethnographers interpret the fluid, flexible, complex social bases of folklore, I have begun to see this thesis project as an opportunity to advance social justice folklore, to challenge inequality and promote the understanding of folklore in community development. My claim is not that society should take pity on the homeless, but rather that homeless persons offer unique ways to think about notions of home, displacement, and diversity. After all, many of us are in our own states of homelessness, constantly searching for recognition, for a sense of community, for belonging, love, and certain types of relationships with others; in other words, we are in search of a sense of home. Looking more closely at the lives of people affected by homelessness offers the opportunity for all of us to learn how we might establish a sense of home for ourselves in the communities we are or would like to be part of.

My role as folklorist ethnographer has been to help demystify homelessness and discover approaches for challenging the societal stigma attached to homeless persons. I see folklore as a tool in conflict prevention and resolution and as a means to better understand and bring the voices of those who exist on the margins of society, invisible to many, to new audiences. At the same time, I wonder about how the individual experience of a homeless man in Chapel Hill relates to the collective experience of oppressed populations all over

the world. Aren't Syrian refugees and the groups who fought for voice and freedom during the Arab Spring looking for "home" within their own countries and societies?

In this project I have pursued and recorded many conversations both inside and outside of the shelter community. These include conversations with members of the Chapel Hill Town Council, the police, and business, arts, and academic agencies in the wider community. Thus, I broadened my scope of consultants to include everyone with an opinion, stake, or viewpoint on issues pertaining to homelessness. This project has become an example of politically engaged ethnography in which folklore serves as a tool for communicating, understanding, and encouraging discourse and dialogue that will tackle inequalities.

In chapter 1 of my thesis, I offer auto-ethnographic descriptions of the shelter, and explore notions of home as revealed through conversations with my consultants and members of the broad community connected to the shelter community. Although I have sought and been offered some level of insider access to the life and workings of this community, much of the conversation-based fieldwork has taken place not within the shelter, but around and away from it. The spaces in which interactions and conversations unfolded became places that informed the directions of this thesis. Many of these conversations took place in one-on-one meetings with men I met at the shelter; others happened in group conversations through a weekly creative writing and discussion workshop called Talking Sidewalks, which I often lead.

Chapter 2 discusses how the men that I met physically craft a sense of home through material means. The spaces in which this happens include liminal spaces in and around the peripheries of comfort, including personal dwellings and other spaces that men seek out for themselves.

In chapter 3, I discuss the narratives of shelter residents, grounding my analysis in theories of performance. I explore the way these narratives give rise to remembrance and storytelling, which are performative genres that form part of a person's construction of identity and *identity talk*. Shelter residents use such narratives to develop their notions of home, community, and solidarity with others, and, at the same time, to detach themselves from the shelter community. I also explore such performance elements as survival and resistance.

In chapter 4, my final chapter, I discuss the next stages in applying this research, specifically addressing and supporting the development of the new IFC emergency men's shelter currently slated to be built in the Chapel Hill area. Based on my thesis findings and discoveries, I offer recommendations, methodological tools, and ideas about how the physical and performative ways through which shelter residents claim a sense of home might be incorporated into the design and functions of IFC's new emergency men's shelter. I suggest opportunities for IFC to broaden its support of shelter residents as they establish routes for feelings of home-ness and community belonging, both as part of the shelter community itself and more broadly within the wider community. I hope this chapter also has interdisciplinary relevance for those in the international and community development arenas working to support vulnerable people in a

changing and challenging world, where different factors—including climate change, lack of natural resources, gentrification, and capitalist expansions—could contribute to an increase in the number of homeless persons.

Chapter 1: The Shelter, Shelter Life, and Notions of Home

Chapel Hill's Homeless Men's Shelter is situated in a large red brick building on the corner of Rosemary Street and South Columbia. Positioned like an enclave amongst an affluent UNC community, the shelter is only a stone's throw away from the town's major intersection, at Columbia and Franklin Street. Like the shelter building itself, other residential and commercial facilities exist on and around Franklin Street, which is Chapel Hill's main commercial artery; they include art galleries, churches, barbershops, parking garages, restaurants, bars, a museum, and fraternity and sorority houses for UNC undergraduate students. The shelter thus has a fairly visible presence as part of the downtown district of Chapel Hill.

Most people who have lived in Chapel Hill for a while know the shelter's location, and most of Chapel Hill's non-shelter residents are aware of homeless persons' presence in Chapel Hill as they interact with, pass by, or observe men from the shelter using Chapel Hill's free downtown bus service or frequenting the stores and facilities on Franklin Street. For a number of years, the university newspaper and the mainstream media have reported on controversial plans to move the current location of the shelter to a new, purposefully built facility and location along Martin Luther King Boulevard. There have been differing views about this move, with people in favor and people opposed. But one thing is

certain: as IFC marks its 50th year this year and with plans now afoot to build a new shelter to open in 2014, the subject of a new shelter, and of the homeless community, have become topics of public discourse in every subset of Chapel Hill's multifaceted population, including those who are long-term, temporary, and transient residents of the town.

The building now in use was not originally built as a homeless shelter. It served as a fire station and a prison before it became an emergency men's homeless shelter. One young shelter resident pointed out a freemason architectural feature to me, a sun sign in one of the windows of the building. Twenty-six years ago, the building was designated as a temporary shelter for homeless men. Today, it continues to serve this function, and now includes a community kitchen and canteen, offices, food storage facilities, sites for social services and medical support, and various adaptive sleeping and communal spaces. Immediately surrounding the building and contained within IFC grounds are parking spaces for staff and volunteers. One shelter resident said he also parked his car in one of the spaces. The site also includes a bike rack, an open top garbage dumpster, trash bins, a wooden bench, a ramp that leads to a basement entrance, and two brick buttress stair entrances to the building. One staircase leads to a lockable door, which leads to a corridor on the main floor. The other staircase leads to a lockable door that opens up to the canteen area. Grassy areas exist in the corner of these peripheral concrete grounds, and include a few trees.

One night I took a close-up photograph of the shelter's front façade. When I showed this photo to friends, we agreed that the building looks a suburban manor house. Without knowing, it would be hard to guess that this building serves as a homeless shelter.

At around 6 a.m., men who live at the shelter gather in the TV lounge, line up inside, or wait outside the shelter. Men who do not live in the shelter come and eat breakfast, and although they might just attend meals, they also form part of a joint communal experience with shelter residents. Although there are conversations amongst different men and opportunities to meet familiar people, conversations are minimal at breakfast compared to lunch or dinner. At breakfast time, the residents transform the downstairs areas, where men who are newer residents sleep, back into a canteen dining area. Men who have been in the shelter longer, who sleep upstairs, are expected to help with this transformation. Visitors walk into this open canteen and into a kitchen area that has a counter serving station. The canteen area is the public space where the idea of community plays out most visibly: in this space multiple users eat and join in conversation during meal times and again at night, after curfew, when they silently sit, sleep, and share space.

When I first go inside the building, I am shown around by the shelter's director. I pass a locked door displaying a "No Guns" sign. In the kitchen I notice that the food is more elaborate than I would have expected from a soup kitchen, and more colorful than the barley soups I remember from freezing cold Glasgow evenings back home, which homeless service users would either complain about

or say how it reminded them of their upbringings and the soups made by their grandmothers. Around fifteen people are sitting around, sporadically dispersed across the rectangular canteen room. There is a quiet sense of calm.

Inside this shelter, I notice the complexities of space. There are many pockets, corridors, and rooms in this tight, compact building. These “social locks” are where the politics of space play out. Who you are and what your status is determines how accessible each social lock becomes for you. I imagine that in such spaces, first-time visitors might feel unwelcome to wander through unaccompanied.

I enter the kitchen, as volunteer groups and men from the shelter collect and sort through leftover food donations from local sorority houses. Volunteers prepare meals, combining bought items with donations from local grocery stores. In order to go upstairs I need to pass a security room, which contains small TV screens where staff workers can observe different parts of the building and its periphery. A small corridor includes information notices and a small elevator. The elevator that goes up to the staff office and resident rooms can only function by use of a key, which is kept only by staff members. This restricted access enforces the idea of social locks even further for me, although it is not entirely unlike walking in or being invited as a guest into a traditional family-style home. The entrance-level floor is accessed via steps from the outside parking lot, and the entrance leads into a corridor where men line up for meals. The other entrance via the canteen tends to be used mainly by staff, volunteers, and residents who are working in the kitchen or are involved in daytime chores that

involve food and food delivery. At the bottom of the staircase is a concrete porch-like space, where we take breaks to sit on crates that serve as seats. We often sit in this space to converse, smoke, and sometimes drink tea. Here the daytime supervisor, Donna, often introduces me to different volunteers and to some of the shelter's men.

The main floor inside the shelter includes the community kitchen and canteen area, as well as the TV room and medical rooms. In the evenings, the canteen area gets converted into a sleeping space where some of the men sleep. Men who have been at the shelter for shorter periods of time use this downstairs space, while men who have been there longer have access to beds upstairs. The upstairs holds dorm rooms with bunk beds, the staff office area, small lockers, a small open-faced library, and communal bathrooms.

There is certainly a hierarchy of different shelter life experiences, from men who have an upstairs space to the newer residents who sleep downstairs. Upstairs, around 30 beds in dorm-like rooms are reserved for men who have already spent some time in the shelter. Some men I speak to have spent more than a year in this shelter, having slept downstairs when they first arrived before being given a bed in one of the upstairs dorms.

Shelter rules declare that all men need to wake up at the same time when the staff turn lights on. All residents must also partake in chores, observe curfews, refrain from drugs and alcohol, and bring no weapons onto the premises. Staff workers make sure that these rules are observed; men who break rules and are caught doing so are “marked up,” adding negative points to

their record. These points, in turn, can yield consequences that range from warnings by shelter staff to being banned from the shelter.⁵

Other men, as well as some women, come in just for meals. These are people who might have houses or other living spaces. Many Latino workers come in the mornings for food, but do not reside in the shelter.

The basement area provides storage space for canned food, mattresses, sheets, and blankets; it also includes showers. Men who sleep in the canteen space need to collect a mattress, blanket, and sheets from this area and make their beds each night. One of the rules is that all residents must take a shower before going to sleep. The one night I sleep at the shelter, this included me.

In general, the shelter has a very clinical feel, much like a hospital building or a prison cell. I say this as I have slept in both hospitals and prisons, and only once slept in this shelter, recently and as part of this study. When I first stepped inside this space, I thought to myself, “Can this really be a home for people that live here?”

Before I first stepped inside this space, I met with the IFC shelter’s director, who opened the door for me to conduct this study. He personally introduced me to the members of his staff, as well as to some members of the community who use, work, or reside in the building. Throughout this project, I have sought to remain loyal in my support for IFC in their work to support men

⁵ At a staff meeting I was invited to attend, the new shelter coordinator suggested that due to the disparities of this marking-up procedure, she wanted to offer a “clean slate” for men and staff who seemed to have issues with the marking-up procedure thus far.

through emergency shelter. However, I have found myself wanting to find a way for the shelter to provide more of a sense of home in spite of its limitations as a place intended to provide temporary emergency shelter. With this in mind, I began to rethink the ways I wanted to engage in this project and communicate its relevance, as well as the ways that this thesis might offer the shelter community opportunities to refine, shape, and develop its own objectives, helping the men who use the shelter to achieve a sense of home beyond the shelter itself and within the broader scope of what constitutes a home.

How long someone spends in the shelter affects the degree to which he might craft or mark his personal space. My interactions with my consultants in and around these spaces have broadened and complicated my ideas about home . Drawing on such genres as narrative telling, identity talk, music, and arts in their widest sense, I began to understand how the powerful idea of “home” is manifested for different people from different walks of life. I realized, for instance, that the divisions of space within a building, and people’s use of material and immaterial objects, could contribute to creating a sense of “home.” How men at the shelter do this depends greatly on the time they have spent in the shelter, as well as on how long they intend to stay. Other factors include whether men have access to a dorm bed upstairs (reserved for longer term visitors) or whether they sleep in the space in the communal dining area (reserved for new shelter residents and shorter-term residents).

Conversations I have had with men at the shelter have often focused on their personal associations with shelter life, revealing that some men associate

their identity with the shelter, while others try to distance their identity from it. Home for some men is interwoven with their attachment to the shelter community, while for others the shelter is far from what they see or consider home.

Many of my consultants talk about the shelter as being a transitional space until they are able to get back on their feet, a space where they carry ideas about home (e.g., a desire to belong and to seek out and be part of a public identity). For men at the shelter, a sense of home means much more than having a place to sleep, eat, and access resources. It often means a sense of becoming established, belonging, or feeling grounded.

Ideas pertaining to home vary among the men who live in, sleep in, or use the shelter in different ways. When describing “home,” my consultants often point to the places they have been; the idea of home includes a variety of places and not necessarily one concrete setting. As one man puts it, “Living life as I have, I have made home wherever I have been comfortable.” The idea of *place* is also relevant, as my consultants describe some places that are *not* designed to be homes. “Some places,” a shelter resident notes, “are not healthy to make home; . . . these places include prison and shelters.” Some men describe home as something achieved through struggle, a place to work towards, a future once they leave the shelter. One man, for instance, talks about home as a site of safety, defined by love, comfort, and family. He describes: “When one has all of the above, that’s home. For me that’s a great definition of home.”

When talking about the shelter as home, one man describes the space as a “half-way house.” Some men I meet feel adopt a shelter identity, where they have a sense of being part of a community, and speak of the shelter as at least a temporary home. Many others, however, are reluctant to attach ideas of home to shelter life, and instead locate “home” in specific persons or friends they have made, or in people outside the shelter who share similar identities. Some men, particularly those who have been rejected by their own blood families or who have moved out of their family homes, talk about home as the friends and relationships they have made through living on the streets or in other shelters, or as people whose paths have crossed with theirs and with whom they have shared experiences. The men refer to many of these people as their family.

Not wanting to be labeled or categorized like others in the shelter becomes, for some men, an important aspect of determining and speaking about their own identity. While shelter life can certainly be a place of refuge, sanctuary, and safety for some men, for others it is an indication of failure, and hence is a place to escape from. One morning, for instance, two men in their mid-twenties talked to me in a café near the shelter, about locating “home” in each other’s presence. Both men talked about their collective sense of home and life in the shelter together: “We don’t want to get too attached the shelter; we are part of it right now, but we don’t want to be part of it our whole life.” This comment also reveals a futuristic sense of a home that they both desire, an idea that I would say resonates with those of many of the men I meet.

Another young man who has spent just three nights in the shelter describes the shelter building as like a “stone in the brook.” He goes on to say that the shelter is like a “stone in the brook that weighs water all around it; it’s enough for someone to step on the brook and pass carefully without falling in.”

Based on the many conversations I have had with men over the past year, I’ll hazard a guess that many of the men at the shelter would agree with this metaphor. For these men, the shelter becomes a physical place to seek protection, reflection, and time to recover from wider societal pressures, personal circumstances, and life challenges.

Even as a place of temporary respite, the shelter can assume some of the qualities of “home.” Many men locate these qualities in the activities of shelter life, such as food preparation, chores, and meeting and conversing with people who share similar life experiences. There is a sense that the shelter is a temporary home, a place of refuge only until the men are able to leave. In this regard, the shelter is often disassociated from comfort, with “true” home existing somewhere else. Nonetheless, the shelter does offer opportunities for many men to feel a *semblance* of home via communal activities (e.g., preparing and eating meals) and other actions associated with home life (e.g., sleeping). Therefore even though these activities offer only partial and provisional feelings of home, they are important because they offer a sense of community belonging that many men do not have access to outside of the shelter.

Chapter 2: Physically Crafting a Sense of Home

As physical structures, shelters help keep the men who stay in them warm and physically protected from the elements. However, the ways in which men physically craft a personal or collective space within the shelter can reveal their desire to survive, hide, create visibility, or disguise themselves, and can show to what degree the shelter represents home or homelessness for each individual. In this shelter, residents are required to minimize their personal possessions, put items in storage, and only take with them material objects that they can carry or transport easily. Turning a community house or shelter building into a home thus becomes challenging because the residents have so few possessions to physically mark the space as “home.” Marking individual spaces at the shelter is also challenging because most of the spaces are shared communally. Physically manifesting a sense of home thus becomes part of the spatial negotiation that takes place at the shelter. This is especially true if men do not see the shelter as a long-term place to live or reside. Nonetheless, many of the men I met use alternative aesthetic resources to find, seek out, and craft zones of comfort through material means.

In exploring the crafting of home through material means, this chapter looks at: a) the physical objects that men carry with them to create home-like spaces or to claim shared space; b) the shared activities that men do to fill the

space with a sense of collectivity; and c) the physical ways that the shelter community collectively and individually decorates the space.

Authors Zimmerman and Welch posit that most Americans assume that homeless persons have no material culture because most Americans want homeless persons to remain invisible.⁶ However, in conversations with men I have met and through observations of their physical spaces, I find the lack of material possessions often elicits powerful attachments to the few material objects that men *do* carry. The valued personal meanings of such objects and how they are viewed, looked after, and displayed, is certainly a dimension of material culture that is worth highlighting.

As I got to know the men at the shelter more personally, they revealed tattoos, electronic and digital devices, clothes, and other objects that held personal significance. Such objects at first impression might seem worthless to the outside world, but to an outsider ethnographer such as myself, they represent clear reflections of the men's paths, spaces, and experiences.

Personal meanings might adhere to a hat or other item of clothing, for instance, creating associations with places, ideas, people and memories. For example, Johnny carried a "masters" golf hat around with him as his prized possession. He told me about how a "good Christian woman" who liked him had given it to him. He later told me that he lost the hat, or that someone might have

⁶ Larry J. Zimmerman and Jessica Welch, "Displaced and Barely Visible: Archaeology and the Material Culture of Homelessness" *Historical Archaeology* 45, no. 1 (2011): 67–85.

stolen it, adding—if the latter was the case—“I hope they choke on it.” The fact that this man was upset at losing the hat indicated his personal attachment to it, and suggested what the hat meant to him, beyond keeping his head warm or protected from the sun. The hat was an object of remembrance that reminded him of playing golf with friends and talking to people he had met when he used to play golf back home in the mountains. Such activities, which had brought him into contact with others and helped him to make social connections, made him feel connected to a sense of home.

Another man, Gary, showed me his sobriety chips as we sat together one day in the shelter canteen area. These chips—which he carries in his wallet at all times—reflect what he calls his “story of recovery.” Gary talked about these chips as representations of his time at the shelter, his interactions with people, and his place and role at the shelter. The chips, including a nine-month sobriety chip, a one-year chip, and a two-year chip, are tokens that represent his becoming sober since he became a shelter resident. The carrying around of such items suggests their value both as personal items that offer a personal and private identity, and as emblems that can connect one with a public identity about which one would feel proud to speak.

These objects, although they may be minimal and few, are infused with extra meanings; as such, they become synecdoches of home. The hats, items of clothing, and sobriety chips invoke a sense of belonging to a community and having relationships with people outside of shelter life. A sobriety chip brings to mind a greater recovery story, one that offers a feeling of security, safety, and

groundedness as a result of participating in shelter life. In much the same way, the hat reminds its bearer of someone who offered friendship in the past, before the recipient came to live at the shelter. Another man carried a love letter that he wrote for a woman he once met. Everywhere he goes he carries this letter with him, in case he one day see this woman and can declare his love for her. Once again, the object points beyond itself to reference relationships, and in so doing speaks to these men's conceptualizations of home. In my time at the shelter, men also talked about how they stored away objects of personal significance. They might keep such items safe with friends, or keep them in storage. One younger man, a newcomer to the shelter, talked about a *Smallville* magazine as his "comfort blanket." He has had the magazine since he was a child, and now keeps it safe at a friend's house. Some men find other ways to store personal items, for example, through the use of digital devices like mobile phones and MP3 players. One man I met, for instance, carries a digital phone that stores a personal gallery of his own art. Other men talked about their collections of songs on MP3 players that they carry around wherever they go. The private and public ways that men display these objects suggest that they have meaning and value not only as expressions of memory and identity, but also as emblems of home.

This digital connection to a sense of home is used in interesting ways. In my interactions with shelter residents, I witnessed digital devices used in at least three different ways—to connect with others online, to connect with others in the immediate space, and to *retreat* from others into a solitary space.

Some of the shelter's men use digital devices to create a sense of home by

connecting digitally to people outside of the shelter, for example through online poker games. (Men who stay at the shelter can access Internet Wi-Fi after the 8 p.m. curfew). Men also use digital devices to sonically craft a personal space around them as a way of inviting conversational connection. One man I met used his digital device to play music aloud, which prompted other men to engage in identity talk: “remember this song?” Such portable devices offer men avenues to digitally connect with people in and outside the shelter, invoking a sense of solidarity and grounding in shared connections. (In my observations, these connections were often formed around 80’s hip-hop, though my conversations with the shelter’s men revealed interest in a much broader spectrum of music.) The ways men make connections to one another through music suggest the different ways music is used as a binding factor, allowing men that share similar interests and memories associated with that music to use it as a topic for conversational connection.

Some men in the shelter, not surprisingly, do not express their musical preferences in such a public way. Some, in turn, sit silently with their digital devices and a set of headphones, creating a solitary (rather than a communal) space of comfort. Finally, many simply do not possess digital devices with the capacity to hold or store music. What I gather from these shared and solitary activities is that men at the shelter use electronic devices to digitally craft home in very different ways.

What these objects offer—whether they are stored away in places outside the shelter or stored digitally and thus transportable—is a catalogue of memories,

as well as a chance to craft a sense of home through conversations. The objects become anchors that point to shared or private memories and serve as tokens of home, reminding the men of places, people, and ideas that connect a past sense of home to their present.

There are also material expressions that are much easier to carry around, where storage or portability is not an issue. These include tattoos, which can also act as anchors of conversational communion. For one older man I met, his tattoo no longer offered any real meanings apart from “its just something I did when I was young.” However, another younger man, J.G., specifically wanted to show me his tattoo one day when we decided to go for a drink at a local bar. The tattoo, on the calf on his leg, consisted of three monochromatic Celtic-looking designs interwoven into oblong circles. J.G. said he had had it for two years and that it had a personal meaning for his life. The tattoo seemed to remind him about his most recent journey. He said of the tattoo:

It represents mind, body, and soul. It's like where you find yourself, in the middle of your own manifesto, having to figure something out, or having to look at something in a different way, that says, “this is something that I need to do, that I need to figure out. This is something that in my way, that I need to conquer.”

Through J.G.'s talk about the connection between “mind, body and soul,” and his description of his tattoo as his “own manifesto,” I gathered that the inked symbols reflected his spiritual place and his sense of belonging in the world right now. J.G. talked about a personal quest to tackle and conquer in much the same way that Gary talked about his sobriety chips as reminders of a symbolic quest for overcoming, achieving, and sustaining a personal challenge. A tattoo,

depending on where it appears on the body and how it is shown by the wearer, certainly offers a carryable sense of home that allows one to store and keep safe reminders of who one is and what home means.

When I first met an earlier shelter co-ordinator, she showed me a pile of black garbage bags that she was keeping safe for one man who requested storage of his belongings while he spent a few days in prison. These bags contained objects of personal value to the man, something the shelter director seemed to understand, since she agreed to keep them safe for him. These bags certainly suggest that this particular man had more personal items than most shelter residents. Perhaps this reflected his particular situation, or perhaps it simply indicated his ability to convince the shelter director that his items were worth keeping safe and protected. But this in itself points to the way that objects can be conversational cues, even if only with the shelter's director. In this instance, the shelter became a place to store personal items while the owner was required to move to a place where he had even less opportunity to carry his personal items. The fact that the man asked that his items be kept safe until he returned suggests that he saw the shelter as a place he trusted enough to hold his personal possessions.

Not only is it difficult to carry possessions around or store them with friends or in storage units, but when one is forced to store them in public spaces, they are always in danger of being stolen, damaged, or degraded in some way. This had happened to two men that I met, who talked about their possessions having been stolen and some items having been "torched" while the men were

living under bridges. This danger makes carrying things doubly problematic: if one does choose to keep things that are meaningful on them or close by, or if one chooses to show them to others, then these personal items are at greater risk of being stolen or destroyed. Because of this risk, homeless persons, including men from the shelter, are essentially discouraged from holding onto many possessions. This leads me to think about the way that men living with such day-to-day challenges who do not have access to ample storage might “hide” objects of personal value from others by carrying them around in what look like worthless plastic shopping bags or garbage bags, in order not to bring attention to them. And the fact that someone might want to steal or torch such items suggests that people living on the streets understand the value and importance of personal items, even if they don’t have much monetary value. They realize the precariousness of their connection to material things, as the connection itself might invite assault from those whose only interest in these items is to destroy them, and thus to cause psychological harm. The question of who might want to destroy such items is also worth considering, pointing to outsiders who have no respect for those on the margins, or to people who see those living on the streets as easy targets. This certainly would explain why many men seek shelter: not only to keep warm and safe, but also to protect their belongings.

Objects, and the ways they can be manipulated or used, offer a chance to hide, escape from, or feel connected to personal and collective memories. These items become symbolic emblems, vernacular reflections of ourselves as well as

symbols of privacy. Such objects can also lend themselves to the creation of refuges that exist in the imagination.

Because of the limitation of having to be able to carry or store every physical item, some personal possessions come to have multiple uses; often, each item in homeless person's possession serves more than one function. In this way, a personal item can become layered with multiple meanings, making it particularly valuable to its owner. Such items as a hoodie or a warm and adaptable piece of clothing, for instance, could also be used as a blanket or pillow. One man I met talked about how, while living on the streets, a blade became his device for protection against outsider elements and the threat of violence. Items such as a blade, heavy clothing, a hoodie, or a collection of songs on a MP3 player are all used for specific functions, but at the same time hold multiple personal meanings, connections to safety and security, memories, and a sense of belonging, all of which point to notions of home.

Men I met at the shelter often talked about their feelings of loss when one of their possessions was stolen or lost. They talked about wanting to keep certain items safe and secure. The importance these men placed on these objects reveals that homeless persons *do* have material culture, and that they hold objects of material worth as reminders and physical incarnations of home, belonging, security, safety, and place. Even if such items are less obvious or even disguised, this very fact may indicate that the objects in question represent an even more personal, intimate, private sense of home.

However, private and personal physical manifestations of home play out

somewhat differently for homeless men, who are required to share space and live communally at the shelter. Although the alterations that men at the shelter make to their physical space are often subtle and temporary, these manipulations are often carried out as shared activities with a sense of collectivity. Their presence tends to correspond to the amount of time men have spent or plan to spend at the shelter.

A staff member shows me around one of the dorm rooms. No men are present at the time, but I notice a small, black Bible placed on one of the beds and what seems like a talc powder bottle. I also notice a shoe placed on the floor beside one of the beds. The placement of such items reminds me of the items I also take to bed or leave next to where I sleep, marking out a personal space that belongs only to me. The objects also remind me of the way people claim space with personal items and non-permanent fixtures as soon as they can when they go camping or to a music festival, marking out the best possible space for themselves or their group of friends. Although they are not permanent, such physical demarcations of space become markings of territory for short periods of time. They also serve as a form of communication to others about space, place, and belonging. Before the lights go out, the men at the shelter sit on their beds, either the ones upstairs or the ones crafted for that one night downstairs. A man I speak to tells me how he makes his bed in the same place each night. This suggests that this place, even though it is small and uncomfortable, is a place where he has crafted a kind of a mini home.

In the upstairs dorms, before the lights go out, men talk to one another,

moving between individual spaces to do so. What I gather from this is that men sense a feeling of ownership as they converse while sitting on their beds. I gather this sense as one evening I walk into the dorm to see if more men would like to participate in the Talking Sidewalks workshop taking place in the offices adjacent to the dorms. There are few takers this evening, as men seem relaxed and content to remain in their dorms, engaging in friendly conversation with one another. The atmosphere is calm and peaceful as men smile and joke while sitting on their beds.

Downstairs, on the night I sleep over, the man in the bed next to mine wants to continue to talk to me when the lights go out. This intimate exchange brings to mind a personal memory of when my cousins and I were children and we would all sleep in one room when we were at large family gatherings. At night, as the adults stayed up late to talk and sing old Bollywood songs in the living room downstairs, these sleepovers became private conversations between us children, intimate cultural exchanges that offered a sense of comfort, camaraderie, and a feeling of groundedness. My short exchange with the man in the shelter suggested a shared past. Perhaps we had both experienced times of family closeness and the intimate vulnerability of the conversations we have when we sleep next to a loved one.

The ritual of everyone going to bed, waking up, getting ready for the day, and communally sharing the activities of cooking and eating lead me to think about the routines and rituals that families and religious groups utilize that contribute to shaping a shared sense of community. As a Sikh, I am reminded of

the family gatherings at Gurdwaras, where everyone had certain roles to play in shaping a cohesive and collective community. In much the same way, the sound of church bells, calls for prayer, and the display of university campus colors serve as emblems and markers of belonging and help to form the bonds of community. I think about how such day-to-day activities can also function as reinforcement rituals that hinder and disrupt community order. In some ways they may contribute to a hierarchy of societal order, which offers a sense of comfort to some of the men.

Collective action often draws men into a sense of community by re-creating a spirit of shared family activity, and as such points to the rituals and routines of a communal sense of home. For example, one man tells me:

So I am back here. People here opened their arms and let me in the shelter; they put me in the kitchen and got me doing dishes. And I appreciate that. They open up their hearts to me. They're not putting me down for my past. That's what keeps me going, helping me put that foot forward.

Such activities suggest the ways that people, including staff members and social support workers, offer a sense of belonging that the men do not experience elsewhere. J.F. tells me, “[Shelter] intake is more than just finding out who you are or where you've been. It's about what the things are that you need to start reconstructing your life.” Another man speaks about the shelter as a family, comparing the shelter community to the family that rejected him. A man who attends a Talking Sidewalks workshop one day says, “My family disowned me. I pretty much take refuge here. Here is my family.”

But for other men, the routines and day-to-day activities at the shelter

become reasons to *leave* the shelter as soon as they can and to come back only when they have to, or to adapt the routines to suit themselves as a way to cope.

For example, Johnny tells me;

I just wake up in the morning, and get out of there [the shelter] as quick as I can. I come back and eat breakfast, then I leave, and I don't stay there long. Or eat lunch or eat dinner. But night time is the hardest; that's when I am stuck with everybody there, and there is nothing I can do about it. I can't go run and hide.

Johnny went on to describe how the period between his morning and evening routines at the shelter is a time when he can he can make choices and physically and mentally detach himself from shelter life and a shelter identity: "Daytime, I can choose to get away from those people, but at night time I am stuck like chuck."

Some men talked about seeing shelter life not so much as a rejection of a wider society riddled with rules, but as a place of comfort and safety. For example, in a conversation between two men, one said to the other, "I am really glad we have settled here at the shelter for the time being, because it's safe. That's another big reason why I am comfortable at the shelter."

The shelter as a place of comfort and safety is created through the physical ways that men manipulate space in and around the building and the way people in the shelter community decorate the shelter itself to incorporate home-like aesthetics. The clinical nature of the space is tempered by the addition of wall art and the creation of mini-libraries. One such space exists on the top floor, near where the men sleep. This space includes a bookshelf and a single desk-like chair with a few artistic creations on the walls. Sometimes when I leave the

shelter in late evenings after leading a writing workshop, I notice a man sitting by himself in that chair, reading books quietly to himself. The space thus offers a way to perhaps escape both the shelter and the outside world, and to transcend the curfews and confinement of the space through imagination.

The ability of shelter residents to craft home through imagination and spatial manipulation becomes even more evident in other shared areas of the shelter. The kitchen has cooking smells coming from it, evidence of members' cooking as part of their required chores. It is also a space where men interact with church and student volunteers, talk about food and cooking, and take advantage of social opportunities. On the wall between the kitchen and the communal dining space is an artwork made from empty Jiffy corn muffin mix boxes. A clock with Gandhi's picture on it sits in one of the corridors near a sign that reads "IFC community house." *These accents remind me of a sign in the house I grew up in that displayed our family crest.* In the upstairs shelter space, a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is on display. Such artful manipulations of space point to aesthetic choice and preference, and are indeed attempts to create a home-like feel. Nonetheless, although much of the displayed "art" works are resourcefully created, they are also disjointed and seem more like ad hoc additions than parts of a cohesive, artistically crafted design. The effect is unlike what one might expect to see in a more traditional family house, where time has allowed space to be decorated and refined in a way that reflects collective family aesthetics.

In the same way that material artistry at the shelter is sparse, the use of aural artistry to create a sense of communal space is also rare. The only exception to this rule that I noticed was on Thanksgiving Day, when I turned up at the shelter and witnessed a volunteer church group bring in a small stereo and play music while serving Thanksgiving dinner. The use of a radio to play music, which was facilitated by a volunteer, created a more upbeat occasion in which shelter residents could feel part of this national holiday. The only other radio I have ever seen at the shelter belongs to an elderly Mexican gentleman who sits outside all day in his wheelchair, in a small green space he calls his “ranch.” For him, this space—defined by his radio and his regular presence—marks his claiming of “home.” He speaks of this small green space as “his” space, while others refer to it as “Favio’s space.” Here, Favio has managed to carve out a place to call his own, which others in the community seem to respect and reserve as his. In this place of comfort, Favio sits in his wheelchair, on a small patch of green grass under an umbrella of trees, and holds onto his radio, observing others and smiling. He sits watching others, turning the gaze that many homeless men experience back onto the world and thus creating a mini-home of comfort and protection. The crafting of spaces and other physical manipulations of home helps to enable imagination and memories to serve as a home in the mind.

The night I sleep over at the shelter, I am given two fold-out mattresses, two bed sheets, a pillow case, a pillow, and a blanket. I carry these upstairs from the basement and find a place to create my own bed for the night. I start to craft my personal sleeping space in the corner of the room, placing my bags against

the wall. Other men do the same in the spaces they make for themselves. I start to remember the stories that Johnny told me in our conversations in Carrboro the previous fall. I begin to remember the moments we shared that day and our reflections of home as we talked about the changing colors of the trees around us. I remember how Johnny was reminded of the trees in the Black Mountains, and I was reminded of the trees in parks near my home in Scotland.

These vivid images now become a place of memory for me as I start to imagine the spaces I will be able to return to when I am out of this clinical place. I imagine the trees and other places of comfort I have found, or escaped to, and the spaces that I have carved out for myself since coming the U.S.

The use of the imagination plays out for another man I meet in the morning after my night at the shelter. We go to a local coffee shop, a place he describes as one of the spaces on the periphery of the shelter that he talks about as “home.” I share my first experience of sleeping overnight at the shelter and I ask him about his nighttime experiences there. He tells me, “I just focus and visualize being not here.” He talks about imagining being in another country, and how he tries to visualize other places whenever he finds himself in this shelter, other homeless shelters, or under a bridge. He tries to think of places that are not derelict and not run down, places like the Swiss Alps or farmlands that he knows from memory. “I close my eyes and try to make it so that it’s nice, like a home,” he says.

Reflecting on this conversation and on my conversations with Johnny, I remember times when, during personal struggles or times of discomfort, certain

smells have induced intense daydreams that take me back to a time and place of complete comfort, warmth, and belonging. This leads me to think about the power of imagination and conscious mindful thought and how it has enabled me, like the men I have met, to transcend time and place and allow a returning to a state of home in the mind. In thinking about imaginative escapes as a type of home that moves beyond physical space, I notice the ways physical spaces can become incentives to take our minds to other places. In challenging moments, the physical space necessitates transportation to another place. Before going to bed that night in the shelter, I imagined myself in a place of comfort, at the Carrboro market, a place I frequent often. That night I had intense and profound dreams about people in my life, waking abruptly to the bright lights and the staff worker's calls of "wake up!" This awakening and the fact that I was not sleeping in my usual place of comfort starkly contrasted with my state of mind when I was sleeping.

When I ask Johnny whether he has anything that reminds him of the place he describes as home, he says, "no, just memories." I ask him if there is anywhere he goes or anything he does to remind himself of these memories. He says, "Yeah, I go to the library. I like to get away from the shelter and find a little peace. I come down here, Weavers Market; I just sit here, watching the kids and the families, the college kids, drink a cold beer—that relaxes me."

There are certainly times when men who want to detach themselves from shelter life do so by physically taking themselves to other places. They may not always interact conversationally with others, but they enjoy the sense of being

around people that remind them of home. Johnny talked about how some days he would take the bus to the mall, where he can listen to music from his own era and be around people his own age. I often come across men from the shelter on the UNC campus, conversing with students, using UNC facilities such as the library, or attending talks and social and academic events.

Many men seek, and in some cases establish, relationships with people and groups outside of the shelter. Some men want to find and connect to particular communities, even if they are not currently part of them. For example, one man told me, "I try to be connected to the gay community, but I don't know where to start. Where do they go, what do they do? I don't see that anywhere. I know that it exists, but I don't see it." The idea that men seem to be seeking out connections with other groups, societies, and organizations, as well as places where they can participate as equal members of a wider society, in order to access resources and specific places of comfort, is an indication that men from the shelter are seeking out and sometimes achieving a physical claiming of home. This seeking of physical interaction with particular communities speaks to the desire be part of something beyond shelter living.

Chapter 3: Claiming Home Through Story and Performance

Narrative telling serves a performative function in that it often allows us to performatively claim a sense of home as an expression of identity. What I have gathered over this past year in my attempt to fully understand the conversations I have had with men at the shelter is that personal narratives reveal aspects of how our lives have been shaped. While the narratives of a personal and collective past often become a way to illuminate the present, they also offer us ways to shape future life directions. Thus, the narratives of shelter residents enable them to not only make sense of the set of circumstances that brought them to seek shelter living, they also enable them to form a sense of home both within and outside the shelter community.

In these narrative tellings and conversational exchanges, I find that shelter residents' everyday talk, whether they are conscious of it or not, very often moves into the realm of performance and what I see as artistic poetics and expressive verbal art. Shelter residents perform their narratives in different contexts within everyday talk. These contexts provide a frame for how such narratives are performed. What establishes these stories as artistically performed is the teller's use of eloquent and exuberant speech patterns, combined with deliberate and elaborate physical body gestures. On some occasions, the men are clearly aware that they are performing in an artistic manner (particularly when

some describe themselves as rappers, or end their talk with “thank you for listening”.) Considering that men at the shelter have few material objects, their use of stories and performance offers opportunities for them to establish relationships with others, to access resources, and to find places of comfort. These narratives thus act as routes by which they claim a sense of home.

In my dialectic interactions with shelter residents, I found that stories frequently start with the person’s most recent experiences and then move to the past; sometimes they include the future that men envision for themselves. One way to look at these narratives is as collective stories of all who have experienced marginalization; as such, they reveal truths about faith, belief, family, love, and relationships and show how the past is important in determining what the storyteller would like for his future. In sharing these stories, men often describe the events that caused them to become homeless; they often speak about such circumstances as the beginning of their “homeless story.”

This talk about stories told by shelter residents leads me to reflect on a study of homelessness by sociologists Barrett A. Lee, Kimberly A. Tyler, and James D. Wright. In the article “The New Homelessness Revisited,” they posit that homeless persons often have “fictive narratives” that they use to determine and shape opportunities to access resources that they need.⁷ Such narratives might go unchallenged, as Lee and his colleagues suggest. However, I counter this claim by arguing that such narratives are not wholly fictive, as they speak of survival, personal and collective struggles, and a sense of solidarity and

⁷ Barrett A. Lee, Kimberly A. Tyler, and James D. Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited” *The Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 501–521.

camaraderie amongst people who share common challenges such as homelessness. They are also used as interesting and exciting stories that facilitate interacting and forming relationships with others. In either case, they are stories that hold meaning and importance to the narrator. These stories reveal life experiences and describe significant turning points that suggest what's important to the men who tell them. They are self-portraits that reveal how men see themselves, what they hold valuable in their lives, and how they identify with other homeless persons, shelter life, and the wider society. They are true in a symbolic sense, if not always in a literal one.

One day I met a group of men outside the shelter and we began to exchange words, poetry, and rap in what might be referred to in vernacular studies as *cyphering* or *jonin* (forms of African American verbal art). There is a strongly competitive element to these forms, which use word play and performed speech to test one's ability to outsmart another with the use of knowledge, quick thinking, and rapid responses to associated ideas. The exchange began when I asked one of the men I met that day just outside of the shelter building if he could tell me about himself. A group of the shelter's men looked on in interest, and began to gather around, almost in semicircle formation, to hear what was developing into a moment of narrative cyphering. Bobby described his experience to me, and as he did, his story unfolded as a strong and powerfully delivered performance that used exuberant hand gestures and artistic verbal crafting, inviting the other men to become as immersed in the moment as I was. Bobby's story is an example of how narrative telling, performed orally, offered

more than a vignette of a past life and current situation. Bobby knew I had my recorder on, and I believe that he was performing a story that served multiple functions for multiple audiences, as well as claiming home, building camaraderie, and inviting recognition from the other men present that day. His story thus acted as a performed claiming of home:

Yeah my name is Bobby Lynch, and I am from the Orange county area, and I come from a very well off family. I was very well established and had a beautiful home; I had two beautiful daughters and was living a life like normal people would do. I never thought this would happen to me, but I got into a fight, a physical fight with another grown man, that was out of place in my own house. I had a good four months in jail behind it and I lost everything and I came home again and just started over.

After this initial description of his past, Bobby chronicled the events that brought him to homelessness and went on to describe how he assumes society perceives homeless people. At this point, I noticed more men were engaged and were paying closer attention to Bobby. His speech became more exuberant, as he began performing his narrative not just for me, but also for others around him:

People look at you as being homeless, as being left in the Lord. But sometimes that's not the case. I go to work every day; I work forty hours a week. I am just like normal people, you know? This is like a transitional period; maybe two or three months, and I will be out of here. And I don't want to be looked as left in the Lord.

Not only was Bobby telling me a story about himself; he was also, in his use of the word "we", attempting to tell the collective experience of men from the shelter. The fact I had my recorder on and overtly displayed suggests that Bobby was also performing his narrative to audiences beyond those that were immediately present that day:

We are just like everybody else. There are a lot of good people here, you know. It's not always what it seems to be on the outside. If you don't know

about it, maybe you should look into it, before you become judgmental. And I just want to say, 'thank you for your time.'

Bobby's story highlights the unfairness of the societal label applied to men who are simply perceived as having no home, the label of "homeless." The label reduces all of a person's humanity to the single dimension of "lacking a home," as if somehow this single circumstance overwhelms all other parts of a person's identity. In response to the dehumanization of this label, many of the men I met engage in creative ways of making, crafting, and having home. This creativity is a form of resistance that undermines the very label of "homeless," showing it to be untrue. Spoken narratives can thus act as a powerful force of resistance for men who have few personal possessions or material means to defend themselves against the gaze of hostility projected towards homeless persons.

I think about the term "homelessness" and whether this term is a misnomer, given the way my own understandings of home have broadened through my observation of and participation with the men of the shelter. As I think about it, home starts to seem like an intangible idea, a state of mind rather than just a physical reality.

Narratives of resistance can empower and create solidarity and a sense of community ownership amongst shelter residents who share similar experiences, even when one takes into account the very subtle ways performance is sometimes manifested, quietly existing in the day-to-day engagements and performed exchanges between people.

Because of their lack of material resources, the men I meet at the shelter creatively and skillfully use diverse aesthetic resources to craft a sense of home.

Storytelling, performed speech, dress, code switching and many other overt and subtle forms of imaginative resistance help to form diverse identity-based personhoods. Performed narratives offer avenues to establish self-empowerment, self worth, and dignity as persons. At the same time, they also offer outlets for anger, frustration, and fear. Narratives, often poetically expressed, become vehicles for expressing personal memory, as well as resistance and imaginative escape. These aesthetic resources, resistance strategies, or acts of defiance against a wider social system constitute ways of establishing a social belonging, and thus a sense of home.

The ways shelter members discuss ideas pertaining to home reflect the stigma attached to homelessness. These two correlated notions became evident one day when I was sitting in a café with a man from the shelter named Franklin. This café was a place he liked to go each day to get away, to remove himself, to find a space to work alone, he told me. Franklin went on to tell me, “I strive hard not to look homeless, so that I can fit in, like everyone else.” Franklin said that he interacts in ways that keep people from becoming aware of his homelessness, so that he does not get asked to leave a café or another place of comfort, solitude, or rest. He told me that he dresses and talks in a particular way so he can be accepted amongst those who assume that homeless people are lesser persons because they lack a permanent address. As Franklin was talking to me about this idea, another shelter resident walked into the café and received a scowling look from the waitress. His face seemed to apologize to the waitress for being there, and he left, having come in simply to see his friend. Right after that moment,

Franklin told me, “that’s exactly what I’m talking about. And the thing is, she’s Black too.”

Franklin’s comments led me to reflect on the academic work of Dolores Hayden, whose ethnographic studies explore relationships between architectural design, culture, and economic life. Hayden unpacks the notion of the triple dream of “home, nature and community” in *The Building of Suburbia*, a work in which she suggests that suburbia is the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies.⁸ Suburban places become “A landscape of imagination and an ideal about upward mobility and economic security, freedom, and private property, longings for social harmony, and spiritual uplift.”⁹ Many of these notions seem to play out in the narratives of the shelter residents. On the one hand, such narratives enforce the homeless label for those who do not have connections to this “American dream” of land and house ownership; many men talk about what they once had or the house they once owned. On the other hand, these narratives reflect how men’s desires to obtain a sense of home fit into notions of success, of dreams and fantasies.

On the first night that I decide to sleep at the shelter, one man meets me in the corridor and asks if this is my first night. When I say yes, he replies, “it will be alright,” offering me a sense of comfort and a protective welcome. Through this verbal offering, he gave me, a newcomer he didn’t even know, an empathetic reassurance through words, trying to make me feel more “at home.” I believe he

⁸ Dolores Hayden, *The Building of Suburbia: Green Fields to Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

⁹ Hayden, *The Building of Suburbia*, 3.

did this to offer me an in-group welcome and to support me and help me establish a sense of home-ness in the shelter.

In addition to the more spontaneous, ad hoc performative moments that take place in and around the shelter, the shelter also hosts weekly scheduled events, which residents can attend should they wish to. One of these events is a writing and discussion workshop called Talking Sidewalks, which takes place on Wednesday evenings from 8 to 9 p.m. Facilitated activities like this provide opportunities to perform narratives about diverse themes and topics, usually chosen by the one of the UNC student facilitators. These workshops offer a chance to establish camaraderie amongst the shelter's residents as well as with students such as myself who attend and lead the workshops.

In one of the Talking Sidewalks workshops that I led, I focused on the topic of home and the label of "homeless." I facilitated this workshop in the style of devising a collective slam poem. To start the workshop, we discussed and shared stories, experiences, and connections about the state of homelessness and about finding home. Before beginning any poetry compilation, we discussed the connections between the experiences of the students and the men of the shelter, in relation to home. What resulted were several short performance slam pieces in which each participant offered one line each. The following poem was one of the eight slam poems that we wrote and performed collectively that evening. The first written line came from William, a shelter resident; then the paper rotated the room, with each participant offering one line as a follow-up to the line before it. Finally, when the sheet of paper came back to William, he had the chance to

complete the poem with a final line before performing it as a slam for the rest of the group. In a sense, this process offered a condensed synopsis of the dialogical process, in which conversations and shared ideas and narratives acted as prompts to perform amongst participants:

I am homeless or am I truly
But “less is more” they say
I am more than my paycheck any day
What matters most are the words we say
Not labels others stick on us, what matters are the choices we pick
Our choices, nonetheless, limited by such labels
Ain’t nobody gives me my label! Ain’t nobody gonna turn me round!
Because there is no place to turn to but home itself

The discussion that we had in this workshop unpacking notions of home seemed to have had a distinct effect on the way the poem unfolded. The opening line, “I am homeless or am I truly,” forms a statement of inquiry, and points directly to the label of homelessness and to a questioning of personal identity. The last line, “Because there is no place to turn to but home itself,” points back to the idea of home as a place of return, refuge, and comfort.

This process of poetry writing had not been used before in Talking Sidewalks. Usually, men are given pens, pieces of paper, a time frame in which to write a single, self-owned poem. However, in my participatory observations of Talking Sidewalks, what I noticed is that when men are asked to write extended, narratively coherent connected pieces some men seem to be restricted by this process. I suspect this might be because they are out of practice in writing in this way, or like myself, they may have a writing disability such as dyslexia that was never picked up by their schoolteachers. Noting that writing can often be a hindrance and barrier for many that live in the shelter, here, I deliberately used a

dialogical style of composing and performing in order to draw upon the way men *talk* about their experiences as opposed to what they might write about them. What this workshop offered was more than a written or oral poem; instead, it offered a chance to share ideas and experiences, and thus to find conversational connections through narrative exchange. When I closed the workshop, we all put our arms around each other in a “group hug,” sharing an exuberant moment of performed, physical solidarity after having shared our stories with one another.

Ultimately, this workshop did more than just build solidarity and camaraderie. Afterwards, one participant said that now, when someone calls him homeless, he can challenge that label, as his sense of home has expanded; for him, home now means much more than just having a house to call his own.

Of course, distant or recent memories of home are not always positive. This mix of good and bad memories conjures up vivid images of places, people, and home. The shelter’s men and I have often talked about the places to which we’re connected, the homes that inhabit our memories and the stories told to us by family members. We invariably start to imagine the lives and movements of people in our own family lineages.

Sitting on the steps just outside the shelter one day, I was drinking sweet iced tea with Mark, a shelter resident, who told me about his grandfather from Scotland who immigrated to Canada. I told Mark about the stories I heard from my own parents, who immigrated to England from Uganda as part of a forced migrant community. We discussed songs and sayings that were passed on in these memories. In this remembrance, we began to map our shared connections

and the similarities in our stories, and started to overlap our imagined maps of home. Such imagined maps create interpersonal connections and outline shared experiences, offering conversational starting points for joint exploration, and thus helping to form a new and shared sense of home. Much like the inviting words that a shelter resident offered me in my first night in the shelter, this conversation with Mark was a short but meaningful exchange. As in other exchanges, it established our connections with one another, and ultimately served as a building block of community.

Story sharing turns shelters into places to meet, to make friends, and to fashion a sense of in-group solidarity. This network gives some a chance to build personal and collective strength, and to establish a place where they do not have to continually explain why they are without a home.

Opportunities to engage in performed speech, of course, depend on who is present. I have observed these moments during Talking Sidewalks workshops, in conversations that directly involve me, and in conversations between others. Such performed telling often takes place while waiting outside at meal times or during the periods between meal times, both times when men have opportunities to gather together in smaller groups. In these moments of sharing, story telling offers a path to establish conversational connections with others. How narratives are performed and crafted in these groups often corresponds to who is present at the time. When other men from the shelter are present, artistic performance often becomes more elaborate. It is as if the men are being drawn into a performative arena in which they are allowed to hear others' stories and experience the

solidarity of a shared experience. The men show their agreement with a performer's messages about struggles and resistance, and affirm the teller's comments or questions about the way that people from the outside view them, with nods and comments like "yes" and "that's right." All of these performative moments represent a claiming of home, as they create in-group solidarity by voicing shared understandings of homelessness and home, and by connecting individual experiences through collective performed action.

This type of narrative telling, with some performances more elaborate, articulated, or artistically crafted than others, is a form of verbal art that counters the societal gaze that is ever present in the men's lives outside and around the peripheries of shelter life. I have never witnessed men disagree with each other when talking about homelessness in this particular performative way. This is not to say that men who live in the shelter always agree and want to share in this form of performed solidarity; I recognize that my own status as an outsider might contribute to this apparent agreement. Perhaps residents would see performing acts of disagreement in my presence as unacceptable, and as potentially damaging to their status among the shelter community. The moments of performed solidarity, however, whether they are performed elaborately or not, are common, and take place frequently in the daily interactions between shelter residents.

There are also many men who have told me that they are not interested in being interviewed, and many who prefer to keep to themselves and silently read newspapers or sit away from others in quiet, solitary contemplation. This could

also be seen as a different form of performative claiming of home, in the way they chose not to engage with others. It could also be a way of challenging or disagreeing with any narrative telling that might be unfolding, or of mentally distancing themselves from spontaneous and unforeseen shelter experiences. Shelter residents like all people affected by homelessness, are denied a right to privacy. Controlling one's own space confers that privacy.

In "New Homelessness Revisited," Barrett Lee and his colleagues suggest that because homeless people face such serious constraints, they must excel at improvisation, coping through creative, opportunistic, and varied means.¹⁰ In the face of the extreme isolation that many homeless persons experience, the process of telling narratives becomes a vehicle for having someone listen to what one has to say, how one feels, and how one sees and makes sense of the world around him/her. Telling their stories to one another gives men a chance to seek attention, intrigue, and wonder. Such performed narratives also offer men avenues to describe their experiences with other agencies, social workers, and the police; to claim benefits entitled to them; or perhaps to elevate their status in their community.

In similar ways, the process of telling offers shelter residents a way to pursue conversational opportunities with people on the outside, a way to share in identity talk with strangers and newcomers and to invite them into the residents' worlds of imagination. In this liminal space, men sometimes approach me and ask about who I am with the question, "What's your story?" One day, outside the

¹⁰ Lee et al., "New Homelessness Revisited," 507.

shelter, a man sitting on a bench called out to me, “Do you want to see my art?” He went on to show me his curated exhibition of his own paintings on his mobile phone. He told me that he now keeps all of his paintings in storage, and that he once had public exhibitions. This was my first conversation with this man, and here he was asking me to engage with him in a conversation about his art. What I drew from this exchange is how skillfully he uses a device to keep, store, and collect what amount to aspects of his identity. The images remind him of who he is, and thus become avenues through which he can engage in artistic identity talk. Each painting he showed me offered snippets of a narrative about himself and his life as a visual artist. His artistry also became a way of establishing a public identity, with me as a member of an outside community. I was carrying my camera that day, so perhaps he assumed I was a fellow visual artist. Even if this wasn’t the case, however, this example suggests how artistry can offer a way to resist the stigma of homelessness, by overriding the imposed identity of homelessness and replacing it with an artistic identity that emerges through talk. The same principle applies whether the art in question is visual, written, oral, or music-based.

When I approach this ethnographic study as an artist, and allow my own artistic identity to be more overt, I start to connect with other men as artists. The identity of being an artist, of belonging to a wider arts community, offers special possibilities for conversational exchange. Dialogically, it offers a chance to construct a shared identity, presenting a possible life direction for both the shelter’s men and me, thus opening new paths for this ethnographic enquiry.

The spaces just outside the shelter often transform into artistic arenas in which men meet, interact, and perform. Here, camaraderie fosters social solidarity amongst the men; outsiders like myself, the shelter volunteers, and passers-by (both walking and in their cars) become members of the audience.

The performative use of lyrical skills—whether happening on the grounds adjacent to the shelter, in Talking Sidewalks workshops, or at night after curfew—becomes a way of asserting the self amongst the group. Such assertion can also take the form of performatively ridiculing others. I witnessed this happening when I stayed overnight at the shelter. That night, I sat with men in the TV room. The TV was off, becoming a large mirror that reflected the men sitting around. I was part of that screen image. As I sat there working out how best to interact with the men, a confident, articulate fellow walked into the room and started to artfully insult another man who was sitting quietly in the corner. Engaging in joning, he claimed he wanted this man’s blanket, doing so in way that derided him in front of the others. But these others—mostly older men—looked on as silent observers, seemingly uninterested in participating. Defiantly, the quiet man did not relinquish his blanket, and the fellow doing the joning eventually left the room, but not before offering a “fist bump” to the man with the blanket, as if to say, “it’s okay; we’re still in this together.”

Recognizing that such speech play, skillfully performed identity talk, and narrative telling could become avenues for establishing bonds, I decided to perform one of my own signature slam poems soon after Bobby’s performance

outside the shelter. I seized this opportunity to use performance to achieve validation from the men at the shelter.

On the day that I performed my poem, another man, Peter, responded to my questions about homelessness with a powerful and poetic telling of his own:

Homelessness is when you are down to where you don't have nothing to
work with, to deal with,
but just your life,
while your living out here in the elements and on the street,
with no where to go.
I hope you're recording this, cause this is all true.
Now, you cannot initiate it,
you cannot be caught,
all you can do is stay.
Live one day at a time,
pray to God to help you,
to do better.
That's all you can do.
Really, that's all you can do,
and when you are here,
the way things are,
the economy on people,
you got to be careful where you go.
Now you can cut it off.

What I gathered from this assertive display of performed speech, and from the references to my act of recording him, was that this man was speaking not only to me and the two other men who were present, but also, through his awareness of my role of ethnographer, to a wider world. The man took full ownership of this moment, telling me when I should stop the recording. In this moment, he not only talked about the general circumstances that create homelessness, but also suggested routes to deal with it, and with life on the margins. The other two men not only looked on, but validated what he had to say through their nodding. For me, what made this such a powerful performance was the way Peter used short

and succinct sentences that flowed poetically, compellingly, one after the other. He was able to artfully convey clear and distinct ideas with only a few words, something that many professors and graduate students like myself often struggle with.

Some of the men speak about how they strive hard every day to disassociate themselves from the shelter, whilst others include shelter life unashamedly in their identity talk. This dissociation becomes a way to establish a “home” of a different order, as well as to claim an identity other than one associated with homelessness. I began to make this connection when I returned a poetic transcription of one man’s comments about his decision to move to Chapel Hill back to him. My conversation with this man led him to tell me that he was once a playwright. Later that day, he decided to take his poetically transcribed remarks and perform them for me and a group of men at Talking Sidewalks. The performance felt like he was owning his identity as a playwright.

On another occasion, I met Warren, a longer-term shelter resident, at a local café, where we spent the afternoon telling each other about our paths as performers. We had already exchanged poems in Talking Sidewalks, and had discussed the connections between poetry, slam, and rap music. We decided to meet up again and have a more one-to-one conversation. . I learned that Warren was keen to pursue music. Although we disagreed on definitions of poetry and rap, I felt that we engaged each other more as performance artists than as ethnographer and consultant that day. Warren identified himself as a Durham

rapper. He told me that he always carries around some paper to write ideas for raps he wants to develop.

It might take more than one conversation, and it might need to take place as part of a continuous dialogical process, but I found that when men from the shelter are given the chance to speak beyond the conditions of homelessness, they often open up and become more exuberant and excited about the idea of a identity that supersedes that of being homeless. Given the opportunity, shelter residents will begin to speak about their pasts as artists, about their diverse professions and experiences, and about their ideas of future homes and who they want to become. Identity thus becomes a way to talk about both the past and the future, and to dialogically and more overtly present an internal narrative as an expression of oneself. These identity-based talks become powerful forms of resistance in the way they reverse and redefine the label of “homeless”; the understanding, self-worth, self-respect, and empowerment they engender enables men from the shelter to craft and carve out a sense of home.

Connections to past or current public identities are important, as many men speak of wanting to feel that they belong to other groups of people. These others might include academic communities, poets, and musicians, or faith-based or church-affiliated groups. One elderly man talked about wanting to be with people his own age, and to find a place where he could shoot pool, relax, and listen to music of his era. A younger man described wanting to find a gay community where he could meet other gay men like himself and feel connected to a group he tells me he knows exists but can't seem to find. This yearning for

belonging, at heart, is a yearning for the feeling of home. A sense of connection and belonging counters the feeling of homelessness and offers a path to feelings of home.

Such articulations of a public identity are not isolated to just a few men, or to those who openly claim identities as artists, musicians, or poets. After a series of conversations with Johnny, for instance, he spoke about his identity as a baker. He talked about baking the best and most perfect southern biscuits and Oreo pies, and about how he once managed thirty-two ovens simultaneously to bake 6,000 biscuits each morning. As he spoke, his vivid and poetic descriptions called to mind some kind of installation art piece for a museum. When I proposed documenting and photographing his life as a baker, and suggested setting up a chance to do this at a local bakery run by one of my friends, he jumped at the idea. This was something he felt proud of, and was able to talk about eloquently and with authority. Unfortunately, when I went to the shelter on Thanksgiving Day to see if Johnny wanted to come with me to the bakery to meet my friend, I discovered that he had already moved back to the Black Mountains. I suspect that our conversations prompted Johnny's decision to move back to a place of comfort. Talking about it apparently enabled him to transition from shelter life sooner rather than later. In our earlier conversations, Johnny had focused mainly on his personal struggles, his dislikes, and the day-to-day challenges he faced; he always seemed to be grappling with words to describe his life as a shelter resident. Things seemed to change, however, when he was able to talk about his knowledge of baking. The apparent result of this encounter points to the

importance of the questions I ask as an ethnographer. It also reminds me of the lack of opportunities that men have to share such stories outside of the shelter community. In order to be able to recover, through narrative telling, an identity that they can fully own, some men might need a specific type of intervention from an inquirer who asks explicit questions. For Johnny and many of the men that I met, I served as a representative of the outside world, and as such became one to whom they could express these public identities, and thus disassociate themselves from a shelter identity. These alternate, non-shelter identities connect the men to a feeling of groundedness.

The ways that men craft a sense of home, whether through performative claimings or through physical means, adds an important dimension to the discourse on homelessness. They also contribute to our understanding of displacement and displaced peoples in our ever-changing world. At the same time, and on a more local level, the understandings that have emerged from this ethnographic inquiry can contribute to recommendations for the IFC shelter, and for its plans to build a new emergency men's shelter in Chapel Hill.

Chapter 4: The Next Stages—Relevance for a Changing and Transitional Community

The primary aim of the Inter-Faith Council's emergency homeless men's shelter is to support persons seeking emergency shelter, so that they might eventually transition to more permanent housing. Considering that part of supporting men through such a transition might be providing a sense of home, one challenge for the shelter is deciding to what extent it should aim to offer a home-like environment. Based on my research, I recommend that the IFC community should support the creation of a sense of home in the physical spaces within the shelter, and that in so doing it should promote a feeling of groundedness for the men who reside there. Residents should have both access to a comfortable space and time to reflect, so that they can make informed and confident choices about their life directions as they search for home.

This year, the IFC marked its fiftieth year as an organization that has always been involved with the wider community. As with any significant anniversary, this year offers a chance to reflect, envision, and plan for the future. The IFC community is planning to mark and celebrate this year with a series of golden anniversary events. This research can contribute to these celebrations, by inviting conversations with the community at large, in order to collectively shape potential directions for the shelter community, and to help foster a sense of

home—and a sense of self and place in the world—for Chapel Hill’s homeless persons.

Recognizing that the current shelter building was not originally designed to be a homeless shelter, and acknowledging the need to serve a growing number of homeless persons, the town of Chapel Hill recently approved IFC’s plans to build a new emergency men’s shelter in the Chapel Hill area. I see many opportunities for this new shelter facility to foster a home-like feeling that enables men to feel empowered and that fuels a greater sense of community, thus aiding the search for home both within and beyond the shelter. In this chapter I offer recommendations for facilitating this greater sense of home through narratives, memories, and arts. These suggestions include architectural and design ideas that reflect the ways men have described home to me. I also describe how integrating formal artistic performances into shelter life would enable men to form a greater sense of community and to claim a personal and collective sense of home for themselves both inside the shelter and in the wider community.

In exploring the architectural makeup of the current shelter, I’m led to reflect on Bauman’s idea that “folklore is a function of shared identity.”¹¹ Although this shared identity is, in some cases, one that men want to detach from, there are still opportunities to celebrate shared experiences in ways that honor the lives of persons who live transitionally, and that offer a sense of belonging, regardless of residents’ degrees of participation in shelter life. My consultant Gary’s definition of home as a site of “safety, love, comfort, and

¹¹ Bauman, “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore,” 32.

family” certainly suggests paths that the shelter could take to realize these qualities.

Regarding the design of the new community house, my first recommendation is that it should include more open communal spaces where cooking, artistic sharing, conversation, and narrative telling can take place. Although the “negotiation of space” can cause conflict and disputes, it also holds potential, if facilitated well, to enable a display of diverse aesthetics and to foster a communal sense of negotiated space. These spaces could be adapted for multiple uses that draw from the creativity of men who live at the shelter and who share and access its resources. Thinking about the ways that men talk about their memories of places where they felt a sense of home, I see such communal spaces as places where new memories, moments, and shared experiences can happen, again fostering collectivity and a sense of community. Having more space for these activities might enable men to draw from their past experiences and to bring new ideas to the community. An events space would help to foster residents’ collective sense of home and would help men to plan, create, and converse through shared events such as open mic gatherings. Such a space might also make art-making materials (paint, pens, good-quality paper) available, to invite visual artistry, and enable men to produce artworks that could then go onto the walls. Opportunities to create new works of art would allow men to imagine a future for themselves when they eventually feel they are ready to leave the shelter.

I also recognize the importance of spaces around the building's periphery, as I have had some of the most revealing opportunities to meet men and to converse naturally, openly, and equally in these insider/outsider spaces. These outside spaces could be designed to foster a greater connection to the wider community; they could include, for instance, community gardens and porches where community festivals and events could be hosted. These spaces offer a sort of equal platform on which members of the shelter, volunteers, funders, neighborhood residents, members of local arts and business communities, newcomers, and outsiders could interact creatively with one another within a peripheral space of comfort.

The current shelter has a sign placed high on the wall in one of the ground-floor corridors that says "IFC Community House." To further foster the feeling of home and community belonging, I recommend making more signs like this, and placing them more prominently and visibly on the entrance doors, within the dorms, and throughout the inside and outside spaces of the shelter. Residents should be asked to contribute to the signs' design, and to think about renaming the shelter, coming up with a collectively created name about which they could feel proud and empowered to speak, should they wish to. Naming their residence might enable the men to feel and speak about it with a greater sense of ownership. As one man told me, "people look at you like you're under a microscope when you live at this address." Enabling people to associate a resident with an address that is spoken about in positive terms and is associated with art and stories might invite further inquiry from the outside, and might give

people outside the shelter more chances to get to know the residents as friends, and thus to move beyond the “conditions” that hold the societal stigma of homelessness. One of the signs could include a “Welcome” in languages that reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of the shelter’s residents and visitors. A prominently placed welcome sign would invite new residents, visitors, community groups, and passers-by into the space, thus nurturing wider community interaction. I believe that some of the current signs, in turn, should be removed, as they present a negative image to newcomers and the wider community; these would include the “No Guns” sign. Such notices, particularly when displayed alongside a “welcome” sign, present mixed messages about the shelter community.

Signs could also be used to lessen the prevailing sense of social locks. For example, outside signs could invite people in to share in communal eating. Another way to challenge social locks would be to provide residents with keys that would access personal storage spaces, and perhaps “master” keys that would open communal spaces. Such keys would encourage a sense of ownership and belonging.

I also recommend enlarging spaces that foster a sense of belonging, such as the community kitchen and canteen, and bedroom-style dorms. Such spaces might become places where residents could cook broader range of foods, drawing on their diverse cultural experiences, backgrounds, and skills. A community garden in conjunction with the kitchen could grow herbs and produce that would reflect the culinary heritage of people who live in the shelter as well as

that of mealtime visitors and guests. In like manner, dorms could display collective or individual art created by men that reside there. The idea is to offer opportunities to evoke imagination and create a home-like bedroom aesthetic. Comfortable, movable armchairs in these spaces would foster conversations, inviting men to sit comfortably and share thoughts and performances.

The kitchen, community canteen, tables, and TV lounge could also function as gallery spaces. These spaces would not have to include permanent art. In fact I would suggest otherwise, as men talk about the shelter being a transitional space. Rotating art works through the spaces would foreground the skills the men have acquired as artists, craftspersons, and tradespeople, offering an opportunity for shared presentations of visual art, photography, and multi-media works; they could also include stories, recordings, and object-based temporary exhibits. All such exhibitions would highlight the material culture of shelter residents past and present. In the digital realm, these spaces could include playlists of shared music selected by the men and played at waking time, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and after curfew. Not only would this allow the men to share their digital collections of music, but it would also invite people in the shelter community to learn more about the residents through the spectrum of music that they carry with them. Such music sharing would foster greater awareness of each other while also prompting the conversational sharing of stories and memories associated with the songs. Another form of music sharing would invite musicians in the community to perform and tell stories in multi-media presentations. All of these visual and audio presentations could also assume an

online dimension, where men could share their paintings, photography, music, and performances. Such online displays would offer avenues for those who participate to connect with a wider artistic community, thus fostering identities that stretch beyond those defined by homelessness and the shelter.. Some of these tangible and intangible collections could also be catalogued, deposited, and stored in a large-container-style time capsule, to which residents could add their personal or collective art works, writings, and digitally recorded stories. This would enable the IFC community to use such objects of meaning in the future to celebrate their history through material culture. Such collection-based archival material would also help future shelter residents understand more about those that lived in the spaces before them. Residents could additionally use this material to teach, develop courses, and generally disseminate knowledge about their collective histories as a shelter community to broader audiences.

Community kitchens and community exhibitions could help the shelter realize the potential for greater community collaboration, participation, and empowerment. Local artists and museums could facilitate the creation of art and loan artwork to the shelter; they could also support the construction of museum cases inside the shelter in which men could curate mini-exhibitions of their own material culture. Such collaboration would encourage dialogue in the spaces that men do share and offer them a chance to perform visually. (Alternative ways to perform self are especially important for those struggling to establish their place in the community.) The wider community could be invited into the shelter as part of Chapel Hill's monthly Friday night art walks.

The opportunities to create temporary and more permanent artwork could utilize digital media, live interpretation, performances, projection, installation, and conceptual art. Stories, for instance, could be projected onto the inside and outside of the building, where the focus could include such themes as foodways, dreams, and identity. In the same vein, the library could be extended to include multi-media sound recording rooms, quiet places for private reflection, a display of “books of the week,” and meeting spaces for a book club, writing group, or song club, all of which would acknowledge the men’s diverse backgrounds and tastes. In the same way, Talking Sidewalks could be extended to include a self-produced magazine or an online, community-based project.

I also see an opportunity to fully embrace the idea of digitally crafting home in the form of collective and personal Twitter accounts. Twitter, with its membership-based format, presents a chance to foster in-group connections in short bites of information, thus building solidarity amongst its members. Twitter and other forms of social media could offer residents a way to communicate with one another and with groups of interest both inside and outside the shelter. Residents would be able to inform each other instantly of specific events; further, they could use these platforms to foster positive and performative competitive camaraderie (e.g., by writing Twaiku-Haiku poetry in a tweet). Twitter could offer residents another performative way to share with each other, while also giving them the option of not responding.

The shelter walls could prominently feature portraits of newcomers and persons in the community’s history, thus complementing the current portrait of

Dr. King and the Gandhi-faced clock, while fostering a sense of belonging, validation, and recognition. Text and audio components of such displays should utilize multiple languages to embrace those for whom English might be a second language. The new shelter building could also feature murals in bathrooms, along corridors, and on outside walls, thus presenting some of the stories the men want to share in a medium that others can easily connect to. Murals could also help to challenge the stigmatizing stereotypes held by the wider community, by delivering messages about the men's lives that stretch beyond common perceptions of homelessness and that lives of those who find themselves in that situation.

Another area of possible change rests in the shelter's rules. Many of the art-oriented and communal activities that I've already discussed can readily be incorporated into residents' daily routines without challenging any of the shelter's rules. The men tell me that they recognize the need for these rules, even if they don't agree with all of them. At the same time, however, most residents would welcome some flexibility to respond to the needs of those who work at night or need a place to nap in the daytime. Providing such flexibility would allow men to pursue a wider range of employment opportunities. One way to insure this flexibility would be to invite the residents to serve on a "rules committee," giving them input into the creation and refining of the shelter's rules. Engagement of this nature would both empower and involve newer residents at an earlier stage in their shelter experience; at the same time, it would integrate new voices and

new ideas into the rule-making process, thus responding to the changing and transient nature of men's life experiences.

Although men talk about the shelter as transitional, it is still a space that provides opportunities to make friends and form other types of relationships, as I have found through my own friendships with most of the men I have met.

Designing the new shelter to intentionally foster connections with the cultural facilities that exist nearby—libraries, cultural centers, galleries, museums, writing centers, poetry performance sites, food organizations, and other places—would invite dialogue between the shelter and the greater community, and would afford residents a greater chance to meet people outside the shelter. Such arrangements would also give non-shelter residents a chance to get to know the men who reside there. And they would offer residents a different degree of ownership in their home, even if it is only temporary.

In order to create and build a community in this way, I would suggest drawing from the skill set of residents as well as staff workers, volunteers, artists, UNC students, and representatives from other organizations in the wider community. For instance, different players could work collaboratively to record and transcribe conversations with shelter residents. These recordings could then prompt further discussions about what might be missing at the shelter, and would help staff better understand what residents want to tell, display, or perform to others about themselves. Material such as ethnopoetic scripts—transcriptions of spoken word in poetic and story form—and multimedia narratives could offer the men new ways to performatively describe their experience for representatives of

other agencies, social workers, and the police; to claim benefits entitled to them; or perhaps simply to elevate their status in the community in which they live.

Throughout this project, men have talked about living in transitional spaces and seeing the shelter as a place that functions as what one resident called a “stone in the brook.” This metaphor is infused with specific cultural meaning, invoking staff workers, volunteers, and community residents, as well as speaking to different identities, and to shared and contrasting notions of home. The sense of finding home, of belonging or feeling grounded, means much more than simply having a place to sleep, eat, and access resources. The crafting and designing of open and adaptable spaces would enable imagination, memories, and remembrances, thus fostering further reflection and conversation among shelter residents. In order to do justice to their stories, however, and to better understand what they reveal about who the residents are, where they come from, and what they might be trying to achieve through their tellings, we must broaden the ways we look at these narratives.

Conversations spark new understandings, suggesting new ways to navigate the day-to-day challenges of shelter living, being labeled homeless or displaced, and being without a physical home. Recognizing the diverse ways that men craft and think about home enables us to collectively make decisions about the home we choose for ourselves. It might also help a group of displaced people move beyond a state of liminality to a greater sense of groundedness and place. This is not to say that men do not already have such conversations; what I suggest here, though, is increasing the number of opportunities for men to have

these kinds of conversations. In one Talking Sidewalks workshop that I led, I focused on the subject of home. After the workshop, one man told me that he now saw entirely new ways to conceptualize home. He added that when someone called him homeless, he would now challenge him/her, because he had been able to unpack and look more closely at what home meant to him. This, of course, was only one man's experience; but if every person labeled as homeless were able to unpack notions of home in this way, it would invite the crafting of more stories that challenge the label of "homeless." This could potentially have a great impact on the stigma of homelessness, and could help restore these "invisible" people as valid, integral, and recognized members of society. The process of dialogical ethnography would also enable support workers, staff, volunteers, and residents to craft the types of questions that would be fruitful in this process.

To get to the point of realizing and forming new identities and life directions, conversations should take place over a period of time. This means that residents should have opportunities to converse in places where they feel comfortable, including places outside the shelter; residents should be able to share new experiences together over food or coffee, at an art gallery, other at other sites of artistic engagement that would encourage conversation. This would invite men to move closer to the places of comfort that might be revealed through this process.

The recommendations I have offered thus far specifically target the IFC community as it builds a new shelter. I would like now to review the main points

of my thesis, which include the transformative potential that rests in storytelling, story collecting and dialectic exchange, and the opportunities that arise from exploring the ways that shelter residents infuse cultural meaning in the objects and personal possessions that they carry with them.

An aesthetics of home can be found in the ways that people converse and perform their identities to one another and to wider communities, and in the personal possessions that they carry. Although homeless persons may lack the opportunity to carry many objects, the fact that they carry fewer of them often means that each such item becomes a powerful vehicle for igniting conversations, evoking memory, and establishing meaningful dialogue and discourse. These objects can offer insight into the ways persons make sense of the world around them. Objects that are initially kept private sometimes become more public once a shelter resident feels he can talk about the object's meaning in a safe and comfortable way that does not bring harm to him or to it. A trusting environment enables men to establish relationships with a wider community and to form friendships and community connections beyond the shelter, which many of the men tell me is deeply important.

Focusing on such objects of value offers a way to escape from the most immediate and difficult feelings of rejection that many homeless people grapple with. Personal objects also become tokens that encourage men to speak about change and the possibility of creating a new identity. A hat, a token, a tattoo, a book, a Bible, a temporary artwork made from found objects—all can powerfully express what is important to an individual.

Finding shared meaning in aesthetic resources demonstrates the untruth in the dehumanizing label of “homeless.” Using labels as points of conversation with people who are so labeled can help *them* understand how to turn the label around, gaining a sense of personal or collective empowerment. Such conversations provide opportunities to focus on the wealth of knowledge, resistance strategies, life experiences, and survival skills that point to the search for home. Recognition and validation are thus modes of empowerment that can help people to achieve a sense of home.

Dialectic exchange creates maps of our imagination. These maps can help us form new ways to look at and reshape our past. We can then focus on past experiences where feelings of home might be found. This type of dialogical opportunity can offer a chance to shape and understand a possible life direction, and at the same time offers a frame for a person who wants to be a supporter. Dialectic exchange involves shared moments and experiences, which can be starting points for joint exploration and a shared sense of home. As many homeless persons experience extreme isolation, the process of telling includes the essential component of having someone listen to what they have to say, how they feel, and how they see and make sense of the world around them. Rehearsing—performing a narrative—becomes a way that homeless men can tell their stories to one another, seeking attention and offering intrigue and wonder.

Such conversations have important therapeutic and communicative functions, offering avenues of artistic engagement, inviting memories, and

invoking physical and intangible aesthetics of home. Encouraging conversations requires the shelter community to think about the integration of artistic potential not as an “add-on phenomenon” that takes place through the occasional weekly event, but instead as something that might be built into the very fabric of the building.

While there are homeless people who find meaning in memories, stories, and objects that provide them with a sense of home, there are also people in every society and community who have houses but still do not enjoy the fulfillments of home. This would include groups who do not have a voice in politically oppressed societies, internally displaced peoples, and people affected by gentrification or other capitalist expansions that result in more homelessness. Although this project has focused on one shelter community in the American South, I suspect that the experiences and home-notions of a group of homeless men in Chapel Hill offer paths to understand, build relationships with, and begin a process of discourse with a much broader population. This project also points to physical structures and programs that could build solidarity and support among, and resonate with the collective experiences of, homeless populations all over the world.

Whether we have homes or not, we as individuals and as a society are all continually grappling with establishing a sense of who we are and where we come from. We try to tell coherent stories about ourselves so we can better understand “ourselves” as a collective, diverse, and plural society, as well as better understand ourselves as individuals in this society. Through listening to the

narratives of homeless persons, I have found that these stories offer mirrors to our own lives, reflections of how we often place conditions upon ourselves, how we create restraints that can hinder realizing our full artistic and creative potential. Our stories offer us a way to skillfully craft for ourselves a sense of home, identity, and belonging. We use our stories—and the material objects with which we surround ourselves—to form and shape ourselves into groups of belonging; stories and other artistic and cultural expressions serve as a means of establishing new identities and charting new life directions. They help us form connections with others as we search for new personal or collective definitions of home. For homeless persons, stories empower and thus offer the chance to find a sense of home.

For residents of this shelter community, who live without many material objects, the lack of material possessions amplifies the role that stories play as vehicles of self-presentation. Many of us can surround ourselves with material objects that most of the homeless simply cannot. Therefore, a key path to engaging with this community lies in better listening on the part of those that want to support residents through homeless transition. Such engagement would foster opportunities for telling. As such, it becomes a critical tool for those who seek to support homeless persons.

A dialogical process offers an avenue for better understanding individuals, and thus to more fully share in these diverse human experiences. Such sharing not only challenges the idea of homelessness, but also enables us all to craft and establish a greater sense of belonging, identity, place, and

community, and to form friendships based on love, comfort, family, and safety. These principles point to the ways we might establish a greater sense of home in a collective, diverse, and plural society, no matter where we find ourselves in this ever-changing world.

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