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Homelessness and the city

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I am not concerned in this chapter to cast so very wide a net. I am keeping to what I know most immediately through fieldwork undertaken and my own research and writing, and also the reading that has been of most immediate use and interest to me in trying to make sense of homelessness. My point of reference throughout is street homelessness as this might be encountered and understood in the cities of the UK and US. A more wide-ranging review might reach out to trouble the definition of homelessness, as Glasser and Bridgman (1999) do, if briefly, by examining varying apppellations and constructions as culturally situated:

[I]n Montreal, Quebec, people are variously called les itinérants by the religious and advocacy community (the newspaper sold on the streets of Montreal is L’itinéraire) and sans-abri (without shelter) for use within professional and academic circles . . . one speaks of the roofless in India, the furosha (“floating people”) of Japan, and the gamino (street child, from the word “gamin”) of Columbia.

(1999: 4; italics in original)

Also by asking questions about those for whom lack of permanent settlement might be considered ‘a part of the culture of the group’ (Glasser and Bridgman, 1999: 5; italics in original). I do not aim to range so widely, or to bring to this chapter too much of anthropology’s comparative warrant – although I will come back around to the question of culture.

If one keeps one’s anthropology close to home – urban settings in the UK, urban ethnography either side of the Atlantic (these are home to me; see Strathern, 1987) – matters, and problems, of definition do not recede entirely. Homelessness is a category of need, and once acknowledged as such instigates further attempts at precise delineation, the better to make appropriate decisions about the allocation of finite resources. Yet categories of need arise in context and in consequence of available understandings, anxieties and patterns of practice. Conventions of recognition – ways of seeing – make homelessness what it is; and those conventions change, and can be challenged. Michael Rowe puts it this way, in the closing pages of his ethnographic study Crossing the Border:

We create and use borders as starting and stopping points for thought . . . Homelessness is, in part, a bureaucratic and political category. Its divisions by time served, demographics,
disability, or the sheer bad luck of its occupants are abstractions that give order to our thinking and help us allocate scarce resources for unlimited human needs. The otherness of homelessness has its special stigmata, derived from history, from observation of homeless persons, and from our pity, disgust, and fears. We mentally place homeless individuals at our symbolic border and see them as living apart from us, perhaps because of our uncomfortable feeling of closeness to them.

(Rowe, 1999: 156)

There is, then, something arbitrary about the category ‘homeless’. Homelessness is, perhaps, just a word. I do not mean there is no such thing. Rather, I am drawing attention to the ways in which homelessness is put together, is pulled this way and that in consequence of its construction as a social problem. Susan Hutson and Mark Liddiard (1994) have addressed this issue in relation to homelessness among young people in particular, exploring the ways in which representations of youth homelessness come to us by way of press coverage, televised documentaries, agency and campaign reports and academic studies, all of these combining definitions of the problem with explanations as to why it occurs; it is a second-hand world we inhabit after all, as C. Wright Mills has it (1959).

Kim Hopper, looking back across the last quarter of the twentieth century and taking stock of ‘one troubled participant’s attempt to assay the career of homelessness among single men’ (2003: 7), identifies dilemmas of classification and definitional quandaries as having plagued discussion and understanding. Definitional conventions flex and shrink, terminologies are developed and contested and then fall into disuse, official records prove incomplete, and more than that misleading; reigning constructs come and go. Much of this is taking place well above the heads of ‘the homeless’ themselves, whoever they might prove to be. Hopper’s downbeat but credible conclusion is that

it would take an elastic notion of homelessness to accommodate this unwieldy mix of station and circumstance. Indeed, the suspicion quickly mounts that seeking to impose order on the hodgepodge of dislocation, extreme poverty, migrant work, unconventional ways of life, and bureaucratic expediency that have, at one time or another, been labelled homeless may well be a fool’s errand.

(Hopper, 2003: 17–18)

In the absence of a definition that might hold for more than a moment or two, Hopper offers instead two framing constructs, the first of which he borrows from historical sociology: abeyance; the many mechanisms by which society absorbs and contains its surplus populations; the various accommodations – pun very much intended – made and introduced (and cobbled together by those directly affected) that keep homelessness going even at the same time as they blunt its appearance. The second is taken from anthropology: liminality; the dangerous indeterminacy of those in passage betwixt and between recognised social roles and locations; ‘the suspension of the rule of the commonplace . . . [and the] intermingling with unfamiliar others in strange settings, often mobile circumstances’ (2003: 20); the possibilities for return, and the consequences of derailment. Hopper suggests that, taken together, these two – abeyance and liminality – might serve as a useful corrective to seeing the homeless only as the homeless we see on the street. The point is well made; to think in these terms is to tie an understanding of (street) homelessness back in to the conditions which produce and conceal it.

Even so, I want to turn now to the very thing that Hopper asks us to treat with caution: street homelessness. I am thinking again about definitions, and my point here is that homelessness is,
in at least one sense, not that much of a mystery. One doesn’t have to rely on expert and professional accounts to gain some awareness and understanding of the issue. This, I think, is important, although the consequences are several. As Rowe (1999) notes, the otherness of homelessness is combined with a feeling of closeness — and not just a feeling, as in a vague impression. Homelessness is close to hand and, as street homelessness, it is visible. On occasion it stands out and is hard to avoid, hard not to see; it can catch the eye — which can then become part of the problem it seems to pose. Whatever the definitional quandaries, one can see for oneself. And this essential visibility is not unconnected with ethnography and its possibilities; and as such not unconnected with anthropology, at least not if readers agree with Peter Wade that although ‘anyone can do ethnographic research . . . it is only really in anthropology that such a technique is constitutive of the subject’ (1997: 10; italics in original). Homelessness taken as street homelessness is, if nothing else, there, and as such available to view. More than that, it may be open to eventual recognition, to the possibility of working towards such, towards understanding and appreciation — of difference and commonality. Homelessness is what happens when individuals find themselves gone public with their needs and difficulties, and in this way (ever-mindful of Hopper’s note of admonition) it is unlike many other social problems which keep, or are kept, indoors and out of sight. This ought to matter to anthropologists, though we should be careful about why and how it matters and where the fact that it does matter then leads us. Because an anthropologist and ethnographer aims to see for her— or himself. Doing so in the city is not always easy, nor is this simply a case of struggling to look around corners.

The essential difficulty is one of the sequestration of urban life, which presents a dilemma of practice for the urban anthropologist, well enough understood by now. Shifting his fieldwork attentions from East Africa to Western Europe and, specifically, the French city of Lyon in the 1970s, Ralph Grillo records having encountered initial difficulties reconciling the methods that had formerly served him well: ‘direct, informal, personal contact with a limited number of informants with whom one could establish enduring rapport’ (1985: 15). The people he wanted to speak and spend time with were not to hand or available. They were either at work, in formal organisations to which only a limited sort of access could be gained, at best, or at home, watching TV in inner-city apartment blocks and typically unresponsive to the casual visit. Occasions for meeting people, Grillo reports, were more or less residual — weekends perhaps, an occasional evening; and even then everything inhibited by a generalised reticence to share. The nub of the problem was that ‘traditional anthropological methods require a sort of openness, or public accessibility, on the part of the society under observation’ (Grillo, 1985: 16), whereas in an urban and industrial society most people are busily leading private lives indoors. The essential privacy of modern urban life is that which the homeless must do without, certainly those who are reduced to making what they can of what is left to them of their circumstances out of doors. Anthropologists and ethnographers have taken note, and advantage, of this fact.

Writing on street homelessness is extensive; an exhaustive review would require a book in itself. There are numerous first-hand accounts, literary treatments, news reports and agency-sponsored studies; social exploration as a distinctive genre of writing (and harbinger of urban ethnographic investigation) offers considerable riches, both contemporary and classic (for the ‘Golden Age’ of social exploration see Keating, 1976). Standout ethnographic monographs on street and city homelessness, or running close alongside that lived circumstance, would include Teresa Gowan’s Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders (2010), Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg’s Righteous Dopefiend (2009), Mitchell Duneier’s Sidewalk (2000), Michael Rowe’s Crossing the Border (1999), Robert Desjardais’s Shelter Blues (1997) and Eliot Liebow’s Tell Them Who I Am (1993); James Spradley’s You Owe Yourself a Drunk (1970) is a model of scholarship and deservedly established as a classic of urban anthropology. Kim Hopper’s Reckoning With Homelessness (2004)
reports on over two decades of close ethnographic documentation spliced with other methods and approaches. My own work in this field includes two published ethnographies, Better Times Than This (Hall, 2003) and Footwork (Hall, 2016), and I will say more about each of these shortly. John Healy’s autobiography The Grass Arena (2008; originally 1988) was important early reading for me and as revealing as any ethnography I have looked at since.

Author’s own research

My own contribution to this field of study has been modest and stands incomplete; it is still working itself out in the anthropological dialectic of back and forth (and forwards) between life and ideas, or field and desk. I am in any case committed, it seems, to homelessness, having made this the defining research object of my academic career; and I have found it wholly absorbing as such. I have spent more time in hostels and night-shelters, in and out of daycentres, moving around neglected corners of city parks, back and forth through underpasses, up and down car park stairwells and along city streets than in any other fieldwork setting. It seems to me sometimes that it would be a better record of commitment to have this logged as miles covered than measured out in years. In any case I have written about little else since the 1990s, when I began my doctoral studies in anthropology at Cambridge. To what end? I think in setting out the trajectory of my interests and contribution it might help if I were to supply a couple of personal recollections, briefly, the first of which belongs to childhood and youth.

I grew up in England in the 1970s and 1980s, in the mostly comfortable suburbs of the post-industrial northern town of Manchester. Homelessness was no significant part of my immediate geography back then, not something I saw or had in any way to do or to deal with all that often as I made my way to and from school or around the narrow trade routes of my evenings and weekends: friends’ houses, the same few streets, one or other of two local parks, the playing fields and the woods beyond. Rare encounters – no more than sightings, really – with solitary figures we readily identified back then as ‘tramps’ were matters of mild curiosity and caution; such individuals were assumed to have strayed into our space from some other territory and didn’t belong. That was the suburbs. Manchester’s city centre was a different story. Once old enough to make the journey unaccompanied, a twenty-five-minute bus ride delivered a different landscape – and all sorts of dereliction. For much of the 1970s and on into the 1980s, large parts of central Manchester were on their last legs: decommissioned rail track and train stations; boarded warehouses; vacant cinemas, scheduled for demolition; empty plots of brick and mud; despoiled canals; mazy backstreets lined with dowdy shops hanging on somehow behind flyblown windows and empty floors above (see Figure 3.1).

The homeless – or those slumped and plodding individuals whom I took to be such – were here in greater numbers and seemed somehow to belong, as experiencing a neglect that was of a piece with their surroundings: there were some spaces of particular dereliction that were as good as theirs (in which I was an occasional, nervy interloper, easily startled). No one seemed to care too much what happened to the homeless or to the spaces in which they found themselves – at least it looked that way to me, aged 13, 14, 15. There seemed a sort of symmetry. Yet change was coming and was in parts already underway. A massive shopping precinct, ‘The Arndale Centre’, opened in the middle of the city just one year before I entered my teens. This development had involved extensive demolition and the realignment of local streets and was to shift the retail grav-
city was still there, just round the back or corner of most of this urban renewal, but out of sight, if you chose to keep it that way. The combination of old and new, visible and concealed, was particularly stark where building frontages were conserved, like stage props, while clearance and demolition were carried out behind.
Here and there, the shabbiness and disrepair of 1970s Manchester came close to that recorded well over a hundred years earlier by Friedrich Engels (whose work I wasn’t to read till I left Manchester for Cambridge in the late 1980s). So too the façadism: grand frontages concealing a maze of neglected streets to the rear. Every urban anthropologist should read Engels’s proto-ethnography *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1993; originally 1844). His descriptions of a city peculiarly built so that those who would rather not see the damage done, ‘the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left’ (1993: 58), could keep from doing so are as powerful today as they were in the nineteenth century. Today in Manchester, just as back then, the street homeless ‘sleep where they find a place, in passages, arcades, in corners where the police and the owners leave them undisturbed’ (Engels, 1993: 44), hoping for indifference sufficient to see them through to the morning.

A second recollection. As a graduate in social anthropology, now living in London and considering the prospect of doctoral study, more or less certain that urban anthropology was my particular field and already considering a thesis addressed in some way to homelessness, the tipping point for me was a conversation with my closest friend, with whom I had shared a Manchester upbringing and who had spent the last six months working for a London charity, living in a house shared by a community of volunteers and ‘homeless’ residents, among the latter some only just off the streets and particularly challenging to live and work with, carrying with them different sorts of damage. The experience had been formative, I think, for my friend, and had shaken him. ‘Some of them you just feel so sorry for,’ he said. ‘There are some people who have had just no chance at all, and never will – not much of a chance. That’s about half of them, and you want to do all you can to help; they don’t deserve to have had it so hard. And the other half’ – he paused, and then delivered this verdict: ‘they pretty much deserve everything they get.’ He didn’t hold this as a view exactly, and would not have shared it with anyone else. But he was ready to say it, to me, just to hear the words – and rid himself of them somehow.

Each of these experiences – 1970s Manchester, and my friend’s cathartic judgment of those he had struggled to help – set me on my way, and I can establish the themes now, in retrospect. The doctoral work I eventually conducted was an ethnographic study of youth homelessness, the analysis of which was addressed directly to issues of inequality, disadvantage, liminality – one of Hopper’s two framing constructs – and judgments of deservingness. This was the early 1990s, and the UK was at that time caught up in in a circling anxiety about welfare and its consequences (or, to frame the same anxiety the other way around: poverty and its causes), fed by media reports and the contested sense to be made out of a ‘rediscovered’ poverty, one startling aspect of which was the growing number of young people to be seen sleeping on the streets of UK cities. Of particular influence, for a few years, was a series of provocative essays by US social scientist Charles Murray (1990; 1994) on what he was prepared to name as an emerging British underclass. My early studies of homelessness were an attempt to make a better sense of the UK underclass thesis and the wider mesh of social concern, and in particular to counter the accusation that the ‘new homeless’ – in particular the young – were somehow to blame for their own difficulties.

If it is the supposedly disaffected young who have provided the subtext to much of the British underclass debate over the last decade . . . then the young homeless have loomed larger here than most: our most vivid reminder of social exclusion, and exemplars too of the feckless, wilful poor – idle, irresponsible and up to no good; at home (comfortable, that is) at the margins.

*(Hall, 2003: 5)*
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My ethnography of youth homelessness, *Better Times Than This*, was an attempt to treat this population rather more seriously, and the accusation of undeservingness more seriously still. I rehearse some of the findings of that research, and its contribution, in later sections of this chapter.

My more recent work has continued as ethnographic but has shifted again, in some ways back to the city centre and to street homelessness. For a number of years now I have been working in the centre of Cardiff, capital city of Wales, tracing the spatial practice of the city’s rough sleepers and the spatial politics of public space and mobility in a city that has experienced significant redevelopment and renewal. The process of redevelopment is ongoing and in some ways particular to Cardiff, but at the same time it has been productive of what is now a familiar UK cityscape: tourist hotels and conference venues, student accommodation, sports stadia, event and exhibition centres, pedestrianised streets and café quarters; and, in Cardiff, a new shopping centre, part of a massive, retail-led, regeneration programme representing £675 million of investment across 967,500 square feet of land in the centre of the city. The move has been from a shabby and in parts neglected post-industrial cityscape to a smartened spectacle essentially organised around the pleasures (and business) of consumption. A process only just begun, and unevenly, in the Manchester I left behind as I began my university education is now full-blown in the city in which I live and work as a university teacher. Cardiff’s street homeless struggle to find space in amidst this new cityscape, as one might imagine. But rather than seek them out myself, I have been working with those whose job it (already) is to do just that. My ethnography of urban outreach, *Footwork* (Hall, 2016), attends to this work in some detail, describing the practice of a team of street-based care-workers tasked to patrol the city centre on the lookout for those in visible need and disrepair, in amidst a city busily putting itself back together.

Experience in the field and methods

My experiences in the field have been particular to me, of course, but I suspect they bear resemblance to a good few others’ if considered as played out across youth and then middle age; there is a pattern to a fieldwork career, not unconnected to the passage of years. When first embarked on doctoral fieldwork – a rite of passage for anthropologists, then as now – I was a young man in my mid-twenties and threw myself into an extremity of participation that had me homeless myself, sleeping out of doors and in emergency accommodation projects across London and the south-east of England. A good part of this time was spent in direct-access hostel accommodation units in central London managed by the then Department of Health and Social Security. These were large units, typically organised as dorm accommodation in which thirty to forty men would sleep together. Conditions were generally poor and often much worse, resources were limited and staff spread very thin. In only a couple of a years all these old units – ‘spikes’ as they were still, sometimes, called – were gone (the closure programme running rather ahead of fully worked plans for the development of replacement provision).

Those early months of fieldwork were instructive; I will never forget them and they have coloured my understanding, commitment and sympathies in ways which show through in all the work I have done since. But I soon enough recalibrated the balance of (raw) participation and observation, finding what was for me a more manageable engagement with homelessness, centred on the work of a smaller hostel, away from the centre of London, providing support to the young and single homeless. *Better Times Than This* opens with my move out from the centre of London to this new field setting and records a year spent in the company of the young people who made repeated use of the hostel. I took rented accommodation nearby, got myself
some sleep and set about a second phase of fieldwork. My methods throughout the year that followed were no more elaborate than those which had guided the urban ethnographic studies on which I had been raised, and which I held as exemplars. Close and intensive sustained observation, sympathetic participation, attention to detail no less than to context, a determined holism of intent, rigour in recall – to be confirmed in repetition – and detailed daily note taking. The very methods that Grillo struggled to realise in urban France I found available to me in England: ‘direct, informal, personal contact with a limited number of informants with whom one could establish enduring rapport’ (1985: 15). Not that this had all that much if anything at all to do with differences between the two countries. Instead, my informants were simply ‘out’ – of luck, of home, of doors – making repeated use of homeless accommodation projects, slipping in and (soon enough) out of such private rented accommodation as they had access to, and hanging about on the streets in between. Added to which they were young, in their mid- to late teens and early twenties. This was not unimportant. In different ways, and for mostly different reasons, going briefly public with one’s lived circumstances is a condition of both (street) homelessness and youth, and this doubling up – of exposure and visibility – was something I was to write about in time (see Hall 2000, 2006).

I then spent a few years on further research into youth and life course transitions, followed by a return to homelessness. In the interim I had become particularly interested in questions of locality and geography, working with young people to map out their neighbourhoods and the ways in which they knew these – routes through and around, invariably on foot – and the intersection between this local knowledge and young people’s biographies. I was buoyed in this by a wider and burgeoning interest in what came to be called ‘mobile methods’, shared by qualitative researchers in the UK and elsewhere (Kusenbach, 2003; Fincham et al., 2010). I carried this interest in local geography and street-level, pedestrian spatial practice over into a study of homelessness in Cardiff and the practice of a team of social care professionals and outreach workers tasked to make and maintain contact with vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations in situ, on the city streets. Hard-to-reach is usually taken to mean one thing, but actually means two. Firstly, hard-to-reach can refer to the sorts of difficulties welfare professionals might face in gaining the trust required of homeless clients on the first encounter if offers of support and intervention are to be accepted: at the sharp end of homelessness there is exclusion, alienation and suspicion enough to hold at least some rough sleepers back from ready cooperation. Michael Rowe’s Crossing the Border (1999) is particularly strong on the high stakes and careful negotiation entailed in encounters between outreach professionals and homeless clients. But if such encounters are to happen at all the street homeless have first to be located, and in this sense they are also sometimes hard to find. Not because they sit at home behind closed doors – homelessness is need and difficulty gone public – but because they are dispersed across the city centre, out of doors and on the move, either that or temporarily holed up somewhere and lying low, and either way by no means certain to be where you saw them last (see Bittner, 1967). The point being that outreach workers have a first task to undertake, before they begin on the work of welfare: they have to search out those they hope to help. This makes their engagement with the homeless always, at the same time, an encounter with the city, as territory and landscape; an intricate and shifting environment, variously cluttered and entangled, yet navigable and replete with signs and indications available to those who know what it is they are looking at and where they want to go. My recent ethnography Footwork (Hall, 2016) provides a close description of the spatial and perceptual practices of outreach workers in Cardiff, and the homeless geography they repeatedly traverse. Among other things, the book is an attempt to understand how it is the city looks to these professionals, and one answer to that question is that it looks a little like it looks to the homeless – has to, if you are doing your outreach job well, as the homeless are those whose spatial practices the outreach
team is always trying to discern and anticipate. In their classic handbook for the anthropological fieldworker, Pelto and Pelto remark that

anthropologists have a long history of Sherlock Holmes-like acuity in deriving data from physical traces. A well-worn path provides excellent, though incomplete, evidence . . . the different states of disrepair of buildings provide possible indexes . . . the extensiveness of refuse heaps gives testimony to durations of occupation . . . numbers of liquor bottles in garbage cans (and other places) . . . The imaginative fieldworker will find many other possibilities for inferring social information from the physical marks of wear and tear (and pollution) people habitually impose upon their physical environments.

(Pelto and Pelto, 1978: 115)

Something of the same thing holds true of a good few other inquirers after others’ lives, and this would certainly include outreach workers. Accordingly, my fieldwork practice in recent years has had me accompanying daily outreach patrols through the centre of Cardiff – early morning, early evening, late at night – managing this ongoing research commitment together with an increasingly busy home life and teaching responsibilities.

A final note on method: I have very seldom relied on interviews in my fieldwork practice. Others have done so to very good effect. It may be that I am a poor interviewer (such interviews as I have conducted very seldom seem to me worth making all that much of subsequently), but I am also slightly suspicious of the research interview and its tendency towards the production of ‘accounts’ as respondents seek to do the very thing they find it unnecessary to do in life: explain what it is they are up to. I prefer to watch and follow what people are already doing, and to note the (sorts of) things they have to say to one another as they do it. My field methods have always been elementary – my dear Watson! – and although I am open to and interested in methodological innovation, I always advise students to start simple, even if they don’t intend to keep things that way. Not that there is anything simplistic in trying to capture field experiences in written notes of various sorts (see Sanjek, 1990). These days, as for some years now, all my field notes are word-processed. Not so my very earliest records. I began my doctoral studies on the cusp of the arrival of the laptop as a plausible tool for the field (and desk), and now can’t imagine life without one. Even so, the sheer portability and resilience, the ease and familiarity, of pen and paper remain unsurpassed in my view. I’m increasingly interested in the place of the drawing in anthropological field notes, perhaps as a way of recoiling slightly from the recent enthusiasm with ‘visual methods’ (very often taken to mean technologically enhanced), and over recent years this has developed into a particular interest in the making and drawing of maps. Cartography was to become a central and organising feature of my Cardiff fieldwork, and I find now, looking back across the development of my field notes from that time, that the appearance of a new diagram or route map very often marks a shift or milestone in the development of my understanding. Indeed, one way in which to tell the story of my Cardiff fieldwork would be by following the evolutionary sequence of the very many maps I made of what was going on and where. The sequence begins with early jottings of location and itinerary scribbled on assorted loose-leaf papers, moving on to more precise and systematised attempts to record location, movement and activity. In time, I produced a number of detailed master plans of vicinity, replete with my own elaborate codes and keys marking particular categories of setting and occurrence. In addition to making my own maps, I also collected a large number of street maps, authorised representations of urban space, which I spread across dashboards, desks and coffee shop tables and defaced with traceries of recorded movement – an unofficial version of the city. Some of these movement maps count among the most intriguing entries in my research archive, the criss-crossing paths

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of key individuals captured as a spectrum of coloured pen lines, shared and recurrent practice confirmed through heavy scoring, densely cross-hatched zones of interest and seeming centres of gravity, spidery outliers tracing uncommon but memorable excursions away from where most of the action was and mostly still is. Oddly enough – although perhaps not – there are hardly any maps in *Footwork*. There is a single street plan and a rather abstract trace of outreach movement as captured by a GPS device. What this confirms, I suppose, is that maps were and continue to be the very thing that my fieldwork informants can manage very well without. Outreach workers know where they are, even as their movements through the city are also so often tentative and exploratory; so too the homeless. (One of the few things that explorers and locals have in common is that they neither of them carry maps, or need to.)

**Ethnographic findings and contribution**

*Better Times Than This* was written some years ago (Hall, 2003), but beneath the surface of its particular moment, the book is addressed to evergreen and essentially contested ideas about how we might understand and respond to poverty. If the UK underclass debate reads as dated in 2016, it remains the case that hardship and homelessness have not gone away or anywhere else; the latter continues as a priority social policy problem, at its most visible in the centre of the many cities in which the street homeless variously struggle to hold on to what little they have; in the UK, media attention is again directed towards growing numbers of young people in particular on the streets and moving in and out of hostel accommodation. New proposals to cut young people’s welfare entitlement have been put forward amidst continuing anxieties about deservingness and (benefit) dependency; ‘populist anti-claimant welfare policies’ (Beresford, 2016: 278) mix with all too familiar allegations that the lives some of the poor lead together might fold back into themselves somehow, perpetuating their disadvantage. Decades of anthropological study have been given over to this vexed assertion; but the issue and arguments are, as I have suggested, perennial. Anthropology has a role to play here, perhaps a continuing duty. My account of the lives of a few dozen homeless teens in the 1990s was as specific to their lived situation as I could make it, and as such also sensitive to how they lived through that circumstance together, sharing practices and understandings, some of those arrived at in situ and squared (up) to the difficulties in which they found themselves. I think such studies serve a useful function in a society that wants and needs to make a better fist of understanding how it is that poverty works for and against those who must live with it.

Moving on, I see my recent field studies in Cardiff as having three points of connection to others’ work and writings on homelessness and city space, and with public implications as such. The first of these has to do with the activity of homeless outreach itself and the knowledge it relies on and repeatedly confirms. To operate effectively, urban outreach workers have to know the city not only in detail but also in a manner aligned to what it is they are looking for. Put another way, they have to see and experience the city as their clients might also see and experience it, attending to the same affordances, recognising the same opportunities and accommodations – *sites of abeyance, sites of liminality* – honouring and breaching the same prohibitions. Accordingly, to trace out the spatial practice of any one outreach patrol is at the same time to begin to delineate the contours of what others have called ‘the homeless city’; and to do this is to map and affirm – to recognise – a space of operations (of care and the needs it seeks out and responds to) that stands as a possible counter to dystopic narratives of homelessness in the revanchist city (see Cloke *et al.*, 2010).

A second contribution, held in tension with the first, results from the sustained and iterative commitment that anthropological fieldwork implies, and from my mapping of outreach work
and homelessness in Cardiff over time. Having followed outreach practitioners around the city for the best part of ten years, covering hundreds of cross-hatched miles on foot (within not much more than the same couple of square miles of streets), it has been possible to trace the changing contours of this line of work. Records of outreach patrol stacked in palimpsest, as it were, supply an unobtrusive measure of urban renewal and its spatial politics and show a slow squeeze on the sorts of (neglected) city space on which Cardiff’s homeless used to be able to rely. Brought to its projected conclusion, such urban renewal looks a little like Figure 3.2.

Such overlooked spaces as remain are essential to outreach workers and the homeless alike, as these are the locations in which workers can reasonably hope to spend time undisturbed with those clients whose trust they hope to win. The essential point here is made with typical flair by Erving Goffman, who writes of the value of the workshop as a space in which off-street repairs can be undertaken, with all the necessary mess that might entail, but only so long as the object under repair ‘is sufficiently independent of its original environment to allow temporary transplanting to the shop without introducing a new set of damages’ (Goffman, 1991: 293). Indeed, street work with the homeless might, in some cases, lead towards a move indoors, but the work can take days and weeks of repeated contact and has to be done in situ, with outreach workers spending time in, and thereby affirming, the locations in which they find their charges. This is harder and harder to do in a city where the look of things matters so much more than it once did. None of which is to argue for a shabbier cityscape. And yet. Footwork struggles with this issue in its closing pages, and I have written more on the politics of space and (im)mobility with my colleague Robin Smith (see Hall and Smith, 2011, 2013).

A third contribution links the foregoing with recent writings in urban theory proposing that greater recognition and thought be given to the unremarked yet ongoing work of urban repair and maintenance, including cleaning – the upkeep of the physical fabric of our cities (see Amin, 2006; Thrift, 2005; Graham and Thrift, 2007). Doing so, it is suggested, might open a way through to new framings of urban politics, new ways in which to envisage the possibility of the

Figure 3.2  Central Square, Cardiff, 2016 © Foster + Partners
good city, which stop short well short of utopian ambitions but aim instead at the everyday resilience that comes with repeated acts of urban kindness. There are, however, several difficulties in making too hasty a transposition from physical repair to social kindness, one of which has to do with the look of things. Appearance matters to repair and can serve as a useful guide throughout the process: objects that are broken generally have the appearance of being so; repaired, they tend to look better than they did. But appearance is no true guide, and the politics of appearance, cleanliness and repair are, or can be made, dubious. A cosmetic fix that does little more than tidy away the unsightliness of damage, or need, is no repair at all (see Hall and Smith, 2015). Again, Footwork explores this issue in some detail.

**To what avail?**

Taking advantage is a turn of phrase I used early on, and I meant it to sting. Kim Hopper (2003), among others, has taken academics to task for failing to move beyond description; ‘producing no more than field guides to sequestered, exotic subcultures’, as Gowan neatly summarises (2010: 297). I am pleased that my own studies in Cardiff have rather more straddled the border (Rowe, 1999), focused as they have been on practitioner attempts to overcome exclusion and engage vulnerable others. (Note that outreach work itself is of course, in part, a practice of abeyance and thereby implicated in the maintenance of homelessness; experienced outreach practitioners readily recognise and struggle with this.) Certainly academic research on homelessness has to count for something and be made to matter (see Valado and Amster, 2012; also Hall, 2013). Who could argue against that? All the same, I sometimes find the public implications of my research harder to identify than many of my colleagues imagine I might. Nor am I wholly persuaded that advocacy is a disciplinary imperative for anthropology (see Wade, 1996). In other areas of my life, out of office hours, I make my own contribution to the fields of study that hold my academic attention; but my academic writing remains for the most part those two things precisely: academic and writing. I might note that my keenest readers in recent years have been those practitioners whose work features in my written accounts of homeless outreach. The public I am most sure of, however, consists of the cohorts of young students who take my classes year on year, on their way to degrees in the social sciences and adult lives beyond that. I like to think of them out there, able to tell the difference between good argument and bad, an ethnographic imagination mixed in with the rest of their education.

In the introduction to the first edition of his book *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has the following to say about popular wisdom and poverty:

> The poor will always be with us: this much we can learn from popular wisdom. What popular wisdom is not so confident and outspoken about is the tricky question of how the poor are made to be poor and come to be seen as poor, and how much the way they are made and seen depends on the way we all – ordinary people, neither rich nor poor – live our daily lives and praise or deprecate the fashion in which we and the others live them.

*(2004: 1)*

This is sincere reasoning, and also an invitation: if the poor are always with us – and it would be wholly naive, worse than careless, to take such a statement as any sort of permit for complacency – then it remains the case that what it means to be poor depends very much – as Bauman goes on to say – on the kinds of ‘us’ the poor are ‘with’. My teaching has always been directed to the sorts of ‘us’ an education in ethnography might lead students towards. Readers of this chapter, and this book, as students and researchers themselves, will bear Bauman’s counsel in mind I hope
as they plot their own course through the city and its very many others and their many needs, some visible and some not so.

Notes
1 Most of it didn’t, of course; most of it came nowhere near the conditions Engels encountered in the course of his forays through the backstreets of nineteenth-century Manchester. Nor did any of this dispair arise from the same circumstance. Engels captured the damage done by an emergent urban industrial economy, in a city created more or less de novo (Joyce, 2003: 9); to walk the shabby streets of 1970s Manchester was to witness the damage done by the retreat of that same economy, a post-industrial landscape. There were some locations in the middle of the Manchester of my youth from which you might draw the conclusion that the city was to all intents and purposes done for, finished.
2 Murray described himself back then, in typically colourful language, as ‘a visitor from a plague area come to see whether the disease is spreading’ (1990: 3). He was prepared to name and frame a US underclass and on that basis was prepared to argue that the UK had one too, or had one coming. That visitors from plague areas might themselves be implicated in the spread of disease does not seem to have occurred to him. Needless to say, Murray’s use of a language of pathology was widely condemned as inappropriate.
3 For those ‘rusty on the history’ as she puts it (2010: 20), Teresa Gowan reviews culture versus structure in American poverty studies in the early pages of Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders (under the subheading ‘Wrestling the Post-Moynihan Syndrome’).
4 From whom I have borrowed my subheading here.

Bibliography


