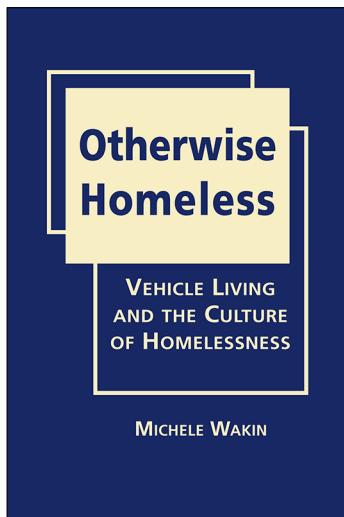


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Otherwise Homeless:
Vehicle Living and
the Culture of Homelessness

Michele Wakin



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Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 Homes on Wheels	1
2 A Brief History of Homelessness and Vehicle Living	21
3 Navigating Vehicle Living	45
4 Negotiating Public Spaces	73
5 Service Provision and Programming	97
6 Vehicle Living vs. Unsheltered Homelessness	125
7 When Beggars Become Choosers	167
<i>References</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>185</i>

1

Homes on Wheels

Louie lives behind a woodpile in the industrial area next to the shelter. He is fresh out of prison after serving a five-year sentence for felony robbery, and the woodpile is the only place he feels safe. When it's really cold, Louie sleeps in his small car, a Toyota Celica packed with possessions and smelling of rot. Louie is tall—6'2"—and the car is uncomfortable for him so he rarely uses it as sleeping quarters. Occasionally, shelter staff coax him indoors with the promise of a cot in the corner, where Louie feels safer than he does in the middle of the floor.

Although his given name is Luis and he is Puerto Rican, he speaks no Spanish and everyone calls him Louie, Crazy Louie, or Louie the Lip. Tall, skinny, and mostly balding, Louie ties his hair into a little pony tail at the base of his neck. When things are going well, he is clean shaven and wears jeans and a button-down Hawaiian shirt or a T-shirt. When things are not going well, he is unkempt, unshaven, and wears a multi-colored joker's hat, complete with jingle bells on the ends. When things are really bad, Louie carries a hatchet, which he ordinarily hides in his car for protection. The hatchet is meant to warn people that Louie is not easy prey. He also uses it to even the score if more than one person tries to go after him. In particular, Louie worries about being "rat packed" by a group of Mexicans and Central Americans with whom he sometimes conflicts. As he says, "I can deal with the bean, it's the burrito I can't handle."

"I am no stranger to Santa Barbara," Louie told me. "I was one of the tree people in the 80s." In those days, there was no homeless shelter, so people congregated around one of the local landmarks, the Moreton Bay Fig Tree. "I met a lot of people, did a lot of stupid things. It was more adventurous then. I jumped a train once to go pick peyote in Texas. I picked in March though and it was colder than shit through Texas. You could make friends at the Fig Tree though. It's the same as

people here, kind of like family.” Louie was taken from his own family when he was eight years old and placed in a home for abused children. Surprisingly, he describes this as a nurturing experience “It was a small group of kids who couldn’t go to regular schools, and I was pretty much everybody’s best friend, I was always captain of the team.”

Unfortunately, his comfort and status there were short-lived and Louie moved from the group home to foster care. By age 11, he says, “all of a sudden, I don’t feel good about my situation. Now I got a foster dad that’s abusing me and I’m basically more like a pet for them.” He switched foster homes several times and got into trouble often: “I had issues, you know; I was not a happy person.” His early experiences at the group home, he says, “helped establish my character because of the way the other kids made me feel. I had my dignity intact.” Yet foster care eventually took a toll on Louie and he began to lose his ability to cope with adversity. “There was a point in time where I would take it all in and think that, you know, I could tough it out, you know, and stuff like that—and you hit bottom finally one day and find out you got nothin’ in your tank. There’s no past experience to say some day you’ll get out of this because you say no, I’ve never been out of it, you know what I mean?”

By the time he was 27, Louie had been in and out of jail for petty crimes. Finally, he committed his most serious crime, “so there I was robbing a jewelry store across from the police department at noon on Friday. I didn’t give a fuck—I’m at the point where I’m saying, *let’s do this.*” He describes his partner in crime getting cold feet when they were ready to rob the store. “He got scared and said ‘it don’t look good.’ Well, it don’t never look good when it could be the worst day of your life.” Although it took the police a month to catch up with him, Louie was given ten years to life and was paroled after serving five. Prison was difficult for Louie, and in order to survive it, he competed with the other inmates by lifting weights. He pushed himself to the physical limit and continues to suffer chronic neck and back pain as a result. By the time I met him, Louie was taking three Vicodin to survive each day.

Soon after his release from prison, Louie applied for supplemental security income (SSI). “I’ve got to survive, you know; this outdoor shit is hell on my back.” SSI benefits are intended for low income people who are over age 65, blind, or disabled, and Louie fell into the latter category. He initially submitted his application in April 1999, and it was denied twice because of insufficient proof of disability. To assist him in filing a third appeal, Louie contacted Channel Counties Legal Services Association, an agency specializing in civil cases for indigent clients.

With all of the paperwork finally in place, Louie was granted SSI in December 2000. He was deemed unable to work and therefore disabled because of “mental and physical impairments,” including depression, personality disorder, Hepatitis B and C, and kidney and thyroid problems. Although recurrent substance abuse was also listed among his disabilities, this did not mean he could not receive SSI, merely that he needed to establish a representative payee who would agree to receive and disburse the money.¹ In March 2001, almost two years after he filed the initial application, Louie received a total of \$8,421.34, representing the monthly payments he would have received since the date of his application, with deductions for general relief and employment payments he received during that time.

Louie’s first purchase was a 1978 Toyota Dolphin motor home with 99,000 miles on it. He met its owner at a gas station in the shelter neighborhood and struck up a conversation with him. The man owned a home and used the Dolphin for vacations. It was in excellent shape, with the original upholstery and a sound engine and exterior. The toilet, shower, and stove were all in working order, and the interior had a collapsible kitchen table and a long bench that doubled as a sleeping area. It also had a smaller sleeping area above the driver’s seat (cab).

Louie lived in the Dolphin for about four years, until he received a Section 8 voucher and moved into his own apartment. One of the main differences between living in his vehicle and living in an apartment was that Louie no longer had to worry about moving the vehicle or coming into contact with law enforcement. “They don’t harass me now like they used to. I got tickets for everything. But don’t get me wrong now, the Dolphin was better than the street. I can lay my stuff out here (in my apartment), I don’t have to move it around, and with my medication there are many times where I really shouldn’t be moving. You know what I mean?”

Louie’s life experiences illustrate some of the reasons that homeless people use vehicles as a form of housing. First and foremost, vehicles allow for more safety, privacy, and autonomy than the shelters or the streets can provide. Living in a vehicle gave Louie the private space he needed to avoid the conflicts he faced on the street and to gain needed, uninterrupted rest. But vehicle living was not without its challenges, as purchasing and maintaining a vehicle also required managing resources and responsibilities. Louie’s ability to manage financial resources, as well as legal and social responsibilities, is what kept him in his vehicle and eventually helped him transition to apartment living. Not all people who live in vehicles as permanent housing are able to manage these challenges and to purchase their vehicles legally or live in them on a

long-term basis. Vehicles are not always used as a midway point between street and apartment living.

Vehicle living is one of many makeshift housing solutions used by homeless people to avoid the shelters and the streets. This book offers an in-depth ethnographic exploration of vehicle living in California and examines how it differs from other forms of makeshift housing. It treats public space as the contested ground on which the daily struggle for survival plays out. I focus on the regulatory practices used by police and city officials to curtail access to public spaces and the modes of resistance used by homeless people and advocates to argue for increased rights and privileges. The dynamic relationship between regulation and resistance is endemic to the experience of homelessness. This dynamic is the theoretical framework used to set vehicle living apart from other makeshifts, to examine how people living in vehicles negotiate public spaces, to explore how and why they resist shelters, and to underscore the importance of creating effective social policy that breaks the cycle of regulation and resistance.

The focus on public space is well-traveled ground, as “space wars” are a central part of the literature on homelessness and urban sociology (Dear and Wolch 1987; Duneier 1999), legal geography (Mitchell 2001), and the focus of national agencies like the National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty and the National Coalition for the Homeless. The occupation of public spaces is also an emotionally charged issue, as NIMBY² battles demonstrate. Fitting vehicle living into this landscape shows that it is different from other forms of makeshift housing for homeless people, as most makeshifts do not allow for a long-standing or permanent claim to public space. Vehicles, by contrast, offer the possibility of legal ownership and a great deal of control over one’s living environment. How does this affect the occupation of public spaces and the attention received from citizens and law enforcement?

Regulation is a way of putting homeless people literally and figuratively in their place by constraining their physical location and their behavior. “Strategies of authority” are one way of describing how homeless or other “unruly” people are managed. Talmadge Wright (1997, 183) describes four essential *authoritative regulation strategies* that exclude, repress, displace, or assimilate homeless people in terms of their occupation of public space and their participation in various forms of communication and protest. Authoritative regulation strategies also redefine social-physical spaces to favor their own interests (Wright 1997, 181). Homeless people who are unsheltered face regulation in the form of public space ordinances that target where they are and activities associated with a life in public (National Law Center on Homelessness

and Poverty 2002). Examining what forms of regulation people living in vehicles encounter and how they manage them is one way of differentiating vehicle living from other makeshifts.

Resistance is a counter to regulation. It is a way of preserving choice and autonomy over living space. Homeless people have limited resources with which to pursue ongoing, organized resistance (Cress and Snow 1996). As a result, the most common forms of homeless resistance are designed to preserve a sense of self-worth or argue for services and provisions, including affordable housing and entitlement to public spaces. Immediate survival needs often overshadow ongoing, organized resistance. Vehicles offer unique resources for enacting resistance as they give homeless people a private, legally defensible space in which to conduct activities usually done in public. How does this affect their self-esteem, and how does it position them in the struggle for social legitimacy?

Negotiating an Interest in the Life

Crazy Ed: Hey Michele, that's Groucho, Groucho, that's Michele.

Louie: Ed thinks I sound like Groucho Marx. So anyhow, so what's the situation, you just interested in what, the Life?

Focusing on vehicle living was a choice I made according to interest as well as safety. On the streets and in the shelters, I was always, either explicitly or implicitly, beholden to someone to ensure that I was safe.³ Vehicle living offered a more private, controlled environment in which to have conversations and conduct interviews. I spent over three years conducting ethnographic research among the homeless community and just over one year intensively researching vehicle living in Santa Barbara, California. I also conducted comparative research in Sonoma and Santa Cruz counties during the summers of 2006 and 2008 with a focus on policies for serving unsheltered homeless people, including those in vehicles.

For nine months of this research, I carried a digital audio recorder at all times and transcribed every night. This yielded an overwhelming amount of data. I also worried that I was relying on the recordings at the expense of actively listening (Lofland et al. 2006, 106). I switched to taking field notes and, later, to conducting semi-structured interviews, administering surveys, and conducting vehicle counts, for the remainder of this research. Discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, these

changes in methodology reflect an emerging research agenda that honed in specifically on the experience of vehicle living.

My approach combines macro-level concerns about the relationship between inequality and public space with the methodological mandate of Participatory Action Research (PAR); that research participants shape the research agenda, from start to finish (Foote Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991, 20). My role became increasingly advocacy oriented (Cole 1991), as I established and maintained rapport with several informants who aided in the process of data collection. Ethnographers who conduct advocacy research not only involve informants or community members, they play an active role in making social change happen. They advocate for the groups they research, write in forums to change public opinion, embarrass power brokers, and provide key information about a situation at opportune moments in the policy decision making forum (Fetterman 1991, 126).

Throughout the course of this research, I became actively involved in local-level policy through regular presentations to the Santa Barbara City Council and County Board of Supervisors and through involvement with nonprofit advocates and service providers. I also testified on behalf of homeless defendants at numerous municipal court trials in which they were cited for sleeping and camping. Data collected in service of this research were also used to justify the creation of the Safe Parking Program, which allowed safe nightly parking for people living in their vehicles. I ran this program as the Homeless Outreach Coordinator for ten months of this research, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. This experience illustrated the issues involved in creating policies and programs to serve homeless people and keep them off the streets.

To explore the issues involved in policing homeless people in public spaces, I conducted numerous ride-alongs with officers in Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma counties. This was an essential step in understanding the opposite sides of the fight for public space. I also examined the point-in-time (PIT) counts in each of the three counties as a way of looking at how the federally mandated PIT is used to enumerate local homeless populations and design policies for serving them. This foray into federal and local policy helped formulate a more nuanced sense of regulatory mechanisms as both provisional and punitive.

My evolving role in the field was part of negotiating an interest in “the Life.” Moving from buddy to advocate to service provider brought about fundamental changes in the way I viewed homeless people and the way they viewed me (Cole 1991; Jorgensen 1989, 55). This evolution also illuminated the regulation-resistance dynamic this book describes.

In the early stages of this work, it was difficult to maintain an “embodied presence” (Emerson 2001). I was always thinking about what I would bring back and present. That meant that in Erving Goffman’s observation, I was playing a discrepant role, as “fink” or “informer” (Goffman 1959). Focusing on advocacy meant that rather than being a detached or even critical observer, I was actively involved in understanding and communicating aspects of vehicle living and homelessness that highlight issues of equity. I was also involved in shaping policy, turning observation into action. In the chapters that follow, I describe how vehicle living fits into the landscape of homelessness and explore how to direct policy and ethnography to increasing awareness and working toward social change.

Vehicle Living and Homelessness

Situating vehicle living along a continuum of housing solutions for homeless people underscores the fluidity of “homelessness” as a social category. According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), individuals living in their vehicles are officially part of the unsheltered homeless population. The high degree of variation within this category makes any attempt at enumeration difficult, as fixed definitions miss the myriad housing solutions and complex survival strategies that homeless people pursue. Yet definitions and enumeration drive federal funding, which in turn sets parameters for local policies and provisions.

Federally mandated PIT counts are a primary way of defining and measuring the homeless population and are required by HUD for any region seeking federal funding. According to HUD, unsheltered homeless people reside in “a place not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings (on the street)” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2004). There is a high degree of overlap between those considered unsheltered and chronically homeless. The latter sleep in emergency or transitional shelters or in places not meant for human habitation. They must also have a disabling condition, meaning “a diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability, or chronic physical illness or disability, including the co-occurrence of two or more of these conditions” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2004; 2008). The literally homeless are distinguished from the “precariously housed,” who are doubled up or who pay a disproportionate amount of their income on rent. Homeless assistance is not directed toward the precariously housed.

The PIT count leaves out a laundry list of people in marginal housing, collectively referred to as the “hidden homeless” (Burt et al. 2001; Rossi 1989; Hallett 2012). Prostitutes staying in motel rooms paid for by clients, children in foster care or staying with relatives, people living in substandard buildings, doubled up with family or friends, staying in motels paid for with vouchers, or who are incarcerated, are not officially defined as homeless and are therefore not counted. In addition, homelessness is often not permanent but episodic, so snapshot counts do not measure homelessness over time or accurately reflect the number of individuals homeless in a given year (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009).⁴ People living in their vehicles are counted among the unsheltered, yet it is difficult to determine which vehicles are being used as full-time housing and which are used as vacation vehicles. RVs are also designed as fully functional residences, calling into question their inclusion in the unsheltered homeless category.

The practical matter of counting unsheltered homeless people, locating inadequate nighttime residences, and accessing public and private places not designed for human habitation is daunting. The end result is that there is over and under counting (Hombs and Snyder 1982; Burt and Cohen 1989) and a heavy, albeit intentional, focus on those in shelters.⁵ Many communities also tailor their counts of unsheltered homeless people to target those groups that are most visible or are considered a problem. People living in RVs are often overlooked, under counted, or targeted as problematic in annual PIT counts.⁶ Designing effective policy is difficult without adequate statistical and ethnographic data. How Continuum of Care (CoC) regions conduct their PIT counts and use data to inform policy is a good measure of how effectively they serve unsheltered homeless people.

California is a prime location in which to examine vehicle living and unsheltered homelessness because of their prevalence. California is home to one in five homeless people nationwide, and over 60 percent of the statewide homeless population is unsheltered, including people in vehicles (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2011). Understanding how vehicle living fits into the policy discussion of unsheltered homeless people highlights the complexity of needs and varying population demographics among the unsheltered. Homeless assistance has historically been directed toward meeting the needs of specific populations at the expense of others—and without acknowledging the constant influx of newly homeless people. Numbers and definitions of homeless people are difficult to generate with any precision, yet they figure centrally into policies that regulate the use of public space and govern service and shelter provisions.

Regulation

Criminalization and *shelterization*⁷ are two of the primary regulation strategies used to contain homeless people by managing their physical location and their behavior. Regulation can be geared toward providing assistance and relief (Piven and Cloward 1993; Wright 1997), or it can be punitive. Punitive regulation excludes homeless people from public spaces and from political decision making, even for decisions that directly affect their welfare (Feldman 2004; Wright 1997). Policy decisions are shaped by negative reactions to homeless people in public spaces, turning anti-homeless ideology into concrete regulation strategies. Unless homeless people are able to garner a space of their own to which they can legally claim entitlement, they are vulnerable to various kinds of sanction.

Anti-homeless laws criminalize homeless people by targeting them as illegitimate users of public space. The most widespread forms of criminalization include the regulation of life-sustaining activities like sleeping; the selective enforcement of loitering, jaywalking, or open container laws; sweeps of city areas and the destruction of property; the enforcement of “quality of life” ordinances related to public activities and hygiene; and levying restrictions on providers of aid to homeless people (National Coalition for the Homeless 2007; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2002; 2009; Ellickson 2001; Kelling and Coles 1996). In principle, anti-homeless laws are designed to rid the streets of people who are seen as unclean, undeserving, and perhaps dangerous. In practice, they are expensive to enforce, address an immediate issue without offering a long-term solution, and create legal problems that can prevent homeless people from establishing employment or housing stability.

Criminalizing homeless people also violates several constitutional rights (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2009).⁸ The fact that homeless people are targeted for legally defensible actions underscores the extent to which they are seen as non-citizens, not entitled to basic rights and provisions, and not adhering to the normative moral order (Feldman 2004). Law enforcement based on stigma results in homeless people being punished for some of the same activities that non-homeless people do with impunity. Vehicle living complicates anti-homeless laws because vehicles offer a physical barrier that allows occupants to perform activities in private and thereby avoid public scrutiny. Yet many of the vehicles and individuals in them are still visibly recognized as homeless and incur sanctions similar to what other homeless people face. This book examines and evaluates the difference

between homeless people living in vehicles and those living in shelters and on the streets in terms of their ability to avoid criminalization and other forms of regulation.

Throughout this book, *shelterization* is used to refer to the set of ideas and regulatory mechanisms that suggest that homeless people belong in shelters. Access to shelter for homeless people depends, at minimum, on the availability of beds and on meeting the minimum entry requirements. Emergency shelters typically offer the least stringent entry requirements and the most rudimentary accommodations, and guests must submit to rules and regulations as a condition of their stay. Particularly in warm-weather states like California, emergency shelters are often only open during the coldest winter months, leaving homeless people unsheltered for the remainder of the year. Those who have a steady income through employment, SSI, or other sources, or those who are members of specific populations,⁹ may have an easier time accessing shelter. Although the distinction between *emergency* and *transitional* shelter is not always clear, transitional shelters frequently offer better meals, more private sleeping accommodations, space for families, and services designed to meet the needs of specific populations (Wong, Park, and Nemon 2006). Because accessing these resources is often predicated on income, many homeless people are unable to move beyond emergency shelter.

Shelters are anathema to many homeless people because they are unsafe, unclean, and mandate submission to rules and regulations (Wagner 1993). Although not all shelters are the same in terms of surveillance, services, and approach (Friedman 1994), relatively few are designed to provide comfort and autonomy. Relinquishing personal belongings and being exposed to various kinds of surveillance and risk are part-and-parcel of most public shelters. Originally conceived of as an emergency measure, shelters have become a default setting that “warehouses” people in refuse or marginal city areas, offering few transitional opportunities (Baxter and Hopper 1981; Wolch and Dear 1993). Shelter conditions, as Leonard Feldman argues, “express a vision of the homeless as bare life, as beings stripped of human personhood and individual identity; they are to be kept alive but not given the resources and privacy for individuation” (Feldman 2004, 96) or community building. Homeless people who opt for private shelters depend on close relationships with and approval from staff, at the expense of building community with other homeless people (Dordick 1997). Shelters can also strip parental authority from homeless parents, as children understand shelter staff as authority figures to whom they and their parents must answer (Crowley 2003). As Elizabeth Joniak

(2005) also shows, conflict between staff and clients can exacerbate feelings of injustice and marginalization. Many homeless people prefer to remain on the streets to exercise control over their living situation and enjoy a degree of autonomy they could not attain in a shelter setting (Wagner 1993).

The irony of shelterization, at least in California, is that it offers about a five-month window during which homeless people can access indoor shelter. They are then on their own for the remainder of the year. Most develop makeshift living arrangements including beach huts, tents, “jungles” in wooded areas or along the railroad tracks, and vehicles. Once in these settings, they are subject to a range of anti-homeless ordinances that push them back toward shelter. This is particularly ironic for homeless people in vehicles, given the degree of self-sufficiency that they maintain. Criminalization and shelterization threaten vehicle living as a form of housing and suggest that the proper place for homeless people is in jail or an emergency shelter. Although one is punitive and the other, in principle, is rehabilitative, they are remarkably similar in terms of the restrictions they impose on homeless people. Being targeted for anti-homeless regulation means being recognized as a particular category of person and behaving in ways that are not sanctioned by authority. Access to shelter also depends on being recognized as a particular category of person and behaving in ways that *are* sanctioned by authority. So proper behavior is rewarded with squalid shelter, and improper behavior is punished with jail time, citation, or other sanctions. In either case, being homeless is the central feature of being targeted.

Avoiding regulation is something homeless people spend a lot of time on. In addition to locating and accessing services and provisions, it is one of the central activities in a homeless person’s day (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985). For vehicle owners, acquiring and maintaining a vehicle to use as housing and avoiding police attention are tedious, time consuming activities but ones that allow them to preserve a sense of safety and autonomy and combat social stigma. This is a primary feature of what distinguishes vehicle living from other forms of homelessness.

Resistance

How do people without resources or social standing attempt to resist regulation? The most common forms of resistance to the regulation of homeless people include actions designed to maximize self-worth, to exercise free will, to protest unfair treatment, and to claim rights to public space. Acts of resistance by homeless people and their advocates

are ways of contesting basic forms of regulation and arguing for increased rights and privileges or simply combating marginalization. Identity work and placemaking activities are two related ways in which homeless people contest regulation strategies that restrict behavior and location. Research on social action and social justice supports the idea that resistance strategies must also give voice to the thoughts and concerns of those under study and work to build alliances and encourage political participation (Lott and Webster 2006). This is an important component of homeless resistance, particularly since it relies so heavily on researchers and advocates for resources and support (Cress and Snow 1996).

Depending on outside resources and assistance is also a limitation in the sense that it leaves homeless people beholden to advocates for funding, for the legitimacy of an outside voice that can effectively use the legal and political language necessary to combat regulation, for an understanding of the needs and concerns of homeless people, and for the tireless energy needed to pursue anti-homeless regulation. For these reasons, without outside advocacy, homeless resistance is often designed to address immediate survival, at the expense of arguing for social equity (Wright 1997).

One of the primary ways in which homeless people preserve a sense of self-worth is by trying to convince others that they are not as they appear. To understand how this works, David Snow and Leon Anderson (1987; 1993) distinguish between two basic forms of identity: (1) social identity, which is appearance- or behavior-based and is assigned by others; and (2) personal identity, which is claimed or asserted by the actor. This distinction has been explored in detail as it relates to social stigma and how a stigmatized person manages personal information in relationship to others (Goffman 1963). To gain a sense of social legitimacy, homeless people assert a positive personal identity to counter a degraded appearance or the visible signs of addiction, mental illness, and poverty. One of the primary ways this happens is verbal.

Homeless people use *identity talk* to explain their homeless status. It is either something they own and avow—“I’m an expert dumpster diver”—or something they distance themselves from: “I ain’t no lazy bum.” The more time homeless people spend on the street, the more difficult it is for them to deny their homeless status, with all of its negative connotations. In fact, they embrace the stereotypes and, in so doing, take ownership of the label (Becker 1971, 69–73). Identity talk gives homeless people agency in describing their own condition and is a way of asserting a positive personal identity. Yet it is a limited form of resistance due to its inability to challenge anti-homeless ideology and a

degraded social identity. It also does not bridge the gap between homeless people and outsiders. In its various forms, identity talk often underscores for housed listeners the marginalization of homeless people.

Anti-homeless regulation focuses on appearance, behavior, and location as a collection of stigma-symbols that signify a homeless presence (Goffman 1963, 43). Despite the personal meanings and understandings homeless people ascribe to themselves, their activities, and their accoutrements, their biggest challenge lies in the ability to convince others that they are socially legitimate, “normal” people. Snow and Anderson’s initial discussion of identity work includes the “procurement and arrangement of physical settings and props, cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance, selective association with other individuals and groups, and the verbal construction or assertion of personal identity” (1987, 1348). The first entries in this list are given short shrift because homeless people typically lack the resources to pursue or maintain them in the long-term. Vehicle owners therefore bring something new to the table. Those who legally own their vehicles represent a form of identity work that homeless people are usually not able to access or sustain: the procurement and arrangement of a legally owned physical setting.

Makeshift housing for homeless people includes huts (Phillips and Hamilton 1996; Wright 1997), abandoned subway tunnels (Morton 1995; Toth 1993), tent cities, shantytowns (Dordick 1997), jungles, and vehicles (Southard 1998). Sustaining makeshift housing means challenging the legal and social risks that threaten a life on the streets. Because they typically lack any formal, legal claim to the spaces they inhabit, most makeshift communities are easily displaced through “sweeps” or other forms of anti-homeless regulation (Ellickson 2001; Foscarinis 1996; Mitchell 2001; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 1991). Regulation is particularly aggressive when homeless groups and individuals occupy a city’s more prominent, lucrative spaces. As a result of the stigma associated with homeless people in public and the threat of regulation, we see the increasing spatial segregation of the poor and homeless into refuse areas or “service-dependent ghettos” (Dear and Wolch 1987; Wright 1997). Exploring this trend, Jennifer Wolch (1995) suggests that negative attitudes toward homelessness necessitate hiding in public spaces. When mere visibility can be grounds for harassment or arrest, homeless people go to great lengths to maintain a life on the streets. Avoiding shelters, developing alternative institutions, participating in social movement activities, and developing a sense of community with other homeless people, are all forms of resistance to regulation.

Although many of the vehicles that homeless people use as housing are designed to be lived in, they are still subject to anti-homeless regulation that targets appearance and behavior. This shows how regulation operates, by using the trappings of social identity to make assumptions about personal identity, and acting on these assumptions. As long as being homeless is considered a problem, being visibly, recognizably homeless means regulation. As Wright (1997, 70) describes, borrowing from Michel DeCerteau (1984),

To be out of place is also to be without respect, and hence without the ability to summon the power, the resources, to change one's conditions... placemaking is a key element of resistance to the gaze that fragments, breaks up, dissociates the poor and homeless subject. Placemaking, in the form of autonomous collective street encampments, allows for the possibility of breaking the public gaze with attached authoritative judgments.

Wright shows that placemaking can lead to the redefinition of public spaces, allowing homeless people to build community and self-esteem (Wagner 1993; Wright 1997). In some cases, placemaking can lead to the acquisition of permanent housing (Wagner and Cohen 1991; Wright 1995; Wright and Vermund 1996). Placemaking is a counter to the idea that homeless people and the makeshifts they inhabit are illegitimate (Oyserman and Swim 2001; Veness 1993; Cuba and Hummon 1993). Vehicle living affords unique resources for performing identity work and conducting placemaking activities. Examining these resources provides a necessary counter to regulation strategies that exacerbate the immediate, emergency nature of homelessness and target a life in public.

Vehicle Living

Vehicles are part of a continuum of housing solutions that range from street to apartment to house. Vehicle living requires establishing an array of social networks, solving logistical problems, maintaining a degree of financial stability, and being a provider. To illustrate how vehicle living relates to homelessness, this book examines station and circumstance,¹⁰ who RVers are, the logistics of vehicle living, and how it is received by police, business owners, citizens, and service providers. It also attempts to make sense of the thin line that separates RVs from other makeshift living arrangements. In so doing, rather than offering an overarching definition of homelessness, this analysis further

problematises how we understand the intersection between housing choice, identity, and public perception.

One of the primary reasons to focus on vehicle living is that, unlike the kinds of makeshift housing previously mentioned, vehicle living allows for the possibility of legal ownership. With ownership comes privacy, control over living space, freedom from shelter rules or the danger of the streets, protection from the elements and from various predators, and mobility. Despite these resources, those living in vehicles are still vulnerable to regulation strategies that target public appearance as problematic and punishable. Like homeless individuals who go to great lengths to pass as housed, those living in newer vehicles or passenger cars can blend in with tourists or motorists, and regardless of their personal history or appearance, avoid the *homeless* label. Most, however, exhibit the tell-tale signs associated with long-term use: parking in the same location, visible bedding, covered windows, tarpaulin on the roof, a patchy or unusual paint job, bicycles and other possessions clinging to the frame, worn tires, and other signs of residency. These tip-offs signal a homeless identity and often trigger regulation. But does permanent use mean that an individual is homeless?

Deciding whether or not someone who lives in a vehicle is homeless depends in part on what the individual thinks and in part on what others think; that is, on both personal and social identity (Snow and Anderson 1987; 1993). Not all people who live in their vehicles consider themselves homeless, but if neighbors, police, and city officials do, they are subject to various kinds of negative attention and regulation, including laws that restrict parking, mobility, and behavior inside the vehicle. The privacy that most vehicles afford offers a physical barrier for the individual so, technically speaking, it should not matter who the person is. Yet, as indicated earlier, the size of the vehicle and its age, appearance, and location can either hide or signal that occupants are homeless.

A lack of social legitimacy and personal entitlement are the most obvious parallels between homelessness and RV living. Recognizably homeless people on the street and in vehicles are symbols of failure. “Homeless” in Jason Wasserman and Jeffrey Clair’s conception (2010, 139) “is a master status—an identity that permeates the entire life of the person who is homeless—and the negative judgments it carries become rigidly attached to understandings of who a person is, even sometimes in that person’s own estimation.” Regardless of what roles they play in the communities they are a part of, homeless people are objectified as broken windows in the sense that they themselves are reified as refuse (Marin 1995; Kelling and Coles 1996; Duneier 1999) and homelessness

is seen as a personal failing. Viewing homeless people as an accepted albeit degraded part of society furthers their objectification (Blasi 1994; Marcuse 1988; Melnitzer 2007). Not only are they seen as illegitimate, non-citizens, but they lack access to the resources needed to challenge their situation and public perception of them in the long term (Feldman 2004; Cress and Snow 1996). In order to survive, they focus on immediate attainment at the expense of thinking about or planning for the future. Valorizing their survival strategies and homeless people as innovative bricoleurs (Snow et al. 1996) is dangerous because it reaffirms their position in the social hierarchy rather than focusing on social change. It is not only interesting that people living in vehicles have managed to use existing parking and travel laws to their advantage in fighting anti-homeless ordinances, but it is potentially useful in challenging practices of exclusion that threaten their existence.

Overview of the Book

This book offers an in-depth exploration of people who live in their RVs in Santa Barbara, California, and a comparative look at vehicle living and homelessness in California's Sonoma and Santa Cruz counties. Like many California cities, Santa Barbara's emergency shelters have exclusive entry requirements and are only open during the winter months. Homeless people therefore spend the duration of the year without shelter. RVs keep people out of the shelters and off of the streets, yet they are still not free of the stigma or the legal backlash that plagues homeless people. Understanding vehicle living sheds light on the complicated relationship between regulation and resistance as two sides in the battle over legitimacy and public space.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of vehicle living and homelessness and their eventual convergence. It tracks changes in vehicle living as it evolved from the auto camping popular in the early 1900s to the blighted trailer parks and luxury tourist vehicles of the mid-to latter part of the century. It also examines the differences in how homeless people have been understood over time, from the adventurous hobo in search of seasonal work to so-called skid row¹¹ denizens and later, families with children. These changes are viewed through public perception and policy as the arbiters of public space provisions. The chapter concludes by introducing Santa Barbara, California, as the primary area under study and offers an overview of homelessness and vehicle living within the city.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on RV living, using ethnographic data to examine resistance and regulation, respectively. Chapter 3 explores how

vehicle living compares with other available housing alternatives and the overlap between people living in their vehicles and those on the streets and in shelters and apartments. It describes the complex social ties that RVers must negotiate to be able to legally acquire their vehicles and maintain them. The chapter offers case studies of where people park, how they gain access to basic amenities, and their relationship to other RVers and to the local homeless community. Contrary to the stereotype that homeless people are dirty, uneducated, and without resources to provide for themselves and their families, Chapter 3 shows RVers as skilled negotiators, able to make the most of limited resources and to provide for themselves and others. In some cases, RV living facilitates the transition to permanent housing. Examining these issues sheds light on alternative housing solutions as a form of resistance.

Chapter 4 focuses on regulation and examines how vehicle owners resist anti-homeless ordinances that target the occupation of public space. Ethnographic data are used to illustrate these issues, which include interactions between police and homeless people in Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma counties, and municipal court trial data in which vehicle owners are cited for violating parking and anti-sleeping ordinances. Police interactions with homeless people show the dilemma officers find themselves in when attempting to regulate public spaces. They also show how homeless individuals and groups become targets for enforcement. Municipal court cases are used to examine the efficacy of resistance strategies that target space and legality. The chapter concludes with the establishment of a program to serve people living in their vehicles, which is the subject of Chapter 5.

How does service provision for people living in vehicles compare with the creation of emergency shelters and services for other sectors of the unsheltered homeless population? Chapter 5 answers this question using ethnographic data to detail the creation of the Safe Parking Program for people living in their vehicles, a program that has garnered nationwide media attention (Chawkins 2008; Gutierrez and Drash 2008; Urbina 2006; Tietz 2012). It provides a view from the perspective of participant observer and offers a critical examination of the utility of programs for homeless people and of entry-level service provision. It examines some of the resources offered through organized programs and some of the barriers that keep homeless people away from them. Together, Chapters 4 and 5 examine the punitive and provisional sides of regulation.

Chapter 6 offers a comparative look at the unsheltered homeless populations in Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma counties, focusing on the policies in place to document and serve them. It

examines how the PIT counts in each county are calibrated with the ten-year plans to end homelessness and offers a qualitative profile of the unsheltered homeless population. In so doing, it places vehicle living into context amidst a housing market that is not affordable and in relation to a population that is difficult to enumerate or gather data on and that has complex service needs that make employment and the transition to housing a challenge. The chapter also examines the differences between unsheltered homeless people living in makeshifts, and those living in their vehicles, in terms of lifestyle as well as the resources and risks associated with both forms of housing. Finally, it examines practical and policy level solutions that would help unsheltered homeless people access entry-level housing and shelter.

The concluding chapter examines the complex relationship between housing choice and social legitimacy, specifically as related to the occupation of public spaces. It offers insight into how regulation can be understood and managed in relationship to homelessness and service provision. It also explores ways of breaking the cycle of regulation and resistance that condemns homeless people to a life on the margins. Conducting this exploration through an analysis of policy and grassroots movements allows for an evaluation of their efficacy in offering housing solutions that are acceptable, logical choices for homeless people.

Notes

¹ A representative payee is someone designated by a beneficiary of Social Security and appointed by the Social Security Administration. People who need representative payees are those deemed incapable of managing their money because of prior felony convictions, mental illness, or other stipulations. When a beneficiary receives supplemental security income, the payee receives and disburses the funds, and assists the beneficiary in managing the money.

When Louie realized that he would need to establish a representative payee, he was furious. “They think I can’t handle myself. I’ve been handling my business for years!” Because of the trusting relationship Louie and I had established, he asked me to be his payee and I agreed. I acted in this capacity for four years so that he could continue to receive his benefits. After this point, he applied for and was granted the right to manage his own income.

² Dear (1992) offers a detailed exploration of how NIMBYism works and how it can be overcome. He outlines the main oppositional arguments that communities and individuals raise against locating shelters or other “unpopular projects” in their midst. These include the perceived threat to property values, personal security, and neighborhood amenities (Dear 1992, 4). Where facilities are located, as well as the perceived threat of the client population, are factors that have affected the siting of homeless shelters in communities nationwide.

³ There are many examples of ethnographers’ bravery in the field, of enduring harassment and winning arguments (Dordick 1997, 119–121). These

moments of pride signal to the ethnographer that she is able to handle herself in the field, that she is “in.” There are fewer accounts of ethnographers taking chances that did not eventually pan out or that resulted in violence or bodily harm. Part of my reticence to conduct research in makeshifts stemmed from the fact that virtually all of the women who slept in unsheltered locations endured some form of abuse. Most women relied on men for protection, and in most cases, they were physically and/or romantically involved with them. Although unsheltered locations were the most interesting for me, ensuring my safety was also paramount. Visiting jungle locations was something I did sporadically and always with an understanding of the personal risk involved, as well as the risk for anyone who acted as protector.

⁴ The methodology of homeless street counts is particularly fluid as communities conducting the counts often vary with respect to coverage area, volunteer support, and consistency across years. In addition to variation within one jurisdiction, there is also wide variation across areas such that some cities conduct street-by-street counts and others rely on reports from homeless service providers or experts in the field. HUD cautions against both of these strategies as they produce biased data. Only rarely do communities attempt to find people who are living in remote or hidden areas, leaving an untallied percentage uncounted and on the street. Chapter 6 offers a detailed overview of the point-in-time counts in three California counties, with a focus on methodology and planning efforts.

⁵ The rise of the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to better track the use of homeless services has led to a focus on service provision and coordination, and overall enumeration. Homeless people who do not use shelters, who resist tracking through HMIS or other means, or who use day services, may be left out entirely. The dearth of information on unsheltered homeless people is particularly troubling in regions where they outnumber the sheltered homeless.

⁶ In Link et al.’s 1995 study of the life-time and five-year prevalence of homelessness, “literal homelessness” includes a list of possible places one might live. Vehicles were found to be the most common place where homeless people reported staying (59.2 percent), followed by makeshift housing (24.6 percent). These results were found using telephone surveys and follow-up interviews, a more in-depth methodology than that used for PIT counts. In addition, because respondents were reporting prior rather than current experiences with homelessness, some of the stigma associated with “hidden” homelessness was minimized.

⁷ The term *shelterization* was coined by sociologists researching homelessness in the 1930s and 1940s. It was used to characterize feelings of inefficacy, lethargy, and removal from schedule or responsibility that shelters were thought to inspire (Sutherland and Locke 1936). The current usage treats shelters as a form of regulation and explores the requirements for entering shelter and why homeless people would resist doing so.

⁸ Anti-homeless laws are in potential violation of at least four Constitutional Amendments, three of which (I, IV, VIII) are part of the original Bill of Rights. First Amendment rights of free speech are violated when soliciting donations is considered legal, yet panhandling is not. The Fourth Amendment prohibits unreasonable search and seizure of property. This amendment is violated when law enforcement destroys and confiscates tents or

other belongings without notifying homeless residents or giving them a chance to claim their property. The Eighth Amendment, prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment, is violated when homeless people are cited for pursuing life-sustaining activities like sleeping, when no other alternatives are available. Finally, the Fourteenth Amendment equal protection clause prohibits the selective enforcement of laws to target homeless people. (See <http://wiki.nlchp.org/display/Manual/Criminalization+Constitutional+and+Human+Rights+Framework> and <http://www.usconstitution.net/>).

⁹ The seven subpopulations specified by HUD for the annual PIT count are: chronically homeless persons, those who are severely mentally ill, those who have chronic substance abuse issues, veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence, and unaccompanied youth (under 18). With the exclusion of unaccompanied youth, these primary need categories prioritize chronically homeless people and those with specific physical or mental issues and needs. People who are newly homeless and do not fit into these categories, although they may be easier to move into permanent housing, would not necessarily be prioritized for shelter.

¹⁰ Hopper (2003) critiques the documentation of the surface appearance of homelessness alone; enumerating mere “station and circumstance.” Instead he focuses on the underlying processes that bring to light the array of preventative mechanisms that keep people from becoming homeless. This book takes the opposite approach and examines the specifics of vehicle living as a way into exploring the ongoing struggle for space and entitlement. Connecting station and circumstance with the policies designed to serve unsheltered homeless people contextualizes vehicle living as a housing solution.

¹¹ The term “skid row” is commonly used to refer to urban areas where welfare hotels, employment services, and cheap amenities for homeless people could be found. The term originated in the 1800s and is associated with Seattle’s waterfront area, where logs were dragged or “skidded” to sawmills to be processed into usable lumber. This usage underscores connection between migrant labor, transiency, and urban life that characterized these areas.