

# Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders

*Homeless in San Francisco*

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*University of Minnesota Press*  
*Minneapolis*  
*London*

FOUR

## Word on the Street

THE 1980S RESURRECTION OF THE OLD SOCIAL PROBLEM of homelessness set off a fierce clash of interpretations. As I argued in part I, debate and policy gradually solidified around three discursive logics, what I call sin-talk, sick-talk, and system-talk. The powerful social justice advocates kept system-talk influential throughout the 1980s. The activists were quickly reminded, however, that social movements produce many unintended consequences. The most substantial end product of their tireless lobbying, media work, and hunger strikes was the great homeless archipelago, a network of depressing and often degrading emergency shelters and soup kitchens. While the activists succeeded in creating national concern about homelessness as a social problem, they gradually lost their purchase on both news media and policy development.

Many of the advocates, along with sociologists like Snow and Anderson, came to feel that the emergency shelter system they had initiated was ultimately accommodating the problem of homelessness more than solving it.<sup>1</sup> It is true that their activism did, by way of the McKinney Act, hasten the progression toward multiservice or transitional shelters with better physical conditions. But the new institutions were steadily permeated by the therapeutic interpretations—or sick-talk—proliferating in social work and public health circles. In the meantime, sin-talk reminiscent of the great tramp scare of the 1870s developed and spread across the entire country, materializing in mass legislation and police campaigns aimed at the clearance of homeless people from public space and their forcible corral into the shelter system.

Chapter 7 describes how San Francisco's prominent homelessness problem became a flashpoint for changing notions of citizenship, entitlement, and community. In 1991, liberal mayor Art Agnos was defeated by former police chief Frank Jordan, who had campaigned on a "revanchist" program to clear the homeless and lock them up in work camps out by the county jail.<sup>2</sup> San Francisco's long-standing progressivism was vigorously confronted with the neoliberal turn in national political culture. Newspaper columnists, drug counselors, city officials, academics, and mental health workers all struggled to stamp their own interpretation on the problem of homelessness. A strong position could make or break a political candidate, but also inject conflict into any casual gathering. Over the next decade the continual homelessness debates propelled a protracted struggle for the heart and soul of the city, resulting in a profound "crisis of urban liberalism," as Vitale has described it.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of this turmoil, what went unnoticed was how San Francisco's passionate debate about causes and solutions to the homelessness problem made its way onto the street itself. As partisans of sin-talk, sick-talk, and system-talk battled for mastery within the public sphere, homeless people themselves pursued their own parallel projects to define, reject, or complicate "homelessness" in both words and deeds.

This is not a romance of resistance. Whatever discursive independence these men showed was reactive and fractured. Already in acute personal crisis, they were confronted continuously by forceful iterations of elite sin-talk and sick-talk in the form of rabble management by obligatory medicalization. In these contexts, their actions become highly strategic. People on the street learned fast how to position themselves when quizzed by shelter workers, police officers, welfare officials, nurses, lawyers, or activists.

Yet the men's iterations of dominant discourses on homelessness ran far deeper than the purely instrumental. Shame, stigma, and isolation kept these ideas twisting and turning in the minds of their objects. Out in the more autonomous spaces of street life—among sidewalk sleepers, corner "bottle gangs," panhandlers, recyclers, and thieves—multiple answers to the ever-implied question, "Why are you homeless?" hung in the air.

Homeless men's struggle to place themselves manifested itself in profoundly different strategies. Many were used to embracing criminality;

they had been chasing “bad boy” cool since they first sneaked into the street to play marbles and smoke cigarettes. At their most defiant and shameless, they claimed the streets for their own, reworking the sin-talk of the city’s political leaders into a glorification of their deviant ways. In more vulnerable moments, though, they might relinquish the burden of agency and welcome the poverty agencies’ offer to exchange culpability for narratives of helpless addiction, trauma, and mental illness. Others strove to separate themselves from the stigmatized status of “lazy bum” with hard physical labor, deploying a kind of “value stretch” to lower the bar of decency. At times any of them might pick up the trail of embattled system-talk, building passionate critiques of oppression and betrayal.

The last chapter showed homeless men writing their presence and way of life onto different city spaces. This one is driven by a different organizing principle: Traveling through a spectrum of street discourses on homelessness, I show how the men combined, blended, subverted, and reworked popular narratives and schemas to make sense of homelessness, both as everyday life and as extraordinary stigma.<sup>4</sup> Many of the most significant moments in street life, though, never reached the point of a sustained verbal articulation. Many of my street companions, especially the white men, seemed suspicious of too much talk, implying with their studied disinterest that talk was cheap and that actions spoke louder than words. In that, I suppose, they were like many white working class men. Yet commentary about homelessness was everywhere—in the downcast eyes of the panhandlers, in the assertive swing of the heavy-loaded recycling cart into traffic, in the angry stare that men bedding down on Market Street might return to curious tourists. To explore such discursively charged action requires moving beyond the text. Indeed, moving practice closer to discourse, getting at “lived discourse,” helps us hold on to the concrete moorings—political, economic, cultural, institutional—that overshadow and channel the street’s potential ways of seeing.

### *Sin*

“I was always way outta control,” said Fox, the African American crack addict raised in the Bayview neighborhood. “I always wanted to

be outside, in the action, so’s to speak. My grandma, she tried to keep me on track, but there was no way. Now I’m talking when I’m just a little kid, first, second grade. The street was, like, *magnetic* to me. I couldn’t stand sticking indoors.”

Their language, style, and behavior might violate countless rules of respectable society, but the disreputable poor of the Tenderloin and other “lowlife” concentrations closely echoed the rhetoric of the public figures pushing for the criminalization of homelessness. Like those who would clear them from the city’s valuable public space, they disdained the term “homeless,” instead identifying themselves as lifelong street people.

“I be always poking my head out the door, out the window, running right on out when my grandma wasn’t looking, when she was in the bathroom. I had this thing: I had to know all the plays, all the girls, all the pimps, the big boys. I would run out and sit on some stoop down by the corner of Third and watch and watch, all big-eyes.” Fox laughed, his gummy smile decorated with a couple of sparse teeth. “I can’t barely remember before I wanted to be a gangster. I’m telling you, it’s like I was born that way. Running the streets—it’s in my blood.”

Within a flipped version of contemporary sin-talk, a homeless hustler like Fox understood his situation as not so much a radical break with the past as a fairly unsurprising consequence of his childhood choices. Indeed it was common to talk as he did about “running the streets” as a kind of life course, a deviant moral career driven by a powerful disposition toward all things street going back to early childhood.

From escaping onto the sidewalk to play with other “bad” kids, the hustlers had graduated to drug sales, pimping, or thieving. The adrenaline of teenage gang banging and the rite of passage in juvenile halls were sweetened by the consuming pleasures of getting high, getting laid (frequently, if their stories had any truth), and “easy” money. Often they described an arc peaking in their early twenties and tailing steadily into failure over the ensuing years. In the context of such a career, homelessness signified rock bottom, a point when the shifting balance of power between man and street turned dramatically, even irreversibly, against the individual. Homelessness was a sure sign that

he was losing or had lost the game of street life. Those men who had lived their lives wandering this particular semiotic grid were therefore likely to consider homelessness as retribution, divine or not. These grisly late chapters—few saw any escape—were only filling out the details of a script sketched out many years before.

Despite their losses, the homeless hustlers often remained loyal to the game. They wallowed in nostalgia for the wild lives they had led before hitting the skids—the time Del scored a three kilo heroin deal, Fox's former glory pimping young white women in the Theater district, Tony Silver's trade in stolen luxury cars. Even now, they would insist that they were still in the game in some minor way, that they were still of (instead of merely on) the street.

Clinging to a sense of agency, the hustlers presented their identification with the street as a fundamental moral orientation more than deprivation. Though they casually wandered through the food programs and often the shelters, they smirked at the professionals and volunteers who tried to help them, preferring to think that they were astutely working the system.

The great seduction of such homeless sin-talk was its extraordinary potential to turn sludge into gold, anomie into bravura. By dramatizing the street as a jungle, battered and broken men could stride in big boots across a stage set, congratulating themselves on their ability to survive. Yet at the same time, the hustlers were reinforcing the age-old demonic construction of deviance, drawing a dramatized line between two kinds of people, the saved and the damned, or, in their own language, the straight and the street. The primary difference was that this indigenous version of sin-talk "flipped" elite discourse, reversing the normative value of the binaries. Bad became "bad," and the street career that they called "the game" was sacralized into a quest for pleasure at any cost.

The diversity of the San Francisco street milieu made it possible for homeless African Americans to maintain some distance from the binaries of sin-talk and orient themselves by different principles. Veterans and ex-blue collar workers tended toward this direction. Refusing to participate in their own "blackening," many avoided the street scene of the Tenderloin and other hot strips and distanced themselves both narratively and practically from the game. Yet there is no denying

that the strong agency of sin-talk had great appeal, and most homeless men, regardless of race, took some refuge in flipping the sin discourse and claiming the street as their own.

#### The Racialization of Sin-talk

Poverty, racism, and harsh sentencing policies had given the African American hustlers limited openings beyond the criminal economy, but the relationship between defiant individual and hostile system had taken the form of an intricate, mutually confirming dance. Adolescent dispositions that might in other boys in other times or places have been left to dissolve into adult conformity were instead intensified by incarceration and the increased difficulty of finding work after release.

The hustlers had seized from their turbulent experiences the attribution of the "outta control" other, the shadowy threat, and taken it for their own. They continued to live out the fundamental ambivalence about notions of good and evil that has sedimented itself into many African American cultural forms over centuries of violence, stigma, and disrespect. Explaining their lives, they drew on the great, ever-evolving countercultural lexicon of black English. More than anything else, they hovered around its one constant: the ambiguous and ambivalent reversal of the standard white usage of "bad," claiming to be "bad boys" grown into "bad-ass mofos."<sup>66</sup>

The street's flipped version of sin-talk, like its straight mirror image, is made of boldly drawn oppositions: the city street versus the domestic home, excitement versus responsibility, the wily "playa" versus the responsible patriarch, hustling versus straight work, and so on. Not only is this discourse constantly reinforced by authoritarian institutions, but its simplicity and coherence as a system of meaning creates a substantial obstacle for those trying to patch together a less bifurcated map of the world. Even when acknowledging that they lacked the youth and strength to push back in as successful "playas," the homeless hustlers could see little alternative to their current existence, given the patent impossibility of succeeding on the patriarchal straight path.

In the last chapter, Sammy, the pickpocket from the Western Addition, defined himself as someone who could handle the Tenderloin.

One of the “people of the night,” he aggressively took what he needed for himself rather than wait for someone to give it to him. In his mind, a survivor like him was by no means homeless, though he had bounced between alleys, shelters, and other extremely marginal sleeping situations for several years now. He treated the term “homeless” as an identity more than a condition, one that he was determined to stay away from. He thoroughly despised anybody wandering around with a cart. “I don’t get why those weak motherfuckers want to *advertise* like they homeless. Ain’t got no self-respect,” he said. Sammy kept himself neat and relatively clean and enjoyed melting into the crowd as much as he could, especially if he could get his hand on someone’s wallet in the process.

“Takes a black man to be cool with the dark side,” went Sammy’s refrain. “You see how Lee and those other white dope fiends stay in their camps come midnight?” He certainly had a point about the disappearance of anyone but the most hardened (or crack-crazed) African Americans from the Tenderloin streets in the small hours? But he was also claiming for his own America’s ancient and persistent coupling of blackness and deviance. The black “people of the night,” in his mind, were part and parcel of the dark side, the essence of sin itself.

Men like Sammy saw themselves as the most street of characters, and many of them boasted of committing quite heinous acts. But although they generally claimed a highly nihilistic, fundamentally suspicious relationship to others, the attitude of “dog eat dog” and “watch your back” could get old. While there was a certain awed admiration for the “cold” psychopaths of the street, Sammy and Fox’s claim that the hustlers were unambiguously dedicated to the “dark side” proved unstable in various ways. Their outlaw street version of sin-talk remained tied to its straight twin, and any form of resistance that stays so close to its template is liable to suddenly capsize, to do a normative flip into straight turf and exchange bravado for guilt and regret. The weakest point of outlaw sin-talk was nostalgia for family. Even Fox, who seemed to have lost little sleep over exploiting teenage runaways and introducing them to heroin, could get maudlin at the thought of his grandmother: “I wish I hadn’t a given her such a hard time. She worked so hard to raise me, and what did she get? A pimp. I wish she had never known about all that shit. She was a good woman.” Fox, usually so disparaging of domesticity, hard work, and

indeed women, still held fast to this icon of decency, fourteen years after her death.

As Kim Hopper argues in *Reckoning with Homelessness*, the severe effects of deindustrialization, drugs, and incarceration on the black working class have strained to breaking point the formidable African American kinship systems that mediated poverty and unemployment in the past, resulting in a flood of utter destitution and homelessness.<sup>8</sup> These men knew that they had exacerbated the difficulties of their families with their wild ways, and I suspect felt a good deal of guilt about it. Certainly exhortations to atone to abused family members created some of the most powerful moments of collective effervescence in substance abuse meetings.

Public guilt and nostalgia about family members did not usually last long; whatever the men might have been feeling in private. But there were other strains on sin-talk. An unmitigated reversal of standard morality was a hard project to sustain, and only a few seemed to have the will to take it to the limit. The competitive, suspicious nature of their existence endangered needs most of us think of as universal—the desire for love, loyalty, and mutual care—providing only the frequently instrumental companionship of those chasing their own desires. When the men were feeling strong, they thought they could still handle it. But as they got sicker and older, locked up and knocked down, the hustlers were more likely to doubt their own bluster.

Upon reaching a personal and cosmological nadir, some die-hard hustlers finally turned to rehab with desperate sincerity. As old warrior Sling said in a Mission District twelve-step meeting: “I’m tired. I don’t want any of it any more. All of that junk, playing this shit, shootin’ somebody, *killin’* somebody. I’m tired, people. God knows I am tired. Just get me out of this place.”

His eyes wide and his tone earnest, Sling went on to lament the lack of true companionship on the street. “I’m looking for help, people. From young, from old, wherever I can get it. We gotta stick together. We done too much of this takin’ each other down, playin’ each other for a fool. I always wanted to be cool with somebody or *killin’* somebody or, *scarin’* somebody—you know, ‘Get outta my face.’ Messing with the cluckers (crack whores). Pushing people around. Well, hey, maybe I finally grewed up, ‘cause you know what? It ain’t cool. It just *stupid* shit.”



James Moss, another Tenderloin crack dealer, had suffered a horrific stroke in a cheap cinema, a cocaine high boiling his blood pressure well beyond the level his hardened arteries could take. Years later he was still bitter that his companions Del and Mike had meticulously robbed him and left him sprawled comatose without calling for help. "Cold," he said with disgust. Now that he was disabled, he wanted nothing to do with such people, but continued to dwell in the stinking purgatory of the Cadillac hotel, warily limping to the soup kitchen and back.

Those living homeless were already financially broken, and if their health was not already in a precarious state, the street would take it to new lows. The oldest, sickest hustlers became riper for apostasy, for betrayal of the game, than they had ever been before. Maybe, like Sling, they would "flip" sin-talk back to its judgmental twin, repenting of their ways, or maybe like James they would wearily turn to the absolution of disability.

Even well before apostasy, though, the edifice of sin-talk was frequently shaken. Claiming the streets for their own gave the crucial

sense of power to these scorned and destitute men. Where it could not help them was in those moments when they felt themselves ruined and helpless, with nowhere to turn, thrown about by powers far beyond their control. There was a fundamental discursive dissonance here. If Sammy really owned the nighttime, why was he face-down on the sidewalk at Leavenworth and Ellis, stammering lies to the police? If Del was so great at working the system, why was he regally turned away from the shelters to sleep on the sidewalk? And if Fox and Sammy were such self-proclaimed dirty bad asses, how could they expect sympathy for their persecution by the police and other white institutions?

I found Fox meditating on these kinds of questions early one February morning. The previous evening the weather had been filthy and the shelters full. Fox had finally fallen asleep around two in the morning, finding some precious heat coming out of a sidewalk vent on Market Street, only to be awakened at five by a blast of freezing water courtesy of a Department of Public Works truck.

"What the hell? I mean, what the goddamn motha-fucking..." Still damp and shivering, Fox shook his head, his eyes speaking his misery and fury. "They treat us like animals, those assholes, like they wouldn't treat a dog. What have we done to get that kind of low-down shit? Why's it make you a criminal if you a poor black man?" Fox faltered, giving me a tired and confused look. "Why the hell are those white mofos sitting on their truck and soaking the hell out of us and laughing on back to their condos, and I'm going through the damn garbage looking for cigarette butts? I don't get it. Sometimes don't get none of it." In such moments, when the fantasy of bad-boy agency fell around their feet, the hustlers shifted toward systemic critique.

### *The System*

Sin-talk, whether on the street or the television, put considerable barriers in the way of seeing homelessness in terms of inequalities of race and class. The same was true of therapeutic interpretations, which backed off from heavy moral judgment but still concentrated on the fallibilities of the homeless individual.

Nevertheless, this was San Francisco. Not only were there a handful of homeless men who were themselves longtime radicals, but a score



of organizations and numerous other sympathizers were elaborating arguments upon which like-minded homeless people could draw. The Tenderloin's Coalition on Homelessness, People Organized to Win Employment Rights, the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, and several other activist and advocacy organizations fought fiercely to keep alive a social justice perspective on homelessness. Despite many defeats, they succeeded in preserving thousands of SRO units, preventing various quality-of-life propositions, and retaining one of the highest remaining General Assistance rates in the nation.

Ironically, perhaps, the Coalition found a stronger audience among the radical middle class than on the street itself. But though their social democratic discourse struggled to gain resonance with a homeless population steeped in mutual suspicion and self-castigation, it had a notable effect.

Most immediately, the *Street Sheet* and other offshoots of the Coalition provided meaningful, nondegrading work in the form of newspaper selling or office workfare to many homeless people on General Assistance. These pseudo jobs represent an ecological niche similar to the can and bottle recycling described in the next chapter. Though

homeless, people could still establish a dignifying identity around work, staying off the extreme alienation suffered by many on the street. Such workers were exposed to simple, strong, resonant articulations of system-talk. The *Street Sheet* printed many first-person articles by homeless people decrying policing practices, GA policies, and workfare, for example. Sellers from the Tenderloin, predictably, showed less interest in the paper, but some of the vendors working in other parts of the city were much more engaged with its content.

Yet as we have seen, homeless men attracted to the social democratic discourse of the Coalition were unlikely to stay in the Tenderloin unless they banded together to pay for temporary rooms inside. Generally they voted with their feet, removing themselves as much as possible from both the BS of the Tenderloin and the areas most likely to be targeted by the police.

#### The Genocide Trope

More powerful on the street than the Coalition's primarily class-based analysis was a version of system-talk that placed race at ground zero. It was easy enough to make sense of the degradations of homelessness in the context of commonsense black understandings of racial oppression. If the disproportionate number of African Americans on the street has been undertheorized by scholars of homelessness, it certainly did not go unnoticed by homeless black men themselves.<sup>9</sup> Everywhere I heard them argue that black homelessness provided just another way for whites to exterminate troublesome black men no longer needed for menial jobs.

Even the most defiantly individualist hustlers veered into these waters occasionally. Remarking on the death of an old companion, Sammy muttered, "It's genocide, that's what it is. We all getting wiped out."

Sammy swung from sin to system and back again according to his mood. Though he was a particularly volatile person, he was not alone in this. Leaving undisturbed the identification with sin, the genocide trope was connected to a particular emotional register—someplace between impotent fury and despair. It was to this brand of system-talk that they would turn when interrogated by officious nobodies, defeated by the police, or humiliated by injury or sickness. At times

like these, their desperate efforts to feel masters of their own destiny proved too difficult. The notion that their difficulties had been determined in the workings of some inaccessible totality could be a great consolation.

I was talking on Turk Street with Clarence, who was passing through the Tenderloin with a huge load of recyclables collected in the theater district, when I saw Market Street panhandler EJ storming up toward us. It was evident half a block away that something was very wrong. His fists were clenched and he was scanning the street furiously for someone to whom he could vent.

EJ had been given his second ticket for urinating out of doors. As he had also been cut off GA for failing to provide evidence he was looking for work, there was a very real danger that this minor violation would land him in jail. "Those motherfucking assholes!" EJ was breathing hard, his usual muted grumpiness replaced by patent fury. "They ain't got no *work* for us, ain't got no *welfare* for us, ain't got shit for us. Hell, they don't even got no damn *bathroom* for us. But come to giving us hell, they's in the *money*. All these po-lice to watch where you go take a piss. All these new prisons, this 'three strikes' bullshit. All our people locked away, that's where we're headed. Locked away or wound up dead."

Clarence nodded sympathetically. "You wanna share a cigarette, brother?" he offered.

"Yeah."

EJ lit up, his fingers trembling, and inhaled deeply. "You know, I'm trying to stay cool. But *damn*, they don't make it easy. What am I gonna do? Eighty bucks! I ain't seen eighty bucks together in a god-damn year."

EJ sighed, and then shot Clarence an inquiring glance. He seemed to be concerned that he was coming over as too desperate.

Clarence, a muscular man with a large Afro and a benign, vague manner, was ready to commiserate.

"Times sure are hard."

"I gotta get me a lick," muttered EJ. "It ain't no use." He needed, that is, to do some thieving to get the money. He handed the cigarette back to Clarence. "Thanks for the smoke, bro," he mumbled without looking at him again. Shrugging himself back into his usual sullen affect, he sloped off toward Eddy Street.

At times the genocide trope could be built into a powerful analysis of the imbrication of race and class in America. But the latter incident shows something of the way that it was limited by the strength of sin-talk, particularly in the Tenderloin and other primary drug markets.

Generally the hustlers made frequent but only glancing forays into system-talk. First, they were uncomfortable with the emotional register in which such talk was habitually voiced. Fulminations and despair worked against the hustler's obligatory "cool" masculinity. EJ's habitual grammar of action—his distrustful manner, his unwillingness to make eye contact—worked against more than a momentary solidarity with the "straighter" Clarence. Second, the hustlers seemed to recognize that the coherence of their discourse on homelessness was destabilized by system-talk. The more they evoked victimization to justify their actions, the more they endangered the core comfort of sin-talk, that precious idea that they exercised some kind of choice or control over their destiny. Without channeling their energies into collective action, system-talk sent them spinning into despair, violating their commitment to seeing life as a drama in which they played the lead role.

The third reason, I think, for the fragmented character of system-talk among the Tenderloin hustlers, was the dissonant note sounded by this kind of talk within a field of action that functioned on thievery, drug trading, and manipulation. To make sense of the world, most of my companions seemed to desire not only a rough coherence to their belief system, but also a cognitive map that wove feasible connections between discourse and action. The level of violence and mutual exploitation in the most intense "sin" zones of the city radically undercut the collective potential of system-talk. It was hard to feel brotherhood when immersed in manipulation, aggression, and physical violence from or against other African Americans.

Even in the Tenderloin's drug markets, though, a more coherent embodiment of system-talk occasionally surfaced. For some people an admixture of system-talk seemed to soften the bold binaries of sin-talk into a more livable form. The genocide trope opened a way to live on the "street" side of the line without losing all claims to be a good person: men could position themselves as victims of the broader system who had no choice but to adopt the deviant moral code of the street to some extent.



Best representing this position was Linc, who combined panhandling, stealing, and collecting cans to get by. Like Del in the previous chapter, Linc preferred to see himself as a hustler rather than a recycler. "I guess you might say I'm a professional alcoholic, not a professional recycler . . . I've sold the *Street Sheet* and clothes I've found on the sidewalk or taken from the wash-dry. . . . One time I had this charity jive going. That's some cold shit, and difficult. I shoulda been an actor. . . . I guess you could say this recycling, it's just playing safe, when a person's too tired to hustle. Hustlin' in my blood, you know, but there is times you get tired."

For Linc, ad-libbing came easily; though not necessarily painlessly. Seeing himself as a smart-talking, adaptable trickster, he prided himself on his wide repertoire of interpersonal skills, his ability to dress his persona for the requirements of the moment. Unlike Del, though, his hustler identity did not go "all the way down," and he did not decisively flip the moral discourse by choosing the *street* over the *straight* version of sin-talk. Rather than rejecting completely straight values, he saw them as a luxury he could ill afford as "another poor black man trapped by the system." He classified his "charity jive," which involved soliciting funds for a fictional organization, as "cold" with a flicker of distaste, but claimed the system gave him no choice: "You gotta do what you gotta do." Petty thievery from white tourists, on the other hand, Linc considered utterly harmless, and he took considerable pleasure in his sleight of hand. Unlike Sammy, he tried to get by without victimizing others on the skids.

The code of the street was, in his mind, precisely that—the law of gravity that governed behavior in a particular environment. But it did not encompass his entire sense of self. His winning charm, humor, and generosity remained distinct from his crafty emotion work when on the scam.

Linc's perception of the fundamentally limited possibilities for African Americans not only allowed him to make sense of the world, but also enabled him to hold onto the strong sense of his own basic humanity, which he had preserved from his moderately happy early childhood. "I don't lie down and take it, but I ain't mean," he said as he reprimanded Lil' Lee for ripping off Domenico, a rather pathetic alcoholic with AIDS.

Interestingly, Linc's ability to integrate sin and system, to play both sides of the line, cushioned his material experience of homelessness. He could turn his hand to various forms of petty crime, but still "be sweet" and maintain genuinely reciprocal relationships. Unlike shifty, bitter Sammy, for example, Linc was often able to find a temporary place to stay when he couldn't get a shelter bed. This was quite an achievement, for most of his friends lived in SRO hotels that either forbade overnight visitors or required advance notice of their arrival. At one time, apparently he had managed to use his money from General Assistance to sublet a couch or space on the floor for longer periods, but by the time I got to know him, he had been cut off GA and seemed to have given up trying to find a place. "I'm tired of trying to get my shit together," he said with a rueful smile as he sat on the ground in a dirty parking lot. "This city make it too hard. Ain't no damn use."

Linc's combination of sin-talk and system-talk was unusually stable and integrated. At this point in his life, any previous attachment to the glory and bravado of sin was far behind him. He was willing to acknowledge defeat by the system without experiencing any fresh wound to his masculinity. In a sense, his worldview was now much closer to system-talk than sin-talk, and he was only a hustler in a shallow sense.

Linc's disposition toward street life is a good example of how narratives, personal dispositions, and means of survival congeal more closely than poststructuralism may lead us to expect. While hard-core hustlers like Sammy painted the world as a jungle and did in fact get by in an almost entirely predatory manner, Linc created a workable blending of sin and system broadly consistent across speech and action.

#### Vietnam Nostalgia

If homeless African Americans struggled to articulate a strong systemic, collective analysis, whites and Latinos often had an even harder time. Disqualified by race from the genocide trope, the attrition of class-based analyses of poverty in American popular culture left them discursively floundering. Most were uneasy with the Coalition on Homelessness's demands for social provision, which they often connected

to the demands of “system-working” African Americans. All the same, they felt abandoned and betrayed by the government, with its homeless clearances and demoralizing shelters.

“Sometimes I can’t believe this shit,” mused Kansan recycler Rich, complaining about the conditions in the MSC South shelter. “This is America? This is the best they can do? I dunno when this country got so heartless. You see people coming in there, they just hit the street, it’s their first time, and they get all freaked out, and the guys on the desk, they just yell at them. Like there was a guy a couple days back, got his car stolen, with all his crap. Spent a couple of nights out, and he gets his face smashed in and his last twenty bucks ripped off by some jerk. Then he comes in the shelter and they turn him away, like it’s just *fine* for him to sleep on the street again after that. I just don’t get it. What do you have a government for anyway?”

The search for a way to understand working-class masculinity betrayed often led men toward the trope of the Vietnam War. They found much to identify with in the idea of vets who had suffered in the service of their country, yet had been abandoned to pick up the pieces on their own, often ending up homeless. The fact that vets were soldiers, archetypes of hegemonic masculinity, could mitigate the implicit feminization of seeing oneself as a victim. Of course, for hundreds of the men and women on the San Francisco streets, this was not a story, but an all too real experience, yet the symbolic resonance of the neglected soldier echoed far beyond the “legit” vets.

Sometimes the Vietnam identification could be instrumental. Many men on the street would introduce themselves as Vietnam veterans, especially if panhandling. Most were in fact too young to have fought in the war, and they often enough turned out to be veterans that had not seen active service.<sup>10</sup> But the “Vietnam veteran” claim was far more than a mere ruse. Unlike most panhandling lines, the resonance of Vietnam went deep, and “legit” vets were treated with genuine respect by all.

The topic of Vietnam would resurface at the most surprising times. One of these occurred when I was with Victor, the heroin-addicted carpenter from New Mexico. With his long hair and tolerant, laid-back attitude, Victor was not someone I expected to join forces with the über patriots. But while he was living with a couple of older white men near the Cesar Chavez Street underpass in the Mission, he started to echo their stories of the government’s betrayal of the (putative) MIAs.

“I wish I’d a fought in Vietnam,” he told me one day as we were sharing breakfast in his camp. It was six-thirty in the morning, and I was cranky and barely awake.

“You do?” I was surprised. “Wha’ for? Fight the commies?” I asked in a sarcastic tone. “I don’t get it, man. That experience really messed a lot of people up.”

“Yeah, well, they were screwed, you know. Those guys in Vietnam were screwed by the government.”

“So why do you wanna go then?”

“You know, do your bit, serve your country.”

“And get screwed.”

“You don’t get it,” he said irritably.

I realized I was being nasty. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to understand,” I back-pedaled. Pleading ignorance seemed like the right thing to do. “I’m not American, you know. Maybe I don’t really get the whole Vietnam thing. You gotta educate me.”

“It’s difficult to explain.” Victor was silent for a while, and I could tell that he was wondering whether he should just drop it.

But he continued. “See, like, when you’re in the army, you do what you gotta do, you know. You ain’t got no choice.” He looked up at me.

“So, what, you like that idea of being on the edge? Surviving in the jungle?” I was thinking of the survivalist trope popular with some of the men. But I was on the wrong track, I think. Victor shook his head from side to side in a “maybe” gesture.

“I dunno. It’s not so much about killing people. That don’t fight my fire personally. Those guys had to do that, and then they just got shafted, they got no respect. They got left behind, or they come back here and they got left behind here as well. Like the American society, the people back here, they moved on, and the guys ain’t got no place. That’s why you got so many of them on the street.”

Victor clearly felt stabbed in the back by the government, and yet he had very limited ways to express his sense of betrayal of being left behind and having no place. His wish that he had fought in Vietnam, it seemed to me, was little about the glory of serving and more about finding a language with which he could legitimately criticize his abandonment by the government.

Vietnam nostalgia was the first articulation of system-talk that really had struck a chord with Victor. Now, for the first time since our first

meeting several months before he was talking about homelessness as a collective injury rather than as the product of his own personal cocktail of woes.

Homeless people hungry for meaning did not invent this idea of an intimate connection between the Vietnam War and homelessness; in fact, it was a common theme in media representations of homeless people during the 1980s. In Hollywood, the pioneering work of this genre was Ronald Reagan's favorite movie, *First Blood* (1982), directed by Ted Kotcheff and starring Sylvester Stallone as the misunderstood hero, Rambo. *First Blood* re-created the Western's man-without-a-name, a penniless drifter set upon by corrupt local elites. Opening with the unfair arrest of a misunderstood Vietnam veteran for vagrancy, the film escalates into unrestrained warfare. The traumatized hero turns back into the killing machine his country has made of him, slaughtering the local forces of law and order with abandon.

Over the next few years, the damaged yet deserving homeless Vietnam veteran became a stock character, taking lead roles in the thriller *Suspect* (1987, dir. Peter Yates and starring Liam Neeson and Cher) and the action film *Hard Target* (1993, dir. John Woo and starring Jean-Claude Van Damme). Such representations of the Vietnam veteran as an enemy in his own country resonated deeply on the street. Eventually Hollywood moved on, yet several of my companions tenaciously clung to the figure of the homeless vet, making it into a primary metaphor for their own homelessness. As Abby Margolis argues in her ethnography of homeless Japanese neo-"Samurai," by creating homeless identities that draw on culturally valued archetypes, homeless people can push back against dominant representations of their cultural difference and marginality. Ideological stock characters such as samurai, or, in the American context, Vietnam veterans, are likely to take on particularly strong meaning among the homeless.<sup>11</sup>

Both on and off the street, then, the "betrayal" of those who fought in Vietnam became a key trope of homeless system-talk. Like the genocide theme, however, the Vietnam connection generally proved to be insubstantial as a way for homeless men to challenge the power of either sin-talk or sick-talk. The problem with each of these tropes was that they remained at the narrative level. Divorced from both the everyday lives of the men and from their more intimate conceptions of themselves as individuals, both tropes were reduced to fractured,

shallow stories that were easily discounted as mere posturing, more street bullshit, in fact. This was the kind of talk that came up in group situations, often connected with alcohol, and was not necessarily taken completely seriously by the same people when sober.

Beneath the froth of system-rants, the taken-for-granted undercurrent of sin-talk pulled hard, consistently overwhelming alternative ways of seeing. Men often approached me individually after a system-talking session and expressed deep skepticism about what had been said. Willie, one of the white recyclers, introduced such a postmortem when we were sorting our recycling together.

"What do you think of that crowd on Bryant Street?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What Ronnie and those other guys were saying when we went over there last week."

"About Vietnam and that?"

"Yeah—all that bullshit about the government causing all their problems."

Willie himself had been a far from passive participant in this discussion, making extravagant claims about the proportion of homeless vets on the San Francisco streets. This was the first time Willie had ever brought up politics, and I was eager to get his own perspective. I tried to reverse the interrogation, saying, "I dunno, really. What about you?"

Willie wasn't having it. "I say BS! But what do you think? You are the college student."

"I don't know about the Vietnam deal. Doesn't seem like there are so many real Vietnam vets out here. But what Ronnie was saying about housing..."

Willie interrupted, determined to talk about the "bullshit." "Yeah, that Vietnam talk. People's always trying to pull that one. Seems like you get a bunch of guys and some liquor and suddenly everything is someone else's fault. Don't get me wrong. Sure the government should have looked after the vets, but seems to me like people would be better off trying to sort out their own shit instead of blaming everything on the government. It ain't much use complaining, and most of it's BS anyway."

What should be made of Willie's discomfort that I had seen him on a Vietnam rant? Maybe this is one more case of my companions assuming that an ethnographer—perhaps especially a female ethnographer—would be bound to the perspective of sick-talk. If this was

the case. I would have been likely to write off the belligerent complaints of Ronnie and company as system-blaming BS, as refusal to take responsibility. Yet Willie was hardly slavish to my way of looking at things the rest of the time. I feel sure that his insistence on distancing himself from the encampment system-rant demonstrated some genuine ambivalence on his part, some skeptical voices in his own head. His belief in the futility of critique, that "It ain't much use complaining," was shared by many of the men. If anyone was going to pull them out of the gutter, it would have to be themselves, they believed.

Those who by one means or another had created some distance from both the sin-dominated hustling economy and the sick-talk promoted by the shelter system voiced the most coherent and consistent articulations of system-talk. They might be working off their GA with one of the better agencies, or perhaps traveling out to a neighborhood commercial strip to sell the *Street Sheet*, but most likely they would be members of the city's several-hundred-strong league of homeless recyclers.

The economic niche of recycling provided a grounding of everyday behavior that proved fertile for systemic understandings of homelessness. It enabled a spatial expansiveness, regularity of routine, and a form of self-sufficient, noncriminal activity strikingly different from either the Hobbesian battle of the hustlers or the limbo of "shelterization." Recycling logistics were the topic of many casual conversations between acquaintances, whether working or not, shifting the terrain away from the standard themes of sin-talk: possible property crimes, personal vendettas, impotent furies. Within this calmer context, episodes of system-talk took on a deeper, more organic resonance.

The serious recyclers, or pros, congregated in the more peaceful edge zones of the city—Dogpatch and other less frequented parts of the shoreline: the more remote stretches of South of Market and China Basin. The recyclers understood the roads by which they had reached the street in a variety of ways. What many of them shared, though, was a claim that the depth of their current abjection was not their fault, but produced by racist or corrupt elites, which consistently foiled their attempts to get themselves "on their feet." Unlike the many panhandlers who saw their "lines" in purely instrumental terms, men like Clarence, Ray, and Victor drew from their work a



*Packed up for the day.*

strong sense of legitimacy, constructing it as a blue collar trade rather than a desperate hustle.

The recyclers' identity as struggling workers surfaced noticeably in their responses to nuisance policing, which were both calmer and more assertive than those of their peers. Where EJ or Sammy would have cursed and fulminated, Raymond and his companions were cooperative yet unyielding in the face of police questioning:

"Sure, you go through my cart." Raymond muttered quietly as two officers took his bundles apart in search of contraband. "I got nothin'. Period. So I got nothin' to hide." One of the officers asked for his ID. "Ain't got no ID. If the DPW" would stop trashing our gear, maybe we could keep hold of our papers."

Ray held himself straight and stared at the officers in silence, daring them to give him more trouble. His patience seemed to make them uncomfortable. Foul-mouthed resentment was easier to deal with. The female officer apologized to him for wasting his time, even helping him replace a bag she had taken from under his cart.

### Sickness

Within the service agencies, however, social workers and advocates attempted to mitigate the sin-talk of the streets with an alternative institutional culture based on the disease discourse on homelessness. In this, San Francisco was in line with the Clinton administration's "Continuum of Care" strategy, mandating a shift away from basic emergency shelters toward multiservice or transitional shelters, which would offer clients various rehabilitative services in exchange for program compliance. With the rise of the transitional shelter and other agencies aimed at changing rather than merely serving the homeless population, the Tenderloin became a battlefield where the two major discourses on homelessness met head-on, drawing a line in the sand between the agencies and the street, *inside* and *outside*.

This stark spatial division was mirrored in the way the agency workers (like the LA drug counselors studied by Weinberg) characterized the street as "out there," an unhealthy chaotic zone where people were dominated by their addictions and lived in denial of their sickness.<sup>13</sup> What the caseworkers of the service agencies offered was a form of absolution from sin, an opportunity to exchange one's career of vice and self-indulgence for a case history, to give up the dirt and danger of the street and remake one's life "one day at a time" through a lengthy process of introspection and self-reform.

"You are not a *bad* person," as former homeless addict and drug counselor Timothy would tell his clients. "You have a serious, life-threatening disease."<sup>14</sup>

By far the most powerful strand of sick-talk within the homelessness industry is the language of the twelve-step movement, institutionally mandated as the approach of choice for homeless addicts and lent added legitimacy by the strong social movement base of Alcoholics Anonymous and related groups. Almost everybody I knew who was admitted into the transitional shelter program was required to attend

numerous twelve-step meetings as part of the action plan laid down by their caseworker. Even admitting to very occasional use of narcotics led to "the whole nine yards," as they called it.

Various elements of the sick-talk promoted within the multiservice shelters and rehabilitation facilities did manage to permeate street discourse, at least among the (large) sector of the street population who regularly circulated through such institutions.

"Drug of choice," "That's the disease talking," and several other twelve-step catchphrases have become essential elements of drug users across the nation. However, as this conceptual vocabulary was transferred from the islands of rehabilitation onto the street, its character changed in a fundamental way. Instead of the serious, worldly-weary, confessional tone of the twelve-step meeting, the street version of sick-talk was more likely to take a form of parody or insult. As in the discourse of the drug rehabilitation facilities, every impoverished man or woman was branded as an addict, first and foremost, but the rest of the fellowship's construction of addiction was lost.

Rather than inciting sympathy for homeless addicts as victims of a disease over which they had no control, the hustlers enjoyed the idea that everyone "out there" was a willful sinner like them. Men like Del and Sammy would lean against the wall, classifying every derelict passerby by "drug of choice," whether they actually knew them or not. "Crack—crack—wines—herone—CRACK—Lord Almighty!" Del cracked up at the sight of an unkempt woman who looked like a particularly obvious case.

Sammy was especially judgmental. One time his friend Tony asked him to help carry a woman who had collapsed on the sidewalk. Sammy walked over to have a look. The woman was unconscious and bleeding from the nose. Sammy turned away.

"Ain't gonna have some dope fend bleeding on me."

Tony was indignant. "No, man, I know her. She cool."

"Then she should stay away from that shit."

"She got fits, that's what is."

"Right." Sammy walked off, radiating disdain.

Rather than offering an alternative to sin-talk, then, street usage of twelve-step terminology merely confirmed the moral deviance of the very poor. Indigence was always a product of drug use, drug use was defined in terms of willful choices, and all and everyone wandering

the Tenderloin sidewalks could blame nobody but themselves for their misfortunes. At the risk of repetition, note how the hustlers' version of personal responsibility again echoed the arguments of William Bennett, Charles Murray, and James Q. Wilson, intellectual architects of the punitive turn in American late twentieth-century social policy.

In chapter 6 we will see something of how different discourses on homelessness played out inside the shelter and rehab institutions. For now, the key point is how hard it was for therapeutic professionals to effect any lasting reorientation on those used to hustling for a living. The hustlers' determination to see themselves as competent, self-sufficient takers stood in the way of the institutions' project to get them to confront their problems and acknowledge that they were in need of help. Indeed, the "programs" provided a chance to show their skills at manipulation.

A "soft" hustler like Linc, who excelled at emotion work, could adapt to the discursive requirements of an interview in a heartbeat. I once went to a shelter intake interview with him. He worked his gentle smile on the intake worker, talked about being "ready for a big change," "wanting to look at his issues," and being generally "sick and tired."

He expressed enthusiastic interest in an employment training program run by Goodwill. "Yeah, that sounds interesting. That might be just the ticket for me," he said earnestly.

I was unsure how to take what I had seen. Did Linc indeed have some motivation to get clean and join the recovery community?

He stayed for a couple of weeks, attended the required drug and alcohol meetings patiently though silently, then walked out, taking a better set of "threads" furnished through one of the shelter programs.

"Why did you quit?" I asked him.

"Aagh!" He chuckled. "Can't stand that joint."

"What did you think you would get out of it?"

Linc looked confused. I tried again, "I mean, did you hope it was gonna be different?"

"Oh, please, baby!" he exclaimed. "Ain't *nothin'* new in those places. Nah, but I was looking into stuff, you know. SSI, mostly. But I don't see it right now. Peoples was sayin' some folks could pull down SSI on accounta being addicted—get yourself a room, you know. Thought maybe I could work that, but I guess it was just idle words, idle words

from idle peoples." He fell silent, musing. "Now I guess you could go further, get into the whole mental thing, but that's a longer game. I don't see myself going that way."

For the right result, Linc might be willing to work the addiction apparatus, but becoming mentally ill seemed to be one step too far. The fact that Linc was an accomplished trickster and liar made it second nature for him to work the system, which he saw as just another form of hustling. This is not to say that he was immune to change. He was indeed sick of his life and, in the right circumstances, the potential of sick-talk was substantially weakened by the paucity of resources offered to able-bodied men like Linc. The shelters may have used their considerable power over their clients to get them to "talk the talk," but they offered little in terms of material resources that could encourage men to give up the money they made from stealing, panhandling, or even recycling. SSI (disability) was Linc's best chance for getting off the street—unlike General Assistance it paid enough to support a basic room—but it remained out of reach.

#### Spare-changing and Boosting

The vulnerability of the disease discourse to distortion by sin-talk was compounded by its relationship with panhandling. Many panhandlers, especially white panhandlers, presented themselves as helpless victims of homelessness, trying to get themselves together. In effect, they had learned to use sick-talk in a purely instrumental way, evoking depression, HIV, and various physical injuries as their primary obstacles to a normal life.

Deathly thin, his left arm stinking from an infected abscess, heroin addict Freddie "flew" a sign from a windy median on Van Ness, one of San Francisco's busiest streets. On the large cardboard sign he had inherited from an acquaintance now in jail was written in red "Home-hair streaming in the wind, would walk along the median next to the waiting drivers, fixing his intense blue eyes on them like a prophet of disaster. He made from two to four dollars an hour, more when traffic was heavy.

While I was working with Freddie's people, Freddie added "HIV+" to his panhandling sign, so that it now read: "HIV+, Homeless, and Hungry. Anything helps. God bless!"

"Are you HIV-positive, Freddie?" I whispered to him, horrified. "I dunno," he shrugged with a half-smile. "Could be, I guess." Freddie, thirty-one years old, looked at me through the detached, ancient eyes of a man with little left to lose.

Freddie's three "H's" were couched in the language of homelessness as victimhood, but it was quite clear to him that this was only another hustle. He had no idea about his HIV status. He also did not consider food to be much of a problem. St. Anthony's dining room was not so far away, and he and his friends only rarely "wasted" money on food. The "H" that most concerned him was heroin, period. In the context of his so-called death quest, his homelessness itself felt more like bad behavior than a genuine misfortune. Others might fall for his sign, but he was never going to take it seriously himself.

Again, we see how the ways that men raised cash from day to day circumscribed the ways that they could coherently understand themselves. Freddie's need to portray himself as a victim to make his living, if anything, blocked any desire for serious self-investigation. Given that he lied for a living, the easiest way to maintain self-respect was to take pride in his ability to manipulate and "snow" his donors.

To some extent, though, everybody trying to work their way through the arcane agency runaround was subjected to the same effects. They had to learn to tell the right kind of story for each given situation—to emphasize job possibilities here, disability there, to talk of a waiting family to get a bus ticket to see an old girlfriend, but then disavow any potential family support for GA. It all took its toll, as beautifully told in Lisa Gray-Garcia's Kafkaesque saga of managing multiple identities to fix painful teeth.<sup>15</sup> Stories of deprivation and disability inevitably became a skill, and "getting over" one of the few satisfactions in enormously frustrating lives. Sin-talk's small consolations drew everybody in to some extent.

Wash, a self-styled "equal opportunity drug addict" and consummate shoplifter, took sick-talk more seriously. Although Wash was over fifty years old, he had the lively eyes and pure skin of a young man. His angular face was clean-cut, with small nose and pointed chin. Sometimes he looked strikingly beautiful, other times blank and eerie. A certain



*Division Street village in the evening sun.*

ageless quality was common to many longtime heroin addicts, but Wash had far more style than most of the homeless guys, with his black tribby and hair neatly braided by his sister every few weeks. Like Linc and Del, Wash was another occasional recycler, who rarely brought in more than five dollars' worth of cans. It took me a while to figure out why he did recycling at all, as he was clearly a prolific and expert thief. Once I got to know him slightly, he used to beckon me over and produce all sorts of goodies—cakes, beer, candies, beef jerky, vodka, toothpaste, shoelaces, prepackaged sushi, cookie dough, slices of ham.

Wash had a way of wandering off if I started asking questions, but I eventually caught him in an expansive mood and persuaded him to explain why he did recycling. We were sitting on the sidewalk, leaning against the chain link fence of a lumberyard in industrial southeast San Francisco.

"So what's the deal with the recycling? You just like doing it? I don't get it."

Wash laughed. "No, baby, this is for show money. I just come down here when I got no cash to get me some show. So I can walk in the store, flashing my money, then they won't be watching for me."

"You don't spend it?"

"Not in the stores, you know what I mean."

"Horse?"

"Nuh-unh. (Winks.) Reefer."

"You quit heroin?"

"Taking a break. I'm trying to be a good boy. Stay on top of my habit. Don't want that AIDS."

"Right on. You do crack?"

"Yeah, well, there's a strange drug. Couple years back I had me a run-in with the pipe... but don't like crack much. I like time for my money. Got too much of it anyway. I want to waste the whole day, and I mean waste." He swept his arm across the sky, wiping out some imaginary days.

Wash pulled two bottles of beer, two bags of trail mix, and a piece of prepackaged carrot cake out of the sleeve of his puff jacket. The trail mix was hot from lying against his arm. "Saved this rabbit food for you," he teased. We drank the beer slowly.

"I guess that would be a good stealing jacket?" I asked him.

I got a gleeful laugh in reply. "This is THE stealing jacket, baby." His lively eyes sparkled with pleasure as he pulled out yet another item, this time a jumbo pack of candy sours.

"You like this dark beer?"

Wash gave me a sad "you-just-don't-get-it" look.

"I've never refused an alcoholic beverage in my life. I'm a chronic alcoholic, I mean chro-nic." Wash took on a deep, doctorly, white voice and said, "This man is a chronic alcoholic with sclerosis of the liver and a history of blackouts, DTs, the works. There's no hope for him, I'm afraid. If only we could have reached him earlier. It is a sad case." (Wash reverted to character.) "Yeah, baby. I've climbed the whole ladder—the twelve steps to o-blivion. From beer to malt liquor, reefer, dope, crack, Hennessy, speedballs. For me that's the twelve steps."

"You ever want to quit?"

"Look." Wash sighed. "It's too late for me to change. I've been hooked on one or other since before you were born."

Halfway through the second beer, Wash put the bottle down on the sidewalk with affectionate distaste. "I don't even need this shit. I shoulda kept it. Now I'll have to go out again this afternoon."

Despite his playfulness, Wash did seem to believe that homelessness was purely the product of his drug-using career. Ever since he

first succumbed to the pleasures of beer and reefer he had been a userless case. While he was definitely attached to his skills as a "booster" (shoplifter), his belief in his powerlessness in relation to drugs and alcohol went a long way to mitigate the intensity of sin-talk. He rarely talked himself up as any kind of "playa," and he observed the fronting of others with amusement. Wash never deified hard drugs in the feverish way of Freddie and his friends. For Wash, drugging was at best about losing time and place in pleasure. His metaphors for drug use were all about leaving his social location: "flying," "spacing," achieving the state of "gone." In comparison, the pleasure of getting away with illegal behavior was less passionately important.

Wash was similarly uninterested in invocations of "the system." One time, his acquaintance Big T was on a roll, crying genocide: "And you've got all these brothers out on the street. They give us this cocaine, this malt liquor, hope we will kill each other, kill ourselves. We got to get away from this shit."

Wash snorted. "Maybe we *like* that shit too much. I keep it real, brother... This all between me and..." Wash waved expansively at his bottles.

#### The Street Ain't No Place to Show Yo' Weakness

In general, sick-talk moved beyond humor only when the men were alone with me. I by no means thought of myself as a representative of the disease discourse, but some of the men would treat me as such, probably by virtue of my education, gender, and race.<sup>16</sup> White recycler Walter, for example, used me as a sounding board for exploring some ideas brought up in a rare meeting with a doctor.

"And she said I'm depressed. I've probably been depressed a real long time, from what she can tell. And, you know, that makes sense to me, because it feels like, oh man, years and years and years since I remember any real happiness in my life. So maybe this drugs thing is more about that, more about trying to force happiness... I don't know. How do you say what comes first?"

It is unlikely, I think, that rough-and-ready Walter would have indulged in such explorations in front of his street acquaintances. With his closest buddy Sam, for example, Walter seemed to have a tacit agreement to camp together with a minimum of talk. Even with me, Walter explored



elements of sick-talk only when inside my apartment. Otherwise, when we were working together or even sitting in his camp, he stuck solidly to his regular street persona—the strong, self-sufficient worker. As another recycler, Luther, told me once, “Get beyond that fronting, and we all weak, believe me. But the street ain’t no place to *show yo’ weakness*.” Self-doubt and introspection were dangerous luxuries.

Though someone like Walter was attracted to certain elements of sick-talk, and had a strong desire to leave the street, he felt that there was no way he could do this as an autonomous, mature person. The only route securing medium-term accommodation and food would have been one of the intensive drug rehabilitation institutions in the city, and he feared that this was not realistic for someone of his age and independent spirit.

“I may be depressed, I may be fucked up, but you know, I don’t need to sit around with a lot of weak-minded dope fiends and be treated like a child. I don’t see how that is going to help me. It never did before.... You know, I could go to meetings. Every day, if necessary, I could go to meetings, I think. But twenty-four seven, I don’t think so.” Walter thumped my kitchen table in frustration. “I need my fucking *privacy*, goddamn it. I need my own space to get my shit together. That ain’t gonna be rehab and sure as hell ain’t gonna be out here.”

There was little chance of Walter getting his own place. The Clinton administration’s “Continuum of Care” plan was designed to provide long-term housing or employment support for able-bodied men trying to leave the street, but this third phase of provision was given low priority within an already stretched homelessness budget and quickly disappeared into the archive of noble intentions. What were left were caseworkers who encouraged their clients to examine how their problems might be rooted in addiction or mental illness. What the caseworkers were unable to offer were the material resources to lift their clients permanently out of homelessness. The primary therapeutic exit from homelessness remained what it had been for decades: disability payments for the minority who could prove that their physical health had been permanently ruined by street life. Robust sloggers like Walter were unlikely to escape the street in this fashion.

I have been discussing how the uptake of sick-talk was disrupted by both the sin-talk endemic on the street and the lack of long-term resources offered by the shelters. Yet in some ways, the most vociferous

explicit resistance to sick-talk came from the direction of system-talk. The system-talk circulating out on the street came into sharp, often explicit conflict with the insistence on individual and family-level causation inside. Indeed, for the many counselors specializing in substance abuse in particular, one of the first lines of action was to directly confront and neutralize elements of system-talk in clients’ stories about themselves.

Shelter caseworker Valerie was trying to persuade white recycler Dennis to take computer classes.

“I don’t see the point of these classes. They ain’t gonna hire no one like me to work on computers,” he grouched.

“Well, I’m sorry, Dennis, but if you are going to think like that, you will never get yourself a job. It’s childish,” she said firmly.

“I just think it’s the truth,” he returned. “I’m trying be realistic. I’m a forty-six-year-old man who didn’t finish high school, who reads for shit. No one is gonna hire me for no office job, no computer job, no retail job, whatever. What I need is forklift, receiving, something like that. And I know how to look for work. It’s getting work that’s the biggest problem.” Dennis was clearly trying to control himself, but his voice was rising.

“Don’t be getting ahead of yourself. I think you need to take some time, work on your substance issues, and work on your anger. I would like you to try a couple of sessions of anger management.”

“It’s being in here makes me angry,” he muttered.

“Uh-huh, that’s what I’m saying,” she said, looking out in the hall for the next client.

Dennis lasted twelve more days, then made his way back to his old encampment at China Basin. He seemed embarrassed that I had seen the interview with Valerie. “You didn’t like what she was saying, I could tell,” I said.

Dennis shook his head. “Talk about a fucking double-blind! They make you so mad, poking at you like — aagh! Then, hey, you’re messed up because you’re some kind of psycho. Oh, *please*. If I wasn’t homeless, I wouldn’t be getting that kind of bullshit. Anyone ‘round here who knows what they’re talking about, they would get it. I screwed up my last job, I’ve been out of work a long time, and it is hard as hell to get back in. That’s reality. It’s not all about me. At this point, my psychological state doesn’t have a hell of a lot to do with it. I would say.”

Dennis was in fact interested in "dealing with his issues," and squarely confronting the obstacles to getting off the street. What he would not accept was how Valerie dismissed his worries about prospects in the labor market as childish.

The same turned out to be true of Linc. Though he had a very different understanding of his homelessness than Dennis, a white man with a long work history, he was also alienated by the way the shelter staff left no room for systemic understandings of homelessness. A couple of months after the incident I described above, Linc revealed more about why he was unwilling to extend his shelter stay into a "longer game." Despite the superficial acquiescence we saw earlier, he was in fact adamantly resistant to the sick-talk of what he loosely called "those programs."

"You know I been in rehab a couple of times, one of those diversion programs. The second time I was thinking I would rather go to jail, but when it came down to it I thought, 'Be real, You wanna do thirty days or six months, you crazy?'" So I went back again, only they kept me in sixty days."

"Warm and dry."

"So they say. But I hate that bullshit. I really can't stomach it. All these people in there playing this shit, this social worker talk, like black people start all their own problems. I don't think so. You wouldn't have all this crack, all this family problems, all that, if we could get ahead in this system.... Drugs and alcohol, that ain't the half of it. I know my own deal. I don't mind fooling around, but I ain't no fool." he shook his head distastefully.

It is not surprising that Linc was thoroughly uneasy within the disease model of rehab. Just as he thought that he had no choice about becoming a hustler, he attributed his fondness for "wines" to the adversity of his life rather than seeing substance abuse as the cause of his poverty. Having made system-talk the foundation of his self-respect within difficult conditions, Linc was extremely unwilling to shelve his invocation of institutional racism.

Irritation over the silencing of system-talk in the shelters gathered more weight when people on the street looked at local homelessness policies as a whole. The extensive shelter funding in place by the early 1990s was accompanied by concerted campaigns of quality-of-life tickets

and homeless clearances. Those who stayed within the tacitly acknowledged limits of the Tenderloin were less affected, but as the last chapter shows, men living in other parts of the city became highly critical of the city's homelessness policy as a whole. In particular, the frequent assertion by politicians that there were enough shelter beds and that therefore nobody should be sleeping outside did much to undermine the idea of the homeless shelter as a refuge. "City wants us out of sight, shelter wants to get paid by the city, simple as that," was a common sentiment. Without the cold weather that drives rough sleepers inside the shelters in less temperate parts of the United States, many saw the shelters as meager inducement to offset the danger of getting drawn into a half-life of "shelterization," spending days waiting silently for something to happen, and nights tossing to the snores and coughs of the multitude.

Those who embraced this perspective most deeply might, even still, be open to working the programs in transitional shelters. Most wanted passionately to get off the street and knew the shelters offered important resources. Yet, like Linc, they entered suspiciously and held on to their system-thinking once inside, ever resentful of the individualistic emphasis of "social worker talk."

#### Recovery

Another response was to appropriate and subvert the idioms of sin-talk to their own ends. Some thoroughly rejected the twelve-step orthodoxy that held that staying "out there" represented complete abandonment to chaotic addiction. They described their street homelessness as a deliberate and relatively healthy choice. "I lose my mind in there, all bunched up with hundreds of other mofos, bowing down to the poverty pimps," said Derrick. "It sets me off. I've gotta watch out for my mental health." This narrative of choice within intolerable constraints sometimes developed into a novel construction of street homelessness itself as a form of recovery, during which ex-cons could relax after the tension of prison and prepare themselves for the uphill struggle to get back into society.

Dobie, the powerful, brooding recycling giant of the Sunset, laid out this perspective one evening while out collecting.

"Prison is bullshit, you know. They talk about rehabilitation, and that is the biggest joke in the world if it wasn't so mother-fucking cold." Dobie swiftly sorted some bottles from a large dumpster into the three bags slung around his cart. "No one leaves with his head straight. . . . There's something about being locked up. . . . It breaks you down, your confidence, your get-up-and-go, your social, like, your social instincts, your health, all of it. It's such a strain, and you have to hold yourself high, like you don't give a damn."

Dobie's friend, Maddox, agreed from inside the dumpster: "Yeah, that crazy fronting. Makes you psycho."

Dobie continued, meditating on his time since prison. "For me, it held me in a time warp. I mean, I came out and I was still angry at Denise. Six years and I still wanted revenge. I dreamed of killing her. . . . I knew I had to chill, and, well, this homeless thing, that's one thing you can do, you can take some time for yourself. You stay out of the shelters, you sleep in the park, do some good honest work. . . . and you can start to get yourself back to a better state. So you would be more ready to deal with people without losing it."

One afternoon I told Julius that I hoped Morris, a literate man with a two-year college degree, might someday be able to use his considerable talents to get himself a decent job. Julius shook his head. "He ain't ready to put himself on the line, you know. He's gotta get his strength back, take some time for recovery. The system's messed him up, you know. He needs to get his head straight, chill for a while."

Julius probably spoke for himself as much as for his friend, as he clearly took personal comfort in talking about street homelessness as sober self-care rather than the chaotic self-abandonment it represented within shelters. This surprisingly optimistic recovery narrative had become part of the project of hope, empathy, and mutual respect he shared with Morris, Dobie, and many of the other pros. The decision to stay outside was generally condemned as a self-evident bad choice, obvious "stinking thinking." When they turned this common sense upside down and constructed it as a rational response to trauma inflicted by the system, they directly pushed back against sin-talk and sick-talk, transforming deviance into self-help and critique.

Here, we come again to questions of "lived" discourse. As Morris and Dobie invoked recovery, they simultaneously cited their practice

of recycling, the active, semi-legitimate "job" that took them outside the confines of the "rabble zones" and enabled them to make money without manipulating or victimizing either the public or each other. In conjunction with this work, which gave them a certain autonomy from the indignities of the homeless industry, the narrative of street "recovery" let the men combine critique of the system with some sense of agency. Men like Dobie and Julius felt driven down by the economy, the criminal justice system, and, more immediately, the police and the homelessness industry. In the absence of more significant forms of empowerment, the idea of street recovery was a crucial way they could still claim to be exercising free will.

This chapter has turned through the spectrum of street discourses on homelessness, from *sin* through *system* to *sickness*. Overall, though, I suppose I should reemphasize the vitality of the antagonistic sin-talk dominating the ghetto and skid row spaces of the city. It was hard for men on the street to find geographical spaces where their relations with other homeless people could move beyond a war of all against all, and equally hard to find discursive configurations where the bluster and cynicism of sin-talk did not either co-opt or undermine the other discourses on homelessness. Nevertheless, there were important ways in which the sin-talk of the street was itself modified by aspects of system-talk and sick-talk, and not just among the recyclers of Dogpatch. The men used evocations of both the inexorable workings of the "sickness" of addiction and the arbitrary power of a heartless "system" to create some distance from the most dramatized versions of sin-talk, opening a more complex repertoire of ways of seeing and behaving.

Literary theory's most influential writers on discourse—Kristeva and Bakhtin in particular—emphasize fragmentation and change.<sup>17</sup> And it seems true that statements about ourselves have an inherently unstable character, many-voiced, hybrid, and changing as we move into different social contexts. "Alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward," in Bakhtin's words.<sup>18</sup> Yet even the battered souls on the San Francisco streets seemed to desire to make

some coherent sense of their homeless condition, one which would reduce the assaults of stigma and somehow unify their narratives about themselves with their day-to-day means of getting by.

The different discourses on homelessness nestled in intimate relations with the material conditions of street life. The power of sin-talk was rooted in the practice of hustling (which included panhandling, in most people's eyes) as the primary way of making money from day to day. It was equally reinforced by the dangers of the street. Certainly in the more dense "rabble zones" of the city, the adoption of a cunning, potentially fierce street persona was the only way to hold on to one's meager resources. The sick-talk circulating in the agencies, on the other hand, required a vulnerability badly at odds with self-protection on the street. There was no street space within which to take it seriously, and mostly people reworked its terminology into the moral model of sin-talk, whether in jest or in anger. Even the transitional programs had limited resources for potential converts unless they were mentally or physically broken, or willing to enter the intensive self-reformation programs of the drug rehabilitation facilities. While one hustler, Junior, eventually "worked" a program to renewal and rebirth, most of my research companions slipped back through the revolving door onto the street.

System-talk, while it could be shallowly combined with forms of sin-talk, was ultimately contradicted by the daily hustle. The implied innocence, or normality, of the victim of larger social forces was hard to sustain when much of the day was spent lying or stealing. Equally, the combination of regular police clearances and attacks from other homeless men created large obstacles to building solidarity and pulling together anything but ephemeral collective action. The exception to this rule was the anomalous social world of the recyclers, which I explore further in the next chapter. Even though many of them voiced a relatively undeveloped narrative of system-talk, the recyclers were able to develop a set of daily practices supporting a collective sense of purpose, a common injury, and most important, a project of solidarity that provided a lived discourse in striking contrast to the Hobbesian tussle of the "wolves."

### *No One Loves a Loser*

WILLIE, A LANKY, GRAVEL-VOICED WHITE MAN with a stoop, came from a hard-drinking "hillbilly" family in Stockton. His mother ran off when he was seven, leaving him with his older brothers, who beat him frequently and taught him to skip school. On New Year's Eve, 1973, fifteen-year-old Willie witnessed one of his brothers attacking a man in a drunken rage, smashing his head with a heavy chain. Overwhelmed by fear and disgust, Willie ran off early the next morning and caught the bus to Fresno, the nearest sizeable town. There he slept rough for a few weeks while looking for work. Lying about his age landed him a factory job, and he soon found an apartment to share with a couple of other young men. He never went back home.

Willie could move, but he couldn't change California's passionate affair with chemically enhanced experience. Early life had left him with a great fear of out-of-control drinking and drugging; a fear tinged nonetheless with desire and curiosity. Not only the bad times but the good had been charged by drug use. In Fresno, it proved hard to stay away from the constant drinking and drugging of his friends and coworkers. It was the 1970s, the height of American drug consumption, and it seemed like everyone Willie knew was involved with drugs one way or another, using marijuana and Quaaludes to chill, PCP and coke to fly, poppers for sex, and heroin—why, with heroin you didn't even need sex, so they said. Willie tried them all, thinking he would just experiment. Heroin proved too strong for him, holding him in a bitter and sordid embrace that steadily led him to unemployment and petty thievery, and then to jail. When he came out a year later, Willie decided to move to San Francisco, thinking that the variety and opportunities of a big city might help him steer a new course.

He worked a few temporary construction jobs and stayed out of jail for a couple of years, but his hold on himself was fragile, and he failed to land the kind of work that could anchor a new life. He started using heroin again in 1988, and his shoddy collection of part-time jobs was woefully inadequate to feed his habit. Again he turned to stealing, this time motorcycles, which he sold to a fence for between \$50 and \$200. Within months he was in jail again.

Willie told me this backstory one day when heavy rain prevented us from recycling. Giving up on making any money that day, we had gone to the St. Francis, a two-dollar cinema on Market Street, to see some second-rate action movie. It was warm and dry, and one of the only places in town where you could get away with smoking inside. I remember Willie's low voice and the glow of his cigarette in the dark as the gunfire rattled and the explosions roared around us.

I met up with Willie again a year later, a couple of months after he landed a dishwasher job at a small hotel. His clothes were cleaner and his beard was gone, leaving a handlebar mustache and sideburns that suited his angular face.

"Remind me how it was you got to be homeless in the first place," I asked him.

Willie leaned toward the tape recorder: "I got clean in the county jail in 1991, and I stayed that way for a while. I was a dishwasher and short order cook at the Shamrock, on Harrison. I was there seven years."<sup>1</sup>

"Where were you living?"

"I had a room in the Delta Hotel."

"Eww?"

"OK, it was a dump, but I had one of the best rooms, up on the fifth floor, with a window looking out right over the corner of Sixth and Mission. I had a girl who didn't do junk, a nice colored girl.... She was only twenty-three when we hooked up, but she really liked me. She was a cocktail waitress in North Beach.... We wanted to see the West, the mountains, Vegas, the desert, you know. The plan was to buy a van, something we could live out of. We had about \$600. Then I lost the money and most of my things in the fire in 1997? You heard about that fire?"

"Sure, it was a bad one," I said. "The place is still empty."

"The top floors were hit the worst, you know. All my shit was destroyed. I had to move into the All-Star, in the Mission. It was all I could find, a stinking little hole with no air, no windows, crackheads roaming the hallways, partying." Willie paused. "A few weeks later my girl dumped me."

"Do you think it had anything to do with the fire?"

"It felt like that. You know, no one loves a loser. She was mad with me over losing the cash, said I shoulda put it in the bank. Like I had enough money for a bank account. I was paid in cash, never had that much."

"You took out your disappointment on each other?"

Willie shrugged. "I guess. I wasn't great company. I was in a dirty mood. Then she caught me with a rock in my pocket and that was it. Her parents were dope fiends, and she wasn't gonna tolerate me using."

"Were you using a lot of crack?"

"I wouldn't say a lot. Couple of times a week maybe. I was trying not to, that's for sure. But I could feel her drifting, flirting with other guys, dressing up more sexy when she was working. And when I talked about getting our shit together again, getting out of town, she wasn't interested. She would just watch TV when I was trying to talk to her. It made me feel like shit. I mean, this was the best thing I ever had, and I knew it was over.... And I was worried about my job. Some developer was trying to buy out the boss so he could tear down half the block for some of those new condos. The boss was giving us a good line, but we all knew he was going to take the money. It was obvious, the way he started spending more on his car, his clothes. He was just waiting on a better price.

"I needed something to look forward to. I was getting so angry, bitter angry. I thought I might hurt somebody. I wasn't going to go near heroin, I knew better than that. But I thought, well, cocaine, that's not my drug of choice. I can take it and leave it. I had done it before a few times, before I got with Theresa. And there was this guy at work, we would go up on the roof sometimes after our shift ended. I tried to keep it to a couple of rocks. I knew it was foolish, but I couldn't do any better. I didn't have the strength in me. It was a bad time.

"After the bar closed, I went on GA, started looking for another gig. But GA barely covered my rent. I had to get some money for my daily

expenses. So I started panhandling on Market Street, by one of the entrances to Montgomery BART Station. I didn't know what else to do. My idea was to panhandle in the morning, then go out looking for work. I wasn't looking for a hustle. I'm too old for that. I just figured panhandling was the most honest way, you know—I need money, I ask people to spare a few pennies."

"Had you ever done it before?" I broke in.

"Panhandling? No. And it wasn't easy.... You get to hate the people marching past."

Willie cleared his throat and glanced up at me, a strained look in his eyes. "I was having dreams of being invisible, really invisible, like I couldn't see my hand. One dream I had, I was standing on a big staircase somewhere, and all these people, this whole line of people I used to know, they came down the stairs past me, and not one of them said a word. They didn't even seem to see me.

"And then I had to get up and try to find work. Except I had to go back to the hotel and change my clothes to look for work. It all took time, and I was so down, it was hard to come into a joint and ask for work. And they didn't seem like the right kinds of joints for me." Willie hesitated, struggling for the right words. "You know how the city, it's become so yuppie? Like, I'm too old, not educated enough.... Seems like it's not good enough to be just a regular guy.... In the end I gave up on looking for work, and I was just sitting out all day panhandling."

"Did you ask people for money?" I asked. "Or just fly a sign?"

"At first I had me a sign, and I would just sit and read a book, but you don't get much if you don't ask. Then I used to give people this intense look, just say, 'Please, anything helps.' I figured people should like that, showing you're not fussy, you'll take the pennies.... The thing is, after a while, you hate them, you hate everyone, and they feel it, they know."

"So how did you come to recycling?"

Willie was silent for a moment, casting his mind back. "See, I was watching Julius every day come past me with this big load. We would say hi. He lived on Sixth Street at one time, you know. I realized that he was having a better time than me. It was that simple. He seemed OK, less depressed than I was, for sure. Then it took a while for me

to get used to the idea of pushing a shopping cart. Seemed to be like saying, 'Look at me, look at this poor homeless motherfucker.' And I wasn't even homeless. I still had my room, just.... But what's worse than sitting on Market Street begging? So I asked him could I go out with him, figure out if I could make it work for me."

"Did you like it?"

"It was OK, but the money was bad, worse than panhandling. I couldn't see it, working all day, and it's hard manual labor, pushing that bone-shaking cart. You know you should be getting twelve, fifteen bucks an hour and you're getting maybe one or two bucks an hour if you're really going at it. It wasn't till I lost my room that I went back to it. The thing is it's real different when you're homeless. For a start, you've got nowhere to go, so you don't care if you're working a lot of hours."

"The more the better?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, just about." Willie turned to grin at me. "And it took me a while to realize that I'm in this mentality of 'I'm not gonna work for nothing.' But with recycling, you're not working for someone else; you're working for yourself, so you don't have to feel like someone's getting rich off you. There's no boss. No one's making you do it. OK, the money's not going to do much for you, but it's something, and it gives you something to do that's not just sitting around. I got stronger than I had been for maybe ten years pushing that cart, slinging those bags of bottles. It kinda hurt my shoulder, but otherwise it was real good for me physically. I started cutting down on cigarettes because I needed my lungs for my work, and I wanted to save."

"Did you manage to?"

"Not much. But the recycling did get me off the streets. I really think it did. See, I met this buddy of mine back from my Fresno days, and I arranged to stay with him and his girlfriend and put something toward the rent. So I was recycling and every day I'd give them ten bucks. My mentality was so much better. I would go look for work in the mornings, then do a big load of recycling in the afternoon. And it paid off, at least for now. I moved with Wayne and Sherry, we got a place in East Oakland now, got my own room. Things are coming together again, I hope." Willie resolutely tapped the oak bar with his open hand.