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Humanities Core Writing 27706

12 June 2017

Beyond Visualizing Homelessness: Ethics of the Aesthetic Production of the Homeless

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is commonly seen as the representation of the underbelly of society and a social phenomenon to be documented in visual media. These representations are often created with the intention to make the homeless visible in a world that seldom acknowledges their existence, but during the creative process, artists are unconsciously reinforcing the marginalization and stigmatization of homelessness. We then have, ingrained in our heads, an image of what a visible homeless person should look like: dirty and ungroomed male rough sleeping on the streets alone. The ethicality of trying to capture a narrative of poverty, but simultaneously adding to its stereotypes, then is a conflict in the visual storytelling of homelessness.

In exploring homelessness in America, more specifically in Los Angeles, I will be looking at the documentary, *Lost Angels: Skid Row Is My Home*. I will evaluate the following questions: (1) is it ethical to film the homeless, (2) does filming the homeless make them “visible” or further an “Othering” culture in society, and (3) does this documentary humanize homeless people. By looking at Thomas Napper’s directive choices in the documentary, there seems to be an intention of humanizing the homeless community in Los Angeles and assuring their voices are heard as significant people rather than “Others.” Unlike most portrayals of homelessness, Napper challenges the usual stigmas that surround the homeless community by

using this documentary as a platform to the people who never get a chance to speak. In doing so, Napper's film reveals a narrative of homelessness that thrives from compassion and acceptance of each person's story, thus humanizing Skid Row as a loving community.

RESEARCH/CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

The stigmatization of homelessness in America originates from the belief that homelessness is a choice. In an article called "Confronting the Myth of Choice," Tanene Allison, who was formerly homeless, believes that homelessness is not an unsolvable problem, but rather a problem not being properly solved. There is cognitive dissonance of how there can be so much success in America, yet huge populations of poverty and homelessness. She explains that "the Myth of Choice asserts that homeless people are homeless only because they make bad choices," and so the government creates policies that criminalize the homeless and makes it harder for them to overcome their homelessness (Allison 254). The public generalizes all homeless people as "bad, secretly addicted to something, or...somehow different from that which was familiar to them" (Allison 254). Allison's firsthand experience of homelessness not only adds to Napper's narratives that humanize and stop the incrimination of the homeless, but reveals that homelessness is a vicious cycle of inequality that fails to improve the resources for achieving the American Dream.

In a comparison study of the housed and homeless, there is a clear disparity in the demographics and conditions of the two groups, demonstrating that the homeless are at a disadvantage. In Michael Cousineau's study, he highlights three independent variables that increased the likelihood of being homeless which included: "having current income below 200% of poverty, being current enrolled in a public assistance program, and being in self-reported poor or fair health" (Cousineau 697-698). According to the 2017 Federal Poverty Guideline, 200% of

poverty level for a one-person household is \$24,120, while the median household income in 2016 was \$56,516 (Poverty Guidelines). The poverty guidelines allow the government to know which families are “poor” and qualify for federal assistance, so many below poverty level often qualify for public assistance programs including health care, establishing a correlation between low-income and enrollment in public assistance programs. However, health care is not always affordable so many are both physically and mentally ill. The study concludes that there are indeed differences between the homeless and homed, adding an interesting complexity in attempting to make the homeless visible and normalizing them when presented with statistics that show they are nowhere near the living standards of an average American.

The insufficient affordable housing in Los Angeles is a major factor to the large homeless population in Skid Row, and unfortunately, the homeless are criminalized for their status of homelessness. Sarah Gerry, who studied at Harvard Law, looks at the *Jones V. City of Los Angeles* case that takes an unprecedented approach in declaring Los Angeles’ ordinance “which prohibited sleeping, sitting, or lying on the street at any time,” as unconstitutional and a violation of the Eighth Amendment (Gerry 248). The Ninth Circuit Court held that the ordinance is cruel and unusual punishment because it criminalizes their homelessness “when the only alternative to violating an ordinance is death,” therefore leaving them no other choice but to sleep on the streets—asserting that the law cannot punish their conduct if it is a result of their status (Gerry 250). This article brings attention to how the LAPD fails to appropriately address their homeless problem and shows how the status of being homeless results in the violation of laws. In Napper’s documentary, the homeless community are often told to leave and go when being kicked off the streets, but because they are homeless they have no place to go or leave to. There is clearly a

disconnect with the police and the homeless community in how they are trying to solve the homeless problem.

Not only is there a housing problem, there is a problem in the recognition of the homeless—they are either ignored or stigmatized in photographs that attempts to make them visible. Jessica Gerrard, who led a three-year interdisciplinary study on the homeless, addresses how the visual discourse of poverty interacts with the public and consumerist capitalist society. Images of the homeless establish “the persistent divisions between the wealthy and the poor,” “between those living homelessness, poverty, and inequality, and those who write and represent it” because there is no personal testimony of the homeless who bear witness to the life they experience; thus our understanding of homelessness are based on representations of homelessness that are not actuality (Gerrard 2223). In an ethnography, Gerrard quotes Gowan’s interaction with homeless men, describing “emaciated panhandlers [displaying] their sores and amputations... jarring the sensibilities of more comfortable passersby” (Gerrard 2223). They define *jarring* as an “interruption between the ‘comfortable passersby’ and the images of ‘street life,’” but regardless we still respond somehow: “we stare, ignore, avert our eyes, give money...gawk, smile, speak or don’t speak” (Gerrard 2223). These sights of homelessness contribute to the Othering of the homeless not only by stigmatizing them, but even by sympathizing with them because it is a reminder of inequality in society.

The division is enlarged as commercialization enters ‘desired’ urban spaces, but services to help the homeless are located away from the urban life. Desired urban spaces have emphasis on tourism and a consumer society, and “pseudo-public spaces, such as indoor shopping malls” create deeper separations between consumers and the homeless as public spaces are created as places of consumption and capitalism (Gerrard 2226). When acknowledging the homeless and

juxtaposing them against the “clean glamorous images of consumer capitalism” they become identified as the ‘Other,’ the problematic, the “glitch in an otherwise functional system” (Gerrard 2226). The “common sense” capitalistic expansion into urban cities Others the homeless because they seem out of place in the socially constructed boundaries of what is “normal” and part of a consumerism society. People who experience homelessness often “articulate feelings of stigmatization in aesthetic language, focusing particularly on the public significance of dirt,” physically on their bodies as they struggle to stay clean, and metaphorically in how they are treated by people in public spaces (Gerrard 2229). Essentially, the ‘lamentable sight’ of the homeless deepens the Othering process by pushing them out of public spaces to make way for consumer capitalism and identifying them as the blemish of society.

Of course, there is controversy surrounding whether photographing the homeless is helpful in raising awareness for homelessness or detrimental to the community by further marginalizing and stigmatizing them. Katharina Schmidt, who studies global inequalities like homelessness, criticizes the reality of the insensitivity behind making images of homelessness into art exhibits. She looks at one project called ‘Invisible’ where portraits were captured to portray different perspectives of homelessness. The public assumes familiarity with the visible homeless (people “sleeping rough” or out in the open) although many of their perceptions are strongly linked to stereotypes and contribute to Othering by making binary distinctions, defining the self as superior and the other group inferior. These binaries create homogeneity within groups, in this case the homeless community, that have clear distinctions. The journalist says to “let the face speak,” and in an interview explained the “terrible nature of all the stories she had heard,” so narratives of the people photographed, though considered different perspectives of homelessness, were still homogenized as pitiful (Schmidt 292). The exhibition failed to fight

stigmas of homelessness, and rather endorsed them by simplifying homelessness into sad narratives and faces.

Often, narratives of homeless people are not even recognized, but when they are, it shatters our preconceptions of homelessness. Michele Lancione, a researcher on homelessness writes about the phenomenon of a police officer caring for a homeless man. He explores the “three spaces” of where care is enacted and performed: (1) capturing care, (2) ‘viralizing’ care, and (3) revealing care. Care is captured by the woman who posted the image on Facebook and sent it to NYPD, and care went viral via media exposure. The act is comparative to the story of the Good Samaritan, but once the “poor” man (the homeless man or Mr. Hillman) is given a voice to speak (revealing care), it causes this story to crumble because the narrative of Mr. Hillman does not match the narrative the public fabricated in this situation. Mr. Hillman, although thankful for Officer DePrimo, felt that this exposure put him in more danger because the boots are valuable and he can lose his life from them. It was when Mr. Hillman spoke, still barefoot, that the desiring machine—a model of unconsciousness that connects internal desires and produces it into reality—broke and the narrative that was good, made us feel good, and created an idealized reality no longer existed. It forced the public “to face the heterogeneous experience of homelessness rather than its simulacra” because the media that created their own narrative of Mr. Hillman did not know his thoughts or desires (Lancione 708). Napper’s documentary is primarily scenes of homeless people sharing about their life, revealing the narrative that is true to the experience of homelessness, rather than a representation of it.

The ethicality in making homelessness into a spectacle and not protecting the subjects photographed, is contrasted by Napper’s documentary that represents his subjects in a positive light, all with unique stories. Now, taking into consideration the ethics of documentary filming,

Patricia Aufderheide, founder of the Center for Social Media and Social Impact, argues that the documentary genre clings to honesty and truth—a portrayal of reality, but still with a vision and agenda of their own. The filmmaker-subject relationship is especially interesting because it raises the question of consent to be filmed. Filmmakers have ethical obligations to their subject, their audience, their sponsors. With their subjects, they strive to have a relationship that values a “do no harm” and “protect the vulnerable” motto, so they do not “put their subjects at risk or cause them to be worse off than they were before” (Aufderheide 369). There is also a lot of trust that goes into the filmmakers because they have the creative freedom to portray their subjects in whatever way they want—that is if they do not mind violating ethical obligations to their subject.

ANALYSIS

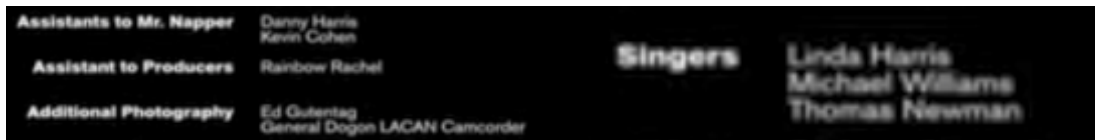
While most people would keep their distance from the homeless community, Thomas Napper, director of *Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home*, reached out to non-profit organizations on Skid Row and incorporated them in his documentary to establish his credibility. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, we are introduced to The Midnight Mission (5:43) and Lamp Community (14:27), both non-profit organizations that exist to help the homeless find shelter and provide services for them to be self-sufficient.



The early exposure to these two organizations allow the audience to see homelessness beyond street life and as rehabilitative to help restore the lives of the homeless so they can rejoin society and live independently. In doing this, Napper gains the trust of the audience, proving reliable in his study of homelessness because these organizations have made a profound impact on the individuals on Skid Row. There is an “ethical obligation to deliver accurate and honestly told stories,” and in telling his subjects’ stories, it is essential to include Lamp Community for KK, Bam Bam, OG, Linda, Detroit and Lee Anne; through them, he met Danny at The Midnight Mission and General Dogon at LACAN (Aufderheide 375-376). This reveals Napper’s dedication to his work as a filmmaker, for he delved into the different services and the community on Skid Row. His intention was not just to go into the area, film, and leave; he formed relationships with the people and cared about what was happening on Skid Row. He portrays reality on Skid Row not as the stigmatized 50-blocks of homeless people, but the compassionate community that exists despite society’s ostracizing. Napper and his work, therefore, can be recognized as ethical because he established solid relationships with his subjects and accurately portrayed different sides of Skid Row.

Further establishing his credibility, the end credits of the documentary serve as evidence that Napper formed symbiotic relationships with his cast to ensure an accurate portrayal of Skid Row. The credits identify “Assistants to Mr. Napper: Danny Harris and Kevin ‘KK’ Cohen,” “Additional Photography: General Dogon LACAN Camcorder,” “Singers: Linda Harris,” and all 75 individual names of people on Skid Row who participated in the film. His two assistants have lived on Skid Row and can provide insight on the community, so Napper can accurately and justly portray the reality of Skid Row. Moreover, Napper gives the General creative liberties of contributing footage to the documentary with a camcorder. He entrusted the General with

responsibilities of an artist to get close-up shots of the injustice that occurs on Skid Row. Linda Harris is also credited for singing on the scores of the documentary, showing that Napper is also highlighting the talents of the people on the streets that are often unknown. And finally, Napper not only credits the main actors in his documentary, but includes an additional 75 individuals on Skid Row who participated in this film. Unlike photographers who simply take snapshots of the homeless and leave them unnamed, Napper actively uses his social power as a filmmaker, someone who can reach millions, to acknowledge each person who appeared in the documentary and give the voice to the homeless who seldom have the chance to speak for themselves. The relationship between Napper and his subjects firmly establish that Napper is invested in this project and this community; it is a topic he is passionate about and he genuinely cares about recreating the image that surrounds Skid Row and homelessness.



Napper proved it is ethical to film the homeless if there is a human relationship with his subjects, but the conflict of Othering when trying to make the homeless “visible” complicates this relationship. Napper inserts a scene of “purple shirts” arresting a man on the street as General Dogon shares about a time he witnessed a woman getting harassed by the purple shirts because they thought she had a pipe when she was simply holding an eyeliner.



A voiceover of the General narrates what is happening, and even without seeing his face, the audience can hear in his voice, disgust, anger, and deep offense towards the police. The visual aid to demonstrate the brutality of police interaction along with the General's narration reveals that even if the homeless are made visible, they are still treated poorly by the police because they are not seen as equal, but lowly drug addicts or alcoholics. Napper then cuts to the close-up interview of the General, and we see how distressed the General is, eyebrows furrowed and eyes wide in anger, while sharing this story.



In including this pivotal moment in the General's story, Napper wants to highlight the

importance of making the homeless visible without discriminating and stigmatizing them. The police clearly assumed the woman was a criminal because she was homeless, and this assumption stigmatizes the homeless and creates a wall between their interactions with the law and passersby. General Dogon, however, makes her visible in a situation that uses her state of homelessness against her, and stands up for her before the purple shirts, ultimately challenging the stigma that the homeless are criminals. Napper allows the General to express all the injustice he felt in this interaction to draw attention to the fact that the police see the homeless and Others them, while the General see the homeless and humanizes them. This encounter inspired the General, a formerly homeless man, to join LACAN (Los Angeles Community Action Network), and now puts in all his efforts to work towards ensuring the homeless are treated fairly and not criminalized.

As illustrated in the General's anecdote, making the homeless visible often involves incriminating and stereotyping them, but on rare occasions, the interactions are humanizing. Napper juxtaposes unnamed officers and LAPD Officer Dion Joseph to contrast the usual strict crime control that deepens social cleavages on Skid Row with a positivist approach to policing that makes the individual visible and normal. He shows a scene of KK standing near police writing up three men on the sidewalk, bitterly explaining, "if you wear a white t-shirt and shorts, you're considered either a dope dealer or gang member. So that's probable cause to be stopped, which is bullshit" (*Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home*). This is racial profiling. This is the Othering of the homeless that homogenizes them into a single category—in this case, a single image of what a criminal looks like.



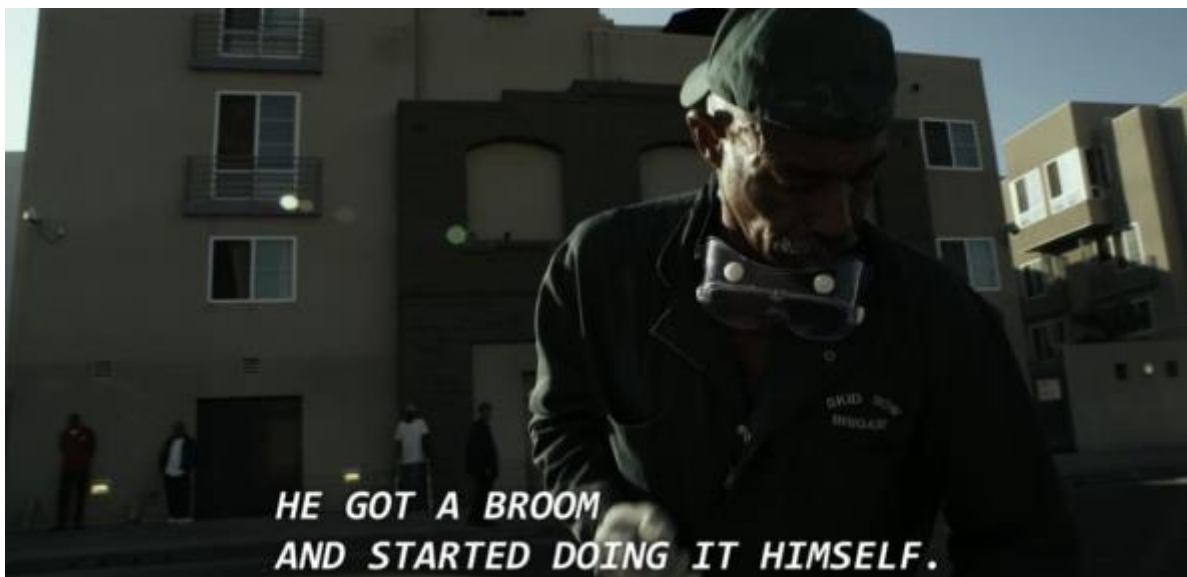
Contrasting this form of policing, there is scene of a woman screaming at Officer Joseph, and instead of restraining her, he allows her to finish her outburst. He does not aggravate the situation by trying to assert his authority over her. By showing this interaction, Napper is perhaps condoning Officer Joseph's approach in policing. It does, after all, makes a powerful statement about how positive interactions with the homeless helped Officer Joseph build trust between him and the community. He is a model for interactions between the homeless and the law—it should be respectful and patient, so they can avoid stigmatizing the homeless as criminals. Instead of immediately imposing his power over her, he shows a high level of tolerance and gives the woman a chance to speak. The documentary opens the conversation to the homeless and gives them a chance to speak candidly, even if it contradicts the socially constructed image we have of the homeless and the reality of the homeless. Joseph reveals, “I try not to judge them, until I see them involved in something,” challenging the correlation of visibility and Othering (*Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home*). Joseph sees them as individuals that deserve to be respected revealing his active resistance of profiling and Othering the homeless into categories that fit the stereotypes of homelessness, but still maintaining their visibility as humans living on Skid Row.



Napper resists Othering the homeless, and tries humanizing them instead by sewing in clips of everyday life throughout this documentary. Like “normal” people who take pride in their accomplishments and passions, these themes are also present in some of these individuals’ stories who Napper documented. For a man struggling with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, gender identity disorder, anti-social personality disorder, violent outbursts, and a drug addiction, Bam Bam is still normal and very human. Overall, he is incredibly well-spoken as he gives his house tour. He takes pride in his home, and says that “this is my house, inside my house, which is the best house in the world” and exclaims with arms wide open, “my humble abode” (*Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home*).



By allotting a scene specifically for a house tour, Napper invites the audience to discard the misconception that people on Skid Row are all homeless—Skid Row is not a homeless community, but a low-income residential community (though low-income can be an understatement). Bam Bam’s body language in this still image also demonstrates a power pose that reveals confidence and pride that is a physical representation of his enthusiasm for owning a home. There is so much joy in his ownership and this goes against the pitiful narratives we have of homelessness of not having a home. Another individual who challenges the stereotypes of homeless people is OG. He takes pride in keeping Skid Row clean and livable and is passionate about maintaining the cleanliness of the community. Deeply disturbed by the dirtiness of the streets, he took matters into his own hands and created OG’s street brigade.



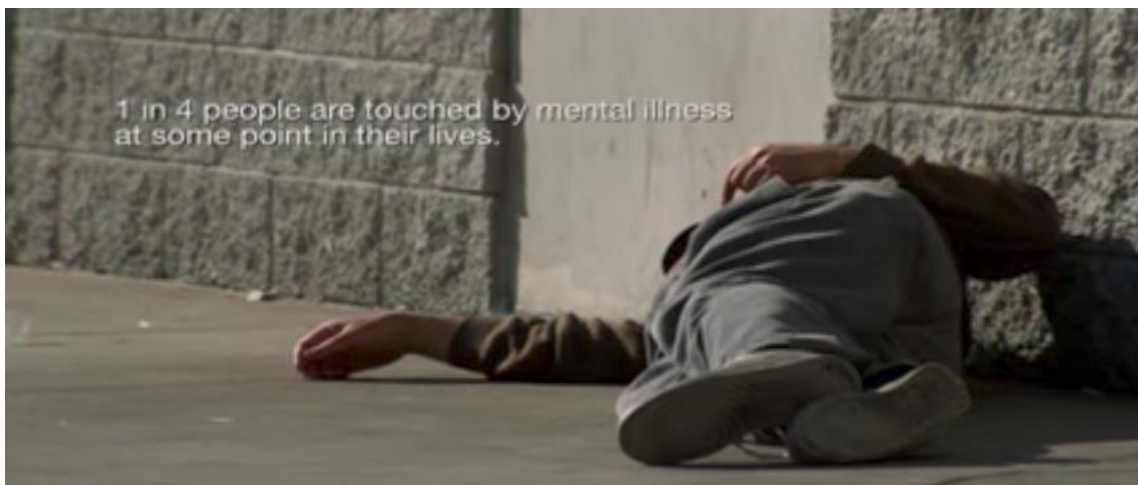
OG’s story is important in Napper’s attempts to humanize and destigmatize the homeless that are often dubbed as unmotivated, dirty, and lazy. It also showed that it is the LAPD who do not care for Skid Row, revealing a reality that is unknown to the public because media does not give the homeless a chance to speak. Again, these clips that show pride in oneself and the community and passion in bettering oneself and the community contradict the usual narratives of the homeless as

pitiful rough sleepers that beg for the public's sympathy. Napper understands that the people on Skid Row are still human and therefore deserve a chance to share with the public the reality of their lives that differ from mere representations of their lives.

Another way Napper defines being human is our ability to show affection and love to other humans because we are social beings who crave acceptance from their community. Towards the end of the film, Napper does a close-up interview with KK, asking what he would do if he were rich, and KK shares, "I would be maybe on 60 acres of something. [Lee Anne] can have her own little house, cats as many as she can have, all the trash you want... cause that makes her happy and content. And it makes me content when I see she's happy" (*Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home*). This heartwarming scene illuminates the sense of community that Napper aims to portray on Skid Row. Napper uses KK who embodies emotions that are essential in treating others like they are important and significant to humanize the people on Skid Row because they, like "normal" people, are still capable of showing compassion, love, and acceptance. He wants to show that being homeless does not make people abnormal or impair their ability to love or behave like people with homes, again breaking down the stigmas surrounding homelessness. KK does not judge or reprimand Lee Anne for her hoarding, but takes joy in seeing that she is happy because he sees her as a human who deserves to be happy and accepted. Napper nudges the audience to grasp onto this type of unconditional acceptance that Skid Row has embraced, but our capitalist society fails to promote. Essentially, KK and Lee Anne's partnership show the natural tendency of humans to want personal relationships that make us feel loved and accepted—relationships that allow us to be who we are and to be human.

As a final statement to emphasize the visibility and humanity of Skid Row, Napper shares where they are now to reaffirm that their lives are not just temporal to the documentary.

Ironically though, Napper first flashes the ingrained image of a stereotypical homeless person: a scene of a homeless man lying on the street. There is also a text overlay of statistics on mental illness with an acapella voiceover of “Jesus Loves Me” at 1:09:25. He goes back to this common image of homeless people and the association of mental illness in people who are homeless because even though it is overexposed, this is the reality for many of the homeless. Napper does not shy away from acknowledging that this position on the street is how many homeless people spend their days. But he contrasts this image with a classic hymnal that captures the purpose of his documentary—to show that the homeless community are still human and deserving of love no matter the circumstances.



The hymnal continues to play as more statistics are shown, and the raw voice is not given a face until the second to last line, “yes Jesus loves me,” revealing a close-up of Linda Harris at 1:09:54. Napper shows Linda only towards the end of the hymn to tap into the prejudice the audience may still hold after watching the film, so that seeing the voice is Linda’s is a surprise because it is not expected that the beautiful voice would come from a homeless person.



After that scene, the narrator voices over a “where are they now” montage, showing clips of them walking the streets in slow motion and fading from one person to the next by dimming the screen. Napper creates an atmosphere that is dramatic and sentimental in highlighting how far they have come since homelessness. He includes this section to extend their story and acknowledge their existence beyond the film because each of them have unique stories. They are not homogenous and Napper does not portray them that way. He makes them known by their distinct and different life experiences, and makes them human by their hearts and compassion for their community.

CONCLUSION

“I think this film is a call to action, a call to arms. It gives you a chance to hear from the people you never hear from, the invisible people on the street that we’re either afraid of or you just don’t have the courage or the time to deal with or listen to. So the agenda with the film was to give a platform to the people who never get a chance to speak. And that’s really what we tried to do and that is [sic] for me, gives the audience a chance to respond to that and to then see how they want to engage with that.”

—Thomas Napper, in an interview with Sonali Kolhatkar on December 6, 2012

It is clear this film was not created to just show scenes of the homeless on Skid Row or to evoke pity from the audience. Napper is interested in provoking righteous anger about how homelessness is being dealt with not just on Skid Row, but everywhere on the streets. Perceived as the filth of a capitalist society, the homeless population in America, although “declined by three percent (or 14,780 people)... between 2015 and 2016” is still as of 2016 at 549,928 (Henry 9-10). With over half a million people on the streets, this documentary aims to avoid further stigmatizing of the homeless, and advocates for an attitude of love and acceptance towards the homeless community. There is little conflict in the visual storytelling on Skid Row because Napper relied on the individuals’ personal testimonies to accurately bear witness to the experience of homelessness. Napper normalizes the people on Skid Row to reject the prejudice and stigmas that homeless people are not worthy of public assistance.

Still, homelessness does not discriminate. Everyone is susceptible to homelessness and once we realize that this is, ironically, an equal opportunity social issue, we can change our perspectives on how we view the homeless. Indeed, homelessness is a social justice issue because of the various underlying factors like poverty, lack of affordable housing, poor physical and mental health, or substance abuse; but it is also a moral obligation we have as humans to care for other humans who are struggling. Napper wants his audience to hear stories of homelessness and to associate the story with a human who once lived in a home. People are not born homeless, and sometimes, it seems like society forgets. When we finally pay attention to people in the homeless community and recognize their worth as humans, we can change the way policies are made to stop incriminating, and instead help the homeless.

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