Urban Spaces, Homelessness, and the Public Sphere: The Urban Homeless Counterpublic

By Andy Forrest

Professor Maya Nadkarni, Advisor

Swarthmore College
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
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Abstract: This paper is an ethnography of homeless and formerly homeless activists who participate in a member-led grassroots organization in New York City named Open City. The ethnography is based on interviews with the members of Open City and personal experiences volunteering with the organization. The lives of the urban homeless, who spend a great deal of time navigating public spaces, are dictated by a set of spatial politics that determine who may access certain spaces and for what purposes. These spatial politics have repercussions for the homeless' ability to be recognized as citizens in the public sphere. Despite this, the homeless resist their erasure from the public sphere using strategies similar to other activist movements that take place in urban public spaces, such as the recent Occupy Wall Street movements. However, the homeless require certain provisions before they can demand rights of representation in the public sphere. Open City’s success lies in its ability to connect the needs of the homeless to the right to participate in the public sphere and to reconstruct homeless individuals as subjects of rights rather than recipients of provisions.

Introduction

It is an unseasonably warm and rainy Wednesday afternoon in mid-January as I make my way to the Open City office on a small side street just off the bustling Fordham Road in the Bronx. If I hadn’t been there so many times the past two summers, I might easily walk past the inconspicuous two-story house. As I start to wonder about what changes might have taken place since I last visited the office almost three months ago, I spot the light blue Open City sign, which hangs over the balcony and displays the organization’s name, an image of the silhouettes of a group of people forming a line, and the slogan, “Don’t talk about us; talk with us.” Carl and Tim, both members of the organization, are chatting outside the main entrance of the building. They are surprised to see me and greet me with hearty handshakes. We all make our way up the stairs just behind the door to the main floor of the office. The light blue walls of the large, open room are still cluttered with banners and posters from past rallies, various awards the organization has received over the years, and large pieces of paper with Open City’s mission statement, campaign goals,
and rules of the space handwritten in marker. Darnell and Leon, who are sitting at
the long foldout table in the center of the room, take a break from folding pamphlets
to greet me. Jerrod awakes from his midday nap on the cushioned chair in the
corner of the room to also greet me. Other members, some familiar and some new,
momentarily turn away from the computers they are using on the other side of the
room to say hello. Jamie, after just getting off the phone, excitedly asks, “are you
gonna come down to the city council meeting with us tonight?” I explain that
unfortunately I will not and that the purpose of my visit this time is not to volunteer
but to do research.

I first heard of Open City (as I will refer to it in this paper), a small Bronx-


based grassroots activism organization, when I found a link to their website in a
directory of New York City activist networks. Open City seeks to achieve political
representation of the homeless through the activism work in which they engage.
The member-led organization is composed of homeless and formerly homeless New
Yorkers who participate in weekly committee meetings that focus on the
criminalization of the homeless and housing respectively. Open City is not a service
providing organization but instead strives to achieve political representation for the
homeless, operating under the philosophy that in order to end homelessness,
homeless people must become an organized, effective voice for change. Both the
Civil Rights Committee and Housing Committee have organized direct actions
protesting the unwarranted ticketing and arrests of homeless people, for example,
and have participated in forms of civil disobedience, such as erecting a tent city on a
vacant lot in protest of the city’s refusal to construct affordable housing on such lots.
Though I was unfamiliar with the organization, let alone New York City, I was immediately impressed by the organization's claim that it was founded and led by the homeless. Prior to that, my experience with homelessness was limited to some volunteer work in high school at soup kitchens. I was especially intrigued by the fact Open City explicitly did not identify itself as a service provider, but instead sought change by bringing the voice of the homeless into policy decisions that affect the lives of the homeless. Working at Open City directly with the members of the organization who have experienced or continue to experience homelessness challenged my previous understandings of how to address issues of homelessness—I had come across various organizations who sought to empower the homeless through a variety of strategies but never had I seen an organization that based all of its decisions off of the will of its homeless and formerly homeless members quite like Open City attempted to. The two summers I spent with Open City, I felt that I was working with the homeless, for example, planning protests of police harassment or discussing the possibilities of urban homesteading, rather than working for or in support of the homeless in a service-providing role.

What seemed most interesting to me about Open City was the fact that its members were reconstructing themselves as the subjects of rights rather than the recipients of services. Prior to my experiences with Open City, I assumed that addressing the issue of homelessness required first and foremost the provision of some of the basic resources that the homeless lacked. In making this assumption, I overlooked the need for political representation of the homeless in the public sphere—many of the institutions like shelters or soup kitchens where the homeless
have access to necessary resources only provide relief to a situation without addressing the roots of the issue. In order to address these issues, the perspectives of homeless people must be considered in deciding what strategies work, which ones do not, and what the needs of the homeless actually are.

As on organization that explicitly does not identify as a service-provider, it initially seemed to me that Open City both addressed this need for political representation of the homeless and problematized the model of service-providing organizations, which often require of the homeless performances of dehumanized, depoliticized identities.\(^1\) However, my ethnographic research shows that though Open City states that it is not a service-provider, members enjoy a variety of resources only available to them at the Open City office. The political goals of Open City for the benefit of homeless New Yorkers as a collective are what keep long-term, committed members involved in the organization, but just as important are the resources such as access to a private shower, computers, a place to nap, socialize, or simply escape the hostility of the general public. In fact, many members describe Open City not as a political party or revolutionary group, but as a family or even home. The seeming tension between Open City’s organizational identity as a grassroots activist group in opposition to that of a service provider and the many services or resources that members of the organization gain from participating in the organization is in fact a fundamental component of Open City—the organization provides a space wherein members can perform activities that are typically

\(^1\) On this latter point, I mean that many service-providing organizations like shelters or soup kitchens require clients to construct themselves as helpless and deserving of care, but not deserving of rights or responsibility for the care they need, a point that will be elaborated on in Chapter One.
reserved for the home but the space and these activities are explicitly politicized because the homeless members have a much greater level of control over the services they use at Open City, allowing them to see themselves as the subjects of rights, not the passive recipients of services. Open City transforms the need for shelter into a right to housing and recognition in the public sphere.

To develop this argument I will first establish an understanding of homelessness as an embodied spatial practice rather than a condition caused by or characterized by individual, dysfunctional behaviors. In Chapter One, I provide a brief history of homelessness in New York City since the 1980s and connect it to some of the literature on homelessness, the public sphere, and public space. I will reject constructions of homelessness that focus on individual “deviant” behaviors to instead focus on the challenges the homeless contend with when navigating public spaces. Theories of the public sphere have an inextricable connection to actually existing physical spaces. For example, the coffeehouses and salons of late 19th century Western Europe are essential locations that allow for the public sphere described by Habermas (1989), whose work provides the foundation for literature on the public sphere. As I will argue in Chapter One, the homeless do not have access to these kinds of spaces wherein they can perform the activities associated with the public sphere. They do not have even the most basic provisions that those who can participate in the public sphere do and are in fact fighting for these provisions. Scholars, most notably Nancy Fraser (1993), have challenged Habermas’ public sphere and have provided models for a more inclusive, multifaceted public sphere. However, the literature on counterpublics still inadequately untangles the
connection between physical spaces, the performances required within those spaces, and the public sphere. Once again, these connections have particular implications for the homeless. The practice of policing or removing perceived homeless individuals from public spaces, for example, has serious implications on the political rights of the homeless.

Once I have described the erasure of the homeless from public space and its effects on the homeless as political subjects, I will present examples of resistance against this erasure. The policing of public space does not result from a fixed power structure but a socially constructed one that homeless people beyond the membership of Open City resist in a variety of forms. In Chapter Two I present a few examples that illustrate the contested nature of public space. Anti-gentrification activism in the East Village during the 1980s, the artistic interventions of Krzysztof Wodiczko, and the contemporary Occupy movements are all examples of the battle for control of public space and political representation in those spaces. I argue that each example deals directly or indirectly with the homeless and provide models for inclusion in the public sphere in an urban context. This chapter is especially relevant as cities across the United States are engaged in efforts that increasingly limit the uses of and accessibility to public spaces. These efforts affect all city inhabitants but especially the poor and homeless. The urban homeless have been and continue to be on the frontlines of the battle for the right to the city. However, the homeless disproportionately face the consequences of these battles, forcing a reconsideration of public space as the only viable site in which the homeless can
claim political rights and moreover, what the goals of these battles are, particularly for the homeless.

In Chapter Three, I introduce Open City and my ethnographic research based on my own personal experiences at Open City and interviews I conducted with members and staff at the organization. I provide a description of the space of Open City’s office and some of the typical activities the organization performs. Additionally, I focus on meanings members and staff construct of the organization, experiences members have had as homeless New Yorkers, the benefits members identify for participating in the organization, and provide a few anecdotes of some of the political activities in which Open City engages. In doing so, I will support my argument that the services and resources Open City provides to its members are crucial to its goal of creating a homeless counterpublic that both challenges and influences dominant public discourse on homelessness. Moreover, I will argue that activities that members perform in the office, like taking a shower, for example, do in fact take on political meanings as members have much more responsibility over the distribution of these resources than in traditional service-providing organizations. I will also explicitly address the tensions between Open City’s role as a service-provider and political organization by analyzing some of the conversations members have about the issue.

In Chapter Four I address some of the internal challenges of the organization, especially in regards to gender. By highlighting some of the complexities of these dynamics, I will consider how these challenges apply to broader theories of counterpublics by arguing that counterpublics are also multifaceted and not free of
some of the dominant discourse that prohibits participation in the public sphere in the first place. I acknowledge these challenges that Open City faces and the strategies it uses to address these dynamics. I view gender dynamics as an important point of analysis because Open City is one of few spaces where homeless men and women interact. Finally, I conclude with a reminder of the stakes Open City’s members face for participating in such an organization consider possibilities for Open City and other organizations to more explicitly give access to necessary provisions while simultaneously challenging problematic constructions of homelessness.

**Methodology**

My ethnographic research is based upon my personal experiences working with Open City and interviews I conducted with members and staff in the winter of 2011 and 2012. I first volunteered for Open City in the summer of 2010 working closely with the Civil Rights campaign organizer. The following summer I received a grant from Swarthmore College that allowed me to return to Open City. The Civil Rights organizer had left the organization by this point and so I essentially took on his responsibilities working very closely with the Civil Rights Committee of Open City. I returned to Open City in the winter of that same year to conduct my interviews with members and staff. By this time I had already established relationships with almost everyone I interviewed having worked very closely with many of them the past two summers. I believe this proved to be advantageous as the people I interviewed were more willing to share sensitive information with someone they knew and trusted. However, it also proved difficult to make the
transition from being a collaborator or ally of the organization to someone who could critically study the group’s work. In total, I interviewed nine members and one of the lead organizers. When appropriate, I quote directly from my interviewees and anecdotes that I share about Open City come from these interviews or my own personal experiences from the past two summers.

I want to conclude this section with a brief discussion of the important issue of speaking to, for, and about the homeless versus speaking with the homeless. As should be made clear in the history of homelessness and its study presented in Chapter One, policymakers and scholars often speak about the homeless. These conversations of the “homeless problem” often exclude the actual voices of homeless people and include problematic constructions of the deserving/undeserving poor, for example. Well-intentioned scholars might try to subvert this problem by speaking for the homeless in an attempt to give voice to the voiceless, but this very process can reify the disempowerment of the homeless. Talmadge Wright (1997) writes, “the solution of how to escape this morass involves conducting ourselves in a dialogue, both listening and speaking with and to those we work with” (32). In accordance with Wright’s proposal, I establish a dialogue with the homeless. I will make clear my positionality as a researcher and participant as I offer my own interpretations and observations while simultaneously recognizing the specificity of the interviews I conducted with homeless members of a highly political organization in order to avoid generalizations about an imagined monolithic homeless community.
Chapter One: Homelessness and the Public Sphere

When writing on the homeless, one of the first questions that scholars must address is who exactly are the homeless? For many people, the first image that comes to mind in response to this question is that of a dirty, unkempt, male with scraggly gray hair who is likely mentally ill. This particular representation matches constructions of homelessness as a problem of dysfunctional behaviors—the rundown appearance of the scraggly-haired vagabond reflects his inability to care for himself and the supposed root cause of his condition. These images and constructions of homelessness simplify the complexities and multifaceted nature of homeless individuals. In this chapter, I do not provide answers to the question of who the homeless are directly but instead use it to challenge predominant representations of homelessness. As a “homeless crisis” emerged in the early 1980s, so too did a specific social understanding of who is homeless and why. This understanding, which tends to emphasize deviant behaviors over structural forces, has influenced policies on how to properly deal with the homeless and more importantly, who is deserving of care. By examining this history of the so-called homeless crisis, I will provide the context from which these social constructions emerged and an introduction to some of the urban policies (specifically in New York City) that have resulted. Next, I examine some of the specific implications these policies have on the daily lives of the homeless as well as their political agency. Throughout, I argue for moving away from constructions of the homeless that focus on deviant behaviors and instead highlight the complex navigation of urban spaces as a fundamental quality of the homeless experience.
Both Anthony Marcus (2006) and Wright (1997) point to the 1980s as a time when the "homeless crisis" first emerged. Examining homelessness specifically in New York City, Marcus (2006) describes a complicated combination of the legacies of 1970s urban decay, gentrification of the early 1980s, and the transformation of New York from an industrial city to an international banking, service, and information economy, which all led to the emergence of highly visible poverty and homelessness in the 1980s (39). More generally, Wright (1997) identifies deindustrialization, deinstitutionalization, and the decline of affordable housing in American cities beginning in the late 1970s as primary causes of the homeless crisis of the 1980s (82). For both authors, a complex combination of structural forces created a large and very visible homeless population. Local trends interacted with national ones to exacerbate homelessness in New York City and many other cities across the country. For example, national policies under President Reagan had a devastating impact, further intensifying the growing homeless crisis in New York City. Federal housing programs faced massive defunding with an 80% decrease from $30 billion in 1980 to $6 billion in 1990 (Pasaro 1996: 22). Meanwhile, housing was being destroyed either officially in the name of urban redevelopment or unofficially by landlords who found it more profitable to let their property decay or even burn it to the ground.² These conditions forced a great number of people into homelessness but disproportionately affected poor, mostly Black and Latino

communities in New York. Today these same communities are still disproportionately represented in New York’s homeless population.

Of course homelessness has existed long before the 1980s, but it was the visibility of the “new” homeless population emerging in the late 70s and early 80s that drew the attention of both scholars and activists. In 1981, Kim Hopper and Ellen Baxter published *Private Lives/Public Spaces*, which Marcus (2006) considers to be the first in a wave of “homeless studies”, marking the official recognition of the homeless crisis and its study (35). Prior to this time, homelessness was commonly thought of as a problem affecting only social deviants, geographically confined to the “skid row” of every city, and rarely involving more systemic issues such as the lack of affordable housing and jobs that paid living wages. No longer confined to “skid row” the homeless became visible in unexpected neighborhoods throughout the city. The sudden appearance of families living in the streets, for example, challenged accepted understandings of homelessness and brought a visibility to the issue. Despite this visibility and the focus of many scholars on the structural forces behind homelessness, as I shall show, the response to the homeless crisis generally relied on and reinforced beliefs that homelessness was the result of individual deviant behaviors.

**Constructing the Homeless**

Though the homeless “crisis” of the 1980s prompted new understandings of homelessness, by the early 1990s, New York City’s homeless policies generally only addressed individual behaviors. Along with these narrow understandings of homelessness, Wright (1997) problematizes the very categorization of
homelessness. Wright (1997) argues that identification of people without a home as “homeless” suggests that these people are distinct from other people who experience poverty (15). This process obscures the structural forces that are at the root of homelessness and instead shifts the focus to the visible dysfunctions of homeless people. Don Mitchell (2003) argues that this is part of an ideological grounding intended to protect notions of democracy and legitimate citizenship by making homelessness seem to be caused by voluntary actions (183). After all, in a truly just and democratic country, how could anyone possibly live such a destitute life unless by fault of their own? This strategy implicates the homeless themselves while simultaneously obscuring the structural forces that are behind homelessness and is precisely the ideological grounding that made Mayor Giuliani’s response (which characterizes a focus on individual, deviant behaviors and will be described in further detail below) to homelessness possible.

Moreover, this strategy locates the solution to homelessness on the minds and individual bodies of homeless people rather than in the economy or housing market (Wright 1997: 23). While it is true that mental illness and substance abuse play a big part in the lives of many homeless, the focus on these issues at worst, displaces the responsibility of homelessness onto homeless individuals and at best, prioritizes funding for services that treat mental illness or substance abuse over affordable, permanent housing. Almost anytime homelessness is talked about in mainstream media, there is usually reference to mental illness or substance abuse, suggesting that this is the sole cause of homelessness and defining characteristic of homeless life. For example, a recent article that appeared in the New York Times
about the apparent success of the city’s opening of smaller, “more welcoming” shelters made a reference to widespread mental illness and drug addiction among the homeless as one of the difficulties city officials face when convincing people living on the street to use the services of shelters (Secret 2011). In doing so, the article neglects the fact that many people living on the street have a deep distrust of city officials and the shelter system in general because of their extremely negative experiences in city shelters due to the lack of privacy and the requirement of performing demeaning identities produced by the service model present in shelters. The failure of people to get off the streets then is displaced onto the people who are actually living on the streets. This article, and the countless other like it, exemplify the construction of the “deserving” and “undeserving” homeless. It portrays those living on the street who refuse to use the services of the city as irrational: they refuse what appears to be legitimate state assistance or charity so they therefore do not deserve such services.

It is true that many homeless individuals have serious problems with mental illness and/or substance abuse. These problems are compounded by the fact that few homeless people have access to the resources that help one cope with such problems more effectively as do others with privileges associated with race, gender, and class. However, Wright (1997) states, “when individual behavior is made the prime focus for research and policy, deeper questions of structure, agency, and access to power are sacrificed to political expediency” (26). In other words, the

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3 In the article’s defense, it does note that many people living on the street felt unsafe in shelters or dislike the highly regimented structure of shelter life. However, by first mentioning issues of mental illness and substance abuse, the article suggests that these are the biggest difficulties in getting people off the streets.
great amount of attention on mental illness and substance abuse diverts attention away from other extremely important factors of homeless life. With this in mind, I avoid characterizations of homeless life that are centered on these issues. Instead, I will focus on the spatial politics of homelessness as a key feature of homeless life.

**Shelterization, Incarceration, and Displacement: A brief history of New York’s Homeless Crisis**

I root my analysis of the spatial politics of homelessness in New York City because of the ways that New York’s policies on homelessness and crime specifically are understood as models for cities across the country and world. For example, Mayor Giuliani (1994-2001), who takes credit for New York’s declining crime rates of the 1990s, has literally exported his policing strategies to cities such as Mexico City through his private consulting firm (Mitchell and Beckett 2008: 76). New York City is frequently described as a global city and indeed, its policies set precedents for other cities around the world.

New York City’s policies for dealing with the homeless evolved out of the intense attention focused on the “new homeless” starting in the 1980s. Mayor Koch (1978-1989) was confronted with the first wave of the homeless crisis. His response was to rapidly expand the city shelter system in a time when federal services were being cut drastically. The result was an inadequate system composed of shelters with substandard conditions. Mayor Dinkins (1990-1993) began the privatization of city shelters with the hopes of offering a “continuum of care” for the homeless. The failings of Dinkins’ “sympathetic” approach allowed an opening for Giuliani’s revanchism that criminalized the homeless. Giuliani claimed responsibility for the declining crime rates of the 1990s, though critics believe the
end of the crack epidemic and an improving national economy were much more likely causes (Smith 1999: 100). Nonetheless, Giuliani's "broken windows" strategy was legitimated and continued under Mayor Bloomberg (2002-present). This trajectory from care for (though inadequate) to criminalization of the homeless is explored in further detail below.

In the same year as Hopper's and Baxter's *Private Lives/Public Spaces* (1981), a monumental decision for New York City homeless policy was made by the Supreme Court of the State of New York in *Callahan v. Carey*. The ruling in this case, which involved several homeless men represented by the Legal Aid Society, required that the city of New York must provide shelter to anyone who requested it (Main 2006: 904). Before this decision, city shelters that were filled to capacity simply turned away applicants. The shelter system at the time lacked the resources to meet the demands of the *Callahan v. Carey* decision. Upon the orders of the *Callahan v. Carey* decision, the city's shelter system began to expand during the same time federal housing programs were being defunded. By 1983, Mayor Koch began opening congregate shelters, which hosted large numbers of homeless people in a single room of a gymnasium or former armory, providing little more than a bed to sleep on (Thompson 1997: 649). Around the country, shelters were besieged in the 1980s as a result of the new homeless crisis (Snow and Anderson 1993: 6). Operating costs increased dramatically for the expanding shelter system: in 1978 the operating budget for New York's shelter system was $6.8 million but increased to about $38 million in 1983 and by 1993 was $500 million (Main, 2006: 904).
Conditions in the congregate shelters were almost always substandard. Pasaro (1996) writes that homeless shelters are incarcerating spaces that dehumanize, domesticate, and debase the homeless with the intention only to shelter the general population from the homeless (32). Shelters are like prisons, in that they are a holding place for homeless people whose presence in public spaces is unwanted. Thus, more than meeting needs of the homeless, shelters meet the needs of the housed population who feel threatened by the homeless’ use of public space. Residents of the shelters during this time and today find themselves in spaces where distinctions of public and private are blurred if not eliminated entirely, as a result of the forced sharing of a bedroom with over six hundred other people, in some extreme cases. Members of Open City who currently reside in shelters express much disdain for the conditions of their shelter. I will delve into these details in Chapter Four. Marcus (2006) writes, “what made life inside the shelter appear different from life outside the shelter was that the deviant behavior and strange acting out that is usually reserved for the home, the bedroom, or the family was visible” (74). Residents in the congregate shelters, having no other option, acted on private needs within a public space. Marcus (2006) accurately sums up the situation in congregate shelters, stating “the macho heterosexual man who wears women’s underwear and the straight conservative family man who uses services of young male street hustlers after work coexisted with all variety of angry father and forgotten middle children in this giant bedroom” (74). Marcus (2006) is not reinforcing definitions of homelessness as social deviants here but instead arguing that the homeless are read as deviants because they do not have access to spaces
except for public ones where they can act on private needs or desires that the housed population is able to do in private. Moreover, this dynamic creates tensions in a congregate shelter where residents must compete for space in which to act on these desires with other members whose needs and desires might be in conflict. The congregate shelter system that expanded during the 1980s created a dehumanizing space that further destabilized a vulnerable population.

Under Mayor Dinkins, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) was established in 1993. As shelters began to privatize according to a plan drafted by Dinkins and Andrew Cuomo (then chair of the New York City Coalition on the Homeless) in 1992 named the Cuomo Commission, DHS increased the number of “program” shelters, or shelters that aimed to serve specific populations, such as veterans, substance abusers, and the mentally ill (Main 2006: 905). By turning the management of shelters over to private, not-for-profit organizations, the Cuomo Commission believed it could replace the dehumanizing armory shelters with smaller ones rich with necessary services for clients.

However, access to these program shelters demanded specific performances of homelessness. For homeless men especially, this required taking on a passive, desexualized, or “ugly” role that is demeaning to one’s identity (Marcus 2006: 31). These identities often interact with problematic constructions of racial identities as well. For example, the passive, desexualized identity program shelter environments require have particular implications for Black men who have historically been constructed as childish or in need of paternalistic care. Similarly the ugly role, which Marcus (2006) describes as a tough, hardened personality useful in
dangerous shelter or street atmospheres, reaffirms constructions of Black men as
criminal and dangerous. Like homeless men, homeless women also have to perform
specific identities in order to receive services. Pasaro (1996) argues that homeless
women receive special treatment from service providers, giving them an easier path
out of street homelessness so long as they perform domesticating gender identities.
The homeless were forced to constitute themselves as “deserving” and willing to
submit to the better judgment of those offering the services as opposed to the
“undeserving homeless” who refuse such services and are therefore responsible for
their situation. Moreover, these services generally only amounted to drug therapy.
Mayor Dinkins’ response to the homeless crisis failed to address causes of
homelessness at the structural level, such as the lack of affordable housing, and by
focusing on issues of mental illness and drug abuse, solidified the belief that
homelessness resulted from deviant behaviors.

Mayor Giuliani took office in 1994 bringing in an era of social revanchism
with his zero tolerance policy on crime. James Q. Wilson’s and George L. Kelling’s
1982 “broken windows” thesis had a profound influence on Giuliani’s policing
strategy and devastating consequences for the homeless. The broken windows
theory argues that neighborhoods that fail to fix broken windows or other forms of
“disorder” invite more serious criminals into the neighborhood (Mitchell and
Beckett 2008: 89). In the 1994 Police Strategy No. 5, Giuliani identified homeless
people, panhandlers, prostitutes, squeegee cleaners, squatters, graffiti artists, unruly
youth, and petty criminals as a threat to civil order and the “quality of life” of all New
Yorkers (Smith 1999: 100). Homeless people were now considered to be the source
rather than symptoms of the city’s ills. Their presence was the embodiment of the broken windows brought decay to a neighborhood according to the broken windows theory. The police were afforded a great deal of power and discretion to enforce the new policy. They even started going out of their way to harass the homeless. For example, undercover cops rode the M35 bus to arrest those on their way to the Wards Island shelters if they did not pay the $2 fare and in 1999, Police Commissioner Howard Saffir announced that homeless people sleeping outside would be summoned or arrested for disorderly conduct (Mitchell and Beckett 2008: 90). The mere experience of homelessness in public spaces was now a crime. Tim, for example, a member of Open City who is introduced in Chapter Three, described a constant consciousness of police officers that might arrest him in the places where he tried to sleep.

Meanwhile, Giuliani made drastic cuts to the social services that supported the homeless and the city services that prevented people from becoming homeless, making no efforts to hide the fact that his policies were “explicitly designed to rid New York of homeless and other poor people” (Smith 1999: 101). With the criminalization of homelessness, the continuing failure of the shelter system to provide a viable track to permanent housing, and the defunding of city services, many have wound up in a vicious cycle of alternating incarceration and homelessness. The total number of misdemeanor arrests increased by approximately 80%, from about 129,403 in 1993 to 224,668 in 2000 (Mitchell and Beckett 2008: 89). Mitchell (2003) points to the ideology of globalization as the motivation behind revanchist urban policies like Giuliani’s. Globalization masks the
“degree to which capital must be located” allowing local officials, businesses, and property owners to argue that they must do whatever is necessary to create a positive image for the city to attract capital (Mitchell 2003: 166). Poor and homeless people tarnish a city’s image and therefore threaten the city’s ability to attract capital in a global market. Giuliani attempted to “solve” this problem by making the homeless invisible through reducing city services and drastically increasing the power of the police. The result was a set of policies that had the goal of incarcerating or displacing poor and homeless New Yorkers. Giuliani did not intend to eradicate homelessness, but rather eradicate homeless individuals from the physical spaces and social imaginary of the city.

The Bloomberg administration has continued the legacy of Giuliani’s revanchist policies. Their goal is not to solve homelessness by providing avenues to affordable housing, but to remove the poor and homeless from the city through calculated management. Bloomberg has accomplished this goal through a series of quietly implemented policies that in some cases explicitly pursue the displacement of the poor and homeless. In August of 2007, the Village Voice discovered that the Bloomberg administration was charging rent to shelter residents who had “a significant amount of income” through the Client Contribution Program designed to “help families and individuals move towards permanency and into their own homes” (Rayman 2007). The idea for this program came directly from Giuliani, who attempted to implement a similar program during his tenure (Rayman 2007). Believing that families were abusing the shelter system to access better housing, Bloomberg ended a longstanding practice of giving homeless families priority for
federal housing vouchers, which allowed recipients to pay no more than 30 percent of their income in rent, in October of 2004 (Bosman 2009). The Bloomberg administration believed this would decrease the number families entering shelters when in fact it increased the amount significantly (Bosman 2009). Combined with the previously described policy of charging rent to shelter residents and the continued policing of the poor, these policies aim to make the lives of homeless and poor New Yorkers impossible, forcing them out of the most desirable spaces of the city, if not out of the city entirely. This intention was most explicitly articulated in a program launched in 2007 that bought one-way tickets on whatever means of transport necessary for homeless families to leave New York (Usborne 2009).

Following the footsteps of Giuliani, the Bloomberg administration does not wish to eliminate homelessness, but to eliminate the homeless.

When homelessness is understood as criminal, resulting from deviant behavior, the solutions focus on ways to discipline, contain, or eradicate the homeless. A Foucauldian point of view is particularly useful for understanding the policing of the homeless. For example, Foucault (1977) identifies “the distribution of individuals in space,” as a necessary component of discipline and describes enclosure as one technique that realizes this goal (141). This reveals the logic behind a shelter system that, as described earlier, only protects housed individuals from the homeless. Foucault’s (1977) discussion of the examination and gaze is also highly applicable to the homeless experience. For the homeless, public space is an “apparatus of uninterrupted examination” where they are observed not only by the police, but also by the housed population who because of negative representations
of the homeless perceive them to be a threat to public safety (Foucault 1977: 186). Moreover, this examining gaze links homeless status to individual traits: “each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterize him and make him a ‘case’” (Foucault 1977: 192). Finally, Foucault’s (1977) description of Bentham’s Panopticon is especially applicable to understanding the experiences of the homeless in public spaces. The homeless are always conscious of the gaze of a hostile public. Their very presence in public spaces is deemed a threat to public safety but they can still manage to navigate these spaces. However, they must constitute themselves in specific ways that require them to perform a docile, passive identity. Foucault (1967) describes the relationships between discipline and space through a discussion of utopias and what he names heterotopias. Utopias “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal” (Foucault 1967: 24). Foucault (1967) describes heterotopias as “counter-sites” that are approximations of utopia and compares the relationship between utopias and heterotopias to the experience of looking in a mirror: the image in the mirror does not exist (and is therefore a utopia) but it is also a real object that shapes how the viewer relates to their image (24). “Heterotopias of deviation” especially contain undesirable bodies so that utopian ideals may be understood. As it applies to homelessness, the homeless are subjected to measures that contain them to specific spaces in order to discipline them for their improper use of public space and uphold the normative uses of space.

Spatial Politics of Homeless Life
By not owning private property, the urban homeless are forced to navigate spaces in ways that challenge the housed population’s understanding of the intended use of these spaces. They must improvise with public spaces in order to serve private needs that are typically reserved for the home. These alternative uses of urban spaces are highly regulated and policed. Some scholars, invoking Mary Douglas’ (1966) concept of dirt as matter out of place, believe that anti-homelessness laws that regulate homeless behavior are an attempt to protect the “proper” or “pure” uses of space (Mitchell 2003; Höjdestrand 2009). These proper uses of space are often connected to issues of hygiene, which proved to be a significant topic of discussion with many members I interviewed at Open City that I discuss in further detail in Chapter Three. Additionally, anti-homelessness policies connect with the constructions of the undeserving poor. Cities designate spaces such as shelters for use by the homeless. If they refuse to enter these spaces and instead occupy other spaces in inappropriate ways, they must be acting unruly and be in need of policing. The policing of the homeless is also the result of the Broken Window Theory’s influence on policies on crime, most clearly exemplified by the Giuliani administration described earlier. Along with the constructions of the deserving or undeserving poor, the Broken Windows Theory constructs the behavior it polices to be voluntary, suggesting once again that the major issue of homelessness is deviant behavior (Mitchell 2003: 201). Finally, the policing of the homeless is part of the neoliberal project of privatizing public space. Neoliberal practices wish to privatize the spaces that homeless people occupy in order to transform these spaces into centers for commerce. Since the homeless are not seen
as consumers and moreover detract from the overall image of a city, they must be excluded from these spaces according to the neoliberal agenda. Mitchell (2003) writes, “new laws governing the use of space are not just a rhetoric or discourse of neoliberal revanchism, but its actual practice, a practice that is a key front upon which the battle for the right to the city must be fought” (167). Mitchell recognizes the relationship between struggles over public space and social justice, placing the homeless in the frontlines of this battle. All of these forces interact with one another to create policies that specify the proper use of urban space and the exclusion of the homeless from these spaces.

This constant regulation of behavior is a prominent quality of homeless life. As such, scholars have focused on the homeless’ navigation of prime and marginal space (Snow and Anderson 1991), or refuse space, pleasure space, and functional space (Wright 1997; Höjdestrand 2009). The basic ideas behind these concepts is that regulation of homeless behavior will be especially intense in the spaces that are mainly used by the housed population, or are intended for commerce, for example a shopping center and its immediate area. The homeless then are generally pushed into spaces on the margins of these areas where this regulation is less intense. Wright (1997) complicates this dichotomy of prime and marginal space by noting that “refuse space”, or spaces primarily used by the homeless, may exist within these same central locations that prime space is typically found (106). For example, a homeless person might make use of a small alleyway nestled in between prime spaces, or there could be a temporal quality to the distinction: parks that primarily serve the housed population during the day might have a different purpose for the
homeless at night. These constructions of prime and marginal spaces or pleasure and refuse spaces exclude the homeless from the physical spaces and social imaginary of the city: the basic characteristic of both sets of defined spaces is that the homeless are not meant to be in spaces meant for use by the housed consumer population.

The homeless are thus highly visible in these spaces but simultaneously voiceless. Their use and even their very existential presence in these spaces threaten the accepted meanings of the space. For this reason, they are highly visible in these spaces and viewed disapprovingly under the gaze of the housed population. Moreover their presence in such spaces is essentially made illegal by laws that define life-sustaining activities committed in “public” spaces as “disorderly conduct”. At the same time this regulatory gaze prohibits the homeless from expressing their voice. Much like Marcus’ (2006) description of the performance of the deserving poor identity in order to receive services, the homeless must perform a very passive identity whenever they are in these prime spaces in order to remain in those spaces. Wright (1997) states that for the homeless, “performing is a constant task” (49), not just in the context of receiving services. Once they step out of this passive role, they are met with legal sanctions for such acts as “aggressive panhandling”. Thus, even when the homeless are not literally being policed in public space, the regulatory gaze polices them by forcing them to present a passive, domesticated identity. Mitchell (2003) writes that this regulation of urban spaces forces the homeless and homeless activists to “argue for the right to sleep in public, lie on sidewalks, to beg on the streets, or to shit in alleys” (209). Under the constant
regulatory gaze of the public, the homeless must fight for even the most basic functions of life.

**The Public Sphere and Subaltern Counterpublics**

Jürgen Habermas' (1989) provides the foundation for theories of the public sphere, or the area of social life in which individuals, independent of the state and economy, can identify, discuss, and deliberate over social problems and thus influence political action. It is the “theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” and can occur in both physical spaces and nonphysical ones (Fraser 1993: 2). Habermas (1989) describes the transformations of the public sphere throughout history from the representative publicity of feudal states (in which a single ruler represented all subjects without any discussion), to the literary public sphere (in which the public could critically discuss art and literature through periodicals, literary journals, and at salons and coffee houses), and finally, the political public sphere in which individuals came together using critical reason to oppose government action. All of these transformations are embedded in the social and economic conditions of their respective time period, and Habermas sees the political public sphere enshrined in the liberal bourgeois society of the 18th and 19th century. Though even Habermas acknowledges the historical specificity of his bourgeois public sphere, the model is an essential concept for understanding this discursive area of social life.

Fraser (1993) problematizes Habermas’ history of the public sphere by highlighting the “masculinist gender constructs built into the public sphere” and goes on to argue that the bourgeois public sphere (and the idea of a public sphere in
general) was and is inaccessible to subaltern groups (7). She writes, “social inequalities can infect deliberation, even in the absence of any formal exclusions” (Fraser 1993: 11). The public sphere transformed from one of repression to one dominated by the hegemonic powers of “majority” rule. These hegemonic powers establish normative discourses that deny subaltern groups equal participation in the public sphere. In the context of homelessness for example, this means that even when the homeless are brought into the public sphere, the discourses on the homeless, which construct the deserving/undeserving dichotomy and obscure structural forces behind homelessness, prevent the homeless from participating in the public sphere as equals.

Though Fraser (1993) questions whether the public sphere ever existed as Habermas (1989) describes it, she develops an alternative model in what she names subaltern counterpublics. Fraser (1993) defines these subaltern counterpublics as, “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (14). Michael Warner (2002) similarly recognizes the multifaceted nature of the public sphere and proposes a model that includes a multiplicity of publics and counterpublics with fluid rather than rigid boundaries. Subaltern groups have the power to form alternative publics of their own. In these alternative publics, or counterpublics, the subordinated groups can develop their own languages, or discourses, to identify the issues that impact their communities. Through these counterpublics, subaltern groups can interact with a plurality of
publics to subvert the hegemonic powers of the public sphere ruled by “majority” interests.

Though scholars describe the public sphere as a social space, there is also a spatial and temporal quality of the public sphere. The public sphere is not located or contained in any particular physical space, but it still has an inextricable link to physical spaces. For example, spaces like the coffee shops or salons were critical components of Habermas’ (1989) bourgeois public sphere. Many scholars have examined the complex relationships between the public sphere and public spaces. By definition, public spaces would seem to be open to anyone and therefore promote a rich public sphere. Simply being in public, however, does not enter one into the public sphere. Iveson (2007) aptly notes, “being public is not just a matter of being in public” (14). Moreover, as described above, the homeless do not experience public spaces in the ways that the housed population does. The barriers they face in public spaces can even be seen as physical representations of the discursive barriers (which the homeless also face) Fraser (1993) describes that prohibit equal participation in the public sphere.

The study of public space and then can provide insights into the public sphere. Mitchell (2003) writes, “theories of the public sphere—and practices within it—therefore must always be linked to theories of public space” (182). While Mitchell’s (2003) argument that the diminishment of accessible physical “public” spaces has political ramifications for everyone, let alone the homeless, is valid, Iveson (2007) argues that this type of argument relies heavily on a topographical approach to theorizing public space (4). The disadvantages to this approach are
that it relies on narratives of loss and reclamation, implying public spaces were once more inclusionary, and even when topographical approaches reject the narratives of loss and reclamation, they still posit visibility through the occupation of material public spaces as the way to participate in the public sphere (Iveson 2007: 8).

As mentioned previously, the homeless often do in fact occupy spaces that could be considered public despite the intense policing they face within these spaces. The regulatory gaze under which they are viewed combined with normative discourses on homelessness, however, deny the homeless access to the public sphere even if they can visibly insert themselves in material public spaces. Faced with these spatial politics, material public spaces do not seem to be a viable space in which the homeless can form a public. My project asks, if the authority of the public gaze and law enforcement agencies working in the interests of neoliberal projects constantly police the behavior of homeless people, how can they interact with one another to form the counterdiscourses and counterpublics of which Fraser (1993) speaks? Since they do not own property and they are made to take on passive, domesticated identities if they wish to remain in public space, where can they possibly organize a meeting or function in which they can honestly share ideas with one another to develop a homeless identity and affect political action? However, it must be noted that the relations of power that produce these conditions are themselves socially produced and therefore open to resistance. Perhaps a better line of questioning might ask how the normative uses of space can be subverted or challenged to produce alternatives. I will explore a few examples of this type of resistance in the following chapter.
Chapter Two: Challenging Public Space

As established in Chapter One, the urban homeless exert a great deal of energy navigating public spaces and managing their identities within these spaces. They must use public spaces in ways that challenge the normative constructions of the public and private realms. For the homeless, the lack of a home not only means a lack of shelter against the elements, but also a lack of a shield against the public gaze—activities that are normally reserved for the home must be performed under the often condemning public gaze. As discussed in the previous chapter, the homeless spend much time in public spaces, yet are essentially made invisible in the public sphere through constructions of the “undeserving” poor, policing that enforces neoliberal projects, and the regulatory gaze of the public, which requires the homeless to perform passive, non-threatening identities in order to remain in public space. Their lack of private property is coupled with a lack of political agency for the homeless and though they spend a majority of their time in public space, the experience of these spaces is often hostile. Navigation of public space and identity management in these often-hostile spaces are the central qualities of the homeless experience.

While homeless identities are strictly regulated in public spaces, these same public spaces, however, can also become spaces of resistance. Margaret Crawford (1995) writes, “rather than being fixed in time and space, these public spaces are constantly changing, as users reorganize and reinterpret physical space,” and furthermore, “urban politics and urban space can be restructured from the bottom up as well as from the top down” (5). Holston (2008) writes specifically about the
entrenched form of citizenship in Brazil that is inegalitarian in its legalization of social inequalities. However, he argues that Brazil’s working class has developed an insurgent citizenship since the 1970s in the urban peripheries of Brazil, where in the face of expulsion from redeveloping city centers, “they had to construct their own houses, organize to gain basic services, and struggle to retain their house lots in often-violent conflicts over landownership” (Holston 2008: 8). Though this emerging, insurgent citizenship has been plagued by violence and impunity, it has succeeded at destabilizing the old, entrenched Brazilian citizenship based on exclusion. Most importantly, the Brazilian insurgent citizenship Holston (2008) describes emerged in urban spaces through informal (and illegal) house building and land conflict.

What follows is a discussion of a few interventions that exemplify the contested nature of urban space and the different ways homeless activists and allies have created what James Holston (2008) names “insurgent citizenship.” The examples I present can be similarly seen as attempts at creating insurgent citizenships, highlighting the ability of homeless activists and allies to challenge and reinterpret uses of public space. First, I will examine housing activism in the Lower East Side and East Village during the late 1980s. Next, I will look at the ways an art project by Krzysztof Wodiczko addressed similar issues. Finally, I will bring the recent Occupy Wall Street movement into the conversation and examine its intersections with the spatial politics of homelessness. All of these examples, including the Occupy Wall Street movement, challenge the control of public space and political representation within those spaces. I argue that Occupy Wall Street,
like the other examples I present, deals with the same issues that the homeless face everyday. As I argue throughout, the homeless are on the frontlines of the battle over the right to the city. However, it is also the homeless who disproportionately face the pushback against these movements. By analyzing these examples, I clarify the difficulties the homeless face in participating in such actions and situate the work of Open City in a broader context of right to the city activism.

**Tompkins Square Park Riot 1988**

The tent city built in Tompkins Square Park in the late 1980s and the subsequent riots and destruction of the encampment serves as a paradigmatic example of an alternative use of public space, the formation of alternative communities in this contested space, and the city’s subsequent response. Tompkins Square Park, located in the East Village of Manhattan, has served as “the neighborhood’s central locus of conscious community activism” for over 150 years (Marcus 2006: 119). The Lower East Side and East Village were hit hard by New York City’s fiscal crisis in 1975. At the same time, the city began to cut services from neighborhoods like the Lower East Side and landlords faced a loss of renters and increased heating expenses resulting from the 1973 oil crisis. These factors combined with runaway inflation motivated many landlords to let their buildings slowly fall into disrepair, if they had not already burnt them down for insurance (Marcus 2006: 121). The neighborhood quickly deteriorated and even became the backdrop for Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), a film that portrays a particularly sinister vision of the urban decay of New York City. However, Marcus (2006) writes, “as the infrastructure decayed, the ideology and civic engagement of anarchists and...
hippies, along with the demimonde of prostitution, drugs, and teenage runaways increasingly filled the vacuum and defined neighborhood public life” (121).

The neighborhood continued to witness drastic changes through the 1980s. In the early 1980s the city saw an influx of immigrants from Latin American, Eastern European, and Asian countries as well as a wave of “yuppies,” or professionally oriented recent university graduates (Marcus 2006: 121). The neighborhood began to gentrify and rents began to rise, displacing underpaid, unemployed residents. The same buildings that landlords had formerly abandoned in the 1970s now became increasingly valuable. By 1990, many of the buildings in the Lower East Side and East Village were worth more than half a million dollars. However, Marcus (2006) writes, “the realization of income on these buildings often depended on forcing out long-standing residents with below-market leases” (122). As the demand for housing and the amount of people who could afford higher rents increased, these long-standing residents were displaced or became homeless. Tensions began to grow between the new Yuppies in the neighborhood and the residents being displaced. In response to the gentrification, radical community organizations of squatters and anarchists emerged. The homeless created a tent city in Tompkins Square Park and the park became a gathering place for the homeless and community activists while urban homesteaders started illegally occupying abandoned buildings.

Marcus (2006) presents the complex relationships that formed between these groups as exemplified by one member of the community named Jaime. Jaime had lived in the neighborhood for twenty-five years ever since his family moved to
New York from Puerto Rico. After the building his family lived in suspiciously burned down, he moved to a nearby building, but eventually was evicted and started living in the abandoned lot of his former building. Eventually, a group of community activists and homesteaders constructed a small six-by-nine foot tar paper shack in the community garden in Tompkins Square Park for Jaime. Jaime was respected even by the Yuppies as a fixture of the community with a long life history in the neighborhood despite the poor quality of the shack he inhabited. Marcus (2006) writes, “In light of the rapidly shrinking social wage and absence of a satisfactory government housing policy, these neighbors accepted the reality that the best thing they could do to ‘help the homeless’ was to join others on the block and build a structure that was barely fit for a dog to live in. But a tar paper shack in a community garden was superior to a tent in Tompkins Square Park that must be collapsed every morning at 7:00 a.m. And even this, for many people, was far better than the dangerous, atomized prison-like conditions in city shelters” (135). The homeless and activist community successfully confronted the new, wealthier residents of the neighborhood with the realities of gentrification and the displacement it wrought.

This success is due to the fact that their activism in the form of the tent city was being executed in a very visible, public and central location of the neighborhood in a park loaded with historical significance for community activism. The public space that the homeless are policed in also has the potential to be the stage upon which activists force the housed to think critically about gentrification, displacement, and the city’s inadequate response to these issues. Homeless
participants in the tent city were meeting needs for shelter on their own terms and simultaneously politicizing the pursuit of housing in the absence of a city-initiated address to the lack of affordable housing. This allowed the homeless activists to meet the need for housing while constructing themselves as subjects of rights rather than recipients of provisions.

Despite the victories of the Tompkins Square Park tent city, the tent city would eventually be shut down after erupting in a violent confrontation between police and community members. Mayor Koch ordered the police to break up the late night gatherings that had been occurring throughout the summer of 1988 and on the night of August 6th, 1988, 450 police in riot gear arrived at the park with the intent of driving everyone out (Marcus 2006: 127). The police line was met with resistance from shouting squatters, homeless tent dwellers, and anarchists. Expressing sentiments familiar to the contemporary Occupy Wall Street movement, they chanted, “Whose park is it? It’s our fucking park!” as well as, “Tompkins Square Everywhere” (Smith 1992: 60). As the crowd threw bottles, the police line charged, attacking anyone in sight indiscriminately. The battle eventually spilled out to the rest of the neighborhood and police violence erupted against anyone on the streets, including people walking their dogs or just sitting on their front stoops (Marcus 2006: 127). Though the riot of 1988 did not immediately shut down the tent city, the police severely limited access to the park, selectively enforcing curfews against homeless park users.

The fallout of the riots would most strongly impact the homeless who lived in the tent city. In June of 1991, Mayor Dinkins, facing the legacy of the riot and
continued activist presence in Tompkins Square Park and surrounding area, announced that the city would no longer tolerate the use of public parks as living spaces and the tent city was destroyed, replaced by a permanent police structure (Marcus 2006: 135). Formerly a powerful symbol of the homeless’ resistance to the housing crisis and city’s inadequate homeless policy, Tompkins Square Park became a symbol (and literal example) of the NYPD’s surveillance of the homeless in public space. The activity in Tompkins Square Park succeeded in challenging meanings of public space and to some extent, even provided alternative solutions to the lack of affordable housing and inadequacies of the shelter system. The police response to Tompkins Square Park revealed how radical these alternatives were as well as the measures those in power are willing to take to protect their power, which was demonstrated once again during the Occupy Wall Street movement. Moreover, the example of Tompkins Square Park shows how the homeless are both on the frontlines of this battle and have the most to lose in these conflicts. The destruction of the tent city had an immediate impact on those who lost what little they had in the wreckage and the establishment of a permanent police structure has long-term effects on all homeless people who wish to use that park.

**The Homeless Vehicle**

Smith (1992) argues that the activity in Tompkins Square Park was defeated due to its inability to mobilize tenants, housing activists, and homeless people citywide (60). Smith (1992) calls this citywide mobilization the “jumping of scales,” which “allows evictees to dissolve spatial boundaries that are largely imposed from above and that contain rather than facilitate their production and reproduction of
everyday life" (60). Smith (1992) identifies two works by artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Homeless Vehicle* and *Poliscar*, as projects that do address spatialized politics by jumping scales. Generally, scale refers to the different levels at which social processes take place. For Smith (1992), scale also produces social processes: “scale both *contains* social activity, and at the same time provides an already partitioned geography within which social activity *takes place*,” and further, “it is geographical scale that defines the boundaries and bounds the identities around which control is exerted *and contested*” (66). In other words, the construction of the politics of scale is an ever-changing social process, not a fixed one. Smith (1992) is particularly interested in the following scales: body, home, community, urban, region, nation, and global. These scales are nested rather than exclusive and often interact with one another. For example, the body is seen as the scale that defines the site of personal identity, but the home often provides the most immediate context in which this takes place. Likewise, the physical boundaries between home and community and community and urban space (and so on) are not always clear but are always produced according to specific social relations. Smith’s (1992) description of the politics of scale affirms the contested nature of space and the possibilities for resistance within public spaces.

Smith (1992) describes the artist Wodiczko’s two projects as a commentary on the spatialized politics of homelessness by addressing issues of scale. Wodiczko created the *Homeless Vehicle* (Figure A) project in 1988 and later elaborated on it to create the *Poliscar* (Figure B) in 1991. The *Homeless Vehicle* is essentially a multipurpose cart that “builds on the vernacular architecture of the supermarket
trolley” and meets basic needs of transportation, sitting, sleeping, shelter and washing (Smith 1992: 54). Wodiczko intentionally made use of an object that was familiar to both housed viewers of the art and to homeless users of the vehicle. The design was inspired by observations of some homeless people’s use of similar carts to collect cans or bottles (Lurie and Wodiczko 1988: 55). The cart’s top section features a foldable sleeping space draped with heavy plastic that can be used for shelter. Wodiczko identified the lack of spatial mobility and the need for economic sustenance as the two most important issues to address (Lurie and Wodiczko 1988: 58). As such, the bottom of the cart includes a storage section for personal possessions. Additionally, this storage section can hold cans and bottles, which can then be transported to redemption centers, providing users with a source of capital.

At the head of the cart is a cone that can fold down to serve as a washbasin. When folded up for traveling, the washbasin gives the vehicle the appearance of a rocket or weapon, bringing attention to the projects intentions to be a radical form of resistance (Lurie and Wodiczko 1988: 62). The scale of the home and community are particularly important to Wodiczko’s work as Smith (1992) writes, “homelessness is a dramatic loss of power over the way in which one’s identity is constructed since, for the homeless person, the home no longer shields the public gaze” (69). Both projects attempt to address realities of and demands of homeless life based on discussions Wodiczko had with homeless people.

The Poliscar expands on the themes of the Homeless Vehicle and focuses on issues of personal security as well as communication. Borrowing from the military aesthetic of the Homeless Vehicle’s rocket-like nose cone, the Poliscar resembles a
mix between a tank and a prop from a science fiction movie. The operator of the vehicle stands upright wholly inside the protective structure of the vehicle. The *Poliscar* includes first aid supplies and tools for communication, such as a CB radio, external camera with TV monitor, and technology for transmitting these images (Smith 1992: 59). These tools allow the *Poliscar* to act as a command center of sorts for political action. This has particular implications for the homeless who are excluded from the public sphere and political discourse. Moreover the *Poliscar* subverts relations of power via surveillance, which will be discussed further below.

Both projects are extremely functional but respond to different needs. The *Homeless Vehicle* offers resources to assist in survival on the streets with its bed, washbasin, and storage. The *Poliscar* is slightly more conceptual in that it offers the homeless a sense of privacy and the potential for political action. However, the *Homeless Vehicle* and *Poliscar* seek to achieve a much more important purpose than a strictly functional one.

Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle* and *Poliscar* provide the homeless with spatial mobility, providing them with a tool to resist institutional efforts that try to discipline the homeless through enclosure (Foucault 1977: 141) to shelters and other marginal spaces. Simultaneously they move art beyond an expression of dissent to a form of social action. The *Homeless Vehicle* "neither is, nor is meant to be, a solution," but instead "empowers the evicted to erase their own erasure" (Smith 1992: 58). The *Homeless Vehicle* makes the homeless visible in public spaces by empowering them to lay claim to their right to space: "operators of the Homeless Vehicle possess space by their obligation to invent it. And enhanced mobility
enhances the possibilities for public gathering and public organizing” (Smith 1992: 58). In the words of Wodiczko (1999), “the homeless become actors, orators, workers, all things which they usually are not. The idea is to let them speak and tell their own stories, to let them be legitimate actors on the urban stage” (177). Even if the projects did not generate the kind of direct dialogue that Wodiczko describes in this quote, the two projects bring visibility to homelessness as a result of the visual spectacle they create in public areas. The projects should not be read as solutions to homelessness, but instead as visual amplifications of the realities of homeless life, which force viewers to question the city’s response to homelessness. For example, by providing a functional sleeping space, the Homeless Vehicle actually exposes the absurdity that some people must and do sleep in similar spaces. The absurd appearance of the cart itself, which is familiar to housed viewers as a shopping cart and to homeless users as a potential storage device, also highlights this quality. Similarly, the tank-like qualities of the Poliscar force viewers to grapple with issues of security that the homeless contend with daily. The projects expose the realities of homeless life by clearly articulating them without naturalizing or legitimizing them.

This concept is further explored in Poliscar, which focuses more on homeless people’s need for security and privacy and enhances communication. The name comes from the Greek word “polis” meaning city but paired with “car” produces a homophone of the word “police car.” This homophone emphasizes the surveillance capabilities of the Poliscar, however, in the Poliscar relations of power are flipped as the homeless user of the Poliscar gazes upon the public: “the Poliscar is intended as a democratization of urban space, giving evictees their own police powers while
simultaneously invoking the possibility of freedom and democracy in a remade polis” (Smith 1992: 59). This aspect of the Poliscar most clearly exemplifies Smith’s (1992) description of “jumping scales” by creating the possibility of a “Homeless Communication Network’ that would enhance the security, the economic and social opportunities, and political organizing of evictees” (59). Both projects can be read as simultaneously a “home and antihome” (Smith 1992: 70). By this, Smith (1992) means that the Homeless Vehicle and Poliscar challenge the physical boundaries of the home and instead envision the community as an extension of the home. In a direct challenge to the erasure of the homeless, this conception of the community becomes inclusive of the homeless.

The Homeless Vehicle and Poliscar both serve as examples of how art and design can challenge the spatial politics of homelessness. Though Smith (1992) is highly laudatory of Wodiczko’s work, its impact is limited. There were only a handful of vehicles that were ever in use for no longer than a year (Pataphysics 1991). As elaborated on earlier, the projects were not limited to functional purposes, but their ability to move viewers to action cannot be determined. In theory, the vehicles addressed anyone who happened to be in their vicinity, but it is not clear if they sparked the type of analysis of spatial politics that Smith (1992) offers. Wodiczko showed his vehicles in several galleries and museums as well, but once again, the impact it had on the gallery public did not necessarily lead to fundamental changes in the lives of the homeless people who used the vehicles. Additionally, the vehicles only addressed the needs of a small portion of the homeless population. For example, only a single, able-bodied person could operate
the Homeless Vehicle. It did not meet the needs of those who do not fit this fairly narrow description. Even so, the projects challenge the erasure of the homeless by bringing visibility to the homeless people who use public space and most importantly, claim a sense of personhood for the homeless. Most importantly, Wodiczko’s projects had the needs of homeless users in mind. Like the Tompkins Square Park activism, Wodiczko’s projects asserted the homeless’ rightful claim to public space and the public sphere but they also provided some level of safety or refuge from the hostile experience of public space. The major success of Wodiczko’s work is that it connects the needs for provisions like shelter to the need for political representation. Similarly, this is central to the work of Open City. While the tent city at Tompkins Square Park also provided shelter for the homeless, it could not be mobilized like Wodiczko’s vehicles and thus could be torn down. However, Wodiczko’s work was in fact temporary. For these reasons, Open City’s ability to provide a more permanent space that can act in the way that the tent city or Homeless Vehicle did is equally important as the organization’s work of bringing homeless New Yorkers into public discourse on homelessness.

**Occupy Wall Street**

I want to conclude this chapter with a discussion of the recent protest movement, Occupy Wall Street (OWS). OWS presents exciting new challenges to the neoliberal project of erasing public space and displays the contested nature of space. It also highlights the connections between physical public spaces, visibility, and political representation. Most importantly, issues that OWS protesters have encountered living in public parks directly overlap with many of the same issues
with which the urban homeless are already all too familiar. I will begin with a brief history of the movement up to the current moment and then provide an analysis of a few developments of the movement that offer creative attempts at establishing a more accessible public sphere including the general assembly, the human microphone, and the People’s Library. Even if the OWS is not explicitly about homelessness, I argue that the movement is directly addressing issues of homelessness precisely because it takes place in an urban public space and fights for political representation within this space. Finally, I will discuss one of OWS’ recent projects of occupying foreclosed homes as a strategy to claim authority over a space in a city where more and more spaces are being policed.

The on-going OWS movement, which expresses dissatisfaction and anger over economic inequalities and the corporate influence on politics, began in September 2011 and spans across the country and globe. The protest, initiated by Adbusters, began on September 17 of this year and intended to occupy 1 Chase Plaza (home of the iconic Bull Statue) but was diverted to nearby Zucotti Park (Moynihan 2011). The protesters were barred from accessing 1 Chase Plaza, a public park, and ended up establishing their encampment at a plaza privately owned by Brookfield Office Properties. Ironically, the fact that the park is privately owned actually proved advantageous for the movement: city codes for public parks, such as the 1 am curfew, do not apply to the privately owned public spaces (POPS) like Zucotti, which allowed protesters to stay overnight in the park (Batchelor 2011). The ironies of POPS such as Zucotti Park are revealing of the neoliberal “annihilation of public space” (Mitchell 2003). However, the fact that OWS found a home in one of
these POPS also reveals that like public spaces, the social relations produced by POPS and their intended uses are also of a contested nature. As these POPS are likely to increase, struggles over representation, visibility, and the right to the city will take place more often in these privately owned spaces.

Since its inception, the movement has had a contentious relationship of varying degrees with city officials and police forces. However, incidents of excessive police force against OWS protesters have often galvanized more support for the movement or at least cause onlookers to question the actions of the police. For example, a video showing NYPD Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna pepper spraying a group of protesters who seemingly were not engaging in any threatening, illegal activity sparked outrage (Associated Press 2011). Likewise, Oakland’s heavy-handed response to its local movement, which left Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen with a fractured skull, became a rallying cry for Occupy movements around the country (Bayard 2011). At the very least, OWS has exposed the limits of democracy in the United States and the repressive forces that maintain these limits, which is a powerful achievement in of itself. Images of a bloodied and unconscious Scott Olsen or a chaotic cityscape filled with clouds of teargas and a highly militarized police force are incompatible with conceptions of freedom and democracy. Moreover, these images make it all the more disturbing when city mayors describe their police force as a private army, as Mayor Bloomberg boasted in an address at MIT (Daily Mail Reporter 2011). While many have criticized, sometimes justifiably, the movement’s lack of direction and leadership, the ability to draw in a variety of participants with an equal variety of concerns has arguably been the source of OWS’
success. The major success of OWS has been its persistence to reclaim public spaces and POPS for the people as a stage upon which to express political dissent. The OWS movement challenges the neoliberal powers that dominate both the public sphere and the actual physical spaces of cities (in the direct form of POPS or through militarized police forces acting as personal armies) by demanding that these physical spaces and the political agency they represent be returned to the people.

Most importantly, OWS is conscious of the limits of the public sphere, such as those defined by Fraser (1993). Though their solutions may not always be perfect, the use of consensus building through General Assemblies, the human microphone, and the People’s Library, all attempt to address issues of accessibility to the deliberations that define the social life of the public sphere. For example, the General Assembly strives to be an all-inclusive space for decision-making by employing a “progressive stack”: those who represent a “traditionally marginalized group” are given priority to speak in the assembly over more privileged participants (Seltzer 2011). The decision-making process in the OWS movements, though a very slow one, becomes a model for a more inclusive, democratic public sphere.

However, the General Assemblies cannot fully address the unequal power relations that privilege certain voices over others and OWS participants have reported “offensive behavior, such as unwanted touching or casually misogynist language, within the movement” (Seltzer 2011). OWS has also attempted to create a space for learning and sharing ideas. Though it was partially destroyed by the NYPD, the People’s Library contained a diversity of donated works that anyone in Zucotti Park was free to use (McVeigh 2011). The human microphone also presents an
interesting tool for bringing less privileged voices into the public sphere. Originally the human microphone, or amplification of speech through synchronized repetition without amplification equipment, was a response to the requirement of a permit for the use of electronic amplification (Kahn 2011). It has since evolved into a tool used to disrupt public events, challenge politicians, and express dissent in a space that might not allow for that expression. Politicians like Newt Gingrich, Michelle Bachman, and even President Obama have all been “mic-checked,” or publicly confronted by the human microphone (Kahn 2011). The use of mic-checks at such events as town hall meetings simultaneously brings forward voices that have often been silenced and calls attention to the superficiality of the “town hall” setting, in which anyone is supposedly given the opportunity to raise their question or concern.

What is most interesting about the OWS movement are the ways in which it is either directly or indirectly a movement about homelessness. To begin with, many of the issues that OWS was forced to contend with are the exact dangers that are ingrained in the daily lives of the homeless. Some activists were surprised by the difficulties of carrying out basic human functions in public spaces, difficulties that the homeless face daily. As Barbara Ehrenreich (2011) writes in an article that appeared in *Mother Jones*, “what occupiers from all walks of life are discovering, at least every time they contemplate taking a leak, is that to be homeless in America is to live like a fugitive.” In other words, to use public space in any way other than the very narrowly defined acceptable uses is to become a criminal, or ironically, a threat to the greater public. Critics of the OWS movement employ the same language used
to justify the homeless’ erasure and exile from public space. One needs only to conduct a brief search for articles about OWS in the *New York Post* or similar publications to confirm this point. For example, an article about the People’s Kitchen (and not about the movement as a whole) opened with a description of “grimy protesters laying siege to Wall Street and the now-smelly Zucotti Park” (Rosenberg 2011). This rhetoric is strikingly similar to the rhetoric used to describe the homeless as a hygienic threat to the health of the “public.” Therefore, the protesters who represent an actual public must be removed from “public” space in order to protect the endangered, imaginary “public.” Likewise, the homeless are routinely banned from public space, begging the question for whom is public space intended and in what activities may they engage?

Homelessness should be on the frontlines of every Occupy movement, as it already is even if not officially. Movements in Philadelphia, Austin, and Portland have already taken on the issue of homelessness as their own (Ehrenreich 2011). The homeless crisis and its subsequent criminalization described in the previous chapter coincide perfectly with the enormous growth of financial institutions beginning in the 1980s, and this is no coincidence. Ehrenreich (2011) writes, “homelessness is not a side issue unconnected to plutocracy and greed. It’s where we’re all eventually headed—the 99 percent, or at least the 70 percent, of us, every debt-loaded college grad, out-of-work school teacher, and impoverished senior—unless this revolution succeeds.” Open City addresses many of the same issues that OWS is working on and members of Open City have become actively involved in the OWS movement. Open City similarly attempts to bring a marginalized voice into
public discourse and has used public space as a site for activism. Members of Open City have even engaged with similar strategies of the Occupy movements, holding “sleep-ins” at city hall or occupying a waiting room at Penn Station. Unfortunately these actions have never attracted the press that the Occupy movement has. The homeless are all too familiar with the policing of public spaces and instances of police brutality against the homeless go unreported as opposed to the images of young, mostly white Occupy protesters circulate through the media. Despite this, the Occupy movements share similar goals with Open City and homeless New Yorkers who resist the policing of public spaces. Once again, the homeless have a higher stake in the battles the Occupy movements are waging as they seldom have a space to seek refuge during the battle.

In the current moment, many of the Occupy movements have already been evicted from the spaces they have occupied or face an imminent threat of eviction. Faced with this eviction, some Occupy movements have looked to the countless foreclosed homes as the new site for political action. In early December of 2011, a team of OWS activists broke into a foreclosed, abandoned housing unit and moved in a homeless family (Harkinson 2011). Open City has also explored the potentials of squatting or urban homesteading. Members of the organization have participated in workshops that teach skills needed for urban homesteading and have even begun to identify potential locations. Holston (1989) describes squatting and other forms of illegal residence as “not only one of the most traditional but also one of the most reliable ways for the urban poor” to claim rights to citizenship (271). Similarly, Smith (1992) writes, “squatting reasserts the rights to social privacy against the
dictates of economic privacy protected in the real-estate market” (69). Squatting both provides immediate relief for those who are denied property and therefore political rights but simultaneously challenges the embedded association of property and rights. It also reveals the relationship between access to private space and the ability to participate in the public sphere. Those who lack private space may look to public spaces or abandoned houses as new spaces for political organizing. Given the exclusionary citizenship determined by ownership of private property, squatting takes on an even more significant meaning. As the neoliberal project fuels the privatization of all urban spaces, even claiming people’s own homes in process, the site for political action and struggles over political representation in the public realm will be in the physical spaces that are simultaneously public, private, and neither: the foreclosed homes and the privately owned public spaces, such as Zucotti Park. For members of Open City who do not have access to private space and are simultaneously denied participation in the public sphere, the physical space of the organization’s office provides opportunities to address these needs. The following chapter introduces Open City and begins to analyze the meanings of that space.
Figure A: Krzysztof Wodiczko, Homeless Vehicle, 1988.
Figure B: Krzysztof Wodiczko, Poliscar, 1991.
Chapter Three: Open City

Open City is an organization based in New York City that directly addresses issues of homelessness, the connections between access to public space and rights, and the political agency of the homeless along with some of the other issues I have discussed in earlier chapters through grassroots organizing with homeless and formerly homeless individuals. The group, which was founded by two homeless men in 1999, is committed to being a member-led organization, meaning that all decisions are made by the membership, which consists entirely of homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers. While all of the members are homeless or formerly homeless, some of the paid staff, including organizers and office managers, does not share the experience of homelessness. Drawing upon interviews I collected with members and staff, as well as my own experiences as a volunteer with the organization, I will examine the ways in which Open City acts as a counterpublic as scholars such as Fraser (1993) and Warner (2002) have defined. In other words, I will examine the ways that Open City as an organization attempts to challenge the dominant discourse on homelessness that exists in the public sphere and create a group of individuals with a shared homeless identity. This shared identity is based on the shared experience of homelessness but there is a multiplicity of race, gender, and sexual identities represented at Open City. This shared identity is also an explicitly political one that recognizes homeless people as political subjects with agency to enact change rather than passive recipients of services.

Though it is a social space and not necessarily linked to any particular physical space, the public sphere has an inextricable connection to physical spaces.
This creates difficulties in establishing a homeless(counterpublic) since the homeless seldom if ever have access to a physical space in which their behavior is not aggressively regulated. Moreover, this dynamic produces implications for an organization such as Open City, which are not adequately addressed in the current literature on counterpublics. In order to address these issues, I will first present a brief history and description of the organization followed by a discussion of the different uses and meanings members construct for Open City and how these uses and meanings relate to the literature on counterpublics presented in Chapter One.

**Open City: A Brief History**

Two middle-aged Black homeless men living in the Bellevue Men’s Shelter founded the organization in 1999 in response to what they perceived as increased police harassment and media demonization of the homeless. The two men, Stephen and Alan, were responding to the increasingly draconian policies of the Giuliani administration in the wake of the attack on Nicole Barrett. In November of 1999, a man named Paris Drake threw a paving stone unprovoked at the 27-year-old office worker, leaving her with a critical head injury. Both the media and authorities early on made claims that the suspect was a homeless man and three days after the incident, Mayor Giuliani announced that “the homeless had no right to sleep on city streets and would face arrest for refusing shelter” (Forero and Blair; 1999). In fact Drake was not homeless at the time but this incident justified the harsh measures Giuliani was already enacting on the homeless and grew support for even harsher measures. The two founders also recognized how their racial identities interacted with the demonization of homelessness to make them particular targets of the
police. Earlier that same year, Andrew Goldstein, who was not homeless but had a long history of mental illness, pushed Kendra Webdale into an oncoming train, killing her instantly (McFadden; 1999). These two incidents, along with a few others, created an atmosphere of fear that encouraged the demonization of the homeless, the equating of homelessness with mental illness, and the belief that the homeless and mentally ill were both threats to the public’s safety. Andrea Peyser summed up these fears in a 1999 editorial in the New York Post where she wrote, “now, we are experiencing a real sense that the streets of New York are once again becoming the province of criminals and crazies” (NYPost). The “criminals and crazies” Peyser spoke of included the homeless and it is this kind of hostility that the cofounders Stephen and Alan were responding to.

Stephen and Alan aimed to develop a way to turn their frustration and anger with their situation into action. They believed that until homeless people had a voice in the policy decisions that affect their lives, the situation would never improve. Moreover, they believed homeless people needed to challenge the discourse on homelessness and the negative images of the homeless that were being circulated by popular media. Stephen already had knowledge of activism having grown up in a family that was very active during the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, before becoming homeless, Stephen had been involved in Al Sharpton’s National Action Network. Alan, on the other hand, did not have a history of activism but had been homeless nearly his whole life growing up in the foster care system and ending up on the streets later in life. Early on the two men started planning various forms of protest, for example, a march from Bellevue Men’s Shelter to WBAI,
a progressive radio station. Here they would share their thoughts and experiences with homelessness over the radio in order to offer alternative narratives of homelessness in the media. Eventually, Stephen and Alan met Christina, a former tenant organizer who had once been homeless herself. Christina was able to use connections she had with other activists to find a Manhattan Church that was willing to offer the organization an office and meeting space.

From the very beginning, Stephen, Alan, Christina, and a few other early members were committed to the belief that in order to end homelessness, homeless people must become the voice of change. Early on they developed the slogan, “Don’t talk about us; talk with us,” to bring attention to the ways decisions that affect the homeless are often made without any regard to the perspective of the homeless. Thus, Open City, which they officially founded in 2000, has never been a service-providing organization but instead serves as a space where the homeless and formerly homeless can organize for political action. It was intended to be a space where homeless New Yorkers could come together to discuss their frustrations, challenge the criminalization and demonization of homelessness, and empower the homeless as agents of political change. In 2003, the organization expanded and decided to hire its first staff member who had not personally experienced homelessness. Though reluctant to break their precedent, a panel of members agreed that Jason, who is currently the lead organizer, would be a positive addition to Open City. Today, there are a handful of staff members who perform administrative or organizing roles but have not directly experienced homelessness. The organization’s membership strictly consists of people who are currently
homeless or have been homeless. Moreover, at least 75% of the board of directors is homeless or formerly homeless and the organization strives to be a member-led organization, meaning that members make all decisions.

Organizational Details: Space and Structure

The office has since moved from Manhattan to the Bronx where it is currently located in a two-story house in the Bronx owned by a nearby church. When deciding on a location, Christina, who is now the executive director of the organization, was very conscious of the significance of the appearance of the building: she wanted it to feel like a home for people who do not have one, which is a point that will be discussed further below. The first floor contains a large meeting room, which is connected to a kitchen, bathroom, and two smaller rooms via a narrow hallway. The second floor has a similar layout, with a common area near the front of the building and a kitchen, bathroom, and three small offices plus a very small copy room along the hallway. The second floor feels much more cluttered because it is where members spend the majority of their time. There is also a mix of office materials, such as posters and pamphlets, and members’ personal belongings, such as bags, coats, and personal documents or letters scattered throughout. In addition, there is much more furniture in the second floor common room: there is a reception desk, a table in the center of the room, and tables along the back wall that hold computers and telephones. There is also a balcony, which staff and members use for smoke breaks or one-on-one meetings. The first floor is used primarily for the committee meetings. When visiting the Open City office, one can expect to hear members chatting about the campaigns they are working on, discussing their
opinions on current events, sharing funny anecdotes and laughing with one another, or singing along to the radio, which is normally tuned to WBLS 107.5 FM, an R&B station. Members seem to have fairly intimate relationships with one another, often referring to each other as brother or sister.

Over the time of its existence, the organization has managed to add over 1,000 homeless New Yorkers and allies to its computer database, which includes contact information of each person. The people in this database are notified whenever a major event is planned, however, it is common for the contact information to be out of date as people who are homeless might frequently change their mailing address or lose access to their phone or email for extended periods of time. A portion of these members and allies might show up to various events or protests that the organization holds around the city, but there is a core of about fifteen to twenty members who show up to the office consistently. Core members will also consistently attend events and perform outreach tasks outside of the office as well. The majority of these core members are Black, mostly middle-aged males; however, the core also includes whites, Latinos, women, and a range of ages from people in their twenties to people in their seventies. Additionally, one member frequently brings his young children to the office who may not participate in the political conversations that occur at Open City but certainly contribute a youthful energy to the office environment. These core members have a diversity of worldviews and opinions but all generally share a unified distaste with the city’s treatment of the homeless in the streets and in the shelters. It is this distaste that forms the foundation for the shared homeless identity described earlier.
An example of how this shared homeless identity works at Open City can be seen in Jerrod, who has been involved with Open City since 2002. He is a Black male in his early 40s who has been homeless for more than ten years. Despite his sustained homelessness, Jerrod is determined to find housing. He draws strength from his spiritual beliefs, which are based on his personal reading and interpretation of the Bible. His spiritual beliefs include strong beliefs on gender based on traditional gender roles, which are at odds with Open City’s goal of creating an organization in which any homeless or homeless New Yorker, regardless of gender identity, can participate. Though he does not shy away from stating these beliefs firmly, Jerrod has demonstrated a willingness to work with all of the members at Open City toward his personal goal of ending unfair policing of the homeless. Moreover, Jerrod’s sense of humor and laid-back demeanor has earned him much respect within the organization despite his conflicting opinions. His jokes as well as his smooth singing voice can almost always lighten the mood in the office, and while conflicts between members do occur, few if any have involved Jerrod. The diversity of perspectives and experiences within Open City, not to mention the broader homeless population, still creates many difficulties for an organization that is committed to being member-led. Though the homeless at large are disenfranchised community, there are voices within the homeless community that are privileged over others. Much in the way Fraser (1993) and Warner (2002) describe the relation between publics and counterpublics, these dynamics are present among the homeless, but members representing an array of viewpoints can
work together united by a shared homeless identity that is in opposition to constructions of the homeless as passive, voiceless, and inactive.

In the beginning of Open City’s history, the member’s main concerns were with police harassment of the homeless and negative images of the homeless in the media. Currently, the organization has a Civil Rights Committee and a Housing Committee, which each meet weekly to make decisions about their respective campaigns. On average, anywhere from ten to twenty people including core and non-core members might show up to the Civil Rights Committee meeting. The Housing Committee meetings usually attract more people and many of the core members on the Civil Rights Committee also participate in the Housing Committee, though the opposite is not always true. The Civil Rights Committee deals with many of the same issues the original members raised, mostly working against police harassment of the homeless by staging protests, holding press conferences, proposing new legislation, pursuing legal action, and educating the homeless about their civil rights. The Housing Committee is a newer committee that operates under the belief that the shelter system is not an adequate answer to homelessness and is working on a campaign to transform vacant buildings and lots into permanent, affordable housing for the homeless and low-income New Yorkers. Most recently, the focus of Open City’s staff and members has been on the Housing Committee, which just completed an extensive project counting vacant property and lots in all five boroughs of New York. The goal of the count was to bring attention to the fact that while people are forced to live in shelters or on the streets, much property remains vacant. This property, which is often privately owned and kept off the
market intentionally to maximize profits, could easily be transformed into permanent, affordable housing. Many members I spoke with described the ways in which this project changed the ways they understood the problems of homelessness, which is a point that will be addressed in further detail below.

Most of the core members regularly attend both or at least one of the weekly committee meetings. These committee meetings are usually co-facilitated by a staff organizer and a member. The first summer I volunteered with the organization, I worked very closely with the Civil Rights organizer and often sat in on these meetings, writing up the meeting notes on a large poster board at the front of the meeting room. The second summer that I worked at Open City, the Civil Rights organizer was no longer with the organization and no replacement had been found. One of my new responsibilities that summer was to co-facilitate the weekly Civil Rights meetings with a member. I would normally draft an agenda for the meeting either the day before or morning before the meeting with a member of the committee. Together, we would also try to think of an icebreaker question to start each meeting with. Before each meeting, I would also ask a member to purchase some snacks from one of the many nearby bodegas with the ten dollar budget the office manager supplied us with each week. The snacks usually consisted of a large bag of chips, bread, lunchmeat, and a large bottle of soda. Though they were intended for the very end of the meeting, members often began passing around the snacks during the meeting.

Meetings lasted about two hours and mostly focused on the progress of the Civil Rights campaigns and what steps the committee wanted to take next. We also
always allowed time in the beginning of each meeting for members to share what was called “new business.” This was meant to create a space for members to share articles they came across and found worth discussing, events they wanted to announce, or ideas for new campaigns. Members generally spoke for a much longer time than I did, but I would occasionally chime in to clarify statements various members made or direct the conversation back to the agenda when it veered off topic. There were certainly a handful of members, usually those who were involved the longest and usually male, which would spend much more time talking than others. Whenever I could, I tried to encourage quieter members to speak up and remind the group that allowing everyone to speak was a one of the fundamental qualities that Open City was committed to promoting. I, along with the co-facilitator of that week, would do this by allowing people to speak after they raised their hand. We would generally allow whoever raised their hand first to speak, but a member who spoke less was always given priority. However, there were several moments during meetings when the conversation would become particularly heated and people would start speaking over one another. When this would happen, there was often a potential for conflict. One specific example of this will be addressed in chapter four. At the end of each meeting, I distributed MetroCards with two fares, or $4.50, to all of the members who attended the meeting.

In addition to these two weekly meetings, Open City also holds occasional classes that teach members skills including technical skills, such as how to use a computer or video camera, as well as writing, speaking, and community organizing skills. Open City holds the classes with the intent in teaching members important
social activism skills, but some members also attend the classes in order to gain general employment skills. Video camera skills are especially emphasized for the purpose of filming events, documenting police interactions at these events, or even for members to document police harassment in their personal lives. The organization occasionally holds general membership meetings to acquaint new members, but the majority of activity focuses on the two weekly committee meetings and especially the Housing Committee as of late. Core members come to the office on days when no meetings are held to help out on various organizational tasks or to use office resources for personal use. Members who perform at least four hours of volunteer work for the organization are also given MetroCards and a meal.

On any given day, members engage in a variety of activities in the office. Some of the work that members do for Open City includes preparing materials for mass mailings, making phone calls to other members and allies, drafting letters to targeted politicians, or creating posters for a protest. Members might also make use of the Open City office space for a personal needs. For examples, a member might take a brief nap on one of the cushioned chairs in the corner of the second floor common room, use one of the five computers available to members to check Facebook or personal email accounts, make and receive personal calls on the office telephones, use available outlets to charge cell phones, take a shower, or use the kitchen to prepare a meal. Some members also use Open City’s office as their personal mailing address. When members finish an organizational task, such as preparing materials for a mass mailing, they often stick around the office for the rest
of the day to socialize. Additionally, Open City provides a meal from a nearby takeout restaurant (usually pizza, Chinese, or Caribbean food) to any member who commits at least four hours of volunteer work to the organization on a given day.

These actions are explained in part by necessity, as most of the members are currently homeless and rarely have access to spaces where they can safely nap, shower, make phone calls, socialize with other homeless people, receive a meal outside of a shelter or soup kitchen, or even charge their electronic devices. These actions can also be an expression of members’ sense of ownership of the office. They are a way for people who do not have a home to create a sense of home and ownership over a space by acting on private needs. These are the kind of actions that are strictly forbidden in public spaces and the ability for members to engage in these kinds of activities is one of the aspects of Open City members value most. Many of the core members commonly describe Open City as a family, a home, or refer to other members as brothers and sisters. Like Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle* described in the previous chapter, Open City meets members’ private needs and offers refuge from the hostile public gaze.

Beyond offering refuge, it offers members a chance to create new meanings of home and family. At Open City, members do not need to perform the docile identity of the deserving poor that Marcus (2006) describes. Moreover, the weekly committee meetings and classes allow members to reclaim political agency despite their erasure from both public space and the public sphere. In this sense, Open City acts also as Wodiczko’s *Poliscar*. The *Poliscar* subverts relations of power by reversing the surveying gaze. Open City is engaged in similar work in its effort to
challenge dominant discourse on homelessness by developing its own political
discourse on homelessness. The two committees that form Open City exemplify the
organization’s discourse on homelessness. The Civil Rights Committee organizes for
the right for homeless people to be in public space and the Housing Committee
fights for the affordable housing and recognizes housing as a human right. Together
these campaigns form a nuanced definition of the needs of the homeless as first and
foremost, recognition as citizens in public space, but more importantly, access to
permanent, affordable housing. In this sense, Open City can be seen as a heterotopia
that both affirms a homeless identity and provides an escape from repression
(Foucault, 1967). However, Open City affirms a specific homeless identity, which is
a point that will be explored further below. Moreover, though members can claim
ownership of their space and develop new identities and discourses, they still share
this space with staff members who possess different privileges and life experiences.

Staff members generally spend most of their time in their offices, but there is
constant interaction between staff and members during a typical day. When staff
members are present in the common room, members will usually include them in
the same conversations they have with one another. Rachel, the office manager, is
especially in close contact with members who often have many questions for her
about office policies or how to operate the computers, telephones, and copy
machine. Additionally, Rachel handles money for food and the distribution of
MetroCards. Organizers are often in and out of the common room to chat with
individual members, make campaign announcements, or ask for volunteers for a
campaign task. The atmosphere in the Open City office is usually lighthearted and
comfortable. When they are not busy with campaign tasks, staff and members alike joke with one another, sing along to the radio, and discuss current events or pop culture. Whenever someone in the organization has a birthday, Rachel assigns a member to pick up a birthday cake and card. On my last working with Open City, I received similar treatment and received a card with short messages from all of the members and staff that were present that day. As described earlier, the ability of members to develop a sense of ownership over the space is an essential component of Open City. In general, the presence of staff who do not share the experience of homelessness with members does not seem to impede this ability. However, there are moments when the role of the staff becomes more ambiguous as well as the dynamics between members and staff.

One fairly common example of this is when there are conflicts between members. During an interview I was conducting, a brief shouting match erupted between Darnell and Leon. Leon is a longtime member who is now in his sixties and has been street homeless for the past couple of years. For many years Leon has looked to Malcolm X for inspiration and I have observed Leon’s development of a militant political activism over the two summers I spent with the organization. The first summer I recall Leon listening intently at committee meetings but rarely speaking up. The following summer I noticed Leon now spoke often at meetings with a forceful, dramatic tone. Darnell is another longtime member though he has been much less active in the organization as of recent due to struggles with finding a secure place to stay at night. He describes himself as “a bit slow” and distrusts most homeless service providers because he believes they might take advantage of his
situation. Leon was sitting at the center table in the second floor main room calling members and allies to inform them of a press conference Open City was planning. He became irritated with Darnell who was also sitting at the table but not working on any campaign activities. Leon asked Darnell somewhat aggressively to help him with his phone calls but Darnell perceived this as a challenge. During my interview with another member in one of the small offices, I heard Darnell shout and then slam on the table. I paused the interview to check on the commotion and saw Jerrod trying to speak with Leon as Darnell angrily made his way to the empty meeting room on the first floor. During the summers I worked at Open City, conflicts such as this one would arise every once in a while in the office or during committee meetings.

I spoke with Jason, the lead organizer, about this issue while I was working with the organization as well as during my interviews. Jason told me that Open City’s policy is to allow members to sort out the issues on their own terms. There are times when an organizer might need to intervene, but Jason emphasized working with other members in the process. For example, if a member pushes for an unpopular campaign tactic, Jason might ask another member to speak to him or her about the issue. On one hand this is a reflection of the organization’s commitment to having members control decisions as much as possible and on the other, it is a more effective when members hear criticism from other members. As Jason put it, “someone might not believe what white boy Jason says, but if they hear it from Richard (a leader of the Civil Rights Committee and member of the Board of Directors), they’re much more likely to listen.” Sometimes this strategy does not
resolve conflicts and members have ended up leaving the organization, a point that will be explored further below.

While Open City does not define itself as a service-providing organization, core members certainly value all of the resources and benefits they have access to through involvement with the organization. These resources include the tangible ones described earlier such as the computers, showers, MetroCards, and meals but also include less tangible benefits. Many members see the Open City office as a space in which they can develop a sense of home and family. I call this a sense of home and family because of the familial language members use to describe this feeling, but more accurately, Open City is a space with relative stability free of the harsh regulations of the public in which members can develop an identity that counters the passive, submissive one they must adopt in most settings. The bonds members describe as familial more accurately reference the trust that allows members to express themselves freely with one another. Additionally, the family is a familiar social unit for many, but the homeless are often estranged from their families (in the normative sense) as a result of their homelessness and as Smith (1992) describes, the family is an important scale at which one’s identity is formed. This might describe members’ identification of one another as family members. The combination of these tangible resources and intangible benefits is what keeps core members involved. Additionally, the safety, comfort, and familial bonds members feel in the office is essential to Open City’s project of creating a positive, homeless identity that expresses political dissent and simultaneously challenges negative images of the homeless.
Home, Family, and Empowerment

Often times the tangible resources Open City provides are what first encourage members to join. For example, Darnell, who was introduced earlier, mentioned the shower and MetroCards as one of the reason he first decided to come to the office in 2005. When asked how he first got involved, Darnell stated, “A friend told me, ‘hey, we can help get you whatever you need, housing. You can come to [Open City], take a shower.’ This is what I want, and I-I got what I want. The shower, they give you a MetroCard, they let you sit in a meeting. I saw that stuff is all good for me.” Access to showers is not something people who are street homeless take for granted. In fact, even if they did not mention using the showers at the Open City office explicitly, many members that I interviewed did mention the issue of hygiene as one of the major difficulties of homelessness. I arrived to the office one day to conduct interviews while a general membership meeting was just wrapping up. Carl, who is currently homeless and a very active member since about a year ago, was describing to the new members what the Open City office had to offer. Carl’s well-trimmed mustache, close-cropped haircut, and neat clothes could easily fool most people into believing he is housed. The tall, handsome middle-aged West Indian immigrant would look more appropriate in a business environment than in line for a soup kitchen to most. When speaking with the new members, Carl put a great deal of emphasis on the showers and additionally described other organizations around the city that addressed other hygiene issues, such as a free laundry service, a place to get free clothes, a place that offered free dental care, and a place for free haircuts.
For Carl and other members, hygiene is a source of personal pride and dignity. Douglas (1966) argues that the body is complex structure on which complex systems of social meaning are reproduced (138). Practicing good hygiene is a form of resisting the denial of personhood that comes with being homeless. However, practicing good hygiene might only make homelessness harder to detect rather than challenge dominant discourse on homelessness and hygiene. Even so, hygiene has real consequences for the homeless. In addition to the possible health risks, the lack of good hygiene can lead to disrespect or pose a threat to one’s self-regard. Speaking on his experiences of street homelessness, Darnell stated, “People just push me away because I smell and they don’t wanna be around smelly people. It makes me feel bad. I wish—I wish... I wish that I had what they had. Like a place called home, where they can go watch TV, they can go take a shower, they can cook. I wish I had that.” Hygienic activities are typically reserved for the home because they require not only the resources like a shower, but also privacy. Many shelters do have showers but residents may be discouraged to use them when they must shower in front of others or compete for a limited number of showers. The shower at Open City provides a sense of privacy contributing to the new constructions of home that members create. Moreover, the act of taking a shower is politicized because the issue of hygiene is directly related to constructions of homelessness described in Chapter One that emphasize individual deviant behaviors. The negative responses Darnell receives from people in public imply that Darnell’s lack of good hygiene is a result of his choice not to shower or more broadly, his choice to be homeless. The shower at Open City allows members to show that they would
engage in proper hygiene if only they had access to such resources in a non-
oppressive environment. Most importantly, the members of Open City have active
responsibility over their use of the shower and are not required to perform passive
identities that shelters and normative service-providers require.

Access to showers was not a major concern for Jerrod when he first got
involved with Open City. He stated more bluntly his reasons for first attending
weekly meetings: “Oh, well to be honest with you, the first interest was every
Wednesday the general membership meeting they would give you pizza and they
would give you tokens to get on the subway. And at that time, sleeping on the cold
floor at Penn Station was very hard, but the pizza and the tokens were the incentive.
So that is what kept me coming in the beginning. It was just the free food and
tokens that kept me coming for maybe the first three-four months.” Though he
reduces his initial interest to the food and tokens, he contrasts the food with the
description of the cold, hard floor at Penn Station in his response hinting at more
intangible positive feelings that could be found at Open City. Longtime members
like Darnell and Jerrod cited these more intangible feelings as reasons for becoming
committed members. Almost every member I interviewed talked about a sense of
community or family that they got out of Open City. Darnell even referred to Open
City as “a place for me to call home, where nobody bothers me.” Additionally, he
spoke about Open City as a family: “We the good family and then there’s the bad
family. And the good family will reach out to somebody that don’t have a family and
say, ‘hey, the doors are open for you.’ But the family—the bad family won’t.” Even if
he might occasionally fight with other members, Open City is a place where Darnell
is not pushed away or dismissed because of his hygiene, for example. He becomes visible in Open City and can express an alternative identity rather than blending into a landscape of urban decay. Darnell can trust Open City as “the good family” that will still recognize his personhood even if he might storm out of the office in anger after a shouting match with another member. He can express his anger or frustration without having to worry that this anger will threaten his access to Open City and can explore the shared identity Open City promotes of homeless New Yorkers as subjects of rights rather than recipients of services.

Other members also spoke of the sense of family or community Open City provides for them along with some other qualities. Cassandra, a Black middle-aged woman, was homeless almost twenty years ago when she was pregnant and raising her nine-year-old son. Whether her relationships with her children or the people at Open City, family is an extremely important concept to Cassandra. I had to pause for a moment during my interview with Cassandra when discussing the Housing Committee’s vacant property count. She began to cry when describing the anger and sadness she felt when seeing buildings that are vacant as mothers like her must raise their children in the street. Without access to a private space, raising family was an immensely difficult task for Cassandra, even while staying in a family shelter. Though she is no longer homeless, Cassandra describes Open City as a family that provides her with a source of empowerment: “Well for me it means family, it means friends, it means learning, achieving something to let people know that homeless people are not illiterate.” For Cassandra, Open City gives her a space to connect with other people who share similar life experiences and form trusting relationships.
With this trust, Cassandra and other members can explore identities that challenge the constructions of the homeless individual as illiterate and helpless.

For other members, Open City represented a platform for self-improvement as well as a way to address structural inequalities. This sentiment is summed up in a comment from Carl, who stated, “I come not just for the change for me, I have to look at the broader picture. Because it’s change for me, and then it’s change for the system. You know, because I have to change first before the system can change. You know, and I have to know what there is within the system that needs to be changed.” For Carl, Open City is a place to develop a critical understanding of homelessness, determine what changes can be made, and better himself in the process.

Members also cited the skills that could be learned from involvement with Open City. Once members feel comfortable at Open City, they often start to recognize their own agency. Cassandra and Darnell both mentioned how they valued the classes Open City provided, which taught them skills such as how to operate a video camera or participate in an interview with the media. These skills are often empowering for members who do not traditionally have access to this knowledge. For example, Cassandra said she has always been rather soft-spoken and could not ever imagine speaking to the media prior to her work with Open City. She now frequently represents Open City at public events, protests, or rallies as a media spokesperson. Jerrod expressed similar sentiments stating, “It was explained to me that Open City—they don’t provide services so that I can’t look for them to provide housing or to get off the street, but I could use them as somewhat of a platform to help myself out of this situation, and that proved to be true.” Though
Jerrod is still homeless, he has made use of the resources at Open City to conduct personal legal research and has been share and learn various survival tips for life on the street with other members, such as what restaurants give away free food at the end of the night, what parks to avoid, or how to deal with arrests.

One of the youngest members Tim exemplifies this idea of using Open City as a platform for learning and self-improvement. Tim is a Black male in his twenties who has been homeless on and off for the past three years. In all of my interactions with him, he has maintained an extremely upbeat personality. The very first time I met Tim I asked him how he was doing. He said very enthusiastically, “positive!” accompanied with a fist bump. Through his involvement with Open City, Tim was exposed to urban homesteading, or squatting. He felt so moved by the idea that he decided to write a book on the subject to serve as a sort of guidebook on homesteading. Tim was able to produce this guidebook by sharing ideas with other members and organizers and by using the computers at Open City for research and writing. For Tim, homesteading represents an opportunity to put “resources and energy back into the building, making it a home for yourself and your family.” It represents a “new beginning and the chance to start your life over again.” For someone who has been denied the opportunity to raise a family by the economic forces of the housing market, homesteading is an activity that addresses more than a need for shelter. Tim’s involvement in Open City has helped him develop a political consciousness of homelessness and has exposed him to alternative conceptions of the home and family. Additionally, Tim and several other members of Open City have become highly active in the Occupy Wall Street movement.
Provisions and Rights

Rita, who is introduced in more depth in the following chapter, believes that more homeless people would join the organization if it could provide more services. Many homeless New Yorkers only have the time and energy to engage in activities for basic survival. It is a constant process that does not allow for much room to participate in the political activities that Open City engages. Simply making the trip to the office may prove difficult for many homeless New Yorkers who must deal with shelter curfews, secure a place to sleep, or figure out a way to get a meal to name only a few. Rita believes that if Open City could address some of these issues, more people would be encouraged to participate. Rita’s thoughts are revealing of some of the fundamental issues an organization like Open City contends with. Homeless people do have a need for and right to receive such services but the institutions from where they can access such services do not allow them to consider the services as a right. In institutions like shelters, the homeless are only subjects of needs, not rights. It may be true that more people would come to the office if Open City could provide more services, but it is not clear what other implications this would have for the organization. On one hand, it might lose some of its political focus, but on the other, the organization already does provide services to some extent to many of its members.

Leon also shared Rita’s sentiments. Though he is often intense and serious, Leon also has a sense of humor and his own eccentricities. He described to me his constant struggle to find a place to sleep at night as he does not wish to enter the shelter system. Leon likes to call the place he finds for sleeping the “sunset place.”
By this he means that wherever he is when the sun sets, he will find a place to sleep. Leon also actively avoids identifying as homeless and prefers to call himself “undomicile” instead. He believes that Open City could be more effective if it provided more services in part because he contends with many of the difficulties of street life in his daily life. In his struggle to find a “sunset place,” he must take into consideration the safety of the surrounding area as well as considerations of the level of policing in prime/marginal or entertainment/refuse spaces (Snow and Anderson 1991; Höjdestrand 2009). This often requires a tricky balance of factors: sleeping in a public space makes one vulnerable to thieves but areas where thieves are discouraged to commit crime are generally the same areas in which homeless people are considered criminals as well. Still, Leon believes his options for finding a place to sleep in public space are far superior to the dangerous and dehumanizing conditions in the city’s shelters. For this reason, Leon sees potential for an organization like Open City to provide safe shelter while simultaneously pursuing its political agenda.

The question of whether Open City should (or already does) provide services raises some difficult issues. It cannot be denied that homeless people, including Leon and Rita, could benefit from receiving services. More homeless New Yorkers, who spend a great deal of energy and time figuring out where to get a meal or where to sleep at night, might be encouraged to come to the office if it could better address these needs. Most importantly, an organization that is led by the homeless might have the potential to eliminate some of the pressures to perform the identity of the deserving poor in order to provide necessary services in a less demeaning way.
However, Open City attempts to address homelessness as a systematic issue. The organization as a whole views many of homeless service providers as band-aid solutions that only respond to conditions of homelessness and never address the root causes. For example, as an organization, Open City opposes the shelter system because it believes that people should be given permanent housing in the numerous vacant buildings and properties around the city. The shelter system would be (and can be) made unnecessary if housing as a human right were prioritized over profits. If Open City then provided shelter, it might not be able to take this stance as strongly. Logistically, the organization would also have limits to how many people it could serve. This might create unwanted hierarchies in determining how to distribute the resources fairly. At the same time, the opinions of Rita and Leon are expressions of the harsh realities of homeless life, which make political action against the powers that determine one’s situation a luxury.

From Anger to Action

All of the reasons that core members stated for becoming actively involved with Open City highlight the most positive aspects of the organization. However, not all people who become involved with the organization gain the same benefits. For core members, reasons for visiting the office regularly seem to strike a balance between the short-term incentives, such as the food, MetroCards, access to resources, and the more intangible qualities, such as a sense of community, safe space, or place to develop a political consciousness. Though the organization does not define itself as a service-providing organization, it certainly provides resources to its members that challenge the group’s identification as a non-service-providing
organization. Unfortunately, this is not the case for all people who come to Open City. Many people have stopped coming only after a few meetings due to the organization’s failure to meet their expectations. When I was facilitating meetings for the Civil Right Committee, I recall several occasions when a person showed up to the meeting asking to see a lawyer. After explaining that Open City does not have a lawyer on staff, these visitors would often become flustered and leave immediately. Some longtime members have left permanently due to irreconcilable differences with other members or pressing personal matters. Jerrod once told me about an early member who struggled with substance abuse. He was extremely instrumental in some of the organization’s early campaigns but when he began to relapse, he became increasingly hostile to other members. He could no longer come to the office without getting into a serious altercation with someone until members came to the consensus that his involvement was no longer productive. He has not returned since. Finally, many people who Open City would hope to represent are simply unable to get to the office for a variety of reasons, including physical or mental barriers, lack or resources, or lack of time.

Members and staff at Open City are aware that while they are attempting to create political representation of the homeless, they cannot ever represent all homeless people. Speaking on this issue, Carl stated, “They are all not the same. They’re the same in that they’re human beings. But they are not the same in that they have different minds, different thinking. Some are not mentally capable of doing certain things, some are not physically capable of doing certain things.” Jason, the lead organizer of Open City, also recognizes that the organization can never
represent the voice of all homeless people since like the housed population, the homeless represent a diversity of perspectives. Jason noted that often times what drives someone to initially come to Open City is a sense of anger—anger at the inadequacies of the shelter system, anger at life on the streets, and in some cases, a misguided anger, for example, at a specific group of people based on racial, sexual, religious identities. When that anger is of the latter form, it can lead to confrontations with members of the organization who do represent a diversity of identities. Jason explained that people who come to the organization with these kind of views either take themselves out or learn to recognize a common goal in order to work with the group: “They either realize it’s not the organization for them and they take themselves out, or they realize like, I’m gonna shut the fuck up about this and you know, we’re gonna work together on this because the cause itself is really important and I don’t have to sleep with that gay person that I hate, but I don’t—they’re working on the same cause that I am.” In accordance with the founding philosophy of Open City, Jason believes it is his responsibility as an organizer to include anyone who is willing to participate and move them from anger to action.

However, the group will not bend to the hatred or bigotry of some individuals and Jason believes that a sort of self-selecting process occurs, which discourages these individuals from attending regularly. For example, during my outreach efforts I once met an older, white homeless man at a large soup kitchen in Manhattan. At some point during our conversation he expressed distrust of other Black homeless people and frustration with “illegals” entering the country. I
continued to describe the work Open City was engaging in, but after the man skimmed through some of the literature I had to offer, which features images of the mostly Black and Latino members of Open City, he quickly lost interest.

Returning to Carl’s comment earlier, the homeless population represents not only a diversity of perspectives, but a diversity of mental and physical ability as well. While I have been avoiding descriptions of the homeless that emphasize their mental health, it is an undeniable fact that the stressors of homeless life can either cause or agitate mental illness. People who have experienced much trauma in their life have been involved with Open City and in some cases, they have been very difficult to work within a group setting. Jason explained, “we’ve had people who are extremely difficult to deal with, who had been living on the streets for decades, who had mental health issues that had gone unattended to before then and that have only been made worse by living in such harsh conditions for so long, who would scream at people for making really minor offenses.” While Open City would like to be welcoming of all New Yorkers who are homeless or formerly homeless, there are times when this is impossible. During my time as a volunteer with the organization, one member who was particularly confrontational with many of the core members was asked to leave the office for an extended period of time, an incident that is discussed in the following chapter. Still, Jason believes that as an organizer, it is his job to support anyone who is willing to be a part of the organization: “It doesn’t matter what kind of shit you’re going through, how angry you are, if you’re here to do the work then we’re gonna make it possible for you to do the work.”
The same fundamental anger produced by one's experiences with homelessness seems to be a shared quality of all members and potential members at Open City. However, this anger might be directed at people represented in Open City's membership or be caused by the personal traumas of extended homelessness. Jason recognizes that Open City appeals to specific people: “I feel like there is a certain kind of homeless people that [Open City] represents and that’s a person who’s really angry about what’s going on and really believes that change can be made, things can be made better, and they wanna be a part of it and they can do it.” Jason’s views on Open City’s membership are hopeful, but they also describe what can be seen as a self-selecting process. The harsh realities of homeless life in addition to the multifaceted nature of the homeless population means that many homeless New Yorkers will not have the resources or the desire to get involved with Open City. Members and staff are aware of this, but believe that Open City still can be beneficial to all homeless people. Jason stated, “I’d like to think that we are fighting for something that all homeless people would want, namely not to be accused by the cops and that people should have housing, but it's sort of like, it's not really—people are different, everybody's really different.”

Learning the Language of Open City

My interview with Jason also highlighted the dynamics between some of the paid staff and the members. Jason, who is a white male in his early thirties, has never personally experienced homelessness and was the first staff member to be hired who has never been homeless. Jason, Rachel the office manager, and the current Housing Campaign organizer have all received a college education and have
not personally experienced homelessness. This gives rise to some questions concerning how these staff members support the member-led nature of the organization. Jason believes as an organizer, his role is to always support the momentum and direction of the campaign members decide on while also encouraging people to go beyond their comfort zones and suggest creative ideas for actions that support the goals of the campaign. In other words, members identify the major issues and organizers determine ways that might help achieve the goals of the members. This dynamic can become more complicated when new members bring conflicting ideas to the table. In general, Jason feels there is usually consensus on the direction of the work, but he stated, “sometime as an organizer you are put in sort of a tough position of having to say this is what we’re doing because this what your folks have said, and sometimes that can be perceived as you dictating the work.” From my experiences working with the Civil Right Committee, there were several moments when a member would suggest an idea or strategy for the campaign that I believed would be ineffective. For example, members were often concerned with spreading the word of Open City. One member enthusiastically suggested using funds to purchase full-page advertisements in the New York Times and other newspapers. Knowing that the organization did not have the funds to even consider this option, I tried to solicit other ideas, but the member who suggested the advertising idea grew visibly flustered.

Most members expressed that Open City did represent the issues they believed in and felt that they contributed to these campaigns. Many of the members’ responses to various questions about homelessness mirrored the language of Open
City’s campaigns and literature. When I asked members to describe some of their experiences with homelessness, many of them spoke about issues that Open City is currently working on using much of the same language that Open City uses. For example, one of the most recent campaigns the Civil Rights Committee is working on deals with advocating for sleep as a human right. The Civil Rights Committee reports that the NYPD aggressively wakes up homeless people who sleep in public spaces, especially on trains and at train stations, because they refuse to enter the shelter system and have no other options. According to Open City, these actions result in sleep deprivation, which is defined as torture by most human rights advocacy groups. When speaking on their own experiences of sleeping in public spaces, members often cited the same argument that sleep is a human right and the NYPD’s policies toward sleeping homeless people amounts to torture. A stronger example of this can be found in members’ discussions of vacant property, which is a major concern of Open City’s Housing Committee. Members often described their disgust with seeing buildings sit empty, as they must remain on the streets or in hostile shelters.

The similarity in language between the goals of Open City’s campaigns and members’ descriptions of homeless life could be a testament to the organization’s success at organizing around the issues that matter most to its members. On the other hand, one could argue that members are simply parroting the talking points of Open City’s campaigns, which may or may not have been determined by them. It is certainly true, for example, that the homeless do face great difficulties when trying to find a place to sleep. Tim, who spent a period of time sleeping in Penn Station,
described a very tenuous sleep schedule and the vigilance required for sleeping in the prime or marginal spaces described by Snow and Anderson (1991): “Whenever I fell asleep you know, I was so conscious of my surroundings a lot a times, you know, I would just try to get up and walk it off or get some coffee if I see them [the police] coming, I just try to fix myself up...I would get a couple winks a sleep but I would make sure I leave my—one of my comrades told me, just leave your receipt and your coffee cup on the table so that way they could see that you are a paying customer.” Tim either had to move from one place to the next as police officers approached or devise ways to pose as someone who more properly used the space (a “paying customer”). Tim’s experience confirms the requirement of constant performance that Wright (1997) describes. While the position that the NYPD is torturing the homeless could be seen as a radical one, based off of Tim’s experiences, it is easy to see that many people who have had to sleep in such places might come to a similar conclusion on their own. In the case of vacant property, however, the connection is not seen as easily. Vacant property was not necessarily something Cassandra thought about before her involvement with Open City: “I never really thought about it until we started doing this vacant count, and I would walk around my neighborhood and I knew that the buildings had been there for years but then it just had a different meaning to me knowing that so many people are in the street.” This might support the argument that the goals of Open City are not entirely member-generated, but Cassandra does genuinely support the work of the Housing Committee. In fact, she has become an extremely important part of the Housing Committee, often speaking at press conferences or other events where media is
present. Though Cassandra may not have had the same understanding of vacant property before being involved with Open City, the organization’s position was in agreement with her recognition of inequality and anger at the inadequacies of the city’s response to homelessness.

A shared familiarity of Open City’s work may also explain the similarity of members’ discourse with campaign literature and talking points. Every member I interviewed knew me pretty well from the two consecutive summers I spent volunteering at Open City and knew that I was fairly intimate with the various campaigns of Open City. Long before my interviews, I have had many conversations about the different campaign Open City works on with almost every member I interviewed. What one might identify as talking points could instead be a shorthand for describing very complex viewpoints or often-traumatic experiences. Fraser (1993) argues that one benefit of subaltern counterpublics is their ability to create counter discourses. In other words, when people of a specific subordinated group are able to discuss with one another their shared experiences, they can develop a language to name these experiences. Though they may be silenced in the dominant public, the discourse they developed may eventually impact dominant discourse and bring visibility to their unique experience. Open City’s development of a language to describe the difficulties the homeless face when finding sleep as torture and an issue of human rights can map onto this model. However, the fact that organizers, who do not necessarily share the experience of homelessness, played a major role in developing this model problematizes Open City’s position as a counterpublic and brings into question the role of allies in Fraser’s (1993) model of counterpublics.
My argument thus far suggests that perhaps Fraser's (1993) model is inadequate for describing the work of Open City. As I have argued, the space of the office itself and the resources available to members is crucial to the organization's success. At Open City, members can access resources like a shower, a quiet place to nap, computers, telephones, and many more. They are not receiving these provisions, but are actively using them. This distinction is crucial because many members do rely on the resources they access at Open City. Access to these kinds of resources in other spaces is completely depoliticized. To receive the services at a shelter, for example, one must submit to the rules, guidelines, and better judgment of that shelter. At Open City, members can access the resources they need without having to perform a demeaning identity. This allows for the creation of a space where the political organizing that Open City engages in can occur. Moreover, it politicizes the use of these resources. I return to the organizations structure, which includes a Civil Rights Committee and a Housing Committee, to clarify this dynamic. The Civil Rights Committee fights for the right of homeless people to be in public space and to access the same rights that the housed population has while the Housing Committee demands permanent, affordable housing for the homeless, not shelters. The Housing Committee also calls attention to why homeless people would demand rights to be in public spaces in the first place: they have no other place to live until permanent, affordable housing is available. Through the work of both committees, Open City demands political representation of the homeless while articulating the need for provisions that current service-providers do not meet.
Chapter Four: Internal Challenges at Open City

Open City has faced plenty of difficulties navigating the dynamics of being a member-led, non-service providing organization that organizes the homeless to be a voice of change. The previous chapter addresses some of the ways these dynamics play out in the structure and membership of the organization itself. The current chapter focuses on the ways that these dynamics, namely the different experiences of space between members and organizers, affect the actual activism work that Open City engages. The previous chapter also offers a discussion on the barriers that prevent some homeless New Yorkers from participating in Open City. This chapter will consider the factors that might silence members within the organization through the lens of gender dynamics at Open City. Open City represents a multifaceted population of homeless New Yorkers and while the organization creates a shared homeless identity, as argued in Chapter Three, not all homeless people are included in this identity. Gender is the most salient lens through which to interpret some of the challenges Open City faces in creating an inclusive space for its members and potential participants.

I will begin with a brief story of when I accompanied members of the Civil Rights Committee to a meeting outside of the office. As part of its ongoing campaign against police harassment, the Civil Rights Committee drafted a piece of legislation that would redefine disorderly conduct in the penal code and put limitations on the use of the charge. The committee had previously conducted a survey with homeless New Yorkers on their experiences with the charge based on the beliefs of members that this charge was commonly used against the homeless on dubious grounds. For
example, Cassandra was charged with disorderly conduct in 2008 though she believes she was not doing anything illegal at the time. She was walking through a park when she noticed an empty liquor bottle on the ground. Aware that many children played in this neighborhood park, Cassandra decided to pick up the bottle and throw it in the trash. Two police officers from down the block approached her as she threw the bottle away and asked her if she had been drinking. Finding the accusation absurd, she laughed and said she was only throwing the already empty bottle in the trash. For unclear reasons, the officers charged her with disorderly conduct. When she was unable to produce a valid form of photo identification (the officers refused to recognize her Electronic Benefits Transfer card, which includes a photo but no address, as valid), the officers took her to the precinct so they could properly identify her. Cassandra was detained over night and never given the opportunity to speak with a lawyer. This was the first time in her life that Cassandra had been arrested. The next day she went before a judge who dismissed the charge immediately. The committee's survey suggested that this was not an isolated experience and in fact, commonplace for many homeless New Yorkers. Worse yet, some respondents were not so lucky to have their charges dismissed.

The legislation, which was drafted by a few members of the committee, edited by myself and other organizers, and agreed upon by the entire committee, sought to define the disorderly conduct statute more clearly. The committee believed that the vague nature of disorderly conduct allowed officers to abuse the statute in the way they had with Cassandra. The committee decided to present the draft to a state assembly member who was an ally of the organization and had a
record of supporting police reform. Building off of Open City’s relationship with the assembly member, I was able to schedule a meeting to discuss the bill. In the weeks leading up to the bill, I met with members of the committee to prepare for the meeting, review the major points of the legislation, and specify our demands. The committee decided to have Cassandra, Carl, Janessa, Roy, and myself represent the organization at the meeting. All of these members had been highly invested in this particular campaign up to this point. Each one of them had been charged with disorderly conduct in the past. I paid careful attention to the logistics of getting all of the members to the meeting on time—the trip to the assembly member’s Brooklyn office required at least an hour train ride from Open City’s Bronx office and I wanted to make sure we arrived on time. Roy, who was living at various friends places or on the streets of Brooklyn at the time, already had an appointment downtown and decided he would meet us in Brooklyn rather than travel all the way up to the Bronx only to head back down.

On the morning of the day of the meeting, I met with the Cassandra, Carl, and Janessa in the office to prepare one last time. The three members left their belongings in the office and we made our way to Brooklyn with plenty of time for delays. We arrived at the office where we met Roy with about five minutes to spare. Roy had been waiting outside in the hot sun for about twenty minutes. He had his large backpack that he carried essential belongings in such as a change of clothes, important documents and hygiene products. As we entered the building that housed the assembly member’s office, a security guard, a middle-aged African American male with long dreadlocks, immediately greeted us and directed us to a
metal detector. I realized that I did not take into account the fact that the assembly member’s office was located in a state building, which required such security. I, along with the three members who were able to leave their belongings at the office, made it through the checkpoint easily. Roy on the other hand, was held up at the checkpoint for almost fifteen minutes. The guard searched Roy’s large bag, which was tightly packed and nearly splitting at the seams. As he searched the bag, another guard asked Roy to step through the metal detector. First, his belt set off the detector. On a second attempt, some loose change in his pocket set it off. Finally, he made it through but still had to wait on his bag. The other members waited anxiously as we were now almost ten minutes late to the meeting. Roy quickly reorganized the contents of his bag. It required a very specific arrangement to fit all of his belongings neatly into the bag. Roy was visibly irritated when he finally was able to rejoin the rest of the group past the checkpoint. As we waited for the elevator and then made our way up to the assembly member’s floor, Roy muttered insults against the “crazy dread-head guard” who had it out for him. The other members remained mostly silent, sensing Roy’s fairly obvious embarrassment from the invasive search and for causing the group to be late to an important meeting.

Despite my careful planning, I did not foresee this issue because of my experiences and expectations of public spaces, which differed from the members I was accompanying. It did not even occur to me that the state building might have a security checkpoint, and moreover, that a security checkpoint could pose a problem. We had a scheduled meeting with the assembly member yet we nearly missed it
because of the difficulty Roy faced getting through security. This was a difficulty that I took for granted, as I never had to carry all of my personal belongings with me at all times. The humiliating experience Roy had with security creates a barrier for other homeless New Yorkers who wish to access the state building in order to speak with elected officials. These are officials that in theory represent a broad constituency that includes the homeless, but the homeless experience the space in a way that makes the building hostile or inaccessible. Despite having a meeting scheduled in advance with a politician who was an ally of the organization, accessing the state building produced a humiliating experience for Roy.

Roy’s experiences with the security also parallel the experiences of other Open City members who attempted to attend a City Council hearing held by the Housing & Buildings committee. A handful of members were trying to attend a public hearing in September of 2010 on a bill that the organization first drafted in 2006 and had been pressuring City Council to pass it since then. Responding to the idea that there is a shortage of housing, the bill would require the city to take an annual census on vacant property. Open City has managed to gain support from many City Council members; however, the chair of the Housing & Buildings committee is in the minority that opposes the bill. A handful of members went to the morning hearing but were denied access to the hearing room and put into an overfill room. After a confrontation with the Sergeant of Arms, one of the members managed to make it into the main hearing room where he placed Open City flyers with information about the bill on a table before being escorted out of the room by security. The chair of the Housing & Buildings committee was so angry at what he
perceived as a disruptive action that he ended the hearing. That same afternoon, a separate group of members had a scheduled meeting with the chair, but when they arrived at 250 Broadway, security informed them that Open City was banned from the City Council for the day. After consulting with a lawyer from the NYCLU who was a friend of the organization, Open City learned that the Housing & Buildings chair illegally attempted to have Open City permanently banned from City Council. Ironically, the member who “disrupted” the morning hearing was protesting his exclusion from the public hearing. When he finally managed to enter the hearing room, he, along with the rest of the organization, ended up being banned from the City Council. His actions were construed as disruptive and even criminal, warranting a permanent ban on Open City. However, the action exposed the absurdities of the City Council’s claim that its hearing was open to the public. Someone who is perceived as homeless is not recognized as a legitimate member of the public who the hearing is open to, and a homeless person is easily dismissed as disruptive or criminal after challenging the City Council.

**Gender, Homelessness, and the Public Sphere**

Thus far I have mostly discussed the experiences of the homeless in public spaces and the implications it has on their political agency. The regulation that the homeless face is not limited to public spaces, however, and I have neglected to bring issues of gender into my discussion of homelessness up to this point. The shelter system is an appropriate starting point for this discussion. Most of the members at Open City prefer not to stay in shelters if they can, but many members do have past experience with the shelter system. In general, members avoid shelters because of
the strict regulations and the dehumanizing effects produced by such regulation. The members that do currently reside in shelters are almost all female and the reasons for this are explained below. Often times, the performance of the deserving poor identity described in Chapter One is gendered in spaces like the shelter system and the problematic gender constructions that exist in these spaces are not limited to these spaces. They have an effect on the political activities that Open City practices. Though most of the members at Open City are men, women have taken on roles of leadership in the organization. Their needs as homeless women are different from those of homeless men at times and they must grapple with gender dynamics both in the shelter system and in Open City. Often times these gender identities interact with racial identities, however, I focus specifically on gender identities here. My reason for doing so is because I want to focus on the internal dynamics of Open City. Most of the members share a similar racial identity as either Black or Latino. Race is certainly a topic of discussion at Open City, particularly in the Civil Rights Committee where conversations about police harassment of the homeless are tied to broader patterns of abuse against poor communities of color. These conversations are often about the racial politics outside of Open City. This is not to say that these racial politics do not affect the internal dynamics at Open City, but because the members share a somewhat unified racial identity, gender seems to be the most salient lens through which to examine

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4 The only male I spoke with who currently resides in a shelter was Martin. Martin is middle-aged Latino man who has been homeless off and on since the late 1980s. Throughout his time being homeless, he has been in and out of several different shelters and has struggled with substance abuse. He currently stays at a men's shelter for former heroin users and unlike other members living in shelters, expressed overall satisfaction with the shelter.
the internal dynamics at Open City. Moreover, gender dynamics seem to have a larger effect on who is able to speak out or act in certain ways at Open City than race does.

Another reason I choose to analyze gender politics at Open City is because there are few spaces where homeless men and women interact with one another. Most shelter systems are segregated by gender, often as a result of the very real dangers of domestic violence, and as will be elaborated on below, few homeless women live on the streets while homeless men are more likely to live on the streets than women. Family shelters are one of the few spaces where homeless men and women live together, but there are strict regulations for who can access these shelters. By this I mean that generally only married partners can live together in a family shelter. Homeless men and women might interact in soup kitchens or pantries, but most social interactions in these spaces are brief as soup kitchens (especially high volume ones) usually try to move clients through as quickly as possible. Open City then is one of few spaces where social interactions between homeless men and women do take place.

Two women that I interviewed currently reside in a shelter. Gender identity and cultural expectations of gender are often important factors in one's use of the shelter system. A homeless woman who lives on the street must navigate public spaces much more carefully than a homeless man. She might be at a higher risk of sexual violence, for example. Passaro (1996) argues that homeless women have a much easier time accessing homeless services because of cultural beliefs on gender differences. Homeless men have an easier time navigating street life in part because
they are invisible in the public sphere. This is because “homeless men are failed men, in traditional gender terms, because they are dependent and unable to support themselves” (Passaro 1996: 2). Their masculine identity, and often their racial identity as well, deems them unworthy of assistance and especially responsible for their condition. Passaro (1996) argues, “Homeless women, on the other hand, are seen as the apotheosis of Woman-dependent, vulnerable, frightened. They benefit from traditional gender ideologies because their individual failures are not compounded by gender failure—a dependent, needy woman, after all, is no challenge to dominant beliefs” (2). As a result, women living on the street are much more visible to city services than men. Moreover, dominant beliefs on gender construct homeless women as members of the “deserving poor,” who are appropriate recipients of service since they cannot help themselves in the way men are expected to.

This in addition to the safety issues mentioned earlier might explain why fewer women are found among the street homeless population. However, this does not mean that homeless women experience fewer difficulties than homeless men. In fact, Passaro (1996) argues that homeless women must perform this domesticated identity as a needy, dependent woman in order to receive services more easily (61). The irony is that domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness for women. The shelter system supposedly protects women from the dangers of street life but it fails to protect women from domestic violence because it often reinforces the performance of a passive, domesticated identity. Women who must perform this identity are taught to be passive subjects and are discouraged to challenge the
issues that make the home an unsafe place for them. Passaro (1996) writes, "the real
dangers lie not in the streets but in the domesticating actions of gender and race, the
ways in which from birth forward we begin classifying selves and others according
to putative biology" (62). The two women that I interviewed who reside in shelters
cited safety reasons for living in the shelter rather than on the streets. They both
expressed frustrations with the shelter, particularly over the strict curfews and
disappointment with case managers’ abilities to secure housing for them. Despite
their issues with the shelter system, they both seemed to have managed to carve out
a relatively stable position in otherwise chaotic environment.

Jamie has been living in a shelter near the Open City office in the Bronx since
the fall of 2009 when she lost her housing. Though Jamie stays in a shelter, she does
not perform the passive, domesticated gender identity that Passaro (1996)
describes. She grew up in Brooklyn in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood and
still proudly identifies as a “Brooklyn gal” even though she is currently residing in
the Bronx. Jamie takes pride in her grandfather who was a Garveyite and owner of
his own small business as well as both of her parents who were active union
members. Every Sunday when she is able to, she makes the long commute from the
shelter to her family Church in Bed-Stuy. Afterwards, she visits with friends and
family in the area and shops for groceries at her favorite stores. Jamie worked for
the Postal Service until she was laid off in 2009. Meanwhile, she was in and out of
court with her landlady who had taken out two subprime mortgages on the home
Jamie was living in. Her landlady had not made payment on the mortgages in over
two years and had moved out to another home. One morning the processor rang the
doorbell of Jamie’s first floor apartment, believing the landlady lived there, and
delivered her a foreclosure notice. The house that she was renting her apartment in
was foreclosed on and Jamie now found herself without a place to go. Most of her
friends and family were already doubled up and she did not want to be an added
burden. Not seeing life on the street as a viable option, Jamie decided to enter the
shelter system. She has been moved around from various shelters but has been
staying at a shelter in the Bronx since 2010.

Jamie’s shelter has a cafeteria, a four-floor dormitory that holds 72 women
with two full bathrooms on each floor, and small common area that has a television
and computer. Jamie currently shares a room with one roommate, but in the past
had two roommates. Jamie describes the cafeteria food as “not sufficient,” but there
are small refrigerators in each room that residents may use. Residents may use the
computer in the common room to search for jobs but use is limited to fifteen-minute
sessions, which Jamie says, “is not enough time to fill out an online job application.”
At Jamie’s shelter, residents must be out of the dorm by 9:00 am. Accessing the
showers is one of the hardest parts about meeting this requirement as 18 women
share the two bathrooms on each floor. Residents are not allowed to return to their
dorms until 5:00 pm and are encouraged to search for jobs during the times they are
restricted from the dorms. According to Jamie, most people in her shelter do in fact
have jobs but these jobs do not pay a high enough salary to afford housing in the
city. For example, many residents work various service sector jobs that only pay
minimum wage. Some women, on the other hand, spend most of their time during
the day in the common area. Residents must return to the shelter to check in by
10:00 pm. The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) requires each shelter to report how many beds are available each night and if a resident does not check in before 10:00 pm, the shelter will report her bed as available. The resident then must wait (until 1:00 am in extreme cases) before she can see if her bed is still available. If it is not, she is transferred to another shelter, which in some cases might be in a separate borough. Often times, women who miss the curfew will sleep on the cafeteria tables until they find out about the status of their bed. Residents must provide documentation of appointments, meetings, or jobs that require them to return later in order to return past the curfew. Each resident is assigned a case manager whose job it is to assist in finding permanent housing and connect clients to various homeless service providers. Jamie has little confidence in the case managers’ abilities as she has yet to find housing and has seen many residents leave the shelter only to return later. Despite her problems with the shelter, Jamie feels relatively stable in the shelter because she has earned some respect from the staff: “I don’t give them problems, so they don’t really give me problems.”

In June of 2010 Jamie slipped on the stairs of the shelter and sustained a leg injury that limited her mobility. It was during this time when she had to wear a cast on her leg that she first heard about Open City. A friend who also stayed at the shelter told Jamie that the organization held a weekly housing meeting and also had contact information with various legal service providers. At the time, Jamie was considering legal actions against the shelter in regards to her injury. She learned that the organization did not really work on shelter issues but was interested in the housing meeting nonetheless. Her family had once owned property in Bed-Stuy but
she now saw the cost of property in her neighborhood increase to unaffordable prices. As mentioned previously, Jamie also knew that most of the residents in her shelter worked but still could not afford to pay rent in any part of the city with the salary that they earned. The Housing Committee’s analysis of the housing situation in New York resonated with her view and she started coming to the meetings regularly.

Jamie has since been heavily invested in the Housing Committee, regularly speaks to the press at committee actions or events, and has earned the title of Housing Campaign Leader. Her role as a leader with Open City challenges the traditional gender roles that Passaro (1996) describes even though she still participates in the shelter system. For example, Jamie is a very vocal critic of the city’s handling of the homeless and can speak eloquently and compassionately on the need for affordable housing drawing on her personal experience with foreclosure. In addition to regularly speaking to the press or at Open City events, she is one of the most vocal members during Housing Committee meetings. Through her actions, Jamie displays a sense of ownership of the Open City office space. For example, Jamie almost always exclusively uses the computer that is located adjacent to the receptionist’s desk in the office and is almost always participating in the casual conversations that occur in the office at any given moment. However, Jamie described her relationship with staff at her shelter as, “they don’t bother me; I don’t bother them,” implying that in addition to not causing problems, she would likely not express concerns she had with the shelter or expect the shelter to address them. Not bothering the order of things means remaining
silent, even when conditions may be substandard and Jamie has often expressed at
Open City her dissatisfaction with the conditions of her shelter. Open City then
provides Jamie and other homeless women a space for the expression of an identity
that challenges feminized notions of the “deserving poor.” This still is
problematicized by the fact that the majority of members at Open City are men, which
will be explored below after an introduction to another prominent female member
of the organization.

Rita, a former schoolteacher, also resides in a shelter though she described a
much stricter environment at her shelter than at Jamie’s. At Rita’s shelter, clients
must be out of their dorm by 7:00 am. Rita wakes up every morning at 3:00 am in
order to take a shower. She will then go back to sleep until she must leave her room
at 7:00 am. This is because the showers are so crowded in the hours closer to 7:00
am and they offer very little in the way of privacy. More than anything, Rita hates
the lack of privacy in the showers. Like Jamie’s shelter, Rita’s shelter also has a
10:00 pm curfew. According to Rita, people lose their beds quite frequently for
missing the curfew. In general, Rita feels that the staff at her shelter treats the
residents poorly. When a person loses their bed, they will often have to wait until at
least 1:00 am, even though their bed is still vacant. Rita believes these policies are
in place only to belittle the residents: “They feel that we are not human beings.
Their treatment is very belittling and I find that their purpose is to keep you in the
shelter.” Her shelter is not run by the city but is privately run by Volunteers for
America. Rita believes that the money the shelter receives to operate is
disproportionate to the conditions in the shelter. She believes this motivates the
shelter to keep more clients in the shelter rather than move them into permanent housing. Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that she distrusts the shelter staff and does not appreciate the dehumanizing conditions of shelter life. Like Jamie, Open City provides a space for Rita to explore an identity that challenges the passive one she must adopt in the shelter. In the shelter, Rita feels she cannot voice her concerns with shelter staff and must instead make compromises to her own sleeping schedule to meet needs for personal privacy in the showers, for example. Rita is able to express a much different identity at Open City. After attending a few meetings, she discovered a new sense of power and pride in a community she felt a part of: “I realized that the poor really have the power and if we can just band together, we could shut the system down!”

Both Jamie and Rita expressed frustrations with the shelter system and Passaro’s (1996) argument seems applicable to these frustrations—the highly regimented nature of shelter life demands a passive, domesticated subject who does not complain or challenge the operations of the shelter. However, both women have also become outspoken leaders or at least committed members of Open City. The organization seems to offer the two women a space to assert an identity that challenges the one that the shelter imposes on them. At Open City, Jamie and Rita can engage in political debates, develop their own political beliefs, openly express their frustrations with their shelters and homelessness in general, and plan political actions to address these frustrations. In addition, both women feel comfortable using the resources at Open City that all members enjoy. For example, after being laid off from her job with the Postal Service, Jamie has been determined to learn
computer skills in order to find a new job. She regularly uses the Open City computers to sharpen these skills and has attended several classes offered by Open City that teach various computer skills. These are all behaviors that challenge traditional constructions of gender, which often exclude women in general from the public sphere, but they have particular implications for homeless women like Rita and Jamie. By engaging in the activities at Open City, the two women are developing an identity that could possibly threaten their ability to receive services. Though both women have an extreme distrust of the shelter system, it is one of few available options with the potential to provide a path to housing. Even if their shelters are not themselves free of violence (Rita has been assaulted by another client in her shelter), they do, if inadequately, protect Jamie and Rita from some of the real dangers of life on the street like sexual assault or the weather. By participating in Open City, Rita and Jamie are able to develop an identity that challenges the institutions they receive services from, but they also risk the potential of losing these services. Even if they believe these services to be inadequate, Rita and Jamie’s participation comes with risks.

While Open City offers a space for Jamie and Rita to express their identity more freely, it is not completely free of problematic constructions of gender. Many members, including Jamie and Rita, speak of Open City as a “home for people who do not have one,” and the home, after all, is often where traditional gender roles are first learned. Moreover, though Jamie especially has earned respect in the organization as a Housing Campaign leader, the majority of members are still men.

For a feminist critique of the liberal political tradition, see Iris Marion Young (2000) Inclusion and Democracy.
Some of these men bring with them their occasionally problematic beliefs on gender. One example can be found in Jerrod who was introduced in the previous chapter. Jerrod specifically identifies as a “former volunteer and friend” of the organization rather than a member because he claims his spiritual beliefs do not permit him to be in an organization led by a woman and though the organization does not necessarily have a single leader, the executive director is a woman. If Passaro (1996) is correct in asserting that homeless men are emasculated and constructed as failed men, perhaps Open City also serves as a space for homeless men to establish their own masculine identity. Since homeless men are made invisible in most spaces, Open City is perhaps the only space where they can reassert their male authority. Often times, homeless men are segregated from homeless women, who are placed in separate shelters and perhaps receive meals from these shelters rather than in the pantries and soup kitchens that men frequent. It is possible then that the sense of “home” that Open City provides to male members comes from the fact that it allows them to reestablish their masculine identity, which is erased by homelessness. This dynamic can create tensions between the male and female members who are each developing expressions of gender identities that while empowering for the individuals who are performing them, may be at odds with one another.

The following example from my experiences facilitating Civil Rights Committee meetings illustrates how these gender dynamics play out in complex ways at Open City. One member, Janessa, was becoming increasingly confrontational with the other members, mostly men, in the committee. Janessa, a
middle-aged Latina American, has been homeless since the late ’80s and has been involved with homeless activism since then. She was even a participant of the Tompkins Square Park Tent City that was mentioned in previous chapters. Janessa never hesitated to speak her mind or confront people in the organization that she had a problem with. She was also a very active member of the Civil Rights campaign and consistently attended protests or rallies that the committee organized. Often times she would disagree with other people in the committee on how to move forward with the campaign. She became increasingly vocal about her position and at times, would speak over other members. Many of the members believed her behaviors were becoming increasingly disruptive and responded with rather apparent hostility towards her. She became more and more alienated by the other members, mostly men, and would often leave meetings after long shouting matches as an expression of her frustration. It was true that Janessa was being very disruptive of meetings and making it extremely difficult to hold weekly meetings, but it was also true that the other members became more dismissive of what she had to say, effectively silencing her despite her shouting outbursts. As one of the most outspoken women on the committee, it is likely that the other men on the committee more easily dismissed her position because of her gender. Unfortunately, these complex gender issues were never fully addressed and Janessa eventually stopped attending meetings and coming to the office entirely.

Despite this incident, Open City still includes many outspoken women such as Jamie or Rita who have gained a great deal of respect from other members in the organization. As an organization, Open City has made efforts to address some of
these internal gender dynamics. For example, organizers and members created a women’s subcommittee to establish roles of leadership for some of the female members. Open City as an organization at the very least acknowledges the ways in which problematic constructions of gender might silence some members in the organization. However, the organization is not foolproof against the incidents like the one involving Janessa described above. Moreover, while the organization strives to address these issues, individual members continue to bring with them an array of perspectives, which may be at odds with one another. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how counterpublics work. When reading Fraser’s (1993) model of a counterpublic, it is easy to imagine a monolithic community of people who share a particular identity. In fact, the same dynamics of the dominant public sphere that Fraser (1993) critiques exist in analogous forms within counterpublics. This is especially the case for a homeless counterpublic that includes people with a variety of life experiences and perspectives. While I have argued that Open City establishes a shared homeless identity, I want to avoid an overly optimistic evaluation of the organization by acknowledging these complex gender dynamics.
Conclusion

Open City does provide a space where homeless New Yorkers are able to express themselves in ways that they are not able to outside of the organization, which is essential to building a community that constantly challenges the ways homelessness is constructed. Members also have access to provisions they need in a way that does not require the performance of a demeaning identity. They also are actively responsible for their use of these resources rather than passive recipients of them. Members are able to relate over a shared homeless identity, but the space is not entirely free of the problematic constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and other identities that pose challenges to the work of Open City. On one hand, Open City can be thought of as a homeless counterpublic in the sense that it provides a space for homeless New Yorkers to develop and understand a homeless identity based on shared experiences of dehumanization and erasure from the public sphere. On the other hand, the homeless population is multifaceted and includes a diversity of people with different experiences and different viewpoints. This multifaceted nature is reflected in the membership of the organization itself yet Open City still does not represent the views of every homeless New Yorker. Paid staff members who may not have ever experienced homelessness themselves also play an important role in shaping the organization. However, these difficulties are not limited to an organization composed of homeless individuals and can be applied to any example of a counterpublic. Dynamics that silence certain voices still exist even within the models of counterpublics described by Fraser (1993) or Warner (2002). These are important insights to keep in mind when examining counterpublics.
Additionally, the services and resources that Open City provides to its members may challenge the organization's avoidance of identifying as a service provider, but they in fact play a crucial role in the work of understanding homeless individuals as subjects of rights who have needs for these provisions.

More importantly, Open City acts as much more than a counterpublic as defined by scholars such as Fraser (1993) or Warner (2002) for its members. It is not just a space for a disenfranchised group of people to reassert their position in the public sphere, but is also a place where homeless people can come to feel comfortable and momentarily escape the dehumanizing treatment that they experience outside of the organization. For some members, it provides a sense of community or home where they can socialize or express themselves more freely. Still for others, the political empowerment is the most important part of the organization. Members of Open City relate over a shared set of experiences, but also bring with them their own unique experiences, which provides them with a variety of meanings to take away from the organization. In order for the homeless to claim their position in the public sphere and their right to be in public space, they first need a space in which they can create an identity that challenges the representations of the homeless as passive and voiceless. This is essential for homeless individuals whose behaviors are strictly regulated in public spaces as well as in the spaces they traditionally receive services, as argued in Chapter One.

As I have argued throughout, the public sphere is inextricably linked to physical space, though no space in particular. Theories on the public sphere need to be more explicit about this spatial component and must question who is able to
perform what activities in which spaces and the implications these questions produce. Homelessness and the attempts of organizations like Open City to bring the homeless into the public sphere are an excellent place to examine this connection because the homeless are on the frontlines of the battles for political representation in public spaces and the public sphere. The work of Open City, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the Tompkins Square Park Tent City, and the artwork of Krzysztof Wodiczko all illustrate the ways in which public spaces, privately owned spaces, and any space in between can be transformed in the battle for the right to the city. However, the powers that protect the connection between property, rights, and the public sphere will not be easily defeated and when they pushback, it is the homeless who face the most severe consequences as they have no private space where they can seek refuge from police brutality or other oppressive measures in public spaces, as argued in Chapter Two.

As Open City has demonstrated through their activism, homelessness is a problem that could be solved if housing were respected as a human right rather than a commodity to sell and trade. The number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots in cities across the country are incongruous with the number of people forced to live in the shelter system or on the streets. Until permanent, affordable housing is established, homelessness will continue to exist. The homeless need to be respected as subjects of political rights who have a right to housing and a right to express their dissent. In the meantime, they have a real need for basic provisions that the housed population might take for granted like access to quality foods, showers, and basic shelter to name only a few. Shelters and other institutions that provide some of
these provisions to the homeless depoliticize the issue by only meeting needs and not allowing clients to consider their rights. Therefore, places like Open City are necessary to meet some of these needs while also connecting the needs to broader conversations about the rights of the homeless. Open City also needs to make this connection more explicit while service-providers need to politicize their clients by framing the services they provide as rights. Until permanent, affordable housing is available, service-providers need to afford clients greater responsibility over the distribution of services. Activism in public spaces like the Occupy Wall Street is useful tool in the battle for the right to the city that Mitchell (2003) describes or for the promotion of “insurgent citizenship” that Holston (2008) defines. However, this type of activism in public spaces needs to better address the risks involved for homeless participants, who are often on the frontlines of these battles.

I want to end with one final story of two members at Open City I have not introduced yet. During my first summer at Open City, Paul would regularly come to the office with his friend who he recruited Derrick. Both Paul and Derrick were middle-aged Black men who met each other at a food pantry they frequented. Paul loved to joke around in the office and would engage anyone who would listen in conversation. Derrick, on the other hand, was soft-spoken and instead of talking, tended to actively listen, perhaps contributing an affirmative “uh-huh,” or “that’s right,” accompanied with a nod. One day Derrick came into the office to help out with a campaign mailing. He was visibly upset but did not seem to want to talk about what was on his mind as he sat at the table in the common room along with me, Paul, and some other members. After some prodding, Paul was able to get
Derrick to explain that the police stopped him the previous night without any apparent reason. Moreover, the police searched through Derrick’s pockets, even though he was not under arrest. As core members of the Civil Rights Campaign, Derrick and Paul knew that this search was illegal. Paul asked Derrick, “did you tell ‘em, ‘I don’t consent to this illegal search?’” Ashamed, Derrick quietly shook his head no. Paul was clearly disappointed and continued his questioning, asking Derrick why he did not stand his ground or use the strategies that were constantly being talked about in the Civil Rights Committee. Finally, Derrick yelled, “Because I was scared, man! They got guns and batons and they’ll beat your ass if you talk back to them!”

This story serves as a reminder of the stakes involved in the type of activities members of Open City perform. Members of Open City do not engage in these activities to challenge abstract theories of the public sphere, but to resist the very real humiliation, harassment, and dehumanization they face in their daily lives. Sometimes they are not successful in these attempts because the risks involved include further humiliation and physical violence. Despite this, members of Open City and other homeless people whether collectively or individually continue to resist their erasure from public space and the public sphere as well as their denial of personhood.
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