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# On the Road and Down and Out: Unexpected Consequences of a Rhetorical Vision<sup>1</sup>

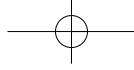
Phillip K. Tompkins

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When there is no vision, the people perish.  
*Proverbs, 29:18*

Befitting its subject, this chapter will appear to be a hodgepodge, a disjointed and unorganized bundle of discourse. This is almost inevitable because its subject, the problem of homelessness, is far more complex than, say, rocket science; the subject itself is unorganized and much is concealed from sight. For eight years I have been serving as a volunteer at the St. Francis Center, a homeless shelter in Denver, Colorado. From my beginning there in 1998, I began to take voluminous notes for a projected ethnography of the shelter, its staff, volunteers, and, of course, our guests. I raided the Director's library for books on the subject and began to acquire my own library, learning slowly what is thought to be known of the subject. I also listened to ordinary lay persons talk about homeless people; everyone, layman or social scientist, seems to have a "theory" about the problem. After years of study I began to doubt the wisdom of simplifying or reducing the complexity of the subject. In opposition to Thoreau's dicta to simplify, simplify, simplify, the problem seems to shout: Complicate, complicate, complicate. My experience and perspective teach me that focusing on a single variable, or even a few, is a dangerous form of reductionism that would prevent us from understanding and solving the problem.

Consider some of the "theories," lay and expert: Some, for example, blame the problem on homeless people themselves, dismissing them as lazy, and choosing the life they lead. Others take them to be unfortunates who are victims of a country without compassion for their kind. Some social

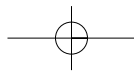


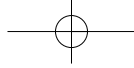
scientists find them to be unsung heroes of the culture wars, brave resisters to a conformist society of dubious values. Advocates for the homeless say most have a form of mental illness. Another approach, pursued vigorously by an organization in Denver, assumes that they are addicted to alcohol and/or drugs, that their only hope is to quit, cold turkey, and enroll in its rigorous rehabilitation program. (I overheard one of the guests at our shelter refute this approach by saying to another guest: “If I can get clean to enter their program, why do I need *them*?”). Others see homeless people as the postmodern personification of the tramp and hobo. What if all of these explanations have some traction? If so, the very word *homeless* must be considered as covering a hodgepodge of social types.

In the course of preparing a book-length treatment of the subject of homelessness, I stumbled on some new possibilities and connections explaining the phenomena. Instead of partitioning or forecasting the approach I shall let it unfold, imitating to some extent the thought processes that discovered the connections. The first step of this unfolding argument was provided by the editor of this volume of chapters on transformational communication studies. In an earlier book, *The View From On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (1999), Omar Swartz explored the great influence of the so called “Beat Bible” on American readers. That the impact of Kerouac’s novel has been staggering is a given. Swartz also showed that not everyone influenced by *On the Road* necessarily read the book; some of those who did read it and act out the vision were able to persuade others to join them to get on the road. By this chain of influence the Beats kept reinventing themselves as new movements: Beats, Beatniks, Hippies, and others.

What does the concept Beat mean? Swartz explains three meanings of the word beat itself. First is the aural marker of musical rhythm, the beat, particularly the beat of jazz, the favorite musical form of the Beats. (My opinion as literary critic is that the most eloquent and creative passages in Kerouac’s prose are his impressions of jazz performances.) The second meaning is the sense of people “being broken, beaten down, pushed to the margins of existence by a cruel and hostile world” (Swartz, 1999, p. 11); this meaning is also idiomatic, as when tired we say, “Wow, I’m beat.” The third is the provocative claim made by Kerouac that beat means a religious experience or form, as in the Beatitudes (Matthew, 5.3-12) articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. Three examples:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the world.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.





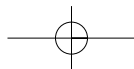
There are Ten Commandments but only eight beatitudes. They neither command behavior nor confer blessedness; rather, they identify a present and future state of happiness or bliss. We shall find several manifestations of this religious connotation — a state of bliss — in Kerouac's novel.

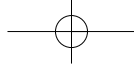
After summarizing the three meanings of Beat, Swartz then adds, "In an important sense, all three definitions of 'beat' are conditions of *liminality*" (p. 12). Upon reading that sentence I was surprised by an apparent coincidence. I had used that exact same word, liminality, in a lecture on homelessness at Baylor University in 1999 and again in the first draft of a book about the subject. As I reflected on this coincidence I realized that Swartz was employing the concept in a way similar to my own use. This similarity alerted me to a potential connection that will be explained later in this chapter.

The three different meanings, according to Swartz, added up to "a break with normal time" (p. 12); we can say this different concept of time is analogous to the beat or rhythm of the jazz drummer — or the beat of Thoreau's different drummer — the beat or rhythm of the streets, and the bliss of the beatitudes. In what seemed to be another coincidence, I had reached a similar conclusion and expressed it in my lecture at Baylor University at the same time, 1999, that Swartz's book was published. I had taken the idea from my early field notes that homeless people do not live in the linear time of corporate order. Instead, they dwell in liturgical time, the religious rhythm of the four seasons they know so much better than those of us who are housed and live by clocks and calendars. This liturgical time, of course, was another potential connection to Swartz's analysis of the religious meaning of Beat.

Swartz also finds three intertwined "fantasy visions" illustrated by the story of Sal Paradise, the narrator of Kerouac's autobiographical novel. The first is the "glorification of social deviance" (p. 55). This implicitly asks the question: deviance from what? A primary deviance is from the conformity of postwar Corporate America. The second fantasy theme is sexual freedom, deviance in the name of the libido, giving "Beat culture its distinctly phallogocentric tone" (p. 55), a tone in which women are often no more than the sexual objects of male actors. The third is "Dean as Vision," a fantasy personified by the main character in the novel, Dean Moriarty, based on a real individual named Neal Cassady, the quixotic and dangerously unconventional sidekick of Paradise/Kerouac. Cassady lived on the Skid Row of Denver, and manifested a form of "madness" in his intense pursuit of IT!, that ineffable object of desire.

Using the "symbolic convergence" theory or critical model (Bormann, 1983), Swartz isolated these three fantasy visions and argued that Kerouac's novel served as a "medium for the chaining out of group fantasies" (p. 46). I



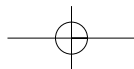


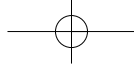
am sure he means by this expression that not everyone would had to have read the book in order to have been profoundly influenced by it, that some of its readers could communicate its vision to others by speech and deed, inspiring listeners by his or her interpretation of *On the Road*, and by their lifestyle or behavior. This kind of communicative practice could also be explained by an early theory of mass communication, the “two-step flow,” which held that the media first reached avid consumers of their messages; these media mavens, or “local influentials,” in turn persuaded friends and acquaintances who attended less diligently to the media.

No matter how one explains the phenomenon, visions expressed in a book, jazz riff, speech or sermon can have a rippling and expanding effect on a much larger number of people. So can the enactment of the vision in everyday acts. According to Swartz, the Beat vision involved the “pursuit of sexual, spiritual, and political liberation” (p. 20) and became a resistance movement against a society they saw “based on lies, deceit, imperialism, commercialism, racism, and sexism” (p. 28). I would add conformism to that list. The Beat movement transformed itself, adapting to events such as the Vietnamese War, and thus attracted new adherents. At first it was a “loose connection of artists and alienated youth” (p. 24), notes Swartz, who were able to have an influence that far exceeded the scope of their social status. Swartz quoted Robert J. Milewsky as having written that the “Beats were emulated by the beatniks. They had their pads, poetry readings, beards, dark clothing, hot and cool jazz, chicks, slangs, parties, wine, marijuana, etc.,” and that since then “the young of each generation have gone ‘on the road,’ across the country, exploring [Kerouac’s] America” (quoted in Swartz, p. 25). Neal Cassidy — a transitional figure between the Beats and the Hippies — drove Ken Kesey’s bus and group of Merry Pranksters around the country in a series of famous LSD road trips immortalized in Tom Wolfe’s 1968 classic, *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*. Swartz and others argue that the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, hippies, rock groups and their followers — Woodstock Nation itself — the New Left and Kennedy Liberalism were influenced by *On the Road*.

The remainder of this chapter will concentrate more on the negative than the positive consequences of Kerouac’s rhetorical power. There were, of course, positives as well as negatives; a balanced assessment was offered by an observant US Senator, Barack Obama:

In the back-and-forth between Clinton and Gingrich, and in the elections of 2000 and 2004, I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation — a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago — played out on a national stage. The victories that the





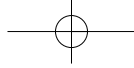
sixties generation brought about — the admission of minorities and women into full citizenship, the strengthening of individual liberties and the healthy willingness to question authority — have made America a far better place for its citizens. But what has been lost in the process, and has yet to be replaced, are those shared assumptions — that quality of trust and fellow feeling — that bring us together as Americans. (Obama, 2006, pp. 36-37)

Obama stresses that although the “psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation” did break down trust and “fellow feeling” between those on the right and the left, it also brought minorities and women into full citizenship, strengthened individual liberties, and encouraged a healthy willingness to question authority — all positive consequences.

## II

Having seen that Kerouac’s *On the Road* contained a powerful rhetorical vision that influenced generations of Americans in the second half of the 20th century, I turn now to explore the physical, geographic, and spiritual context of the novel: Denver, Colorado, USA. In 1998, the University of Colorado at Boulder promoted me to Professor Emeritus of Communication and Comparative Literature. Bored by the extreme sameness or homogeneity of Boulder, my wife Elaine and I sought a more diverse environment by moving into a loft in downtown Denver at 15th and Curtis. The address is important. Almost immediately I began working as a volunteer every Friday at the St. Francis Center (SFC), a shelter for homeless people at 2323 Curtis, only eight blocks from our loft as a starling flies but an existential distance of far greater magnitude. Walking to SFC, I pass through the intersection at 15th and Curtis, across the busy 16th Street Mall, through some skyscrapers, then by a U.S. Post Office; after the bus station the area becomes more industrial. Approaching the shelter one notices more litter on the sad sidewalks and streets. Homeless people are often standing outside and across the street from the shelter.

After being trained and socialized by the staff, other volunteers, and the “guests,” as we call our homeless visitors and clients, I began reading the social scientific studies of homeless people, plus the literary classics, and joined some advocacy groups. I learned later that the author of the definitive history of homelessness, Kenneth L. Kusmer, had divided the subjects of my study into two, broad and overlapping categories, captured in the title of his book: *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (2002). Those who traveled to find work and adventure were, of course,

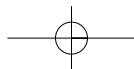


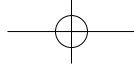
mainly younger than those who were down and out. As the tramps and hobos aged, however, they sometimes joined the bums and others down and out. Although Kerouac's name does not appear in Kusmer's index, the title of his novel is subsumed in the history book's title: *On the Road*. The novel illustrates a literary genre in which the narrator goes on the road in a vision quest; others would include works by Walt Whitman and Jack London.

I was aware that Denver was an important stop on Kerouac's real life travels detailed in his novel, but it was not until beginning to work on a book about homelessness (Tompkins, *Work in Progress*) that I realized our city is both the geographic and spiritual center of the novel. During the first three months of 2007, the 50th anniversary of the publication of *On the Road*, anyone awake in Denver was made aware of it as well. Six events were scheduled. My wife and I tried to join an urban hike through Denver highlighting the settings and sites in the book; so many people joined the tour we could not hear the words of an expert's talk at each stop. The 120-foot scroll on which Kerouac typed the first draft of the book was exhibited at the Denver Central Library. It was shown in two 60-foot sections, the limit of their glass covered case. I viewed it, marveling in its lengthy stream of consciousness and, taking notes on its typographical errors and handwritten corrections by the author. How did Denver become so important to Kerouac?

Kerouac, qua Paradise, hitchhikes from New York to Denver with \$50 in his pocket; with others he travels to San Francisco, New Orleans, and Mexico, each time returning to Denver. He comes to Denver in the first place to visit a young man, Dean Moriarty, in order to follow the mad adventures of his beat life. There are others he knows, and is attracted to, who are in Denver as well, including Carlos Marx, the character based on the life of the beat poet Allen Ginsburg (who was instrumental in the founding of the Naropa Institute in Boulder). During the last hitch of his trip from New York, Paradise is riding with a young businessman driving south from Longmont, Colorado, along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. Paradise anticipates part of the rhetorical vision played out in the rest of the book:

Just ahead, over the rolling wheatfields all golden beneath the distant snows of Estes, I'd be seeing old Denver at last. I pictured myself in a Denver bar that night with all the gang, and in their eyes I would be strange and ragged and like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only word I had was "Wow!" The [driver] and I had a long, warm conversation about our respective schemes in life, and before I knew it we were going over the wholesale fruitmarkets outside Denver; there were





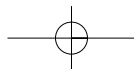
smokestacks, smoke, railyards, red-brick buildings, and the distant downtown graystone buildings, and here I was in Denver. He let me off at Larimer Street. I stumbled along with the most wicked grin of joy in the world, among the old bums and beat cowboys of Larimer Street. (Kerouac, 1957/1976, p. 35)

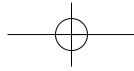
The self-styled Prophet made it to the Promised Land: Larimer Street is the oldest section of Denver; once the Main Street of Denver, as it went to seed the City Fathers developed 17th Street to supplant it. By the time Kerouac visited the city, the street was Skid Row, replete with rows of bars, flophouses, and whorehouses. Neal Cassady, the model for Dean Moriarty, lived in a hotel room on Larimer with his alcoholic father. Cheap single occupancy hotel rooms (SROs)—with a bathroom down the hall — were the manner and means by which the free market accommodated both the down and out, the bums, and those on the road, the beat cowboys, tramps, and hitchhikers. One historian says that Kerouac’s *On the Road* “achieved great acclaim among those seeking alternatives to the sterility of postwar suburbia. If anything, the novel brought more explorers and unconventional types to Larimer Street” (Goodstein, 1999, p. 277). This was exactly what the City Fathers did not want. The downtown business interests redoubled their efforts to eliminate the undesirables, and the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA), established in 1958, proceeded to eliminate the SROs, and no affordable housing was built to replace them, increasing the population of people on the streets of Denver.

Indeed, much of Larimer Street today is part of the gentrified Lower Downtown section of Denver, affectionately known as LoDo. There are automobile tours of Denver that bring the driver to sites mentioned in the novel. There are now “Kerouac Lofts” near Coors Stadium, the home of the National League baseball team, the Colorado Rockies. When Kerouac walked southeast on 15th from Larimer he crossed Lawrence and Arapahoe Streets before reaching Curtis, at the very intersection where we live:

I saw the little midget newspaper-selling woman with the short legs, on the corner of Curtis and 15th. I walked around the sad honkytonks of Curtis Street; young kids in jeans and red shirts; peanut shells, movie marquees, shooting parlors. Beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West. (p. 58)

The references to movie marquees and the glittering street were the traces of earlier days when Curtis Street was the theater district of Denver, the Great White Way. There were thousands of marquee lights so bright that there was





no need for street lamps. The local lore has it that Thomas Alva Edison, after visiting Denver, said Curtis was the best lighted street in the world. In the paragraph just quoted, Kerouac/Paradise wanted to see the West, and would soon drive to California, but he would return to what he called “holy Denver” (p. 264). Part of that holiness was experienced at a softball game he watched one night at Sonny Lawson field at 23rd and Welton:

The strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian, were on the field, performing with heart-breaking earnestness. . . . Near me sat an old Negro who apparently watched the games every night. Next to him was an old white bum; then a Mexican family, then some girls, some boys — all humanity, the lot. Oh, the sadness of the lights that night! The young pitcher looked just like Dean. A pretty blonde in the seats looked just like Marylou. It was the Denver Night; all I did was die.

Down in Denver, down in Denver

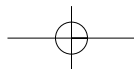
All I did was die (pp. 180–181).

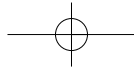
Many of Kerouac’s readers have wondered about the frequent use of the word sad in *On the Road*; in the paragraph above we see a variation, sadness. Why are sacred scenes sad? Kerouac, a student of literature, may well have been alluding to a passage in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael sees for the first time the Pequod, the vessel he will board to track the great white whale: “A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy! All noble things are touched with that.” All noble things are touched with melancholy or sadness. Similarly, in Lord Byron’s poem, “The Dream,” melancholy is described as a “fearful gift” (see Shenk, 2005, pp. 31-33).

The scene at the baseball field has a religious ambiance of community, of racial integration and communion; its nobility is touched with sadness. Kerouac also writes of listening to live jazz all night in the African-American section of Denver — Five Points — and of his desire to be a Negro. All of this constitutes a spiritual vision not unlike the one Martin Luther King later articulated to the benefit of all Americans. The racially integrated players and spectators at the ballpark constituted such holiness that the author “died,” only to be born again in the next passage of the novel. Kerouac meant that Denver was blessed, beatific, holy.

### III

We have seen that Kerouac’s powerful vision set in holy Denver encouraged readers to go on the road, many of whom visited the city to find the beatific





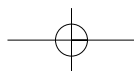
bums on Larimer Street. This increasing population of tramps and bums set off a countermovement within the downtown business community: Larimer was transformed by DURA in order to make its denizens invisible. No other affordable housing was provided for them. But the continuing influence of Kerouac's vision would produce a significant and continuing explosion of the homeless population, a causal connection never identified before so far as I know.

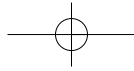
Recall that the Baby Boom generation was influenced by *On the Road*. This generation significantly affected every institution they entered, from maternity wards to universities, straining them by their numbers and altering them by their challenge to authority. Between 1946 and 1964, about 75 million babies were born to veterans whose family life had been delayed by World War II. This was a huge increase over the previous two decades. My source for these figures is a remarkable book published in 1993 by Alice S. Baum and Donald W. Burnes called *A Nation in Denial: The Truth About Homelessness*. In this book, Baum and Burnes made the case that the boomers were responsible for the big bulge or increase in homelessness in the number of homeless persons during the 1980s and since.

Baum and Burnes call our attention to the fact that "in 1980 the boomers born in 1946 had just turned thirty-four, not coincidentally about the average age reported for the homeless population in the United States in most studies" (p. 33). In each of the eleven succeeding years, the total number of thirty-four-year-old persons in the United States increased. This generation created the semantic, if not the ontological, state of homelessness — literally. The word homeless did not appear in the New York Times Index until the early 1980s. "In 1983, the language dramatically changed as homeless persons displaced vagrancy as a classification" (Campbell & Reeves, 1999, p. 23), and the articles and stories about them rapidly grew in number.

The title of the second chapter in the Baum and Burnes book is "The Baby Boom and Homelessness," two pages of which appear under the heading, "The Emergence of the Counterculture" (pp. 37-8). This section reviews the Woodstock Nation, 400,000 strong, their drug use, radical politics, experimentation, and their "frantic search for a new identity" (p. 37). Their description of the Baby Boomers is almost identical to Swartz's attempt to capture the Beat Generation. *Could Baum and Burnes be talking about the same phenomenon Swartz described? On the Road* first appeared in 1957, when the first boomers would have been eleven years old, and it has been in print since. As mentioned above, scholars consider Woodstock, the beatniks and hippies, the counterculture, and liberalism as variations of the vision articulated by Kerouac and his fellow Beat writers.

In a conversation we once had about college students, the critic Kenneth Burke remarked that there is a period in life in which young people have to



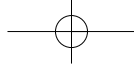


accomplish three objectives: (1) Find a permanent sex partner; (2) find a job; and (3) find a place to live. As I later recalled those objectives I elaborated on them by saying the job would have to pay enough to afford a place to live, and if it did not one would have to choose among other options, such as living with their parents, piling in with friends, sleeping in shelters, or the streets.

By 1999 I had found a theory of homelessness that assumed similar premises, which I discussed in the lecture at Baylor University that year. Specifically, I accepted Kim Hopper and Jim Baumohl's (1996) description of the word homelessness as an "odd-job word, pressed into service to impose order on a hodgepodge of social dislocations, extreme poverty, seasonal or itinerant work, and unconventional ways of life" (p. 3). They develop their theoretical scheme by means of two concepts from anthropology and sociology: *liminality and abeyance*. The first, liminality, is from a Latin word for threshold (recall the striking coincidence, or apparent coincidence, in Swartz's use of liminality in his analysis of the Beat Generation). Anthropologists use the word for a number of "states of passage" a member of a culture must negotiate. One example they give is the one Burke called finding a permanent sex partner: they use the word marriage, noting that most of the passages are prescribed by ritual. Other passages would be apprenticing to a profession and preparing to take religious vows. No matter how rigorous the passage, how uncertain it all is, there is the expectation that one will return to a settled life. The passage occasionally stalls, however, putting a person in limbo, a space of forgotten confinement.

Abeyance, the second concept in the framework, recognizes that in any society there are a limited number of desired status slots available (fewer jobs, for example, than applicants). Abeyance mechanisms or measures are "devised to absorb the surplus" (p. 5). Although Hopper and Baumohl do not use this example, organized labor in the United States historically supported education at all levels so as to keep students in abeyance longer because of the finite number of jobs — status slots — available to them. Other abeyance methods might be government programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression of the 1930s, organizations that hired surplus workers, a way of creating status slots. The essence of the theory is "that which unites the phenomena gathered up in the term homelessness is liminality (resolved or stalled) and abeyance gone awry" (p. 6).

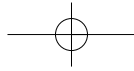
The authors give a short history of American homelessness by which to make the theory concrete. Perhaps the best example from that history of homelessness would be the period beginning after the Civil War and leading up to the 1890s. The American West was built by tramps. They built the



railroads that helped towns like Denver grow to become cities. Once the gandy dancers built the railroads, the precious metals in the mountains could be mined, smelted, and shipped back east. Some of the people who did these jobs were youthful adventurers going through a passage, but others caught the fever of the road, the beat of tramp, tramp, tramp, the origin of the onomatopoeic noun. When the trains could traverse the entire country on intercontinental railways, the tramps could ride the rails to Denver. These tramps were, according to Hopper and Baumohl, “a motley mix of people in sometimes tumultuous transition: demobilized soldiers and emancipated slaves, disillusioned workers unwilling to buckle to the time demands and discipline of the new industrial order, stubborn practitioners of vanishing skills . . . and venturesome adolescents lured, like young Jack London, by the novelty and danger of it all” (p. 8, emphasis added). This is a good example of liminality stalled. Indeed, the authors might have made the example stronger by adding that there was a depression in the 1890s that reduced the number of status slots, jobs in the East, leaving even fewer for these adolescents and others of the motley mix to fill.

When construction work on the railroads and harvesting jobs shut down during the late fall they could ride the rails back to the Midwest to Chicago, the biggest rail center, and spend their winters in Hobohemia, in flophouses next to saloons and whorehouses, a subculture documented by sociologists at the University of Chicago. Was this abeyance gone awry? Hopper and Baumohl did give us a vocabulary and a way of thinking about homeless people who have trouble with states of passage and finding status slots that would allow them to lead a “normal” life.

This anthropological model is but an elaboration of Kenneth Burke’s conversational observation about the problems teenagers have to solve in order to become grownup members of society. Parents of teenagers in the top economic tier, the comfortable class, know that it is a good idea to subsidize teenagers in this state of passage so they can go to college. Their hope is that this delaying experience — or preparation — might help them solve all three of Burke’s problems at once. We know it is good for our kids to find a spouse who is able to get a good job and help pay for either the rent or the mortgage. Parents in the lowest tier may not see this, nor may they be able to offer much by way of subsidy. Their kids may not see the connections, instead finding a sex partner and producing offspring before they have a clue about how to achieve the other two objectives — a job and a place to live. In our capitalistic-organizational society, private firms and public corporations provide the jobs the young need in order to afford a domicile. Unfortunately, our economy cannot create enough jobs, or status slots, that pay enough to provide an abode for everyone. Increasingly, the jobs do not pay enough to take care of high rents. Although we had low



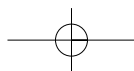
unemployment in 1999, particularly in Colorado, some who were working hard could not afford a roof. When unemployment was low and production was a priority — during World War II — we bused winos into defense plants, trained them how to weld, and gave them a status slot.

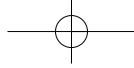
This last example shows how another demographic/economic concept can affect all of this; I refer to the dependency ratio. Nations with fewer people dependent on those who work have a more robust economy than those with the opposite ratio. The recent upturn in Ireland's economy, for example, is explained in large part because of a downturn in the birth rate a few years ago. Similarly, a company with fewer workers paying for more and more pensioners is unlikely to survive; a current example of a firm in such difficulty is General Motors. Indeed, GM's foreign competitors have the competitive advantage of having their workers enrolled in national medical and retirement programs.

Some of the young people in our society today get stuck in the passage from parents' home to one of their own. Some never get unstuck, although it is more often episodic, a cycle of moving in and out of the streets. Or they suffer a setback that forces them from their own domicile and back into the parents' home. If that option gets closed they will wind up on the streets as one of our organizational society's surplus or redundant people. Other institutions, however, accept some responsibility for providing supplemental status slots, abeyance, for the surplus and redundant among us:

Whether these surrogate occupations are provided under the auspices of the state (frontier settlements, public works, compulsory education), the church (monasteries, breakaway religious orders), or even countercultural groups (communal experiments), the effect is the same. Such measures provide for — and control — redundant people who, in their restive idleness, might undermine social order. (Hopper & Baumohl, 1996, p. 5)

Hopper and Baumohl's reference to countercultural groups and those who might undermine social order can serve as a transition back to the question of the Beat Generation. As mentioned in the first section above, Swartz's rhetorical analysis of *On the Road*, by coincidence, concluded that the three meanings of the word beat were conditions of liminality. He recites the anthropological meaning of the concept as a rite of passage, but then gives it a literary twist by writing: "As both Kerouac and Richard Rorty suggest in their respective writings, the important 'meanings' in life, the lessons we learn through the exposure to different people and different lifestyles, are the travels, not the arrivals, the texts — in their ability to instill in us





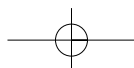
compassion and solidarity — not the interpretations” (p. 94). Adding richness and subtlety to the concept, Swartz discusses the work of Gustavo Perez Firmat, the Hispanic literary critic:

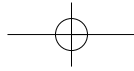
Liminality, for him and other scholars, “is a phase, a fleeting moment designed for supersession.” In literature, liminality functions at the point between two stages in the development of a character. Sal is in a liminal state. In the condition of liminality, Sal gains a unique perspective on both worlds. His is the visionary’s experience from which a new view of social reality is formed. However, such a position cannot long be maintained, nor, by definition, can it last; hence Sal’s refrain “Everything was collapsing” expressed at the points in the novel in which his liminal position is threatened by the encroachment of a recalcitrant or dominant reality. Visions, themselves, become dominant realities or else are refuted, leaving the visionary encapsulated again in the structure of the old confinement. Another result is for the visionary to wither and die with the fading remains of past experience. Either way, the liminal position is a precarious one. (Swartz, 1999, p. 96)

Clearly, the Beat generation and many homeless people have a similar identity; both experience the precarious “liminal position.” As Swartz notes, Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, Sal and Dean, both died — after much suffering — at early ages as “burned-out shells” of their former selves (p. 96). Both men died of drug or alcohol related causes. As such, Kerouac and Cassady represent the “ritualistic self-abuse that marred the consciousness of the 1960s counterculture and led to many casualties” (p. 97). Is it not necessary, then, if *On the Road* had as much rhetorical influence as scholars claim, for us to conclude that it encouraged thousands of others to practice ritualistic self-abuse with drugs and alcohol? Can we not attribute part of the huge increase in the number of homeless people in the United States to the effects of this quest vision, this novel, on the Beat Generation, the Baby Boomers, the beatniks, and the hippies? We can subdivide further the effects into those of addictions interacting with mental illness, and those people who, because of their deep disaffiliation with the dominant culture of the country, chose to remain in a state of liminality. And let us not forget the economic plight of many in the working class: Too little in wages, too much in rent.

#### IV

Martin Heidegger’s Existential philosophy supplies another insight on the



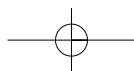


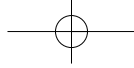
“liminal position” homeless people and the beats shared. Surprisingly, he found all of us to experience a similar phenomenon. Heidegger defined the human condition as one of “thrownness.” His major work, *Being and Time*, indicates that he realized that the third word in his title is as important as being or existence itself. In the book he discusses the effect thrownness has on Dasein, which for our purposes can be defined as “we” or “human beings” in the abstract. Here is a relevant if difficult passage to grasp at first reading:

Yet every Dasein always exists factually. It is not a free-floating self-projection; but its character is determined by thrownness as a Fact of the entity which it is; and, as so determined, it has in each case already been delivered over to existence, and it constantly so remains. Dasein’s facticity, however, is essentially distinct from the factuality of something present-at-hand. Existent Dasein does not encounter itself as something present-at-hand within-the-world. But neither does thrownness adhere to Dasein as an inaccessible characteristic which is of no importance for its existence. As something thrown, Dasein has been thrown into existence. It exists as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 321, emphasis in original)

This short passage illustrates some of the fetishes that are characteristic of Heidegger’s writing style. One is the use of neologisms, words that he made up, “thrownness” being a good example. The word existed in neither German nor English until he wrote *Being and Time* in the one language and it was translated into the second. He also put words together in German that have to be hyphenated in English: present-at-hand and within-the-world are two examples from the brief passage quoted. Another characteristic is the high level of abstraction. Because of these and other stylistic quirks, some claim his writings are “untranslatable,” but the standard translation of *Sein und Zeit* into *Being and Time* was made by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson in 1962. Several scholars have written books “translating” the translation. Macquarrie himself wrote such a book. What does he make of “thrownness?” He explained in this way: “Dasein did not create itself and it did not choose to exist” (Macquarrie, 1999, p. 47). Michael Inwood, author of *A Heidegger Dictionary* (2000), says this in his entry for “thrownness”:

Every Dasein is thrown, not only misfits. . . . For thrownness is not a fact that is over and done with, like details of one’s ancestry which one can discover by research. It is a constant accompaniment of Dasein’s existence. . . . Since Dasein is simply thrown, and does not





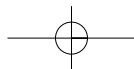
throw itself, thrownness, the fact that Dasein is, is not in Dasein's own control. . . (pp. 218, 19)

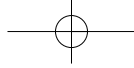
Inwood goes on to link thrownness with another crucial concept: “[Dasein] is thrown naked into a bare insignificant world, in which it is not at home . . .” (p. 38). The phrase “not at home” prepares us for another entry in his dictionary of Heideggerian terms: “home(lessness).” His definition of this term includes the statement that “homelessness is our primary condition and impels us to seek a home” (p. 97). Stephen Mulhall makes the same connection in his book, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (1997): “. . . Dasein's thrownness . . . is expressive of the fact that Dasein is always already delivered over to the task of existing placed in a particular situation that it did not choose to occupy . . . so that Dasein can never regard itself as domesticated, fully at-home with whatever state or form of life and world it finds itself inhabiting” (p. 127).

Let me attempt to translate these “translations” of the translation of *Being and Time* into ordinary English. The first observation is that we had no choice about entering existence itself. Not one of us has ever entered existence or being on our own terms. We are hurled or thrown into being, into existence. No one gets to choose her/his gender, race, space, nationality, or social class. Heidegger also expresses thrownness and homelessness as a kind of “falling.” And although he insisted that the word had nothing to do with the Christian fall from grace, Christian clergy and theologians have a gripping interest in the concept. A way of illustrating this thrownness would be to use the example of Neal Cassady: He had nothing to do with the beginning of his life. He had no control over his heritage, his gender, his race, the time and place of his birth. He chose neither his alcoholic father nor the seedy hotel on Larimer Street in which he was raised. He and Kerouac were homeless most of the time they were together, driving about the country and staying with friends. But, according to Heidegger, all of us are homeless. We experience the thrownness of our existence, suffer from homesickness, and vainly seek a homecoming. (As a philosopher, Heidegger thought that doing philosophy was a form of homesickness, and perhaps the closest we could come to a homecoming.)

*A Heidegger Dictionary* paraphrases and includes translated quotations from *Being and Time* on this topic:

This homelessness drives man on to “the conquest of the planet Earth and the venture into cosmic space”: “Homeless man lets himself be driven — by the success of his enterprise and of his organization of ever greater masses of his own kind — into flight from his own essence, in order to represent this flight as his





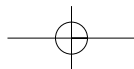
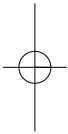
homecoming [Heimkehr] to the true humanity of homo humanus and to take charge of it himself.” (Inwood, 2000, p. 98)

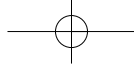
There is more than a hint here that homeless people may be more authentic than the domiciled, for the latter are driven by a “They-self,” an existence of blind conformity and clockwatching. And yet everyone is “thrown,” not just the misfits, the migrants, and vagrants. We are all thus homeless and homesick creatures. So, if all of us are homeless, what is the difference between those who need the services of the homeless shelter where I work as a volunteer and those who do not? What is the difference between those sleeping on the banks of the South Platte River in Denver and those in condos and lofts in LoDo? In a speech at the annual meeting of the Capitol Hill United Ministries of Denver in 2000, I proposed to express the difference by calling the former “houseless.” They lack each night the four walls and roof that the rest of us have.

Is it not logical, then, to conclude that part of the significant increases in the homeless population from the 1980s on can be attributed in part to the new liberating lifestyle envisioned by Kerouac? Although they could not escape the thrownness of their existence, they could “project”—note the double meaning — could project themselves into a slightly different trajectory of falling. The increased use of drugs and alcohol made it impossible for many of them to obtain or maintain a status slot that would allow them to afford even modest housing, particularly given the effect of addictions over time. This view would seem to be consistent with the attitude of many housed citizens who talk to me about homeless people: “Well, they chose that way of life.” This attitude allows one, of course, to dismiss the problem, or as some would say, blame the victim, even though generalizing about houseless people is a hazardous endeavor.

Let us examine this attitude in deeper detail. Assume, as has been argued, that a significant proportion of currently homeless people went “on the road”—literally and metaphorically—in the sense that Kerouac described in his vision of liberation. It is doubtful that they were consciously opting to be “down and out” by the age of 34, or that they chose to be houseless as well as liberated. In fact, the social workers I have talked to over the years are convinced that more people become addicted after being stuck in the streets than before. Drugs and alcohol are the only painkillers they have; the consumption of alcohol, mainly done by passing a bottle in a circle, is just about the only social life many people experience on the streets.

Baum and Burnes give us another perspective on this, and a term they coined to express it: “disinstitutionalization.” They used this term instead of deinstitutionalization because the seriously mentally ill “were being deprived of the institutional care they needed. It is not the fact that people





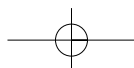
were being released from mental hospitals that caused homelessness to increase in the 1980s, but rather the total absence of institutional facilities to care for those who became psychotic after most of the state hospital beds were eliminated and too few alternative facilities were made available” (p. 166). This keen observation can hardly be emphasized enough. Although part of the rationale was that American communities would create local facilities when patients were released from state mental hospitals, this did not happen. Many of those people now wind up in jail, prison, shelters or on the streets.

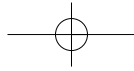
There can be little doubt that economic factors, combined with addiction and illness, account for most of the homeless people in the shelters and on the heating grates. Consider a simple but “unobtrusive measure” of the economic factor in homelessness. At the St. Francis Center, the shelter where I have worked as a volunteer for eight years, we sell razors and toothbrushes for ten cents each, combs for a nickel, to our guests. We noticed during the economic turndown of 2001 that pennies made up an increasing percentage of coins we took in and counted. Many, many times since then I have accepted ten warm pennies for a razor or toothbrush. (Guests have told me where they find them — around parking meters. They believe some motorists empty their pockets of pennies while searching for quarters; perhaps some are dropped and deemed not worth picking up. I have confirmed this while walking the streets of downtown Denver. I have also noticed that the area outside the car wash where workers shake out floor mats is littered with coins, most of which, of course, are pennies.)

## CONCLUSION

Kerouac’s rhetorical vision of liberation, in part as freedom from the overbearing corporate control of linear time, had unintended consequences on generations of Americans. Most would interpret that these consequences are destructive to them and society. The lure of the road and freedom will continue to attract young people, but this does not mean that society should turn their back on them, to deny that being thrown into economic, social, and biological conditions — including disabilities of a physical or mental nature — contribute significantly to their sad fate. What can we do? We need a new vision of how to treat houseless people if not homeless ones. Some features of a new vision are becoming clearer.

The first step, according to Baum and Burnes, is to confront our national denial about this complex problem. No matter what first encouraged people to experiment with alcohol and drugs, we must establish that addiction is a disease just as much as mental illness and diabetes.





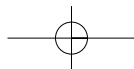
Stigmatizing names do not help either. Relative deprivation, a concept advanced by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, has proved to be as harmful to poor people's health as is absolute deprivation. Local communities must provide treatment facilities for the mentally ill, even if federal assistance is required.

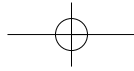
Another proposal made by Baum and Burnes is that after confronting denial and discovering the truth, we have a duty to become advocates for the homeless. What kind of plan can we advocate?

We now see a vision, or at least the outline of a vision or program, that tries to solve the problem. One part of it is called *Housing First*, and has been vigorously advocated by Philip Mangano, the Director of the Interagency Council on Homelessness at the federal level. Housing First makes the sensible assumption that we will be more effective in treating mental illness and addictions among chronically homeless people — estimated to comprise 20% of the homeless population — if they are housed than if they are on the streets. Being houseless, as mentioned above, is a condition that encourages illness and addiction, is more a cause than an effect.

In 2003, the city of Denver, according to Mangano, was the first in the country to announce a commitment to end homelessness within a decade. Mayor John Hickenlooper made the commitment by appointing a Commission to End Homelessness in Denver within the Decade. The Head of the Commission was Roxane White, his Head of Human Services in Denver's city government. She had many years of experience working with homeless teenagers in Denver and was further qualified to lead the diverse commissioners to a consensus by being a professional Group Facilitator. Part of the plan, as mentioned above, is Housing First, a process in which chronically homeless persons are placed in apartments. Their rent is supplied in whole or part by the program. They are assigned a caseworker who keeps track of them, monitoring their behavior, including the use of medications. The span of control, or ratio of caseworker to clients, is around one to ten; they meet collectively to talk about all of their clients. Although they are not required to stop drinking or taking drugs, they must observe all the rules established by their landlord. Nonetheless, some of the people have reduced their intake of addictive substances once they become housed.

An outreach worker from the St. Francis Center named Jim allowed me to accompany him on a tour of downtown Denver in the summer of 2006. We met at 6:30 on a weekday morning on the 16th Street Mall, a main artery restricted to free shuttle buses and pedestrian traffic. Jim found several people sleeping on the sidewalk, woke them gently, and asked what services they required. He directed all of them to the St. Francis Center, and asked some of them if they would like a place to live. Some expressed interest but did not have the necessary identification to qualify, a problem of epidemic





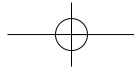
proportions among houseless people. They lose their IDs, or are robbed of them, and then it is difficult for them to get their birth certificate — a document necessary for a new ID. At a McDonald's on the uptown end of the mall I met the poster boy for Housing First named John. He is an African American man 46 years old. He had to be scraped off the sidewalk nearly every day when he was not already in a detoxification unit, jail, or hospital. Now he has his own place to live, comes to the St. Francis Center for Antabuse to help him stay off liquor, and now tries to persuade his old drinking buddies to follow his example, to come in off the streets.

There are pragmatic goals for the program in addition to confronting denial and trying to do the right thing for our houseless brothers and sisters. The downtown business interests, in a desire to increase tourism, would like to make the houseless citizens invisible; that is why they help pay for the outreach workers in the program. In addition, it is now widely believed that the chronically homeless, again about 20% of the total, cost taxpayers more on the streets than in subsidized housing. In one documented case, an alcoholic man in Reno cost the city one million dollars in hospital and medical fees before he died (Gladwell, 2006).

It will take some years before we know how well the program is working. There are some successes, such as John the poster boy, but there are setbacks as well. One sadly handsome man I knew for years died of alcohol poisoning in his new apartment. Another died from a drug overdose. But many others do seem to be living a better life.

Some of the caseworkers say they are encouraged by the results of the program, but are somewhat disheartened when they see new faces on the 16th Street Mall. And there is the case of Norm, a man who has been coming to the St. Francis Center for more than twenty years. Although I have never seen him inebriated — he would not be allowed in the center if he were — he is said to be a heavy drinker. Norm was offered a voucher for his own place. He accepted the voucher but was so uncooperative with the caseworker assigned to him that she became frightened. Norm gave back the voucher. Norm clearly prefers the “beat” life in permanent abeyance, an abeyance gone awry; I have a difficult time imagining a solution that would deny him that freedom of choice if he otherwise lives by the rules.

Because houselessness is such a hodgepodge category, the Commission made other recommendations as well. They thought it best to build more shelters for the episodic and chronically homeless people. They urged that we build more affordable housing for the working houseless people, transitional and transformational housing for those trying to come in off the streets. From an Existential perspective, therefore, it seems clear that the street people were thrown into houselessness as well as homelessness because of conditions largely beyond their control.



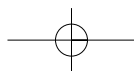
One of our greatest presidents would no doubt accept this point. About mental illness Lincoln had this to say, in part because of his own experience with it: “This, let it be observed, is a misfortune not a fault.” About alcoholism, a problem he did not experience, he said this: Drunkards should be “pitied and compassionated, just as are the heirs of consumption and other hereditary diseases.” Their problems should be treated as a “misfortune, and not as a crime, or even as a disgrace” (see Shenk, 2005, p. 89, emphasis in the original). If we could catch up with Lincoln’s astute and ethical position, then we would more closely manifest what he called the “Better angels of our nature.” Yes, houselessness is a misfortune, not a fault. Fundamentally, we must also do something as a democratic society so that the working class can afford housing. A hike in the minimum wage was on the ballot in Colorado for the November 2006 election. The fact that it passed in a relatively conservative state suggests that most people recognize that a large part of the problem is due to the Wages-Too-Low/Rents-Too-High combination. I find shameful the condition in which 40 to 50% of the guests at the St. Francis Center have jobs but cannot afford housing. Housing in Denver, like the cities on both coasts of the United States, is extremely expensive. We must find ways of providing affordable housing.

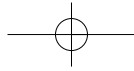
There are reasons why homelessness cannot be completely ended within the decade. There are the Norms, of course, who will want to stay in the shelters, technically in a state of homelessness. And then there is the “magnet” theory of homelessness, i.e., that if you try to provide housing for people on the street the word will get around and homeless people will stream to Denver. San Diego and San Francisco are cited as examples that serve as magnets for homeless people from around the country. Although this “theory” is embraced by people in most cities as an excuse for not treating homeless people decently, this chapter has embraced the idea that a large segment of the homeless population at any time is “on the road.”

Part of our problem to date has been ideological. Those with different beliefs and conceits have been so eager to win arguments about the problem of houselessness that they have not tried to solve the problem. Our new vision should regard houselessness as a problem that we are going to attempt to solve, rather than one we try to “manage,” even though some individuals will resist our best efforts to make them housed members of society.

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## NOTES

1. While in the final stage of negotiating stylistic changes with the editor, I discovered a forgotten and unread book in my personal library: Todd Depastino's *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (2003). To my surprise I found a section dealing with Kerouac's *On the Road*, and its sequel, *Dharma Bums*. Depastino's perspective is that of the historian, and he places the Beats in this way: They 'would eventually emerge as the most important counterculture in postwar America until they upheavals of the 1960s' (p. 235). Even the Hippies, he concedes, were 'inspired by Kerouac's vision of perfect freedom' (p. 240). Unlike the argument in this essay, Depastino's narrative does not consider the long-term effects of the Beat-Hippie lifestyle on homelessness in America.

