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MIT272A: Representing Homelessness

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The mass media provides a diversity of visual experiences that both inform and persuade public opinion. Through a wealth of images this pervasive form of media assembles an illusionistic world where the person and objects in it become equivalent to the public's perception of actual existence. This is the case for the homeless depicted in Jennifer Toth's, The Mole People. By merely portraying the underground homeless as a dichotomous subculture Toth proliferates the public's notion of "deserving" and "undeserving" homeless populations. The Mole People exemplifies the correlation between the "reality" of an image and the psychological and mythical constructs of society in the United States, allowing its authorship to explore a dualism that manipulates Western thought.

In Jennifer Toth's, The Mole People, the author ironically intends to dismiss the urban myth of animal-like underground dwellers by presenting her readership with the personal accounts of those who inhabit the tunnels beneath New York City. It is unfortunate that Toth's lofty attempt to metaphorically resurrect the underground homeless bares more likeness to the 1956 movie monster series of the same name than to the perception of its ultimate purpose. Toth's interpretation of life in the tunnels beneath New York City becomes the sensationalized voyage of a dichotomous nether world. By merely depicting the underground homeless as a dystopic or utopic subculture Toth proliferates the

misrepresentations of homelessness, all the while inadvertently dehumanizing the “mole people” to be as visceral as their label suggests.

In the 1956 Universal Studios’ release of The Mole People, intrepid archaeologists John Agar and Hugh Beaumont explore treacherous caverns only to discover an underground dwelling race of albinos who keep as their slaves the hunchbacked, clawed and bug-eyed Mole People. The film’s trailer contemplates whether or not these heroes “can save themselves with only a flashlight for a weapon”. (“Rotten Tomatoes” 1) The very nature of this seedy horror film is seemingly analogous to the way in which Toth, having strode beneath the heart of New York with only a can of Mace from her father, acts as our brave guide to the subterranean dystopia she has stumbled upon. The thrill of this adventure has obviously jaded Toth’s sense of objectivity, regardless of what her disclaimer (Author’s Note) might offer as “relevant” proof against this argument.

Simply by naming her book, The Mole People, Toth has chosen to sensationalize the perplexities of the underground homeless. Toth is unhesitant to portray the dystopia of a menacing subculture of irrational activity and unpredictable emotion. The “Dark Angel” chapter contains the most redundant display of Toth’s overt voyeurism, comparable only to the final few pages of the book’s epilogue in which Toth “escapes” from the horror of the “mole people” entirely. The devil-like figure that Toth devotes an entire chapter to could easily be miscued as an accurate representation of the underground homeless population. More importantly, if Toth were truly trying to alter the public perception of the mole people why would she include such an extraordinary

spokesperson? Perhaps “Satan” is right when he describes Toth as “having a fascination with the darkness of the tunnel” and the evil within it. (Toth 165) This fascination leads Toth to go so far as to despotically define the smells of homelessness: “spoiled and soured food from scavenged dumpsters, stale sweat, and the excrement and urine of the streets”. (Toth 78)

In conjunction with the terrifying adventures of her personal narrative, the quotes Toth selectively employ lend themselves to support her dystopic image of a carnal subculture. Rob Buckley, the director of the All Saints’ Soup Kitchen on New York’s Upper West Side, affirms, “Once you go down there and see the way they live, like animals, you can surely say no human beings live like that.” (qtd. in Toth 91) Harold Deamues, a volunteer with ADAPT (The Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment) attests to “feeling their eyes” and starting to wonder about the stories of cannibalism. (qtd. in Toth 160) Luckily, on the next page Toth goes on to state that Daniel Crump, a steward for the Transit Workers and Mechanics Union, “is one of the first knowledgeable people to talk about the underground homeless with her”. (161) Perhaps, her audience can momentarily refrain from peeing its pants; that is until she incessantly reminds them of a third rail that pulses with electricity, or of the hidden criminals, drug addicts, enormous rats and rushing trains that occupy the tunnels.

However, just when it is reasonable to believe that the “mole people” are villainous creatures, doomed to the lifelessness of their underground dystopia, Toth strategically twists the plot and allows her audience to empathize with them. Once more, Toth’s work is reminiscent of the Universal Studios’ 1956 monster

series of the same name; the only difference being that their “mole people” partook in terrible dance scenes when they grew tired of enforcing their reign of terror upon society. For obvious reasons, portraying the tunnels as an alternative utopia to the “topside world” becomes just as harmful to Toth’s “cause” as it is to depict the tunnels as a dystopia. This book craves for a common ground. Toth’s glorification of what she calls “the homeless version of the sweet life” is equally disturbing in the sense that it has the ability to tempt its audience into wanting to join the ranks of the underground homeless. Needless to say, the enchantment and hyper-reality of Disneyland cannot lie within a subway tunnel. One is lead to believe that Toth would have her “mole people” singing and dancing in a well-orchestrated chorus line if she could. Toth goes on to fantasize about Ghost Cliff, “a ten-thousand-year-old standing forest buried deep under the Upper West Side”, and a room “with a piano and tiled floor with mirrors all around” that is even known to have a fountain as part of its décor. (234) Toth paints a lucid picture of hidden societies that consist only of “those who believe in the human spirit”, as is the case with J.C.’s community. (209) Example after example of these utopic places insists that some of the underground homeless are free from any kind of outside pressure. There is no fighting or struggling to be someone; everyone is part of a community established to abide by a basic human religion. The only war the “mole people” wage in is an “independent fight against society and its institutions”. (Toth 178)

As unrealistic and harmful as it may be for Toth to display the “mole people” as a strictly dichotomous subculture, what’s more detrimental to Toth’s,

The Mole People, and more specifically the goal it has set for itself, is the way in which she persistently dehumanizes the homeless throughout her work. There are at least 41 instances in the book in which Toth metaphorically compares the underground homeless to some sort of animal. Within the first few pages of the introduction Toth identifies the homeless as “wild and frightening...untamed and dangerous”. (2) Perhaps one of the most obvious examples (of the way in which Toth undermines the goal of her book) can be found in her first impression of Bernard. Toth describes Bernard as “gliding” towards her over the tracks only to crouch when he reaches her “in preparation to lash out”. Bernard goes on to circle Toth, prowling silently, leading Toth to believe she has found a mole person. (97-98) Are these the best words for an author to use who is hoping to dispose of the animalistic images that illustrate underground homelessness? When Toth suggests that Teresa was once a “teddy bear, all round and always laughing” but now she “moves like a colt, an angular body with loose skin over sharp bones”, it becomes obvious that the “mole people” are to be viewed as animals. (86) She goes on to depict Joey as being seen as a “useless parasite of an old man”. (113) Toth can “feel the eyes” of the “mole people” in tunnel and often distinguishes them by way of their faint growls and reverse hisses. Toth admits that the Dark Angel personifies her visceral fears of the underground and the creatures that exist there. (169) She encounters gangs of youth who roam the tunnels for helpless prey, laughs at alien-like figures that resemble E.T. and compares the entryway of J.C.’s community to the entrance of a “good-sized dog house”. (193) Throughout The Mole People, Toth continually stresses the

importance of possessing “a primeval instinct for survival” when beneath the tunnels in New York City. (239)

Overall, it becomes clear that if Toth were to have taken a more pragmatic approach in her depiction of “the mole people” her book could have been viewed as a revolutionary work in its field. As it is, The Mole People, plays out more like a Nancy Drew novelette than a text whose aim is to dismiss the urban myth of animal-like underground dwellers. Toth’s voyeuristic portrayal of a strictly dichotomous subculture makes it impossible for her audience to objectively examine the realities of life in the tunnels beneath New York City. On this thrill ride, Toth inadvertently propagates the very images of the “mole people” she is seeking to dismiss, effectively deceiving her readership to believe that what they see is the truth. It is for these reasons that Toth’s, The Mole People, is a grave misrepresentation of homelessness.

Americans have always found it necessary to distinguish between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor – the former, victims of circumstances beyond their control who merit compassion; the latter, lazy shiftless bums who could do better for themselves “if they wanted to” and who therefore merit contempt.

Concurrent with the increased media and political attention being given to the problem, there has also been an outpouring of research studies that provide reliable guides to the relative proportions of “worthy” and “unworthy” homeless. My aim here is to review the findings of some of these studies, to see if we

cannot be more precise about how many homeless deserve our sympathies and how many do not.

For convenience, it is useful to begin by imagining a sample of 1000 homeless people, drawn at random, let us say, from the half million or so homeless people to be found in America on any given evening. Based on the research I have sketched, we can then begin to cut up this sample in various ways, so as to portray as graphically as possible the mosaic of homelessness in the United States of America. Our strategy is to work from “more deserving” to “less deserving” subgroups, ending with the absolutely least deserving: the lazy shiftless bums. Along the way, I call attention to various characteristics of and problems encountered by each of the subgroups we consider.

Among the many tragedies of homelessness, there is none sadder than the homeless family. The homeless family is often an intact family unit consisting of a wife, her husband, and one or more dependent children, victims of unemployment and other economic misfortune, struggling in the face of long odds to maintain themselves as a unit and get back on their feet again. How many members of homeless families can we expect to find among a sample of 1000 homeless people?

Members of homeless families constitute a significantly large fraction of the homeless population; my guess is that we would find 220 of them in a sample of a thousand homeless people, nearly half of them homeless children. Not only would most people look on homeless families as most deserving of help, there is also reason to believe that they need the least help (in that they appear to have

the fewest disabling problems and tend generally to be the most intact), and that even relatively modest assistance would make a substantial difference in their life chances and circumstances. If the available resources are such as to require triage, then homeless families should be the top priority.

By these calculations, there remain in our hypothetical sample of 1,000 some 780 homeless persons. This number is representative of single individuals on the streets by themselves. Based on the HCH (National Health Care for the Homeless Program) study, some 6 percent of these 780 are children or adolescents age nineteen or less. This amounts to 47 additional children in the sample of 1,000. Furthermore, 20 percent are adult women (156 additional women), and 74 percent are adult men. This leaves, from the original sample of 1000, only 580 adult males who are not members of homeless family groups. Adding these to the earlier results, we get two significant conclusions: First among the total of a thousand homeless persons, $99 + 47 = 146$ will be children or youths aged nineteen or less, approximately one in every seven. Second, among the remaining 854 adults, $156 + 83 = 229$ will be women, which amounts to $229/854$ or 27 percent of all adults. Combining all figures, homeless children and homeless adult women themselves comprise $146 + 229 = 375$ of the original 1000. This can also be represented as three of every eight people in the sample. Adult men comprise the majority of homeless, but not the overwhelming majority; a very sizeable minority, nearly 40 percent of the total, are women and children.

Although precise numbers are hard to come by, there is little doubt that many of these homeless teenagers are runaway or throwaway children fleeing

abusive family situations. Among the girls, the rate of pregnancy is astonishing: 9 percent of the girls ages thirteen to fifteen, and 24 percent of the girls ages sixteen to nineteen, were pregnant at or since their first contact with the HCH clinic system; the rate for sixteen to nineteen year olds is the highest observed in any age group. There is impressionistic evidence, but no hard evidence, to suggest that many of these young girls are reduced to prostitution in order to survive; many will thus come to possess lengthy jail records as well. Drug and alcohol abuse are also common problems. Indeed, the rate of known drug abuse among the sixteen to nineteen year old boys (some 16 percent) is the highest rate recorded for any age group in the data.

I am discussing a time in life when the average adolescent's biggest worries are acne, or whom to invite to the high school prom or where to go to college. This is a time of uncertainty, but it is also a time of hope and anticipation for the future. In contrast, homeless adolescents, must worry about where to sleep at night, or where their next meal is coming from, or who is going to assault them next. What hope for the future can be nourished under these conditions? Many of these kids face an unending downward spiral of booze, drugs, crime and troubles with the law. They too must surely be counted amongst the "deserving" homeless. Anything that can be done should be done to break the spiral and set them back on a path to independent and productive adult existence.

Most people would feel comfortable counting the adult women amongst the "deserving" homeless as well. Just as women and children are first to be evacuated from a sinking ship, so too should women and children be the first to

be rescued from the degradations of street life or a shelter existence. If we add to the group of “deserving” homeless the relatively small number of adult men in homeless family groups, then our initial cut leaves but 580 people from the original 1000 yet to account for.

What is to be said about the 580 lone adult males (who are not members of homeless families) who remain? A small percentage of them, much smaller than most people would anticipate, are elderly men, over age sixty-five; in the HCH data; the over sixty-fives comprise about 3 percent of the group in question, which gives us 17 elderly men amongst the remaining 580. Those over sixty-five surely are to be included within the “deserving” group. As it happens, only about half of them receive Social Security benefits. Many of those who do receive Social Security payments find that no housing can be purchased or rented within their means. Well over half have chronic physical health problems that further contribute to their hardships. Certainly, no one will object if we include the elderly homeless among those deserving our sympathies.

We are now left with, let us say, 563 non-elderly lone adult men. If we inquire further among this group, we will discover another surprising fact: at least a third of them are veterans of the United States Armed Forces. Most homeless veterans in the United States of America are drawn from the lower socioeconomic strata, having enlisted to obtain “long term economic advantages through job training as well as post-military college benefits and preferential treatment in civil service employment”. These veterans have found out the hard way that their economic and employment opportunities remain limited. The lure

of military service proves to have been a false promise for many of these men: “Despite recruitment campaigns that promote military service as an opportunity for maturation and occupational mobility, veterans continue to struggle with post-military unemployment and mental and physical disability without adequate assistance from the federal government.” Many of the homeless veterans are alcoholic or drug abusive, and many are also mentally ill. The same could be said for other subgroups we have considered. Whatever their current problems and disabilities, these men were there when the United States of American needed them. Do they not also deserve a return of the favour?

Sticking with the admittedly conservative one-third estimate, among the 563 adult men with whom we are left, 188 will be veterans; 375 non-elderly, non-veteran adults men are all that remain of the initial 1000. Sorting out this subgroup is in the HCH data, we find that a third are assessed by their care providers as having moderate to severe psychiatric impairments (not including alcohol or drug abuse). Many among this group have fallen through the cracks of the community mental health system. In the vast majority of cases, they pose no immediate danger to themselves or to others, and thus they are generally immune to involuntary commitment for psychiatric treatment. At the same time, their ability to care for themselves, especially in a street or shelter setting, is at best marginal. Compassion dictates that they to should be included amongst the “deserving” homeless.

Subtracting the 125 or so mentally disabled men from the remaining group of 375 leaves 250 of the original 1000. Among these 250 will be some 28 or so

men who are physically disabled and incapable of working. This includes the blind and the deaf, those confined to wheelchairs, the paraplegic, those with amputated limbs, and those with disabling chronic physical illnesses such as heart disease, AIDS, obstructive pulmonary disease, and others. Like the mentally disabled, these too can only be counted among the “deserving” group. Subtracting them leaves a mere 222, non-veteran adults males with no mental or physical disability, remaining.

Of these 222, a bit more than half (112 men ACCORDING TO statistics) will be found to have some sort of job. When applying the data to a sample of 1000 homeless people it suggests that 7 will have full-time jobs, 27 will have part-time jobs, and 78 will be employed on a sporadic basis. Peter Rossi’s Chicago data shows largely the same pattern (FOOTNOTE). The remaining 110 men must be unemployed. IF WE ASSUME THAT 61 of these men will be looking for work, then among the 222 will be 173 who are at least making the effort. These 173 people are most likely men who looking for work, but so far with no success, or have a job but not one paying well enough to allow them afford stable housing. This then leaves us with 49 people from the initial 1000 who are not members of homeless families, not women, not children, not elderly, not veteran, not mentally disabled, not physically disabled, not currently working, and not looking for work. Call these the “undeserving” homeless or, if you wish, lazy shiftless bums. They account for 5 percent of the total: a mere one in every twenty.

