

CHAPTER 37

One Thousand Points of Blight: Old, Female and Homeless in New York City

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Unfortunately, one thousand points of blight is too generous a title for this chapter, considering the growing dilemma of the poor elderly.¹ Throughout the nooks and crannies of our cities and suburbs, the older men, like those discussed in chapter nineteen of Sokolovsky's *The Cultural Context of Aging* (1997) have been joined by female age peers, as well as younger men, women and children. They are sleeping in parks, train stations, temporary shelters, alleyways, under bridges, in their cars and over heating grates (Golden 1992). This includes evicted families living in armories or doubled up with relatives, battered wives concealed in shelters trying to retain their lives, sanity and most of all, their children. Among these suffering ranks, women are the fastest-growing single category and 20 percent of this particular new homeless group consists of individuals over age 50.

Homeless women are not new to the American scene. While they were found among female camp followers of revolutionary times or the numerous depression era "box-car Berthas," even the 1930s did not produce the numbers of homeless older women now undomiciled. The increase of homelessness among older women is obscured by the movement of young men and young single women with children into the undomiciled ranks. Older women have been much harder to count as they tend to shun the large public shelters and choose either tiny charity shelters, drop-in centers or the streets.² While the percent of older women counted as homeless has dropped in the last decade, their absolute numbers are actually increasing (Cohen 1996a; Cohen et al. 1997).

When older homeless women have been conceptualized, it has either been as totally stigmatized adjuncts to alcoholic skid-row men (depicted in the novel *Ironweed*) or as the feisty, psychotic bag ladies dangerously alone in their own minds and lugging mysterious packages through the streets (as portrayed by Lucille Ball in the television drama "Stone Pillow"). Media coverage in the 1980s tended to romanticize these bag ladies and mythologize about their former lives as highly placed professionals—one report even

claimed to have found a former anthropology Ph.D. on the streets. During the depression, “sisters of the road” as they were sometimes called, were never accorded the symbolic, carefree panache of the male hobo, glamorized in song, movie and novel. They were regarded as adventurous, *unredeemable* deviants who should not exist. In our culture the only way such women can exist is as individuals of “spoiled identity”—a category of person almost impossible to recast as “normal.” Older women, typically, are socialized more than men to be linked to the private, domestic sphere of home and intimate social relations which involve some flavor of “kin-like” feelings.

Yet, the experience of homelessness forces older women into a physical and social world which is the antithesis of “home” and enduring kin relations. As will be seen in the following case illustration, such women can quickly exhaust the resources of kin and then are thrust into an inversion of the basic spheres by which our culture normally judges the realms of public/private/domestic. The culture of homelessness is dominated by large communal areas for accomplishing eating, sleeping and hygiene. These environments have been designed to accommodate the poor single male, who is more likely to have at least experienced such environments in the military, in boarding houses or in jail. Many of these women are presented with a terrible cultural and psychological paradox: by choosing to accept being housed in typical public shelters, they are moving even farther away from the cultural links to “home” than might even be created while living on the streets.

In a follow-up study to the “Old Men of the Bowery” project mentioned in Sokolovsky and Cohen (1997), in 1989 the National Institute of Mental Health funded a five-year study of older homeless women scattered throughout New York City. The larger project included a sample of 237 women age 50 or over. The following short piece is from my ethnographic fieldnotes recorded in the early stages of this project.³

SETTING

July 12, 1991, 10:30 A.M., Women’s Shelter (located in a U.S. Army Armory). I was told today by the head of social work that the Army does not want the shelter here and has fought efforts to improve ventilation and provide airconditioning. It is very hot today, in the mid-90s; there is still no air-conditioning up here and the big fans just blow the hot stale air into my face. As I enter the room where the case workers are sitting, I notice a woman, likely in her early sixties who is hounding one of the case workers as he enters the room. They are having a loud argument (it seems to be over needed bus fare). The case worker seems totally exasperated and quickly enters a nearby office and shuts the door. The woman storms around the room for a minute and gradually calms herself down and lingers outside the big office. I go over and introduce myself 388 Networks and Community and tell her about our study of older homeless women. She seemed eager to tell her story and I suggested we go to a nearby coffee shop to talk.

INTERVIEW

Question: Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to this shelter?

Just call me Val. I'll be 60 soon and my sister is pushing 70. We grew up in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. I was working in a factory in Queens, before they moved to New Jersey and I lost my job. I didn't know what to do, I was living with my sister and her grown daughter in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Before we got burned out of the apartment building, we were living in a two-family house nearby, but it was eventually sold. Our last place was four nice little rooms in a City-owned six-family building. We had lived there four years. But a fire destroyed the place. What the fire didn't take, people stole. Now we got nothin', except for a few pieces of clothing the shelters have given us. Together, we get about \$500 a month, what can you do with that, today?

First we went across the street to my friend's place—it was just her and her husband, but my sister's daughter could not take it and went her own way. We stayed there about a month and a half. Then we went to my niece's place in downtown Brooklyn, but she has eight kids so it is rather crowded there. It was tough, her husband and my sister were always getting into fights. We were tossed out at 2:30 in the morning. My niece had to choose between her man and us and she chose him. We went to the Red Cross and the welfare sent us to a drop-in center on Bond St., downtown and they sent us to some woman's shelter for the day. They fed us and transported us to the assessment shelter that night and we stayed there the required 21 days before coming to this shelter for older ladies. I felt totally disorientated: I kept on saying to myself, over and over again, "I'm actually homeless!" Well, you see, people read about homelessness and even sometimes sit down and converse about it with other people. And then when it's you, reality doesn't hit you until then. It's a frightful thing, it can blow your mind. This assessment shelter was for tough young people, a lot were lesbian, gay kids and it was hard to cope; and you really had to block a lot of situations out to cope, just to get to the next day.

Did you ever see this picture with Olivia de Havilland called *Snake Pit*? Well, this is the way the assessment shelter is. People talking to themselves and screaming at night; it's nothing you can describe, it's like a picture, quiet before a storm.

Lots of people around here need to be in a mental hospital. You line up for everything; that isn't so bad; but, you got to show your meal ticket, and they throw food at you. If you want another piece of bread you have an hour's wait, but then, you see the staff eating anytime. They curse you and talk to you like you're not human. It's bad enough just to be homeless, but it's worse when you are degraded and more or less, spit on. . . . That is hard to take.

Question: What were the first few days like?

It was like walking into living hell. I was glad in one sense 'cause I had a place to put my head. The place was very full when we were there; they let a pregnant woman sleep on the floor in the basement. . . . They give you a bed, but they put you through a degrading process, so that some people crack. If you were 5 or 10 minutes late they would snatch you out of bed and take it away and give it to a newcomer. Fortunately, we were in a small room like now—12–14 in a room. We were in one of the quieter rooms with ladies in our age group. But we had to sit in the TV room most of the time with the TV and stereo blaring, there was fighting and carrying on; I tried to stay mostly by myself. We had to be out of our rooms most of the day (from 8:30 A.M. to 6:30 P.M.).

Much of the time I took a book and went out and read until meal time. My sister would generally do what I did.

The food wasn't too good either. For Mother's Day, we had frozen cheese and string beans. They give you meals like dogs in there. . . .

Well, we finally get transferred here, to this better shelter for older women and the second night, when my sister is going to bed, a mouse runs up her arm and she has a heart attack, right there, and has been in the hospital for awhile.

My whole life now is getting my sister to kin in Georgia, and finding me a place, where I can close the door and have a key!

NOTES

1. The beginning part of the title of this chapter is a purposeful alteration of a phrase—"A Thousand Points of Light"—used in former President George Bush's Inaugural Address on January 20, 1989.

2. Drop-in centers in New York City provide limited respite from the streets and usually for relatively small numbers of homeless. They typically provide a place to get a meal and wash up. They are often linked with religious institutions which provide sleeping places overnight. Studies funded by the Bureau of the Census, in 1989, to evaluate their methods for counting the homeless, showed that those homeless in non-shelter environments were the hardest to count. Census takers may be missing 50 percent or more of this population.

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