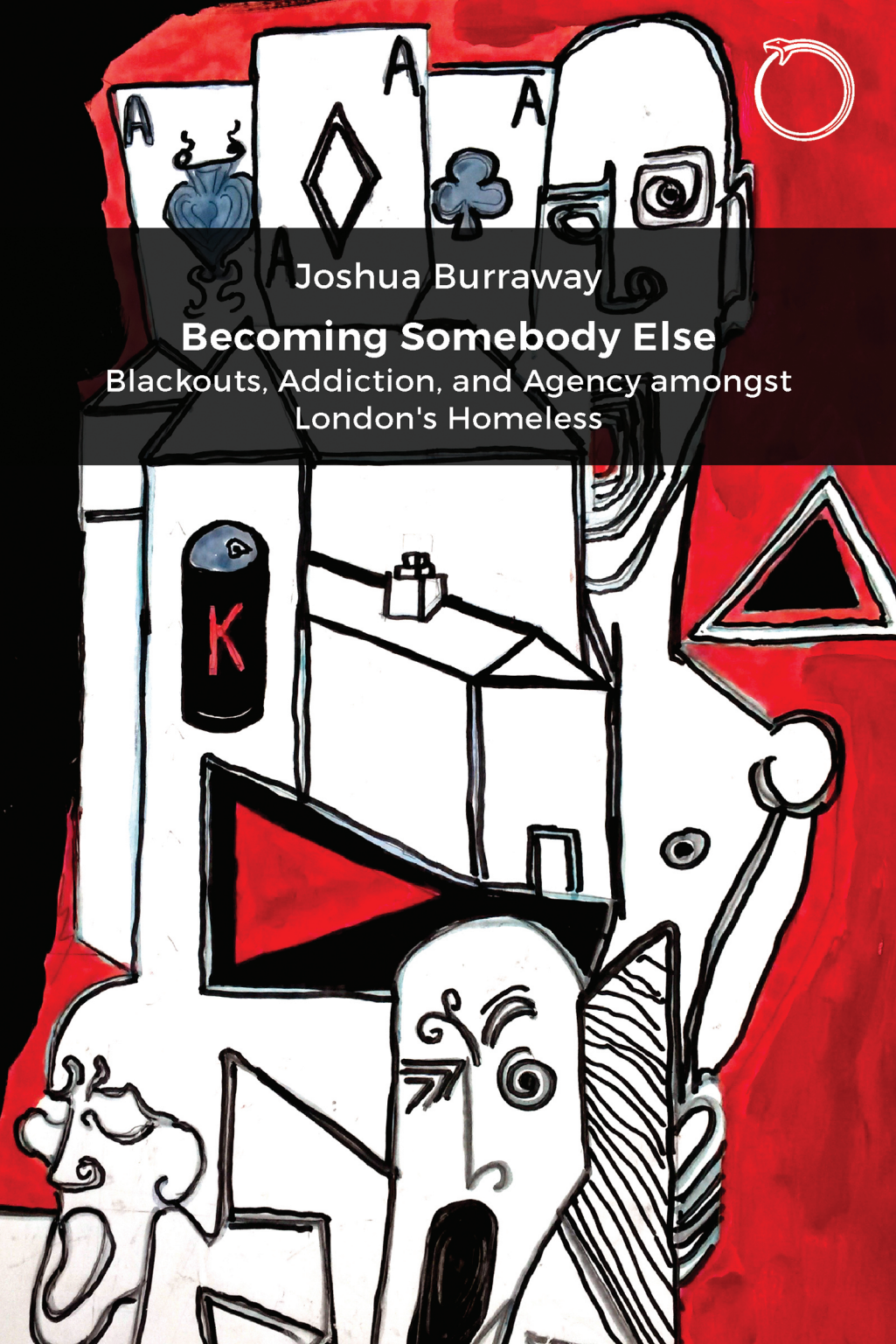




Joshua Burraway

Becoming Somebody Else

Blackouts, Addiction, and Agency amongst
London's Homeless



Becoming Somebody Else



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Prologue: Two Millimeters

What separates people experiencing homeless from those who don't? For Lenny, the difference was about two millimeters, give or take. More specifically, it was the two millimeter spring-loaded pin inside the lock on his front door that wouldn't move when he went to turn the key back in November 2014. How many times had he opened that door in the ten years he'd been living there? Enough times to give it no more than a second thought. The turning of a house key—just one tiny action in the churn of everyday life, no more or less eventful than the flicking of a light switch or the twisting of a bathroom tap. A second thought, on second thought, would be generous. Daily habit, in its relentless recursion, puts certain things almost entirely out of thought, stuffing them below the threshold of conscious reflection into the deeply seated repertoire of skills, techniques, and capacities that form the background noise of the self—where body, being, and materiality loop endlessly into one another's bounds.

This is the feeling of sliding a house key—*your* key—into the lock, the only lock, it is designed to fit. Heidegger had his hammer, Lenny his key. For a decade, Lenny's key had been "ready-to-hand"—it slid, as a hand moves into a glove, into the keyhole, each tooth and notch along the serrated edge caressing and cajoling the pins up and down until they aligned with the internal track that locksmiths know as the shear line: *Open Sesame*. Day in, day out: the familiar gliding feeling of the lock opening up to—welcoming—its missing half, the ratcheting sound as metal tooth rubs against metal pin, the intimate clunk as the cylinder turns and the latch releases.

The wrist turns and a closed door becomes an open house, and with such an opening up, everything that makes that house a home rushes in: the unopened letters on the floormat, the unique geometry of the furniture, the pictures on the mantel piece, the stains on the rug, the one creaky floorboard. Not to mention the smells—not just of cigarettes, laundry, and meals gone by—but of the people who smoked, wore, and ate them, the human beings who endure together within these spaces.

Does every home not have its own smell, its own signature bouquet? And what is that smell if not the emergent constellation of all those bodies and things and doings that happen within its contours? Of course, we take it for granted—the smell—just as we take the key—that tiny mechanical miracle—for granted. The key, once buried into the depth of our bodies, our daily routines—our “felt sense” of things—just works.

Right up to the point that it doesn't.

Which brings us back to those two millimeters. That was all that was required for the key to float up from the unconscious depths of Lenny's habits into the realm of a singular event. Unable to turn the lock, Lenny discovered the key's “unusability.” In its sticking in the lock, the key no longer functioned as a prosthesis to bridge the gap between the outside of public space and the privacy of home. When everyday tools like house keys refuse to do their job, they become unready-to-hand. Once unusable, it is a key only in name, the void created by this flight of purpose ushering in a new assemblage of meanings and realities. In Lenny's case, the estrangement of his key into just another curious lump of metal was also the moment where he became estranged from his home, his world. Just as the turning of his wrist had, for ten years, opened up this world into being, his failure to turn the key that day marked the closing off of this world, and with it his exile into street homelessness.

Lenny remembered the moment in technicolor. We were sitting on a bench on the north side of the Thames right next to London Bridge, taking a short break from a morning of almost nonstop walking.

At first I just stood there. Jiggling the key, y'know, like maybe it was just stuck. Then I realized it was all new and shiny—totally different color. That's when I realized. I thought, fuck! She's changed the fucking locks. Just like that. That was it, that was the moment I became homeless.

About ten days prior, Lenny's long-term partner, Christie, had suffered a fatal heart attack. With no obvious health problems as a warning sign, her death had come as a complete shock—the first domino in a sequence of luckless happenings. For Christie was also his de facto landlady. Though they had been cohabiting for a decade, there was no official

record of Lenny's tenancy. He had signed no formal agreement, paid no council tax, nor was he on the electoral role. Though it had served as his registered address for his welfare payments, he held no official claim to the property, be it as a tenant or otherwise. He had been, in legal terms at least, little more than an ongoing house guest who stayed there at his partner's pleasure. For the majority of their relationship, Lenny subsisted off a small welfare package interspersed with occasional cash-in-hand construction work. Now in his sixties, however, his ability to pick up and physically manage such manual labor jobs was severely diminished, leaving him almost entirely reliant on the welfare system. It was with these funds that he used to pay into the household economy that he shared with Christie, withdrawing some cash each month to put towards the bills. When Christie passed away, the property was inherited by her daughter, with whom she and Lenny enjoyed what could at best be described as a fractious relationship.

We never got on; always had a bee in her bonnet over me. But then she didn't get on with her mum either—they were always falling out. Massive rows. When she died they hadn't even spoken in years. I probably should have seen it coming, to be honest.

"It coming" was the changing of the locks, the moment when his unusable key became an artifact of his dispossession and an artifact of his most enduring loss. "We hadn't even held the funeral yet. That's how fuckin' quick she was. Can you believe it? She didn't even bother showing up, and there I was—homeless—on the day of her funeral." Racked with grief, no surviving family to speak of, and nowhere to go, Lenny sought shelter in the cemetery chapel, sleeping there for a couple of nights before being moved on by the ground staff. There would be much "moving on" in the coming months, his enforced movement into public space placing him at the mercy of those who police and monitor its boundaries. Sympathy always has a sell-by date, even in a graveyard. Its shelf life is even shorter on London's streets, the year-on-year rise in homelessness matched, step for step, by increasingly punitive legislation that targets and sanctions homeless bodies for their use of public spaces.

This constant traipsing around is why Lenny's feet are in such dire straits; he feels he has to keep moving for fear of being singled out. Stay anywhere too long and he becomes a target: for fines, for violence, for human waste.

I woke up the other night and there were a group of lads around me and one of them was just pissing on me—the rest of 'em laughin'. I thought, is that what I am now, a fucking toilet? But what could I do? There's fuckin'

ten of 'em. Before all of this they wouldn't have dared. But look at the shape I'm in now.

Lenny gestured towards the state of his body, sweeping his hands down his torso in manner that suggested a kind of melancholic exasperation, a yearning for something—*somebody*—that he used to have. Had Lenny been standing at his full height, rather than curled up in a sleeping bag in a doorway, it's likely true that they wouldn't have dared. Once standing, Lenny pushes six foot five. His shoulders are a pillory of muscle (a valuable asset when you have to carry your entire life in a single rucksack). Though born and raised in the United Kingdom, his father was an Afrikaner raised “on a diet of farming and rugby,” the genetic legacy of which can be seen not only in Lenny's broad back, but also in his dinner-plate hands and tree-trunk calves. In any other situation, then, his towering stature and physical presence would radiate strength and self-assurance. Sitting by the river though, the day-to-day realities of Lenny's homelessness have ruthlessly eaten away at his powerful presence, reducing whatever physical presence his body might have once had to the dull ache of lumpen misery.

His boots are at least half a size too small and riddled with holes. Nor would they be suitable for long-distance trekking, even if they were the right size. Acquired from a clothing hand-out at a day center on the other side of the river, Lenny's boots speak to the not-enoughness of his situation—a life endured at the margins where nothing fits and that which people do own is always on the verge of falling apart. The Thames was in a foul mood that morning, an easterly gale winding up the river's surface, causing its hackles to rise before abducting the top layer and whipping it up and over the banks and into my cheek, like an open palm slap covered in tiny needles.

Whereas I winced, Lenny didn't even register it, the slap. He was too busy fiddling with an errant strand of electrical tape that he had been using to keep the sole of his boot in place, cursing as he went. After jerry-rigging it back into something resembling its original place, Lenny sat back up and let out a deep sigh. He had—like every day before this eviction—been awake since dawn, the slightest sound invariably jolting him from a sleep so shallow that he was lucky to get even three hours per night.

Normally, Lenny has kind eyes that seem to smile even when his mouth does not. That day, though, his fatigue seemed to have caught up with him, that deep-set kindness hidden behind the glaze of extreme sleep debt, his eyes leaden and puffy with exhaustion. Until the night

before, he had been able to find a relatively quiet area around the back of the hospital in which to bed down, near enough an air vent to remain mostly dry. This little oasis was short-lived, however, hospital security moving him on and then hosing down the ground so as to make the area unfit for sleeping. Once awake, Lenny's only goal had been to keep moving, trudging his way through the city streets until The Manna Society, a small day center located in the heart of London Bridge, opened its doors at 7 a.m. Then he could finally get off his swollen and blistered feet, sit down, and take in some much-needed calories. Here, where I also had come, he was able to find some respite from the wind, from the indifference from strangers, and from the daily violence of the streets.

Constantly on the move, his feet are in a truly sorry state, the ill-fitting boots and sodden leather giving him the kind of problems that wouldn't look out of place in war trenches. His weight in freefall, the jeans he is wearing are held up by a length of rope that looks as resilient as his boots and about as sturdy. Lenny tries to see the osteopathic consultant whenever possible during clinic hours at the Manna. Lenny has been told unequivocally by the attending consultant that he needs to stop walking so much if his feet are to stand any chance of recovering. She tells him that at the very least he needs to find a new pair of shoes. Lenny accepts the advice with one hand only to disregard it with the other.

They say I've got to get off my feet, stop walking so much. Or else my feet are gonna get even worse, like I'm gonna need surgery and all that. They say I need new boots, that these ones aren't designed for all the walking I'm doing. I mean yeah, fair enough. My feet are fuckin' killing me. And getting new bandages on each week is a blessing. But where the fuck am I gonna get the money for new shoes? I've got barely enough to make it through the day as it is. What do they expect me to do? I walk here in the mornings, eat as much as I can, you know, trying to pack on the calories. I tell you, I've lost so much weight, down to almost twelve stone. I just can't seem to get enough calories down me, to keep my weight up, y'know? I should be at least three stone heavier, at least! But I don't have a choice, I've got to keep walking. When this place closes at lunchtime what else do I have to do? Can't go to sleep yet, wouldn't be able to anyway, too many people around. Plus, I've got to keep my bag with me, or else someone'll just fucking nick it. Just like they did with them jeans you given me last week. Only thing I can do is keep moving, keep out of people's way, out of trouble, keep my eye out for a new place to skip. Thing is I'm fuckin' wasting away at the moment, y'know? At this rate I'll be dead by the end of the month, just another number in the queue.

What does it mean to waste away on the streets of London, one of the world's wealthiest cities, being treated as waste by your fellow citizens? Who are these numbers who queue up each month for death, allowed to wither and die so long as they do so out of sight, out of mind? How, then, to occupy yourself in death's waiting room? How to pass the time? For Lenny, the only thing that offered him any kind of respite from the desperate conditions of his daily life was alcohol.

Ever since I've been out here I've found myself back on the drink. Was never much of a drinker before all this happened, now it seems like I'm a full blown alkie! What else am I gonna do though? You've gotta have a bit to drink in the evening...kills the time. Takes you out of the situation for a bit. Gives you a break from all this shit.

The situation¹—the *shit*—that Lenny is trapped within is complex, ever morphing, and multiscalar, which is to say that his homelessness encompasses every aspect of his existence as it dynamically unfolds in the world he is embedded within, affecting not only his body and material circumstances, but also his sense of time, space, and self. The extreme isolation, chronic exhaustion, physical infirmities, constant harassment, painful memories, relentless boredom, and hair-trigger anxiety intrinsic to rough sleeping brings about an existential torment that leaves Lenny craving some—*any*—kind of relief. However, with nothing to his name but his body and—quite literally—the clothes on his back, his analgesic choices are limited almost exclusively to chemically based options. These chemicals, in the ways that they pass through and between human bodies, coalesce along the lines of a single human imperative: to *escape*, however briefly and whatever the cost, the conditions of their existence. It is this escapist imperative, or more accurately the people who embody and live it each day—the Lennys of this world—that occupies the focus of this book.

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1. I use the term “situation” following Jarrett Zigon’s theorizing of the term. From his perspective, a situation can be conceived as “a non-totalizable singular multiple, which as such is an assembled intertwining that always has interstices, gaps, incompatibilities, and aspects of other assemblages” (2018: 83). If I am reading him correctly, a situation, as Zigon understands it, is the temporary and local manifestation of diffuse but interlocking social, political, moral, economic, institutional, and historical forces, creating the shared conditions of existence—the worlds—that people find themselves “caught up in.”

Introduction

Dropping Like Flies

In order to better understand the kinds of chemically induced states people who experience homelessness escape into, we must first turn our attention to the very conditions they seek to break out from. Put another way, if pharmacological relief is the response, what is the nature of their suffering? Questions pertaining to the dynamics of human suffering are nothing new to the social sciences—anthropology being no exception. Indeed, for over four decades, anthropologists have been locked in fierce debates about how people who live under brutalizing social and political conditions should be accounted for, attended to, and represented in contexts of ethnographic writing and anthropological theorizing (Biehl 2005; Das 2015; Das et al. 2000; Fassin 2014; Kleinman et al. 1997; Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013). As distinct phenomena, homelessness and addiction can be categorized as “wicked problems”—intractably complex issues with multiple and interconnected causes. They are also both wicked in the more traditional moral sense of causing great harm and suffering to those who find themselves ensnared in these conditions. For those who are caught up in both simultaneously, the problem becomes doubly (or perhaps quadruply) wicked. The fact that situations of homelessness and addiction so consistently overlap is no mere twist of fate. Not unlike two substances whose pharmacokinetic capacities within the body reciprocally amplify the potency of the other, homelessness and addiction enjoy a similar mutuality, the reality of one frequently intensifying that of the other. The trajectories of this entanglement, though, are anything but preset. For every person

who struggled with substance use issues before they slipped into homelessness, there are those who had never even considered drinking or using before they found themselves on the streets. Nevertheless, what remains empirically undeniable is that those who do end up experiencing homelessness are disproportionately likely to suffer from substance use issues compared to other groups, a reality that is borne out most egregiously in the mortality rates that show them living on average thirty years less than their housed counterparts, with complications relating to drugs and alcohol *the* primary driver of death and morbidity.¹ It is, in short, a fatally dangerous situation for a person to find themselves swept up in.

The homeless community I worked with, it must be said, were not ignorant of the mortal risks they faced in relation to their substance use. During my sixteen months in the field, there were two fatal opioid overdoses, one death from exposure to subzero temperatures after the person in question lost consciousness following a drinking binge, two suicides that were carried out under conditions of intoxication, and innumerable other near misses. Combine this with escalating levels of liver cirrhosis from excessive drinking, the spread of potentially deadly infections from shared needles, as well as the constellation of co-occurring mental health issues, and it is not an exaggeration to say that this group both understood, and in many ways courted, death with an extraordinary intimacy. As Max—someone we will meet in greater depth later on—said after finding out about the death of someone he knew from a suspected fentanyl overdose: “We’re dropping like flies around here! Who’s gonna be next!” He then began to laugh: “Maybe me, at the rate I’m going! If I go just make sure to have a hit in my honor—just don’t go too big!” The others around him who were listening chuckled, shaking their heads in mock condemnation at the “too-soon-ness” of Max’s joke, before raising their cans of beer and cider in a sort of funeral toast, seeming to address both the actually deceased

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1. Alcohol accounts for approximately 40 percent of all deaths among homeless people. Statistics taken from: “Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2019 registrations,” by Asim Butt and Paul Breen, 2020. Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2019registrations#causes-of-death-among-homeless-people>. Accessed 2021.

alongside Max's future corpse and perhaps even their own overdosed bodies.

What to make of Max's laughter in the face of death? To some, Max's laughter might look like a kind of displacement, a shifting of the emotional goalposts such that the death he is faced with—a death that could all too easily claim him too—is transformed from something upsetting into something amusing, actively detaching himself from its otherwise unbearable reality. More than just a clever bit of gallows humor, though, Max's suggestion that those who survive him—should he be next—celebrate his life by injecting the very substance that would have killed him, and in so doing risk their own lives, is not so much about creating distance from this other man's death. Rather, it is about articulating in quite visceral terms their extraordinary proximity to it, namely that any one of them *could be next*. It is a poignant reminder that removing death is not an option so long as they remain stuck in patterns of homelessness and risky substance use. Affirming what other anthropologists have observed in social spaces where human life is rendered highly fragile or even expendable, people use humor as a means of living alongside death (Harrison 2015; Mbembe 2003; Romanillos 2015; Rehak and Trnka 2018). Max's laughter, then, is not so much at death as it is *with* death—a move that allows him to express the mortal precarity and bodily vulnerability he and his fellow homeless are faced with by virtue of their shared existential conditions. His joking in a space of death can thus be thought of as a form of life.

This book is not about joking and laughter. Nor is it about death, for that matter—at least not explicitly. That said, it does concern itself with forms of life—like Max's joke—that swirl and eddy around the vacuums created by absence, of which death is surely the ultimate. The vacuums I am talking about here concern the dissociative states of being that people experiencing homelessness slip into through their heavy consumption of psychoactive substances, including but not limited to alcohol, cannabinoids, opioids, and benzodiazepines. The apotheosis of these memoryless states, as this book will argue, is the blackout. Not to be confused with passing out, the blackout is best conceptualized as a kind of transient, chemically induced amnesia. It is this phenomenon that I have committed the book's analytical energy towards, my ethnographic attention utterly captivated by the blackout's unique mode of embodiment as my interlocutors seemed each day to willfully unravel the all-too-fragile seams between time, memory, body, agency, and self.

Anthropology and Intoxication

The drug-induced blackout, as a particular mode of intoxicated subjectivity, has enjoyed precious little anthropological airtime, occasionally mentioned or alluded to within ethnographic accounts of addiction, but never as the central object of study. One exception to this is the state of *agsan* described by Morten Axel Pedersen (2011) in his study of shamanic potentialities in postsocialist Mongolia. As a condition of violent drunken rage that occurs when men become taken over by occult forces, *agsan* bears some important similarities to the blackout states I explore in this book, something I will revisit in chapter 5. Pedersen's work notwithstanding, blackout states that emerge via alcohol or drugs are rarely afforded anything like pride of place in the anthropological canon even though they remain one of the most prevalent embodied experiences across heavy substance users, as well as being one of the most subjectively disorienting. What little has been written can be located primarily in the clinical and psychoanalytic literature, where (as will be illustrated in greater detail in chapter 4) it has been historically viewed as a "phase" within the broader psychopathology of alcoholism and drug addiction. The neglect within the anthropological literature echoes a broader reluctance within the discipline to engage with the experiential nature of intoxicants and the complex subjectivities they engender. Historically, intoxicants have been afforded bit part roles by ethnographers who have been happy enough to explore their symbolic functions within certain social, cultural, and ritual arenas (Antze 1987; Bott 1987; Douglas 1987; Garvey 2005; Gusfield 1987; Holt 2006, Hunt et al. 2009; Joralemon 1984; Kasmir 2005; Mitchell and Armstrong 2005; Papagaroufali 2002; Goodman et al. 2014) but have all too often stopped short of phenomenologically exploring the embodied experience of these substances as they work their particular brands of chemical magic on those who ingest them.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to this. Philippe Bourgois's (1998) experientially rich account of "speedballing"—ingesting a mixture of heroin and cocaine—in a New York shooting gallery springs to mind, in which he poetically captured the seesaw subjectivity indigent substance users experience as they are thrown between conflicting states of analgesic oblivion and cocaine-infused hyperstimulation. To this we might add Joseph Calabrese's (2008) firsthand account of the hallucinogenic matrix of affects, visions, sensations, insights, and interpretive activities that comprise Peyote meetings among the Navajo. Then there

is Allison Schlosser and Lee Hoffer's (2012) work on the intersection between psychopharmaceutical medication with illicit drugs in the formation of complex patient subjectivities that in themselves problematize easy distinctions between "good" medicines and "bad" drugs.² Another important body of work in this area is that of Angela Garcia (2010), whose work delves into melancholic forms of subjectivity in contexts of intergenerational heroin use (and overdose) among socioeconomically deprived Hispano families in New Mexico. Jason Pine's (2016) account of the way that methamphetamine "fires up" the human body, and sends those who take it spiraling into complex webs of affect, possibility, ruination, and subjective dissolution as selves are made, unmade, and remade across the meth-brain barrier is another good example. These pieces of scholarship, however, tend to be the exception³ rather than the rule.

2. See also Meyers 2014.

3. It is worth pointing out that the burgeoning anthropological subfield of addiction that began in the 1960s has its roots in the innovative work of several sociologists. Using primarily ethnographic methods, these influential scholars argued not only that substance use tends to be culturally constructed around local needs and concerns (Dai 1937; Lindesmith 1947), but that the pathologization narratives ascribed to substance users are as well (Becker 1963). These sociologists were the pioneers of the "subcultural" approach to addiction, a move that sought to go beyond narratives of deviance and exclusion and instead focus on the complexities and intimacies that pervade substance-using social groups. While the "sub-" prefix (literally meaning "below") arguably risks reifying hierarchical divisions of "good" versus "bad" forms of human social life, the purpose of this term was to call to attention the myriad ways that people on the periphery carve out ways of living that are at variance with the prevailing cultural center. The so-called "underworld" of drug addiction, in other words, is just that—a *world*, one teeming with complex forms of sociality that cannot be so easily explained away through the dehumanizing language of deviance and moral decay. Emerging predominantly from street-based research in America's inner cities, these rich sociological accounts—in their detailed descriptions of the selling, buying, sharing, and consumption of drugs—demonstrated these practices to be foundational to the daily lives of vulnerable and marginalized people (see Feldman 1968; Fiddle 1967; Partridge 1973; Sutter 1966).

Particularly influential here was the work of Edward Preble and John Casey (1969), who described in intimate detail the social life of lower-class heroin users in New York City. For these users, tracking down and injecting heroin is understood as a "career." It is a never-ending hustle that, from

None of which is to say that there has not been a tremendous amount of work carried out in anthropology and the social sciences more broadly on the topic of addiction. Indeed, since capturing the discipline's attention in the 1960s, addiction—as a both a lived experience and a set of concepts—has provided a powerful prism through which anthropologists have investigated a dizzying range of human concerns, including but not limited to morality, law, biology, neurochemistry, pharmaceuticalization, agency, free will, and structural violence. This boom in interest was, in large part, stoked by major historical transformations in how our sociopolitical structures have come to understand and regulate the human consumption of psychoactive chemicals (Alexander 2012; Gusfield 1967; Lusane and Desmond 1991; Musto 1999). These transformations include how such chemicals have been culturally and medically conceived. For example, many contemporary “street drugs,” such as cocaine and opiates, were often prescribed during the turn of the twentieth century as over-the-counter treatments for everyday maladies. These transformations also reflect political changes, notably around interconnected themes of race, class, criminality, and power (Bourgois 2000; Garriott 2011; Lyons 2014; Netherland and Hansen 2016, 2017). As rising levels of socioeconomic and racial inequality in the West became tangled up with major public health concerns—such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic—the question of where and why substance use patterns fitted into these crises became paramount (Carlson et al. 2009; Kaplan and Verbraeck 2001; Singer 2012). Addiction has thus emerged as a central concept through which to consider the complex intersection between drug use, therapeutics (Dupuis 2022), epidemiology, and sociopolitical exclusion (Bartlett 2020; Garcia 2015; Hansen 2018; Raikhel 2016).

Despite addiction's burgeoning expansion into our disciplinary consciousness, embodied experiences of intoxication have tended to take a back seat as anthropologists have overwhelmingly devoted their

making money to buying the drugs, emerges as a full-time job that imbues each day with meaning, purpose, and business. A major contribution of this body of literature was to challenge entrenched myths surrounding drug consumption, especially intravenous usage, which had historically been viewed with high levels of moral panic. In many countries, notably in the United States, the puritanical fear of needles remains ingrained in public health policy, with needle exchange programs regularly defanged or shut down out of the unfounded fear that they abet drug use (Rhodes et al. 2005).

attention to the structural conditions that drive substance use (Rhodes et al. 2005; Jervis et al. 2003; Singer and Snipes 1992; Zigon 2015, 2019), the sociality, interdependence, and rituals that encompass them (Heath 1958, 1987; Hughes 2007; Wakeman 2016), the epistemological foundations through which addiction becomes categorized (i.e., whether it is classed as a health, criminal, or spiritual issue, or some complex blend thereof; see Kaye 2013; Vrecko 2010; Hansen 2004), the institutional and therapeutic management of addiction (Brandes 2002; Campbell and Shaw 2008; Carr 2011; Parker 2020), and the models of personhood that shape culturally how addiction is understood and negotiated (McKim 2014; Scherz and Mapanga 2019; Raikhel 2012). These, of course, are all fundamental pieces of addiction's unique and ever-shifting puzzle—no small number of which I will also be engaging with over the course of this book. Nevertheless, when it comes to the ontological realities of intoxication—that is, what it means to be intoxicated—anthropologists have been far less forthcoming and ultimately less ambitious in their analysis.

The Art of Intoxication

The relative gun-shyness described above might, in part, be a response to the sheer slipperiness of intoxicated consciousness, to the way it twists and squirms its way out of linguistic signification. Certainly, the genre of ethnographic writing—for all its more recent emphasis on representational experimentation—remains stubbornly tethered to its positivist past, far more likely to align itself with the prosaic domain of science than the poesis of art. Which is why it is maybe not surprising that art—in all its many forms—has approached the question of intoxicated consciousness with far greater appetite and zeal, seeking not—as recent work in the biomedical and neurological sciences has done—to reduce it to internal biomolecular mechanisms, but rather to express it in all its vast human ambiguity, indeterminacy, and contradictions. We might think of the work of William Burroughs (1953, 1959), whose nightmarish, hallucinatory aesthetic straddled both novel and canvas, his ability to evoke the creative destruction of heroin in his writing echoed in his “shotgun paintings” where the blast from the weapon through tins of paint was used to unmake objects into new forms, obliterating context and rendering all indeterminate. We can detect a similar ballistic energy in the work of Jackson Pollock, whose extreme mode of drip canvas

expressionism has been said to gesture to the chaos of his own substance use issues and intoxicated neuroses. Some of the West's most prominent poets—notably Samuel Coleridge—sought expression of their intoxicated experience through verse, with the surreal imagery of *Kubla Khan* thrown into existence at least in part from Coleridge's regular descents into opium dreamworlds.

As arguably the first narrative account that delved into both the seductive ecstasies as well as the craving of substance use, De Quincey's 1821 work *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* can be thought of as a precursor to the contemporary drug memoir with its familiar tale of initial euphoria, diminishing returns, and subsequent cycles of intoxication, withdrawal, and relapse. In calling out this irreconcilable tension between opium's irresistible pleasure and its excoriating misery, De Quincey had succeeded in mapping out a visceral account of addiction that would be revisited and reimagined countless times across the literary field. One especially potent reemergence in the contemporary is the "dirty realism" of Charles Bukowski, whose semi-autobiographical body of work (1973, 1974, 1977, 1983, 1997) wove poetic patterns across what he understood to be the unique, double-edged liberation of intoxicated subjectivity. For Bukowski, alcohol and writing both offered an escape from the ugly realities of everyday American life, his often violent (to himself and others) prose-poetry continuously veering into the realm of the anesthetic to the point where to read Bukowski is to feel boozy-woozy, as though the barstool you suddenly find yourself sitting on is about to give way. In contrast to De Quincey, whose accounts of opium's unique blend of ecstasy and misery were anchored primarily to the ups and downs of the author's internal world, the characters who sit at the heart of Bukowski's work are, for all their solipsistic bravado, always responding to the broader conditions of their external world, one that Bukowski identifies as rife with meaninglessness, boredom, dehumanizing labor structures, and social suffering. It is this tying of intoxicated subjectivity to a critical political and historical consciousness that has occasionally made Bukowski's poems, short stories, and novels attractive to anthropologists, lured to the seamless way that his protagonists finesse the murky boundaries between embodied reality, human agency, and structural circumstance (Saris 2013).

Bukowski's work notwithstanding, there is perhaps one literary work above all others that has probed most deeply at the phenomenon under investigation in this book—Patrick Hamilton's 1941 novel *Hangover Square*. Set against the final days of peace before Europe's slide into the

abyss of the Second World War, the novel stories the life of George Harvey Bone, a downtrodden, hopelessly infatuated man who increasingly finds himself slipping into his own internal abyss. As George hops from pub to pub, drowning himself in alcohol and desperately courting the attention of a woman, he finds the “dead moods” that have been stalking him since childhood have started to intensify. Fueled by humiliations, these dissociative episodes eventually take the form of psychotic blackouts where George becomes preoccupied by a singular obsession—murder.

The schizoid interplay between self and nonself, between being present in the world and moving through it—as George Harvey Bone described—like “a silent film without music,” is at the heart of what it means to be blacked out. Though Bone exists within a fictional world, we would do well to remember that fiction, like any form of artistic expression, is always grounded in specific cultural and historical contexts. As scholars working in the still somewhat marginal subfield of literary anthropology have noted, literature’s power lies in its ability to inspire a critical imagination by helping the reader explore their own society, history, and culture through new eyes (Cohen 2013). In other words, to read authors like Hamilton, Bukowski, and Burroughs⁴ is to be inspired to think differently. This book harbors similar aspirations, the hope being that, by the end, the reader will think about the blackout and its relation to homeless existence quite differently than when they opened it up. In what remains of this introductory chapter, I attend to the core theoretical and methodological frameworks I will be employing to try and make this hope a reality.

What Are We Forgetting?

Like most anthropologists, the phenomenon I have dedicated myself to exploring was not what I had originally intended to study. Certainly, I was interested broadly in questions of addiction, vulnerability, structural

4. For other authors who also dedicated much of their literary lives to exploring the ethereal realm of intoxicated subjectivity, we might also consider the work of Malcolm Lowry, Dylan Thomas, David Foster Wallace, James Joyce, John Healy, Aldous Huxley, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O’Neill, Ernest Hemingway, William Styron, and William Kennedy.

violence, and spatiotemporality What I did not realize, however, was that these questions would crystallize so jarringly around a singular embodied experience. I also did not anticipate how prominently processes of memory and forgetting would figure in this project. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that they are the central scaffolding on which this book's argument rests. Here, after all, was a group of people who quite literally seemed each day to willingly abandon their bodies and selves, forfeiting their agency to a state of being that, stripped of their memories, they had access to only through oblivion. I found myself awash with questions: What was this state they were slipping into? What did it mean to exist as a being without memory? What happens when the supposedly synthetic link between past, present, and future, between anticipation and memory, begins to break apart? What does a sense of time look like in the absence of memory? If such a being does exist, what does it tell us about the role of memory in the constitution of subjectivity, of temporality?

While these sorts of questions have traditionally been the preserve of continental philosophy and more recently cognitive neuroscience, they are fundamentally anthropological questions as well. Indeed, that these questions coalesce within the experience of blackout makes it a profound object for ethnographic inquiry. It is also a fiendishly slippery object. After all, you can't ask someone to directly reflect on the moment-to-moment realities of the blackout—it is, by its very definition, unavailable to conscious reflection. It would be a bit like asking an anesthetized patient to talk you through the experience of their surgery. At first glance then, it is tempting to suggest that all forms of oblivion are essentially off limits, the blackout as black hole, so to speak. This, though, would be a mistake. After all, if this were the case, would anthropology—as it currently does—be able to discuss and explore the erasures of memory in the wake of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as in the case of soldiers returning from conflict (Young 1995), victims of sexual assault (Mulla 2014), or those who have survived natural disasters (Simpson 2014)?⁵ Or what about the dialectic between memory and forgetting in the wake of political violence—such as in genocide (Hinton and Hinton 2015)

5. See also Seale-Feldman (2020) for a critical phenomenological approach to the Nepalese earthquakes of 2015. Seale-Feldman demonstrates the way in which the vacuum left by natural disasters initiates complex configurations of ethical work that both reproduce and challenge existing therapeutic care structures.

or torture (Hughes 2013)? Would we be able to attend, diligently as we have, to the bodily and relational dynamics of dementia and other forms of senility that are defined, above all, by memory's absence (Leibing and Cohen 2006; Randall 2009)? Had we thrown in the towel the moment that our interlocutors' memories fled the scene, we would not have such rich anthropological accounts of phenomena like *ataque de nervios* in Puerto Rico (Guarnaccia 1993), *amok* in Indonesia (Good and Good 2001), blind rage in the American inner-city (Karandinos et al. 2014), or *agsan* in postsocialist Mongolia (Pedersen 2011), all of which exhibit distinctly amnesiac qualities.

Rather than providing a detailed literature review of these studies right here, I will be evoking the most relevant cases at germane points throughout the book. I will be paying rigorous attention to the existential and temporal dynamics of the blackout in chapters 4 and 5. For now, it simply bears emphasizing that just because something is forgotten—be it a traumatic event, a painful memory, an everyday conversation, a ritual transformation, a religious message, a healing rite, a surgical procedure, the infliction of violence, the face of a family member, or even a public monument—does not mean that it is somehow unyoked from the lived tapestry of human experience, destined for the dustbin of ethnographic inquisition. Rather, in many cases, forgetting is the defining aspect of that experience. Indeed, memory has spawned such a vast corpus of scholarly inquiry—across both the social and cognitive sciences—precisely because it is so unreliable, intractable, and prone to fault (Argenti and Schramm 2009; Berliner 2005; Bloch 2018; Carsten 1995, 2007; Ricoeur 1984). How often does it trip us up in the course of our conversations? How often does it become a sticking point of contestation in the ebb and flow of our most intimate relationships? How often does it break down on the tip of our tongue, or else in our fingers when we misplace something? Of course, there are plenty of other moments in our lives where it provides synthesis and continuity, be it at the personal level, such as when singing along to the words of a favorite tune or remembering to buy a gift for our partner's birthday, or at the cultural and political level, such as when we transmit shared memories of the past through rituals of mourning or commemoration (Empson 2007; Severi 2016; Wagner 2008).

With regards to the everyday flow of perception, it seems fair to say that we are in a constant state of noticing and remembering some things while ignoring and forgetting others. For those who consider the sieve-like way that our perceptive consciousness filters out some things over

others as somehow a limiting aspect of being human—our fatal flaw, as it were—consider the cautionary tale offered up by Jorge Luis Borges about Funes, the man who is unable to forget anything. Lamenting his preternatural ability, Funes says: “I alone have more memories than all mankind has probably had since the world has been the world” (1964: 64). Rendered more or less omniscient by his infallible memory, Funes is the living embodiment of the forsaken—if all too human—pursuit of absolute knowledge. Rather than experiencing this gift as a blessing, he is tortured by his hyper-encyclopedic memory. Unable to participate in any kind of meaningful social life, he isolates himself in his bed chamber, shrouding himself in darkness and passing the time by conjuring and committing to memory an “infinite vocabulary.” Borges, a master at playing with themes of human temporality, created the character of Funes to remind us that forgetting, as ongoing practice, is foundational of our being-in-the-world. This idea chimes with one of Nietzsche’s (1996) famous moral imperatives, namely that the past—in certain moments—ought to be sent into exile through the “active forgetting” of memories and experiences that might disrupt the flow of present and compromise future existence. In this sense, active forgetting constitutes a kind of strategic disarmament of the past in order to circumvent the ghostly and melancholic echoes that invariably reverberate into the present.

Memory and forgetting, then, are not so much structural opposites as they are obverse—two sides of the same coin. The dynamics of what you remember and what you forget, as well as how you remember and how you forget, are fundamental to how we come to constitute ourselves, not only at the psychological and cognitive level, but also at the existential and sociopolitical level. So, if a primary goal of this book is to provide as rich an account as possible of the drug-induced blackout within the context of homelessness, it would be fatal to hunker down in our epistemic silos as if one single domain—the psychological, the neurological, the biochemical, the sociopolitical, or the cultural—were sufficiently exhaustive. What is needed, then, is a methodological and analytical toolkit that allows us the descriptive agility to cut through and find synthetic crossovers between all these domains.

Anyone who owns a toolkit will appreciate that it contains all manner of instruments, all of which are designed to do different jobs. You use a hammer if you want to hammer a shelf into place, rather than lashing at the out-sticking nail with a screwdriver. Likewise, if you want to cut a piece of wood in half, you reach for the saw, and not a pair of pliers. The point is that certain tools are suited to certain jobs—that’s why we

acquire a kit, so we have options. In anthropology, our tools are the explanatory models that we use to think with. And, just like the instruments in a toolkit, some explanatory models will be more appropriate than others, depending on the context that we are trying to explore or understand, or indeed the claims we are trying to convince others of.

To take the analogy a step further, when a carpenter is faced with a big or elaborate job, be it constructing the foundations for a house or crafting an intricate piece of furniture, they will use multiple tools, breaking the job down into its constituent parts and using the right tool for each segment; this process of fragmentation serves, in the end, to produce the whole. Unlike an ornate armoire or a series of joists, however, the job of anthropology is perpetually unfinished. Such is the dynamism of human life over the immobility of timber. Nevertheless, this does not mean, as Michael Jackson (1998, 2005, 2012, 2013) suggests, that we should not be pragmatic and diligent in choosing which explanatory models to withdraw from our conceptual toolkit. His point, one that I follow, is that our choices should be responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that we, as ethnographers, find ourselves caught up in, intellectually bound as we are to then make (some) sense of these worlds. With respect to the worlds I was invited into, it is the phenomenological tradition that I will be drawing on most extensively throughout the course of this book. Few other branches of intellectual thought have attended so deeply to questions of experience, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and embodied existence. Not wanting to foist upon the reader an exhaustive history of the phenomenological tradition, I will instead lay out some of the most relevant and important ways it has been applied by anthropologists, teasing out for the reader its methodological and analytical utility for the job that lies ahead.

Unpacking the Toolkit

Phenomenology can, simply put, be understood as a broad philosophical method that seeks to reveal the structure and conditions of lived experience by articulating how the world appears and is felt from an embodied perspective. Rather than trying to argue for and prove some preconditional “logic” of reality, phenomenology attempts to trace the ways that a person’s experience of the world around them—their very being-in-the-world—emerges out of their intrinsic entanglement and submersion in a world that always already matters. From this perspective, meaningful

existence does not emerge out of some a priori set of facts, but rather from the situational possibilities that emerge from the dynamism of a relational world in constant motion.

The first inklings of an explicitly phenomenological analysis within the anthropological canon can be traced back to Alfred Irving Hallowell ([1954] 1967) and his explorations of how selfhood was fashioned among Ojibwa communities. Departing from the structural-functional paradigms that were, at the time, the vogue of the British tradition, Hallowell extolled the virtues of a phenomenological approach, emphasizing its capacity to include the agencies of spirits and ancestors within ethnographic descriptions of the Ojibwa lifeworld. While Hallowell, as Thomas Csordas (1994) argued, begins his analysis with a preconceived vision of the Ojibwa self that possibly revealed as much about his own cultural background as it did about the local context, the rest of his analysis remains distinctly phenomenological to the extent that it accounted for the existence of nonhuman beings not as a figment of belief, but as an ontological reality that was shaped by culturally defined “bodily and perceptual engagements with the lifeworld” (Hallowell [1954] 1967: 38).

The best known exponents of this phenomenological tradition—thinkers such as Thomas Csordas, Byron Good and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Michael Jackson, Jason Throop, Cheryl Mattingly, and Jarrett Zigon—have built much of their careers by seeking critical dialogue with this philosophical tradition, using it as a framework for thinking about how local worlds and possibilities come into and out of being, the perspectives and historical forces that structure these worlds, and the types of bodies and concepts that move through and within them. For many of those anthropologists experimenting with this explanatory model, the phenomenological provided a means of puncturing the cult of rationality that has historically shaped the anthropological project, more specifically the “wink-and-nod” structural-functionalism that ethnographers tended to indulge in when separating local “beliefs” from what were considered to be universal truths—truths that were seemingly exclusive to Western epistemology. Such a position can be summed up in the following way: here is what they, over there, *believe* is going on. Of course, we, over here, *know* what is really going on. Rather than reifying this deeply ethnocentric distinction between belief and knowledge, the phenomenological grounds knowledge in local worlds of experience, agency, and embodied practice, emphasizing that a multiplex of different perspectives emerges within these worlds, shaping not just the cultural

specificity of these domains, but how culture itself is experienced and made sense of.

Besides its potential for shaking up anthropology's epistemic assumptions, the phenomenological has also provided a profound avenue for descriptive agility at the level of ethnographic analysis, especially when faced with those whose lives and worlds are changed in the course of major social and existential events, such as severe illnesses (Biehl et al. 2007) or traumatic experiences such as collective violence (Das 2007), solitary confinement (Guenther 2013), or extreme destitution (Desjarlais 1997). Rather than describing the lived experience of, in this case, blackouts through a biomedicalized discourse of interiority—be it through psychocognitive interpretations or neurochemical models centered around brain chemistry—the phenomenological instead looks to interrogate how “being” blacked out changes the everyday stakes of existence, how the world literally morphs in shape and shade as the situations and relationships around them shift and, quite often, fall apart. In such cases, the conceptual vocabulary laced into phenomenological modes of analysis can offer unique and often thought-provoking avenues for exploring what Good calls the “shifts in ordinary reality associated with serious illness” (2012: 26).

Within this tradition of thought, the focal point of anthropological analysis shifts away from the pursuit of objective “truth” vis-à-vis cultural-symbolic systems, moving instead towards the subjective substance of particular interactions as they unfold in an always already relationally constituted lifeworld (Schutz 1972). In this sense, experience is not a stand-alone mental process, but rather it emerges through interhuman encounters, *between* people rather than within them. Despite the many conceptual developments and theoretical interventions that have arisen within phenomenological anthropology since Hallowell first published his work, his original notion of the “behavioral environment” is still instructive. Indeed, his idea that human beings make their way in the world in accordance with a subjective orientation that is psychologically and somatically attuned to the lived realities of their immediate social and material environment ([1954] 1967) has become more or less a staple of anthropological thought, on par with the presumption of cultural heterogeneity. Further to that, the theoretical preeminence of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962), as the primordial condition for culture itself (Csordas 1994), has itself given rise to a vast corpus of literature that takes as its focus the intersection between self, body, and environment.

Phenomenology has also articulated a deeply rich theory of time and temporal experience. Time, after all, pervades all levels of human existence. By this very token, then, it is foundational to our embodied and social capacities for memory and forgetting—the spinning coin around which the experience of blackout takes shape. Here, I briefly outline three modalities of time that come together in the context of temporal experience. I do this because articulating the way in which these three dimensions bleed into one another within the lifeworlds of the homeless remains a central ambition of this book.

Clock Time

Clock time is the modality of time that systemically organizes temporality into a universal measure. It is the time we use to measure the sequential passing of events. When we say that we endured an eight-hour flight or that our train arrived before we managed to make it to the platform, we are arranging these things into a clear sense of before and after, the gap between which is measured through the divisible units of the ticking clock. It is through the clock and its digital analogues that we have been able to systemically institutionalize time into public technologies that appear at once objective and verifiable. This is time that we have been socialized to share as a common resource, to prop up and channel the flow of a world we collectively inhabit.

The philosopher Henri Bergson ([1911] 1991) famously described clock time as “artificial,” arguing against the notion of time as a series of divisible, measurable units. He suggested that this conventional view misrepresents the continuous and qualitative nature of temporal experience. This flow, he argued, cannot be broken down into discrete parts without losing its essence, much like a melody cannot be understood by simply pulling apart its individual notes but must be heard as a whole to appreciate its true nature. He likens duration to an elastic, continuous action rather than a series of static moments. For Bergson, the act of stretching an elastic band longer and longer is a useful analogy to think with insofar as it is the action itself—the motion of stretching—rather than the resulting length of the band that captures the essence of durative consciousness. Bergson’s view of consciousness and time as indivisible wholes contrasted sharply with the dominant mechanistic views of the period, which typically dissected time into the countable units of the clock. He maintained that the essence of life’s continuous creative process—what

he called “*élan vital*”—are found within this indivisible flow of duration. His was an invitation to step out of the conventional, spatial mode of thinking about time and instead reckon with its continuous, qualitative aspects. This, he argued, is closer to our real experience of time and consciousness, which are far more than just the sum of their parts.

Subjective Time

Bergson’s insights lead us to the second level of time—subjective time. This temporal modality denotes the experience of a durative and sequentially unfolding present. Such durativity speaks to the notion of consciousness as an ever-permeating matrix of states that has no intervals in and of itself. This, then, is the level of time that structures the changing states of conscious life. It is through subjective time that intention and experience permeate one another. It is also at this level that we drag the past into the present through memory. As the phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski (2000) points out, our internal temporal ordering is somewhat analogous to our internal bodily schema, to the way we experience ourselves “from the inside.” In other words, though we consciously experience things in a kind of internal sequential order—these thoughts, feelings, and sensations cannot be measured through clock time. All the clock can offer is a symbolic representation of consciousness in space, a move that immediately renders the durative static. Just as the felt internal distance between my nose and my diaphragm cannot be measured in centimeters, subjective time—like the internal life of my body—is private, not public.⁶

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6. It is worth noting, with regards to Bergson, that he was not discounting the notion of clock time as an existent reality. Nor was he making the case that space is some made-up thing, some mere playground for our intellectual abstractions. Rather, his point was that clock time is both analytically and experientially different from durative consciousness in the pure sense. At the end of the day, Bergson would be forced to concede in his own work that life is not lived, or rather endured, in purity; rather, it coexists with other life forms in space. Seeming to harbor a certain level of lament, he calls this “the gradual incursion of space into the domain of pure consciousness” (1950: 126). We drift into something like “pure duration” in sleep and dreams, when the surface of the ego is withdrawn into the internal, where duration is “felt” rather than “measured.” Or, as he puts it, “from quantity it returns to the state of quality” (1950: 126).

Consciousness of Subjective Time

The third and arguably most nebulous mode of temporality concerns our consciousness of subjective time. In short, this is our reflexive awareness of ourselves as beings who fundamentally exist in time. It is for this reason that Heidegger asserted that time is the very origin of subjectivity. A preeminent figure in continental philosophy, Heidegger argues that time does not reside *in* the mind, but rather sets the existential conditions for the possibility of the mind and the self (Heidegger 1996).

Within the messy flux of everyday life, these three levels are forever crossing into one another's domains and reshaping each other's boundaries. As I will explore in greater depth later, clock time holds a unique kind of power, one that is inseparably connected to the emergence, spread, and perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism. As such, the degree to which subjective time exists in synchronicity to the drumbeat of clock time can reveal profound insights into the distribution of contemporary power relations as it pertains to the intersectional fields of consumerism, labor, and social exclusion. The blackout, as I intend to show, emerges from somewhere within this crowded intersection, its pervasiveness amongst my interlocutors at once a reflection of, and a response to, the power relations thus entangled. In order to capture the enmeshment of different time-perspectives within particular regimes of disciplinary power, I invoke the notion of the *chronopolitical*.

Loosely defined as the "politics of time," the chronopolitical points us to the manifold ways that different scales and modalities of time—clock, subjective, and reflexive—interact and clash with one another within the ever-heaving spaces of social life, in the process dynamically shaping the boundaries of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. A temporally oriented phenomenology is an essential tool for exploring the chronopolitical conditions of everyday life in contexts of homelessness. This is because it explicitly recognizes the conflicting state of human coexistence as it plays out in time: namely that we are always already part of the worlds of others, as an alterity, as well as the embodied locus of our own subjective worlds. This paradox is manifest in our internal time consciousness; our subjective sense of duration is intrinsically enmeshed in the flow of a relationally constituted world but, in our simultaneous capacity for reflexivity, this same consciousness also hovers *above* this world, thus providing the existential glue that allows the world to emerge as specific to our particular being. In this sense of things, we are both parts of worlds and worlds unto ourselves. Our internal time consciousness, then,

is the foundation upon which the temporality of sensible existence takes shape, constituting all the things that form our immediate experience of the world: our perceptions, our imaginations, our memories, our forgettings. Anything that disrupts or alters this process will thus understandably have a profound effect on the nature of that person's reality.

So, when people lose their sense of subjective time and forfeit the reflexivity of internal time consciousness—as they do in a blackout—it is fair to say that something quite radical has happened to their sense of self, their subjectivity, and indeed their world. The tools provided by phenomenology can help us explore this experience as it unfolds in relation to a person's immediate context. As will become clearer in following chapters, the historical and cultural specificity of a given fieldsite—its context—is important. It reminds us that a homeless person experiencing blackout in London's East End is not the same as a college freshman in Virginia blacking out during an especially boozy night on the town. Though both involve the same neurological short-circuiting at the level of the individual brain, the socioeconomic, chronopolitical, spatial, material, and existential conditions that encompass both situations are so divergent that (even though they quite possibly share a similarly escapist or self-annihilating imperative) they are, if not exactly apples and oranges, then certainly two very different species of apple.

Contextual Chemicals

Chemically identical substances carry different meanings and induce dramatically variable psychocorporeal experiences when ingested in different cultural contexts. To get blind drunk in a Mexican cantina (Mitchell 2004) doesn't mean the same as getting drunk at a football match in Valetta (Mitchell and Armstrong 2005). Likewise, to shoot up heroin in Lisbon where drug use has been decriminalized (Hughes and Stevens 2010) is not the same as doing so in the Philippines where it is punishable by death (Raffle 2021). Along with culture, different historical and political circumstances also play a powerful role in shaping the experience and meaning of intoxication, as well as the consequences. Consider, after all, the risks of a white person smoking cannabis in Colorado, where the drug is legal, versus a black or brown person in Arizona, where the most draconian cannabis laws in the country are instruments for racialized violence in the form of mass incarceration. Or consider the body politics of intoxication and long-term substance use as they relate

to gender, the intoxicated or addicted female attracting unique forms of moral panic and retribution throughout the ages, doubly so if that woman also happens to be a mother or pregnant (Baker and Carson 1999; Kilty and Dej 2012; Radcliffe 2011). Of course, there will also always be similarities in experience across both time and space. Give a person enough of something, wherever they are in the world, and eventually they will begin to feel its effects. Human bodies are biological bodies, after all. Nevertheless, everywhere around the world human bodies feel the wind on their skin—and yet this simple phenomenon (in sensorial feeling, if not in meteorological dynamics) has produced a multiplex of different sociocultural interpretations and bodily attunements. It is experienced as a herald of shamanic potencies (Glass-Coffin 2010), a conduit of spiritual and ancestral power (Salmond 2014), and a transmitter of illness (Foster 1976), to name just a few.

Difference and Sameness, Phenomenology, and Psychodynamics

It is in this tension between sameness and difference that anthropology has made a name for itself. Ultimately, it is a tension that, as a discipline, we are as wary of as we are welcoming. This is especially true when it comes to the question of how experience and subjectivity fit together. Steeped in a scholarly environment that has historically emphasized the tenets of cultural relativism, anthropologists have tended to be suspicious of the very notion of experience, especially as it might be used as a one-size-fits-all expression for human subjectivity (Desjarlais 1994). Much of this wariness is down to its long-standing associations with Euro-American notions of individuality, autonomy, intentionality, and deep interiority. At the same time, to theorize the constitution of any human world, wherever it may be, without considering the ways that people subjectively encounter, endure, and negotiate the conditions they are embedded in would feel fundamentally incomplete. Just as eyebrows would be raised if a marine biologist were to declare that they wouldn't be including the symbiotic algae that reside with a coral's tissues when examining the life cycle of a coral reef, one would expect similar facial twitches if an anthropologist were to actively ignore the interrelated questions of subjectivity, interiority, and intrapsychic life.

Our reliance on ethnographic methods means that our access into these questions hinges on our capacity for situated intersubjectivity.

Ultimately, the act of situating is at the same time a kind of transplantation, that is to say the intentional relocation of one subject—the ethnographer—from one world into another. And, as gardeners and surgeons alike will tell you, transplantation carries risk: the most severe being rejection. For ethnographers, the risks of transplantation are perhaps not so fatal (or not always). Instead, the risks are more epistemological, insofar as this relocation into another world will always produce as many gaps in understanding as it does connections. Without the kind of crystallization craved by positivist science, the intimate intersubjectivity that underwrites the ethnographic method is, like a bar of soap, tricky to keep a hold of. As such, it requires forms of analysis and writing that marry epistemic flexibility with descriptive agility. Phenomenology, along with frameworks from the psychological sciences, offer just that. These two intellectual traditions provide such fertile ground because each one, in their own particular way, is preoccupied with this ephemeral notion of human experience as it pertains to being-in-the-world with others.

Indeed, this desire to marry an understanding of the conditions that structure lived experience with a language for inner psychic life is what has compelled many anthropologists to seek a greater dialogue between the phenomenological and the psychological. This is what drove Good (2012)—one of the pioneers of cultural phenomenology—to look elsewhere after he began working with traumatized people in Indonesia who had survived political violence and torture. From his perspective, articulating the worlds of those who had endured extreme violence required a model of interiority and psychological pain and recovery that phenomenologically oriented anthropology was not, in his view, equipped to offer. Having transplanted himself into such a high stakes and morally charged environment, Good's point was not that the phenomenological baby or even its bathwater were in need of throwing out, but rather that the addition of psychoanalytic paradigms into the tub would help make a far more appropriate environment for both ethnographer and interlocutor alike.

In Good's eyes, while phenomenology can provide valuable insight into how a person meaningfully experiences the ebb and flow of the world they are embedded in, its usefulness as a tool begins to blunt when turned onto those aspects of our subjectivity that remain concealed from conscious thought. And it is precisely these hidden depths—many of which escape even the most concerted reflexive thought—that psychoanalysis has been plumbing since its inception. Further, as Good argues, what we hide from ourselves, how we go about hiding it, and what this

concealing means cannot be unyoked from the political conditions that people find themselves swept up in. Power and psychology, in other words, are intimate bedfellows, the systemic capillaries of the former forever looping into and out of the latter, in the process breeding complex forms of subjectivity that are as likely to manifest in self-deception as they are in self-expression.

As a unique form of self-deception, the blackout cannot be unpacked by phenomenology alone. For one, there are deep intrapsychic and neurological processes to consider. The blackout is, after all, chemically induced. Which is to say that it is something that happens, on a neurobiological level at least, in the brain. This does not mean that it is solely *of* the brain; rather, the neurological trigger is but one aspect in a complex web of neurochemical and intrapsychic dynamics that are themselves always already caught up in the changing stakes of a person's social, cultural, and political environment. Given that one cannot begin to discuss the blackout without exploring internal processes of memory, forgetting, trauma, and self-making (and unmaking), the need for a psychological lens within any explanatory toolkit is obvious.

Psychological anthropology, much like the tradition it is inspired by, is a nonlinear, fragmented constellation of ideas—one that encompasses the full range of psychological theories and canonical figures. Much of the clinical and conceptual work from within these areas touches extensively on what I consider to be the central concerns of this book: memory, forgetting, trauma, pain, mourning, boredom, the uncanny, haunting, transformation, and destruction. As will become clearer in chapters 3 and 4, engaging with, challenging, and experimenting with the ideas developed within these intellectual lineages are essential steps in creating, as Kevin Groark (2009, 2017, 2019) suggests, a more nuanced “cultural psychodynamics.” By this, he means combining phenomenological approaches with frameworks from depth psychology to more holistically understand the dynamic interrelation between a person's inner and outer world. The aim of this ethnographically grounded approach is to avoid the reductionism of psychology and social determinism, destabilizing Eurocentric paradigms of mind and subjectivity by starting from local conceptualizations of experience, all the while making a broader analytical commitment to keeping the psychological and phenomenological in ongoing conversation with one another (Denham 2020). This book makes a similar commitment to the extent that it also tries to avoid reductionism, seeking instead to develop integrative analytical frameworks that leave room for multiple levels of understanding—phenomenological,

ontological, cultural, temporal, psychodynamic—regarding the experience of blackout.⁷

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1, “Itchy Park,” contextualizes the core fieldsite that defined the research period, known locally as Itchy Park. This chapter links Itchy Park to broader historical transformations in the United Kingdom’s political landscape as they relate to questions of labor, welfare, and housing. In so doing, this opening chapter seeks to establish why addiction and homelessness have become so indivisibly entangled in recent years, arguing that anthropology is uniquely suited to parse out the complexity of this entanglement as it manifests in the everyday lives of London’s homeless population.

Chapter 2, “Killing Time,” establishes the temporal and structural configurations of homelessness in London, documenting how the social drama of eviction and rough sleeping is tangled up with major breakdowns in a person’s most intimate relationships. In particular, it addresses how deep boredom comes to structure and drive these temporal and

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7. Groark’s notion of cultural psychodynamics can be understood as part of a broader, if still somewhat peripheral, disciplinary imperative to bring the phenomenological in conversation with the psychodynamic. As part of a special issue of *Ethos*, Jason Throop (2012) along with a host of other leading anthropologists used this platform to discuss theoretical and methodological convergences between the two domains. Both approaches, we are told, presume lived experience to be complex, multidimensional, and intrinsically dynamic. Further to that, both strands tend to envision human subjectivity as emerging at the intersection of a number of divergent forces, forces that vary in their degrees of transparency, opacity, and accessibility. Where they differ, however, is with regards to which analytical lens best allows us to make sense of these forces as they take shape in everyday life. In both schools of thought, though, the million-dollar question is the same: what are the processes that structure and condition human experience? In a sense, both try to answer this question by setting out what they consider the building blocks of the human to be—primary ontological structures of existence for the phenomenologists, and the caprice of egoic drives and interpersonal conflicts for the other. Likewise, how and why subjects generate meaning through their worldly encounters remains a central focus for both.

relational unravelings. Here, I introduce several of the key protagonists who sit at the heart of the book, deploying ethnographic descriptions of begging and hustling to document and analyze the tension between the undiluted time of existential boredom and consumer time that regulates the spending, labor, and welfare cycles of commodity capitalism. This mode of analysis sets the stage for the book's broader examination of how social death, economic redundancy, urban poverty, and street homelessness intersect in the escapist imperative of the drug-induced blackout.

The third chapter, "Not Enough," situates the hustling and begging practices of the informal economy in the deeper, embodied context of the moral economy that my interlocutors relied on in their pursuit of "time-killing" substances. It details the life histories of key individuals—Tony, Larry, and Jimmy—who, despite different trajectories, have all found themselves in Itchy Park, stuck in repeating patterns of alienation, abjection, addiction, and limbo. The chapter details the constellations of care, deception, and reciprocity that weave through their sense of "stuckness" and ensuing substance use patterns, exploring how these webs of mutual support and subterfuge are indivisibly tied up in the disciplinary and policing regimes that regulate public space in the inner city.

Having established the social, economic, political, and moral dimensions of the Itchy Park community, the second half of the book pivots towards a deeper phenomenological engagement with the lived experience of the blackout. Chapter 4, "The Blackout," begins this process through a deep ethnographic portrait of Ash, an entrenched rough sleeper whose alcoholic binges have become so intense and frequent that he is constantly seesawing in and out of blackout states. His story and experiences become the grounding for an exploration of the connections between memory, grief, haunting, and deep boredom. This exploration pulls on threads from both the psychological and phenomenological traditions, articulating how these haunting forces entrap the homeless in a kind of existential crisis—a crisis that is solved through dissociative journeys into the blackout. Emphasizing the need to move beyond reductionist accounts of the blackout currently buried in the clinical literature, I use the second half of this chapter to establish a new conceptual framework for this experience, drawing on the phenomenology of Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino—notably his theories of institutionalized ritual and existential presence. Facing what De Martino terms a "crisis of presence," but with neither the collective ritual structures nor the sacred figures who have traditionally regulated these arenas available, the burden

of ritualization, I illustrate, falls at the feet of the person experiencing homelessness. I argue that the blackout can be understood as a kind of modality of self-transcendence where the Itchy Park homeless must use their foremost instrument, the body, as a ritualizable medium unto itself. These anesthetic states-of-being entail novel forms of bodily metamorphosis that simultaneously defy and attract biopolitical regimes of time and control. Most significantly, the Itchy Park homeless describe this blackout transformation as occurring in the context of “lost time.”

Chapter 5, “Lost Time,” examines the precarious relationship between episodic memory, self-continuity, and the lived experience of Itchy Park’s residents. It delves into the ways in which blackout episodes create memory gaps that disrupt the narrative continuity of selfhood. The chapter also explores how my fieldnotes inadvertently became a memory archive for the residents, revealing the social dynamics and ethical complexities involved in recalling and documenting the lives of others. A critical analysis of episodic memory’s role in self-continuity is threaded throughout the chapter, contrasting clinical perspectives with the lived realities of those in Itchy Park. To contextualize these themes, I introduce the artwork of one resident in particular, Jay. Drawing extensively on his biography as a Scottish Gypsy Traveller who wound up in Itchy Park following the death of his parents and subsequent breakdown of his marriage, I locate the lost time of Jay’s blackouts within a complex matrix of cultural displacement, persistent longing for kinship, and the unrelenting cycle of substance use as a means of escape.

The sixth chapter, “Becoming Somebody Else,” builds on this notion of lost time, recentering on another of Jay’s artworks. This painting vividly depicts the transformation of selfhood that occurs in the midst of a blackout. By maintaining a constant dialogue with his artwork and life history, I connect Jay’s experiences to Roy Wagner’s (1978) analysis of Daribi possession rituals, arguing that “becoming somebody else” through blacking out constitutes a “reinvention of self” that bears an uncanny experiential and conceptual resemblance to certain kinds of possession-trance states, along with the amnesia that follows in their wake. My central claim in this final chapter is that my interlocutors, faced with the traumas (both intimate and structural) haunting them, respond by chemically reinventing themselves into a kind of ghostly alterity—becoming other unto themselves. As this chapter draws to a close, I establish an experimental dialogue between this new theory of blackout and Jay’s artwork by (quite literally) laminating Wagner’s seminal “obviation” diagrams onto the images.

In initiating this mutual layering of theory onto ethnography (and vice versa), I reengage with some of the theoretical themes raised in the previous chapter, situating my argument within the broader milieu of phenomenological and ontological anthropology. It is through this move that I make intelligible the core paradox at the heart of this book: the irreconcilable tension between the blackout as escape and the blackout as prison. This alternative conceptualization of the blackout, grounded in Jay's artwork and other ethnographic particulars emerging out of Itchy Park, illustrates the urgent need to move beyond existing psychomedical paradigms and foster a deeper epistemic pluralism within the addiction sciences.

In the concluding chapter, I attend to the theoretical frameworks and insights developed throughout the course of the book, aligning them with what I consider to be a form of anthropological poetics. As part of my concluding remarks, I emphasize what Rupert Stasch (2013) might call the "poetic density" of the Itchy Park lifeworld, by which I mean the dynamic assemblage of relationships, stories, embodied moods, social dynamics, spatiotemporalities, moral economies, structural underpinnings, chronopolitical pressures, and existential attunements that bind together in its constitution. The blackout, I reaffirm, is but one intersectional knot within this constellation, a novel modality-of-being that shapes, and is itself shaped by, the unique social, psychic, and moral life of Itchy Park. Finally, I return to the poesis of artmaking and, inspired by Jay's paintings as a technology of self-recovery in the face of his blackouts, end with a discussion of the healing potential of art therapy and why it ought to be elevated from a peripheral "added extra" to the core of homeless services.

A Note on Gender

It is worth noting in advance that the people at the heart of this book are almost exclusively men. There are several key reasons for this. For one, the Itchy Park homeless were made up overwhelmingly of men, which meant that as I became embedded in this community, the relationships I developed tended to reflect the park's vastly male-dominated population. This also reflects the broader composition of the homeless population in the United Kingdom, of which the vast majority are male. This did not mean, however, that I did not establish close connections with homeless women over the course of my fieldwork,

nor that gender dynamics were not an important aspect of Itchy Park's social, economic, and moral fabric. Indeed, the majority of the women who frequented the park were entrenched, to varying degrees, in precarious forms of sex work, complicating the picture of male-female relationships within the park, often leading (as is illustrated in chapter 3) to misogynistic interpersonal ruptures and suspicions that gesture to the unique embodied and moral vulnerabilities of homeless women. Though I do not attend to these realities with the depth they deserve in this book, elsewhere I have provided extensive phenomenological explorations of the way that gender, addiction, substance use, social suffering, moral personhood, embodiment, and mental illness become entwined in contexts of street homelessness (Burraway 2021a). These themes, quite rightly, should not be minimized, and it is certainly not the case that the relative lack of women's experiences in these chapters be taken as the absence of interest. Rather, it simply reflects the very male-dominated world that, for better or worse, came to define most of my time in the field.

For those who seek social science studies of homelessness where gender and women's experiences are at the forefront of analysis, there are a number of compelling options. To name just a handful, there is Amy Cooper's (2015) work on institutionalized modes of waiting and the way these temporal patterns shape homeless women's experiences as they look to navigate often contradictory social services in Chicago. Also set in Chicago, Tanya Luhrmann (2008) has attended to the complex ways that homeless women negotiate psychiatric diagnoses and illness experiences as they refuse state help, the socially injurious tag of "craziness" that comes with accepting diagnosis-dependent rehousing outweighing the benefits of this structural assistance. Beyond the anthropological canon, Ann Marie Rousseau (1981), in her photographic documentation of New York's "bag ladies"—older homeless women who cart their belongings around with them—offered one of the first explorations of homelessness that focused on the lived experiences of women.

Outside of the United States, Sophie Watson and Helen Austerberry (1986) have employed a Marxist lens to articulate the double bind that women in the United Kingdom become trapped in: culturally "stuck" to remain in the home at the same time as they are economically foreclosed from accessing the housing market on their own terms. Though the United Kingdom has moved on since 1986, their analysis remains germane to the extent that women still make up vast swathes of the country's hidden

homeless⁸—often linked with domestic abuse and other forms of male violence against women. Increasingly, though, women are also making up more and more of the “visible” homeless population, especially in urban parts of the United Kingdom. This is something that Jon May, Paul Cloke, and Sarah Johnsen (2007) have attended to through their “cartographies” of homelessness in relation to women, pushing back against the idea that there is anything like a singular experience of homelessness. Instead, they trace the shifting identities and different modes of embodiment that women deploy in order to cope with the particular precarity and danger that comes with being homeless and female. These examples are part of a growing body of literature that has been fundamental in recalibrating conversations on homelessness, powerfully illustrating that it is anything but gender-neutral in its configurations and highlighting in complex detail the way that gender shapes how people negotiate contexts of extreme social exclusion.⁹ While this book will not be contributing to this emerging scholarly agenda in any direct way, it remains my hope that the ethnographic accounts and theoretical conceptualizations provided throughout these pages might nevertheless stir up the imagination in ways that can be adapted, applied, and debated across the still shifting spectrum of homeless studies.

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8. The hidden homeless are those with no permanent address who find shelter in the penumbral corners of the city’s social architecture, in bed and breakfasts, squats, night shelters, hostels, or on the sofas of friends or relatives. Crucially, these hidden subspheres should not be understood as discrete categories; rather, they continuously overlap with one another, setting the stage for situations of chronic and capricious upheaval as people stumble cyclically between the streets and precarious, impermanent accommodation.
 9. For example, see Casey et al. 2008; Cheung and Hwang 2004; Evans and Forsyth 2004; Gelberg et al. 2004, 2009; Radley et al. 2005, 2006.

CHAPTER I

Itchy Park

Fields of Play

From December 2014 to February 2016, I became involved in the lives of a group of people experiencing homelessness in London, the majority (if not all) of whom were heavy drinkers and substance users. The fluid and ever-changing texture of ethnographic fieldwork meant that my time was spread across three key sites, the distribution of which changed in accordance with the relationships that formed as the fieldwork progressed. The first and most short-lived site was a rehousing hub in West London where I worked in a volunteer capacity.¹ The second site was The Manna Society, a day center in London Bridge.² The third, Itchy

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1. Though my time in the rehousing hub was formative, allowing me a unique entry point into the bureaucratic and legal processes that determine housing possibilities for the homeless, I have provided a detailed analysis of this site elsewhere (Burraway 2020).
 2. The experiences I had in the Manna Society deserve a book of their own. Hopefully one day they will get one. My time there was profoundly formative insofar as it offered me a priceless window into the institutional and moral infrastructure of homeless service provision in the United Kingdom, and in particular how these spaces cultivate shared deep experiences of vulnerability, of community that exists in friction with fatigue, exhaustion, and the latent violence of chronic poverty (see Massey 1994). I am eternally grateful to the Manna's director, Bandi Mbubi, for allowing me to spend so much time there carrying out ethnographic work

Park, was a small public park in London's East End. This final site is where I came to meet most of my central interlocutors and thus where I ended up spending the majority of my time. Correspondingly, it is the place where the lion's share of the ethnographic data that sustains this book is drawn from. In what follows, I lay out in greater detail the texture, contours, and social dynamics of Itchy Park, and the larger historical, political, and economic context of which it is part.

Itchy Park

The world of Itchy Park became known to me only by chance. It was early 2015, and I had been working at The Manna Society's day center as a volunteer for a handful of months. One of the center's guests, Toby, had taken an interest in the project, having faced troubles with alcohol at different points in his life, especially in the periods where he had found himself sleeping rough. There was one place, he told me, that I simply couldn't ignore if I was interested in homelessness and substance use—Itchy Park: "That's where the addicts of the addicts hang out. Take yourself down there if you want to meet some people who are serious about their substances. They're hardcore." I asked Toby if he would be willing to make an introduction on my behalf. And, to my deep gratitude and good fortune, he agreed.

After closing time, we grabbed our stuff and hit the road, walking for half an hour or so from London Bridge, our journey winding us through the heart of the financial district and then into the borough of Tower Hamlets, right to the gates of Itchy Park. As I lingered near the gates, shuffling my feet with the awkwardness of a kid who is getting their friend to confirm if their teenage crush fancies them back, Toby approached a group of homeless persons—mostly men—who were scattered across the benches and surrounding concrete, smoking and swigging from cans of super-strength beer and cider. After spending a few minutes catching up with one man over a cigarette, Toby waved me over and introduced me to the few that he knew personally. We shook hands and I took a seat on the concrete, one of their dogs taking a particular liking to me as I told those who seemed interested about my project. After a while, Toby excused himself to attend to other things, his role as

and developing the relationships and understanding that would propel me into subsequent phases of the project.

my intermediary duly fulfilled. And so there I was, sitting amongst the so-called “addicts of the addicts,” Toby’s introduction opening up not just a host of new relationships and perspectives, but a whole new world. In all the ways that matter, the complex relationalities of this particular world form the gravitational center of this book. As such, building up a coherent picture of Itchy Park’s unique history is an essential task.

Located in the heart of East London’s Whitechapel, Itchy Park is one of several small public parks scattered across the local area, many of which are little more than a wafer of greenery in an otherwise densely packed urban sprawl. The name can be appreciated as emerging at the intersection of several different historical and cultural trajectories. Briefly tracing these trajectories will not only help to contextualize the place as a particular ethnographic and historical field, but also point to the complex ways in which different genres of knowledge and historical meaning coalesce around the naming (and renaming) of a place.

Place names continue to occupy the attention of anthropologists because they cut across three core elements of cultural analysis: language, thought, and the environment (Thornton 1997). Not only are place names linguistic signifiers, but they are also sociosemantic fields unto themselves, revealing important features not only about the physical world, but also the ways in which people approach, perceive, categorize, conceptualize, and use that world. Indeed, an analysis of toponyms as they emerge across different discourse modalities—such as stories, songs, paintings, dreams, and everyday speech—can reveal significant insights into the way that people experience the world and also how both the built and natural environment fold into the articulation of their experiences (Sicoli 2020). In other words, a place name is always more than just a referent for an area’s physical environment. Rather, it seethes with an open-ended potentiality that can disclose important details about a place’s social, historical, and political circumstances. Itchy Park is no different.

Itchy Park was the local appellation employed by those who hung out on what was often called Addict’s Corner. As Tony, the oldest serving member of the Itchy Park crew, said to me, matter-of-factly, after I asked him about the origin of the name: “I don’t know, this has always been Itchy Park, as long as anyone can remember. Even if that sign says different.”

The sign he was pointing to read, in bold white print set against a navy blue background, “Welcome to Altab Ali Park.” Already, then, Tony was (quite literally, in this case) pointing to an ongoing clash between

different genres of toponymic knowledge, in this case between the everyday forms of oral history reproduced amongst his fellow drinking partners and him, and the official record as laid down by the borough. To understand this clash, we need to go back in time to May 4, 1978, when the place went by the name St. Mary's Gardens. That date marks the murder of Altab Ali, a Bengali immigrant who had moved to London with his uncle a decade earlier to work in the textiles industry. On the day in question, Ali was walking home from work when he was stabbed to death by three teenagers in a racially motivated attack. The act itself arguably constituted the apex of an increasingly violent anti-immigration sentiment that had been bubbling up in the area for some time, stoked primarily by a resurgent National Front movement whose far-right hate-mongering had been steadily intensifying in relation to demographic changes in Tower Hamlets and the East End more broadly. The large-scale Bangladeshi migrations that began in the early 1970s had become the human focal point for racialized acts of violence and terror.

Ten days after his murder, Tower Hamlets' Bengali community, starting in the iconic East London street of Brick Lane, formed a seven thousand-strong column and marched on Downing Street, walking behind a car carrying Ali's coffin. Historians and local activists alike view Ali's murder and subsequent protest march as a turning point in community activism and political self-determination amongst the Bengali population of Tower Hamlets, in the process establishing Brick Lane as the cultural and symbolic "heartland" of the British Bangladeshi community (Alexander 2011). This social agency continues to ripple out today through ongoing forms of memorialization, starting with the official re-naming of the park in his honor all the way through to commemorative events that now take place each year on the anniversary of Ali's death.³

For those members of the Bengali community who regularly gather in the park either to pay their respects to Ali or else to engage in other forms of political activism, the space comes to mean something because they *make* it mean something, these various and ongoing forms of "space-making" inexorably caught up in the ever-changing tides of local and national politics. In Altab Ali Park, diasporic Bengali culture, postcolonial history, Islamophobia, and fascistic ethnonationalism have been spilling over into each other's domains for over half a century now,

3. The park was named in his honor in 1994.

these spillages forming the historical backdrop against which the Bengali community has come to constitute itself.

Since Ali's death, the park has over the years been subject to numerous architectural innovations and overhauls that playfully marry Bangladeshi and Gothic ornamental designs. In 1999, for example, installed in the southwest corner was a Shaheed Minar (Martyr's Monument) that replicates a larger monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which commemorates those who died in the 1952 independence movement.⁴ In 2002, a path was paved diagonally across the park, inscribed into which was a line from a poem by Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, which reads: "The shade of my tree is offered to those who come and go fleetingly." In a manner perhaps befitting of the ephemeral invitation of shadows, Tagore's offering was lost during the park's most recent landscaping overhaul. The result is a collage or scrapbook-like effect, the park teeming with objects, fragments, and archaeological monuments—some real, others fictive—that are largely noncongruent with one another, forming an ambiguous memoryscape that straddles different cultural and historical epochs. For example, across the way from the Shaheed Minar stands a long green bench that traces the outline of where the eponymous White Chapel used to stand before it was destroyed during the Blitz.⁵ Sprouting up from the grass to the east are large boulders and tree stumps for people to sit on. Elsewhere, there is an eighteenth-century stone chest tomb, and a public drinking fountain dating back to 1860. The philosophy behind this relandscaping effort was to capture the heterogeneity of Whitechapel's historical identity, deliberately using these archaeological fragments to bring its Christian and Islamic elements into a form of coexistence.

Coexistence between objects, of course, is one thing. Coexistence between people is quite another, and one that often falls well short of peaceful. Which perhaps helps us explain why, to Tony, no matter what the sign says, this plot of land is Itchy Park first, and Altab Ali Park second, if at all. This was a sentiment shared across the majority of the people who hung out on Addict's Corner, especially those who hailed from the local area. To a certain extent, this sentiment speaks to the demographics of the people experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park:

4. Each year on February 21, a ceremony is held in the park commemorating this seminal political victory.

5. The church was practically destroyed during the Blitz and was finally demolished in 1952.

predominantly white, male, and working class—many of whom had ancestral ties to the Docklands area. Tony, himself the son of a docker, often spoke wistfully about the loss of “the *real* East End,” often pointing to the influx of Bangladeshi migrants as the catalyst for this perceived erosion of authenticity. In Tony’s vision of local community history, authenticity of *realness* is tacitly equated with whiteness, or rather white Britishness. Indeed, for many of the men on Addict’s Corner, white Europeans—especially those from Eastern bloc countries such as Poland, Estonia, and Lithuania—incurred an even greater level of suspicion and ire, often centering on their perceived inability to speak English. In these cases, their linguistic shortcomings hinted at a different kind of foreignness, one that was tangled up in broader immigration anxieties regarding perceived economic exploitation at the hands of Eastern European invaders, typically men, who were seen as flooding the country’s overly porous borders to deliberately undercut the labor market, drain healthcare resources, and more generally abuse the generosity of the United Kingdom’s civic resources. In many ways, it is possible now to detect in this suspicion the steadily growing anti-European sentiment that burst into public consciousness via the 2016 Brexit vote. More acutely, these kinds of sentiments can help us trace the complicated and fragmentary way in which Itchy Park, as a space, is made to matter, not as a closed site of belonging but as an open hub of multiple and conflicting claims, historicities, motilities, and anxieties that condition the experience of its denizens and their attachment to place. In this spirit, then, consider these words from Danny, another East End local, as he gestured in the direction of a group of Polish drinkers on the other side of the park:

They’ve got a system, right. I know from a mate of mine who’s got family over there. Half of them get a job on a [building] site and work for eight weeks or whatever, then they start stealing stuff until they get sacked or there’s nothing left. That pays for all their booze. And after that, the other half of them takes their place—become the providers, y’know? Then they’ll do it all over again at another site. They’ll be like six of them all staying in a single room, in a flat the council paid for, so they can send money back. Can you believe it? I was born here, right in this place, and there isn’t even a fucking home for me?! That lot, all they do is get drunk and fight each other. And if they run out, they’ll go into hospitals and lift those bags of soap, the antibacterial stuff—for the alcohol. They’ll mix it with orange juice. I know at least one of them’s died from it. Gives us a bad name, y’know. We ain’t like them.

In Danny's description, we can see the reproduction of an anti-European sentiment that has been bubbling up amongst the white working class for some time. In many ways, Danny's condemnatory assessment of these men reflects and embodies the xenophobic discourse that has been ideologically reinforced by the Eurosceptic politicians of the country's right wing over the last decade and more. For him, these Polish drinkers—metonymically standing in for the more general bogeyman of the Eastern European invader—come strategically from “over there” to undercut job opportunities, steal from both their employers and the tax system, extract and repatriate money out of the economy, and exploit the housing system at the expense of native applicants, such as himself. On top of that, in this possibly part-apocryphal account, these men are depicted in somewhat barbaric terms, interested only in fighting and alcoholic oblivion, even if that means stealing hand sanitizer from hospitals and risking their lives in the process. Perhaps worst of all, they do reputational damage to Danny, a long-term street drinker who sees public drinking as something close to an ancestral birthright, tied into what he liked to describe as his “pagan heritage.” In Danny's eyes, the violent and unpredictable behavior committed by these other (“we ain't like them”) drinkers tends to attract unwanted police attention. The problem being that, for him, this unwelcome attention not only tars them with the same brush, thereby giving them a “bad name,” it also acts as justification for the escalation of already punitive regimes of policing that sanction, fine, and sometimes imprison people experiencing homelessness for drinking in public spaces. Danny liked to call these disciplinary measures “sharia law through the back door.” In such a declaration, we can locate a moment of slippage between the Europhobic and the Islamophobic—exclusionary forces that have become increasingly entangled in the East End and the United Kingdom more broadly, each side sharpening the blade of the other to produce a toxic political discourse that trades in the currency of scapegoating, fear, displacement, and white indigeneity.

Ultimately, as we see in Danny's account, this discourse intersects with personal narratives and connections—in this case, his friend's familial connection to Poland—to challenge and reimagine what de Certeau (1984) might have called the park's “spatial story,” a process that reconstitutes the materiality of the park along ethnonational lines. In Danny's retelling of the space, we can, I think, detect some of the “unbidden associations [and] conscious or unconscious plots” that Fran Tonkiss (2005: 128) alerts us to in his sprawling analysis of urban life. While stories such as Danny's certainly evoke a nostalgic yearning for a

more ethnoculturally homogeneous and “fair” time, they also speak to a more embodied attunement to the relationship between history, politics, and space. In this case, the space of Itchy Park emerges not as a self-contained, homogeneous, and ahistorical container but one which is fraught with differentiation, its borders dynamic and permeable, its meanings fashioned and refashioned through the interactions, encounters, and practices of those who traverse it.

In many ways, the views articulated by Danny and Tony speak to broader transformations in the cultural, political, and demographic landscape of the Docklands area. Their uneasy cohabitation of the space with threatening foreign others, their anxiety surrounding police harassment, their slippery sense of belonging and unbelonging, and finally their nostalgic groping for “the real” East End in the form of a thinly veiled white nativism—these sentiments can be understood as emerging at the triangulation point between the neoliberal restructuring of London’s economy, the rapid expansion of inner-city infrastructure into a formerly village-like environment, and the commencement of large-scale, notably South Asian, immigration into the area.

At this juncture, let me be clear. I am in no way trying to paint Tony or Danny as a pair of irredeemable racists, as though they were on a par with Ali’s murderers. Rather, while both of them (along with many others with whom I spent time in Itchy Park) would sometimes talk about the history of the borough in ways that evoked the enduring image of the white “indigenous” Eastender or Anglo-Saxon under threat from invasive foreigners emboldened by liberal multiculturalism, the actual ethnic, national, sociocultural, and religious makeup of the group spoke to a relational and moral complexity that belies overly simplified notions of native and foreigner, of insularity and division. Indeed, though they were disproportionately few in number, a number of the Itchy Park homeless were Bengali themselves, such as Max. In order to appreciate how deep interethnic affiliations and intimacies can coexist alongside highly racialized tensions and divisions within a borough whose ethnopolitical situation frequently flirts with powder keg status, one must first develop a stronger grasp of the moral economies braided into the scarcity of street life. As I will later show, these complex forms of morality not only sustain everyday survival among people experiencing homelessness, but they are also the shared grounding from which intimate and often paradoxical relations can and do emerge, such as when ethnic prejudice commingles with interethnic friendship (often in the same sentences).

This small public park, then, is at least two places at once. Which is to say that Altab Ali Park and Itchy Park coexist in a dynamic state of perpetual overlap, constantly changing as everyday urban life draws different people, events, and meanings into its always porous bounds. Having attended to the historical conditions that constitute Altab Ali Park as a particular place, I want to now return attention to the other half of the Venn diagram—to Itchy Park. This, after all, is the place name I will be employing throughout the remainder of the book. There are good reasons for this. Had I been penning a study on the question of how the spectral menace of Islamic fundamentalism has been converging with post-imperial British anxieties around the topic of urban transformation and transnational migration, I likely would have opted for Altab Ali Park. While this would be a more than worthy undertaking, the research questions that lie at the heart of this book concern a different aspect of the East End, more specifically its enduring history of extreme poverty, addiction, and social decay. Which is where Itchy Park comes in.

Itchycoo Park

According to Jimmy, one of the park's most enduring stalwarts, Itchy Park got its name from a 1967 psychedelic rock song by the band, Small Faces. In the song "Itchycoo Park," lead singer Ronnie Lane recalls childhood memories of playing truant, escaping to the park to "get high" and "blow his mind" while staring up at the sky and, among other things, feeding the ducks. In keeping with the countercultural crosswinds blowing through the '60s at the time, the song imagined Itchycoo Park as a psychedelic dreamscape where the dreary propaganda of the national school curriculum could be abandoned in favor of ecstatic overstimulations and tear-inducing natural beauty. Why Itchycoo? The term Itchycoo is slang for stinging nettle, a weed-like plant whose leaves are covered in minute hairs that irritate the skin when touched, causing burning and itching. According to Lane, Itchycoo Park was the local nickname for Little Ilford Park in East London, located close to where he grew up, known for its profusion of nettles. At first glance, then, it seems Jimmy must be mistaken in believing that the song was referring to what is now Altab Ali Park, what with Whitechapel located some seven miles southwest of Ilford. However, in an interview with Kenny Jones, the Small Face's drummer, he suggests that Itchycoo Park was not so much one particular place as it was a broader postwar phenomenon, bundled up in

the changing patterns of urban destruction, transformation, decay, and regrowth that have come to define the East End since the Blitz:

For me it was the bombed ruins in the East End where I used to play. We all had short trousers on as kids, and there were these great big stinging nettles, you know, really horrible, the big ones, you know? And when they stung you, cor, they were terrible and itchy. So, it was itchy, itchycoo. That's why Itchycoo Park. In fact, all of us had an Itchycoo Park around us. Steve Marriot had one in Ilford which was called Itchycoo Park. And there's another one in the city I've found as well. So, there's a few about. But my one was the bombed ruins. (Kenny Jones, NME Song Stories Interview, 2014)⁶

Suddenly, then, Itchy Park starts to appear at the convergence of a number of different historical and cultural forces. On the one hand, it speaks to the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s, a space of drug-fueled ecstasy free from the institutional bondage of mainstream education. On the other, it speaks to the complex tension between material decay, wildlife, and urban development. While the ubiquitous Itchycoo nettles might once have symbolized the forgotten materiality of a post-Blitz East End—of the natural reclaiming the cultural in the craters formed in the wake of militarized violence—these spaces no longer suffer from the kind of neglect that allows nettles to flourish. Instead, the steady encroachment of a ravenous private property market fed by London's deregulated financial sector has seen the East End emerge as a hotspot for transnational investment, privatizing large swathes of space that were formerly designated for public usage. These forces—more Wild West than wildlife—engender a different type of sting, one that has caused a far more enduring and complex pain than what the Small Faces would have felt grazing against their exposed shins. These are stings that the Itchy Park residents suffer every day, the increasing monopolization of public space by private interest groups and predatory opportunists occurring in lockstep with increasingly revanchist forms of policing and social control.

I will say more about these nettled fields of power in the forthcoming chapters, constitutive as they are of the everyday life conditions for those who eke out an existence on Addict's Corner. For now, I want to drag

6. "The Surprise Meaning Behind 'Itchycoo Park'—NME Song Stories." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9etm7ABVdE>.

the reader's attention back to the words of the drummer, Kenny Jones, and his claim to have recently discovered another Itchycoo Park in the city. In reading that short excerpt, one could be forgiven for thinking that he was referring to the park that concerns this book. While Jones never elaborated on exactly which park he was referring to, the smart money is that he was referring to Christ Church garden at Spitalfields, a mere ten-minute saunter from Altab Ali Park. Smart because it too had long gone by the name of Itchy Park, a nickname that came not from the abundance of stinging nettles, but from the abundance of street-sleeping homeless, and more specifically the lice that tormented them. A historical and literary relic with respect to poverty studies, this church garden captivated the attention of American novelist Jack London, providing the inspiration for his 1902 masterpiece, *The People of the Abyss*. Part ethnography, part autobiography, his book focused on the hellish realities of London's poor at the turn of the century. Below is one of his descriptions:

The shadow of Christ's Church falls across Spitalfields Garden, and in the shadow of Christ's Church, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I saw a sight I never wish to see again ... On the benches on either side arrayed a mass of miserable and distorted humanity ... It was a welter of rags and filth, of all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces. (London [1902] 1962: 62)

Some seventy years later, in 1971, the church's shadow emerges yet again as scene of abject poverty, humiliating destitution, and social defeat—this time under the observation of urban sociologist Honor Marshall. Seeming to channel the spirit of Jack London, Marshall writes:

Just beyond Spitalfields and the dank aroma of trampled vegetables, another far worse smell rose in waves from Itchy Park, where an old couple sat under a tree. The woman had cataracts on both eyes and drank from a colorless, ridged bottle. When the bottle was empty, she flung it away, cackling harshly. Further on, a man sat on a bench, urinating through his trousers, and another man staggered towards the drinking trough beyond the railings. He lunged forward, missed the trough and there was a sickening crunch as his face smacked into the gutter. Nobody cared, nobody moved. The remaining dozen or so men hunched on benches or sprawled on the grass shapeless and inhuman. (1971: 95)

Since Marshall wrote her chronicle of East End's indigent poor, the Itchy Park at Christ's Church has become significantly less itchy, the twin tides of gentrification and social sanitization that have since swept the immediate Spitalfields district effectively displacing those who might have once bedded down in its grounds into more peripheral areas—areas such as Addict's Corner. In this way, the denomination of Altab Ali Park as Itchy Park by people experiencing homelessness there not only functions as a form of communal identity work in the face of demographic and cultural-political change, it also captures and taps into the changing forms of structural violence that surf the waves of history, waves that have heralded the progress of modernity even as they have left a trail of human wreckage in their wake. For Jack London, these waves were those of the industrial revolution, its new labor system birthing a ghettoized urban underclass defined by "howling and naked savagery." Seventy years later, when Marshall wrote her book, the industrial wave that flung Jack London's people into the abyss had begun to change. Having long since shed its revolutionary label to become the very engine of the British socioeconomic system, industrial capitalism when Marshall wrote was beginning its slide into its postindustrial form. Before this transition, though, the emergence of a postwar welfare state along with the growth of trade unionism had meant that much of the poverty reported by Jack London had receded from the public eye, the mass unemployment and lumpen destitution seen around the country's industrial centers at the turn of the century largely (but by no means completely) absorbed into the social security promised by the welfare system. Towards the back end of the 1960s, all this began to change, however, as the first siren songs of a globalized, postindustrial globalized economy sounded the call for what would become a nationwide migration of industrial manufacturing to low-wage countries, a shift that would later be aggressively championed under the banner of free market liberalism by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Given that this postindustrial shift in the labor economy was, in many ways, just as radical a transition (though arguably subtler in nature) as the industrial revolution itself, it should perhaps come as no surprise that the poverty that Marshall "rediscovered" in the late '60s and early '70s so closely echoed the abyss that Jack London had stumbled into some seventy years before.

With urbanization having vastly accelerated during this interim period (excluding the war years), the mass expansion of the United Kingdom's cities created a fragile socioeconomic ecosystem that would create what Marshall called "the phenomenon of poverty in affluence"

(1971: 72). As John Davis (1999)—a historian of the British welfare state—notes, this fragility had much to do with the tension that existed between the dynamic transformations occurring in the economy and what was a comparatively static urban infrastructure—a tension that was most patently manifest in the gross deficiencies within the social housing system.⁷ On top of that, as people flooded the city from more rural areas seeking work, leaving their communities and social support systems behind, these mass migrations dramatically changed the social and demographic composition of the city in ways that stressed the welfare system in hitherto untested ways, widening the gaps in this social safety net to the point where many of the most vulnerable—the mentally ill, the disabled, the uneducated, the elderly, adolescent runaways, and long-term alcoholics and substance users—simply fell through, landing in places such as the garden by Christ’s Church.

Peering skywards from Addict’s Corner in 2015, it is impossible not to be struck by the skyscrapers that leer over into Tower Hamlets from the bordering City of London, a municipal corporation and borough that operates as the United Kingdom’s financial hub.⁸ Known colloquially as “The Square Mile,” the borough is lined with architectural superstructures tall and ruthless enough to slice heaven’s belly clean open. In our age of opaquely digitized global capitalism, it isn’t hard to imagine currency literally pouring in speculative bursts from the clouds that each day amass over the area’s now iconic skyline, before evaporating back into them the very next day. Almost fifty years on from Marshall’s book, “poverty in affluence” remains as pertinent an observation as ever. Indeed, during this half-century interlude, the gap between the United Kingdom’s wealthiest and poorest citizens has only increased, the bulging of London’s wealthiest district against one of its most impoverished boroughs a fitting affirmation of the systemic inequality of our current times. This inequality can be seen in the escalating rates of homelessness that continue to dog the capital and the country more broadly. The origins of this escalation can be largely connected to the triadic forces of deindustrialization, mass migration, and rapid urbanization that began

7. These deficiencies would be ruthlessly exploited by Thatcher’s ideological drive to open up the social housing market to free market privatization, with the now infamous “right-to-buy” initiative paving the way for much of the current housing crisis, from hyperinflated rental markets and cowboy development projects to a pervasive culture of slum landlordism.

8. The borough boundary lies less than a mile away from Addict’s Corner.

in the 1960s, a crisis that has been supercharged by the assaults on welfare and social care that would start with Thatcher and flow through New Labour before being destructively repackaged in the form of David Cameron's coalition government's austerity measures.

These historical and political transformations will receive greater attention in the section that follows. For now, we can note that Itchy Park is more than just a name—it is a multilayered assemblage of convergent, often conflicting cultural and political forces that have been continuously articulated and rearticulated over the long *durée* of historical time, finding concrete form in the dynamic interplay between bodies, memories, space, and place. Indeed, one might argue that wherever you find a public space where economic deprivation intersects with social defeat, migration anxiety, structural failures in labor, welfare, and housing, punitive policing, and substance use, you are discovering an Itchy Park. Just as Kenny Jones and his band members all had their own different Itchycoo Parks growing up, so too does London, and arguably the globe more broadly.⁹ In other words, there are a plethora of public spaces around the capital's urban sprawl where I could have encountered a similar convergence of forces. In this way, while the Itchy Park that Toby introduced me to certainly describes a preestablished chunk of geographical territory, it simultaneously describes a set of situational and existential conditions that are themselves inexorably tethered to the unique political and spatial history of the city, especially its East End. In this regard, the name encapsulates the confluence of the spatial, psychological, and phenomenological structures of experience that are at the heart of this book. This convergence is not just a backdrop but a social canvas where lives intersect. To grasp why Itchy Park has become such a gathering point, we need to consider the historical and political contexts that ensnare its residents.

9. We might consider the Edgewater homeless encampment of Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) ethnography as possessing a similarly "itchy" quality. Likewise, the zones of abandonment described by João Biehl (2005), the killing fields of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside brought alive by Jarrett Zigon (2019), the heroin-soaked landscape of Angela Garcia's (2010) *Española Valley* in New Mexico—all these sites can be thought of as places where itchy people gather. In this sense, Itchy Park could be thought of as an open-ended descriptor for the broad and diffuse set of situational conditions that constitute certain places as sites of human precarity and vulnerability.

The Welfare State and Spaces of Homelessness

Itchy Park can be understood as part of a more general proliferation in what social scientists have called the “spaces of homelessness.” Wearing one’s anthropological hat, it is important to note that the social and political dynamics that fold together to form these spaces vary enormously from place to place (Lyon-Callos 2000, 2004; Hopper 2013). To be sure, configurations of homelessness (and, indeed, substance use) are contingently shaped on the basis of differences in culture, economy, social policy, and even climate. Crossing the line into homelessness in post-socialist Russia (Stephenson 2006) cannot be casually conflated with the structural violence endured by indigent heroin users living under a San Francisco freeway (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Even within a given city, the spaces of homelessness are themselves often highly antithetical: for example, the “compassionate” space (Cloke et al. 2010) of day centers like the Manna is in stark contrast to the violent realities that make up much of life beyond its walls (Newburn and Rock 2005). Accordingly, the current homelessness crisis gripping London must be understood within its particular national and historical context, and more specifically the changing dynamic between the individual and the welfare state. A historically oriented look at UK housing policy is as good as any place to start.

The notion that the state should play some kind of a role in housing its citizens precedes the oft-cited birth of the UK welfare state following the ruination of the Second World War. Despite the urgent need, reported by people like Jack London, it wasn’t until 1919 that the first piece of legislation regarding municipal housing was passed. As the twentieth century rolled on, the demands for mass social housing continued to increase as socioeconomic and geopolitical transformations reshaped the country’s demographics. The result of these demands was the creation of the now ubiquitous local authority (LA)—municipally bounded bureaucracies that implement national housing policy at the local level. This transition would radically alter the topography of the United Kingdom’s housing landscape. By way of example, in 1914, approximately 90 percent of those living in England and Wales were housed in privately rented accommodation. By 1945, this number had shrunk to 62 percent. In short, the prevailing culture of slum-landlordism was being gradually replaced by a state-regulated public housing system, the implementation of rent control, and a slowly growing emphasis on owning your own home, effectively eating away at the unregulated profitability

that landlords had once enjoyed. Nevertheless, so acute was the housing crisis during the first half of the twentieth century that homelessness remained a serious social issue. Only, it was recognized under a different term: destitution. The term spoke to the deeper existential deprivations of extreme poverty that afflicted those who suffered from a lack of stable housing, the conditions of which were mostly mediated through various forms of temporary accommodation that ranged from basic hostels to the iniquitous dosshouses that lay scattered throughout the most deprived parts of the capital.

The most significant transformations in the government's social security system emerged in the wake of the Second World War, the so-called "welfare state" designed to act as a safety net that that would take care of the British people "from the cradle to the grave"—as per the recommendations of the 1942 Beveridge Report, implemented in the wake of Labour leader Clement Attlee's famous 1945 election win. In a nutshell, this system would combine a national insurance and social care system and integrate both into the nation's core healthcare and education infrastructure, the bundle of state services being free to all at the point of access. This movement towards a welfare state occurred in lockstep with broader reforms to the economy, most notably the nationalization of public utilities and other forms of industry—such as coal, steel, and the railroads—in conjunction with a more even-handed taxation program. Furthermore, it was in the aftermath of the war, 1948, when the first legislation was passed that mandated LAs to provide temporary housing to those who had been made homeless (a key condition being that their homelessness had occurred through circumstances that they could not have foretold). Many people continued, however, to fall through cracks in the safety net that the LAs were supposed to offer. Ultimately, it wasn't until 1977—following a prolonged and dedicated campaign from social activists—that the first truly comprehensive piece of legislation regarding homelessness passed through Parliament.¹⁰ Known as the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, this legislation provided a statutory definition of homelessness and placed legal obligations on LAs to secure housing for those who met the definition.

This legislation was a watershed moment in terms of housing policy, one that pointed not only to the recognition of homelessness as a legitimate form of personal and social crisis but also to deeper universalist imperatives at the heart of the welfare project, imperatives that,

10. See Somerville 1999.

very soon, were going to come under sustained and increased attack. These assaults were led by four consecutive Conservative administrations, starting with the eleven-year reign of Margaret Thatcher. A period of economic downturn in the 1970s combined with an increasingly feverish Cold War anxiety surrounding socialist principles of government ushered in a new form of British conservatism, one fueled by an ideology of economic neoliberalism, urging minimal state intervention in free markets. Under this new management, public expenditure was seen as excess blubber that hamstrung the transformative forces of competition and privatization, an idea that fostered an enduring fat-trimming politics where state spending has been turned from a universalizing force for social safety into an object of suspicion and moral hazard.

This Thatcherite welfare upheaval was sufficiently sweeping to reach every arm of the state apparatus, from healthcare (Howorth et al. 2002) to labor to education (Littler 2013). Arguably the greatest cuts and most radical transformations, though, were reserved for housing. One of Thatcher's first major legislative moves was to introduce the Housing Act in 1980, which gave tenants living in social housing the "right to buy" their home at a reduced rate. What this meant was that millions of former council homes were sold at discount prices and subsequently absorbed into the private market, a move that was not offset by the government replacing the sold housing stock. With cuts to public finances, there was practically no money being put towards rebuilding the social housing market. In many ways, the right-to-buy scheme catalyzed a huge reversal of historical fortunes for the landlord class and the transfer of millions of council homes into the private domain, leading to the enduring marginalization of tenants who found themselves at the de-regulated mercy of an inflated rental market where landlords retook the balance of power they had held at the start of the century.

The shrinking of the public housing supply corresponded with a surge in demand for housing under the existing homelessness legislation, doubling from 1980 to 1991. As more and more unhoused spilled onto the nation's streets, it became increasingly difficult for the Conservative government at the time to turn a blind eye, leading to the introduction of the Rough Sleepers Initiative. For the first time in its history, the state began providing funds to tackle rough sleeping, funding services that were typically delivered through the voluntary sector. In many ways, this revealed a kind of doublespeak moment in the history of British conservatism. On the one hand, there was a much-needed recognition of rough sleeping as a nexus of multiple deprivations that required state

intervention, many of which were unignorably hitched to governmental policy. On the other hand, outsourcing services to the voluntary sector constituted something akin to a sleight of hand, allowing an acknowledgment of the issue while at the same time pushing ahead with the same free market policies and public cuts that produced the problem in the first place.

In many ways, then, the changing complexion of homelessness that began with Thatcher's rise to power can be read as proxy of broader ideological struggles within the political spectrum. Over the course of this almost twenty-year period, the New Right had served the Old Left defeat after electoral defeat, bending the terms of the debate to their will. In this new world, traditional socialist policies—from nationalization to redistributive taxation—emerged as both antiquated and dangerous, fading into obsolescence as the so-called “hard left” were driven to the fringes of the Labour party, or else weeded out entirely.¹¹ The party that emerged was New Labour, and even though it would go on a sustained run of electoral success with Tony Blair at its helm, the neoconservative years had fundamentally shifted the United Kingdom's political center of gravity to the right, where it has remained ever since. Indeed, when Thatcher was asked at a dinner in 2002 what her greatest achievement was, she replied: “Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds.”

Homelessness and New Labour

Before the party's internecine collapse in 2010, the Blair-led Labour party sold itself as a form of governance constituted by a “Third Way” that operated in the interstitial space between social democracy and neoliberalism. From the outset, New Labour publicly denounced homelessness as a moral outrage while arguing that it was a fixable social ill, rooted in the economic mismanagement and welfare retrenchment of the preceding two decades of conservative government. Designated as a “high priority” social problem by the Social Exclusion Unit (a strategic arm established from within Blair's Cabinet Office), rough sleeping was targeted as an issue that could be solved technocratically, mostly through

11. To be reborn under Corbynism in 2015, before being shunted yet again to the periphery following Labour's demolition at the polls at the hands of Boris Johnson's Conservative Party in 2019.

procedural recalibrations at the bureaucratic level. This intermingling of the moral with the technocratic was manifest in New Labour's enduring, borderline myopic focus on what has been described as "new managerialism" (Ferguson 2008; Jordan 2010). By reshaping the bureaucratic infrastructure that dealt with homeless claimants, the government envisioned that increased access to support would produce something of a knock-on effect whereby the claimants would want to take greater responsibility for their own situation and future well-being. This responsabilization imperative was deeply embedded in the New Labour project, one that arguably had its ancestral roots in the neoliberal ethos of autonomy and entrepreneurial selfhood initially developed in the Thatcher years. Understood as a kind of conditional paternalism (Garrett 2003), this approach to the homelessness crisis reflected the party's renewed emphasis on "positive welfare"—supporting social mobility through education and healthcare while pruning the demands on the welfare state by getting people back into formal employment.

As if to confirm the gravitational shift of New Labour's politics towards the center, the fight against the moral scandal of rough sleeping would be transferred mostly into the voluntary sector, perpetuating a policy that the Conservatives had instigated—albeit with far greater liquid investment. Voluntary agencies and charitable institutions amenable to this model had to compete for this new public money, creating a partnership system that dramatically altered the borders between the third sector and the state.

Given that tackling the evils of social exclusion was arguably the flagship message of New Labour's political philosophy, it is no wonder that street homelessness became a hot political topic during their tenure in office, what with rough sleepers enduring high levels of violence, dislocation, and exclusion. The government's approach was two-pronged. One, the stream of new rough sleepers into the nation's streets had to be staunched through reformative policies at the level of labor and housing. Two, a more extensive and well-staffed street outreach system needed to be built alongside bespoke services for chronic rough sleepers. Through transformation and triage, then, the government argued that, with dynamic third sector collaboration, even the country's most impoverished citizens could be lifted out of their destitution and into the world of work, a place where they could become responsible for themselves. This aim, to return people experiencing homelessness to work, quickly became the prevailing trope in discourse being driven by New Labour. Framed as the most effective "exit route" out of homelessness, to join

the workforce was to achieve an unparalleled form of moral agency. This notion spawned innumerable third sector partnerships whose primary purpose was to provide individual training programs centered around the idea of self-enhancement through employment.

As Julie MacLeavy (2008: 21) has pointed out, New Labour's policies profoundly reimagined the boundaries of the welfare state, "in which issues of inequality and disadvantage were addressed not by redistributive welfare *per se*, but through the institution of an advance form of liberal rule." MacLeavy goes on to argue that in reorienting the conversation on welfare provision around questions of autonomy, responsibility, and choice, New Labour changed the United Kingdom's political furniture into a distinctly more biopolitical configuration, with an ideology of self-governance that centered on the movement from welfare to work. Citizenship thus became intrinsically more contractual in nature, not so much given as earned through a kind of paternalistic reciprocity. The problem with this model, as many have noted, is that it embodies a similar sentiment to Thatcherite bootstrapism to the extent that poverty and unemployment again reemerge as individual rather than structural failings—failings that are said to be perpetuated by an overly munificent welfare system. Contained within the brackets of the "Third Way," then, is the implicit idea that the carrot of self-improvement is more determinative of social inclusion than a level playing field (Dean 2007).

Notwithstanding these critiques, it is important to note that these policies had a positive effect on the number of rough sleepers bedding down on the nation's streets. They extended the "priority need" category to include a wider cohort of people; adjusting the distinction between priority and non-priority groups was especially instrumental in driving these numbers down. No doubt a robust and growing economy aided this reduction, with LAs and the voluntary sector enjoying record levels of funding.

On top of that, a renewed emphasis on rough sleeping not only increased its visibility as a social issue, but it also helped reimagine what could be called the built environment of homelessness. Historically, the route to homelessness would often mean passing through a "place of last resort." This term designates the kind of inadequate emergency lodgings that conjure Dickensian images of decay and desperation, places that all too readily ghettoize people experiencing homeless along with other socially vulnerable people, such as those suffering from substance use and mental health issues. This renewed sense of urgency towards rough sleeping as a political issue saw new sites of transition emerge in the bid

to shift rough sleepers out of destitution and back into the productive economy. A national network of semi-independent halfway houses was established, used both by those on the verge of street homelessness as well as those taking their first steps out of it. Ultimately, as Cloke, May, and Johnsen (2010) have demonstrated in their meticulous analysis of London's homeless infrastructure, places such as night shelters, hostels, and day centers are intrinsically fragile, perpetually caught between hope and hopelessness, easily blown into different shapes by the prevailing winds of differing political regimes. It is worth noting, too, that the implementation of austerity measures since 2010 has done much to reverse such progress as there was, the conditions of despair sowed in its wake providing fertile ground for the reemergence of last resort places. While this push for deeper involvement by New Labour was often framed to the public in terms of care and social justice, looking back now with hindsight's stethoscope it is hard not to detect the deeper moral heartbeat of responsibilization, in which homelessness was conceived as momentary hiccup on the route back to economically productive work. As Martin Whiteford says in his analysis of this political epoch, "within this understanding, homeless people have a 'duty' to transform themselves from the shackles of economic marginality and status of economic burden" (2013: 15).

This moral authoritarianism fed into a number of more pernicious policy manifestations, notably the explicit use of enforcement to target and criminalize, among other things, begging practices, loitering, public drinking and intoxication, and even the act of rough sleeping itself—counterintuitive as that might appear. Running parallel to this politics of self-empowerment, then, was a politics of brute power encapsulated by the introduction of antisocial behavior (ASBO) legislation: sweeping, flexible powers that allowed the authorities to discipline and imprison the most vulnerable populations for participating in the kind of "street culture" that sat outside of normative, distinctly bourgeois, value systems. Much in the same way that New Labour continued and tweaked many of the policies first enacted by their New Right predecessors, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that succeeded them expanded the ASBO legislation to include Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs)—a draconian collection of discretionary laws that severely restrict how certain public spaces can be used, disproportionately impacting people experiencing homeless as well as other vulnerable groups. Returning to the New Labour years, it was on their watch that the capital's wealthiest districts began "wetting" the ground to deter

rough sleepers. Recall that Lenny, whom we first met in the prologue, had experienced this on several occasions, this cruel act of displacement part of a long-standing drive in the capital—spearheaded by business owners—to cleanse the streets of not just the homeless but even the services that might attract them, such as clothing handouts or mobile soup kitchens.

More broadly, the revanchist and punitive undertones driving this parallel track in government policy reveals some of the ways in which the welfare system tends to exist in a dynamic entanglement with disciplinary forms of governance. In order to access services, a culture of behavioral compliance began to proliferate across providers. Couched in the language of personal responsibility, this culture required the homeless to subscribe to particular codes of conduct. Certain forms of behavior—sobriety, punctuality, proactivity—were conceived as more deserving than others, effectively creating a moral hierarchy of behavioral traits that emphasized individual autonomy over statutory obligation. Very quickly, this conditional ethos began to filter into almost every aspect of the welfare system, the threat of sanction and benefit withdrawal serving as a disciplinary technology that often had the effect of excluding from welfare the very people who most needed it.

By the time New Labour fell apart and the Conservative-led Coalition government took the national reins in 2010, its imprint on the inter-related dynamics of homelessness and welfare provision had grown very deep indeed. What began ideologically as an assault on social exclusion had stirred up into existence a whole new social policy landscape—what Whiteford elegantly describes in terms of a “lattice of governance.” The metaphor of the latticework is deliberate, calling “for great cognisance of the complex (and sometimes ambiguous) webs of conditionality, coercion and support that criss-crosses the contemporary governance of homelessness” (2013: 19). Viewed in this way, we can see how the dragnet of responsabilization, beginning with Thatcherite bootstrapping, came to encompass the political responses of New Labour to homelessness in the United Kingdom, a mantle that was then adopted and fine-tuned by the return of successive right-wing governments. Only now, following the seismic shock of the 2008 global financial crash combined with a ballooning national deficit, this deeply entrenched personalization agenda would be coupled with a campaign of public spending cuts—on welfare, policing, housing, education, and healthcare—the likes of which had not been seen since the 1970s. This period—still ongoing (public spending in the wake of COVID-19 notwithstanding)—is known as the

era of austerity. It is an era that has refashioned the very fabric of British society, and one that has had an especially deleterious effect on people experiencing homelessness, at once dramatically worsening the conditions in which they are forced to live in as well as sending their numbers through the roof.

The Age of Austerity

Following their ascent to power in 2010, the Coalition government wasted little time in implementing the severest benefits regime ever seen within the UK welfare system, significantly escalating conditions imposed on benefit claimants as well as the graveness of sanctions for failing to meet the new criteria. This ramping up was predicated on the idea that sanctions and other forms of punitive governance would foster behavioral change, motivating claimants to rediscover their work ethic and return to employment. If New Labour's social policies mostly employed the carrot over the stick, the Coalition government reversed this polarity, but with similar goals. A supercharging of the responsabilization narrative, these reforms were designed to strike at the heart of what was seen as a culture of indolence amongst the lower classes. Camouflaged amongst the now decades-old language of autonomy, productivity, and responsibility, these punitive welfare measures combined with greater deregulation, growing privatization of public services, and austerity measures to exacerbate inequality and discipline the poor.

Concretized in the Welfare Reform Act 2012,¹² this austerity legislation had an especially pronounced impact on homeless populations, given their necessarily deep relationship with the welfare system. Under its conditions, eligibility for government support is premised not only on need but also on complying with particular obligations. These obligations revolve around work-seeking behavior. In order to secure benefits, a claimant—so long as they are “fit for work”—must demonstrate their commitment to finding employment or preparing themselves for such an endeavor.¹³ These policy transformations have precipitated yet

12. Welfare Reform Act 2012. Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/5/contents>.

13. Even those deemed unfit for work—such as for reasons relating to long-term illness or disability—are now subject to varying forms of conditionality. The provision of Employment Support Allowance (ESA), for

another shift in welfare ideology, away from the notion of universal rights and towards conditional provision. Just as the phenomenon of redshift alerts astrophysicists to the way that objects in space are moving farther away from us at ever faster speeds, the Welfare Reform Act marks the newest recession from the rights-based program that defined the United Kingdom's original postwar political settlement. Much like the distant galaxies that will soon disappear from our view altogether, the universal safety net promised by Atlee is increasingly difficult to detect, the right to welfare lost in the redshift towards punitive conditionality.

Though much of the practical blueprint for this conditionality regime can be traced back to the previous government, this idea that no one should get "something for nothing" has gained significant momentum since 2010. In many ways, then, the homeless have provided a particularly visceral affront to the aim of "getting Britain working again."¹⁴ Worth noting is that this suspicion of poverty as kind of nefarious subculture has a long history in the United Kingdom's political imagination, the "something for nothing" homeless or other "benefit scroungers" of austerity Britain viewed in the same light as the "feckless poor" of the industrial age, who were also treated with repulsion and distrust (Howe 1998). This notion that poverty and low employment are entrenched problems of culture rather than structure was made explicit in 2011 by Lord Freud who, as acting Minister of Welfare Reform, stated: "That's what the welfare revolution is all about—that's the final goal—to bring an end to long-term benefit dependency and begin a cultural transformation."¹⁵ More reincarnation than revolution, Freud's statement nevertheless captures the tone of the national mood with regards to welfare, reinforcing in the public's moral imagination that it is the individual's personal failings that lead to unemployment and, furthermore, that welfare support amplifies rather than alleviates the problem. Under this vision, welfare dependency—framed, notably, in similar terms to substance

example, is contingent on claimants demonstrating a readiness to take steps towards work.

14. This sentiment first appeared in a government speech by the Conservative MP, Iain Duncan Smith, who was then head of the Department for Work and Pensions. Full transcription of this speech can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working>.

15. "The Welfare Revolution." Speech by Lord Freud. Published December 6, 2011.

dependency—had become the root cause of the United Kingdom’s socioeconomic lassitude, a move that effectively deflected attention away from the gaping structural fault lines in the prevailing economic order. Changing conditions to the labor market (such as through the increasing gigification of the economy), a banking industry fueled by speculation and predatory opportunism, and a rigged tax system—these were not the issues that needed attention and reform. Rather, the issue was a lack of self-reliance and get-up-and-go, the lower classes’ dependence on the welfare system undermining their potential to achieve the eulogized status of *independence*.

As noted, the austerity measures and sanctions regime implemented by the government have disproportionately affected people experiencing homelessness, regularly imposing demands and expectations that are impossible to comply with. Indeed, the overwhelming evidence is that people experiencing homelessness can be up to four times more likely to be sanctioned than their housed counterparts within the benefit claimant population. Framed by ministers as a deterrent rather than a punishment, these sanctions were put in place to beat out this supposed culture of worklessness and replace it with a culture of self-reliance. Those who failed to comply began to be framed, by government ministers no less, as flagrant rule-breakers who have been taking advantage of the state’s good nature for too long. It was quickly decided that those who “refused to play by the rules” were living on borrowed time—a sentiment that continues to this day.

Fundamentally, the sanctions regime ignores the complex and multiple needs that dictate the everyday lifeworld of those experiencing homelessness. For example, being given a work coach appointment time is all well and good but remains difficult to keep if you don’t have the necessary funds to pay for the transport required to get you there on time. On top of that, the decentralized nature of social services often leads to scheduling conflicts, meaning that someone with complex needs will often find that work program appointments clash with other appointments, such as with a housing officer, a mental health worker, an addiction counselor, or a healthcare professional. On top of that, the increasing digitization of state bureaucracies has placed new forms of stress on claimants, with access to the internet and other computer services providing another obstacle in the endless battle for compliance.¹⁶ Plus, the lack of a fixed

16. It was typical for many of the rough sleepers I worked with at the Manna Society to be required to apply for fifteen to twenty jobs each week. For

abode meant that any form of postal communication was difficult to maintain, even when a local day center acted as a surrogate. Indeed, one of my jobs at the Manna Centre was to sort and distribute the post for those whose mail had been redirected there. Within the daily piles of letters, by far the most common was the sandpaper brown government envelope, the kind that contains appointment information or else warns of impending sanctions. With the nomadic and capricious nature of the homeless experience causing many to lose track of their postal correspondence arrangements, all too often these letters would gather dust or else the information/threats enclosed would pass into obsolescence, morphing instead into concrete punishments that damaged the claimant in both the economic and social sense, often plunging them deeper and deeper into the punitive vortex and blacklisting them as a noncompliant shirker undeserving of future support.

Arguably, the area of welfare provision gouged most severely through the twin claws of austerity and sanctionism is that of housing. This gouging was an intrinsic part of David Cameron's oft-quoted "Big Society." Presented by Cameron as a critique of big government in favor of local devolution, the Big Society was more than just a renewed effort of localism. Rather, it was a way to ideologically justify the rolling back of the welfare state, smuggled into political discourse as an attack on the red tape of bureaucracy and entrenched welfare dependency (McKee 2015). While local devolution in the form of LAs had been a fixture of UK public housing infrastructure since the early twentieth century, the localism drive of the Cameron years was married with a revamped sense of distrust towards those who claim housing benefits. As a way of displacing attention away from the human costs of austerity, the narrative of the duplicitous individual claimant "gaming the system" has served as a powerful scapegoat for our times, with young working-class (often ethnic minority) men frequently bearing the brunt of this characterization.

Making the case that young people should not be burdening the state with single household claims but rather should be sharing with others or family, in 2012 the government expanded the "young people" category

most, these requirements far exceeded their capabilities, even with their access to the Manna's services. Many of them had complex and multi-layered vulnerabilities, ranging from severe mental health problems, substance use issues, to poor literacy. Despite these vulnerabilities, the job seekers program maintained that these requirements reflected the claimant's particular capability and circumstances.

from the age of twenty-five to thirty-five. What this meant was that single people (without dependents) under thirty-five are now only eligible for the Shared Accommodation Rate, meaning that they can only claim housing allowance to cover the rent for a single room in a shared household. This move has rendered vast swathes of the country completely unaffordable for single people in need of accommodation, especially within already hyperinflated and oversubscribed housing markets such as London's. In short, even if all landlords were willing to accept Housing Benefit (and many do not), the private rental sector simply does not contain enough shared properties that would be affordable for those now encompassed within this bracket. Denied the right to claim a home of their own under the guise of social justice, this policy has directly contributed to the surge in those who are deemed "intentionally homeless"—the implicit assumption being that they could return to their parents and that the parental home is an intrinsically safe and nurturing space. This assumption ignores the reality that home life is all too often a site of insecurity, violence, abandonment, and danger—especially in lower-income neighborhoods—the same localities that have been hit hardest by austerity measures. The idea then, that the family home is an ever available and benevolent universal resource is a distinctly false one, eliding the social realities of fragmenting kinship relations—such as through divorce, remarriage, and incarceration—as well as ignoring the financial and spatial restrictions that limit the ability of even the most willing parents to welcome their adult children back home (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2017). To mark a person out as intentionally homeless and young is thus an especially insidious category, one that reproduces a victim-blaming discourse at the same time as reinforcing the now deeply entrenched responsabilization narrative, in the process deflecting attention from structural neglect at the level of government. The cost of this neglect has been a surge in street homelessness not seen since the Thatcherite period of the 1970s.

By the time I began fieldwork in 2014, the pain helix of austerity measures and an entrenched neoliberal housing policy had taken root throughout the country's social and political infrastructure, transforming the need for housing into what McKee (2015: 3) has described in terms of an "ambulance service"—that is, something that provides help and support in a moment of emergency but remains fathoms away from a basic right of citizenship and welfare provision. In London, an increasingly polarized distribution of wealth combined with changing urban demographics has led to the gentrification of formerly working-class

neighborhoods (like Whitechapel), leading to the ghettoization of poverty into so-called “problem places”—such as Addict’s Corner in Itchy Park. Indeed, the installation of a surveillance camera atop the park’s central lamppost, its gaze angled firmly in the direction of the corner, confirms the way in which problematic forms of poverty—such as street drinking and substance use—are mapped onto geographically bounded areas. Huddled together in these problem places are so-called “problem people”—people who are subject to daily forms of pathologization that are reinforced through discourses of antisociality and worthlessness.¹⁷ With their myopic focus on the behavioral adaptations that emerge from extreme poverty rather than its systemic roots, these discursive forms of exclusion dovetail with punitive forms of governance. Founded on the twin pillars of conditionality and compulsion, these modes of governance radically limit the day-to-day life possibilities for those caught up in its pincers, both creating and amplifying some of the most destructive waves of social displacement and abandonment ever witnessed in the British Isles. While homelessness may be just one of austerity’s many symptoms, it has long been held up as a reliable indicator of the general health of society. If we accept that this principle holds a degree of truth, austerity Britain—and its post-Brexit, post-COVID iterations—is not in good shape.

Having traced the historical and political transformations in Britain’s welfare policies from the turn of the twentieth century onwards into the twenty-first, the lived realities of the Itchy Park residents that I explore and analyze in the forthcoming chapters can now be understood in their proper context. As I turn my attention to the analytic object of this study—the drug-induced blackout—the reader would do well to keep this context close to hand. I urge the reader to keep these sections close by, not because I treasure any perceived uniqueness of insight, but rather because these historical and political conditions remain fundamental in the constitution of my interlocutors’ subjectivities and lived worlds, not least of all in the extraordinary lengths they go to escape them.

17. Discourses that now include the long-term sick and disabled.

CHAPTER 2

Killing Time

Itchy People

In the previous chapter, I outlined the dynamic constitution of Itchy Park, painting it as a polyvalent place where multiple meanings, historical contingencies, and political processes intersect. More generally, I suggested that Itchy Park could be thought of as an open-ended descriptor for the broad and diffuse set of situational conditions that constitute certain places as sites of human precarity and vulnerability. Ultimately, Itchy Park is a place where itchy people gather. What, though, does it mean to be an itchy person? An itch, after all, is not a good thing. Rather, it is a state that requires relief. Itches, in other words, demand to be scratched. What itches those who gather on Addict's Corner each day? As I hope to show in this chapter and the next, their itches are multiple, emergent from a world of chronic scarcity and struggle. There are bodily and psychological itches—in the form of enduring chemical dependencies. There are moral itches—deeply rooted economies of mutual reciprocity that are enfolded into these chemical dependencies: *you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours*. Encompassing these intertwined fields of itchiness/scratchiness is a deeper spatiotemporal irritation that sets the existential stakes for daily life in the park: boredom, a way of relating to time and place. A semantics of itchiness can help tease out the experiential shape that boredom takes as it emerges within the unique spatiotemporality of Itchy Park.

There is, of course, another meaning to itchiness beyond irritation and inflammation. This is itching as longing, as restless desire. In this regarding, itching binds the psychocorporeal with the temporal—the itchy subject *longs* to scratch their itch, to satisfy their restless desires. No surprise, then, that in Itchy Park, scratching abounds. Crucially though, their very scratching, public as it is, invariably irritates the social skin, their daily pursuit of relief becoming an itch unto the body politic, one that is scratched by police and policy alike. Exploring how these modalities of itching and scratching both intersect and clash with one another can reveal fundamental aspects regarding the spatiotemporal constitution of homeless existence. In this world, the itch is time itself. And to scratch time, sometimes you need to kill it.

Waste Not, Want Not

The stretches of pavement outside of pubs make for rich pickings, as do bus stops. Places where people wait and socialize are breeding grounds for smokers, the lit cigarette the perfect company in both isolation and communality. Jimmy is scanning the pavement for butts. The night before was a dry one—a blessing. “Can’t go scavenging like this after rain, everything’s fucked.” After rain, streets-worth of second-hand tobacco is immediately ruined, an entire urban crop wiped out. “Still, if you look for places with awnings, there’s still baccy you can find. Obviously, I’d rather buy a fresh packet but, you know, you do what you have to do.” He finds a good one, practically only half-smoked. “Look at this one,” says Jimmy, holding up the cigarette like a detective showing a rookie the ropes. “This one’s barely smoked.” He looks behind him, and points to a bus stop sheltering a group of commuters: “Whoever lit this one was probably waiting for a bus—had to throw it on the ground cos the bus came quicker than they thought. See, it’s not even been stamped out, still round.” We inspect the half-finished cigarette together as a shared object of curiosity, the acrid smell of old tobacco wafting up from the now-yellowed stretch of paper. He’s right, it’s practically a perfect cylinder. Jimmy slides down against a wall and pulls a metal tin from his pocket and balances it on his lap. Popping open the tin, he pinches the scavenged cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, making small circular motions to dislodge the tobacco from its cavity, working all the way to the tip of the butt. “Waste not, want not!” proclaims Jimmy, wearing an almost satirical smile. Popping the tin shut, the metallic snap rings

out as a kind of punctuation mark, another comma in the ongoing list of his pursuit for smokable second-hand tobacco, or Roadside Virginia, as the local euphemism goes. "There's another one," he points out, scrutinizing the crevices in the pavement. "And another one over there. They're everywhere if you know what you're looking for." The way that Jimmy scans the pavement evokes the swing of a hammerhead shark as it works its mallet-shaped head across the seabed, using its extraordinary senses to pick up the electrical fields created by animals hiding beneath the sand. I told him as much, the image causing him to chuckle: "At least what they catch is fresh! Can't say that about these." He is holding up a butt that's been pancaked by someone's heel, before throwing it to the ground, detecting too much moisture in the butt's flesh. This scavenger hunt goes on for the best part of forty minutes, Jimmy rooting around the forgotten interstices of the urban landscape, seeking substances of opportunity from what are otherwise objects of waste. "I used to find it, a bit—you know...well, it's sort of humiliating, isn't it? Scavenging around for fag butts. I know that people'll find it disgusting or whatever. Now I just get on with it—people can think what they want. Anyway, when I can afford it, I try and buy a fresh pouch."

While Jimmy will attract a few sideways looks as he carries out his pavement inventory, the vast majority of those who pass by do not acknowledge him at all, confirming his social invisibility. Indeed, the physical plane where his scavenging takes place—the pavement—is quite literally below the field of vision in which most people operate, their eyes tending to be fixed on what is before rather than below them. Below is where waste tends to amass: litter, disgorged gum, old newspapers, cigarette butts. It is also where the rough sleepers spend much of their time, either camped out in front of doorways, sitting against the wall to beg, or scavenging for things that others have deemed no longer useful.

No wonder, then, that those who live in society's margins, who make their worlds within waste-littered environments, are all too readily classified as a form of social waste (Lynch 1990). The intimate connection between material waste and its metaphorical transference onto other domains, such as marginalized people, is well established within anthropology. Think here of Mary Douglas's (1966) famous articulation of the relation between pollution and purity, of dirt as "matter out of place." For her, things are dirty not because they are necessarily unhealthy, but because they transgress the classificatory boundaries unique to each culture. Douglas's ideas have inspired generations of anthropologists who have explored the lives of those deemed expendable. For example, migrants

caught crossing borders have been dehumanized through discourses linking them to trash objects. The language of pollution and waste is thus used as an instrument of exclusion, which serves to reinforce the symbolic and regulatory boundaries of the nation-state. The urban homeless are also associated with waste, which reflects deeper moral concerns regarding the tension between order and disorder. This association also reveals dichotomies within the labor economy, such as between productive and nonproductive work. We see this entanglement between moral and economic failure in the term *waster*, used to describe those who are idle and producing nothing of value. It is a term frequently applied to people experiencing homelessness. And yet, to be dubbed a waster is not to be totally outside of consumer capitalism. Rather, it speaks to the double movement of inclusive-exclusion, an idea developed in Giorgio Agamben's (1998) reformulation of Foucauldian biopolitics. From Agamben's perspective, the politics of modern liberal democracies are defined by the inclusion of certain forms of life at the expense of others, thereby rendering exclusion as constitutive of politics itself. Here, their nonproductive "wasterness" becomes the measure against which the productive consumerism of the "good" citizen can be defined and, in many cases, defended from.

We can see the mechanisms of inclusive-exclusion in Jimmy's cigarette butt hunting, in the way that he participates in the tobacco economy primarily through what is thrown away by productive bodies. While Agamben's remodeling of the biopolitical harbors a rich analytical potential, there remains a risk that his vision becomes too all-encompassing, such that forms of life on the margin become almost impossible to make sense of outside the framework of power structures built on exception, forms presumed to exist in a kind of "necropolitical" slow death. The necropolitical assumes a figure who is incapable of acting on the situation in which they find themselves caught up (Mbembe 2003). They are rendered meat awaiting the grinder, leaving little to no space for anything like hope, laughter, irony, or creativity. By contrast, the way Jimmy goes about his foraging reveals a profound attunement to the conditions of his world, to the rhythms, tempos, and textures of the cityscape. He knows what time the pubs begin their outside clear-up and thus when the previous night's butts will be swept up and the ashtrays emptied. He knows the color he's looking for as he casts his eye over the pavement. He knows the yield of each cigarette as he feels its volume between his thumb and forefinger, the fleshy pads on his fingertips sensitized to the tone of each butt's tissue: "This is a fat one right here, you

can feel it—give it a little squeeze and you can hear the baccy that’s left. If you listen, it’s like a crisp packet.”

If Jimmy sees someone tossing a butt to the ground, he doesn’t go for it immediately: “People can get funny about it—like they’re thinking that you’re stalking them or something. I’ll make sure I wait for a bit, until they get ahead. And if it’s busy you wait for a gap in the traffic, or else somebody’ll step on you!” Jimmy’s attunement to the flow of tobacco operates not only at the sensate level of the body—spotting the right color, squeezing the butt with his fingers, listening to the butt’s tell-tale rustle—but also at the level of the body politic. This is the reason he holds back and waits—he knows that his relationship to waste, as someone who consumes it rather than creates it, can make people feel “funny.” What does he mean by funny?

Not ha-ha funny, obviously. Like, I don’t know, uncomfortable, or whatever. I guess normal people just think it’s a bit disgusting, like the idea that someone would want to pick up and smoke the shite they’ve thrown away. You never know how people are gonna react. I’ve had people say some pretty horrible shite—disgusting tramp, scum, all that. I know people who’ve taken a kicking for less. Even just the looks you get are bad enough. Better just to hang on a few seconds, you know—keep out their way.

Here, then, funniness emerges not as an index of something comical but rather as a descriptor for the way in which waste objects mediate the affective and psychological relations between the social center and the periphery. In designating those who throw away cigarettes as “normal,” Jimmy de facto casts himself as abnormal. As the collector and consumer of discarded “shite,” Jimmy recognizes the risk of becoming a similarly repulsive object, all too aware that his association with abjection and disorder can render him a target for dehumanization, either through direct verbal and physical abuse or else in the diffuse violence of the repulsed gaze. Reluctant to open himself up to these interconnected modes of violence, Jimmy hangs back on the edge of things, actively working to avoid disrupting the fragile ecology of everyday movement and interaction that upholds social norms of comfort, security, and order. This ecology is fragile because all it takes is one miscalculation—a getting in the way, a getting too close, a backwards glance—and suddenly the distance between the socially marginal—the abnormal—and the central—the normal—collapses into a previously un contemplated intimacy, their respective lips separated by little more than the pavement and a few passing seconds.

Jimmy’s scavenging tactics demonstrate the creativity, the quick thinking, and also the dangers required to carve out a living on the social

periphery. For Jimmy, tracking down tobacco is about more than satisfying his neurochemical itch for nicotine. It is tangled up in complex sharing economies that bind the Itchy Park residents to one another through complex relations of reciprocity. On top of that, rolling, sharing, and smoking cigarettes is also one technique encompassed within the deeper existential imperative to kill time and provide some temporary relief from the crushing boredom of street homelessness. Tobacco is just one substance within a broader constellation of chemical potentialities that emerge in response to the spatiotemporal conditions of their existence. And on top of that, folded into the spatiotemporality of extreme boredom is the ever-looming threat of substance withdrawal, the combined pressures of which profoundly shape the ways people experiencing street homelessness negotiate the material scarcity and swollen temporality of street homelessness. In what follows, I turn to boredom—as both an embodied mood and a discursive concept—as a means of exploring the imbrication between personal tragedy, social death, temporal breakdown, spatial discipline, and economic redundancy as it takes shape in Itchy Park.

Boredom

Jimmy and I were sitting on one of the benches. An early spring morning, there was a snap in the air, the damp chill seeming to alight on us from the blanket of gray that had unfurled itself across London's skyline. The ground was still wet from the night before, as were Jimmy's clothes and rucksack, the damp forming a kind of osmotic shadow around the edges of his sleeves and ankles. The darkness mingled with the mildewy smell of unlaundered clothing, something that Jimmy often complained about: "Even when you go to a day center and grab a shower—the moment you put your clothes back on you stink again." Jimmy took a swig of the super-strength cider he'd been keeping in his bag for that morning and rolled himself a cigarette, taking pinches of Roadside Virginia from his tin. Three out of four times the lighter sparked but wouldn't catch, seemingly sabotaged by the dewy morning air. Like a microbolt of lightning, each failed spark bathed Jimmy's face in a flash flood of light. Below his eyes hung heavy bags. Around their edges crept out a deep crumple of crow's feet. The weathering of his skin made him look older than his fifty-four years, accentuated by a stiff gray stubble that enveloped the lower half of his face like a bandanna. Jimmy peered

through the green-tinted plastic to gauge the fuel level. He briefly shook his head in mock disbelief, his nose crinkling in frustration as he began to vigorously shake the lighter up and down, the furious motion of his fist resembling a gambler's final roll onto a craps table. Cupping his hand to guard against any delinquent wind, the lighter was inspired by his gambler's rattle and the flint sent up a steady flame. Jimmy pulled on the cigarette and let out a deep smoke-filled sigh. He took another hit from the can of cider, or "breakfast," as he called it. Jimmy was in the habit of always saving at least one can for when he woke up. Otherwise, he would have to endure withdrawal tremors until he could get hold of another drink.

Waking up without breakfast is a fucking nightmare. You can't stop your hands moving, like you've got a fucking washing machine trapped inside you! Your skin starts to crawl, your head's splitting in half; stomach churning. You can't think! Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. You need it to get right.

In another life Jimmy had been a tree surgeon. Blessed with the lean, sinewy build of a rock climber, it was easy to imagine him using that wiry strength to scale trees and make short work of any unwieldy branches. The work, though, was dangerous. Seven years previously, Jimmy suffered a serious fall after one of his support harnesses had failed. The accident damaged Jimmy's back, leaving him unable to work. Following the accident, his doctor prescribed him an opioid analgesic to help him deal with the more acute periods of pain. By the time this prescription dried up, Jimmy had already begun combining these pills with alcohol to help numb the pain. Being unable to work placed enormous strain on Jimmy's domestic life and in particular his relationship with his wife. With historical ties to Travelling communities, Jimmy's constant moving around meant that he had never finished secondary school, working from his early teens in various forms of transient, typically cash-in-hand manual labor, such as on construction sites or collecting scrap metal for old acquaintances within the Travelling community. With his back in the state that it was, though, none of these forms of work were possible. Deprived of the autonomy, freedom, and indeed the pleasure that these forms of work offered, and forced to subsist on what was a distinctly meager welfare package compared to the money that he was used to making, Jimmy fell into a deep depression that saw him increasingly regulate his mood and body through alcohol and later Valium¹ as well. He

1. A benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety, alcohol withdrawal, and seizures.

found this combination offered an analgesic relief closest to the opioids he had initially been prescribed. Jimmy describes this period of his life as a kind of fog, a haze of pain and loss.

I could barely fuckin' move. Just lying there in agony. You know, I went from being someone who could provide, who had a purpose, y'know. To suddenly being nothing. My wife—I let her down. I don't blame her for leaving. The drink and drugs—they became the only thing that mattered—you just shut everything out. You fuck the world right off. Even my kids. Nothing else mattered. And then one day you look around and it's all gone; everything you've worked for. And for what?

Following the breakdown of his marriage, his wife moved to another part of the country with his two daughters, leaving Jimmy to cycle between the sofas of various friends and acquaintances. As welcomes became outstayed and viable options in his social network dwindled to nothing, he decided to move to London in the hopes of cleaning himself up and securing regular employment. Dogged by chronic pain and ongoing chemical dependencies, Jimmy failed to achieve either. The temporary accommodation he had initially secured for himself through saving up some of his benefit payments fell apart when the cost of living caught up with him, sending him through the trapdoor into street homelessness. As a single man with no local connection to any of London's municipal boroughs, Jimmy was deemed by the Tower Hamlets housing authority to be “intentionally homeless”—a bureaucratic status-of-being that, as outlined previously, shunted him out of the social housing queue.

By the time we first met, Jimmy had been living on the streets for almost five years, during which period he continued to self-medicate with alcohol and benzodiazepines. As his earlier testimony reveals, withdrawal from these substances invited upon him an embodied state-of-crisis that was nightmarish in scope. As has been demonstrated across various ethnographic contexts that have engaged with people struggling with substance use, staving off withdrawal is an integral aspect of their being-in-the-world, its ever-looming threat a powerful determinant in the kinds of relational networks that such people form and cultivate with each other (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Wakeman 2016). While a couple of super-strength ciders and a Valium were enough to stabilize Jimmy and keep the nightmares at bay, for a few hours at least, the psychocorporeal menace of withdrawal was not the only existential threat he faced.

Also confronting him was the stuckness of existential boredom, the bloated temporality of his present rendering time's river a stagnant and limitless repetition of the same. Compared to "situative" boredom—where boredom is related to a particular object or event, like waiting on the platform for a delayed train—existential boredom, as the Heideggerian-inspired philosopher Lars Svendsen (2005) describes it, is where soul and world are disemboweled, in the process causing an aching sense of emptiness that cannot be shaken off. Under these conditions, boredom scaffolds reality by dragging the world from its normal context. As Jimmy put it:

We didn't just wake up one day and decide to be here. We don't enjoy being in the situation we're in. We just suddenly found ourselves stuck in this existence. Alcohol fights off the boredom, gives you something to look forward to. Gives you an escape from it all, you know? Otherwise, what is there? Nothing. There's nothing.

Tony, another of the park's regulars, echoed Jimmy's sentiments: "The days just seem to go on forever, like they're never going to end. You've got to find a way to kill the time somehow, the fucking boredom, otherwise it'll just eat you up. Why d'you think we're all on drugs around here?"

Why, indeed? Foregrounding one of the central questions of this book, Tony situates drugs as the primary technology of anesthesia through which time is killed in Itchy Park. In such a framing, failure to kill time risks being swallowed up in its monstrous gape, an arresting image that profoundly captures the indivisible relationship between temporality and being as it pertains to the perceived endlessness of deep boredom. In both Jimmy and Tony's case, we can see how the precarity of their situation combined with the stuckness of boredom was deeply connected to a kind of bracketing—that is to say, they experienced their homelessness as a kind of bloated, almost endless present that was flanked on one side by a painful, often tragic past and on the other a future that had all but been evacuated of meaningful possibilities. Typically, this was a bracketing they struggled to see a way out of, the possibility of a long-term exit from their conditions foreclosed by forms of state power that reinforced their marginalization on an almost daily basis—be that through direct policing or more diffuse forms of social death and institutional abandonment at the level of housing, welfare, and labor. That they articulated this congealment of intimate breakdown and inclusive-exclusion in terms of boredom is revealing. For one, it demonstrates how the forces of social marginalization are felt not only socioeconomically, but temporally as well.

Boredom: A Brief History

To fully grasp the particular shape of boredom as it was experienced and negotiated within Itchy Park, some brief notes on its historical development as a concept are worth sharing, particularly with regards to how it has been adopted and rearticulated within anthropology. Boredom, like anything else, is a historically and culturally conditioned concept whose shape has morphed over time. Notwithstanding these changes, boredom remains intimately tied to questions of temporality, in particular to the way in which time can be experienced as stretched, endless, or emptied of meaning. Keeping these ideas in mind, scholars interested in boredom have traced its Western genealogy back to the phenomenon of *acedia*. The term first emerges in relation to a group of ascetic monks sometimes referred to as the Desert Fathers. Owing to their extreme social isolation, these medieval Christian monks were often beleaguered by experiences of *acedia*, described as a deep feeling of listlessness which impeded them from fulfilling their religious obligations. This state of torpor was caused by the presence of “the noontide demon”—a demonic apparition with the power to induce in them a dangerous form of spiritual alienation, tempting them away from their union with God. As Andrew Crislip (2005) has pointed out in his detailed exposition of this phenomenon, a host of psychological and somatic symptoms index the presence of the *acedia* demon. Bodily symptoms can include sleepiness, physical weakness, pain in the joints, and a general heaviness pervading the body. Psychological signs tend to focus on experiences of tedium, indolence, impatience, as well as the urge to abandon the cloistered life. Deeply embedded in Christian moral theology, *acedia* has in recent times become a rich object of scholarly inquiry, birthing a semantic pluralism that has seen it articulated as the progenitor of not only boredom, but also a range of psychiatric syndromes, including depression, anxiety, and neurotic disorder (Daly 2014). Putting this conceptual multiplicity to one side—and not wanting to draw hard lines between the psychological, the somatic, and the existential—*acedia* can perhaps best be understood as a disease of the soul that emerged at the convergence of the moral, the temporal, and the spiritual.

As the Middle Ages turned to the Renaissance period, the condition and concept of *acedia* began to shift, eventually becoming subsumed into the notion of melancholy, reflecting broader cultural transformations in theories of illness, in particular the growing emphasis on the bodily and psychological over the spiritual. The concept of melancholy

can itself be traced back through to humoral theories that emerged out of Ancient Greece, systems of medicine that conceived each person as constituted by four kinds of elemental substance: blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile. Melancholia was the disposition associated with the “cold dryness” of black bile, an excess of which was thought to have a profound effect on a person’s bodily state, their subjectivity, and their behavior. It was, in a sense, an early theory of mental illness. By the time the Renaissance rolled around, humoral theory became absorbed into a wider cosmology that conceptualized the human as interdependent with certain patterns of astrological movement. Saturn, being cold and dry, was understood as sharing qualities with the melancholic in a kind of symbolic unity. A person’s mood, in other words, was part of a broader cosmic arrangement. However, as empirical ways of thinking reshaped metaphysical assumptions about the way the world and the body worked, the cosmic gradually gave way to the psychosomatic as people sought internal mechanisms as explanations for the melancholic disposition. This turn was part of a wider conceptual shift in which the importance of elemental substances became displaced in favor of more psychological and physiological explanations.

Broadly speaking, then, the shift from *acedia* to melancholy reflects epistemic and cultural transformations in Western explanations of human illness, most patently from the moral and cosmic towards the psychological and the somatic. While melancholy remains a prominent trope for exploring certain kinds of affective dispositions—notably in the psychoanalytic tradition with regards to experiences of depression, loss, grief, and mourning (discussed in greater depth later)—it too, like *acedia* before it, has been largely superseded by a new conceptual vocabulary: first by the notion of *ennui* and later boredom.

According to Reinhard Kuhn (1976), the condition of *ennui* reflected a crisis of meaning that was said to be plaguing the upper classes following the material transformations of modernity. An affliction of subjectivity that was, during this epoch, reserved for the affluent and the aristocratic—a curse of “too much” free time, as it were—the emergence of *ennui* has since been articulated as a kind of bellwether for deeper cultural, historical, and economic transformations occurring during this era. Ben Anderson (2004), for example, argues that much of these changes can be connected to the rise of individualism in conjunction with increasing secularization. With religion being usurped by economics as the central fulcrum around which social and political life was organized, he argues that a metaphysical void emerged that was subsequently filled by

more concerted focus on the interior realm of the self. Further to that, he connects this more “self-centered” construction of meaning to changes in time-space orientation and discipline, in particular to the birth of leisure time as something conceptually and experientially distinct from the realm of work and commodity production. As these changes took deeper root in Western culture, experiences of ennui that might formerly have been the preserve of the affluent expanded across the socioeconomic continuum. In other words, with the unfolding of modernity, anyone—rich or poor—could be afflicted by this condition. It was this “democratization” of ennui around the eighteenth century, then, that ultimately led to the proliferation of what we have come to understand as boredom.

Since then, boredom has quickly ripened as an object worthy of philosophical and literary introspection. Kierkegaard, keenly aware of its historical connection to *acedia*, famously asserted that boredom was the “root of all evil,” articulating it not so much as an individual malaise as spiritual or existential mood, the relief of which could be sought through the “passion of faith.”² Heidegger also viewed boredom as a mood rather than an internal psychological state. Far from the root of all evil, though, Heidegger argues that the temporal dislocation, elasticity, and emptiness of boredom contains a “profound” potentiality—a possibility for opening up new configurations of meaning and self-insight. In his eyes, it is the empty temporality of boredom that provides the ontological measure against which authentic being-in-the-world takes shape. More recently, Agamben (2004) has revisited Heidegger’s notion of profound boredom, quipping that “Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored.” His point is that boredom, as an existential mood, is something very different from animal captivation, insofar as moods disclose the existential reality of our contingency or “thrownness” in the world. In this genealogy of thought, the perceived endlessness of boredom gestures towards the infinity of temporality, thus holding the capacity to alert us to the intrinsic finitude of human existence. Such a realization—supposedly unavailable to animals—can disclose the ecstatic potentiality, creativity, and openness of man’s being-in-the-world.

As we think about these Heideggerian conceptions of boredom, an important line emerges—one that requires careful treading. This is the line between seduction and engagement. As James Laidlaw (2013) has pointed out, anthropologists have historically exhibited something of a

2. See McDonald (2013) for a deeper exposition of Kierkegaard’s conception of boredom.

tendency to turn to philosophy in search of gurus, becoming so seduced by their explanatory models that we defer to them as though they were an ultimate authority, projecting their doctrines onto our interlocutors as though we had finally discovered the key to their previously impenetrable alterity. In so doing, we fail to recognize these models for what they are: a tool (or perhaps a set of tools). As discussed earlier, a tool can be good to think with, or not so good—it just depends on the ethnographic context in which we find ourselves embedded. Encouraging careful engagement over the blindness of seduction (or indeed avoidance), Laidlaw encourages a productive dialogue with philosophy that remains faithful to the lived realities of those who are gracious enough to invite us into their worlds. In the world of Itchy Park, boredom unquestionably abounds. Just how much “profound” disclosure is going on, however, is suitably up for debate.³ Indeed, just because deep boredom can, in the abstractive arena of the Heideggerian imagination, reveal the “ecstatic unity of temporality”—which is to say that the present is constituted by the collision of the having-been and the not-yet—this does not mean that boredom is articulated or experienced as such in the messy flux of street homelessness.

Indeed, for the Itchy Park homeless, the lived reality of boredom often spoke more explicitly—but certainly not irreducibly, as we will soon see—to stuckness and paralysis, of being confined to a time-space that was defined as much by disjunctive breakdown as it was any sense of ecstatic unity. Nevertheless, Heideggerian conceptions of mood can still be a useful tool to think with, as several phenomenologically minded anthropologists have demonstrated (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017; Gammeltoft 2018; Throop 2017, 2018; Zigon 2018). Following their lead, when I speak of boredom as a particular kind of mood that was shared and articulated amongst the Itchy Park homeless, I am not using the term to designate an individual emotional or psychological state. Instead, moods can be understood as indeterminate and emergent atmospheric conditions that shape “the way we are in a world at any particular moment” (Zigon 2018: 144). In this way, boredom (along with other moods, such as its cross-cousin, anxiety) can be understood

3. See Lems (2019) for an interesting discussion on how “profound boredom” can be used as a theoretical lens to examine the existential dialectics of movement and stasis in the context of young Eritrean migrant men as they try to initiate change in their lives under the shadow of vast institutional constraints.

as distinct existential responses to the social, political, and material conditions that constitute the realities of everyday life. This idea hinges on the premise that we are always already caught up in some kind of mood. Moods, then—as opposed to emotions that emerge as reactions to particular stimuli—constitute the filters through which we attune ourselves to the worlds we find ourselves in.

Seen in this way, boredom no longer seems a good fit for Elizabeth Goodstein's (2005) catchall term of "experience without qualities." Rather, boredom possesses very distinct qualities, the shape of which, as many anthropologists have demonstrated, emerges in symbiosis with the social and historical realities that constitute a given place, as do the responses that people cultivate to deal with it (Masquelier 2013; Musharbash 2007; O'Neill 2014; Ralph 2008). Boredom then, with its stretched and perforated temporality, is always situated. Adeline Masquelier and Deborah Durham (2023) describe this mode of temporality through the notion of the "meantime." Their work and those of their coauthors across this edited volume offers an excellent example of how ethnographic particulars can deeply enrich and indeed problematize the philosophical work that has historically set the tone for our thinking on questions of boredom, waiting, and temporal orientation. The boredom of waiting, then, does more than simply disclose reality—as Heidegger and Agamben might have it. Rather, it is actively lived within, ripe with possibilities that, even if never materially realized, are nevertheless worked on, explored, and tied to new projects and anticipations. Waiting, in their eyes, is not suspended animation, but rather the animation of suspension itself, the constant defibrillation of time itself as people seek new modes of sociality and futurity to reckon with the meantime they inhabit. None of which, it must be said, is meant to recast waiting in some kind of utopian light. Rather, it becomes a lens through which to examine and trace the contours of inclusion and exclusion, the boundaries of which are deeply enmeshed within how people experience, make sense of, and negotiate the meantime. Masquelier's work (2013) with the jobless youth of Niger is exemplary here, demonstrating the eventfulness that structures waiting practices; the chatting, planning, joking, and scheming that takes place during tea ceremonies enables these young men to transform waiting into a kind of labor that opens up new possibilities of futurity and sociality, a counterbalance to the narrowed futures their economic precarity otherwise inflicts upon them. Daniel Mains, Craig Fadley, and Tessema Fasil (2013) have also studied unemployed youth in Africa. Their work in Ethiopia echoes similar themes to those surfaced by

Masquelier. Their findings are especially relevant given the topic at the heart of this book. Their focus concerns how young jobless men spend their time tracking down the stimulant *khat* and then chewing it with others, the goal being to imbue the day with some kind of meaningful rhythm, in the process taking up time, of which there was plenty. Many of these men used *khat* to forge a desirable temporal narrative in which they were moving towards the future, seeking the psychoactive condition of *mirqana*, a state which moved them beyond the banal realities of the swollen present and thus allowing them an escape into dreams and hopes for the future.

For those experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park, they too sought escape from the perceived “nothingness” of the future that had wedged itself into the present. Any dreams of new futures—chemically stimulated or not—were similarly fragile, prone to collapse under the weight of their own escapist imperatives. Itchy Park, like many spaces of homelessness and social deprivation across the United Kingdom, is awash with cheap anesthetic intoxicants, be it super-strength alcohol or other “downers” circulating within the illicit drug market—notably benzos, synthetic cannabinoids, and opiates. As Max says:

When you become homeless, you become invisible. Life ain't no longer ahead of you, so when you ain't got no future you have to create a new time for yourself. This life, it's like a cancer. On the streets you have to drink, smoke, shoot up, whatever; it's the only way to get through the situation.

Cheap or not, accruing the amount of substances required to create a new time and propel them into the kind of escapist bodily states where time could be killed—such as the drug-induced blackout—required a certain amount of money. Money, as is often remarked, does not grow on trees. Under conditions of extreme scarcity, as in homelessness, money barely grows at all, anywhere. Faced with this desperate economic reality, the residents of Itchy Park came together in various ways to pool their meager resources and form what Phillipe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg (2009) have influentially articulated as the “moral economy of sharing.” In the next chapter, I will describe in greater detail the kinds of interpersonal care and resource sharing that were incorporated within this moral economy. At this juncture, though, I want to focus more on the kinds of individual labor and survival strategies that the homeless enacted in order make ends meet, in particular begging. For the purposes of this book, an ethnographic focus on this kind of activity is vital, not least of all because it provides a window into the way that psychoactive substances, boredom, waiting, spatiotemporality, chronopolitical forces,

and biopolitical pressures intersect to constitute the life possibilities for those who called Itchy Park home.

Looking the Right Way

Recall how the combination of austerity measures and neoliberal governmentalities has created a welfare system that marries the carrot of responsabilization with the stick of sanction, the idea being that people who had previously been abusing the state's generosity would be "jolted" into work. Not only would they, in theory, become economically productive and responsible, they would also become temporally productive and responsible—"spending" their time on normative cycles of employment and consumerism rather than "wasting" their time on drugs and alcohol or else idling within the welfare system. Unable, however—by virtue of their abject social position and structural limitations—to acquire this kind of formal work, my interlocutors instead gravitated to other forms of informal labor that held fewer structural obstacles, yet consisted of far greater risks. Begging, for example, was a form of money-making that required a deep attunement to the rhythms and tempos of urban, commodified time-space: a "disposedness" that Jimmy had learned to cultivate over his years out on the streets.

When I first found myself on the streets you don't know what to do with yourself. You're just thinking about the cold, about sleeping. It's just survival. It's only once you get to know the streets that you realize where the best places are. At first you think that banks are a good idea, because that's money; but nobody's giving the homeless bank notes. You've got to find the right people in the right place. I tried working the other station exit [Aldgate East] for a while, but then I realized all the city lot get off here [Aldgate], suited and booted. They're the ones you want. They've got way more cash than your average punter.

By the "city lot," Jimmy was referring to smartly dressed commuters who work in the City of London, the financial district that rubbed up against Tower Hamlets' municipal boundaries. It was along this outskirts—where the raw power of corporate finance looms as a kind of ever-replenishing thunderhead—that Jimmy situated himself in the hope that some of these downpours would splash up against him. For Jimmy, knowing where to position himself as a beggar was borne from a deep understanding of the city's microarchitecture as it related to the flow of people and money. By gradually attuning himself to the ebb and flow of

public life, Jimmy—while not possessing the symbolic or cultural capital to participate directly in these flows—was savvy enough to understand how best to scavenge and make a living off the spare change that these flows left behind, manifest in the form of individual acts of charity.

In short, while the difference between Aldgate and Aldgate East in geographic terms is all of two hundred meters, the difference in earning potential for someone in Jimmy's situation is vast, insofar as the former acts as a commuter artery for white collar workers to make their way into the heart of the City whereas the latter serves as an exit into regionally bounded poverty. In more concrete terms, Jimmy might expect to earn almost five times more at Aldgate than what he would sitting outside Aldgate East. While the amount earned ranges from day to day and season to season, during the rush hours of 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., it would not be uncommon for Jimmy to make between twenty and thirty pounds. In order to reach these amounts, though, Jimmy had to be sure to attend to the "optics" of his condition. For one, he knew that outward signs of alcohol and Valium withdrawal, such as the tremors, would signal the wrong thing to his would-be benefactors. Hence why his "breakfast" can of cider was so important—not only did it stop his body feeling as though it was "full of chili powder while having [his] skin ripped off," but it also allowed him the psychological and corporeal relief to perform a more deserving form of homelessness: "The fact is that people don't want to give to you when you've got the shakes, they think you're just some dirty alky."

We can thus see how Jimmy learned to internalize the moral hierarchies of "deservingness" that society uses to demarcate who is and is not worthy of charity (Hall 2006; Howe 1998), as shown by his experientially founded claim that your average "punter" will be less inclined to give to a homeless person if that same person also exhibits any kind of substance use problem. Further, I was strictly banned from sitting next to him and chatting. Any suggestion of cordiality and laughter would, Jimmy appraised, detract from the austere and down-on-his-luck aura that he was trying to broadcast to the passing commuters—an aura that was not an ingenuine reflection of his actual circumstances, it should be noted. Prohibited from being too close, I would instead sit against the wall a few feet away but still within earshot, noting the way he greeted familiar faces with a smile, the way he tactically coughed in deep gravelly bursts to bring attention to himself when his visibility started to wane, the way he took off his gloves to reveal and rub the frostbite scars he had around his knuckles from the previous winter.

One of the most oft-cited reasons people give when asked about their decision not to hand out spare change is the fear that the beggar will (ab)use their charity for drugs or alcohol (i.e., bad or immoral consumption) rather than food (i.e., good or morally correct consumption). In Jimmy's case at least, while this "bad" consumption is ultimately the name of the game, he learned to camouflage these "immoral" desires behind a carefully cultivated begging persona that projected a particular type of homelessness. For example, whenever he could, he borrowed George's dog Bruno (on the condition that he received a cut of whatever Jimmy made), fully aware that the presence of an animal effectively (and with no little irony) humanizes the begging person in a way that makes the commuter more likely to cross the threshold of invisibility that all too often operates as a default setting when the passers-by encounter the people experiencing homelessness in public space. Whether that was stopping to stroke the dog or ask its name, Bruno facilitated a human encounter that turned Jimmy from an ignorable object into a talking subject, worthy of charity rather than suspicion and indifference. On top of that, Jimmy always came armed with a sign—cut from the homeless material par excellence, cardboard—that said, in thick-tipped lettering:

HOMELESS

AND HUNGRY

Please Help

When you've got a dog you're approachable. You become a real person. Maybe they've got a dog. Maybe they feel sorry for the dog. I think we [British people] have always loved dogs more than people. It's about looking the right way. Anyway, it's nice to be with them [the dog]. A companion to pass the time with. Because sitting there is pretty fucking lonely and boring you know, even though there's always people walking past you. But like I said, you can't be shaking and stinking of piss and booze, fag hanging out your mouth. And people can't be thinking you're just some dirty junkie looking for a fix. People are way more likely to give if they think you're going to get food. That's what the sign is for, to let them know. Of course, nobody who's on the streets actually goes hunger...for food that is!

Notice the way in which Jimmy uses the sign to project (or underline as the case may be) a particular image of his homelessness, one that pleads for help through evoking the possibility of starvation, an embodied state

that is universally recognizable as a dire situation to find oneself in. Furthermore, the state of starvation establishes for his transient audience/client base a corporeal (and psychological) need that exists at a particular point on consumption's moral continuum, namely as far away as possible from its dark mirror and bipolar opposite—drugs and alcohol. And yet, there exists a telling kind of doublespeak contained within the sign that Jimmy himself reveals, half-jokingly, in his testimony; his true hunger, so to speak, is not for calories, but for chemicals, the same chemicals he works so hard to distance himself from via his strategic projections.

Strategy, if it is to be successfully executed, requires skill. And Jimmy, as illustrated, is a skilled operator, his craft cultivated through years of perseverance, repetition, and practice. It is not uncommon for people in Jimmy's situation to describe begging, often in half-jest, as a "full time job." In many ways, it is. As Johannes Lenhard has noted in his ethnography of rough sleepers in Paris, their daily begging activities become a kind of inverted simulacrum of conventional work: "My informants begged to survive; on the one hand, they didn't produce anything of lasting value or importance beyond their immediate ability to consume in a repetitive circuit. In this sense, begging is quite useless, categorically unproductive. On the other hand, however, still, begging is a skill which my informants acquired and practiced and one that structured their day and routines and kept their future open, enabled their *projets de vies*" (2021: 805). Lenhard goes on to describe the different kinds of emotional, physical, and narrative labor his interlocutors embodied and enacted through their begging practices, many of which echoed Jimmy's strategy: choosing an optimal spot, sitting still for hours on end, crafting and repeating narratives of deservingness, "passing" as a sober person worthy of care, curating visibility out of invisibility, and creating personal connections through stories, compliments, gregariousness and, when possible, using Bruno as a foil to attract sympathetic attention.

The fleeting moments of intimacy that unfolded when passers-by or "regulars" chatted with Jimmy, asked about his story, brought him food and drinks, stroked Bruno and fed him treats, or simply wished him luck—even if they were outweighed by the volume of neglect, disregard, police discipline, and, on occasion, verbal and physical abuse—served as a reminder of the moral and relational ambiguity of begging. Wedged into this small slither of public space, Jimmy found not just money and structure, but also moments of laughter, solidarity, and connection, all of which worked to rehumanize his sense of self. There was one woman, in particular, who sidled up alongside Jimmy and shared one of her

(fresh) cigarettes, the two of them sitting alongside each other—she in her smart, professional outfit, he in his damp, stained jumper—like two old friends catching up in a pub smoking area.

She had such an easy manner with Jimmy that I felt compelled to go after her once they had said their goodbyes. Sarah, as she introduced herself, had an illuminating response to my collaring (that is, once she'd shaken off the not inconsiderable confusion of being called out in the middle of the street by a random anthropologist). Her father had, at one point in his life, been homeless and, never forgetting that experience, had imparted to her the importance of acknowledging people experiencing homelessness as “just another person, like you or me,” of looking them in the eye, shaking their hand, and most importantly—asking their name. Anyone can rumble around in their pockets and fish out some shrapnel, she told me—it took a lot more to sit on the cold pavement alongside someone and actually listen to them and “show them that you actually give a shit, even if it's just a few minutes.” Though my conversation with Sarah was all too brief, the crux of her thinking seemed to be that the meaningful recognition of someone in Jimmy's situation required something more than a monetary transaction. Welcome as spare change might be (and Sarah did not advocate withholding money, quite the contrary), I think her point was that money can sometimes operate as a technology that forms both a symbolic and physical barrier between bodies in space, holding the intimacy of intersubjective contact—such as through listening, handshaking, and exchanging names—in abeyance, and thus becoming a substitute for more meaningful forms of interpersonal care and recognition. Two people gripping each other's hand, looking each other in the eye while swapping names, and then verbally sharing something of themselves with the other—these mutual acts open up a transient space of care that momentarily lifts Jimmy out of his “less-than” status and makes him feel like a “real human being” again. Rather than misrecognizing Jimmy's begging as parasitic or exploitative (as the prevailing political discourse would have it), Sarah experienced his vulnerability as an ethical demand that she felt impelled to respond to, not just with her money, but with infinitely deeper pieces of herself: her touch, her voice, her hearing, and her name.

From this angle, Jimmy's begging could be understood, in Lenhard's terms, as a labor of hope—his daily routine doing just enough to get his foot in the door of the future, keeping his relational possibilities alive, offering a world beyond mere survival. This modality of hope, though, should not be overstated. Bruce O'Neill (2017), in his work on boredom

in postsocialist Romania, offers a different angle. Using the image of the photographic negative—a strip of film where the lightest areas appear darkest and vice versa—O'Neill calls our attention to the hidden “negatives” that lie, inverted, beneath the daily hustle of informal car park attendants in Bucharest. These young men are constantly on the move directing traffic, and yet chronically stuck. They squat in houses, and cannot achieve the ontological security of a proper home. Their days have structure but remain riddled with precarity. And so it is for Jimmy in his begging. Surrounded by passers-by and regulars but dislocated and alone; autonomous in how he portrays his homelessness, yet at the mercy of the charity of others; enveloped by the motion and commotion of the city's capitalist rhythms of production, but banished to its peripheries, a standstill soul amidst the rush.

The Rush

Jimmy's decision to base himself at Aldgate to embed himself in the rush hour circulation of more affluent city workers reveals how people experiencing homelessness are often compelled to interact with the very systems of power, time, space, and commerce that otherwise exclude them. At the intersection of two major transport lines that service over a hundred and fifty million journeys each year, Aldgate Station sees thousands of people move in and out and of its gape every day, the flapping of the barriers mingling with shrill beeps as commuters palm their contactless smartcards and phones against the electronic readers that regulate the barricades. At the peak of rush hour, these sounds are joined by the trampling of hundreds of feet, the drone of passing traffic, the hydraulic hiss of train doors, as well as announcements that warn people of various safety issues or else problems that might have arisen across various transport lines.

During rush hour, even a slightly delayed train can swell the platforms and create human bottlenecks within which patience can all too easily buckle and tempers flare, the breakdown of the temporal rhythm of the train arrival board creating a spatial stickiness that marries the panic of claustrophobia with the anxiety of tardiness. Under these conditions of enforced waiting, the stress painted across the faces of those on the platform is matched by the discomfort of those who burst out of the doors of any late-arriving train, under pressure of those behind and their jobs ahead. As the commuters waiting on the platforms swap one state

of stress and confinement for another, the recently disgorged make their way towards the exit, the latest or least patient of them making angles of their shoulders and hips as they try to steal a march on those who walk before them. Finally, when the dance of trains, bodies, and escalators is over, the commuter emerges out of this subterranean pressure pot and into the light. Should that person take a right on exiting the station, they would likely walk past Jimmy (and possibly Bruno) sitting on a cushion of newspaper to staunch the spread of the cold up from the pavement into his body, his knees tucked high into his chest, cardboard sign leaning against the wall, right next to his Styrofoam begging cup.

Delays are shit. When the traffic isn't too bad you can hear them on the announcements, even from out here. You can tell anyway, the way people are moving when they come out, that they're in a rush—can see it on their faces. They're just head down, checking their phones, y'know. You can tell they're late...pissed off. Which means they've got less time, y'know. Too busy to notice, no time to say hello or ask them if they can spare anything. They're just whoosh, gone—just like that. I can't even afford the tube and TFL [Transport for London] are still fucking me!

Jimmy's begging persona can be impeccably cultivated, the perfect blend of pity and deservingness. He can also be perfectly placed—slap bang in the middle of the morning rush, visible to any commuter who walks in and out of the tube station from that access point. And yet a delayed train can derail the whole enterprise, the squeezing of clock time that makes a person late for their job producing a kind of tunnel vision that effectively eclipses Jimmy out of visibility. Spare change, in other words, is deeply connected to the spareness of someone's time—a superfluity that hinges on the punctuality of the underground system as it intersects with the more diffuse cultural pressure not to be late for work. In this sense, while Jimmy can arrive for *his* work more or less on the dot, his own punctuality means little if his would-be benefactors—delayed by a signal failure, a faulty train, a missed alarm, and so on—are up against the clock and stressed about the personal consequences of tardiness. When Jimmy sits in his spot and reads the stressed faces of those who speed past him in their hurry to make it to work, he reveals not only his attunement to the bodily, psychological, and affective dispositions of those he depends on for financial relief, but also his somewhat abstruse connection to the chronopolitical regime that determines the labor cycles of those who get up each day and catch the tube to work.

To understand why this connection is so abstruse will require some unpacking. To start, recall that Jimmy's personal history, ever since he

suffered his accident, has been defined by chronic unemployment and familial estrangement. Chronic unemployment is not only economically calamitous, but also bound up with a profound kind of temporal dislocation, the exit from the productive rhythms of formal wage labor fostering major levels of ontological as well as material insecurity. For Jimmy, not only was this dislocation tied to traumatic past events, but it had also trapped him within a present in which the future had been all but drained of meaningful, long-term possibilities, what Bourdieu (1997: 233) has called a “non-time of life.” His was thus a life that no longer participated directly in the prevailing economic and chronopolitical order; he was forced instead to become a skillful (if still overwhelmingly passive) receiver of that what others could spare—both temporally and economically. He was, as Nancy Munn (1992) might have it, caught at the center of a dizzying intersection of overlapping and often contradictory temporal states and systems, from the subjective and embodied to the institutional and regulatory.

The complex relationship between time, subjectivity, and social organization has been of interest to social theorists since at least Durkheim (1912), who viewed time as a “social institution” that served as a fundamental component of a given culture’s structural arrangement. This could be clock time, but also event time—as with public rituals that might be tied to seasonal transitions. As a social institution, time could also demarcate boundaries between generations, ensuring that each one could enjoy not just a shared sense of historicity, but also futurity in relation to broader community goals and cultural processes (Mannheim 1952). Certain thinkers such as E. P. Thompson (1967) have seen, especially in the history of industrialization, time as a technology of discipline and social control, notably within the context of early capitalist commodity production. Echoing Thompson’s account of the clock as a technology of tyranny with regards to labor organization, Lewis Mumford (1973) claimed that it was the emergence of the clock, not the steam engine, that marked the true dawn of industrial capitalism. Even as industrial capitalism has moved into its postindustrial namesake, time remains integral to the interrelated notions of productivity and efficiency. A business or organization is seen as more productive or efficient if they can cut down on the amount of time it takes to complete a particular task or body of work—be that piecing together parts on a factory assembly line in the 1960s or coding an algorithm at a modern-day software company. This is the case because even as society has changed its consumptive habits and productive techniques, the clock has remained fundamentally the same.

There are still twenty-four hours in a day, sixty minutes in an hour, and sixty seconds in a minute. It remains linear, homogeneous, and objectively divisible. While the transformation from analogue to digital has had profound effects on the relationship between subjective and clock time, with new forms of information technology—the internet in particular—speeding up the lifeworld to create what Robert Hassan and Ronald Purser (2007) call a “digitally compressed temporality” defined by a constant now, there is still only one “correct” time. Hence why “being late to work” remains an unambiguous transgression for the employed: you are either on time (and time is money) or you aren’t. It is, I suggest, this lack of ambiguity that causes so much vexation and frustration among commuters at Aldgate Station when the trains are delayed, the anxious look that Jimmy sees on their faces as they rush past him serving as an expression of the way that time-discipline has been embodied and internalized by those who live, work, and travel within London each day.⁴

Ultimately, the irritation that comes from being late speaks not only to the disciplinary structures embedded in the workplace, but also to the intrinsic plurality of time. In the case of the upset commuters who suddenly find themselves in a rush, their lateness reveals a disconnect or fracture between subjective and clock time. Despite these two temporal modalities being radically divergent in terms of their phenomenological organization, the ubiquity of the clockface has meant that they are all too often experienced in what can seem like near-faultless synchronicity. Clock time, in other words, has become so deeply internalized by some as to become a kind of second nature, what Anthony Giddens (1984) has articulated in terms of “doubled existence.” The keeping of calendars, the setting of alarms, the hourly structuring of routine, the scheduling of social events, the booking of appointments, the time-indexed wage a person draws—all these practices hinge on the clock’s unfailing persistence, a relentlessness that effectively works to superimpose itself, like tracing paper, onto a person’s embodied sense of duration. Crucially though, as

4. Since the completion of the ethnographic fieldwork that this book is based on, the United Kingdom—like most other countries—has experienced major changes to working and commuting patterns due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that consumed the globe in 2020. Despite the strange temporal orientations and new labor patterns ushered in by the pandemic, it is still, I believe, fair to say that the disciplinary power of clock time remains an integral part of how many people view themselves in relation to work and moral responsibility.

the lived frustration of lateness reveals, this superimposition of clock time onto subjective time is prone to disruption. In everyday life, people constantly find themselves unhinged from the fragile, albeit deeply powerful enchantment of synchronicity. Being late to work because of a delayed train is just one small example of this intertemporal dissonance. For someone in Jimmy's situation, the disjuncture between subjective time and clock-regulated labor time is amplified that much further, his street homelessness, physical condition, and ongoing substance usage foreclosing any realistic opportunities to reenter the formal workforce.

Bittersweet Branches

Jimmy's aching sense of temporal dissatisfaction created by this chronopolitical dislocation was deeply linked to his fractured sense of the past, in particular to feelings of loss relating to the work he used to do back when his family was still intact. It was not uncommon for Jimmy to slip away from the wider group and take himself to the other edge of the park, staring up at the trees while working away at his cider and cigarette in silence. Any random person walking past him during these moments of solitude could be forgiven for assuming that Jimmy was simply "waiting for nothing," the stillness of his body and gaze implying a kind of vacancy or inaction. Others might see the cider in his hand and impose deeply enculturated suspicions of indolence, just one more alcoholic who'd rather abuse the state's good nature than take responsibility for their life and "contribute" to society. Both positions presuppose a particular way of viewing the world. In the former, the presupposition is that physical stillness equates with existential inertia. With regards to the latter, the presumption is that public daytime drinking is underwritten by a kind of moral decay that directly exploits the welfare system. Sitting down and listening to Jimmy (a mutuality the homeless are rarely afforded), though, reveals something quite different.

A lot of these guys on the benches, this is all they've known their entire lives. The most money they'll ever know will be a benefit check or a budget loan from the state every two years. I can't imagine it, never being employed again. I miss it every single day. That's why I'm always staring at these trees, I'm remembering things I used to do. Who I once was. What have I got now? Just this [holding up the can of cider]. I feel like my life has been frozen. I want to move into the future, but I can't. I'm just stuck here in this boredom, waiting.

As we sat and watched the branches sway, listening to their crepitations as mosaics of light made and remade themselves with each passing spasm of wind, Jimmy's gaze remained fixed on the line of trees that wrapped around the park's edges. Occasionally he would shake his head wistfully before turning to me and smiling: "Amazing to be up in the trees all day." He inhaled deeply with his eyes closed, almost as though in taking such a breath he was transporting himself back among the branches: "There's a freedom up there, y'know? Like a different world, or something. Sometimes I would just sit on a branch and look at from wherever I was, a different view of things." Later, Jimmy would tell me that his favorite thing to do as a kid was to climb different objects, especially trees, and how he had an insatiable appetite to scale anything he could get a hand or foothold on: branches, rocks, houses, scaffolding, fences. He used to joke that when he died, he was convinced he would come back as a mountain goat, that climbing was in his DNA. More than just a casual saunter down memory lane, Jimmy's decision to sit beneath these trees and allow himself to fall into nostalgic reflection can be understood as a particular kind of "time work" (Flaherty 2011). Not immediately overt, Jimmy's nostalgia worked to cycle him between past, present, and future horizons, suturing together "discordant temporal regimes" (Masquelier and Durham 2023: 3). Emerging at the ambiguous intersection of fantasy, memory, and loss, Jimmy's wistful staring up at the trees offered both an interruption of his boredom as well as a confirmation of it. Dylan Trigg (2007) has commented on this paradoxical quality of nostalgia, noting how it conjures "an image of the past in which time is literally held in unreal place" (158). His point is that nostalgic memory hinges on the conjuring not just of an elsewhere time, but an elsewhere place. For Jimmy, it was the sight, sound, and shadow of the park's trees that summoned this commingling of time, place, and materiality. What's more, it was an evocation that simultaneously connected him to a whole host of bodily and existential sensations that belonged to a time in his life when he was healthy, happy, and gainfully employed—a time when he was still connected to his family. In this sense, the trees truly were a different world, as he put it, offering not just a different viewpoint in terms of his position in space, but also in terms of his positionality vis-à-vis his family and society more broadly.

As Annika Lems (2016) has pointed out, anthropological approaches to nostalgia have tended to emphasize it as a discursive construct, in particular as a highly politicized and thus potentially dangerous instrument

for withdrawing into the past during periods of socioeconomic upheaval and volatility. Such accounts, Lems argues—while important—suffer from a lack of engagement with the actual lived experience of nostalgia. In a bid to remedy this neglect, Lems attempts a phenomenology of nostalgia by exploring the lifeworld of a Somali woman, Halima, who was forced to flee her home following the eruption of war in the 1990s, relocating to Melbourne. Emphasizing the dialogical “back and forth” that unfolds during the shared experience of storytelling, Lems demonstrates that Halima’s everyday nostalgia—for sights, smells, sounds, and tastes—was just as closely related to the spatial as it was to the temporal. For Halima, the yearning for a return to home (understood as both a place and a time) did not provide comfort or relief from the pain of her loss, rather it accentuated her sense of uncertainty in the present. More broadly, Lems’s point is that nostalgia can provide a prism through which to examine the ever-shifting plate tectonics between self, time, memory, imagination, place, and world. Following her keen observations, I think we can see a similar interplay in Jimmy’s elegiac enchantment with the park’s trees. In his case, while the trees catalyzed a nostalgic interruption that allowed him to momentarily reimagine himself traveling backwards into a previous place in his biography—among the branches, looking out onto a world that felt alive with freedom and possibility, and making a good living for his family—they simultaneously confirmed the ongoing reverberation of his losses and perceived failures into his present, crystallizing around his inability to secure formal employment and provide as he once did. Hence why he won’t spend all day in the nostalgic refuge of their shadows.

Can't sit here forever, mind you. Gets too depressing after a while...y'know. What's the term, bittersweet? Reminds me of what I've thrown away, situation I'm stuck in. I mean look at me now—some sad cunt swigging a cider and staring up at a fucking tree. Pathetic, isn't it?

Blaming himself for “throwing away” the life that he once cherished, Jimmy’s description of the trees as bittersweet neatly captures the paradoxical experience of nostalgia, in particular its capacity to heighten the disjuncture between past and present ways of being-in-the-world. Beleaguered in the here and now by memories and reimaginings of his former self up among the branches, nostalgia’s bittersweet flavor points to the way in which past losses can intrude into the present and wrench time out of joint. For Jeff Malpas (2012), this wrenching that causes the echoing pain of nostalgia is a manifestation of a deeper dislocation between self and world. Stuck in his current situation, bracketed outside

of the chronopolitical regime of work and acceptable futurity, Jimmy's current way-of-being no longer matches up with the values and possibilities he held in his previous life.

The uncanniness of imagining himself being "back there" while actually being "stuck here" is rooted in this spatiotemporal discontinuity, something that Jimmy articulates through a combination of self-pity, self-loathing, and stuckness. Deeming himself "pathetic" for allowing himself to get lost in the interstices between past and present, Jimmy's assertion that the risk of spending too long in the imaginative realm of nostalgia can lead to depression confirms the way in which moods, or rather changing moods, can "disclose forms of attunement to worldly conditions" (Throop 2017: 199). If moods are "always there," tucked away latently in our being until they are contingently awakened by some form of encounter in the world, then ethnographically tracing the transitional flow and changing composition of a person's mood can shed an important light on the predicaments that particular persons, such as those experiencing homelessness, find themselves caught up in. In Jimmy's case, nostalgia—as an emergent mood that responded to being in the presence of trees—tended to manifest as something of an unstable bridge between the sweet joys of his past and the more encompassing bitter mood of his present—boredom.

Moods are socially produced, emerging between (rather than within) people in specific situations. It is this betweenness that I want to focus on in the next chapter. I intend to demonstrate how the complex of boredom examined thus far, when placed in the context of material scarcity, gives rise to a pervasive mood of anxiety that is tied to a deeply unstable sense of futurity, which can appear at once empty and crushing all at once. It is against this backdrop that the existential imperative for chemical escapism takes shape. The next chapter will illustrate how these conditions are mediated by complicated systems of reciprocal care and resource management that go beyond (and yet remain tethered to) the individual labor of begging. Interwoven within these webs of mutual obligations and friendship are forms of deception, betrayal, and naked self-interest—the coagulation of which constitute the park's complex moral-economic relations. More broadly, the tactics enacted by my interlocutors to source the level of intoxicants required to stave off withdrawal and propel them into escapist bodily states where time could be killed (such as the blackout) hold the capacity to reveal important insights into one of anthropology's most enduring intellectual concerns: the relationship between structure and agency. The social and

moral dynamics of substance use in contexts of urban homelessness not only alert us to the structures that weigh upon Itchy Park's residents and compromise their existential possibilities, but also reveal the ways in which these systemic abuses are agentively negotiated, subverted, and/or reproduced.

CHAPTER 3

Not Enough

Going Out with a Bang

The walk to Tony's flat from Itchy Park takes about ten minutes. The quickest way there is via Brick Lane, past the market stalls flogging their fruits and vegetables, past the innumerable curry restaurants and twenty-four-hour bagel shops that nourish the appetites of office workers and all-night ravers alike, past the street art emblazoned across the road's buildings, doors, and shutters. To walk through Brick Lane is to pass through a synesthetic melee, the garish colors beaming out from each piece of graffiti mingling with the turmeric aromas pouring out of the curry houses, all the while being absorbed into the market soundscape, swallowed into the cacophony of hollering ("pound for a bowl!") and haggling. Larry seems to notice very little of this though. Or if he does, it is of trifling importance. In moments where Tony slows down to point something out—a place he used to hang out when he was younger, a piece of street art that held personal significance for him, a local landmark—Larry turns and almost barks at him to hurry up, a patina of sweat visible across his forehead. With early withdrawal symptoms beginning to set in, Larry's patience was starting to wane, his foremost concern getting to a place where he could safely shoot the heroin he had tucked away in the relative safety of his underwear. That Tony was able to provide such a place was a welcome change to the dingy hostel dorms and back alleys Larry was often forced to use.

Tony's securing of this property was connected to a long-standing compensation claim he had been embroiled in for over twenty years. In the mid-1980s, Tony had gotten into an altercation following a drug pick-up turned sour. During the skirmish, Tony was stabbed and so badly beaten that he fell into a coma. On admission to the hospital, he received a blood transfusion. Though he eventually came out of his coma and underwent rehabilitation for his injuries, Tony continued to feel unwell. At the time, he was cycling through various subspheres of precarious housing, with occasional stints of rough sleeping interrupted by long periods of hidden homelessness.

Tony first found himself in a position of homelessness following his release from prison, where he had been for over ten years. Throughout his teenage years, Tony had been involved with sections of the East End's criminal underworld, mostly as an errand boy or lookout. By the time the early 1970s rolled around and he turned eighteen, he was starting to be groomed for more active responsibilities, his burgeoning career as a potential foot soldier meaning that he was soon doing more than just keeping an eye out for the police. As part of a deal that involved illegal firearms, Tony was tasked with picking up the merchandise from what was thought to be a secure location. Walking out with a bag full of guns, his fingerprints all over them, Tony was ambushed by a group of anti-terrorist police who had been surveilling an IRA operation. The guns, Tony would discover at trial, were destined for republican paramilitary groups. Though Tony pleaded ignorance regarding their final destination, The Troubles¹ were at an especially violent peak at the time of his arrest, the volatile political climate creating an appetite for harsh sentencing.

I didn't know they had anything to do with the IRA. But they found my fingerprints on one of the guns, so I was labeled a terrorist. Solitary confinement, six screws outside the door. The full treatment. That's where I first started [using heroin]. Not much else to do inside, y'know? Kills the time, gives you an escape. That's what they used against me later though, dragged me through all that shit.

Tony is telling me this story in his ground floor flat, with Larry hunched over the coffee table and drawing the amber solution up from

1. "The Troubles" refers to the violent ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to 1998, involving nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities, as well as the British government, characterized by bombings, riots, and political strife.

the “cotton” (in this case a cigarette filter) into the syringe. All the blinds are drawn, allowing just a few wrinkles of sunlight to smuggle their way inside and merge with the electric hum of the ceiling light that hovers above the table. Larry’s injecting paraphernalia lays scattered across the table’s surface, fraternizing with more conventional coffee table items: ashtrays, mugs, magazines, some empty crisp packets. This intermingling of injecting paraphernalia with these garden-variety household objects engenders a kind of double movement, the paraphernalia exoticizing the standard household objects as they in turn normalize the paraphernalia. This dialectical intrusion lends itself to the everydayness with which Larry gestures over to Tony as he takes off his tracksuit top and pulls his t-shirt down, opening up the part of his body where the neck meets the clavicle. Taking the needle from Larry, Tony comes up alongside him as he leans his head in the opposite direction, almost as though Tony was a barber instructing him to tilt his head. Tony barely breaks stride as he continues his story, only really pausing in the moment where he locates the vein, this small peak of silent concentration married with a distinct flush of pomegranate red as he draws the blood into the syringe for confirmation. As he steadily presses on the plunger, causing Larry to let out a deep sigh of relief, Tony looks back at me:

The blood they gave me in the hospital, after I got stabbed—it had HIV in it, contaminated. Only found out I had it a few months later, at a clinic for a check-up. ‘Course at the time they said I must’ve got it from sharing needles, you know, ‘cos I was on the H. But I said no—no way, couldn’t be. I wasn’t a mug, it was a huge thing back then, wasn’t it? In all the papers, on the telly. I wasn’t even shooting up much back then, and when I did I didn’t share nothing. But they didn’t want to listen, I was just another junkie far as they were concerned. Told me I’d be dead within a year, but here I am—still here. Doctor I used to have said it was a miracle I didn’t croak—don’t feel like a miracle, this.

For years after his diagnosis, Tony remained adamant he hadn’t contracted the virus from his heroin use, the stigma associated with HIV/AIDs only fueling his feelings of isolation and depression. His growing sense of despair was exacerbated by the precarity of his housing conditions combined with his chronic unemployment. On the occasions that he interacted with social workers, medical professionals, and welfare officials, his claims that his drug use was not the cause of his HIV infection was given short shrift, deemed an act of conspiratorial deflection employed to displace responsibility away from his own risky behaviors and self-destructive impulses. “I remember the patronizing looks they’d give

me, it was like: Really? The junkie hasn't brought this on himself. I think they'd rather I'd just packed it in and drop dead, save them the earache."

It wasn't until he had a chance encounter with a caseworker who had some connections to the Macfarlane Trust (MFT) that Tony's assertions began to be taken seriously. The MFT was one of a number of charitable trusts funded by the UK Department of Health (DoH) to support those with hemophilia who had been infected with HIV following the use of contaminated NHS blood products. As the scandal that broke in 2017 would reveal in detail, thousands of NHS patients admitted to hospital in the 1970s and '80s for blood transfusions were given infected blood from abroad. Bought on the cheap, the contaminated blood had been sourced primarily from high-risk populations from the United States, such as prison inmates and sex workers.

After reaching out to his estranged father for some financial help, Tony managed to find legal representation who agreed to advocate for him. After establishing from hospital records that Tony had indeed received tainted blood during his admission for his stab wound, his solicitor spent a long period wrangling with different DoH-funded charitable trusts, fighting both for formal recognition as well as financial support. The process was painstakingly slow and often discouraging, cycling between numerous stages of appeal, rejection, and reapplication. After years of this exhausting dance, Tony was finally deemed eligible for compensation, receiving a nondiscretionary lump sum that would be coupled with means-tested ongoing payments. The end result is that Tony has, since winning his appeal, been receiving around two hundred pounds every fortnight into his bank account. Though the money and recognition were welcome, it ultimately felt like a pyrrhic victory. For one, his father died not long after his appeal process concluded, before they had managed to properly reconcile. Further, although he had responded "miraculously" to treatment and cheated the initial death sentence his doctors had first prognosticated, the stigma of the condition, combined with the weight of his criminal past, left him feeling isolated, alone, and resentful.

Ironically, then, this was the point in his life when his injecting had begun to escalate, the initial lump sum he received in compensation providing the perfect seed capital to fund his growing habit. With no immediate family to speak of following his father's death, Tony continued to seek social connection in the one place he had found it since he left prison: Itchy Park. The enduring ties of reciprocity, hustling, and drug-sharing that he had cultivated in Itchy Park over the years since his release from prison meant that it remained the epicenter of his social and moral

universe, a reality he would perpetuate by burning through his compensation money at a rate of knots, regularly taking it upon himself to buy large quantities of alcohol and drugs for the park's residents as he himself sought a constant state of chemical oblivion. Also, having successfully leveraged his HIV status to acquire a number of disability and housing benefits, Tony had managed to secure a flat through the local authority, a space which would quickly become a de facto shooting gallery for him and his most enduring running partners, one of whom was Larry. Over this period, Tony would regularly flirt with losing his accommodation following complaints regarding his late-night parties. Eventually, as the compensation lump began to shrink, the parties became fewer and further between. Within a few years, the lump had dwindled to little more than a speck. Here's Tony reflecting on this period in his life:

What's the expression, misery loves company? I had this thing, right [referring to his HIV infection]—I just thought, I'm on fucking borrowed time anyway—that's what the doctors tell me. May as well go out with a bang, right? I mean, what else've I got? Mum and dad are gone, no family, can't work. All I've got is the park and this...death sentence or whatever. In my head, I'm thinking...I'm thinking I'll be dead a long time before the money runs out—may as well spread it around, you know, help some people out. Fuck it, I thought, what difference? Now I'm still alive [laughs] I wish I hadn't been so generous!

For Tony, then, what he perceived to be his truncated lifespan—his “death sentence”—radically transformed his sense of futurity. This altered understanding of his longevity effectively hollowed out the future, reorientating him to the “borrowed time” of the present. In borrowed time, Tony was articulating a temporality that married the shadow of imminent death with a kind of ambiguous postponement, the only certainty he had being that whenever his luck run out, it would do so before the money did. Under these conditions, the compensation money he had fought so hard for took on an entirely different meaning. Etymologically related to the concept of weight, compensation is about finding balance, of weighing one thing against another in the hope of finding some kind of equilibrium or equivalency. In many ways, the question of compensation was a defining aspect of his lifeworld before he became infected. His prison sentence, for example, can be thought of in similarly compensatory terms, the scales of the UK justice system determining that the weight of his crime be counterbalanced not in money, but in time.

Returning to the moment of infection and his subsequent fight for recognition, there emerged a significant polarity reversal, occurring at

two, interlinked levels. On this occasion, Tony's time—his longevity—was again taken from him, only this time as a victim rather than a perpetrator. In the end, the weight of this profound temporal loss was counterbalanced with money, the legal premise being that these payments would “make up” for his truncated futurity. For Tony, though, this was a false equivalence, the accelerated finitude of his condition adjudged, at the time, to be moving far quicker than money could be spent. In effect, then, this perceived futility of the future endowed the money with an entirely different value to the extent that investing in the morrow seemed pointless. Committing himself (and his money) instead to the borrowed time of the present, the withdrawal from the future became interwoven with the deep pain of his past losses and abuses, leading to a kind of death-wish hedonism—“going out with a bang”—that centered around the pursuit and ingestion of heroin, alcohol, and other drugs. Recalling the gallows humor that began this book, Tony was convinced he was soon to be one of the dropped flies. And yet, at the same time, the seeming inevitability of this premature death also catalyzed a dynamic, intense form of sociality; Tony's restless desire to redistribute his newfound wealth and have his misery accompanied led him to become the primary benefactor for many of the park's fellow users, his free-flowing cash and comparatively stable housing forming the epicenter of park's economic and moral universe: “I would just give it away—someone wanted a can, I'd give them the cash. Someone wanted a bag of brown, white, whatever—I'd sort it. What did I care? I thought I was already dead.”

As it turned out, though, Tony's death moved slower than his money. Not only did the initial lump sum disappear in a blur of drugs, alcohol, and morrowless generosity, Tony found himself in a peculiar situation where the imminent death he had been promised had gradually given way to new kind of futurity, one constituted, if not by optimism, then at least by a reconfigured sense of adjournment. Having responded unexpectedly positively to an experimental drug trial, Tony found himself giving new thought to the future. For Tony, the dawning realization that his HIV infection was not going to kill him anywhere near as soon as he had anticipated—owing to a combination of natural immunological resilience and increasingly effective antiretroviral (ARV) medication—made him fundamentally reevaluate certain things about his life. For one, the value of money took on a new significance—he could no longer afford to sponsor the drug and alcohol habits of his fellow users in the ways he once had, not least of all because there was practically nothing left of the original lump sum remaining. Increasingly, then, there was a

life that needed living. On top of that, where before the threat of eviction from his flat seemed inconsequential in comparison to the onrushing threat of death, suddenly his material circumstances mattered a great deal more.

We can think about this existential shift in a number of ways. In the borrowed time of these hedonistic and overly generous years, the threatening imminence of a painful HIV/AIDS-related death had rendered his future cares and concerns irrelevant, throwing him into a kind of hyperpresent underpinned by the risky sociality of heavy drug use. In Heidegger's (1996: 235) interpretation of finitude, it is "being-unto-death" that catalyzes the self to explore and realize certain potentialities in the world, the fundamental time limit of our existence effectively operating as the motor for the emergent (or "ecstatic") possibilities of Dasein. With this time limit brought that much further forward by his diagnosis, Tony sought to "go out with a bang"—a modality-of-being that married a potlatchesque munificence with an unremitting narcotic escapism: "Sometimes I wish I'd just OD'd and got it over with, y'know? Would've been easier than the situation I'm in now."

Ironically, then, the "miraculous" pushing back of his finitude created what might be thought of as a "being-unto-life," experienced by Tony as a radical recalibration of self and circumstances. With this came pressures and anxieties that had previously been eclipsed by the shadow of his any-second-now promise of death. In another ironic twist, he now found himself confronted with a new set of health complaints that were, in many ways, more immediately pressing than his HIV infection—which continued to be held in check by his medication regimen. These new complaints were primarily related to the scale of his drug and alcohol use that defined his way-of-being during the period of borrowed time. His liver was in an especially bad state, as was his respiratory system from all the years of heavy smoking. His borrowed time, then, had produced a set of corporeal debts that, much to his incredulity, he was now having to reckon with, even as his HIV status continued to loom over him: "Ridiculous, isn't it? That the HIV probably won't even be the thing that does me in?"

The Godfather

Caught up in this unexpected limbo, Tony was forced to make certain changes in his life. For one, he had to be more careful with his money, in

particular whom he gave it away to. He no longer allowed anyone but his most long-standing friends to come back to his flat and use it as a safe haven to shoot up.² Notwithstanding these adjustments, Tony remained a central—if somewhat crotchety—figure in the Itchy Park community. To many of those who had been frequenting Addict's Corner the longest, he was still affectionately referred to as “the Godfather”—a nickname he earned for his legendary displays of generosity back when his death was still deemed quicker than his money.

Though Tony has been forced to become more frugal, he remained an integral part of the park's moral economy. As in other impoverished social contexts constituted by addiction and scarcity, Itchy Park's moral economy can be understood a dynamic web of reciprocal sharing and mutual obligation, these interactions setting the parameters for intersubjective relations in the park. In short, how you share and whom you share with are the primary social fail-safes against the threat of withdrawal, thereby ensuring that drugs and alcohol are inseparably bound up within the park's economic and moral fabric, entrenched within the daily struggles of homeless living. Ultimately, these mutual relations of exchange and care are built on the shared experiences of dependency and withdrawal, such that it is practically impossible to disentangle the long-term human relations within the park from the psychoactive relationships that each person was grappling with. This is not to deny or trivialize the intimacy of these intersubjective relations; rather, it is to embed their formation within a chaotic and traumatic world that is underpinned by an inextricable scarcity.

Back in Tony's flat, for example, after providing Larry with a safe space to fix³ and dutifully injecting him in a vein that would have been nigh impossible to locate on his own accord, Larry was obligated to return the favor. This meant giving Tony a hit from his score and helping him find a vein, heroin serving as the shared currency that underpinned their relationship. Theirs was a reciprocity built up over almost twenty years of sharing and hustling within the informal economy. Indeed, Tony had first met Larry when he was dealing heroin, before he was first sent to prison for the assault. After getting out of prison, Larry reconnected

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2. During my time in Itchy Park, I only saw him allow two people back to his flat, Larry and one other—Max.
 3. The term “fix” denotes the relief or “fixing” of withdrawal symptoms and the craving for the drug, providing a temporary solution to their physical and psychological dependence.

with Tony and a group of other active users, their shared precarity and heroin dependence turning them into enduring running partners. As Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) have noted, being someone's running partner entails the intimate circulation of moral and material debts within a complex gift-giving economy. The obligations tied to gift exchange, as anthropology has noted since Mauss (1966), entails a kind of relationship that goes beyond the transactional. This was certainly true between Tony and Larry. Having both spent long periods in prison, Tony and Larry spoke a kind of common language, underpinned by their shared experiences of incarceration, heroin dependency, and street violence. They had a unique kind of insight into the innermost parts of each other, built up and reinforced through almost twenty years of knowing one another. It was a running joke in the park that they were a bit like an old married couple—finishing each other's sentences one moment, bickering with each other the next.

As in all marriages, the intimate and the economic were deeply entangled. Tony's ongoing health issues, for example, meant that he was physically vulnerable—something that could easily be exploited given the unpredictable and potentially violent conditions of street life, especially given his comparative levels of "wealth." Larry's reputation preceded him. His own prison sentence was for a serious assault, inflicted on someone who had accused him of being a police informant. He grew up in one of the toughest, most deprived neighborhoods in Glasgow before he eventually made his way to London. As a result of all these, he oozed the kind of the outlaw habitus (Karandinos et al. 2014) that communicated a readiness for violence. This reputational capital meant that Larry commanded a certain kind of respect just by virtue of his presence. Larry, as people often told me, was someone you didn't mess with; this meant, in turn, that Tony wasn't to be messed with either. When people came to Tony asking for money or drugs, it would often be Larry who would jump in and chastise them for pushing their luck. In his eyes, Tony was too generous for his own good. And Tony, as someone who didn't really like conflict and was now dealing with newfound penury, was all too happy for Larry to take on the role of quasi-minder. There was, it is worth noting, something of a performance to it as well—one that spoke to the complex moral and economic dynamics of status, care, and scarcity within the Itchy Park community. Someone would ask Tony for something, Larry would aggressively interject and, depending on the nature of the request and the person doing so, Tony might then decide to overrule Larry, so to speak, and begrudgingly agree to at least some part of the

request (typically much less than the original petition). In many ways, these kinds of performances enabled Tony to maintain his own “Godfather” status as a generous benefactor in spite of his dwindling resources, at the same time allowing Larry to reinforce his own reputational capital as someone not to be crossed.

This is not to suggest, somehow, that their friendship was somehow impure (or indeed that these performances were somehow premeditated). Indeed, the very notion of pure friendship is problematic. The fact is that friendship, like all relationships, is contextually grounded and shaped by circumstance. And, if there is anything that separates friendship from mere association, it is a mutual understanding of, and willingness to engage in and with, the vulnerabilities of the other party. Tony and Larry’s friendship was no different. Indeed, they were deeply attuned to one another’s vulnerabilities—vulnerabilities that were, in turn, profoundly tied to the conditions of their social abjection. Coming from the Latin *vulnus*—meaning wound—vulnerability discloses the innate risk of our intersubjective life, of our potentiality to wound one another. The flipside of this, though, is our capacity for healing, for others to tend to our wounds (Butler 2012).

Our vulnerabilities, then, are always both social and somatic. Here, then, we can start to see how the sharing of heroin and assisted injecting that took place in Tony’s flat was more than just an economic obligation of reciprocity. Rather, it denoted the unique bounds of their friendship as two men who have lived chronically on society’s margins. Tony helped Larry find a vein because he could be trusted to do so, not just in the technical sense, but in the ethical sense too. They understood, intimately, the nature of one another’s situations, called forth to act in response to one another. This intimacy played out across the contours of their bodies. Watching Tony insert the needle into Larry is a reminder, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) might have it, of the way in which bodies serve as the foundational site of community, the ontological threshold from which being-with is summoned forth. In Nancy’s phenomenology, the sensate capacity of the body—its ability to feel (or indeed having its own feeling extinguished)—is the domain where being together and being apart converge, each bond we make in the world simultaneously a site of potential isolation. Which is to say that any relationship that forms always holds the potential to fall apart. As it turned out, this double-edged potentiality was a core tension right at the heart of Tony and Larry’s friendship during the period I got to know them. In his bid to grapple with his mounting health problems, Tony had partially transitioned onto

a methadone program. Despite his attempts to get his friend to follow suit, Larry's intravenous heroin use was going in the opposite direction.

During his period of incarceration, Larry lost both his parents. He recalls attending both their funerals in shackles, under police escort. He carries an immense shame and guilt that his parents died while he was in prison. Tainted by all that surrounds the death of his parents, he now finds himself stuck within a state-of-being that is defined by a swollen and stagnant present, where unprocessed mourning, despair, and boredom have threaded together to constitute a nihilistic mood that pendulates between suicidal ideation and chemical escapism: "I wish I could grieve properly. Instead I just sit here and drink, shoot up. Sometimes I wish I could just scream. I go to sleep hoping I don't wake up. I'm fed up. Sick of it."

These pendulum swings are inscribed across Larry's body, his arms and legs acned with abscess scars that evoke deep lunar craters, along with ramifying webs of track marks that follow the darkened path of what were once functional veins. Pulling up the leg of his trousers, he points to a particularly nasty looking scallop of scar tissue on his left calf: "This is what happens if you stick yourself wrong when you can't find a good vein." He takes a sip from his beer and rolls up his sleeves, pointing to the pockmarks up and down his skin. "They're all over me, you see? Junkie skin." Normally evoked by clinicians who accidentally jab themselves with used needles, Larry's "sticking" points to a different kind of accident—the missing of a vein and subsequent injection into soft tissue. The steady scarring or "collapsing" of the body's vascular infrastructure that occurs over the course of long-term intravenous drug use means that locating a working vein becomes harder and harder, invariably leading to an increase in "sticking" the wrong parts of one's body. Notwithstanding the immediate bodily risks of "sticking" himself, it is this (increasingly laborious) quest to find a good vein among the scarified canvas of his "junkie skin" that speaks to a deeper existential need, to find some analgesic relief from the asphyxiating conditions of his stuckness, of which heroin withdrawal symptoms play no small part. A survivor of multiple overdoses, the lines between analgesic escapism and suicidal ideation have crisscrossed at various times in Larry's life and seem likely to do so again in the future. Indeed, he often framed himself in distinctly zombie-like terms, frequently describing himself as a "dead man walking." Tony, of course, understands this kind of death-wish escapism better than most. At the same time, he's also convinced that his friend is close to the point of no return: "He's gonna kill himself. He'll

die with a needle sticking out of him. He plays roulette every time he shoots up.”

If Tony thinks this, how can he be so willing to provide his flat as a place for Larry to inject, even going so far as to insert the needle himself? The answer is that, rather than leave his friend to spin the roulette wheel on his own, he is instead offering a kind of makeshift harm reduction program. Harm reduction is a public health model that emphasizes reducing the negative effects of drug use rather than eliminating it or pushing for abstinence. A classic mantra of harm reduction programs is to “meet people where they are at.” In practice, though, many harm reduction programs fall short of this stated goal. In part, as Jarrett Zigon and other scholars have illustrated (Campbell and Shaw 2008; Nichter 2003), this is because such programs are readily at risk of morphing into instruments of state control and coercion, often excluding the very people they purport to care for. According to Zigon, an overreliance on public health lenses risks distorting what, at its ethical core, is the truly radical potential of harm reduction. In his ethnography of safe injection sites in Vancouver’s infamous Downtown Eastside, Zigon (2024) shows how these clinical spaces are just one node in a broader, networked assemblage of political activism and community possibilities, in which active drug users are linked through conjoined infrastructures of communal eating, social justice advocacy, housing, job-seeking, and even banking. Notwithstanding the ongoing social issues that remain entrenched in this still deprived part of Vancouver, there was, at least for the period of time when he was there, a real-life example of harm reduction as something beyond mere clinical risk mitigation. Instead, he located an emergent community of “attuned care,” where people were being met not just where they were psychologically, but *ontologically*—affording people the room and resources to build and rebuild their worlds on their terms, doing so in a way that made sense for their particular vulnerabilities and modes-of-being as active drug users.

Tony’s living room, then, is arguably closer to the safe injection sites and adjoined networks of attuned care identified by Zigon than the traditional public health version. After all, who beyond Tony could be said to be more attuned to the unique singularity of Larry’s situation and the vulnerabilities thus embedded? Indeed, it is this attunement that sets the conditions for his practices of care. Tony makes sure that, when he’s at his place, there are clean needles available. He makes sure the blinds are closed and the door is locked, away from the prying eyes of neighbors

or passing police officers (protection Larry would not be afforded if he was shooting up in a hostel or public space). He also makes sure he has naloxone—a medication that rapidly reverses overdose—on hand, just in case. As described earlier, he also helps to inject Larry, protecting him from incurring another abscess. And, if he starts to nod and needs somewhere to crash out, Tony ensures he can do so on the sofa, under his watchful eye. So, while Tony might still believe, with good reason, that Larry will die with a needle sticking out of his arm, he has resolved that it won't happen on his watch.

Where Tony's attuned care for his friend stops short of the conditions described by Zigon in the Downtown Eastside is in the nature of Tony's network. Unlike in Vancouver, where turning up at any node within the network (the syringe exchange, the artwork space, the bank foyer, etc.) affords "whoever arrives"—as Zigon puts it—opportunities for community participation and worldbuilding, Tony and the rest of Itchy Park's residents do not have this kind of social infrastructure available to them. There are no political activists in their midst seeking actively to experiment with otherwise forms of politics. This is not to diminish the ethical work that Tony is putting into his relationship with Larry as he takes care of his vulnerabilities in the safety of his living room, but rather to say that it is not embedded, on his own terms at least, in some broader political project. Nevertheless, Tony and Larry's friendship, like other similar running partnerships of this nature, still relies on a deep form of networked existence—moral economies of sharing that encompass larger webs of fellow substance users, thus broadening the pool of resources that people can make demands upon. The naloxone he kept behind his sofa, for example, was sourced from this web, acquired from a man called Simon who actively ran a surplus from his interactions with public health officials—a surplus he would trade for money or, as was often the case, heroin. Tony found Simon galling, describing him as a "piss taker" for trading naloxone for personal gain, given that it was something health officials gave out for free.⁴

4. Simon, for his part, rejects the idea that his naloxone trading program is somehow beyond the moral pale. As far as he's concerned, traveling between clinics, pharmacies, and other healthcare services to acquire naloxone is a hustle like any other, requiring time, effort, guile, and no shortage of creativity and grit.

Taking the Piss

Whether or not someone is deemed to be “taking the piss” is, to one degree or another, a question that is constantly being asked, implicitly and explicitly, among the park’s residents as they negotiate the interpersonal matrix of the moral economy. An enduring form of British slang, to “take the piss” has several closely connected meanings. To take the piss *out* of someone is to mock them, often through exaggerated forms of imitation. A “piss-take” can also refer to luring someone into a gullible state where they are persuaded to believe something patently absurd. The term also refers to taking unfair advantage of someone, such as by abusing their trust or generosity for personal gain. It is this exploitative meaning that was most pervasive among my interlocutors, its evocation both stirring up and reflecting deep anxieties within the park’s interpersonal boundaries, anxieties that spoke to the intrinsic scarcity and precarity of the Itchy Park lifeworld. In many ways, then, “piss-taking” can be seen as a modality of everyday discourse through which Itchy Park’s residents made ethical evaluations about the behavior and status of those enmeshed within their networks of reciprocity. For example, after Tony fetched his works from a drawer on the other side of the room to prepare himself a hit from Larry’s stash later on that evening to “top up” his methadone prescription, the shot he drew up was markedly smaller than the one Larry had arranged for himself. This was partly because Tony “didn’t want to take the piss” and abuse Larry’s generosity and limited resources.

Ultimately, generosity and piss-taking often went hand in hand—something that Tony had been increasingly frustrated by ever since he had been ambushed by his newfound future and forced to economize. Indeed, while “the Godfather” might have been a befitting mantle for the period of nihilistic hedonism that defined his “borrowed time” years, its ongoing legacy had created its own set of vexations: “Everyone round here knows me, cos I’ve got a reputation from when I when I was younger. They’ll follow me everywhere, piss-takers. No matter where I go in the park, in no time at all I’ve got a group of them around me. Most of them have never done a thing for me. Gets on my nerves.”

Weary of the way that his enduring “Godfather” persona continued to attract what he perceived to be unsubstantiated and overwhelmingly nonreciprocal demands, Tony grew increasingly stern and uncompromising in his decisions as with whom he shared money, alcohol, and drugs, excluding, dismissing, or lying to all those whom he deemed to

be piss-takers. While the decision to withhold resources from another person hinges on a number of interlocking factors, it is based primarily on the interpersonal history and reputation of the people involved—a relation that is itself shaped by conditions of chronic poverty and “not enough-ness” (Burraway 2021b). Borrowing from Primo Levi (1998), Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) have famously deployed his concept of the “gray zone” as a way to analyze the social and economic relations that emerge in homeless contexts of deep uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity. Put briefly, in the gray zone of homelessness, the need to help others is continuously set against oftentimes brutal cost-benefit analyses that can never leave everyone satisfied, ensuring that care and betrayal remain intimate bedfellows. To illustrate how this gray-zone logic plays out in Itchy Park, in what follows I provide two contrasting examples.

The Rumor Mill

Tony, Larry, and Max were sitting shoulder to shoulder along the benches, their backs to the road. The adjacent high street had been plagued by roadworks of late, the pneumatic drilling weaving amongst the snarls of stop-start traffic to create a din that seemed to hang over the park like a swirling mist, swallowing chunks of conversation whole. Larry had recently come back from Chester House, a notorious hostel about ten minutes down the road. He had gone there to fix with an acquaintance who was occupying a bed there, Larry having “sorted him out” the previous week when he had been “clucking” (local parlance for withdrawal). While a shared hostel room didn’t offer the same kind of privacy and security that Tony’s flat offered, it was preferable to public injecting, which carried increased risks (be that arrest at the hands of the police or else being “ripped off” by predatory opportunists who see people experiencing homelessness as easy targets for robbery and abuse). Because of these risks, those who used heroin intravenously tried to avoid public injecting whenever possible. Typically, this meant those who had temporary/emergency accommodation in nearby hostels would volunteer their rooms in return for receiving free “tastes”—as per the logic of the moral economy. This was itself not without risks, illegal drug use in these places being grounds for expulsion. Most hostels also had policies that restricted visitation from nonoccupants, often put in place to discourage communal drug-using activities. While there were—depending on the security level of each hostel—various ways to circumvent these policies, the running

of this particular gauntlet was risky. In point of fact, along with hostile behavior towards hostel staff and violent conflict with other residents, being caught using drugs and/or smuggling unpermitted guests into the premises was the primary cause of expulsion. Accordingly, the desire for a safe and secure place to share and consume drugs was, ironically, one of the foremost drivers in yo-yoing patterns of accommodation insecurity that saw Itchy Park's residents bungee between precarious forms of shelter and rough sleeping. In situations where using someone's hostel room is not an option, a public toilet is often the next best port of call, a lockable door at least offering a modicum of security and seclusion. When, for whatever reason, even this is not a viable option, the park's residents will seek out the more penumbral corridors that run through their locality, such as more deserted and isolated parks, wooded areas, derelict buildings, neglected property, alleyways, car parks, and the like.⁵

Aside from the debt he was owed, another reason Larry had been fixing in a hostel room rather than Tony's flat was because, as alluded to earlier, Tony was trying to scale back his heroin usage after enrolling himself in a methadone program. As he said to me later on, when Larry had gone to the liquor store to buy another round of super-strength alcohol: "If I have him round my flat to shoot up I know I'm gonna have a taste...I won't be able to say no, I know myself. I've tried to convince him to get on a program as well, y'know. Keep telling him he's gonna kill himself the way he's going. Doesn't wanna know, though." Tony had entered the program following a recommendation from the doctor who had been regulating his antiretroviral treatment. Though it never emerged as fully clear in our conversations on what clinical basis they had made this recommendation, Tony had been convinced that transitioning onto methadone would potentially improve his health and further limit the virus's development. Max had also been transitioning onto methadone. In between drags on cigarettes and swigs from their respective cans, they

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5. Not only are public toilets few and far between in London, but they also typically have fee-controlled barriers and, on top of that, are often subject to surveillance from police or security guards, depending on the location. This leaves the toilets in busy high street eating and drinking establishments, such as McDonalds, Starbucks, or else, local pubs. Mostly, though, people experiencing street homelessness were extremely reticent to use these facilities, conscious that their disheveled appearance was likely to attract the attention of the staff who more often than not deny them entry or, if they suspected drug use, call the police.

exchanged views on methadone as a treatment modality. In comparison to heroin, both agreed that it had a very different sensorial and psychological effects: less “rushy” and more “mongy.” “It mongs you out,” says Max, “like you feel heavy...your eyes feel heavy, everything feels heavy. H [heroin] is lighter, like you’re falling back onto something, y’know? Wrapped up in something...something soft. But it don’t last nearly as long, you’re clucking before you know it. The meth lasts way longer. But when you do start clucking, it’s just as bad. Worse, actually.”

Tony wholeheartedly agreed with Max’s assessment that methadone imposed a greater weight upon one’s subjectivity than did heroin, describing it as inducing in him a “zombie” state that was radically divergent from the moments of levity and escapist anesthesia he associated with intravenous heroin use. Tony’s zombification metaphor echoes observations made by ethnographers working in similar sites of vulnerability, with methadone addiction often described as a kind of burden or enslavement (Johnson and Friedman 1993; Koester, Anderson, and Hoffer 1999). At a more theoretical level, methadone treatment has been critiqued as an instrument of disciplinary biopower, implemented by a hostile state to regulate pleasure and to transform the quasi-criminal addict not just into a compliant patient, but also an obedient and economically productive subject (Bourgois 2000; Fraser and Valentine 2008). While there is an extensive critical scholarship dedicated to exploring the way in which methadone (along with other opioid replacement therapies) problematizes the intersection between biopower, governmentality, and subjectivity, for the purposes of this section I want instead to emphasize the way in which methadone becomes diverted from contexts of therapeutic compliance and into informal sharing economies.⁶

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6. In a subsequent ethnographic project (Scherz and Burraway 2022), my coauthor China Scherz and I have explored in greater depth how the illicit circulation of opioids marketed as replacement therapies intersect with localized forms of moral economy. This project was based in the Appalachian region of Southwest Virginia and Eastern Tennessee. We focused on how the diversion of suboxone—a partial opioid agonist that is used in medication-assisted treatment (MAT) programs to reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms—from clinical programs across kinship networks involves forms of concealment, secrecy, and deceit, even as it is used to provide a vital form of care. In exploring the moral economies that shape the licit and illicit circulation of suboxone in this region, we aimed to unpack the logics of obligation, care, and secrecy that emerge for rural communities who are caught in a set of sociopolitical, economic, and

While UK methadone programs typically require supervised dosing for the first few weeks of treatment, take-home supplies are often permitted after this initial period so long as a patient demonstrates what is often termed “clinical stability” or “compliance adherence.” As a result, methadone is regularly found circulating within the moral economies described in this book. Tony, for example, had recently earned the so-called privilege of being prescribed a “take-home” supply. Ever the canny operator, whenever Tony “topped up” his methadone prescription with heroin—as he had done with Larry earlier in the chapter—he made sure to source so-called “clean” urine that he could use to cheat urinalysis. Clean urine, or at least heroin-free urine, was relatively easy to come by. A few of the park’s residents only drank alcohol, stringently avoiding any kind of illicit substances. Following the logic of the moral economy, they were all too happy to sell or exchange their urine to people like Tony.⁷ So far, Tony, hadn’t gotten caught. Max, on the other hand, hadn’t been so lucky. As a result of several failed urine tests that screened positively for heroin, Max had his take-home privileges revoked: “The whole thing’s bullshit. The only reason I had to score [heroin] was cos I’d been helping people out when they’d been clucking—like with Jasper, remember? You remember what I did for him? So, when I was running out nobody had any [methadone] to sort me out.”

Tony interjected: “I sorted you out.”

therapeutic conditions defined by endemic precarity. This paper provides a worthwhile counterpart to this part of the book’s analysis, insofar as it reveals both the convergent and divergent dimensions of moral economies that exist between urban and rural communities, as well as how intimate familial contexts foster certain dynamics of care and secrecy that were not evident in Itchy Park. In our account, we pay deep attention to the way that our core interlocutor, Tripp, a young woman enrolled in one of these MAT programs, covers up her needle marks from her mother who, despite also taking suboxone, abhors intravenous use. As we discuss at greater length, the notion of hiding track marks from other drug users would have been laughable to those who used in Itchy Park. There are many things that these people hide from each other on the streets—drugs, money, the truth—but their skin isn’t one of them.

7. Elsewhere (Burraway 2020a: 6), I have examined in greater detail how patients at MAT clinics in Eastern Tennessee try (and often fail) to cheat urinalysis tests, connecting these attempts to the intimate moral dynamics of the clinician-patient relationship as well as the macro-context of what I term the “urine industrial complex.”

“Yeah,” Max replied, acknowledging Tony’s generosity. “I know you did, but it wasn’t enough—I’d given too much away. That’s why I had to go back with Kev and fix [heroin] after you left; I was starting to cluck bad, bruv. If there was meth I would’ve done that, but there wasn’t—not like I’m gonna just let myself cluck, y’know?”

Tony agreed—nobody would ever willingly put themselves through withdrawal just to maintain a commitment to clinical compliance. “It’s hell,” Max said, “it hurts to see someone else going through it.” Hence why Max went out of his way the week before to help out Jasper—a long-term heroin user and heavy drinker who, like Max, was also struggling to walk the compliance line; his continued polysubstance use, history of diversion, and frequent failure to make appointment times meant that he often found himself running low. On the day in question, Jasper had wandered into the park late in the evening, bent double and groaning loudly, his face dripping in sweat. Claiming to have missed his supervised appointment slot at the pharmacy earlier in the day, Jasper was exhibiting all the signs of withdrawal.

Before he even got to where Max was sitting, he crumpled to the ground and slumped against a tree, cursing and lolling his head back and forth. On noticing Jasper (whose audible groaning, swearing, and spitting had made it all but impossible not to), Max rushed over to attend to him. Sunk to his haunches, Max almost seemed to cradle Jasper as though he were a sick child, withdrawing from his pocket an amber-tinted medicine bottle before pouring out some of the liquid methadone into the bottle’s cap. In a motion reminiscent of the Good Samaritan raising water to the mouth of a dying man, Max took Jasper’s head and brought the bottle cap to his lips, encouraging him to drink while soothing him with gentle assurances, telling him “that everything will be fine when the meth hits. Just hang in there.” After drinking the methadone, Jasper started to calm down and Max rolled them a cigarette to share. Though the methadone wouldn’t take full neurochemical effect for a while, its administration seemed enough to ward off the most visceral symptoms, settling the pain skewering his stomach as well as inducing a profound psychological and existential relief that his dope sickness would be held in abeyance for the time being. Passing the cigarette between each other, Jasper tenderly squeezed Max’s shoulder and thanked him profusely, remarking that he could now be hopeful of getting some sleep tonight and actually making his appointment slot the following day.

Before he left the park to try his luck begging on Brick Lane, Jasper pulled a tin of cider from his coat pocket and placed it in Max’s hand as

a kind of token tribute, reiterating that he would “sort him out” in the future when he next had the means, caveating this pledge by reminding Max that it was “like Big Brother there at the moment.” The implication was that he was under such heavy surveillance at the clinic that the likelihood of him being able to divert any of his prescription to repay Max was, at this point in time, limited. Max accepted the cider and returned to the bench, the hiss from the punctured ring pull stealing through the air as a sibilant whisper. As we discussed why he had gone out of his way to help, Max began by emphasizing his embodied understanding of what Jasper was going through: “I’ve been there, too many times. I’ve been through the clucking, I know what it’s like, the pain, your bones aching, the stomach cramps, the diarrhea. If I see a friend going through that and I can help, I’ve got to do it man. It’s the right thing to do.”

In this regard, we can see how substance withdrawal is not only a personal torment; it is also a shared existential anxiety that hinges on a particular kind of empathetic relationality—one that is underwritten by persistent histories of mutual reciprocity and shared experience. Max’s insistence that Jasper has “done the same” for him in the past when he had been going through withdrawal or else staring down its barrel attests to this enduring mutuality. In this sense, what drove Max to part with what was a limited and vital resource should not be confused with commonplace notions of sympathy—that is to say feelings of pity and grief *for* Jasper’s misfortune, as though Max was somehow outside or beyond it. Rather, the ethical imperative that compelled Max to rush to Jasper’s aid as he writhed in dope sickness is closer to what Hankins (2019) has called “sympathetic engagement,” or what Zigon (2019)—following Throop (2017)—has termed “empathetic attunement.” For all three scholars, sympathy or empathy is not about feeling *for* someone else but feeling *with* them—an interbodily togetherness that is rooted in the relationality of always already being-in-the-world with others. From this perspective, the withdrawing body is also a shared body—the suffering of which Max is relationally and sensorially attuned to, in the process shaping his moral orientation regarding who does and does not deserve care. Jasper deserves care because witnessing his withdrawal induces a profound feeling-with, a mutuality that has been cultivated through years of intensive relational entanglement and contiguity.

That said, deservingness is never a stable moral category, especially in social contexts where scarcity, precarity, and vulnerability intersect. Indeed, as our discussion continued and more people chimed in, Max began to express an increasing ambivalence about Jasper’s commitment to

future reciprocity. As he worked through the cider Jasper had given him, Max joked that he ought to savor it, increasingly convinced that this token gesture would end up being the full extent of Jasper's promised reimbursement. As the evening went on and the group grew more intoxicated, the suspicion that Jasper was no longer as reliable a reciprocator as he once was began to grow and fester, a number of others commenting that they had also given away drugs and alcohol and failed to see any kind of equivalent return. Quickly, rumors began to abound that Jasper's "Big Brother" excuses were bogus, that actually he was stockpiling his methadone prescription and selling it on the black market or trading it for heroin, in effect abusing their generosity to avoid having to use his own supply. Those who felt especially hard done by even suggested that Jasper had slapped some water on his face before coming into the park and feigned withdrawal symptoms in a cynical bid to take advantage of Max—something he forcefully denied: "Fuck that—no fucking way! I know when someone's clucking—you can't fake that. I was there with him; I could smell the sweat on him. It was fucking real. I could see it in his eyes."

Max's vehemence stems from the double-edged nature of the accusation. In suggesting that Jasper was shirking his obligations and exploiting his fellow homeless through performative chicanery (thereby becoming a "piss-taker"), not only was his moral integrity under threat, but Max's as well. This is because those who are perceived to be easily deceived or gullible suffer from diminished social capital within the group, liable to be abused, exploited, and ripped off by those who are—as per the logic of the gray zone—inclined to view weakness as opportunity. As Tony once told me after loudly reprimanding me for giving some coins from my pocket to an individual who was known as an opportunist: "You can't be soft out here—if you're soft you won't survive. People will just take, take, take till you've got nothing left. You only look after the people who look after you." Max, then, did not want to appear soft and risk being seen as an easy target. Hence, he adamantly refuted the claim that Jasper had managed to swindle him, invoking the supposedly undeceivable truth of that which lies behind a person's eyes. Further, by calling forth his own embodied attunement to assert the legitimacy of Jasper's dope sickness, Max was also emphasizing his own munificence in such a situation, effectively turning the implicit accusation of softness into an opportunity to cultivate his own public persona as a generous donor and reciprocator.

The rumors that revolved around Jasper turning into a potential "piss-taker" can be understood as having a number of significant effects

upon the group's broader moral and economic relations. For one, they provided a discursive medium through which Max and the rest of the group could confront what was an ambiguous and potentially tense shift in the interpersonal dynamics that were unfolding between Jasper and the community. As a kind of narrative poetics, these rumors also allowed those sitting on the benches to subtly maneuver themselves into different moral orientations, the circulation of these stories testing the boundaries of their everyday relationships and understandings of one another. Max, for example, didn't just casually rebuff the suggestion that Jasper had splashed himself with water in order to fake the sweats—there was too much at stake. Instead, he vehemently dismissed the idea by saying that *he physically smelled the sweat himself*, the contradiction of which would have amounted to an accusation of fabrication. Unwilling to call him a liar to his face, the speakers of this rumor became the listeners as Max drew on the viscosity of withdrawal to rubbish the claim. In this moment of repudiation, not only was his relationship with Jasper suddenly on the line, so was his public persona. As Glen Perice (1997) has pointed out in his work on the “intertextual” politics of rumor in Haiti, rumors are bound up in a process of continual retelling, their motility and plasticity constituted by the way they tend move in fragments through ever-unfolding fields of sociality, mostly behind people's backs. No wonder then, that during the interlude when Max turned *his* back and went to the liquor store to buy more alcohol, the rumor mill shifted gears as people speculated on whether he *really* smelled sweat or was just posturing to save face having been duped. Sure enough, though, on his return this rumor faded back into the discursive ether, replaced by a newfound conviviality as Max handed out ciders and beers across in the group, a public display of generosity that seemed to emerge in triage to the potential denting of his reputation, shifting the mood from one of suspicion to renewed fraternity.

If rumors are to be understood as responses to the sociopolitical contexts within which they circulate (Turner 1993), then we can also appreciate the way that they become bound up in the existential moods that contingently emerge out of these conditions. The whispers surrounding Jasper, the subsequent threat to Max's reputation, and the public displays of denial and generosity that arose in its wake—they all contribute to deeper moods of suspicion and anxiety that are inseparably folded into the dynamics of the moral economy, often coming to the fore in moments of uncertainty that are themselves shaped by conditions of scarcity. As an existential mood that emerges *between and behind* others

(rather than within individuals), suspicion discloses the ways in which deceit, opportunism, and betrayal become laced into expressions of generosity and solidarity. The figure of the “piss-taker” looms large as a discursive element of this mood, lingering at the back of people’s minds as they evaluate the deservingness of the demands that others make of them.

Returning to the day that began this section, the rumors circulating about Jasper were still weighing on Max. Though he remained adamant that Jasper hadn’t pulled the wool over his eyes to extract a free hit of methadone, Max was nevertheless beginning to express doubts about the integrity of their relationship going forward, focusing on what he perceived to be Jasper’s escalating levels of intoxication combined with increased social reclusion: “Whenever I see him he’s fucked—he can barely speak when he comes in the park. I mean, yeah, none of us are exactly sober; but you can’t even speak to him at the moment, he’s just all over the place when he’s here. Barely here. Hard to have someone’s back when they’re like that, y’know.”

Sitting next to Max and listening to him agonize over the state of his relationship with Jasper, he appeared visibly torn up over the prospect that their connection might be fraying to an irreparable level. Rarely one to worry about sugarcoating the anxieties of others, Larry—who had joined the conversation halfway through after having snuck off to urinate behind a nearby tree—duly threw in his two cents, telling Max: “He’s trying to get one over on you, mate. Course he is—you’re too fuckin’ nice, that’s your problem.”

Given the tense atmospheric shift occurring on the benches, Violet could not have picked a less opportune time to approach the three men and ask for help. A sex worker who was based at the women’s hostel a few minutes west, Violet was one of a small handful of women who frequented Itchy Park to drink, use drugs, and more broadly kill time. Violet moved across the grass in a stagger, clutching her elbow and making a sling of her arm. The black of her mascara had fallen in kinked streams down the side of each cheek, mixing with the tears as she arrived, sobbing. Her body shook as though it were caught in a deep chill, the vibrations asynchronous with the afternoon’s unseasonable warmth. In between snuffles and heavy breaths, Violet made her pitch. She began by saying that someone in her hostel had gone through her bag and stolen the stash of heroin she had been keeping for the afternoon. Suggesting she knew who the culprit was, she went on to say that her withdrawal symptoms were making it impossible

to go out and find the work that would enable her to buy another bag. Stressing her catch-22 situation, she begged the men for a taste of heroin or methadone, frequently peppering her story with visceral descriptions of the pain she was enduring. Max, Larry, and Tony, though, were unmoved. Watching Violet plead her case before them, the scene felt like an imperial court, Violet utterly at the mercy of their judgment.

When they did break their silence, it came in a deluge of profanity and cynical repudiations. “Get the fuck out of here!” bellowed Max as he swatted his hand in her direction as though she were a bothersome fly, followed swiftly by Tony telling her to “fuck off and tell your sob story to someone else!” “Always trying to get something for nothing, when the fuck have you ever sorted anyone out?!” snarled Larry. At first, Violet tried to defend herself against the accusations. Realizing her appeal was going to come to naught, Violet turned and stormed off, returning fire with a few four-letter words of her own. The last word, though, went to Max, who shouted at her to “wipe away them fucking crocodile tears!”

The ferocity directed towards Violet took me aback, she—to my eyes—looking no less credulous than when Jasper had stumbled into the park evoking withdrawal. How were they so sure she was faking? What if she had been telling the truth? My questions got short shrift. My desire to give Violet the benefit of the doubt was bundled up in my naivety about “the way things are” in the park. When I inquired as to whether there was something about her physical appearance or demeanor that had tipped them off regarding her duplicity, they dismissed this as unnecessary. Max said they could all “smell a sob story from a mile away.” They all agreed that before Violet made her appeal she had been hiding somewhere around the corner, smearing her makeup, faking tears, rehearsing her story, and preparing herself for the ensuing performance. As I pressed the group further on just what it was about Violet’s approach or comportment that had set their collective alarm bells ringing, what emerged was that it was not so much her bodily demeanor, but rather her checkered interpersonal history within Itchy Park’s moral economy. Each of them emphasized that she was a well-known “piss-taker” who frequently made up stories and falsified withdrawal in order to elicit sympathy and milk drugs and money from people. Of equal if not greater significance, they claimed she never reciprocated or helped people out when the shoe was on the other foot, a cardinal transgression that was compounded by the fact that, in their

eyes, she was seen as having far superior earning capacities owing to her trade as a sex worker.

Whatever extra economic capital Violet was deemed to have accrued through her sex work, it was this very same labor that diminished her social capital and made her, in this moment, a less worthy moral agent. Indeed, as the men discussed Violet's long-standing reputation for duplicity and exploitation, they never referred to her by name, choosing instead to use highly gendered pejoratives, such as "bitch" and "crackwhore." The use of such highly gendered derogatory terms was not uncommon in the park during moments of conflict and contestation involving women, almost all of whom were entrenched, to varying degrees, in precarious forms of sex work. Such language speaks directly to the many gendered fault lines that exist within spaces of homelessness and substance use, in particular to the way that internalized misogyny intersects with economic scarcity, poverty, and addiction to leave already vulnerable women in escalating situations of precarity and personal danger. As I said in the introduction, these themes demand far greater attention than what I have just provided. For the purposes of this book, what I instead want to focus on is the way in which the rumors that had begun the previous week regarding Jasper had continued to reverberate throughout Itchy Park's moral economy, reappearing in conversational narratives to foster an emergent mood of suspicion and latent indignation that was, however unluckily, both reactivated and reenergized by Violet's appeal. In particular, the consensus that Violet had preemptively choreographed her appeal by smudging her mascara and forcing herself to shed "crocodile tears" is strikingly reminiscent of the rumors that had been circulating about Jasper splashing water on his face to replicate the withdrawal sweats. However, where before Max had refuted that rumor on the basis that he had physically smelled the dopesick sweat across Jasper's brow, now it was Violet's sob story (rather than her sobbing) that emanated the strongest odor. In this way, the suspicious smell of Violet's tears seems to confirm one of Perice's central claims about the creative lability of rumor, namely that it operates as the "practice of reinscribing reinscriptions" (1997: 3). In this case, the reinscription speaks to the ways in which the cultural logic of the gray zone becomes distributed across the multiple layers of Itchy Park's moral economy, continuously shaping and reshaping the dynamics of interdependence, mooded attunement, and relatedness as the park's residents attempt to negotiate their way through everyday conditions of chronic scarcity.

Moving On

The radically divergent responses to Jasper's and Violet's almost identical demands demonstrate the complex dynamics of suspicion, rumor, trust, and treachery that emerge within the moral economies that sustain everyday life for vulnerable groups, in particular the way in which they are driven by ever-shifting existential moods, attunements, interpersonal histories, and bodily dispositions. Crucially, we must also remember that these moral economies are embedded within the highly volatile domain of public urban space, attached to which are an assemblage of laws, policing practices, and disciplinary measures that pressurize the tactics the homeless employ to survive, in the process amplifying the importance of the sharing networks outlined throughout this chapter. Take this curt response I got from one officer I spoke to after watching him fine Jimmy a hundred pounds for breaching a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO)⁸ for begging at his usual Aldgate East spot: "We don't make the laws around here, we just enforce them. I told him just last week to pack himself up and move on. He can't say he wasn't warned."

The irony was that Jimmy had moved on that week. Certain police officers had nastier, less forgiving reputations than others. Knowing from personal experience that this particular officer was likely to follow up on his warning, let alone give one at all, Jimmy had moved on to newer pastures, begging in other, notably less lucrative spots around the Whitechapel area until it could be reasonably assumed that the policeman in question had been moved on to a different route. Indeed, on gathering in the park to drink and use drugs together, talk would often drift to which police officers, security guards, and alcohol enforcement officers people had recently caught sight of or encountered, and also where they had been seen. This kind of talk not only allowed people to vent their personal frustrations and detail the kind of unlucky events that might help reinforce future demands within the sharing economy, but it also functioned as something like an advanced warning system that marked certain public spaces as more or less fraught with danger than others. Public space being public space though, predicting which kinds of law enforcement agents would appear in which areas was always more of a gamble than a guarantee. Ultimately, Jimmy's calculated gamble

8. Originally brought into existence under the 2014 Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act.

didn't pay off and he saw almost five days' worth of earnings evaporate in the flick of a policeman's pen.⁹

Returning to the officer responsible for fining Jimmy that day, his response to my challenge reveals some of the troubling contradictions at the heart of PSPOs. On the one hand, the officer first disavowed himself of the notion that another course of action might have been taken, announcing himself to be an enforcer rather than a creator of laws. And yet, in his next sentence he exposed the discretionary nature of PSPOs, revealing in his brief description of their previous encounter that he did in fact have the capacity to turn the other cheek, should he have seen fit. Brought into effect to regulate and control public space in accordance with the particular demands of each local council, these sweeping powers manifest themselves at the discretion of the officer in question. In other words, the council will create a list of predetermined activities—begging, loitering, alcohol consumption, and rough sleeping, to name just a few—that are then mapped onto certain sanctionable spaces, such as the pavement around train stations or a public park. Once briefed by the local council's checklist of predefined quasi-criminal activities, law enforcement officers are granted the flexibility to prosecute at their own discretion. In this sense, these are laws that are created as they are enforced, mapping themselves not only onto spaces but onto certain kinds of people who occupy these spaces in particular ways. The protection of space, then, goes hand in glove with the persecution of the city's most vulnerable people. In taking up spaces, and times, through undesirable and ultimately illegitimate activities—such as begging and public drinking—the PSPO legislation renders the homeless the abject border—or the “internal enemy” in Zigon's (2018) terms—against which the “good” citizen is both defined and protected.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Jimmy's begging time required a certain level of symbiosis with the rush of consumerist spatiotemporality. The above example, though, demonstrates that his begging was also a time-space that was prone to dangerous and costly forms of interruption. Affixed to his spot on the floor, Jimmy was quite literally a sitting target for varying forms of criminal and financial sanction. Further, the officer's insistence that Jimmy had previously been “warned” hints at the way in which these punitive power relations are interwoven into the temporal fabric of Jimmy's daily life. From the old English, *warnian*—meaning to

9. These PSPO fines would often be docked straight from a person's benefits payments.

give notice of impending danger—the officer’s warning directs us to the way in which dangerous, potentially carceral futures perpetually loom over people in Jimmy’s position, this imminent threat casting a shadow over their present in ways that radically limit their possibilities for being-in-the-world. Indeed, when the homeless suffer this kind of debilitating financial sanction, the sharing economy takes on an even greater significance.

Not Enough

Facing a period of extra scarcity following his fine, Jimmy was forced to depend more heavily on the generosity of others, now that the city worker rush was temporarily out of reach. Knowing that the fine would be coming out of his benefits package, Jimmy budgeted what little cash he had on him to try and make it stretch as far as it could. It was important for Jimmy that nobody knew the exact amount he had available, lest others from the group use this as an excuse not to share their resources with them: “Most of them, they just see a round number—they don’t realize that it has to last.”

Jimmy and I walked to another park about half a mile away where he broke down his budget for me—he had just shy of sixty pounds, almost all in change except for a couple of five pound notes. He was careful to keep most of the money tucked away in his bag so that it didn’t jingle in his pockets and “give the game away.” “Just to keep myself in one piece I need at least three [ciders] a day, two Valium—and that’s just to stop my skin crawling!” He worked out that the cost of staving off withdrawal was between nine and eleven pounds per day, depending on current Valium prices (they tended to fluctuate between two and three pounds per pill depending on market availability). Not accounting for any top-ups that might occur from any begging stints in less policed spots, he figured that he had five days more or less covered on the substance front, also factoring in other basic subsistence costs. “The thing is,” said Jimmy, turning to me after he had finished the calculations and secured his money at the bottom of his rucksack inside a pair of socks,

This isn’t enough, you know. The fucking boredom—the booze and the pills, they kill the time, you know? Like, you don’t have to think about it, your situation. You’re somewhere else. I don’t have to be me anymore. People are gonna have to sort me out. God knows I’ve taken care of them when they’ve been in the shit.

In this moment, Jimmy explicitly evoked the key moral imperative of the sharing economy—namely to take care of those who have historically reciprocated in kind. Further to that, in squirrelling away what money he did have out of sight, Jimmy also revealed the way in which strategic forms of deception and self-interest are intimately braided into these moral demands, shaped as they are by conditions of chronic scarcity. Sure enough, on his return to the park Jimmy loudly retold the story of his encounter with the policeman so that everyone could hear, explicitly detailing the injustice of his situation. Urging others around the group to recall past encounters with the same officer, or else had suffered similar PSPO fines, Jimmy skillfully reeled them into the narrative, beckoning them to join in and retell their own stories and blow off some steam.

That one fucking copper, he's the worst of them. Never gives us a break! They're all the fucking same, like we're the fuckin' enemy or something. Shouldn't they be out locking up murderers? Instead they're out there picking on the homeless. Pathetic!
You go into Spoons [short for the Wetherspoons pub chain—famous for selling alcohol at inexpensive prices] at 9 a.m. and it'll be choc-a-bloc. People come out of there steaming at 11 and no one says a dicky-bird. I open a can in the morning and I either get a lecture or a criminal record. Come off it! Treat us like scum. Like we don't even matter.

With the group openly sharing their stories of abuse and dehumanization at the hands of law enforcement, Jimmy had managed to catalyze a personal account into an interpersonal story-swapping arena. As Michael Jackson (2013) reminds us, stories allow people to share and potentially transform the realities of their world, creating a public forum for private experience. These forums, by virtue of their relational constitution, offer a reparative resource in moments of crisis. As a modality of shared meaning-making, they allow people to creatively restructure bonds of sociality. They are, in short, a form of care. Through his performative retelling and invitation for others to throw their own experiences into the mix, Jimmy's position as the story's original author quickly began to disintegrate as similar stories from around the group fused together into a kind of metanarrative, a collective world-sharing as well as a discursive commentary upon the predicament of their own vulnerability, abjection, and desperation. In rousing the group as he did, Jimmy shifted the entire mood of the benches from what had initially been a kind of subdued detachment into a cacophony of shared indignation. For Jimmy, this emergent mood shift created a fertile atmosphere

for him to seek generosity by carefully invoking intimate histories of reciprocal care. The burgeoning sense of discontent amongst the group seemed to renew bonds of fraternity between a number of the park's residents, something that Jimmy capitalized on by reminding certain people of times that he had "sorted them out" when they had been in a similar situation. Making his way over to George, he said:

You remember when you came in the other week clucking, five quid short of a bag? You could barely stand, remember. What did I do? I went straight into my pocket and gave you the cash so you could take care of yourself. No questions asked. Because I know what it's like—it hurt me to see you in that state.

George reacted first by laughing, half-joking to Jimmy that he owed him *at least* a fiver for borrowing Bruno, his dog, the week before. The implication was that Jimmy's act of kindness was actually a case of settling up an earlier debt. The two went back and forth for a while in a kind of mock negotiation, each cajoling the other into remembering past acts of generosity while at the same time hinting at the suspicion of past deceptions, until eventually George withdrew a selection of coins from his pocket and handed Jimmy four pounds. "That's a quid less than I gave you!" quipped Jimmy, his wry smile suggesting that it was now he who was being generous by letting George off of a debt. "Don't worry, I'll remember this," said Jimmy as he pocketed the change, still smiling. Unclear as to whether it was the shortchanging or the donation that Jimmy would be committing to memory, the ambiguity seemed to hang in the air, a reminder of the intimate interweaving of care, scarcity, deception, and betrayal that constitute Itchy Park's complex moral-economic relations.

Notwithstanding George's goading, Jimmy certainly had an enduring history of reciprocity within the group. In part, this was down to Jimmy's work ethic—it was widely accepted that he was the park's most successful panhandler, his greater income reflected in his higher levels of generosity. A "piss-taker" Jimmy wasn't. As outlined in the previous chapter, he associated this work ethic with his long history of employment. Recall here, though, that this same ethic was also a vestigial trace of that which he had lost, the bittersweet echoes of which continued to haunt him as he stared up at the trees and contemplated the life—the family—he used to have. Where before this work ethic constituted the foundations of a household economy that supported his wife and children, it now sustained a very different economy, with radically different temporal and interpersonal stakes. No longer

building a future for his kin in the conventional role of a husband and father, Jimmy's sense of futurity had been largely forestalled, rendering his present "frozen"—a temporal ossification brought about by the temporal elasticity of street homelessness, where the boredom never seems to pass. Stuck in a crystallized present that is bracketed by a painful past and a future foreclosed of meaningful possibility, psychoactive substances were the only thing that combated the deep ache of this boredom, that papered over the cracks of his intimate and structural losses. In particular, it was the anesthetic combination of alcohol and benzodiazepines that offered him the most effective short-term reprieve from his situation, killing time by transporting him, in his words, "somewhere else." Given that Jimmy remained in the park to consume these time-killing substances, this somewhere else was actually more of a *somewhen*, and—as the following chapters will show—a *somebody* else, the dissociative temporality of heavy intoxication providing a psychocorporeal "else-when" that temporarily released him from the burden of having to be himself.

In order to achieve this state though, Jimmy had to rely on the sharing economy. Almost every time someone went to buy alcohol, Jimmy would find himself with a fresh can of cider. As the day went on, other people's tobacco migrated into his empty pouch, coins found their way into his pockets, and little blue pills slipped themselves under his tongue. By the time I left the park in the late evening, Jimmy could barely stand, the eloquent, somewhat audacious charm of earlier turning into a boozy, wonky-legged slur.

The next morning, I arrived to find Jimmy visibly hungover, fiddling the last sprinklings of tobacco from his tin into a razor-thin cigarette. After lighting up, he hobbled over to one of the nearby dustbins and pulled a newspaper from the top of the pile before spreading it out on the ground. He pulled the change he had from his pocket and spread it across the crumpled page. Twenty pence short of the cheapest super-strength cider, he gestured towards the only other person within earshot, a man named Freddy who was sitting on the bench with his head sunk deep into his hands, also sleep-deprived and feeling the effects of the night before. Snapped into half-consciousness by Jimmy's request, Freddy fumbled around in his pocket and pulled out a ten pence piece before proffering it vaguely in Jimmy's direction. As Jimmy started to complain about the inadequate amount offered, I volunteered to make up the difference and spare Freddy from the upcoming tirade. Jimmy accepted my offer with what felt like feigned reluctance, his performance of politeness

somewhat mired by the fact that he and I both knew that there was extra change at the bottom of his rucksack.¹⁰

After buying his cider, Jimmy stuffed it into his bag. He let out a deep sigh and began to fidget, squeezing his fingernails, an anxious look spreading over his face. Most of the day and all of the night before was a total blank. The last thing he could recall was someone giving him a Valium. "I don't know what happened yesterday, but whatever happened it wasn't me!" exclaimed Jimmy in a disavowal of yesterday's agency, pointing to the cluster of trees across the road which he had woken beneath. Jimmy liked to describe regaining consciousness after a blackout as "waking up alive"—the absence of a retrievable past experienced as a kind of rebirth from the jaws of death. "Here we are again, eh? Same shit, different day. That's how it is in the park, the same thing over and over."

Initially, I assumed Jimmy's anxious fidgeting was because he had no memory of the previous night's happenings. Actually, he was more concerned with how he was going to get enough alcohol and benzos to make it through the coming days. Though the evening was a blank, he knew from his earlier memories of the day that he'd called in a number

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10. Freddy, in his disorientated and semicatatonic state, was in that moment an easy mark for someone with Jimmy's shrewdness for spotting an opportunity—this brief moment of exploitation laying bare the gray-zone logic outlined earlier on. Indeed, it is in the very meagerness of the amount—just twenty pence—that we can see how scarcity comes to share a bed with predatory opportunism. From an ethnographic perspective, I too had to negotiate this tension in the context of the park's moral economy. The learning curve was steep. At first, offering to buy rounds of drinks became a way of participating directly in the sharing economy, building trust, and establishing myself as a reciprocator. In typical novice fashion, however, my sometimes clumsy attempts to (quite literally) buy into this culture became a kind of overcorrection, insofar as I inadvertently marked myself out as someone who could be easily manipulated into buying drinks without the favor being returned. In short, I had focused too much on the economic part of the equation and not enough on the moral. Tony and Larry, at one point, physically stopped me from getting up to go to the shops, disciplining me for being an easy target and reminding me in no uncertain terms that letting people "take the piss" was not an option. From that moment onwards, the morality of refusal became just as important as the economics of sharing. Indeed, this ethical shift was an important step in my immersion and acceptance into the community, blurring the Geertzian insider/outsider boundary that marks the ethnographic research process.

of favors, cognizant that all forms of generosity in the park were intrinsically limited. “I’ll get a little bit here and there, y’know. But not enough. I need to get back to my spot—fuckin’ copper,” hissed Jimmy, lamenting his enforced displacement from his preferred begging location. What he needed was to reembed himself back into the spatiotemporality of the commuter rush—an exigency that was curtailed by the looming, almost spectral threat of the police officer who had displaced and sanctioned him. Caught in this multiple bind, Jimmy decided he would walk some miles north to Hackney, a neighboring borough that he reasoned would be outside the officer’s current beat, the risk of further sanction outweighing the slimmer pickings that Hackney would offer. In such a moment, Jimmy found himself caught between a number of overlapping and often contradictory demands. He could rely on the sharing economy, but only up to a point. While he had enough cash tucked away in his rucksack to stave off withdrawal for a few more days, there was not nearly enough to kill the repetitive cycles of bored time that lay ahead of him. Nor was there enough to escape the haunting memories that lay piled up as dead weight behind him.

In the second half of this book, I will explore the amnesiac states-of-being that emerge when Itchy Park’s residents find enough psychoactive substances to kill the time they are otherwise forced to dwell in and, in so doing, escape the triple lock of memory, self, and agency. I will draw on analytic tropes in phenomenology and psychoanalysis to demonstrate the ways in which memory can act as a conduit for ghostly forces that entrap the homeless in a form of existential crisis—a crisis that is solved through dissociative journeys into the drug-induced blackout. In these forthcoming chapters, I demonstrate how, for many of my interlocutors, the blackout is a time in which they “become somebody else.” In this way, I more broadly make the case that the ontological particulars of the blackout—in which the vacuum left by the dissolution of memory is filled by the emergence of a new concealed presence—can be operationalized as a prism through which to think through the complex entanglement between memory, loss, temporality, agency, and discipline within a historical moment defined by extremes of income inequality, social precarity, and political instability.

CHAPTER 4

The Blackout

Real Pain

Ash's hair has a mad scientist quality to it, shooting off in every direction like dendrites branching off from a nerve cell. With his ice blue eyes, thickly matted beard, and unkempt, often dirty clothes, he often resembles the archetype of what many people might picture in their heads when they conjure for themselves the image of the rough sleeper. After almost three decades of yo-yoing between precarious housing and prolonged periods of rough sleeping, Ash looks every day his sixty-four years, plus probably another ten on that. On the parts of his face uncovered by his beard, there are scars galore. From falls. From fights. From the cold. His fingertips, in particular, are dipped in frostbite's scabbing paint, rendering them numb in the heat and throbbing in the cold. When I first asked him about his experience of frostbite, I was ready for him to tell me about the terrible pain, if only because my father had recently experienced mild frostbite on his toes, describing it to me as the single worst pain he had ever endured. Ash's response didn't match my expectations: "The worst thing was I couldn't roll cigarettes—couldn't feel what I was doing, like they weren't my fingers, my thumbs. Baccy kept falling out everywhere. Did my fucking head in, really. But you get the hang of it after a while."

That it was his inability to properly roll cigarettes that he found most galling about the state of his hands struck me as revealing. Telling Ash I had expected him to make more of the physical pain, he replied: "These?"

he asked, almost incredulously, fanning both his hands out and, like one of those rotating showcases you see in a jeweler's, twisting them back and forth to give me a glimpse at the different lesions and blemishes: "These aren't pain. That's just fucking life out here. I know people who've lost more than fingertips. These are nothing. These aren't real pain." What, then, I asked, was real pain?

Ash began shaking his head. Initially, I feared I had said the wrong thing. Perhaps, on some level, I had. After all, the question—what is pain? (let alone real pain, whatever that might be)—has, to varying degrees, occupied many of history's most renowned thinkers. Indeed, given the sheer scale of theological, philosophical, sociological, psychological, and biomedical responses that exist in relation to this question, to thrust it so suddenly upon Ash in his still-hungover daze was probably more than a little unfair. And then came his reply: "Everything. Everything that's happened. That's real pain. Just being here. All of this," he said, motioning first towards himself, before flicking his wrist out towards Itchy Park and the city beyond.

What is it, then, that happened to Ash that has made everyday life so painful that severe frostbite was little more than a minor inconvenience? The attention I will pay to Ash's pain is not meant to replicate the fetishization of the "suffering subject" that Joel Robbins (2013) cautioned against as he pivoted towards what he calls an anthropology of the good. Indeed, while lady luck has rarely, if ever, shone on Ash, he is—like the rest of Itchy Park's residents—by no means a passive absorber of such forces, agency all but hollowed out. Broke but not broken, Ash's agential possibilities and demands are coterminous with his suffering in a way that renders even his most self-destructive actions—in this case drinking himself into oblivion—as sites of emancipatory potential. To understand why this is the case, we need to take a closer look at Ash's life history, in particular how certain traumas and troubles from his past continue to seep into his present and shape his possibilities-for-being.

By the time Ash came of working age in the mid-1970s, the winds of socioeconomic change were already starting to gather, the political mood ripening in anticipation of Thatcher's reign. The economy was tanking, inflation was high, labor unions were striking, and unemployment was climbing. Following in his father's footsteps, Ash had begun training as a bricklayer. However, a stagnating economy combined with a decline in the construction industry meant that Ash was rarely able to cobble together more than a few days' work at a time, often at a markdown rate. He remembers his father suffering an especially precipitous decline,

forced to take unskilled laboring jobs that paid him a fraction of what he would get for laying bricks. Ash was always at his most effusive when he spoke about his father's bricklaying skills.

He was an artist with it. People who don't know look at it and think—that's a piece of piss, I could do that. No problem. But they ain't got a clue what goes into it. Laying the muck. Getting the cut right. My old man had been working on sites since he was fourteen. He had the eye. It was a respected thing, y'know? Something to be proud of. Losing that hurt him.

With opportunities to practice his craft fading, Ash's father began to drink heavily, causing problems in his marriage. "They always used to have it out, but with the booze it got worse. I'd come round and she'd be wearing a ton of make-up to cover things up. I wasn't in the house then. My sister—she got the worst of it. She was still there."

At the same time that his father sunk into employment obsolescence, alcoholism, and domestic violence, Ash's life also began to change in response to these structural shifts. While his father dealt with his obsolescence by falling back on the bottle, Ash responded to his socioeconomic uncertainty by dealing small quantities of drugs along with other forms of hustling and petty crime, such as breaking into building sites to steal valuable materials like copper and lead. As opportunities for laboring work grew fewer and further between, Ash again began to follow in his father's footsteps, turning to alcohol and other substances to numb the pervasive boredom and social death of chronic unemployment. Soon enough, his increasingly public bouts of intoxication and petty drug dealing brought him to the police's attention, who regularly arrested him: "I was a marked man. All of them—they had in it for me. Still do. Fuckers. It's cos I stood up to them and fought back. They don't like that, you see. And didn't they let me know it." One police officer, Ash claimed, almost beat him to death in a holding cell before then threatening to sexually assault his sister who was, at the time, also known to the authorities for minor misdemeanors. At a certain point, Ash began to experience these police interventions, beatings, and threats as a kind of constant harassment, his frequent arrests, incarcerations, and spiraling alcoholism leading him to repeat yet another of his father's patterns—spousal abuse. Ash's ex-wife, Betsy, still lived fairly close to Itchy Park and, despite their troubled history, would still sometimes come by to check up on him, invariably turning up with a hot cup of tea in a takeaway cup whenever she did. A slight woman with freckles dotted across her cheeks, Betsy had a steely resilience to her that belied her diminutive stature. Though our meetings were typically the result of happenstance and thus mostly

brief, Betsy seemed pleased that Ash had someone to talk to, especially given that, by the time I met him, he had been displaced to the peripheries of the Itchy Park community owing to his violent tendencies and unpredictability while drunk.

One morning, Betsy had come to the park but had been unable to speak to Ash, finding him passed out in a nearby doorway, half inside his sleeping bag, empty cans of beer and cider littered around his comatose body. We bumped into each other not long after and, after accepting my invitation to talk, she disclosed some details about their history in a small café just off Whitechapel Road. Over a cup of tea, she told me how much Ash had idolized his father growing up, and in particular how his descent into precarious employment and alcoholism had deeply wounded Ash, gelding his own sense of future possibility. She recalled how frustrated he grew at his own situation, about how he saw himself as a failure—not just as an aspiring bricklayer, but as both a husband and a son. “He became so angry,” she told me, her eyes drifting towards the window behind me, gazing out into the past with the strange detachment that comes with excavating long-buried memories. Betsy went on to paint a complicated picture of Ash’s burgeoning rage, noting in particular the way it coalesced with the devout love he felt for his father. She told me how much he resented his father for the way he abused his mother, and yet never confronted him about it in spite of the anger it stirred up in him. “It was like he had a hold over him,” she told me. “I was the closest one to him—so I got the worst of it.” She paused, clasping the mug to warm her hands. “In the end it was just too much, I couldn’t keep doing it.”

As she discussed the limits of her endurance with regards to Ash’s escalating levels of abusive behavior, she often added caveats about the social and economic difficulties of the era. “Things were tough back then... for everybody,” she repeated on a number of occasions, each reiteration working to affirm the way that socioeconomic disadvantage can seep into the most intimate spaces, establishing the conditions for harrowing forms of gendered abuse. Betsy, it should be said, was not saying this to free Ash from the responsibility of the emotional and physical violence he inflicted on her. Indeed, she also asserted that these harsh conditions were no excuse. However, in the same breath she also left a “*but...*” hanging at the end of the sentence. She left this “*but...*” unfinished, letting the ellipsis trail off into silence as she began to shift her gaze, washing away whatever unformed words were impending along the tip of her tongue with a gulp of her tea. She smiled across the table, a doleful smile: “We

hurt the ones we love, don't we?" In Betsy and Ash's marriage, the tension between hurt and love had clearly reached unbearable levels, manifest in the recurring cycles of intimate abuse that would eventually dissolve their relationship and see Ash fall into homelessness. And yet, here Betsy was, some thirty years later, still dropping into Itchy Park with her takeaway cups of tea to check up on her indigent, chronically intoxicated ex-husband. I felt compelled to ask her: after all he had put her through, why did she still feel the need to check up on him? "Because," she said, after a contemplative breath, "after the accident I'm the only person he has left." She took another sip from her mug. "Whatever he's done, he's gone through enough."

Letting Go

The accident concerned the car crash that claimed the lives of Ash's mother, father, and sister. According to the coroner's report, Ash's father—who was driving the car at the time of the collision—had significant quantities of alcohol in his system. Whether this was residual alcohol in his bloodstream from his drinking the night before, or whether he was consciously impaired when he decided to get behind the wheel was never cleared up. Betsy though, knowing the family as she did, suspected the latter—telling me that by that point in time, Ash's father's alcoholism had progressed to the point where the first thing he did in the morning was pour himself a drink just to keep his hands steady: "He started when he got out of bed and finished when his head hit the pillow. If he was awake, he was drunk."

Already homeless, the brutality and suddenness of this loss radically compounded Ash's sense of despair and isolation, accelerating his alcoholism and plunging him deeper into cycles of self-destruction and temporal erasure, each violent drinking binge or blackout a honeytrap for punitive forms of policing and carceral governance. For over a year after the accident, Ash fell off the map completely. Betsy presumed him dead, either from drinking himself to death or something more precise (Ash having regularly threatened suicide over the course of their marriage). In fact, when she did finally see him again after this gap, she didn't recognize him at first, his years of living rough drastically transforming his appearance: "I remember thinking that he'd aged a decade being out there, doing what he was doing. Honestly, I couldn't believe it, I was shocked—it was like I was looking at a completely different person."

Something about seeing time's arrow work so mercilessly upon her former husband defused whatever residual anger might have still been lingering within her. She described this moment as a kind of epiphany, of how in coming face-to-face with Ash's continued suffering and grief, she could finally "let go" of the acrimony that had defined the latter years of their marriage. For Betsy, this "letting go" did not mean getting back together with Ash, nor did it mean exculpating him for the way he had treated her. What it did mean, though, was that Betsy was able to cultivate a form of forgiveness. Crucially, this was not forgiveness as some kind of interior regime of self-discipline, a way to auto-repair the wounds of the soul and "move on." As Hannah Arendt (1998) points out, forgiveness—along with promising—is a uniquely human activity, one that is grounded in the singular plurality of the other (Nancy 2000). Though she deploys this notion of plurality to relocate forgiveness within the realm of the political—in particular as it pertains to repair and reconciliation in the aftermath of political violence—her emphasis on the centrality of the other in processes of forgiving is applicable to Betsy. Indeed, no one could have blamed Betsy had she chosen to shut the door on Ash completely, banishing him from mind and thought and letting him recede into the palimpsest of memory. Nor could she have been blamed for going to the police and pressing charges against him. And yet, Betsy instead chose a particular kind of forgiveness, manifest in the occasional checkup and delivery of a hot drink.

This was forgiveness not as a means of purifying the soul or "getting right" with God, as in certain Christian contexts of salvation. Nor was it about "getting right" with herself, as in the Foucauldian spirit of self-care work. Rather, Betsy's checkups and cups of tea constituted a kind of everyday forgiveness. Here, I use the term not in the sense of happening every single day (which they did not), but rather to hint at the way in which these small acts of recognition were woven into the fabric of ordinary life, notably as moments of ethical potentiality. These moments hinge upon a temporality of remembrance and repair, markedly different from the temporality of erasure that Ash had become subsumed within. Which is not to say that they were somehow grand gestures or huge acts of self-sacrifice or generosity. Nor were they even particularly frequent, Betsy sometimes going weeks between checkups.

I don't plan when I go and see him. I'll be doing something round the house, cleaning up, making lunch or something, and he'll pop into my head, for some reason. And so I'll think—okay, I'll go for a walk later on or tomorrow or whatever and see how he's doing. Bring him a cup of tea. Or

just leave it next to him! Even after all this time I still remember how he takes it. Two sugars.

Ash, then, even though he is no longer a central figure in Betsy's life, remains a kind of latent half-presence, prone to unexpectedly "popping up" and rising briefly above the waves of thought that mesh with the ordinary rhythms and practices of her daily life—doing the dishes, preparing food, going about the house, etc. The question, then, is what makes Betsy's bringing of the tea a form of everyday forgiveness—a unique kind of ethical activity—and not just an act of kindness? After all, strangers—whether out of pity or piety—buy and deliver hot drinks for the homeless every day, Ash being no exception. The difference, I contend, lies in the unique singularity of their interpersonal history—something we can explore more acutely through the notion of interruption, in particular with regards to those moments where Ash "pops" into her head and remakes her future plans.

Interruptions

In a recent paper, Rasmus Dyring and Lone Grøn (2022) examine the concept of interruption in the context of a Danish dementia ward. One of the residents, Ellen, finds a toy cat and adopts it as her own. She calls it the Little One and takes it upon herself to care for it, furious that someone could have ever abandoned such a small and helpless creature. Ellen allows the Little One to sleep in her bed. She begins to carry it with her everywhere. Her daughter, following her mother's lead, buys the Little One a crib, which Ellen pushes down the hallway, the high-pitched squeaking of the crib's legs dragging along the hallway floors causing many of the other residents to shout and complain about the noise. Distancing themselves from neuronormative explanations that would render Ellen's relationship with the Little One as delusional or else indexing a declining grip on reality, the authors instead focus on what they describe as the strange intimacy of the connection, articulating the Little One's discovery and subsequent care as an "ontological event" that changes the way Ellen inhabits the institutional space-time of the dementia ward and relates to others within it (2022: 5). They go about this by offering a phenomenology of interruption.

For Dyring and Grøn, interruptions can be thought of as experiential openings that disclose planes of undetermined potentiality and ethical creativity. In Ellen's case, the discovery of the Little One emerged as

an interval of ethical possibility that became pluralized and distributed across the community of care that defined the ward. It is plural because Ellen's ethical impulse to care for the Little One is, despite its common "origin," markedly different from the ethical demands that occupy her daughter. Indeed, her daughter buys the crib not because she considers the Little One to be a real cat, but because she is attuned to her mother's being-in-the-world and understands that the Little One's aliveness is coeval with this reality. Likewise, while the ward's caregivers initially support Ellen's adoption of the Little One, they eventually decide to remove it when her crib-dragging starts to bother the other residents, this removal part of a broader ethical imperative to coax her back into the broader relational folds of the ward, which they successfully do. As the authors argue, the removal of the Little One and Ellen's subsequent assimilation into a new group of women is also constituted by a kind of interruption, one "that gathers a web of relations that are settled only tentatively and for the time being" (2022: 20).

My claim, then, is that Dyring and Grøn's concept of interruption—understood here as an interval of ethical potentiality—can help us better understand what is happening when Betsy is going about the house and Ash just happens to "pop" into her head. Here, Ash, manifesting as an unexpected thought, flares into Betsy's consciousness and quite literally interrupts the flow of her daily existence, causing her to momentarily pause, reflect, and then resolve to go looking for him with a cup of tea made just the way she knows he likes it—with milk and two sugars. Here, there are clear conceptual similarities to Zigon's (2007) notion of "moral breakdown," in which moments of crisis (big and small) in everyday life become the locus of ethical activity insofar as people are forced to confront and recalibrate the situations (and people) that have thrown them into crisis and discomfort. Given that Dyring, Grøn, and Zigon are proponents of the critical phenomenological tradition, this conceptual similarity is not surprising. The difference, perhaps, is at the level of scale. Where something like the violence that Ash directed towards Betsy which eventually caused her to leave him, expel him from their flat, and later divorce him can be thought of as a form of moral breakdown in Zigon's sense, the momentary intrusion of Ash into her thoughts some thirty years down the line is, I think, better articulated through Dyring and Grøn's notion of interruption. In both models, the ethical emerges as a site of otherwise activity, a moment where alternative possibilities for being-in-the-world are imagined and enacted.

Indeed, it is perhaps the case that any interruption—by its very nature as a site of human potentiality—has the intrinsic capacity to morph and mutate into a full-blown rupture closer in shape and scale to the Zigonian concept of moral breakdown. Perhaps the first day that Betsy ran into Ash after years in the wilderness, unable to recognize him, was closer in scale to a breakdown. That she recalls this moment as epiphanic suggests as much, the shock and disbelief of seeing Ash in such a sorry state sufficiently destabilizing for her to begin letting go of any residual anger and entertain the ethical possibility of forgiveness. In this regard, if the incipient possibility of Betsy's forgiveness emerged in a moment of breakdown, this potentiality has since been perpetuated, enacted, and maintained through ongoing and yet still totally unexpected moments of everyday interruption. In Betsy's case, thoughts of Ash arrive unannounced, like bubbles of primordial air erupting from the ocean floor, halting her in her tracks, resurfacing her past, and reorienting her future in a different direction. Interruptions such as these, then, can be thought of as mood-changing events, imbuing the everyday with new existential and thus ethical possibilities. Leaving her house, ordering a cup of tea at the local café, pouring in the milk, tipping in two heaped spoons of sugar, stirring them in, and then finding Ash to check up on him and give him the milky, sweet tea—these actions are about as mundane as they come. And yet they retain the vestige of the moral revelation that struck Betsy when she ran into Ash that day and realized, in spite of all the pain she had endured at his hands, that she was the only person he had left in the world.

The buying, making, and delivering of tea points to the kind “ordinary” transcendence identified by Cheryl Mattingly (2014) in her discussion of the moral dynamics of love and friendship among low-income African American families caring for chronically ill and disabled children. Much as the family in Mattingly's ethnography rediscover new moral boundaries of care and forgiveness in the wake of a tragic accident that involved a child scalding the lower half of his face with bacon fat (2014: 82), Betsy also discovered a different modality of being together with Ash—a way for her to remain connected and caring, but without being controlled and dominated. Making the tea the way Ash liked it, we might think of this not as strange intimacy, as in Ellen's relationship to the Little One, but maybe something closer to estranged intimacy, to the extent that the tea—in its very creation and subsequent passing between bodies—manages to act up close while also maintaining a certain level of distance. After all, when Betsy drops off the tea, she doesn't bring her

own to share with him, as they would have done when they were married. And often, as in the day she and I bumped into each other, Ash is not always conscious in its reception—it is just there, placed next to him for when he finally wakes up from whatever alcoholic coma he has induced himself into. In this respect, the tea is not merely a token of forgiveness, but an elemental component in forgiveness as a lived, interpersonal process that unfolds in the world. In this case, the tea not only mediates the tension between the distance of estrangement and the proximity of intimacy; it speaks to the inimitable singularity of their relationship—differentiating that cup of tea from any and all others that might await Ash on the other side of his slumbers. They remain estranged, but they are not strangers.

In point of fact, after Betsy and I said our goodbyes at the café, I headed back towards Itchy Park, finding Ash on a bench with a can of super-strength lager in his hand. By his feet was an empty Styrofoam cup. Though I already knew that Betsy had dropped it off to him, I wanted to know whether or not he knew. “Tea for breakfast?” I asked him, gesturing towards the cup. “Betsy must’ve left it for me,” he replied. I continued to play dumb, asking how he knew, noting that people must leave him hot drinks all the time. “It’s sweet,” he replied, barely missing a beat. “Randomers,” he continued, “don’t bother with sugar. Or they leave a packet next to it.” In this moment, where the sweetness on his tongue spoke simultaneously to Betsy’s presence and absence, we can begin to see how the tea, in its estranged intimacy, works as a form of interruption. Just as Ash “pops” into Betsy’s head, so too does Betsy “pop” into Ash’s world, either in person or else by sweetened proxy. Here, as one person’s interruption flows into the other’s, the stakes and meanings contained within the interruption change in accordance with this flow. Consider Ash’s reaction to the cup of tea that morning, knowing that it was from Betsy: “I don’t know what I ever did to deserve her. I don’t know why she does it—she’s a fucking saint. The shit I put her through. She should want me dead. Instead she brings me tea. Part of me wishes she’d just stop coming.”

This commingling of gratitude, shame, inadequacy, and incredulity over Betsy’s continued presence in his life, emergent and fleeting though it was, was commonplace after her visits. Sometimes, Ash confessed to me, on the rare occasions that he managed to see her coming from down the road, he would pretend to be passed out to avoid having to talk to her, her continued recognition and forgiveness shoring up an unbearable sense of guilt, loss, and undeservingness. Quite literally, he couldn’t face

her. Still, though, the tea would always be sitting there, even after she left. This alone was enough to reinfect the already open wounds that dogged him each day, the interruption initiated by the sweetened tea intense enough to dilate into something more like a rupture of self, the tragic memories of his past—his professional failures, his failed marriage, his deceased family—flooding over him as though bursting through the crack in a dam. Here, we can see how processes of everyday forgiveness, in their intrinsically intersubjective and interruptive constitution, can simultaneously engender repair and rupture. In Betsy's case, the ethical activity of checking up on Ash and bringing him the tea, even though it is always already rooted in the singularity of their shared past, is predominantly future-orientated, insofar as it readjusts her mood towards the pursuit of something not yet done, a latent and ultimately reparative possibility. By the time this "plane of interruption" (to borrow from Dyring and Grøn) arrives at Ash's feet, there is a temporal shift in how this ethical potentiality is received and experienced. Here, it is the past, rather than the future, that predominates, drowning Ash in memories that threaten the integrity of his existential presence.

This is not to say that Ash was not grateful for Betsy's continued existence in his life, nor that he somehow resented her for her saint-like capacity for forgiveness. Indeed, for the short duration of her checkups, it was always noticeable the way that Ash's mood shifted and became more buoyant. He smiled and laughed more. There was a softening of his voice. He didn't swear as much. He even refused to drink when she was around, shuffling any open cans to one side and clumsily hiding them behind his backpack, like a teenager shoving his dirty laundry under the bed at the sign of his mother entering the room. This buoyancy was always short-lived, though, Ash's mood deflating the moment she left, such that he would immediately begin to accelerate his drinking, as though making up for the brief interval of sobriety that marked each of her visits. "That's why I wish she wouldn't keep coming—it's too much to handle, seeing her. Things are bad enough already—seeing her just brings even more back...I...I just can't take it, you know—got to block it all out." At this point, as memories of loss and pain (inflicted as well as endured) begin to colonize his thoughts, his already unsteady sense of self begins to wobble, interrupted by a pervasive sense of crisis that threatens to consume the coherency of his being-here. And so, he drinks, and continues to drink until the memories no longer matter, ushering in an even more radical interruption of self—the blackout.

The Blackout: A Particular Dissociation

First studied in clinical settings by Elvin Jellinek in 1946, the blackout was an integral part of his disease model of alcoholism, a theory that rapidly accelerated the medicalization of drunkenness and, by extension, addiction in general. Despite significant criticism (Fingarette 1988; Kumar et al. 2005; Leggio et al. 2009; Marlatt and Donovan 1985; Peele 1998; Vaillant and Milofsky 1982) for its narrow sample of handpicked Alcoholics Anonymous members and reductive conclusions about the chronological phases of alcoholism, its legacy continues to reverberate through contemporary biomedical approaches to addiction, revealing itself in modern ideologies of phasing and control loss, whereby the alcohol or drug user stumbles from one increasingly dire stage to the next.

As alluded to in the introductory chapter, it is a common misconception that blacking out is akin to the loss of consciousness. Rather than losing consciousness, a person in the midst of a blackout is, biologically speaking, undergoing specific neurological impairments that shut down the memory-storing faculties of the prefrontal lobe, the area of the brain located at the front of the cerebral cortex (Levin 1995; Rose and Grant 2010). While much of the brain continues to function as normal, the experiences that constitute the immediate past are not recorded into memory. In this regard, the blackout belongs to the category of a dissociative experience. From the Latin—*dissociatus*—meaning to sever a connection, dissociation in contemporary thought has come to refer to forms of experience that involve shifts in the normal functioning of memory, perception, and identity.

Dissociative experiences form a rather broad church, encompassing banal everyday phenomena, such as “highway hypnosis,” all the way through to more sustained and problematic forms of dissociation, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Dissociation has long been an object of interest spanning disciplinary boundaries, in particular across the psychiatric, neurological, and social sciences. While there have been growing conversations between the psychiatric and neurological fields on the matter, interdisciplinary dialogues between these more clinically minded domains and disciplines such as anthropology have been less productive. Loosely stated, the clinical model conceives of dissociation as rooted in a person’s internal world, articulated primarily in terms of their psychological and neurological dynamics—in particular as they relate to traumatic events. In this model, the dissociative episode—experienced psychologically—is assumed to emerge as an adaptive response

to a deeper neurological trigger. And so, trauma and other experiences that create major psychological stress are seen as both triggers and causes for the emergence of dissociation, thereby cementing its function as an adaptive mechanism. The anthropological model, conversely, tends to locate dissociation in its local patterns of sociocultural meaning and personhood—often as a ritualized response to some kind of broader social or personal state change.

For the most part, the clinical-psychiatric paradigm tends to pass over explanations that might pertain to the social, cultural, or indeed political meaning of the episode. In parallel terms, most anthropological explorations of dissociation tend to emphasize the relational and discursive elements of dissociation while neglecting or ignoring the influence of internal mechanisms, be they psychic or neurological. Concerned that this lack of interdisciplinary dialogue risks impoverishing our understanding of dissociative phenomena, Rebecca Seligman and Laurence Kirmayer (2008) have, through an exhaustive review of the relevant literature, argued that the dichotomy between these two models is false. Rather than conceptualizing dissociative modes-of-consciousness as separate from social positioning, they argue both are locked in a dynamic equilibrium. In their model, dissociation emerges at the intersection of multiple drives that simultaneously encompass the internal and the external. As such, they call for an integrated approach that can account for both meaning and mechanism.

For example, drawing on her work among Afro-Brazilians who participate in the Candomblé religion, Seligman (2014) explores the way in which racialized poverty, gendered violence, personal trauma, and spiritual forces intersect to shape dissociative experiences of spirit mediumship within ecstatic ritual arenas. Here, the possession of people (often women and gay men) by nonhuman agents is interpreted within broader matrices of cosmological meaning and personal suffering. Distinctly nonpathological, the abduction of their bodies and selves by Candomblé spirits is seen as spiritually generative, opening up a novel social arena in which the compound trauma of personal suffering and socioeconomic marginalization can be negotiated safely with communal support, from fellow mediums and devotees alike. Crucially, though, Seligman also emphasizes how the Candomblé meaning system and its divine pantheon intersects with psychophysiological processes.

Drawing on results drawn from cardiac autonomic regulation and electrocardiogram data, Seligman makes the case that the capacity for spirit mediumship, as a unique form of culturally-attuned embodiment

that carries psychotherapeutic health benefits, is also connected to the workings of the autonomic nervous system—the control system that regulates unconscious bodily processes, such as blood pressure or breathing. In this way, Seligman connects the dissociative experience of spirit mediation to the prevailing clinical paradigm that views extreme stress, be it physical or emotional, as having a particular effect on the autonomic nervous system. While acute stress can lead to what is often termed “hyperarousal”—as in fight or flight—clinicians have also observed the suppression of autonomic arousal, especially among patients who had gone through some kind of major traumatic event. In these cases, then, the experience—or indeed the memory—of trauma can lead to a quashing of emotional and existential sensitivity, taking a person “out of their body” in such a way as to create a protective distance between self and reality. It is this internal psychophysiological mechanism, Seligman suggests, that might make certain people, when taken in concert with their broader sociocultural environment, especially fitting candidates for Candomblé spirit mediumship.

What, then, does the meaning-mechanism dynamic look like in the context of the blackout? What would comprise an integrated approach towards this phenomenon? Let us first consider the mechanism.

The Mechanism

As briefly mentioned above, a blackout is brought on when ingested chemicals affect the neurochemistry of the brain, in particular the frontal lobe—the part of the brain thought to play a pivotal role in the formation, maintenance, and retrieval of memory (and long-term memory in particular). The drugs most associated with memory loss are those that increase the efficiency of synaptic transmission of the neurotransmitter GABA¹ by acting on its receptors (most notably alcohol, barbiturates, and benzodiazepines), sparking a progressive reduction in inhibitory neurotransmission in the hippocampus—the brain structure that is responsible for memory (Tsai and Coyle 1998; Wetherill and Fromme 2011; Wetherill et al. 2013). Although not GABA drugs, opiates such as heroin suppress the locus coeruleus, the primary producer of norepinephrine—a

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1. Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA) is a primary inhibitory neurotransmitter in the brain that reduces neuronal excitability, meaning it helps to calm the brain and prevent overactivity.

neurotransmitter that, among other things, plays an important part in the brain's ability to store and retain information (see Slotkin, Seidler, and Yanai 2003). In Itchy Park, the vast majority were heavy polydrug users, often mixing alcohol and other substances on a daily basis. The other substances they used were contingent on personal preference as well as availability and price. Jimmy preferred to mix alcohol with benzodiazepines. For Tony, Larry, and Max, opioids were their first choice, buttressed with liberal doses of alcohol and cannabis. Many others were also taking psychiatric medications for their various co-occurring mental health diagnoses. Neurochemically speaking, simultaneously taking two or more different substances can create new chemical combinations within the body, mutually transforming the pharmacokinetics of each substance involved.² Certain substances, in other words, can either boost or suppress the effects of others when taken in tandem. While the effects can often be unpredictable (especially when involving illegal drugs that originate from unregulated, heavily adulterated supply chains), people who combine multiple drugs, whether concurrently or in a particular sequence, do so because they are consciously trying to induce, augment, or mediate certain effects or sensations.

Max, for example, found that combining alcohol with methadone created mild feelings of euphoria that would otherwise have remained blocked by methadone's suppressive molecular properties. Speedballing—the simultaneous ingestion of heroin and crack cocaine, either through sniffing or injection—was also common in Itchy Park, the dynamic interplay between heroin-induced anesthesia and the cocaine rush inducing a kind of seesaw subjectivity that pendulated them between analgesic oblivion and psychostimulated rapture. For Jimmy, while he originally stumbled upon the benzodiazepines-alcohol mix as a way to mimic the analgesic properties of the prescription opioids he eventually lost access to, the particular cocktail would eventually emerge as a preference in its own right (even though he still used opiates from time to time), in particular because of the way it helped him forget himself, his past, and his current situation. Indeed, for those seeking amnesiac escape, there are few combinations more potent than alcohol and benzodiazepines. This is because the two drugs chemically interact in a way that mutually increases the bioavailability of the other, meaning that the effects of both are amplified simultaneously. Given that both substances

2. The branch of pharmacology that studies the ways in which the human body absorbs, distributes, metabolizes and excretes drugs.

increase GABA uptake, their combined usage drastically increases the likelihood that the person will slip into a blackout state. While neither Jimmy nor any other of the park's residents possessed much, if any, specialist knowledge of the molecular pharmacokinetics of polydrug use, their sensorial knowledge was second to none. Theirs was a knowledge established through years of first-hand experience—of trial, error, and experimentation—all of which points to the way in which intoxicated subjectivities, along with the neurological mechanisms that underpin them, are always mutually enmeshed in complex configurations of sensory experience, sociocultural circumstance, and interpersonal exigency.

The Itchy Park blackout—as a particular kind of dissociative subjectivity—is thus held together in its own configuration, one that is unique to the structural and existential conditions that mediate life within its bounds. The neurological mechanism, as outlined above, is just one node in this configuration. An integrated approach to the blackout, then, must find ways to marry neurological explanations with sociocultural determinants and existential processes of self-making and transformation. Such a model hinges on the premise that self-making (and unmaking) is a continuous and open-ended process that sees mood, emotion, cognition, environment, spatiotemporality, and neurobiology as intractably entangled within one another.

As we shift our attention from mechanism to meaning, there exists a central pivot that straddles both sides of the dialectic: *memory*. As will become clear, the manifold processes of memory—including its erasure—offer a unique prism through which to consider the central question at the heart of this study: what does it mean to black out and become somebody else? Indeed, this is a question that Ash reckons with each time he embarks on one of his alcoholic binges.

The Meaning: Memory and Metamorphosis

Where does memory come into all of this? As Betsy's caffeinated dropoffs have illustrated, she and Ash are both caught up in the complex tension between remembrance and forgetting. Betsy is ultimately unable to forget Ash, and yet the very symbol of her forgiveness—the sweet tea—is itself a reminder that forces Ash to confront his past in such a way that, in the end, its sheer weight on his memory is simply too much to bear, giving way to the chemical forgetting of his blackout drinking, where he feels taken over by alien forces. In the Candomblé tradition,

as in other religious contexts that incorporate spirit mediumship, the experience of possession trance involves the surrendering of agency to alien forces that lie beyond the self. These forces are not uniform, their shape and power ranging tremendously across different cultural settings and historical epochs. They can be benevolent deities, malevolent demons, ancestral ghosts, or animal spirits—to name just a few. Further, the effects these forces have on people, as well as the social contexts from which they emerge, are not stable. Rather, they twist and transmogrify in dynamic response to the ever-changing conditions of a given place in a given time. Faced with this heterogeneity, anthropologists have deployed a similarly diverse range of theoretical paradigms aimed at unpacking this slippery human phenomenon. It is slippery because possession, true to its radical alterity, consistently seems to render our vocabulary inadequate when we encounter such experiences. Take this passage, written by Mattijs van de Port after witnessing a young girl suddenly fall into possessive trance during a Candomblé ceremony:

A young girl, who had been chatting and giggling with a friend as if this was a schoolyard rather than a place of worship, all of a sudden fell into a rigorous spasm, and rolled over the dance floor, stiff as a broomstick. She was covered with a white sheet and for over an hour lay motionless on the floor ... I felt nervous. I was overwhelmed by the sight of behavior I could only interpret as a complete lack of self-control. And I was scared that I too would fall to the floor, but with no narrative other than “hysteria” to make sense of it. It was only a sense of professionalism that kept me from wrestling my way back to the exit. I recall that I crossed my arms over my chest. I tried to dissociate myself from the scene by rummaging in my rucksack to look for nothing in particular. I urged myself to breath deeply and calmly. I told myself that I do not believe in spirits ... Language was to no avail here. It would be fairer to say that imagination itself was lacking. (van de Port 2005: 150–51)

Van de Port’s observations, and in particular his disquietude in the face of the girl’s state-of-being despite his “disbelief” in spirits, place him in a lineage of anthropologists who, faced with the visceral reality of watching another human being slip into a possessive trance, suddenly found their own conceptual categories unfit for purpose. Something about the intensity of possession and its sheer incommensurability with Western notions of agency, control, and personhood—these qualities

resist linguistic signification. Of course, this incommensurability has not stopped anthropologists from trying to unravel this particular mystery. While there is a general consensus that the impenetrability of possession's psycho-bodily form precludes any kind of totalizing explanation, there are certain aspects of possession that give it definitional coherency, which is to say that we seem to know it when we see it. Perhaps the most fundamental aspect is the notion—self-evident though it may seem—that during possession one is no longer oneself. A person's agency has been renounced, invaded, or hijacked by an alien agency. The arrival of this nonself force can be marked in multiple ways, though typically it results in a person acting in a way that does not conform to normative social behavior: speaking in tongues, nonvolitional bodily movements such as spasms, sudden catatonia, uncontrollable bodily arousal, unfettered sexuality, bursts of extreme profanity, etc.

Another commonly reported aspect is that the possessed individual is unable to remember anything that happened during the episode. Often described in terms of “post-possession amnesia,” this memory lapse has become a central question for certain anthropologists interested in the topic, in particular for the way these “time out” periods point to the complex ethical and ideological underpinnings of the possession state. In some cases, the therapeutic efficacy and spiritual legitimacy of the possession ritual is contingent on the person achieving the amnesiac role. We see this in the *dang-ki* healing ceremony, a form of Chinese spirit mediumship found across Southeast Asia. In these ceremonies, where people are taken over by deities so as to provide help and advice to devotees, forgetting is not an option; rather, it is a moral imperative that gives rise to the very possibility of healing (Chan 2006; Lee 2016). Other anthropologists, such as Ruth and Seth Leacock (1975), have argued that post-possession amnesia carries an ideological function. Following interviews where mediums seemed to contradict themselves regarding their recall of past events, the Leacocks claim that their declared memory loss was a carefully cultivated fiction, endowing the trance state with a secretive power that reified hierarchies—moral and structural—between themselves and devotees.

This tension between suspicion and curiosity speaks to broader methodological problems when it comes to articulating the phenomenology of possession, with many ethnographers struggling to grapple with the social taboos that often encompass just talking about it. In any case, the question as to whether post-possession amnesia is an empirical reality or a socially constructed one is not a rabbit hole I wish to go down at this

point. Indeed, the binary nature of this question is, if anything, likely to be a false one—the neurocognitive faculties involved in memory and forgetting having been shown to be locked in dynamic interaction with a person's sociocultural, affective, and physical environment (Barsalou 2008, 2016; Hacking 1986, 1999). Processes of forgetting—whether socioculturally driven, neurocognitively driven, or (as is more likely) a dynamic combination of both—are inexorably tangled up in the dissociative rough-and-tumble of the possessive state—a state where, for all intents and purposes, the person involved loses their self and becomes other. This is important because it helps to establish a meaningful and enduring link between memory (loss) and subjective transformation in the context of dissociative experience.

In dissociation, then, we can see a profound form of severance or rupture in normative patterns of self-experience, temporality, and interaction. Here, as we consider where the drug-induced blackout fits into all this, a brief circling back to Latin proves illuminating. *Dissociare*, broken down into its constituent parts, can be literally translated as to be set apart (*dis-*) from society (*sociare*). In ecstatic ritual contexts where people dissociate through spirit possession, such as in the Candomblé tradition, this *disjoining* from the normative yoke of everyday sociality is simultaneously marked by a *conjoining* with the divine pantheon, during which they act in ways that accord with the personalities and character traits of the deities that possess them. Set apart from their normal social context, roles, and interrelationships, this new state-of-being not only fostered a transformational identity that could displace the trauma that otherwise blighted their everyday lives, but it also bolstered their role as mediums and thus embedded them deeper within their religious community. In this way, the simultaneous disjoining from self and society can perhaps be thought of as a kind of elision, each dissociation flowing seamlessly into a consociation with new beings—thus opening up the person to new possibilities for healing. As already discussed, it is commonplace for the vanquishing of memory to be considered integral to possession's therapeutic efficacy, a necessary lacuna in the self that ushers in the arrival of nonself agents. Here, then, it is the loss of memory that corroborates the loss of self, retroactively confirming the becoming Other that marks possession as a particular state-of-being. Under such conditions, these ritualized contexts allow for a generative tension between the everyday social order (the world of humans) and that which exists outside of it (the world of spirits), situating the possessed individual in a web of meaning that articulates and legitimizes that experience in positive terms.

In contemporary Euro-American contexts where the therapeutic infrastructure is grounded overwhelmingly in psychomedical paradigms, the interplay between the social center and its peripheries—to borrow Ellen Corin’s (2007) terminology—plays to the beat of a different drum. Here, the tension between normative and nonnormative tends to err on the side of the negative rather than the socially generative. In other words, dissociative states that involve ruptures in self, identity, and memory—even when viewed as adaptive—are predominantly categorized in terms of psychopathology. In large part, this is because dissociation is conceived as umbilically linked to traumatic events that involve the self being degraded or punctured in some way—such as through extreme violence or other forms of interpersonal abuse. Accordingly, dissociative experience is treated as a proxy for this maltreatment of self, in the process becoming a byword for existential suffering. Broadly speaking, dissociation is understood as somehow interfering or disrupting normal healthy functioning, propelling the sufferer into states-of-being that, if not actively distressing, are intrinsically dysfunctional—severing the normative relation between self and social world. The dissociated, in other words, do not *fit in* with normative Euro-American conceptions of the autonomous, cohesive, responsible self. In fact, more than just ill-fitting, those who slip into dissociative states actively *violate* and thus threaten normative categories of personhood—thereby becoming subject to ongoing forms of moral evaluation and social control that reflect a deeper cultural anxiety towards those deemed too “mad, bad, and dangerous” to participate in normal everyday life.

Throughout Western history, the question of who belongs under the mad-and-the-bad’s umbrella has been subject to constant change, ever-responsive to shifts in cultural ideology and societal attitude. Homosexuality in the United Kingdom, for example, has undergone significant shifts, moving from a criminalized psychopathology to an identifiable—albeit still heavily marginalized—subculture. The mentally ill, despite increasing attempts by activists and patients alike to destigmatize the conditions from which they suffer, have long been huddled under this umbrella too—especially those who exhibit psychotic symptoms. Alongside them we can include drug users, who enjoy a double-edged pathologization—occupying at once criminal and psychopathological categories. In this regard, it should come as no surprise that people experiencing homelessness (a disproportionate number of whom suffer from severe mental health issues) who use alcohol and drugs to induce in

themselves dissociative states find themselves wedged deep into pathological categories.

Compared to post-possession amnesia—where the disjuncture of memory and self opens up novel, restorative forms of interconnectivity with the cosmological beyond—the dissociative amnesia of the blackout is regularly invoked by clinicians as evidence of addiction’s vicious circularity. Indeed, while some clinicians will acknowledge blacking out as an adaptive coping mechanism in the short term, it continues to be perceived as maladaptive in the long run, thereby laminating a model of chronic psychiatric victimhood onto such experiences. This, in accordance with Ian Hacking’s (1995) model of “biolooping,” creates a feedback cycle that ultimately leads users to assess their own dissociative episodes as abnormal and thus self-destructive, cementing the blackout as a pathological by-product of their addictions. This account of the blackout is, I contend, impoverishing in its reductionism. This is because it fails to appreciate how the neurophysiological and psychological mechanisms that underpin the blackout might emerge in dynamic interplay with a person’s social, political, and material conditions. Applying these ideas to Itchy Park, the clinical paradigm can be said to lack a sense of how the metamorphosis intrinsic to blacking out is imbricated in the unique existential exigencies of the homeless lifeworld—in particular the haunting spatiotemporality of deep boredom and the sense of stuckness that such a mood engenders.

I have chosen the word metamorphosis because what the people I knew experienced could not be reduced to a pathological glitch in their neurological circuitry. Rather, it constituted a radical transformation in their embodied experience of self and other, a turning inside out of their very being-in-the-world. Many described this metamorphosis in terms of “becoming somebody else.” In this way, the blackout as articulated by my interlocutors appeared to enjoy an experiential status approximate to the forms of spirit possession discussed earlier. The *somebody else*, in other words, that emerged from within the blackout was frequently experienced as an external, labile force—arriving under the cloak of chemical oblivion to hijack their bodies, their consciousness, and their agency.

At first glance, it would be all too easy to dismiss this sentiment as the kind of thing that drug users and alcoholics are prone to saying when trying to vacate responsibility for their intoxicated behavior, especially if such actions proved shameful or violent. This, though, would be a mistake. For one, this would be to slip into one of the most essentializing discourses of the lived experience of addiction—namely that the

substance user is chronically mendacious: a pathological liar who will go out of their way to avoid accountability for the damage they inflict on those around them, themselves included.³ This is not to say that people under the influence of intoxicants do not carry out damaging and self-destructive acts. They undoubtedly do. Nor is it to say that the things people do while under the influence—such as drunk-driving or spousal abuse—should not have serious consequences, legal and otherwise. Certainly, they should. However, to so dismiss all those who chemically induce dissociative states is not only lazy, but also—from an anthropological perspective—unforgivably flippant. The laziness is obvious: to sweepingly generalize all substance users as intrinsically deceitful, destructive, and two-faced is about as analytically useful as claiming that all sports car drivers are intrinsically aggressive and insecure. Not only is this a prime example of the fallacy of the lonely fact, but it also reproduces the enduring mythos that substance users are fundamentally untrustworthy (and so, unworthy)—ideas that can (and do) have major impacts on people's health and life possibilities.

The accusation of flippancy is arguably the graver charge. This is because to dismiss offhand the claim made by my interlocutors that, during blackout, they “become somebody else” as either—at best—a metaphorical sleight of hand, or—at worst—an abdication of personal and moral responsibility is to fundamentally flatten their experience. To adopt either position is to deny the richness, complexity, and perplexing qualities of the blackout. Here, I am intentionally invoking Cheryl Mattingly's (2019) notion of the “perplexing particular” as situated within her vision of “critical phenomenology 2.0.”⁴ By this she means “an encounter that

3. We can see a similarly problematic position within some of the early anthropological literature on possession, where the analysis focuses on the neurocognitive “truth” of the amnesiac experience, as though this is the sole hinge on which the broader social and cultural meaning of the ritual is dependent. In this view, the possession ritual becomes denigrated as a “sham” performance, in the process reducing the associated cultural configurations as to a kind of cosmetic prosthesis, obscuring a deeper duplicity underneath.
4. Whereas “critical phenomenology 1.0” marks the drawing together of critical social theory with phenomenologically grounded “experience-near” accounts of human (inter)subjectivity, the 2.0 version bears a strong resemblance to theoretical models of the ontological turn as advanced by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017). As Mattingly describes it, critical phenomenology 2.0 is phenomenology as an enterprise in the critique of

not only surprises, in the sense of striking unexpectedly but also eludes explanation. Such a particular (it could be a person, a scene, an event, an object) emerges with an irreducible singularity” (2019: 427). Such a “particular” is of the here and now in such an urgent way that it cannot simply be explained away by packaging it up in a general concept; the perplexing particular is too unwieldy, too concrete—it is stubbornly coexistent in its presence alongside us. At the same time, though, it is matted with concepts. This is because, Mattingly tells us, “at the same time that it exudes a singular presence, it confounds or disturbs concepts and categories themselves” (2019: 427). This is what happens when we confront something that, in spite of its momentous exigency, still manages to escape our grasp. Perplexity, we are apprised, is a unique brand of confusion, designating complete (*per*) entanglement (*plexus*). Moving forward, I consider the way in which the blackout—understood here as a perplexing particular for the person involved and the witnessing ethnographer alike—winds together with a number of conceptual categories, in the process destabilizing the boundaries of such categories and exposing their limits.

The Crisis of Presence

In tracing the perplexing and particular ways that intimate pain, structural alienation, personal crisis, existential presence, memory, forgetting, and metamorphosis converge in the lived experience of the blackout, I

concepts themselves (rather than just “experience-near” descriptions of the world as it stands). Spending time trying to nitpick apart what separates these two orientations would be, in my eyes, to participate in the kind of “minor differences” narcissism that Freud (1930: 114) conceived of regarding the feuds that emerged between neighboring communities. More productive is to consider these two modes of theorizing as isomers of one another—the same analytic formula, just with a different intellectual arrangement. For my own purposes, taking the phenomenological and ontological turns to be isomeric rather than adversarial bequeaths major analytical benefits, not least of all because it significantly enlarges the range of scholarly resources on which this study can draw, the melodies of concert far sweeter than the din of conflict. This is not to say that such debates are not necessary enlivening. There have been attempts—notably Pedersen’s (2020) recent article—to parse out the key differentiators between the ontological turn and critical phenomenology 2.0.

have found the Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino's concept of the "crisis of presence" a useful tool to think with.⁵ It provides a framework for analyzing how existential crises manifest and are managed, particularly through religious rituals. His exploration of presence—a synthesis of past and future in the form of ongoing self-coherence in the present—illuminates the fragility of human existence and the potential for dislocation from societal and historical contexts due to trauma, shock, or misfortune.

His engagement with Heidegger's notions of Dasein and Hegel's (1959) idea of "practical intentionality" informs his understanding of presence as an active, dynamic process of self-production in dialectical relation with the world. This process, he argues, is inherently unstable and vulnerable to crises that can strip individuals of their agency, rendering them passive and disoriented.

First appearing in his 1948 book, *Il Mondo Magico*, the "crisis of presence" emerged as part of a wider discussion on dissociative experiences, in particular the Malaysian phenomenon of *latah*. A trance-like state characterized by hypersensitivity to startling or fright, *latah* can also be accompanied by compulsive mimicry, coprolalia (repetitive use of obscene language), violent bodily movements, major anxiety, and extreme suggestibility, along with other forms of uncontrollable behavior. De Martino describes those in the throes of *latah* as having suffered a "loss of presence"—that is, they have entered a state in which the possibility of ceasing to be has reached a critical point. *Latah*, he argues, speaks to the elemental existential dilemma that lies at the heart of human

5. Though he remains a little-known figure in anthropological thought outside of Italy, recent translations of his work have since raised his profile in the discipline's anglophone quarters. Further, as Tobia Farnetti and Charles Stewart (2012) point out, his grounding in phenomenological and existentialist traditions mean that his work, after some sixty years of relative obscurity, is beginning to align with contemporary debates in anthropology.

George R. Saunders (1993, 1995) has made notable contributions to the study of Ernesto de Martino's theories, particularly through his exploration of "critical ethnocentrism" and its implications for ethnological research. His work also delves into the "crisis of presence," examining how it manifests in the religious conversions of Italian Pentecostals. Saunders' research provides valuable insights into de Martino's concepts, emphasizing their relevance and application in contemporary anthropological studies.

being—the risk that, any moment, we might cease to exist. For de Martino, the threat of this cessation, and the disturbed sense of self that emerges in response, is often expressed as complex illnesses marked by psychic and existential anguish.

For de Martino, cultural and historical contexts, especially within ritual settings, provide a backdrop against which individuals navigate and potentially overcome crises of presence. He argues that the fabric of a given time and place offers both the means and the stage for the enactment and resolution of existential dilemmas. His work had a decidedly political bent, too. He conducted his fieldwork among the poor of Italy's rural south. Inspired by Marx and Gramsci, questions of class struggle, political consciousness, and power distribution remained a central concern in his work. Deploying the Marxian framework of alienation, for example, de Martino emphasizes the way in which extreme economic poverty forecloses possibilities for action, creating a situation of chronic fragility that leaves the poor uniquely open to the anguish of existential crisis. He chose to explore these ideas primarily through the interrelated prisms of ritual and magic, exploring their prevalence in the south as a means of articulating and confronting illness, death, and social tragedy—of which there was plenty.

Across de Martino's extensive body of work, we can see the convergence of a number of disparate analytic strands that are of clear relevance to the argument of this book: theories of structural violence and socioeconomic precarity, the psychopathology of dissociation, ritualized healing, phenomenological models of human temporality and existential meaning, and political dynamics of action versus passivity. In what follows, I want to tie these ideas directly to the Itchy Park context and, building on his analytical frameworks, more closely examine the intersection of oppressive conditions, memory, and dissociation, and how they shape individuals' sense of presence, agency, and therapeutic possibility.

Memory and Mourning

Where memory figures in questions of presence (and crises thereof) is somewhat less clear. Though de Martino does mention memory in his work, notably in his accounts of funeral mourning, he does so mostly in the context of what might be thought of as cultural or historical (rather than subjective or neurocognitive) memory. Describing ritual mourning as a “protected discourse,” de Martino (2012: 446) suggests

that culturally patterned techniques of mourning emerge as a way to guard people against what he calls the “crisis of grief.” Left unchecked, grief will, like a black hole, absorb the living into its nothingness, drawing them into a psychic realm akin to that of death. Ritual mourning, he argues, allows people to express grief without being swallowed into a full-blown crisis of presence.

Based in the southern Italian region of Lucania, his ethnographic accounts of this process focus on the performance of grief as a kind of embodied practice, especially as experienced by women. He approached these grieving rituals as a dynamic assemblage of bodily gestures, verbal stereotypes, and musical events (de Martino 1978). Rituals encompassing death and grief were of particular interest because of their intrinsic connection to questions of existence, being, finitude, and transcendent action. In his eyes, these questions were magnified in traditional rural communities, where death was typically felt not only as a personal trauma but a community one as well. This tension between individual and community loss was laid bare in the techniques, instruments, and institutional-cum-religious mechanisms that underpinned mourning rituals. In the immediate wake of death, the crisis of grief induces what he describes as a kind of “psychic block”—the bereaved falling into uncontrollable states that range from catatonia to violent outbursts that often involve self-harm. In one episode, he describes the way in which a woman, after learning about the death of a loved one, flings herself to the floor before bashing her head against the wall. She then begins to tear at herself with her nails, drawing blood as she rips at her clothes, primeval howls spilling out of her (de Martino 2015: 91).

The goal of ritual mourning, then, is to bring the griever out of this state, unblocking this psychic obstruction while at the same time channeling her pain into a more culturally appropriate mode of action. Relocated to the ritual arena, her violent outbursts change as she shifts her bodily disposition in accordance with normative patterns of grieving conduct: loosening her hair, rocking her body in rhythmic undulations, adopting established speech patterns, singing funeral melodies. While these normative patterns exist prior to the loss of a particular person, they are not identically replicated at each funeral. Rather, each mourner will adapt and reinvent their own particular mode of mourning by experimenting with the various techniques, speech stereotypes, and melodies available to them. In this way, the mourner re-creates and re-memorizes an image of the dead that connects with their personal history as well as the broader demands of the community’s cultural and spiritual

traditions. As a site where tradition and psychological recovery dynamically interact, rituals of mourning allow the griever to return to everyday historicity (states such as catatonia or self-flagellation clearly being an obstacle to this). Paradoxically, though, notes de Martino, this restoring of historicity is possible only when the event of death is “dehistoricized.” By this, he means that the deceased—severed from the community of the living—must be absorbed fully into the community of the dead, which is taken to be a realm outside of history, a timeless or “metahistorical” dimension shared by ancestors, deities, and demons alike. Rituals, in their weaving of these metahistorical patterns—through song, dance, trance, and other transcendental activities—enable distance to be drawn between the living and dead, thereby facilitating social reintegration and averting the crisis of presence that lurks immanently within unresolved grief.

It is within the timeless realm of metahistory that de Martino locates “the ethos of memories and sentiments” that sustain the possibilities for existential recovery in the face of crisis. Here, memory is being evoked not in the sense of an individual’s capacity to recall information, but rather closer to something like social or cultural memory or, as Carole Crumley might put it, a carrier wave “transmitting information over generations regardless of the degree to which participants are aware of their role in the process.”⁶ In this regard, de Martino’s work can be thought of as foreshadowing the recent boom in memory studies that has swept across the social sciences, in particular the conception of memory as a kind of collective storage depot, intrinsically linked to the reproduction of culture across generational divides.⁷ The danger, though, as David

6. Cited in Jacob Climo and Maria Cattell (2002: 40).

7. Long gone, in short, are the days when scholarly discussions of memory referred to the power of individual brains to absorb, retain, and recall information. Today, memory has captured the anthropological imagination predominantly as a kind of work that is defined above all by process rather than content (Thomson, Frisch, and Hamilton 1994). This focus on how people perceive the past (rather than what they perceive) has produced a veritable font of ethnographic writings that are primarily focused on how history is lived, how memories are shared and transmitted across groups, and, in particular, how multiple and often contradictory visions of past events and experiences are able to coexist in the same society (Bloch 1998; Cohen 1998; Sorabji 2006; Stoller 1995). Viewed through the many-sided prism of anthropology, memory is at once a performance event (Severi 2016), a signifier of identity (Boyarín 1991), a political ritual

Berliner (2005) points out in his critique of the “memory boom,” is that memory and culture have become indistinguishable, a shift that he attributes to anthropology’s long-standing interest in processes pertaining to cultural conservation and social continuity. Memory, he suggests, is a conceptually expedient means of extending the anthropological obsession with continuity, of how society is able to continually reproduce itself through time.

Notwithstanding the problem of clarity that comes with defining memory in such broad brushstrokes, the fact remains that one cannot talk properly of memory without acknowledging its umbilical link to the past. Indeed, to a greater or lesser extent, it is our (inter)subjective relationship to the past that determines the shape and color of our memories—colors that are shaded through the complex and ongoing entanglement between personal biography, neurobiology, relationality, temporality, sociopolitical situation, and material circumstance. From this perspective, memory can be understood as a kind of synthesizing agent, one that creatively rearranges the past as a means of forging continuity between the temporal tenses, smoothing over what would otherwise be deep and potentially insuperable disjunctures in the self. In this regard, the subjective capacity to remember cannot be unyoked from our sense of lived historicity—it binds our intrinsic temporality with our self-identity as historical and cultural beings. For whatever reason, though, de Martino makes little room for subjective processes of memory in his studies of presence and crisis, choosing instead to socialize it through his emphasis on historicism and cultural dynamics.

Heidegger was also tight-lipped on the topic of subjective memory, barely mentioning it at all in his writings. The philosopher Stephan Käufer (2011) puts this neglect of memory down to Heidegger’s denial of consciousness as the building block of *Dasein*. Arguably, this neglect reflects the historical moment both men were writing in, with research on the psychological and neurocognitive dynamics of memory not nearly as sophisticated and prevalent as in our current moment. However, that is not to say that memory was not of interest prior to advancements in modern technology. Take the work of William James, for example, whose cogitations on the link between temporality and memory led him to coin the term “specious present,” described as “the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible” (James [1890] 1950:

(Empson 2007), a scientific technique (Wagner 2008), a material process (Navaro-Yashin 2012), and an ethical negotiation (Carsten 2007).

631). James was drawing a conceptual distinction between the immediate past that lingers in the present's slipstream and the past that is recalled through memory. In his view, the immediate past that streams behind the present like a comet's tail is markedly different from the remembered past of memory, insofar as memory reproduces an event that has already faded away: "the reproduction of the event, after it has completely dropped out of the rearward end of the specious present, is an entirely different psychic fact from its direct perception in the specious present as a thing immediately past" ([1890] 1950: 631).

James's statement, made over a century ago, is remarkably consistent with models coming out of cognitive neuroscience. Antonio Damasio, for example—one of the foremost specialists in this field—all but affirms James's original observations when he notes how "whenever we recall a given object, or face, or scene, we do not get an exact reproduction but rather an interpretation, a newly constructed version of the original" (1994: 100). It is for this reason that Damasio says that the present is always already just out of the self's reach, proclaiming us "hopelessly late for consciousness" (1994: 240). Here, Damasio's neuroscientific observations align uncannily with those of Henri Bergson (1950), who argued that the self is essentially a memory, experienced as an ongoing interruption in the flow of *durée*, forever filtering into the delayed feedback loop of self-consciousness. In this sense, the self, like memory, is always lagging behind the flow of the durative present; it is an afterimage, a ghost of *durée*.

What these thumbnail sketches demonstrate is that strict lines need not be drawn between cognitive science and phenomenological inquiry. As noted by Eduard Marbach (1993), though, strict lines are often what we get, describing the historical relationship (or lack thereof) between cognitive science and phenomenology in terms of a "cold antagonism."⁸

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8. For cognitive scientists who remain antagonistic towards the benefit of phenomenological frameworks, the standard barb is that no level of philosophical inquiry can access the "core" functions and causal mechanisms of mental processes. Tim van Gelder neatly sums up the historical disconnect between the two orientations: "phenomenology proceeds from the assumption that the study of mind must be rooted in direct attention to the nature of (one's own) experience, whereas cognitive science proceeds from the assumption that a genuine science of mind must be rooted in the observation of publicly available aspects of minds of others" (1999: 249). Like Marbach, van Gelder sees no reward from this adversarial approach, arguing that without phenomenological reflections on conscious

Much of this tension rests on a binary assumption that phenomenology is in the business of subjective description while cognitive science is in the business of objective explanation. Developments in critical phenomenology, though, are helping to make this division seem less clear cut. After all, science is not conducted in a social vacuum. Its analytic categories and its concepts are derived from a broader world in which they are always already embedded (Latour 1987). Nevertheless, much of cognitive science continues to pursue its study of consciousness at the interior level. In other words, it is the internal mechanisms that count as so-titled “genuine” theoretical explanations—a process that invariably leads researchers back to the brain, again and again. Where before our most “internal” selves might have been located in the soul, now it is the brain that echoes the deepest.

Phenomenology pushes back against this cerebral internalism. As Shaun Gallagher puts it, “the conditions necessary for consciousness cannot be found complete in the artificial ecology of ‘the brain in the vat’” (1997: 209). Memory, perception, forgetting, intentional action—the full gamut of human consciousness—occurs in the world, not laminated on top of it. The point is that our cognitive mechanisms are entangled in a social and cultural world in which we actively participate. Again, Gallagher’s words are instructive:

Here it is not a matter of an independently formed consciousness thrown into an objective environment, or of a fully formed brain existing in a container we call the world. Rather, consciousness and the brain develop and function within a form of existence that is already defined by the world it inhabits. Moreover, embodied action in social circumstances, rather than intellectual cognition, constitutes our first interaction with the world. (1997: 209)

Relating this idea to Ash’s blackouts, we can lay out the neurobiology in all its internal complexity. We can provide the chemical formula of the substances he ingests. From there, we can identify the brain cells

experience, we would lack a working conceptual vocabulary for articulating how the mechanisms that cognitive scientists seek to identify interface with the lived reality of each person. In this regard, Marbach and van Gelder argue that the two disciplines ought to be brought together in “mutual constraint”—each side setting the limits for the other, thereby establishing a more coherent balance between theory and experience.

involved in his blackouts and examine the molecular mechanisms that seem to support their functioning. From there, we can examine the way that alcohol pharmacokinetically interferes with certain key NMDA⁹ receptors in the brain's hippocampus, causing them to manufacture steroids that impede what is called "long-term potentiation"—a process that fortifies connections between neurons, crucial in the formation and retention of memory. Ash's world, viewed in these terms, begins and ends with his skull: in philosopher John Searle's words: "Each of our beliefs must be possible for a being who is a brain in a vat because each of us is precisely a brain in a vat; the vat is a skull and the 'messages' coming in are coming in by way of impacts on the nervous system" (1983: 230). Searle's work trades in hermetic metaphors, his encasing of the word messages in scare quotes especially revealing. Perhaps Searle was wary of its Latin root, *missus*. The term can be translated as hurling or throwing. Messages, then, can be thought of as directing us to the thrownness of our existence, to our enmeshment in a world of others who have their own messages to worry about, and in turn worry us with. In Searle's philosophy of mind, the Cartesian coffin that separates the thinking subject from the world of external objects beyond it is to be replaced by the skull vat that encases the brain.

But Ash is not just a brain in a vat. His memories cannot be explained away simply through the neuronal mechanisms or retrieval and reenactment. Nor are such explanations sufficient in accounting for his forgettings. Memory. Forgetting. These are processes that happen between people as much as they do inside them separately. Indeed, it is this in-betweenness that allows Betsy to forgive Ash, to reimagine and recreate their relationship under the shadow of what were some horrendous memories of violence, abuse, and neglect. Ash too, is followed by these memories—though in a different way, of course. For him, Betsy's forgiveness carries a different weight, one that he would just as often try to forget, the end of their marriage intimately bundled up with the car accident that took his family. Though triggered neurobiologically, Ash's blackouts cannot be reduced to these mechanisms. Indeed, a more integrated understanding is one that sees them as an attuned response to the existential conditions of his world, of which his brain chemistry is just one important but not reducible part.

9. "NMDA" refers to a type of receptor in the brain called N-Methyl-D-Aspartate receptor, which is involved in synaptic plasticity, memory function, and is known to be affected by alcohol.

Inspired by the pioneering neuropsychologist Francisco Valera, Charles Laughlin and Jason Throop have begun to trace out the contours of what they describe as cultural neurophenomenology, defining it as “the application of a trained phenomenology that controls for cultural variation in perception and interpretation, coupled with the latest information from the neurosciences about how the organ of experience—the brain—is structured and operates” (2006: 308).

So, it is not enough to reduce something like a blackout to its neurobiological mechanisms. At the same time, it would be similarly inadequate to dismiss these mechanisms as irrelevant within the bounds of that particular experience. Rather, an integrated approach to drug-fueled dissociation must be able to pull together different modes of temporal experience as well as allowing connections to be made between neuroscientifically informed models and ethnographic ones. The benefit of creating such links is not to seek neurological reductionism or to *naturalize* these kinds of experiences. On the contrary, the aim is to dig deeper into the way that a person’s existential condition of being-in-the-world intersects with the different modalities of subjective experience, including that person’s neurochemical underpinnings. Lambros Malafouris argues, using Edward Evans-Pritchard’s conception of Nuer temporal models as an example:

The challenge for the anthropologist is not to go deeper inside the Nuer brain in order to discover the implicit understanding of temporality (at the millisecond range at the neural level) which underlies their explicit statements and conceptualization of time (at the phenomenal level). Rather, the question is what a Nuer phenomenal sense of time might be, and how it emerges from, or changes the more basic temporal characteristics that all human beings might share. (2015: 364)

Malafouris suggests that a neurophenomenology of time-consciousness can provide the building blocks for thinking about the ways that social experiences shape the lived experience and conceptualization of time without dismissing or neglecting the neurophysiological components of time-consciousness (Laughlin and Throop 2006, 2008). What remains crucial is developing this idea in tandem with a commitment to exploring the broader existential conditions of a person’s reality, to ensure that human experience is located beyond just “skin and skull,” extending into the cultural, social, and material world.

My intention, then, is to apply the lessons offered by cultural neuropsychology and integrate a theory of subjective memory (and forgetting) within the models of grief, presence, and crisis resolution offered by de Martino.

Saying Goodbye

Recall that following Betsy's visits, Ash steps up his drinking, her very proximity—even when it is just the tea she leaves behind—enough to bring on a deluge of painful memories, not only of his own failures and sins as a husband, but also of the family he lost. His accelerated drinking is his attempt to dam this flood, whatever the cost. Using de Martino's language, Ash's catastrophic losses have led to a crisis of grief that, in never being fully resolved, leaves him especially vulnerable to experiencing crises of presence—a vulnerability that is amplified by the precarious everyday realities of his homelessness. The extent to which Ash has been unable to move past his grief is a significant component in his life history and ongoing alcohol use. Already sleeping rough and drinking heavily at the time of his family's death, Ash was not in a fit state to organize the funeral proceedings. Instead, the logistics were left to an extended family member, a cousin of his father. Ash never made it to the funeral. He doesn't remember whether he was given the time and place by his father's cousin or if they even succeeded in finding him to give him the relevant information. He concedes that even if they had managed to track him down and give him the details, he would likely have forgotten them. Or, even if he had managed to retain the information, he had such a fuzzy sense of which day of the week it was that it would have likely passed him by anyway. His binges had totally dislocated him from any coherent sense of public time. What he does remember, however, is the day he realized he had missed it.

Something happened. I'd lost some money. Or someone had nicked it, something like that—I don't remember. But I couldn't get any booze for a bit. It was like a break in the clouds or something—I thought about them. And, you know, I thought—the funeral must be soon, when is it? But then I thought, how long has it been? I remember the date that I found out—these things, what, stick in your head, don't they? I think I found a newspaper. Or maybe I asked someone. I dunno. Anyway, I realized it had been weeks since it happened. I thought—fuck. I fucking missed it. So off my head I missed it. I felt so fucking guilty. I still feel guilty. Every day. I

went and visited their graves, but that's not the same, is it? Not the proper way to say your peace, say goodbye or whatever.

As de Martino (2012: 445) argues, as institutions of ritual mourning, funerals are fundamental in resolving the crisis of grief and preventing it from spiraling into a full-blown crisis of presence. They are the most culturally “proper” means to say goodbye and recover a sense of peace in the wake of death, the ultimate critical event. While not everyone in Itchy Park had missed a parent’s or loved one’s funeral, the overwhelming majority nevertheless suffered from varying forms and levels of unresolved grief pertaining to intimate losses they had endured, both in the build-up to being made homeless as well as during their time on the streets. For many of them, losses compounded on one another: multiple family members dying in quick succession; messy divorces, break-ups, and family estrangements overlapping with the death of relatives or close friends; partners being sent to prison followed swiftly by losing children either to foster care or to the world entirely. Imbricated with these compound losses were structural catastrophes at the level of employment, welfare, and housing—the texture of which I have outlined. Amplified by the abject realities of street homelessness, this combination of structural and intimate losses imbued Itchy Park’s psychic economy with a pervasive sense of unreconciled mourning—what Freud might have described in terms of melancholy.

For Freud (1917), melancholy is what happens when the mourner is unable to “work through” their grief, becoming suspended in an endless mourning that puts the future on hold, prompting a withdrawal into the inner world that is marked by pathological forms of self-beratement. Here, we can draw parallels with Angela Garcia’s (2010) seminal work among low-income Hispanic heroin users in New Mexico. Building on Freud’s intrapsychic model by carefully interweaving it through the local Hispano lifeworld, Garcia retheorizes this notion of melancholia as a mode of historicity that sits at the intersection of historical tragedy, land appropriation, rural poverty, and overdose deaths. More broadly, she demonstrates how this historical suffering intertwines with heroin addiction and biopolitical therapeutics to amplify the melancholia of her interlocutors, stunting future possibilities but also creating a feedback loop where the temporality of heroin use blunts the very escapist relief it helps to bring about. Further, she demonstrates how these dynamics have become encapsulated within the clinical model of chronicity that underpins recovery programs in the area and the United States more broadly, reinforcing the prevailing concept of addiction as a “no exit” condition

that, like unresolved grief, is destined to return again and again as unfinished business (2010: 71). On top of that, so frequent are heroin-related fatalities in the region that the fragile dialectic between memory and forgetting is continuously under pressure: memories of each singular loss coalescing with the community's previous overdoses to form a kind of death-blur that risks anonymizing the specificity of each individual loss. In short, not only did they worry they would forget their loved ones amidst this blur, but that they, too, would also be forgotten when they died (2010: 95).

What we can glean from Garcia's work is that processes of grief are underwritten by the interplay between memory and forgetting, the dynamics of which will be shaped—as de Martino illustrates—by the cultural world and historical conditions in which such losses are experienced and negotiated. In Ash's case, it is not the fear that he might forget his loved ones that grips him, but rather that—outside of his blackouts—he cannot help but remember them, in particular the tragic circumstances surrounding their death. For example, Ash continues to have recurring nightmares about the car crash that claimed their lives, even though he wasn't there to witness it. In the nightmare, either he's sitting next to his father or he's at the wheel himself and they're heading towards something like a wall or oncoming traffic. Sometimes he tries to brake but the pedal won't work, or else he'll try to turn the wheel but find his arms are paralyzed, unresponsive to his intentions. If it's his father driving, he'll scream at him to brake or swerve, but his father will simply keep going, oblivious to his screams of warning. Then, they crash. Ash wakes up, covered in sweat and sometimes screaming and lashing out, his heart thumping in his chest. Sometimes, though, Ash doesn't fully wake up when the car crashes, instead rendered immobile by the violence of the event, stuck between the nightmare and wakefulness, feeling as though something, or rather someone, heavy is sitting on his chest. These descriptions are consistent with the phenomenon of sleep paralysis; falling asleep or passing out near a main road, with the constant din of traffic seeping into his subconscious, seems to increase the chances of the nightmare occurring, especially those of the paralyzing variety.

Depending on the cultural setting, nightmares and sleep paralysis carry multiple meanings, often evoking the influence of supernaturalistic powers and nonself agents. More broadly, they point to the way that painful memories—if left unresolved—hold the capacity to continuously intrude into our subjective and embodied being, replaying past traumas that simultaneously traumatize the present. Memories, after all,

though grounded in the past tense, are always called forth and reflected upon in the present. For something to reemerge, it must first have been submerged somewhere, waiting to be “re-presented.” In terms of cognitive mechanics, this process differs from perception, which establishes an immediate reference with whatever it is in the field of our senses that captures our attention. In other words, we perceive things that are present, whereas we remember things that are absent. Of course, when it comes to the dynamic reality of being embedded in a world, perception and memory are forever spilling into one another. Nevertheless, separating them into their own heuristic categories is useful in highlighting the central role of absence in processes of memory. There is perhaps no context where this sense of absence is more keenly felt than in remembering the people we have lost. In Itchy Park, as in Garcia’s community of heroin users, absence abounds. Further, it does so with such intensity and under such oppressive and alienating structural conditions that it resists normative patterns of mourning, stunting the healing process and locking people in prolonged cycles of grief that feed, almost parasitically, off everyday reminders of loss.

For Ash, these reminders are in the sugar granules mixed into the tea that Betsy leaves him, in the wail of passing traffic that infuses into his nightmares. For Jimmy, they are in the swaying trees that encircle the park, in watching families gather on the weekends to enjoy picnics on the grass. For Max, it’s walking past the local mosque on the way to the liquor store, knowing that the family who disowned him for his drug use and subsequent incarceration are inside offering prayer, likely alongside the same uncle who sexually abused him as a child, about which he has kept secret his entire life, burying the pain and humiliation through self-harm and analgesic escape. For Larry, the loss of his parents is inscribed across his body, legible through the abscess scars that pockmark his flesh, their names memorialized across his shoulder in prison ink. In Tony’s case, smuggled within each new ARV dosage is a reminder of that day in the park where, at the point of a knife, his world and future possibilities were turned inside out, never to be the same again.

In Itchy Park, then, this landscape of unresolved grief cannot be uncoupled from the relentless re-presentation of memory as it unfolds in the ebb and flow of perceptual consciousness. To boot, the spatio-temporal dynamics of deep boredom that pervades everyday life on the streets ensures that the toxic interplay between unresolved grief and pain-soaked memory is given ample room to grow and fester, ratcheting up to unbearable levels when combined with the ever-looming threat of

substance withdrawal. On top of that, there is also the pervasive sense of loneliness to deal with. While the moral economies and webs of relationality that have emerged in Itchy Park certainly go some way to mitigating this, they are, by their very nature, an imperfect form of triage—the gray-zone logic of street life ensuring that these interpersonal bonds lack the kind of security and care that one might expect to find for those who enjoy stable housing and close kin relations. Indeed, feeling alone and isolated, even in spite of there always being other people around, was a recurring sentiment among the park's residents when asked about what aspects of being homeless they found most distressing, feelings that were compounded by ongoing forms of institutional and symbolic dehumanization at the hands of police, polity, and policy alike. And, as Katherine Shear (2012: 125)—a psychiatrist who specializes in grief—notes, the single most important therapeutic component in healing prolonged and unresolved grief is having people around us who we trust and care about. In other words, we do not grieve well alone.

De Martino, who held extensive (and often highly critical) knowledge of Freud's psychoanalytic theories on processes of mourning and melancholia, would no doubt have agreed with Shear's claim. Indeed, this was precisely the point of the funeral ritual—a way to collectivize the private pain of grief by filtering it through the shared mythico-religious traditions intrinsic to a given community. Without such collective arenas, the crisis of grief (driven by memories of the deceased) is likely to spiral into a full-scale crisis of presence, thereby disjoining the sufferer from society and, by extension, history. De Martino would describe this experience in terms of "irrelative dehistoricification"—the implication being that, in losing presence, the person is suffering from an inability to participate actively in their historical moment. Paradoxically, though, in order to resolve this irrelative or unsolicited dehistoricification, the sufferer must, should they wish to be healed, submit themselves to the institutional dehistoricification of religious ritual. These spaces address the condition of unsolicited dehistoricification by displacing the sufferer from historical time altogether and situating them in "the beyond" of mythic or metahistorical time where the condition can be confronted. Under the care of culturally ordained authority figures, the sufferer is transported into the timeless arena of metahistory, a process that actually deepens and intensifies the ataxia of irrelative dehistoricification by virtue of an even greater step out of history. Counterintuitively, then, it is precisely this total dislocation into the beyond—itself a time out of time—that enables the subject to reacquire the present and reestablish themselves as

an active presence in the world. As de Martino puts it, “the metahistorical level, as a horizon of the crisis” establishes an alternative space of existence and allows one to “be in history as if he weren’t in it” (2012: 78).

Here, then, is where de Martino makes a significant departure from the psychoanalytic tradition. In the psychoanalytic model, first put forward by Freud and since developed by a range of psychological theorists—notably Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994)—unresolved grief over the death of a loved one has been conceptualized through the image of the crypt. The crypt serves as a metaphor for the deepest recesses of memory. Like the false bottom of a smuggler’s suitcase, it is at once part of us and closed off from us. Nicolas Argenti and Katherina Schramm, drawing on Derrida, describe this nethermost interiority as “parasitical, a sort of psychic cyst” (2009: 12). This cyst becomes especially swollen following the death of those closest to us. Indeed, the memories of those we have lost, in the case of unresolved grief, may become entombed inside this cryptic chamber, effectively keeping the person alive on a respirator and preventing their memory from being reconstituted in ways conducive to healing and acceptance. This smuggling of the dead into the depths of embodied memory—incorporation—is said to emerge when introjection fails, introjection being the gradual internalizing and integrating of loss into the psychic structure.

Incorporation does not tend to be gradual; rather, it is sudden and howling, ripe with magical potentiality and hallucinatory comfort. From this perspective, to overcome melancholia and resume patterns of healthy mourning requires an intrapsychic “working through” in which the lost love object—the deceased person—is gradually displaced from the crypt to allow for new attachments to develop, in particular through new forms of remembrance that can be integrated into the self-image. In this way, the mourner is able to recover their sense of the future that had previously been forestalled by their grief. While de Martino would agree that grief requires a working through, he did not locate this process in a person’s intrapsychic dynamics as played out in the psychoanalytic encounter. For him, if the dead ever belonged in a crypt, it was not an intrapsychic one, but rather the metahistorical crypt offered by myth: a timeless place that could only be accessed through institutionalized ritual. In this way, memories of the dead (embodied in the crisis of grief) were recalibrated through institutional networks of culturally enshrined meaning and reparation before they could metastasize into anything more existentially and socially disruptive.

Rituals of the Self

Moving into and through these ritualized theaters occurred under the guidance of culturally anointed ritual specialists, such as healers or shamans. This notion that rituals tend to be regulated by guides or sponsors (as well as possessing their own intrinsic temporality) is nothing new. In fact, it is something of a time-honored idea within the discipline (Bloch 1991; Kapferer 1991; Taussig 1993; Turner 1969; van Gennep 1977). That being said, within modern society, these ritual healing structures, along with the stewards that guide them, are very much on the wane, almost nonexistent in some areas, particularly in urban settings such as London (Napier 2004; Zoja 2000). The dwindling of these ritualized arenas has emerged in lockstep with the ascendancy of individual-centered psychomedical therapeutics, a system of care and treatment provision that has wasted little time in medicalizing complex human experiences such as grief and loss.

According to Leeat Granek (2010, 2013), the medicalization of grief really accelerated in the 1930s and '40s as the various psychological disciplines increasingly sought the status of *hard* science, something they looked to achieve by imitating (as is the nature of flattery) its positivist methodologies. As she puts it: "When we tried to turn grief into a science, or *only* a science—we also lost some of the deep engagement we had with the sheer humaneness of mourning and the transformative power of grief in our lives" (2013: 280). By the time clinicians such as John Bowlby started challenging this mantra in the 1980s—his attachment theory contending that for healthy mourning to occur, the bereaved person requires time, space, ritual, recognition, attuned care, and the security of trusted companions (Bowlby 1980)—the groundswell of medicalization was such that his ideas, along with those who shared his more holistic model, were all but drowned out by the ever-growing emphasis on measurement, diagnosis, dysfunctionality, and symptom management (with an increasing emphasis on pharmaceutical intervention).

Despite these changes in the structures of healing that have come to privilege the individual (and his neuropathology) at the expense of a more collectively styled therapeutics, we should not dismiss communalist systems as inefficacious or even undesired. Indeed, the gradual sliding of collective healing rituals into relative obsolescence at the level of structure should not be conflated with the fading out of need at the level of the person. The exigency to transform and heal the self through Others is as strong as it ever was. The problem, David Napier (2004) claims, is

that, owing primarily to an overarching ideological fear of Otherness, we now lack the institutional structures (and personnel) to put this kind of Other-led healing into action. The question, then, is this: in the absence of sacred figures and established ritual institutions, how can the cauterizing of the existential wounds of people like Ash through dehistoricizing transcendence be performed, if at all?

What follows can be read as an attempt to answer this question. My central claim is that it is precisely because of this deep, unmet existential need that people experiencing homelessness are left with little option but to take on the healing responsibility themselves—to become their own redeemers, so to speak. Furthermore, in being forced by their conditions to take on this particular existential burden, I argue that their bodies, as the only “thing” they have left, become both the site and the enactor of the ritual process.¹⁰ Recognizing the entwining of crisis, presence, grief, and memory, I will extend de Martino’s model of ritual dehistoricization as a way to explore the blackout as a modality-of-being unto itself. In so doing, I destabilize the predominant conceptual clusters around the blackout that have consistently marked it as a psychomedical pathology that can be reduced to its neurobiological mechanisms.

All the King’s Horses

Sleep paralysis is not the only time that Ash feels haunted by ethereal figures that seem to dwell on the edges of visibility and tangibility.

When I’m walking around drunk, I always think someone is following me, so I quickly turn around, but there’s nobody there. Then I start walking again, and I feel a big push in the back and hear someone saying, “Junkie, alky, tramp,” and then I fall over. I’ve hit my head a lot; I’m sick of it.

In such instances, where ghostly forces appear to commingle with Ash’s intoxicated consciousness to reinforce his sense of social abjection, we begin to get a sense of the way in which the deep losses of Ash’s past dynamically interact with the social categories imposed on him to take on a distinct kind of force, one that he feels literally follows him around, taunting him and even pushing him to the floor. Indeed, when the pavement is not taking out its frustrations on Ash’s skull, the police are seemingly only too happy to fill in.

10. See Desjarlais 1997.

Just last week they tried to arrest me for being drunk. I refused to get in the back of the van, so they hit me in the head with a truncheon. There was blood everywhere, all in my eyes. Spent the night in a cell and then just threw me back onto the streets. It's like I can't catch a break. I've got no family. I've got nothing left. No one. That's life... my life.

It is not only when Ash is actively drunk that these kinds of forces have gotten him into trouble with the police and public alike. On more than one occasion, when Ash has been suffering from sleep paralysis, he has emerged out of it in fits of violent terror, his body a coiled spring held down by the weight of this entity that sits upon his chest. Ash does not have the luxury of going through these panicked outbursts in the privacy of his own bedroom. Instead, he has them on the streets—in public space—which means that random pedestrians have sometimes been inadvertently caught up in this very particular form of terror. To any of these passers-by—who have no window into the terrifying experiential realities of Ash's sleep paralysis—it looks as if a random homeless person has burst out of their sleeping bag in a fit of violent rage that could be directed towards them. For Ash, these outbursts exist in the liminal bounds between sleeping and waking. The outbursts, combined with his near constant levels of intoxication, mean that he is always extremely disorientated when they happen. In other words, he has little conscious appreciation of where he is, let alone who might be close by and in range of his screams and flailing limbs. Of course, these unfortunate bystanders aren't privy to this information and, perhaps predictably, have not tended to react favorably. Twice at least, Ash was assaulted, once by a group of men who threw him to the ground and kicked him so hard he broke two ribs. On other occasions, members of the public have called the police, leading to arrests and PSPO sanctions. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Ash should continue to view the police in terms of a constant, lumpenizing surveillance that destructively shapes the contours of his everyday life on the streets.

They will drag you down to the very bottom; they fucking hate people like me; they think I'm nothing, that I'm fucking scum. They want to destroy you. They want to fucking destroy you. They'll push you down so low that you'll want to commit suicide.

Under these conditions of perpetual crisis where systemic and subjective forms of violence coalesce with the lived terror of his nightmares with such intensity as to make Ash consider taking his own life, the only solace that he finds each day is in the bottle.

What else are you gonna do in my situation? When you're homeless, on your own, you drink. What else is there? Booze, that's the only love I have left in my life. I'm a binge drinker. When I drink, I just don't stop, don't eat. Nothing, just drink. When I'm sober, I get very down, like I'm falling apart into pieces. Sometimes it gets so bad that it makes me want to kill myself. Alcohol makes me feel whole again. It puts me back together. I just keep going until everything about my life fades away, until I become somebody else.

For Ash, it is only when he is bingeing on alcohol that the haunting echoes of yesterday no longer colonize his tomorrow. In contrast to the punctuated linearity of normal sober time in which Ash feels at risk of existential collapse, drunkenness causes time to drift out of joint, taking the sting out of his normative temporality, eventually casting him into the netherworld of the blackout as the alcohol moves into his body and works its pharmacokinetic magic upon the brain. Ironically, though, it is in these states of timeless self-abandonment, where his memory functions begin to fall apart, that Ash feels whole again.

De Martino's theory of dehistoricification provides an analytical framework to explore this seemingly paradoxical state of affairs. Remember that in Ash's sober time, homeless and destitute, he feels as if he is falling apart—what de Martino would recognize as a crisis of presence. Burdened with a tragic yesterday, a swollen present, and an empty tomorrow, Ash finds himself washed up on the banks of the chronopolitical order, dislocated from the intersubjective relations that bind him to the rest of society and, indeed, history. Presence, in de Martino's sense of things, is generated under the shadow of this void, in which “the risk of human history not existing takes shape as the risk of losing culture and receding without mitigation into nature” (2012: 5). As such, when a specific historical moment threatens to collapse in on itself, there arises a peculiar existential contradiction where the strength of presence to produce subjectivity becomes twisted back on itself, creating a situation where presence *is* crisis: what Ash describes as “falling to pieces.” Crisis, as I outlined earlier, represents the ultimate risk: annihilation of that which is human (a possibility that Ash reflexively acknowledges through his regular bouts of suicidal ideation). In this sense, Ash's sober presence—fragmented, on the verge of collapse—is facing a crisis point where the possibility of ceasing to be feels like a real prospect. In this sense, Ash is staring down the barrel of becoming absent from history. Symbiotically adjoined to this fragmentary, precarious, and fading sense of presence is the ongoing existence of autobiographical memory, an embodied human

capacity that sits between the stream of past experience and personal narrative, feeding into a reflexive, durative sense of self that, in Ash's case, is constituted above all by the compound fractures of his multiple, unresolved losses. In this respect, his crisis of presence can be understood as inseparable from the presence of his memory.

Consequently, it is not an exaggeration to say that, when sober, Ash feels at "risk of losing the very possibility of deploying the formal energy of being-there" (de Martino 2012: 10). Teetering on the precipice of his own existence, he is forced to consider the prospect of his own alienation from history. Ash thus uses alcohol as a redemptive "system of techniques," to borrow a phrase from de Martino's writings, to unparalyze himself from the radical threat of his alienation through a transcendental step into the atemporal realm of the blackout—an altered state-of-being that sits beyond the normal flow of history and memory, where time and self are allowed to go on behind his back. So, in absencing himself through the atomizing effects of drunkenness, Ash is paradoxically able to partially recover a sense of presence, to regain some traction on a world that felt as if it were falling apart, to "feel whole again."

In other words, by actively dispensing with the synthesizing capacity of memory, Ash is effectively dehistoricizing his presence, dropping himself out of history (absencing himself) to gain the necessary adhesion to reinsert himself into the present. However, the dehistoricized being that emerges into the blacked out present, to fill the void left by his memory, is ultimately a different being altogether. Under these conditions, the present tense—no longer in symbiotic contact with the synthesizing capacity of memory—turns in on itself, ossifying the new presence to create a temporality in which the immediate past is no longer cognitively accessible. In this expanded, hermetically sealed present—hard as granite and thin as silk—the immediate past can no longer be reproduced into a "psychic fact," to use the Jamesian term.

Ash's blacked out presence, constituted by a present tense that effectively locks out the reproducible past, can therefore be said to exist exclusively in periods of lost time. In this sense, alcohol has crafted for Ash at once a new body and a new temporality. To draw on his own Humpty Dumpty metaphor, when Ash is faced with the shattered pieces of his sober self, alcohol puts him back together again—not as he was before ("brick for brick"), but instead reassembling the broken pieces of his being into a radically different temporal and bodily form. The irony, of course, is that Ash, by virtue of his memory loss, has no reflexive access to this alternative bodily form. Rather, he recovers a sense of presence

only by living as an absence. This, then, is the key existential paradox at the heart of the blackout.

Indeed, the moment the booze wears off and Ash returns to sobriety, his crisis of presence invariably comes roaring back, along with all the attendant memories that make it feel as if his existence is falling to pieces. In other words, the crisis is solved only so long as the person remains dehistoricified. In the institutionalized ritual settings analyzed in de Martino's ethnographies, the idea is that the fragmenting subject returns from the dehistoricified state with a more solidified sense of presence. The problem, it seems, with the embodied, self-enacted form of psychoactive dehistoricification articulated here is that the person in question does not emerge on the other side any more solid than when they left. Rather, the solidification, or recovery, of presence occurs from within the space of dehistoricification rather than through it. Paradoxically, then, the possibility of restoring presence becomes locked within a corporeal form that is constituted specifically by its capacity to live as an absence—what is experienced as a seemingly endless game of cat and mouse. For people like Ash who wake up every morning and immediately feel as if the fabric of their existence is unraveling at the seams, a voyage into the dehistoricified space of the blackout is akin to a kind of Sisyphean torment, insofar as the wholeness he seeks is, in effect, always already just out of reach. To wit: in trying to become whole, he becomes hole. In other words, through alcoholically losing his memory, he recovers presence—until the sauce wears off, that is, at which point he *de facto* loses presence and recovers his memory.

The Singularity

As with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Ash's presence and his memory are existentially incapable of being in the same room at the same time. Because he is forced to endure an existence in which his sense of presence continuously slips away just at the moment when it is recovered, it does not seem extreme to suggest that Ash's bouts of intoxicated dehistoricification are as destructive as they are redemptive. In this regard, his blackouts bear a resemblance to recent developments in the psychodynamic literature, notably the work of Alistair Sweet, whose clinical work on the psychic dynamics of addiction is rooted in questions of temporal perception. Contemplating the lengths that substance users will go to sidestep the pain intrinsic to their present, Sweet likens these evasive maneuvers

to a black hole: “in the same way that a black hole represents a region of space from which matter and energy cannot escape, due to the intensity of the gravitational field, addicts appear to collapse intrapsychically into sealed-over states of being” (2012: 95).¹¹ As an entity that exists as a kind of pure negation, the black hole is deemed analogous by Sweet to the inner psychic life of addiction because, from his perspective, it too exists solely through the force that it exerts on that which lies outside of it. Both, Sweet claims, have the capacity to swallow time and in so doing warp the very seams of reality, entrapping the person in self-immolating patterns of repetition. This repetitive warping, he argues, is rooted not only in damage sustained during early developmental phases, but it is also intimately connected to the person’s relationship with time, in particular to the traumas of one’s past.

For Sweet, dissociative experiences are a fundamental component of “black hole” addiction psychology. These experiences are pivotal insofar as they provide a site of elision between the painful present and the early identifications of one’s past—what he describes in terms of “dissociative functioning.” From his perspective, the efficacy of dissociative substances to split the ego is their fundamental appeal, something he locates primarily in the internal object world of the user. Another scholar who draws extensively on Freudian notions of melancholia, Sweet approaches bingeing patterns as a vista into the “deep unconscious object imagos and the gravitational pull that they exert upon a very fragile ego” (2012: 99).¹² Under stressful conditions, argues Sweet, the destructive aspects of one’s personality become jettisoned from the self and reformulated as an *it* that exists outside of a person’s control and agentive faculties (“it has a hold over me I can’t break” ... “it’s driving me insane” ... “I can’t seem to

11. As Sweet (2012) himself notes, the “black hole” concept has a rich tradition in the psychiatric literature, deployed by a number of analysts to capture the way that chronic relational traumas manifest in the form of psychological voids that hold the capacity to warp reality through the almost primordial strength of their gravitational field. The dead parent, to take one example, has been articulated as possessing a near infinite capacity to ensnare people in dangerous cycles of psychopathological repetition as patients seek resolution to this unimaginable loss (see Green 1986).
12. A term originating from the thought of Carl Jung (1959), the imago refers to the intrapsychic archetypes that human beings internalize in order to make sense of the people and objects they encounter in the world. In this sense, the imago hovers in the interstitial space between consciousness and unconsciousness.

get out from under it"). The "it-ness" of addiction, he suggests, points to dissociative splitting that looms internally, to the lost object that cannot be properly integrated into the ego.

This sense of being haunted by an intrusive force or foreign object that resists cohesive ego integration seems to occur when the boundary lines between self, object, and affective state begin to dissolve into one another. Responses to such a situation have been described by a number of clinicians working across the psychiatric disciplines. For those in the midst of such a breakdown, the obliteration of the self can emerge as the last line of defense. The result can be an overidentification with destructive objects, the compulsive seeking of which can lead, in Sweet's estimations, to the creation of a psychic region akin to the black hole: "just as the collapsed star exerts its intense gravitational pull and attracts matter towards it, so the addict's self-destructive behavior and sadistic attacks on others may be evidence of the compulsive need to identify with destructive and deadly internal objects" (2012: 100).

From the psychodynamic perspective offered by Sweet, Ash's bingeing and blackouts would resemble a textbook case of someone who, following a series of major relational traumas from childhood through to adulthood, has struggled to fully develop an internal capacity to endure and meaningfully process negative thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Lacking the appropriate psychic infrastructure, Ash's losses—from this angle—are never properly symbolized and synthesized through secondary processes, such as through language and other more complex forms of object representation. Unable to process these lost objects within a coherent self-image, dissociation emerges as the primary defense against these forces as they threaten to spill into conscious life, a kind of self-cauterization that seals the ego off from that which threatens to compromise its already fragile integrity. The annihilation of time that Ash seeks, Sweet would argue, can be understood as a "primitive phantasy" in his inner life—indicating a desire to close the gap between conscious pain and the unformulated, punitive objects that lurk in the timeless well of the unconscious. This tactic would also have the added bonus of temporarily inoculating Ash from the chronic fear that he will be swallowed by the nameless dread that radiates out from these hostile internal objects. In this respect, his *taking in* of chemical substances—themselves a form of external agent/object—is thus understood as an attempt to displace or expel the internal objects that threaten an inherently fragile egoic structure. The affective states that emerge—such as blacking out—are thus the embodied manifestation of these intrapsychic dynamics.

The blackout, however, does not necessarily need to be approached as a black hole from which nothing can escape. The reason I mention Sweet's work here is because—in much the same way as Freud's notion of melancholia provided a useful prism for Angela Garcia to think with before, ultimately, she turned it inside out it so as to encompass the breadth and depth of the Hispano lifeworld as experienced by those stuck in recurring patterns of heroin usage—I, too, seek a form of eversion with respect to the black hole. The black hole as imagined in the psychodynamic tradition is a vacuum of self, a dysfunctional if nevertheless adaptive attempt to repair the fragility of an ego that is fundamentally lacking. The dissociation then, remains fundamentally pathological, emptied of meaning until the recovery process begins, at which point a degree of meaning can be infused into these episodes retroactively through the therapeutic encounter. Alistair Sweet and Ian Miller (2016) describe this process of retroactive meaning-making through the image of the "white hole." Fostered through the kind of empathic attunement intrinsic to the clinical setting, the white hole is, like the black hole, something that the person can fall into. However, it is not an abyss that totally seals over. In short, there is a point of return: "The internalized white hole structure may be thought of as allowing the individual the freedom to fall, though still remain psychologically suspended. For the patient it now becomes possible to weave a sort of 'trampoline' within her accustomed abyss; one falls, but remains suspended, if not bouncing" (2016: 167). In the white hole, then, the void is not traversed alone, but rather under the guidance or stewardship of the therapist, creating what the authors call a "joint witnessing." As an intersubjective exercise in shared meaning-making, trips into the void are enacted together in a way that makes what was previously unendurable durable. If the black hole is a hermetically sealed abyss from which nothing can escape, the white hole can be understood as a shared therapeutic reality—one couched in collaborative recovery. This shared reality provides a momentary respite from the patient's otherwise relentless existential despair. Within the bounds of such an interruption, the primordial fear of annihilation that is said to lie at the heart of the black hole can be arrested and, with careful management, be shifted towards meaningful thinking and reparative introspection.

While the metaphor of the white hole provides an interesting insight into the intersubjective dynamics of recovery in therapeutic settings underwritten by psychodynamic practices, it—like its black namesake—raises some significant questions. For one, it reaffirms the pathology of the black hole, rendering it a meaningless vacuum for as long as the

afflicted person remains outside of recognized recovery pathways. What, then, for those—such as those who dwell in places like Itchy Park—who do not have the luxury of long-term psychodynamic therapy, and likely never will? Where does that leave their dissociative experiences? As things stand, it leaves them stranded in the wastelands of meaninglessness, pathology, and ego deficit. On top of that, Sweet and Miller's white hole model draws a hard line between abyss and recovery, effectively overlooking the possibility that—under certain conditions—they might be one and the same. Indeed, we can see this paradoxical state unfolding within Ash's daily cycles of blacking out and waking up alive, of having to escape the crisis of his own presence by continuously living as an absence and becoming somebody else.

For Sweet and Miller, the "somebody else" that Ash becomes in blackout is illegible outside of the "deficit" frameworks that prop up the psychoanalytic tradition. From such a view, the somebody else that emerges within the lacuna of the black hole is not granted an experiential quality in its own right or on its own terms. Rather, it becomes a reflection of early deficits in ego formation that are typically explored through the prisms of orality, poorly integrated internal objects, fetishization of transitional objects, and parasitical narcissism. In such a model, dissociative black holes, like the broader psychomedical conception of addiction, are situated within the individual, whether through predisposition or through breakdowns in early care structures. The oblivion sought by drug users is found in the fragility or deficit of the ego, not in the fragility and deficit of the world they are embedded in. For people such as Ash, his ego may well have taken a beating over the years, but it is above all his world that is fragile and in deficit. This is a world churning with the forces of dehumanization, exhaustion, and casual violence. At the same time, this is the same world that carries on its crests the small kindness of strangers, the moral fellowship and high stakes drama of street addiction, and the forgiveness from those he has wronged. There is little room for this world in the psychoanalytic version of addiction. The body also fades from view here, flattened into a vector of doomed pleasure and little else—less a lived body and more a "thing-body" that exists in a constant state of chemical manipulation (Kemp 2018). Even time—one of Sweet's key analytical prisms—suffers from a kind of reductionism, with temporal perception articulated primarily in terms of an intrapsychic tension between the present self and the various object representations that loom up from the past-laden depths of the unconscious. Little thought is given to the way that multiple temporal scales

converge together to shape the lived experience of time, to the way in which the intrapsychic is always already in intersection with the social, chronopolitical, and economic conditions that constitute a given person's temporal reality.

None of this is to say that Sweet has not made an astute observation that the draw of certain substances is their capacity to warp, distort, and collapse the perception of time. Indeed, this dimension of psychoactive chemicals has long interested scholars of drugs and alcohol (Cope 2003; Deleuze 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 2013; Denzin 1987; Flaherty 1999; Hill 1978; Huxley [1954] 2004; Klingemann 2000; Reith 1999; Shanon 2001; Smart 1968). While I am happy to go along with Sweet's observation that dissociative temporalities point to an obliteration of self, my concern is that in describing these experiences in terms of a black hole, he risks obliterating any understanding of what could exist within this void (other than an assemblage of intrapsychic deficits). The notion that, in blacking out, a person might become somebody else, offers a path out of pathology's cul-de-sac. Rather than a deficit, it is a central claim of this book that the alternative body-being that emerges to fill this memory void might instead be considered a kind of surplus self, one that slips the normative bonds of time, ego, and agency. Such a claim is grounded in the phenomenological understanding that lived experiences, even those submerged beneath the dark lake of our forgettings, intrinsically exceed the categories we routinely reach for by means of explanation.

Not Just

Here, I find myself circling back to Mattingly's (2019: 427) perplexing particular, to her assertion that human experience possesses a form of singularity that spills over from any categorization designed to contain it. Ash—like many of his Itchy Park contemporaries—has worn and lived the labels of “homeless” and “alcoholic” for so long that they have become fused into his self-identity. As he puts it: “I’m an alcoholic—no mistake. That’s just what I am. Nothing stops me when I get going. Nothing.”

“We’re all addicts out here,” Max tells me, echoing Ash’s statement. “Junkies, drinkers, whatever—we all suffer from the same thing. These people, man,” he says to me, gesturing towards the pedestrians making their way down the street. “They think there’s something wrong with us. Like we’re dangerous, or diseased. They just look right through us, like we don’t even exist, just because we got a drink in our hands. Like we’re

nobody. People look at us and think we're the plague. But we're still human beings, y'know? We're more than just this," he says, holding his drink up. "Yeah, we drink, use, whatever; we get fucked up—maybe more than we should—but we're still people, y'know?"

When I asked Max to elaborate on what he meant by being "more" than the can of drink in his hand, he took a moment and stared off to the side, biting the question between his bottom lip. Smiling, he turned back and looked me up and down: "Like you, you're a sociologist, right?" Anthropologist, I corrected him in a sheepish tone. "Anthropologist! Sorry, right—my sister loved sociology, that's why. But you're an anthropologist, yeah?" I nodded in confirmation. "But that's not all you are, is it? You're not just an anthropologist. See what I mean? I'm a junkie, but I'm not just a junkie. There's more to me. Same for everyone here in the park. But that's how most people see us—just a bunch of homeless drug addicts."

Max's enrollment in the methadone program as well as his history of carceral punishment for drug offences meant that he was, like Ash, intimately acquainted with what it was to exist within the double-edged category of the addict, to be at once patient and criminal. So pervasive is this two-faced label that both men have to come to experience it as bone-grafted to their sense of being, as something that quite literally has come, in no small part, to define them. However, as demonstrated in that brilliant moment where Max turned the tables on me and challenged the status quo of my own self-identifications, the addict frame (like the anthropologist one) is never all-encompassing, even in spite of its prevailing dominance across our culture as that which makes a person "less-than." As he so astutely pointed out, the singularity of my existence exceeds my professional category, regardless of how much personal stock I care to put into it. I am more than *just* an anthropologist. Likewise, Max and the rest of Itchy Park's residents are more than *just* addicts. Of course, different kinds of categories carry different moral weightings—the anthropologist tag carrying infinitely less prejudicial baggage than that of the addict. This is because any category will, like a Russian nesting doll, contain within and around it an assemblage of conceptual clusters that, contingent on the historical patterns from which they have been woven, can be more or less reified than others. Some presuppositions, in other words, can be harder to budge than others, with some so axiomatic that they become internalized as a matter of fact. The modern view of addiction—entrenched in our cultural imagination through the language of permanence, predisposition, and hardwiring—is especially

stubborn in this regard, at once externalized as an object of scientific truth at the same time as becoming internalized through the everyday reality of being an addict (Carr 2011; Hunt and Barker 2001; Raikhel and Garriott 2013).

As Max lays out, though, even in the face of this concentric containment and deep internalization, he is still more than just his addiction. The singularity of his existence outstrips even the most stubborn of conceptual clusters. Railing against those whose dehumanizing gaze would render his being-in-the-world defective and plague-like, Max powerfully asserts that he is more than the chemical dependencies that wider society so readily reduces him to. In so doing, he leaves room for otherwise possibilities from within the bounds of his existence, possibilities that exceed the social and cultural category of addict. Indeed, while Max would certainly acknowledge that his years of using opiates had created patterns of craving at the psychophysiological level, his ongoing polysubstance usage—in particular his mixing of these opiates with alcohol and cannabis—was rarely talked about in such terms. Rather, for Max, combining these substances together was an exercise in shifting his embodied sense of temporality in such a way so as to craft a “new time” that sat beyond the chronic existential crises that constituted his homelessness.

Under these conditions of chemical dissociation, novel temporalities entail novel forms of embodiment, subjectivity, and indeed sociality. As I have already discussed, however, these novel forms are rarely taken on their own terms. Instead, following the conceptual proclivity and dominance of psychomedical perspectives across Western culture, they are overwhelmingly taken as evidence of psychopathologies—black holes from which all meaning is denuded. This point where stars collapse in on themselves, the point of zero volume and infinite destiny, creates what is called a “singularity”—a site where the gravity is so enormous that not even light can escape its pull. In Sweet’s cosmological metaphor, in which drug-induced dissociation is analyzed as a kind of psychic black hole, light is analogous with meaning. In other words, just as the physical collapse of a star makes it impossible for light to break free, the collapse of time in the mind of the substance-using patient is said by Sweet to strip any ensuing dissociations of their meaning.

From an anthropological perspective, however, the concept of singularity carries different connotations. Drawn from the phenomenological rather than the astrophysical tradition, an anthropological use of the term singularity points to the irreducible complexity of each human being as

it comes along in a world that is always already drenched in meaning, to the idea that human life intrinsically escapes the categories that social, cultural, and political orders routinely impose upon it, tending instead towards an unfixed potentiality and adjustable belonging. Zigon has described this kind of belonging as “the existential imperative to dwell in openness” (2019: 96). This, I contend, is precisely the imperative that Ash and Max are enacting when they drink and drug themselves into blackout states, even if such states, because of their temporality, entail a somewhat hermetic degree of closure. Faced with limited options, scarce resources, and an intolerable sense of presence, dissociative temporalities become sites of dwelling unto themselves, a momentary opening into a new way-of-being, of feeling at home in a homeless world. This notion that the blackout might be understood as a simulacrum of home was first raised by anthropologist Laurie Hart in a discussion of these ideas when acting as a reviewer and commenter for a previous article (Hart, comment in Burraway 2018).

Pondering why blackouts might emerge so prominently in situations of street homelessness, Hart suggests that the temporality of the blackout is more than just an escape from the chronopolitical regime and the painful memories that plague people such as Ash. Drawing on Mary Douglas’s appraisal of home as a “triumph of space over time,” Hart suggests that the blackout might also be a way of “doing home” in the absence of physical dwelling spaces. If, as Hart points out, home can be understood as “an embodiment of social memory in which everyday sustenance and environmental conditions are brokered and anticipated, in a synchronization of (and tyranny over) socially connected bodies [then] homelessness in the context of a society ordered by homes is all (unsynchronized) time, no space” (Hart, comment in Burraway 2018: 483). It is for this reason that Hart suggests that the blackout, in its vanquishing of memory and presence, might be considered not only a temporal reprieve but, in this sense, something akin to a home.

In my reply to Hart’s thought-provoking observations, I found much to admire in her connection of the blackout to Douglas’s visions of home. Rather than being a triumph of space over time, though, my feeling—one that has grown in the intervening period since our correspondence was published—is that the blackout is more like the triumph of time(-lessness) over space, insofar as even the most intimate of all human spaces—the body—is also held in abeyance from the self. Indeed, it is within experiences of timelessness that de Martino locates the reparative power of collective ritual. As a self-enacted step into timelessness, though, the

blackout lacks this collective, institutionalized safety net. So, with the burden of ritualization placed squarely at the feet of the individual, the blackout can instead be conceptualized as a kind of auto-salvage operation where the person must use their foremost instrument, the body, as a transformative and ritualizable medium unto itself. Recall that for de Martino, on the collective ritual level, the dehistoricizing step can be likened to cauterizing a wound, to the extent that things get worse before they get better. On the embodied level, however, it is as if people become locked within the cautery, desperate to stem the blood flow but unable to close the wound all the way up. In this regard, drug-induced states-of-being may indeed open worlds and new possibilities for dwelling, but these same possibilities are, by their very constitution, prone to close in on themselves. The blackout is a prime example of such a paradox—it is simultaneously a prison and an escape route, a black hole through which homeless people can, however briefly, feel whole.

In this regard, the blackout can be said to share the liminal temporality of other ritual forms that exist in a time out of time. As a corollary to this, the somebody else that emerges from within the bounds of this temporal liminality can be thought out as a “self out of self.” This new self, like the one it leaves behind and, in a very real sense, like the one it *possesses*, exists as its own unique singularity. Unlike the black hole of Sweet’s cosmological metaphor, the singularity of the blackout is thick with meaning, creativity, and reparative possibility, even in spite of the negation and fragmentation that lurks immanently within its folds. In the next and the following chapters of this book, I will venture deeper into the phenomenology of the blackout as experienced by those experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park, taking the “somebody else” that lives at the core of this black hole as its own concrete singularity. Like the dehistoricizing rituals of which they are a simulacrum, blackouts contain their own sociality, their own particular gravity into which other things, practices, relations, concepts, and events are irresistibly drawn.

CHAPTER 5

Lost Time

There is a term used among physicists who study black holes: “cosmic censorship.” This term essentially states that the singularities at the heart of black holes are concealed behind an event horizon. There is a threshold beyond which nothing can be observed. While the blackouts experienced by the Itchy Park homeless involve a radical form of self-censorship, they are perceivable in a way that their cosmic cousins are not. They are, in so many ways, horizons that are littered with events. These events are not cosmic but rather social, shaped and reshaped by the contingent, precarious, and ultimately shared realities of homeless living. In paying deeper attention to these events and the forms of sociality that becoming somebody else entails, this chapter will demonstrate how these forces coagulate around the paradoxical agency of the blackout state.

Remember What?

Max shakes his head back and forth in mock disbelief. Lisa, a sex worker who frequents the park in between clients, shoots across the benches: “Don’t you remember?” They’re talking to Jay. “Who fucking did this to me?” Jay repeats, almost accusatively, pointing to the cuts and dried blood streaking from the side of his mouth all the way down to his chin. There’s swelling along the side of his face as well. “Well!?” he asks again, pirouetting so as to broadcast his question to the wider group. “Don’t

look at me,” says Max, tsk-tsking. “Take a look at yourself before you start fucking mouthing off at people,” he follows up. There’s a murmur of agreement across the group, and a few sardonic chuckles. “Remember what?!” Jay shouts back at Lisa, his feathers clearly ruffled by the laughter: “I cannae fucking remember anything.”

“Don’t fucking shout at me just cos you were too off your head, too fucked to remember,” snarls Lisa, visibly agitated that he chose to raise his voice to her when she wasn’t even part of the laughing contingent. “Remember what?! What happened?” asked Jay again, this time to nobody in particular, his voice lowering to a mumble.

Rewind

Rewind to the previous afternoon and there was Jay on all fours, licking the pavement. In between drags of his tongue, he’s screaming: “I’m sleeping rough and someone has stolen my food! These are the floors I sleep on!”

A pedestrian cutting through the park looking at his phone doesn’t notice Jay at first. He is suddenly startled with fright as he almost bumps into Jay’s quadruped form. “Does that disgust you?!” shouts Jay, his tongue black with tarmac, causing the passerby to drop his phone before just catching it by the headphone wires dangling out of it. The more alert pedestrians are giving him a much wider berth, doing their best to ignore him in between furtive glances. Across the road, a couple of young men laugh at the sight of him, holding up their phones in capture.

“Oi, Jay, fucking cut it out! Old Bill’ll be here if you don’t fucking pack it in!” snaps Tony, trying to use some of that Godfather-esque moral leverage.¹ Jay doesn’t seem to hear Tony, or if he does, he isn’t listening. Instead, he keeps licking and asking, on repeat, to anyone within earshot if his actions disgust them. Reading the faces of passing pedestrians, there did seem to be a fair amount of revulsion going around, combined with that uneasy look people often get when confronted with a set of eyes that so clearly do not have a shared world behind them. Tony and the others, though, seem more annoyed than disgusted, especially at the prospect of his behavior attracting the police. “All it takes is for one person to call this in. Bad enough with the Poles always fighting. Council already don’t want us here. This is just gonna make it worse. Fucking

1. Old Bill being British slang for the police.

nightmare when he gets like this—you can't get through to him. Oi! Shut it! Before you get us all nicked!" shouts Tony, to no avail. "See? Might as well be talking to a brick wall."

Larry, who had heroin and cannabis on him, quickly tires of Jay's performance, understandably nervous at the prospect of being around should the police turn up. "Fuck this!" he growls, as he packs up his bag. He stops alongside Jay and jabs a finger in his direction: "Stupid fucking cunt!" I see Larry's jaw stiffen as he looks around, gauging his surroundings. Max leans over to me: "He wants to give him a smack, you can tell he's itching for it. If it were dark, he'd knock him out for making such a racket—wouldn't be the first time. Too many people around now though." Larry storms off, quickly joined by a number of others also keen to avoid any potential police presence.

Something of the force from Larry's finger jab seems to jolt Jay off his hands and knees. Suddenly bipedal, he begins pacing back and forth while talking to himself, oscillating between whispers and shouts. Though it's difficult to make out all of what he's saying, most of it is about the searing indignation he feels about having his lunch stolen. His lunch—a couple of Pret a Manger sandwiches—had been picked up that morning from the local day center and, from what I could make out, put in a plastic bag and tied to his rucksack. "How can you steal from a homeless man. Taking food out the mouth of a homeless man. Heartless. FUCKING HEARTLESS!" he yells, still pacing back and forth. This goes on for a while—the pacing, the violent outbursts, the accusations: "Did you take it? Did you? Did you. Someone fucking took it. Took food out a homeless person's mouth."

Jay had been drinking heavily since the morning; strewn around his rucksack was a clutter of empty K-cider cans, at least seven by my count. Coming in at a hefty 8.4 percent ABV, each can is essentially almost double the potency of an average-strength cider. To put this into perspective, the United Kingdom's chief medical officer currently advises that men and women should not exceed more than 14 alcoholic units per week. A half-liter of standard 5 percent lager or cider contains approximately 2.5 units of alcohol. A can of K-cider contains 4.2. In other words, drinking just over three cans of this stuff would be enough to reach the recommended weekly quota. Jay, in a single morning of drinking, has already exceeded double this weekly limit, and those are just the empty cans I can see. It is not uncommon for Jay to drink upwards of ten cans of K-cider each day, sometimes pushing as high as fifteen. Even by the conservative estimate of seven cans per day, Jay's weekly

consumption would be upwards of 200 units, or fifteen times the recommended amount. While Jay, along with Ash, was one of the heavier drinkers, this level of consumption was by no means abnormal in the community. Though different people metabolize and process alcohol at different rates, such consistently high levels of drinking are enough to take a toll on even the most hepatologically robust. It should not be surprising, then, that liver failure is one of the leading causes of death for rough sleepers, a risk that is amplified by polydrug use and other forms of comorbidity that also affect the liver, notably hepatitis C from sharing needles and snorting devices.

All of which is to say that, by the time he had begun to lick the pavement and scream at random pedestrians about the heartless theft of his sandwiches, there could be no doubt that, for all his heroic tolerance, Jay was drunk. And here, deeply intoxicated by the day's steady flow of super-strength cider, Jay stopped pacing and picked up one of the old cans littered around his bag. He began to go at the can with his teeth as though he were trying to tear meat from a bone, ripping it apart until the serrated metal began to cut up the inside corners of his mouth. From there, he dragged it down the side of his cheek, the dregs from the bottom of the can mingling with the blood as he opened up a parallel series of cuts that appeared like claw marks. It was hard not to be struck by the almost bestial rage of the act. Jay and I didn't know each other especially well at this point, and he appeared (at least in my memory) to be looking directly at me, eyes glassed over, body cataleptically rigid, as though caught in a trance that might burst into violence at any moment.

Max and Tony, though, remained unconcerned that Jay posed any kind of physical threat. It was the threat of the police arriving that most concerned them. "Don't worry about him," said Max, sensing my apprehension. "He's just having one of his episodes or whatever." "Episodes?" interjected Tony, "episode of *Doctor Who*, more like—bloke acts like he's been taken over by aliens or something. He ain't all there."² "C'mon Tone," replied Max, "it's not like we don't have our moments." "Not like fucking that we don't," shot Tony back, pointing over to Jay, who was

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2. *Doctor Who* is a British science fiction show that follows the intergalactic adventures of an alien being called "the Doctor" who exists in what appears to be a human form. The series is something of a national institution, spanning decades and recognized for its innovative visuals, amusing special effects, as well as its ability to captivate adults and children alike, combining space horror, politics, and alembicated humor.

now spitting blood on the floor and repeating, “I’m the last Traveller,” over and over. Max, the more sympathetic of the two, leaned over to me and said:

Tone’s just pissed off cos this isn’t the first time he’s acted like this and gotten the coppers involved. But you can’t do anything when he’s like this, he won’t listen—he’s not himself. All of us get like that, well...maybe not exactly like that—but when you get fucked up you do shit you wouldn’t do normally. Stuff you’ve buried comes up, takes you over. We’ve all got demons.

Jay eventually broke out of his trance and stormed out of the park and down the road in a kind of fugue state, leaving behind a pool of blood and his rucksack at the foot of the bench. “Fucking idiot,” said Tony, “someone’ll have that in a second,” pointing to the backpack. Max, sensing an opportunity, got off the bench to collect it: “We’ll keep an eye on it for him. Tone’s right—someone’ll have hold of it in a second.” Max proceeded to pat the bag down. You could tell from the way the fabric bulged that there were a couple of ciders in the front compartment. He withdrew two tins of K-cider and passed one to Tony and, preempting any judgment on my behalf, told me that Jay was lucky it was them who had spotted his bag: “Anyone else around here would have been off with that in a second. Especially anyone that’s clucking.” Tony nodded in agreement as he opened the spoils of Max’s kindness: “Would’ve taken it to some back alley and emptied it onto the floor, see what they could sell. Then they’d have left it there. He’d never see it again. Gone.”

“Just don’t write this part in your notebook!” joked Max as he took a deep swig.

Fast Forward

Fast forward to the opening of this chapter and Max, tired of Jay’s amnesiac allegations, fills him in on the above story: the rage about his stolen lunch, the pavement licking, chewing the can apart with his teeth. Initially, Jay seems dubious of the story he’s just heard, dismissing it as “bollocks.” Straight away, though, Lisa vouches for Max’s account. As does Tony. Before long, a few others who had been there for the first part of the episode also corroborated this version of the events, even though most of them had fled the scene before he’d started tearing into the can. Max, adopting the disposition and dramatic gestures of a trial lawyer, arose from his seat and directed Jay’s attention to the patch of dried

blood that clung to the paving stone, now ashen-colored after its night under the cold air. “Whose blood do you think that is?” asked Max with a sort of case-closed triumphalism. Sensing that Jay was still not fully convinced, Max decided the time had come to present his star witness, my field notebook. “Take a look, he said, the whole thing’s in there. Show him,” he said, gesturing towards the book I was actively scribbling away in.

While I strove to be open with my fieldnotes, often encouraging people to revisit—when appropriate—scenes, situations, life histories, and events with me so as to cultivate collaborative forms of ethnographic analysis and storytelling, this moment caught me off guard. It did so for two main reasons. First, it disrupted the normative temporality and sociality of the processes of ethnographic composition—within which data is assumed to move in a linear fashion from the “raw” to the “cooked,” so to speak. Second, it laid bare the fragmentary, multi-authorial, and fraught construction of memory and forgetting in social contexts permeated by dissociative temporalities, a process of which I had now become a distinct (and unexpected) part. This moment, where fieldwork methodology and fieldwork reality collapsed in on each other, is worth exploring further. Not only does it intimately flesh out the complex sociality of blackout temporality, but it also problematizes the positionality of ethnography and with it the jurisdiction of anthropological knowledge.

The Whole Thing

When Max confidently assured Jay that the “whole thing”—that is to say the complete picture of the events from the day before—was contained within my notebook, he effectively turned my fieldnotes (still in their crudest, most unrefined form) into a piece of hard evidence, or better yet, a reliable archive of the past, akin to video surveillance footage. Where the group’s collective recollections were deemed, on some level, to be unreliable—even in spite of the broad level of corroboration—my notes were presented as something concrete, objective, and trustworthy, unmoved by personal bias or an ulterior motive. They were, to use the language of the courts, meant to remove any reasonable doubt in the mind of Jay who, because of his blackout, was simultaneously jury and accused.

From my perspective, though, these biro-written notes were distinctly raw—partial, sketch-like compositions of the previous day’s happenings. But for Max, they were as good as finished, cooked entirely through.

Ultimately, it was this discrepancy between my and Max's understandings of the degree of "wholeness" sandwiched between the covers of my notebook that knocked me off balance. So, where does this vast discrepancy emerge from? We can start to answer this question by thinking about the spatiotemporality of the fieldnote itself. As James Clifford (1990) discusses, the notes that anthropologists accrue over a period of fieldwork are never truly "raw" as such. Rather, they are one node in a discontinuous, uneven, and often opaque web that is in a constant state of change as the notetaker moves within and between different stages and spaces of fieldwork. Taking the example that prompted this section, when Max commanded that I open my notebook to set Jay straight about his past actions, the shorthand scribbles he wanted to use as evidence had already mutated by that point, reinscribed and thus remade the night before in my bedroom. In that secluded space, my skeletal shorthand became lengthened and thickened as that which was "written down" began the process of becoming "written up." Crucially, the movement from initial inscription to thick description all the way to the "smooth veneer" of ethnography is rarely, if ever, a linear process. As demonstrated in going home to privately type up and "flesh out" the day's fieldnotes, these reinscription practices are defined not only by a spatial distancing, but a temporal one also. This temporal distancing refers not only to the post hoc nature of writing but also, as Johannes Fabian (1983) famously observed in his critique of the anthropological episteme, to the way in which ethnographic writing denies the contemporaneity of the subject. On the one hand, Max's requisition of my notes, already mutated on an elsewhere (and elsewhen) hard drive, confirmed Fabian's warning. At the same time though, his interruption of my note-taking and his command to literally turn back the pages worked to collapse this temporal distance, affirming not only the coequality of fieldwork, but also the embodied immediacy of note-taking as a distinctly intersubjective activity.

So, when Jay came forward and I hurriedly began to flick the pages back to uncover the entry in question, what exactly was he faced with? Below, I offer a photograph of the page in question.

The first thing that happened was that Jay stumbled over my scratchy handwriting and idiosyncratic shorthand. Going back and forth several times, Jay and I worked together to decipher the text, all the while Max and the others closed in around us to form a kind of hushed cocoon, with some occasionally interjecting when they heard a phrase or description from the retelling that matched their own recollections. When these voices got too loud, Tony and Max would intervene and adjudicate,

S. "choose to be homeless" my life
is falling
apart

↳ looking after (over?)
daughter

Says kill anyone who touches her

↳ violent language

Lost of his kind? Gypsy, Aberdeen

S. "get to sort myself out" wife
divorce

looking for his lunch (sandwich)!!

All Ls - into pavement disgust you!

"Slept on floors" (X) X

(15+) ↳ guy jumps

Rips LC - carter with teeth, blood
everywhere

Cries he's an animal) - Tony

↳ Trance? "I'm the last
traveller x 3 x 4

S. "Do you think I'm crazy"

- Squares up to Liam, walks away
(sneering)

Figure 1. Page from field notebook.

imploing for people to keep quiet until Jay and I had managed to get through my notes. Already, then, the notion that my notes were anything like video surveillance began to fall apart, the to-and-fro process of unscrambling my jottings into something jointly legible revealing the liminal quality of fieldnotes, of their betwixt position between reality,

perception, and memory. This betwixtness carried a deeper existential resonance for Jay than anyone else involved. After all, this collective act of remembrance was about more than settling a difference of opinion. Rather, it brought into public existence a differentiated self that Jay had, until now, been occluded from. As we went through the notes, reconstructing each event as we went along, Jay would frequently shake his head in disbelief, murmuring things like: “No, no,” “couldn’t have done that,” “no fucking way,” and “that wasn’t me.” At the same time, Max, Tony, and others who had been there would counter Jay’s disavowals by loudly affirming the veracity of the story that was reemerging, creatively infusing it with their own memories, descriptions, and embellishments.

At one point, Jimmy—who had been uncharacteristically quiet until then—said that someone should commission a DNA test on the dried blood across the pavement. Fanciful though such an idea was, it was met with groans of approval from the wider group, the blood appearing to offer the kind of irrefutable, objective evidence that only the body and its markers are supposedly capable of providing. Reentering the story as a piece of forensic proof to be held alongside the more circumstantial evidence of group testimony, this talk of blood and genetic testing seemed to make Jay reach for the cuts on his face, as though probing the reality of his body—a body whose wounds originated from a time (and self) zone he had no access to. “See there” said Max, drawing the materiality of the fieldnote into the that of the pavement, “look what it says: blood [from] his mouth, all over [the] floor,” quoting my notes verbatim. “Why would Josh wanna make this shit up? He’s here to observe. That’s his job, innit?” In his eyes, I was an impartial observer who would have nothing to gain from fabricating stories about Jay. I was trustworthy, in other words—which meant my notes were as well. Eventually, the combined force of this collective retelling, buttressed by the blood stain and the now decrypted set of fieldnotes, caused Jay to accept that nobody in the group had inflicted the cuts upon him. The evidence, it seemed, was simply too much to ignore. What seemed to finally get things over the line, as it were, was one of the final notes on the page, the one that read: “I’m the last traveller.”

Something about that phrase seemed to connect with Jay in a way that the other notes—the ones detailing the self-wounding and fury—did not. It seemed to spark a kind of recognition amongst the darkness, like spotting your signature amongst a page thick and swirling with otherwise impenetrable scribbles. Sensing Jay was starting to calm down and accept the group’s version of events, Max decided the moment was

right to tell him that he and Tony had kept his rucksack safe for him. Tony, taking this as a signal to pull the bag out from behind his own, felt compelled to remind Jay that he was lucky they'd happened upon it given the state he was in, careful not to let their act of opportunistic altruism go to waste. Faced with his rucksack, Jay suddenly seemed embarrassed at his earlier outbursts and, shifting to a more diffident tone, thanked Tony and Max for doing him a favor, promising that he would "sort them out" with some drinks later by way of recompense. The two men nodded in acceptance, choosing to ignore the ciders they'd already taken from his bag as a deposit.

Just as the atmosphere began to simmer back down, though, Jay still had one unanswered question, which he directed at me. "What about my face?" he asked, pointing to the plum red swelling around his eye and cheek. "It say anything in your book about who fucking dooshed me one?"³ This, my fieldnotes didn't have an answer for, their archival reach not extending beyond the point where he'd left the park. I told him as much, even taking him through the next set of notes I took after he'd disappeared. Before I had a chance to turn more than a couple of pages, though, Larry intervened, telling him that he'd found him slumped unconscious at the foot of steps going into the hostel where Jay was staying. On his way out at the time, Larry told Jay someone had said that they'd seen him fall over and hit his head, which would explain the swelling. "Who do you think dragged you in there and put you to bed?" said Larry, his tone seeming to insist on gratitude. Jay—clearly having no memory of the degree to which he'd infuriated Larry the day before or how much he'd wanted to punch him for the commotion he caused—had little choice but to accept Larry's version of events. As I would later discover, though, while Larry had indeed run into Jay later on that evening, it wasn't outside the hostel, but inside the building where their paths had crossed. Presented with an opportunity to do what he'd been unable to earlier in the day, Larry had struck Jay across the face and knocked him unconscious following an altercation in the hallway, one that he had purposefully provoked.

Much like the cuts on his face, though, the swelling across his cheek was a remainder from a past he had effectively forfeited authorship of, a temporal void that now belonged to somebody else.

3. Scottish slang for punched.

Swiss Cheese

Before that day in question, the jottings I kept in my field notebook were essentially addressed to me, *aide-mémoires* used alongside other field materials like photographs, diagrams, sketches, and audio recordings to prompt recall and arouse the anthropological imagination. In this respect, the fieldnotes' relationship to memory is intrinsically fraught and complex, their form shrouded in ambiguity. As such, they hold the dual capacity to both stimulate and strain memory, a polyglot container of multiple voices that, in their stains and scruffiness, cut simultaneously across multiple temporal fronts. They echo back to the past and yet they belong in the present, always open to new rereadings that leave them forever en route to future destinations unknown. This ambiguity notwithstanding, my privileged position as the ethnographer meant that I exerted considerable levels of control over the flow of information, typically withholding any "raw" data from public rereadings until they had been sufficiently "worked on."⁴ My ability to rethread these past events back into the needle's eye of the ethnographic present as and when I saw fit thus reflected the uneven power distribution within the field. The fact that—until Max summoned my notes as evidence—I had barely given this capacity more than a second thought only confirmed this asymmetry, power so often hiding behind the things we take as our prerogative.

And just like that, I lost control. My rawest fieldnotes, warts and all, were suddenly a public resource. I was no longer in charge of them. By contingency more than design, what little power I had taken for granted had buckled under the ephemeral sociality of Itchy Park, swallowed into a complicated event within which Jay's memories were created, contested, transformed, abused, and redeployed across the broader community. Clifford's assertion that "any representation of the event ... is itself part of the event" (1992: 54) carries particular weight here. After all, even when they are not being used to fill in the temporal blanks left by dissociative states-of-being, fieldnotes are always in the business of "re-presenting."

4. There were also important moral and ethical reasons behind this decision. Given the gray-zone logic underwriting social relations in the park as described in the first half of the book, I bore witness to countless swindles, deceptions, abuses, and behind-the-back rumors throughout my time in the field. So, in order to minimize the risk of sparking a feud or violent altercation by disclosing sensitive information, it would not be uncommon for me to redact sections from my fieldnotes in advance.

Like the memories they aid, fieldnotes are *re*-enactments of the past, bringing forth into the present that which is now, in reality, absent.

If memory is already a kind of absence, then Jay's blackout entails a double absence, a void so deep he is effectively forced to cede authorial control of his past to outside forms of re-presentation. This, it should be noted, was by no means a unique situation in the daily ebb and flow of park life, even if the sequestering of my fieldnotes added a novel feature to the collective memory work undertaken by the community. With different people ingesting different combinations of psychoactive chemicals at different times of the day, there was no way to coherently map who was falling into states of timelessness and who was coming out of them. The varying metabolic constitutions across the group meant that some, depending on the type and quantity of the drugs they were taking, were more likely to experience blackouts than others. On top of that, plenty of people experienced "grayouts"—partial blackouts in which memory was not totally vanquished but rather fragmented, the past appearing as a broken jigsaw with multiple pieces missing.

Finding the missing pieces meant embarking on a kind of detective work. Like a police officer going door to door to interview potential witnesses, it was standard practice to move through whoever was hanging around over the course of the day in a bid to pick up scraps of information that might help someone retrace the lost footprints of their past. Given the scale of anesthetic intoxication, though, there were plenty of times where the witness a person sought was in exactly the same boat, unable to remember their own yesterday, let alone someone else's. Other times, a witness's memory could be uncannily precise, turning almost scalpel-sharp when it came to remembering acts of kindness or generosity they supposedly enacted during that person's amnesiac interval. Debt squaring also seemed to spike during these periods—claims that would frequently be contested by the memoryless party, often leading to heated arguments. If neither side was prepared to make concessions, these disputes would often end up being settled by the kind of collective adjudication described at the beginning of this chapter. Often, though, people remained suspicious of these verdicts and refused to accept them, convinced that ulterior motives and historical animosities had been used against them.

In many regards, people had good reason to hold such reservations. As demonstrated by Max and Tony helping themselves to Jay's cider stash (not to mention Larry playing the Good Samaritan despite assaulting him), absent memories were, like everything else in the park, ripe for

abuse and deception. Because everyone had, to varying degrees, taken advantage of other people's memory blanks, it was only logical that they should hold a certain level of paranoia regarding their own vulnerabilities when slipping into these kinds of states. At the same time, though, the fact that everyone in the park was almost guaranteed to experience some level of chemically induced memory loss at some point had a sort of limiting effect, preventing the abuse from reaching too elevated a level. As Larry's assault illustrates, though, this prisoner's dilemma-esque situation was no fail-safe, with people frequently exceeding the limits of protection offered by this shared vulnerability. What's more, these very abuses could often turn into a kind of capital unto themselves, a little black book that people could whip out when it was deemed advantageous. For example, someone running low on drugs or money might use a secret they'd been harboring as leverage to acquire donations or else procure a discount or even forgiveness on an outstanding debt. It was also not uncommon for someone to corroborate a story they couldn't remember or weren't even present for in order to curry favor in the future. Other times, these secret abuses would be unleashed in the heat of arguments as a way to acquire new allegiances and publicly tarnish an opponent's reputation, effectively diminishing their moral standing in the community.

Memory in Itchy Park is thus not only a site of existential crisis, but also a currency in a broader political economy. Underpinned by mass chemical forgetting, these communal re-presentations can be said to intersect, almost symbiotically, with the gray-zone sociality of the sharing economy described in the opening chapters. In much the same way that wood filler has no market value in a world without wood, the representational fillings provided by the park's memory economy are worthless if there are no holes to be filled. This, of course, is not a problem in Itchy Park—a place where holes abound. As Jimmy told me, "people's memories here are like Swiss cheese." Riddled with holes, in other words. Jimmy's evocative analogy can be broadened to encompass the wider socio-temporal fabric of the park, a moth-eaten world in which holes expand and vanish as different people seesaw between memory and oblivion, between self and nonself.

Indeed, it is this nonself that allows the aforementioned memory economy to operate in the way that it does. To wit: these self-forgettings are not so much gaps in the memory market, rather—as gaps—they *are* the market. In this respect, the moment my fieldnotes slipped my control and became co-opted by Max and the wider group, they

became—to borrow the language of market innovation—a “disruptive” technology to the extent that, for a time, they began to alter the social patterns of memory-filling intrinsic to daily life in the park. Publicly portrayed by Max as an impartial observer, people began to see me—or rather my fieldnotes—as a kind of archive, a one-man-one-book court of arbitration that could be relied upon to settle interpersonal disputes. For those with absent memories, my fieldnotes seemed to promise a panacea for their predicament, something that might liberate them from the uncertainty, suspicion, and predation intrinsic to the memory economy. As is the case with almost all panaceas, though, the reality failed to live up to the promise. For one, my so-called “success” of accurately recording the key details of Jay’s amnesiac episode created the false impression that I possessed some kind of panoptic view of the park’s daily happenings, despite the fact that—as in any situation that involves large groups going about their daily lives—people were continuously splintering into subgroups, going to the liquor store, sourcing drugs, hitting up begging spots, and just generally moving around to do things and have conversations that I couldn’t see or hear, even if I’d wanted to.

For the first couple of weeks following the incident, people would frequently approach me—sometimes on their own, sometimes in groups—and ask me to settle disputes or fill in their blanks. This posed a number of problems. Most immediately problematic was that, in many instances, I simply had no idea what had transpired. One afternoon, for example, I was approached by George, his barrel-chested Staffordshire bull terrier Bruno in tow. Walking alongside him was Jimmy. “Josh’ll sort it” was the first thing I heard as they moved towards me. George was adamant that Jimmy owed him a cut from his begging earnings for using Bruno the day before. The tricky part was that George, following a major binge the day before, had no memory of lending Bruno to Jimmy. Originally, he’d entrusted Bruno with his girlfriend, Emma, who was meant to be keeping an eye on him while George went off to score for the both of them. According to another park resident, though, Jimmy was the last person to be seen with the dog. This much was true—Jimmy had been taking care of the dog the day before, and he didn’t deny that. According to Jimmy though, the only reason he had Bruno in the first place was because Emma had disappeared and left Bruno tied to a bike railing at the other end of the park.

According to Jimmy, Bruno was getting agitated from being left on his own and he was concerned that the police or the RSPCA would be

called and that Bruno would be taken away.⁵ As far as Jimmy was concerned, he had done George a favor by saving his dog from impoundment or worse and, further, if George should be angry with anyone, it should be Emma for being so negligent. As Emma told it, though, she'd only chained him up to run across the road to use a bathroom in a café—the implication being that Jimmy had opportunistically rushed over and walked off with him before she'd returned. Jimmy found the accusation that he had been lurking in the background like some kind of ambush predator waiting for a chance to swipe George's dog especially insulting, and tempers began to flare when he rebutted that Emma “was a fucking liar” who George “shouldn't trust as far as [he] could throw her.”

Nestled among these claims and counterclaims were my fieldnotes—called upon to reach some kind of authoritative judgment: *to sort it*. Except that I couldn't. As I told both of them, the whole thing was news to me. I'd remembered seeing Bruno at some point in the day, but I certainly couldn't remember under whose eye he was being kept or whether I'd seen him chained up to a bike rack or not. Faced with this gap rather than the filling they'd both hoped for, George turned to me and half-joked: “What good are you, then?” The joke was halved because George was genuinely disappointed—both men were. Aside from touching on one of anthropology's central nerves—the fear of irrelevance—George's quip, in all its disenchantment, spoke to the changing social dynamics of my fieldnotes. All too often, when someone recruited me to sort truth from falsehood, the authority of my notes would centripetally form together in the moment of recruitment, only to fall apart and disperse, centrifugally, back across the park's Swiss cheese memoryscape when it became clear that my own memories, and the representations that flowed from them, were often just as intractable and sieve-like as their own. On other occasions where I was within earshot and had indeed been taking notes on events, the moral complexities of certain situations would often impel me to feign ignorance, the ethical and social cost of exposing someone's deceptions, secrets, or hidden agendas simply too high—threatening not only my own relation with the person in question, but also their broader social standing. If, as Anne Lovell notes (2007: 59), secrets can be thought of as secretions that are continually oozing through the semipermeable layers of intersubjective life, forever making and unmaking the bounds of our most intimate selves, then my

5. RSPCA stands for The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

notebook was a particular kind of membrane—as likely to ossify as it was to discharge. In short, those in the park who presumed me akin to Funes the Memorious soon found me to be Funes the Forgetful, each failure (and refusal) to retrieve and sort the past into an accurate re-presentation serving to diminish my reputation until, little by little, my fieldnotes lost their wonder-drug luster and, like before, faded into the background—still occasionally invoked but never relied upon.

For those who came to me alone, not to settle a dispute but to try and piece back together the lost time of their black- and grayouts, our conversations tended to follow a familiar pattern. Assuming that I possessed any relevant information (and so long as nothing I had written down risked disclosing anyone else's secrets), what normally unfolded was similar to what happened with Jay at the beginning of this chapter—albeit without the same heightened level of audience participation. There would be a back and forth, in other words, that would involve me retracing my fieldnotes, unscrambling my shorthand, and broadly creating a timeline of any events, conversations, and interactions that I had happened to witness or participate in. Just as Jay had shaken his head with incredulity, so too would others as we walked backwards over the second-hand memory fragments my notes could offer them. “I did that?” “I said that?” “I told you that?” were the most common questions my interlocutors would ask me as we worked our way through the notes. Some were shocked at what they had done, at how they had acted towards others in the park, the police, and the public. Many were furious at the money, drinks, and drugs they had given away. Others were horrified at the secrets they'd disclosed to me. In truth, often it was the deep intimacy of these secrets—these micro-signatures of self—that allayed any mounting suspicions that I might have been engaging in fabrication. Folded simultaneously into these incredulities and secretions was a disclaiming of their agentive faculties, that this person they were being re-presented with was, quite simply, *not them*. The intensity with which this *not me-ness* was experienced varied from person to person. For some, like Jay and Ash, blacking out involved a radical eversion of self—a “becoming somebody else” that was experientially kindred with forms of abductive possession. For many others, the dissociative vacuums left behind in the wake of their black- and grayouts were not articulated in such radical terms.⁶ Nevertheless, across the continuum, what remained true for all

6. Within any social group, we would expect the most extreme forms of experience to be, by definition, some of the least common. Thinking back

was the experience of lost time—a hole in the past that, no matter how “accurately” it was filled in by other people, would always retain a disembodied third-person quality, would always lack the synthetic “mineness” of self-generated memory.

Lost Time

The artwork on page 192, entitled *Lost Time*, was created by Jay in a local day center. This image profoundly captures the way the breakdown of episodic memory as experienced in the blackout intersects with, and disrupts, normative regimes of time and self. Over the remainder of this chapter, I will be drawing extensively on this image along with another of Jay’s artworks to problematize dominant social categories that hold self (presence) and Other (absence) in binary relation, revisiting Mattingly’s vision of critical phenomenology 2.0 as a way of exposing the structural conditions and “frozen thought” that lurk hidden behind these categories. First though, it is important to dig deeper into the relation between episodic memory and self-continuity.

Those with an interest in the area have tended to divide memory into four subcategories. Short-term, working memory: as in remembering a person’s address or a phone number. Procedural or “habit” memory: this refers to the type of implicit, long-term memory that allow us to perform complex skills, like riding a bike or finely chopping a clove of garlic. Semantic memory: an explicit form of long-term memory that concerns learned knowledge about the external world, things like capital cities, vocabulary, types of food, etc. Episodic memory: our memories of events in their specific spatial, temporal, and interpersonal context. Episodic memory is coextensive with autobiographical understandings of the self, meaning that the emotional and affective resonances along with the broader social context of the event are entwined within each memory.

to Seligman’s work on the Candomblé possession tradition, not everyone who is part of that religious community experiences spirit mediumship. In fact, most do not. Nevertheless, as R. D. Laing (1967) might have it, it is often those who have the most extreme experiences—be they spirit mediums, the socially outcast, or the clinically abnormal—who can provide the most revealing vistas into the “tangled web of social relations” that uphold normalcy, the cultural patterns of which will determine whether those at the extreme poles of experience are revered or reviled.



Figure 2. *Lost Time*. Artwork by Jay; used with permission.

In the cut and thrust of daily life, these types of memory all share features and are prone to bleeding into each other. Still, breaking them down into these distinctions is analytically useful. For one, it allows us to more accurately pinpoint the role that psychoactive substances play in the destabilization of a person's sense of self and how memory figures in that process. After all, someone in a state of blackout can certainly remember a person's phone number long enough to dial it. Procedurally speaking, they can continue to draw on procedural memories like rolling cigarettes. Being able to answer what the capital of France is would also not be an issue, so long as they had learned of Paris at some point in their lives. However, having any recollection of the phone call they made, the cigarette they smoked, or who asked them about France's capital and under what experiential conditions would be impossible. Unhooked from episodic memory, these experiences would become foreign events.

This is why episodic memory has featured so consistently in the domains of philosophy, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, especially when it comes to existential questions regarding the continuity of the self. In part, this interest can be traced back to Endel Tulving (1985) who, by focusing on episodic memory, developed his theory of "auto-noetic" consciousness. Broadly stated, Tulving's argument was that human beings enjoy a type of memory (episodic) and thus a form of consciousness (autonoetic) that is different from animals. Drawing on the work of William James, Tulving defines autonoetic consciousness as the human capacity to undergo mental "time travel" through subjective time and consciously "apprehend her personal past and future" (1985: 7). The episodic memory system is thus said to transmit to our autonoetic consciousness whatever information is needed for recollective experience to occur. As Thomas Natsoulas (2003) has deftly observed, Tulving's notion of a "personal" past/future was clearly influenced by James's (1890: 311) assertion that memories, if they are to be truly reexperienced as personally our own, must evoke a feeling of "warmth and intimacy." James's point was that the perceptual stream of consciousness is intrinsically qualitative and so any reflective inner awareness that turns this stream into an object of recollection must necessarily summon a commensurate qualitative character. Otherwise, our sense of the past will lack "first-handness" and so feel cold and foreign (Dokic 2014). Building on this, Tulving describes our autobiographical memories as possessing a unique "flavor." Without the episodic memory system, then, the past—unyoked from its lived, experiential context—would lose its unique flavor, leading to a profound cleavage in the self.

It is something like this disappearance of flavor that Jay experiences in the wake of his blackouts. That said, the painting he has created gestures towards something more than mere disappearance, but rather to a novel flavor of being. Here, then, we start to depart from Tulving's project, which—it should be noted—was distinctly nonanthropological. Rather, his interest was in enacting a paradigm shift within the psychology of memory, to break away from what he perceived to be the stranglehold of behaviorism (the theory that memory ought to be primarily understood in terms of stimulus-reinforcement dynamics). Indeed, Tulving's thesis is rooted primarily in the case study of K. C., a man who, following brain damage sustained in a motorbike accident, suffers from a rare form of retrograde amnesia that prevents him from being able to recall any autobiographical events. Unable to "time travel," Tulving makes the case that K. C., because he does not possess a functioning episodic memory system, is effectively minus an auto-noetic consciousness. K. C. is said to live in a "permanent present" that denies him a temporal frame for existence, cut off from both past and future. While K. C.'s existence is undeniably abnormal, Tulving's analysis of him becomes problematic when held up against one of his central claims—namely that auto-noetic episodic memory is so uniquely human as to be one of the key features that separates us from other animals. The implication being that those who, like K. C., do not possess this capacity are at least partially diminished in their humanity. To be clear, Tulving never makes this suggestion explicitly, and would likely be horrified at the notion that he had somehow, however partially or accidentally, dehumanized someone he had spent so much time studying and clearly had great affection for. Nevertheless, K. C.'s temporal life is frequently described in terms of its deficiency and impoverishment—there is a resounding "blankness" where subjective time is meant to be (Tulving 1985). And yet, as Natsoulas (2003) suggests, maybe he is not nearly as auto-noetically "mind-blind" as Tulving might have us think, arguing that K. C. demonstrates an ability to use first-hand apprehensions and imaginations of the world to reflect on his inner life and parse out a subjective sense of time consciousness. He notes, for example, K. C.'s ability (barring distractions) to hold a conversation and conform to normal patterns of social interaction, an intersubjective experience that requires a certain level of retentive and protentive capacity.

Tulving is also clear that so long as K. C.'s environment remains stable (i.e., that the fridge is stocked and the bills are paid on time), then he "has no problem surviving, and surviving well" (2004: 29). The idea,

however, that he could *live* well—rather than simply survive well—in the world is not advanced so readily, even though K. C. himself rates his quality of life at four on a five-point scale. He remains in the eyes of the psychological sciences a pathological outlier, so profoundly interesting not because of what he has, but because of what he lacks:

He does not seem to possess what others do—an ever-present awareness of one's being existing in a subjective sea of time, always in transition from what is now becoming the past to what once was the future. K. C. possesses a noetic (knowing) self, but lacks an auto-noetic (or projectable, or time traveling or remembering self). (Tulving 2004: 29)

Half Measures

Whichever way you take things, empty or full, K. C. is presented as missing one half of his self—a lack that is seen to fundamentally diminish a core part of his human potential, that is to time travel. Here, though, one cannot help but wonder what an ethnographer might have gleaned had they, like Tulving, spent the same number of years alongside K. C. For Tulving and his colleagues who visited K. C. and conducted their experiments over a twenty-year period, his case served as the bedrock for a number of major theoretical frameworks in their field beyond just episodic memory, including the concept of multiple memory systems, the “remember/know” paradigm, and chronesthesia, to name just a few (Rosenbaum et al. 2005). And yet, when it comes to the man's daily life, we are given but a cursory snapshot. We know that he lives with his parents in the same home he grew up in. We know his mother wakes him for breakfast and leaves him a note on the microwave door reminding him to maintain his daily exercise regime of treadmill running and stationary biking. We know that he takes daily outings which involve a combination of volunteering at a local library and other activities like swimming, bowling, and playing pool. We're also told that he does these things with a group of other people who have suffered head injuries—a group he also sees every Friday night for dinner and a film. For downtime, when nothing has been arranged, we learn that K. C. sits down and plays the organ, or else plays card games on his computer. In the evenings, we know that he eats dinner with his family and watches his favorite television shows before retiring to bed.

What we don't know is anything about the depth and complexity of the social relations that hold this routine together, a routine that clearly involves—on some level—novelty, creativity, and community. When K. C.'s family is mentioned in the literature, it is to remark on their openness in allowing the scientific community into their lives, and not on the texture of their life as it is experienced communally. Did his mother sign her notes each morning? Did she leave a kiss? Did she just recycle the same note, or did she craft a new one each time? What was it like for K. C. to hit the treadmill? Presumably lacking a historical sense of anything like a personal best, what kind of "zone" did he enter when he ran? What sort of strategy did he employ when playing cards, a game that hinges on an acute juggling of past interactions and future possibilities? What did he play on the organ—the same tune every day or did he pick a song that reflected his mood? Did he improvise new melodies—how might any such song choices and improvisations have tied into his radically altered sense of temporality? What sort of things did he and his friends discuss at their Friday dinners? How did this group, all possessing different forms of neurological impairment, maintain and negotiate their interpersonal relationships with one another? How did his parents adjust the kilter of their dinner conversation to reflect and connect with the unique temporality of their son's condition? These are just a handful of questions that an ethnographer would likely have been interested in.⁷ Whatever the answers might be, what seems clear that is that K. C.'s life was packed with a unique flavor that far exceeded its clinical categorization of a "psychopathological reality" (Rosenbaum et al. 2005: 991).

Would an ethnographer have arrived at the conclusion, as Tulving and his colleagues did, that K. C. was competent and "effortlessly functioning" in his limited environment, but still only half a self? Of course, this is a loaded question. For psychologists whose intellectual interests are centered around the internal mechanisms of memory, it was the unique absence of his episodic faculties that made him such a rare and enticing research subject. No surprise, then, that the focus of these studies has always been on what is missing and, by extension, what is therefore required for a human being to be considered "whole." Without diminishing the significant theoretical developments that K. C. (and other amnesiacs) facilitated in these various fields, it remains hard to shake off the sense that there are some deep-seated cultural assumptions

7. There is precious little of note written on the social life of amnesiac patients.

baked into these interpretations. As Emily Martin (1991) demonstrated in her deconstruction of gendered human gamete dynamics in science textbooks—namely that encultured patriarchal hierarchies are being reproduced though the imagery of brave and heroic sperm fertilizing passive and vulnerable eggs—cultural assumptions influence every stage of the research process, from the framing of research questions all the way through to the interpretation of findings.⁸ With respect to the vast corpus of clinical work dedicated to K. C., the implicit cultural assumption or “sleeping metaphor”—to use Martin’s term—is that temporal continuity, underpinned by the time-traveling capacity of autonoetic episodic memory, is required in order to exist as a full and healthy self. Those, such as K. C., who live in state of temporal discontinuity are thus Othered through discursive regimes of psychopathologization. Of course, because K. C. found himself in this state through a tragic accident, he naturally escapes any moral criticism for his predicament, lauded instead as a “psychological marvel” (Rosenbaum et al. 2005: 1013).

For those who do not find their way into discontinuous temporal states via accidents, there is rarely this kind of moral get-out-of-jail-free card. The residents of Itchy Park, despite their daily abdications of their episodic memories, are hailed not as psychological marvels, but psychopathological marginals. The logical interjection here might be that people experiencing homelessness have a choice where K. C. did not.⁹ One might say that if K. C. were able to have gotten his episodic memory back, he surely would have done. Indeed, one of the few psychological studies to have investigated the changing shape of K. C.’s social world from before and after his accident suggests that his life would have been richer had he not lost this capacity, at least in terms of the density and variety of his interpersonal relationships (Davidson et al. 2012: 6). The authors make the case that episodic memory functions as an important

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8. As scholars adopting a feminist stance have illustrated, cultural presuppositions—in particular those centered around gender—are liable to influence every stage of the research process, including the formation of the initial question and the selection of participants (Nechas and Foley 1994), the interpretation of findings (Martin 1991), and the inclusion or omission of findings in textbooks (Metoyer and Rust 2011).
 9. Hardly a steadfast argument when one considers the paradoxical notion of choice that circulates within the prevailing psychomedical models of addiction as a fundamentally “choiceless” affliction. See Raikhel and Garriott 2013.

“social glue” that helps establish the kind of interactional continuity that allows deep human bonds to be made and maintained through time. Nevertheless, this study also hints at some of the ways that kinship and community relations become reinvented in the wake of episodic memory loss, bending social ties but not breaking them. Certainly, none of this is to diminish the tremendous strain that life-altering accidents place on those who suffer them, as well as the families and friends who are required to pick up the pieces and refashion their shared world. Rather, what I am gesturing at is that even the most serious forms of episodic memory loss take place within a particular social context. It therefore follows that the interlocking forms of selfhood and temporality that emerge from such losses are no less social in their constitution and continuation.

By locating the self as intrinsically linked to our internal hardware—as per Tulving’s argument—the social software of our existence becomes relegated to an afterthought. Further, it reinforces the notion that episodic memory is intrinsically a positive thing with regards to our existential constitution, that to compromise or lose it is to effectively cripple the self. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, though, episodic memories for those in Itchy Park are often overwhelmingly negative, imbued with social (and bodily) death, tragedy, and humiliation. Such recollective experiences do nothing to strengthen and fortify the self. Frequently, they do the opposite, fracturing rather than fulfilling the self and dragging them into crises of presence. The lost time of the blackout thus emerges as a site of triage to deal with episodic memories that threaten the self, memories that are inseparably tangled up in the social and temporal complexities of their homelessness. In what follows, I want to turn again to these complexities, demonstrating that for those, like Jay, who opt out of episodic memory as a means of existential survival, such oblivion does not constitute a reduction of self, but rather a reinvention.

The Last Traveller

According to cultural critic Allen Weiss, at art’s limits we find the poetry of delirium. In this realm, the creative act is nourished by forms of being that, to use his words, “shatter the codes of everyday communication” (1992: 1). Surrealists, like Salvador Dalí, tried to harness these poetics by inducing in themselves simulated forms of mental illness and dissociation, establishing the paranoiac-critical method as a new artistic frontier

from these shattered codes.¹⁰ For many artists, though, simulation is not required—they already exist under conditions of exclusion, occlusion, and dissociation. As a person experiencing homelessness who struggles with paranoid delusions that frequently emerge at the intersection of his substance use and bipolar disorder, Jay is just such an artist. His work is a prime example of *art brut*, sometimes called *outsider art*. Coined by Jean Dubuffet (1988: 32), he defines the term as “works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture ... We are witness here to a completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all its phases solely by means of the artists’ own impulses.”

While *art brut* has, to a certain degree, entered the mainstream—becoming assimilated into the official domain of what some might call the artworld or indeed art history—Dubuffet’s definition still holds plenty of water, even as it remains problematic (as it did then). Certainly, no impulse—no matter how raw—stands fully outside of culture and society. In Jay’s case, his artwork gestures to the unbearable tensions baked into his sociocultural position: between clock time and subjective time, center and periphery, presence and absence, self and nonself. Indeed, Dubuffet’s theorization of *art brut* was distinctly ethnographic, emerging from several trips to Algeria in the late 1940s. In particular, he was gripped by the nomadic sociality of the Bedouin, fixated by the transience of their desert existence, by the way the changing sands swallowed up and erased that which was inscribed upon them. Setting to one side some of Dubuffet’s more egregious exoticisms and thinly veiled ethnocentricities, the *art brut* project was, in its origins, less about the objects themselves and more about an “attempt to write their makers into history” (Minturn 2004: 253). In other words, he sought not only to collect objects, but biographies as well, wedging their “outsider-ness” into dominant cultural institutions (like museums) so as to subvert the very categories on which they are founded.

What might Jay’s biography tell us? Recall from earlier the fragment of my fieldnotes that seemed to jolt Jay into recognizing himself within the pages—“I’m the last traveller.” Over the course of a year, as the trust between us deepened, Jay began to tell me the story of his life, enabling me to understand what he meant by this phrase and, more broadly, how he ended up in Itchy Park, so far from home. Sometimes, this story came

10. Salvador Dali’s paranoid-critical method is a surrealist technique that involves the artist deliberately inducing a paranoid state to access irrational thought processes and subconscious imagery for creative inspiration.

in fragments. Other times in gushing surges. Other times in song, or drunken soliloquy. Pulling his biography together was a bit like trying to restore an ancient mosaic discovered in the ruins of an old building, always trying to connect the dots between the fragment and the whole. Like such a mosaic, there are of course pieces missing that will never be found, sections degraded that will never be repaired. Nevertheless, a picture begins to take shape.

Jay had grown up in a Scottish Gypsy Travelling community. Growing up in the 1960s and '70s, he and his family had worked by traveling around Scotland. Some summers, they would help set up fairgrounds through connections they had in the showground community. Jay has especially fond memories of hanging out around these places, helping with the game stalls and being able to go on the rides for free. Otherwise, his family relied on other forms of informal, flexible labor in the colder months, such as construction, scrap dealing, mechanics, and—when the opportunity arose—horse husbandry. Jay was always effusive about this period of early his life, in particular regarding the freedom—economic and spiritual—provided by mobile living.

As a kid, we lived on the move. We had our caravan, so we were always ready to go, picking up and moving on as we liked. We traveled through the countryside with other families, our cousins—the whole clan. Those are the best memories I have, messing around in the fields with my brothers and cousins, playing music, building fires, causing trouble—you know. Listening to my dad sing.

This life of unfettered freedom roaming the countryside, however, did not last long. By the time Jay hit double digits, an already simmering cultural and political hostility towards Travelling communities was growing. This hostility, combined with changes to housing and property law, radically limited opportunities for mobile living, curtailing work opportunities and forcing many Travelling groups into low-income housing and encampments on the outskirts of cities. Soon, his family found themselves caught up in this de facto ghettoization (Bancroft 2005), eventually finding themselves in a run-down housing project on the edge of Aberdeen. By this point, Jay's mother had begun to develop chronic health issues that began to limit, more and more, their ability to physically travel. He also found himself funneled into the state education system for the first time in his life, which is where he became directly exposed to the kind of ethno-racial prejudice that had seen his family's way of life marginalized, punished, and held up as socially aberrant when compared to the "settled" majority. Belittled

and picked on for his Gypsy heritage, Jay would get into fights with his taunters and, even when he hadn't thrown the first punch, be blamed by the teachers and disproportionally disciplined, which back then meant being beaten. Having never attended school before, he was always behind his peers in terms of academic performance and mercilessly teased for being stupid. Belittled and abused, it didn't take long for Jay to give up on school entirely, spending most of his time playing truant with children from other Travelling families or else working menial, low-status jobs to help his father out where possible. The pain, though, of suddenly finding himself holed up in a small council home, was hard to endure.

I remember dad saying it was only temporary, that we'd be back on the move in no time. That was our instinct, to travel—that was just what we did. We ended up stuck there for years—especially when mum got bad. Everything was different in there, we felt trapped. Nobody felt good about it—the atmosphere wasn't good. It was...low, everyone felt low. It felt like a cage.

The summers, though, were a time of escape from this cage, his family piling into their caravan and hitting the road, weaving their way through the countryside, connecting with other Travelling families and their own extended kinship network. During these periods, Jay and his family would visit different campgrounds, go hunting, build fires, revisit ancestral sites and famed walking trails, and attend family gatherings to share stories, sing songs, and mark important community events. Jay's accounts of his summer escapes are understandably idyllic when one considers the grinding poverty and marginalization his family endured when confined to their cramped council home. For Jay's mother, whose health was getting worse year on year, these trips offered moments of levity and peace that her situation otherwise denied her. "Mum only smiled in summer. When she got in the caravan she was like a different person." Crucially, these excursions should not be thought of as a holiday.

Traveling is more than just something like 'Oh, I really need a holiday'—it's not a holiday. It's a way of life, it's the stuff that happens en route. You feel light when you travel, like you don't know what's gonna happen. You don't just book a cheap flight and sit around the same pool for a week, eating at the same fucking buffet every morning. You travel not knowing what can happen, what other Travellers you're gonna meet, which family you'll bump into. In summer we got to have those kinds of feelings again. Even when you're back inside though, it stays with—it's in the spirit, y'know, a state of mind.

After one summer, when Jay was in his mid-teens, they tried living on a caravan site for a while. However, conflict with the landowners combined with his mother's declining health meant that this quickly ceased to be a viable option.¹¹ Driven by an underlying immunodeficiency disorder that had been growing steadily more debilitating, Jay's mother began to develop multiple comorbidities that required increased visits to the hospital. Again, they found themselves "caged" up in poor quality urban housing, their summer exoduses becoming shorter and shorter until, by the time Jay turned eighteen, his mother was simply too weak to leave the house for anything other than medical reasons. As she approached the end of her life, the family would comfort her by sitting around her bed and recalling memories of their time on the move. They would revisit old photographs that captured family events and camp-site happenings. There would also be photos of landscapes, paths, woods, and trails they had visited and revisited over the years. They would pass around treasured objects like polished horseshoes and stuffed animals from their time working the fairs. They would sing Gypsy ballads. It was these songs that elevated her mood the most, Jay told me, the collective vibrations transporting her back to their time on the move, to the ties that held kinship, landscape, place, and memory in their uniquely mobile assemblage. She passed away surrounded by these vibrations. A "good death," Jay said, "given the circumstances." Jay's mother's passing points to the complex tension between fixity and mobility that Scottish (and other) Gypsy Travellers have been forced to reckon with as nomadic ways of life have been pushed further and further to the cultural and political margins. After all, how is it that a "good death" was able to transpire in a place that Jay and his family—not least of all his mother—experienced as a kind of prison? The answer to this lies in Jay's earlier assertion that travel is about more than just physical journeying, but rather an activity of spirit, mind, and memory. As scholars of UK Gypsy culture have noted, traveling is polysemic, connected to more than just physical movement. Rather, it relates to a particular kind of motile engagement

11. Caravan sites are in increasingly short supply, putting major pressure on Gypsies and Traveller groups. At a high level, the reasons behind this decrease can be traced to the way that discriminatory government policies (at both the national and local level) have converged with assimilation pressures and an increasingly voracious property market to ramp up demand for land that was in the past seen as undesirable or unusable (Bancroft 2005; Kenrick 2004).

with the world, a “being on the move” that is simultaneously corporeal and imaginative (Shubin 2011). In such worlds, community and kin are tied to an ever-shifting, emergent sense of place that is brought into being through the performance and reperformance of songs, stories, and sensations. In this regard, the ballads they sang with and around her in the build-up to, and during her death, along with the objects of memory they shared and the stories they revisited, were themselves a form of travel. These practices recreated a sense of continuity with the ancestral past, quite literally reactivating a shared sense of mobile belonging: “She died smiling.”

They buried her in the countryside at a family burial plot, following traditional funeral rites of burning her clothes, bedding, and some key possessions. For Jay, these rites—the burial, the burning, the scattering of ashes, the music, and other mourning rituals—constituted a new stage in his mother’s traveling. It also marked a new phase in his Jay’s life. He, his father, and his siblings stayed on the road for a few months, connecting with kin as they moved between campsites, lay-bys, and other old stopping places. It was during this period that he met his wife, Charlotte, who was also part of this extended Travelling community. Jay and Charlotte had two children in quick succession. Their arrival put both of them under financial and material pressure, further complicated by their son developing health difficulties from a young age. At first, they tried to rely on local midwives and health professionals who frequented some of the more secure stopping places, but this became increasingly difficult as government policy grew more hostile to the presence of Travellers. Land formerly seen as unwanted or unusable—once a safe haven for Travelling communities—became swallowed up by a growing private property boom that was spreading into the countryside. These factors, combined with aggressive assimilation pressures, direct policing, and discriminatory legislation, essentially forced their hand—driving them back to the outskirts of Aberdeen, back into the “cage” of bricks and mortar housing.¹²

12. There are two main pieces of legislation that directly impact the lives of nomadic peoples. The Trespass Scotland Act 1865, introduced to control the movements of Scottish Travellers, has long been used by the police to move Travellers from stopping places. Almost 130 years later, the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 has been used to effectively criminalize the Gypsy/Traveller modes of life.

While being “settled” allowed them to register with a GP, life back in Aberdeen was tough, and they struggled to make ends meet. In many ways, the forces of social exclusion that had forced their hand followed them back, mutating into more diffuse forms of institutional discrimination and sociopolitical marginalization, notably at the level of welfare and healthcare. Jay’s innate suspicion of government bureaucracy and his rejection of “settled” value systems only exacerbated these structural disadvantages. For years, Jay tried to keep afloat through flexible forms of work—like laboring—in conjunction with petty crime. Often these two forms of work would intersect, Jay stealing building materials, metal piping, and furniture from building sites and selling them through his contacts in the Travelling community. Despite his resistance to the morals and values of the “settled” majority, the everyday structural stresses of this coercive assimilation into sedentarist ways of life began to take a toll on Jay. For one, being kept apart from his wider community and kinship network—most of whom were scattered across Aberdeen and other Scottish cities—intensified feelings of loneliness and frustration. The distress of chronic joblessness was especially hard to take, leaving him feeling emasculated and useless. He began to drink heavily, concealing it from Charlotte and other close family members, citing the prevalence of stigma and shame that surrounds alcoholism, especially among the older generation of Travellers.

While there is precious little written about the dynamics of addiction among Scottish Gypsy Travelling men who, like Jay, have been caught up in these ambivalent webs of exclusion and assimilation, there is a body of literature on Irish Gypsy Travellers that reflects Jay’s experiences. Marie-Claire Van Hout (2011), for example, notes how everyday and structural stresses of assimilation into sedentarist forms of life can chip away at ethnic identity and community resilience, fracturing social norms previously held together by tradition and thus opening a gateway for destructive patterns of substance use to take hold. Broader conditions of adversity, a lack of employment opportunities, and pervasive forms of discrimination against Irish Travellers put a significant strain on those of the younger generation, many of whom had spent most of their lives in fixed houses rather than on the road. Caught in this liminal position, Van Hout describes how drug use patterns—that is to say both consuming and selling—emerge as a novel cultural logic that allows young Traveller men to negotiate the ambivalent and precarious social spaces they are forced to inhabit, often bringing them into direct conflict with the values of their parents’ generation.

In Jay's case, his desire to keep his drinking hidden from his immediate family meant that he began drinking with non-Travellers who lived in the same council block as he, many of whom made a living from selling drugs. Still struggling to make ends meet, drug dealing emerged as a lucrative entrepreneurial avenue, relatively speaking, helping him acquire a level of agency and social status that had hitherto eluded him on the estate. Soon, he began to sell to the same people who used to bully him at school, his Gypsy identity endowing him with a threatening mystique that protected him from being hassled or targeted. "No one fucked with me—I was the 'mad Gypo' from school. Fucking hated that name—someone said it back then and I'd try and take their head off. It ended up having a use though. You couldn't have someone thinking you were soft—otherwise they'd have you." Ironically, it was this same identity that would eventually enable him to sell to some of the young, also unemployed men within his own community, many of whom were intrinsically wary of buying anything from settled outsiders. Despite easy access to drugs such as heroin, speed, and cocaine, Jay initially steered clear himself of these substances, supplementing his drinking with cannabis, which he said helped to calm his nerves. His avoidance of these so-called "harder drugs" was again connected to his sense of commitment to traditional Traveller values that mark drug taking as a taboo practice.

Although his dealing provided a much-needed income stream, knowing how it would be viewed by his father—should he have ever found out—combined with the internalized shame he felt regarding his secret drinking left Jay feeling psychologically fragile and increasingly paranoid. In this sense, it was a double paranoia—not only about being ripped off by other people in the drug trade or being arrested by the police, but also that his family might discover what he was doing. As a result, his mood swings—which he says were always part of his personality for as long as he could remember—began to grow in frequency and depth, often leading to major disturbances and arguments between him and Charlotte. After someone he knew got picked up by law enforcement, Jay stopped dealing for fear that he might be next. While this lessened his arrest paranoia, it exacerbated his already precarious financial situation, plunging him back into feelings of obsolescence and impotence. His drinking began to intensify further, and he would intentionally pick fights with Charlotte to give him an excuse to "storm out" and disappear for one or two days where he could binge drink with his non-Traveller associates.

The main relief from these ongoing psychological and material pressures was during the summer period when, just as his parents had done, Jay and Charlotte would pack up the car with the kids and hit the road, driving into the countryside for as long as they could manage, reembedding themselves back into the mobile lifeworld that they both longed for during the rest of the year. Interestingly, Jay said he never drank when he was on the road: “It was like my spirit was light again—I never even thought about it while I was out there, it had been lifted off my heart. It was like a scab that just fell off.”

Things began to unravel, however, when Jay’s father died. Unlike his mother’s passing—a good death in bad circumstances—his father suffered what Jay described as “the worst” death. After suffering from a brain hemorrhage alone in his flat, his body had been left undiscovered and decomposing for almost two weeks before one of the neighbors complained about the smell and the authorities found him. Following his funeral, life back in Aberdeen became more and more turbulent, and Jay’s problems with drugs and alcohol worsened. “Just knowing he was around, somewhere, kept me in check. With him gone it was like someone had taken off the handbrake. I just lost it.” The harder drugs Jay had initially managed to stay away from crept into his life, causing him to behave more erratically. He struggled to keep his drinking and drug use from Charlotte as word got around the estate. Whispers began to trickle down about his time as a drug dealer, the rumors mutating into punishing caricatures, casting him as someone who had forsaken his cultural heritage and corrupted long-standing anti-drug Traveller values. With their marriage under increasing strain from Jay’s substance use, Jay and Charlotte went back on the road and, following advice from her elders, sought help from traditional healers in the community. Again, a familiar pattern emerged. Jay would find himself “cured” when he was on the move, only for his substance use issues to return with greater intensity when they had to go back: “I could feel my father’s spirit out there—when the wind picked up. Could feel him on my skin. Back in Aberdeen though, there was nothing—no sign of him. I don’t think he wanted to ever go back there. He died alone in that fucking cage—there was no way he was ever going back. I was terrified that the same thing was going to happen to me.”

This exodus-detox-relapse cycle continued for several years until, eventually, with Jay’s behavior growing more unpredictable, Charlotte reached her limit. Seeking a fresh start for her and the children, Charlotte separated from Jay and relocated to London, moving in with one

of her cousins who happened to be based in Tower Hamlets. At first, Jay stayed in Aberdeen where he continued to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol, falling deeper and deeper into destructive bingeing cycles that ended up alienating him even from his brothers. “I was a mess. Nobody wanted anything to do with me—not even my own blood. I’d turned radioactive. I thought, what was the point of living?” Following a botched suicide attempt, Jay decided that he would travel down to London to try and repair his marriage. He managed to find out where Charlotte and the children were living but she refused to even see him, using her cousin as a go-between. “She said she won’t even let me see the kids until I get myself sorted out.”

Turned away by his wife, hundreds of miles from Scotland—Jay found himself wandering the streets of a foreign city. Dislocated from any kind of social support network, Jay was destitute, the sheer scale and density of inner-city London dwarfing anything he’d encountered in Aberdeen. When Jay and I first met, he had been sleeping rough in London for over a year. At first, Jay had been optimistic that he might be able to turn things around enough for Charlotte to take him back, even imagining that they might rebuild their family life here, in London—which seemed to hold far more economic opportunity than Aberdeen, as well as, on the surface at least, less anti-Traveller discrimination. During his first few weeks sleeping rough, he was happened upon by a street outreach team who gave him information on homeless services and charitable institutions. From there, he found his way into a local day center where advice workers helped him navigate the labyrinthine patchwork of local services, in particular those relating to welfare and addiction services. He was able to get a bed in a local hostel and, although still drinking heavily, was regularly meeting with a mental health counselor. During this period, he was formally diagnosed with bipolar depression and put on medication to help with his mood swings and paranoid ideations, something he felt was moving him in a positive direction. In short, he felt as though things were looking up. However, whatever progress he felt himself to be making hit the skids when he discovered that Charlotte had begun seeing someone else. Incensed by this perceived infidelity, Jay turned up at Charlotte’s cousins building and, in a drunken rage, tried to break down the door to their flat. A violent altercation with her cousin ensued, and the neighbors called the police. Jay was arrested but nothing came of it. Though he avoided any prison time, Charlotte severed all contact after that, refusing to respond to any of his calls and messages and threatening to take out a restraining

order if he came near the building again. Eventually, she changed her phone number. Now, the only information Jay receives about her or the children comes through back channels in their broader family network back in Aberdeen.

Despite the collapse of his marriage and Charlotte's refusal to engage with him, Jay decided to stay in London, where has been oscillating between rough sleeping and hostel living ever since. By his own admission, barely a day has gone by since the bust-up with Charlotte's cousin that he has not consumed some kind of psychoactive substance, with alcohol being his preferred modality. Indeed, from the day he and I met, it was rare to see him without a can of K-cider on the go. Over this period, his blackouts have grown in frequency and intensity and his behavior while intoxicated more erratic. Where before he would lose hours, he regularly claims to lose days at a time now.

Checkmate

For Jay, being in London means being caught in a number of overlapping catch-22 situations. For one, he knows full well that remaining in his current state of near-constant intoxication is not only taking a serious toll on his health, but it is also preventing him from gaining access to his children, let alone reconciling with Charlotte. Historically, Jay would have gone on the road in order to get his substance use issues under control, even if these breaks were more suppression than elimination. However, not only was this logistically impractical (what with Aberdeen some four hundred miles north), but his status within his Travelling community had been severely compromised by his previous behavior, especially with his two brothers who had given him an ultimatum—clean himself up or don't bother coming back. In this regard, "sorting himself out" and reconciling with Charlotte was not only about restoring the immediate family unit, but it was also about repairing his broader kinship network so that he might reenter a deeper realm of belonging and cultural meaning. With his marriage in tatters, however, such a return had become harder and harder to enact or even imagine, especially given the escalation of his drinking. Jay thus found himself trapped. Alienated from his wife and kids in London and ostracized from his community in Aberdeen, Jay became increasingly ensconced in patterns of street homelessness, drawn to the triage sociality of Itchy Park and the moral economies underpinning it. Here, at least, he could remain somewhat

close to his children, in geographic terms if nothing else. “At least I know they’re close by here. I can’t see them—not in the state I’m in. But I know they’re close.”

In many ways, Jay’s ongoing stint of homelessness in Itchy Park is the next chapter in a lifelong struggle to reconcile fixity and mobility, internment, and escape, a struggle that is firmly grounded in his Gypsy Traveller identity and the mobile corporealities that come laced within such identities. Unlike the other Itchy Park residents, Jay had a lifetime’s experience of being culturally Othered and persecuted by police and policy alike. “Settled people have looked down on me and my kind my entire life. You think people give you shit when you’re homeless? Try being a Gypsy in Aberdeen.” Despite this relative insulation from the “culture shock” of suddenly being Othered (something all of Itchy Park’s residents described feeling when they first found themselves on the streets), Jay’s Gypsy Traveller heritage could not immunize him from the abject spatiotemporal realities of homelessness. If anything, his nomadic roots actually made it worse.

At first glance, the above statement might read as counterintuitive. After all, one might reasonably think that a history of nomadism would mean someone taking to street homelessness like a duck to water. To some extent, this was true for Jay in terms of certain practical realities. Sleeping outside, for example, did not bother Jay unduly. Plus, in terms of economic self-sufficiency, Jay’s entrepreneurial streak—cultivated by a lifetime in the informal economy and a prized aspect of Traveller culture—was well suited to street life, getting by through begging, shoplifting, diverting his bipolar medication, and other forms of petty crime and hustling. Indeed, it did not seem coincidental that he and Jimmy—the other person to have extended family ties to UK Travelling communities—were typically the most self-reliant, accruing more money and at faster rates than the rest of the group. That said, to assume that Jay—or Jimmy for that matter—were somehow more “at home” in their homelessness would be a mistake. For one, such an assumption reproduces essentializing discourses surround Gypsy Travellers as people who are fundamentally unrooted from and indifferent to place (Sibley 2003). As Jay’s biography reveals, though, his relationship to place is neither unrooted nor indifferent. Rather, it is connected to a “sensuous geography”—to borrow Shubin’s term—that binds people, mobile socialities, and episodic memories into dynamic, ever-emergent sense of place. It is not, in other words, movement for movement’s sake.

Never Sing the Same Song Twice

This cultural grounding in a sensuous geography is one reason why songs held so much meaning for Jay. “When someone gets to singing it won’t be long and then everyone joins in. It moves you, y’know. Brings everyone together, you’re all part of the same Travelling family. These songs are part of you, part of your history. Part of the journey. We sing about places we’ve been, about places we dream of visiting again.” These songs—emergent within particular places while at the same time gesturing to places afar in time and space—are powerful conduits of Traveller spirit and identity, creating potentialities of movement, effervescent collectivity, historical consciousness, and ecstatic joy for all those involved. Indeed, the intrinsic multiplicity of Traveller songs is captured by Jay’s assertion that “you can never sing the same song twice.” The lyrics, in other words, are just one element of a complex sensorial, spatiotemporal assemblage that helps create this dynamic and contingent community of moving bodies. This notion, that no song can be sung the same twice, maps onto broader understandings regarding the heterogeneity of traveling, to the fundamental impossibility of being able to retrace one’s steps. As Jay says: “You can end up somewhere, take the same road back—exactly the same one—but the journey will be completely different. Different people, different songs, different weather, different paths, different opportunities. Never the same.” Being on the move, then, means existing in a state of dynamic impermanence, where each journey comes together in its own unique configuration that gestures to the plurality of spatial, temporal, and interpersonal relations gathered up along the way.

On London’s streets, though, Jay is afforded none of this “placeful” contingency as he goes about his daily life. Instead, Jay feels as though he retraces the same steps every day, walks the same routes, sees the same people, repeats the same activities. “I’m stuck in a loop out here—every day the fucking same.” As demonstrated in earlier chapters, Jay is by no means alone in feeling stuck in a recursive temporal loop. That said, his cultural attunement to the plurality of place (as a site of mobile belonging that holds objects, memories, landscape, bodies, stories, and songs together in dynamic harmony) arguably amplifies the sense of alienation and stagnation that grips him as he relives the same day over and over. For those in the park who grew up as part of the sedentarist majority, a good number of whom were born and raised in the surrounding area, the Tower Hamlets borough holds an uncanny quality—that is to say the

commingling of the strange and the familiar. For Jay, though, the locality is just strange, disconnected from the kind of enduring memories and events that sustain the ambivalence of the uncanny.

The only familiarity that does grope at Jay each day is, ironically, his family, their very presence (or rather their absence) inducing a major internal conflict that is experienced as yet another catch-22—namely, he can't be with them, but he also can't bear to leave. One of Jay's biggest fears is that his two sons, should they remain in London without him, will grow detached from their heritage.

My wee ones—without me who's gonna show them what my dad showed me? Who's gonna show them how to live on the road, show them the Traveller way. All our people are back North. Except for that prick [referring to Charlotte's cousin]. They need to know where their family is buried. They need to visit the resting places, the fields, the hills. They need to hear the stories, sing the songs. Like I did growing up. What memories do they have here? None. This place is barren. At least if I was with them, they'd be able to know. But I can't teach them if I'm not allowed to see them. Their mum can't do it all—it's a father's job.

Embodied memories of place—constituted by rich modes of storytelling and kinship—are described by Sara Reith as “the key and strongest safeguard to the esoteric type of knowledge held within Traveller tradition” (2008: 87). Adopting a tone of patriarchal insecurity, Jay fears that his absence combined with the barren memoryscape of London will deprive his sons of this special knowledge and effectively strip them of their cultural birthright. And so, Jay stays put, clinging onto the idea that by remaining in the same local area, he might find a way back into their lives and “protect them from losing their roots.” In remaining here, though, Jay has effectively found himself rootless, left to wander the same barren memoryscape that he fears will eventually corrupt his sons. Just as that first flat on the outskirts of Aberdeen became a cage, so too has London—Jay frequently describing the city as “a prison with a thousand streets.” Back in Aberdeen, Jay had managed to escape his cage in two ways: by traveling outside by loading up the car or by traveling inside by loading up his body.

With the former no longer a viable option, Jay is forced to plump for the latter, the abject conditions of his homelessness dragging him deeper into his checkmate situation, caught between a life he cannot return to and one he cannot arrive at. As Jay's artwork reveals, this double bind is experienced—and negotiated—in distinctly temporal terms, clearly pointing to the interplay between presence, episodic memory, durative

time, clock time, and chemical dissociation that I have been expounding over the course of the book so far:

You can see the clocks moving here, right? One o'clock... Three o'clock—that's time, time passing, right? But that's the thing when you're homeless, time passes...but it doesn't. You're stuck in it; every fucking day the same. It all just becomes a blur—you don't know what day of the week it is. I mean, what do they mean when everything is the same—nothing. How do you kill the time? You drink. You take drugs, whatever. Instead of time eating you up, you eat it. You can see that in the painting, I'm eating time up. You drink and you drink, until time doesn't matter anymore. Like I said—you got all these memories; they're everywhere—they won't fucking leave you be. Like it's all you can think about; nothing but time to think about everything. You know, my sons are always on my mind, somewhere. My missus—ex-missus. What else can I do to take my mind off it? The paintings help, like it helps me to do something. But I can't paint all day—the Dello closes at lunch. And then the clock starts ticking again—tick tock, tick tock. And I've already had a couple, y'know, to keep my hands from shaking. Can't paint when you've got the shakes! So you have some more and have some more—to kill the time—and then bang! The clock cracks. That's what the cracked clock's about—it's about the time I've lost through drink and drugs, when I don't know where or what I am anymore. Everything's broken. Everything's black. I start to melt—you can see it there, in the eye—I'm melting away, losing myself in the black. The K brings the blackness, smashes the clock. That's what being an alcoholic is—living in lost time. You're stuck in blackness. That's why the colors are so bright there—because once you step into the blackness, there's no color, nothing at all. Everything stops. Time. Memories. Myself. Everything. It's a black hole where I become somebody else.

CHAPTER 6

Becoming Somebody Else

In Dubuffet's eyes, the art brut artist and the works they create are a "closed circuit." Its core essence, in this view, is its unintelligibility and incommunicability. At first glance, Jay's likening of his lost time to a "black hole" seems to fit with Dubuffet's claim. As I have already demonstrated, however, these dissociative black holes are not closed systems, but rather one node in a rhizomatic assemblage of social relations, historical circumstances, existential attunements, and chronopolitical pressures.

Recall that in a previous chapter, I retooled de Martino's notion of dehistoricification to open out the embodied phenomenology of the blackout, using it as a blueprint to problematize the interplay of presence (self) and absence (Other) as emergent in such experiences. I have argued that, for some in Itchy Park, their crisis of intolerable presence is momentarily resolved by living as dehistoricified absence ("somebody else"), a transformation-of-being made possible through the opting out of episodic memory. In so doing, I have sought to lift the blackout from its psychopathological cradle and have instead begun to connect its subjective life to the alterity experienced in certain forms of spirit possession, where memory loss ushers in the arrival of external agencies.

Building off this blueprint, my aim in this final part of the book is to further enrich our understanding of the therapeutic potential that such self-transformations hold, at the same time exploring the limits, paradoxes, and negations they entail. To do this, I seek to deepen the theoretical dialogue between critical phenomenology and ontological anthropology,

in particular by engaging with the groundbreaking ideas developed by Roy Wagner (whose work has inspired many of the arguments put forward by thinkers such as Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen). A true polymath of the anthropological genre, Wagner's most influential work—*The Invention of Culture* (1975)—famously turned the tables on the anthropological project, arguing that culture is something invented in the interaction between the anthropologist and the people they study. Both parties, he claims, are mutually interested in drawing out and making sense of the differences between each other, drawing on their respective symbolic repertoires to do so. Based on years of fieldwork among the Daribi of Papua New Guinea, Wagner argues that culture is not some static, a priori symbolic system, but rather an emergent matrix of creative reinventions that comes from people interacting in the world. A given cultural order, in other words, can establish conventions for how to act and view the world, but these same conventions are themselves ripe for transformation and creative improvisation, what he describes in terms of the “the dialectic of invention and convention” (1981: 46). As Iracema Duley, in her extensive study of Wagner's work, says: “[this dialectic] allows him to find a compromise between permanence and change that is not deterministic regarding significations to come but allows one to refer meaning to previous instances of signification *ex post facto*” (2019: 43).

Here, I do not seek a full review of Wagner's work—if that were even possible. Rather, I want to hone in on just one of his core concepts—obviation—as outlined in the context of the *habu*, a Daribi healing ritual. As Wagner notes in his monograph, sickness and death within the Daribi community can be attributed to the will of ancestral ghosts who stalk the living. In particular, it is the dead who have not been properly mourned who are most impelled to bring illness upon the living (a sort of reversal of the crisis of grief described in chapter 4). The *habu* ritual emerges in response to this ghostly affliction. In another of his works, Wagner (1978) describes the ceremony as underwritten by a Daribi “ideology” of mortality, one that is expressed through the aforementioned dialectics of invention and convention. In order for the Daribi to appease the unmourned ghosts afflicting their kin with illness and enact a curing, certain men must become possessed by these dead spirits, thereby allowing them to reconcile their issues within the domain of the living. Here, then, conventional distinctions between the living and the dead are collapsed, “inventing” a novel social reality in which living men and dead ghosts can occupy the same body. Wagner examines this creative coextension—of man into ghost and ghost into man—through the lens

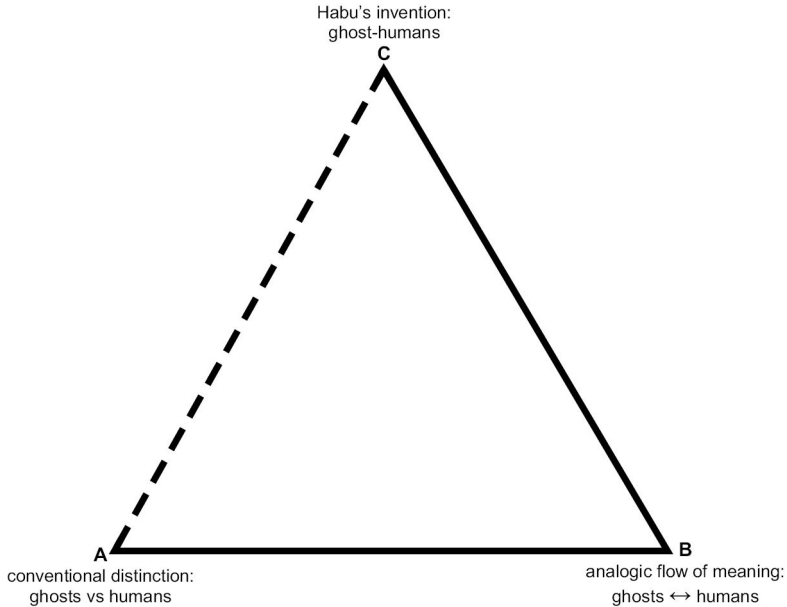


Figure 3. Daribi obviolation sequence (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 89).

of obviolation, which Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) neatly map out in the figure below, this image an adaptation of the many triangular diagrams that show up in Wagner’s work on the topic:

Put briefly, obviational analysis requires that already established meanings are overcome, or perhaps *dissolved* in Wagner’s terms, so that something else, something *inventive* and other can appear. Wagner’s (and indeed de Martino’s) genius was to reconceptualize ritual as an improvisational enterprise in creative liminality, producing new meanings and possibilities from the artifacts of preexisting symbolic constellations. Wagner (1975: 49–53) argues that this whole becoming-ghosts business is not about obeying the demands of cultural convention; rather, Daribi improvise with the symbolic-cum-conceptual “givens” they have to hand, a process that capsizes “innate” distinctions (in this case the distinction between living bodies and dead ghosts) to produce a curing that is profound and effective because it rearticulates the categories that they take for granted. In his words, “the result is a novel expression that intentionally ‘deconventionalizes’ the conventional (and unintentionally conventionalizes the unconventional): a new meaning has been formed (and an old meaning has been extended). The novel expression both amplifies

and controverts the significance of the convention upon which it innovates" (Wagner 1978: 28).

For Wagner, then, the creative potentiality of the *habu* ritual—or indeed any ritual for that matter—hinges on this idea that the conceptual-symbolic and the phenomenal are not separate domains, but mutually imbricated in such a way that one is always necessary to bring about the existence of the other. As such, the meaning (and future potentiality) of any symbolic constellation is necessarily located in the material and historical realities that underpin daily life. Unlike someone like Lévi-Strauss, who sought to refract and compare the symbolic codes of a given culture to reveal what he considered to be the underlying structure of human thought, Wagner sought no such transcultural abstraction, choosing instead to emphasize the power of creativity, invention, and improvisation within a singular cultural setting. For this reason, Wagner talks about creative modes of action taking place within the bounds of a particular cultural "style." Style comes from the Latin word *stilus*, referring to a pointed stick used for writing on waxen tablets. Whether Wagner had this etymological origin in mind when he talked of cultural style, who can say, but style is a local instrument.

What this means is the modes of creativity available to a given community are grounded in (and shaped by) the historical and material conditions of their existence. Not only does the Daribi cultural style allow for such improvisational events, they are fundamental to how they negotiate everyday human concerns and crises such as death, suffering, and illness. So, if the people experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park, like the Daribi, can also be said to exist within the bounds of a particular cultural style, the question arises: what innovative forms of embodiment and/or modes of creativity are available to them? The blackout, I suggest, is one such innovation. The reason that Wagner's work is so germane here is because blackouts are—like the *habu*—a powerful example of obviational transformation. This claim can be neatly illustrated by repurposing Wagner's obviational triangle:

Just as in *habu*, we can see how conventional distinctions—in this case the premise that self/presence and Other/absence exist in binary relation—are dissolved into one another to bring about a novel expression. Contained within the simple statement "I become somebody else," then, is a metamorphosis of meaning that is unique to the abject temporal and social conditions of street homelessness: the possibility that, while existing in the present, the self ("presence") may also become simultaneously lost and Other ("absence"). Crucially, just because this "somebody

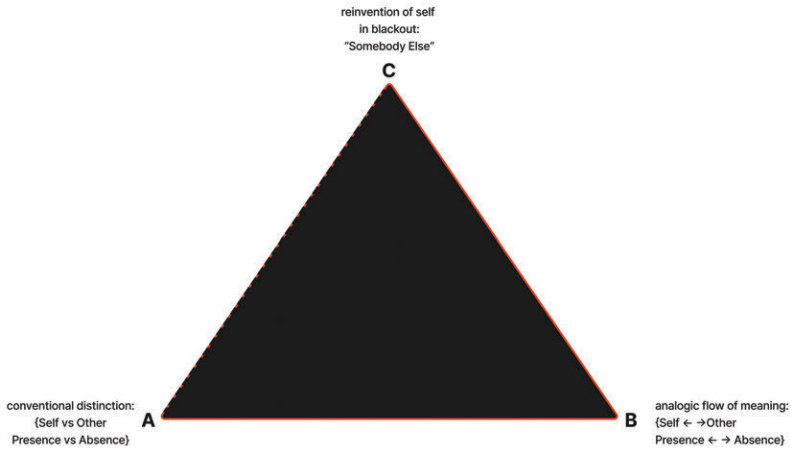


Figure 4. Blackout obviation sequence.

else” does not exist within the reproductive realm of auto-noetic episodic memory does not mean that it should forfeit its ontological existence, which is exactly what happens when the blackout is reduced to a psycho-neurological pathology. This claim, that people experiencing homelessness chemically reinvent themselves into a kind of ghostly alterity so as to escape the tyranny of their unbearable presence, can be demonstrated in more granular detail by moving through each prong of the triangle. Before that, though, a quick cautionary aside: just as Wagner warned that the diagrams he uses are not obviation itself, but a model of obviation, I would offer the reader the same appraisal. Here, the reader could be forgiven for wondering why, of all the conceptual models available, I have reached for something as esoteric as obviation. While I am certainly not the first anthropologist to bring this model to bear outside of the Melanesian contexts in which it was first developed (see Nielsen 2013), I want to preempt any accusations of over-theorization or exoticization. Far from frivolously cherry-picking from the ether of the anthropological imagination, my borrowing of the obviational model was, as it was for Wagner, learned through dialogue with my interlocutors. This will become clear when I introduce another of Jay’s pieces of art brut, the image from which the title of this book is drawn. Before I introduce this second piece of artwork, though, it will be instructive to move through the obviational processes as outlined in the above diagram.

All Models Are Wrong, Some Are Useful

Looking at the triangle in Figure 4, we may start with what can be called the ontological *default setting* [A]—one body, one self, one presence. This is the conventional baseline, against which the statement “I become somebody else” [C] acquires its meaning. Before this, however, we see the second step [B], in which conventional classifications {Self/Other Presence/Absence}¹ are distorted in order to be rearticulated, or indeed reembodyed, in a new, “differentiating” way. The notion of becoming Other—possessed by the abductive force of a “somebody else”—is carried across onto the notion of what (my)self might be, metamorphosing itself across the conventional divide between self and Other in what Wagner would call the “analogic flow” of meaning.

So, while it is the conventional distinctions between self and Other, presence and absence [A], that provides the building blocks for the (re)invention, it is the second step [B] that energizes the process, not only by offering a “reason” for the transformation (namely, an alternative means of being in a world that haunts and tyrannizes them), but also because it sets the (re)invention in motion, effectively kickstarting the analogic flow through which the meaning of self and Other and presence and absence enter into relationship of mutual recombination. The effect of this movement, then, enacts the third step of the reinvention [C], in which this dissolution of meaning turns into something novel, “deconventionalizing” convention and thus creating a new ontological threshold for existence. The possibility that, while existing in the present, the self (presence) may also become simultaneously lost and Other (absent) is made manifest through the eversion of the default setting, such that the conventional distinction between self/presence and Other/absence is replaced by the proposition “I become somebody else”—a proposition (and modality-of-being) that differentiates the blacked-out body from the sober self.

So, if the very act of blacking out involves, by virtue of its emergent innovation, a supplanting of the initial meanings (self/presence vs

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1. These two conventional assumptions that sustain the inventive transformation of the blackout are mutually constitutive of each other. In mathematical terms they represent a conventional “set.” In this way, even though each distinction can be seen as a “discrete object,” as a collection of terms the “set” can be seen as an object in its own right—namely a single set of size two: {Self/Other Presence/Absence}.

Other/absence) that required transforming in the first place, what about sobering up? This is an important question because it helps us think more deeply about the paradox at the heart of the blackout—its capacity to be at once a prison and an escape route. Indeed, if “becoming somebody else” is an invention, then sobering up is, in Wagner’s terms, very much a “counterinvention.” As those who dwell in Itchy Park know only too well, any transformations they induce in themselves are always temporary. One can become somebody else, just not in perpetuity. The blackout, then, also obviates—that is to say it ends up negating itself. In the context of a collective ritual enterprise like the *habu*, this negation is part and parcel of the therapeutic process—Daribi men return to convention, but not quite the same as when they left. Something has changed: the unmourned dead have (ideally) been appeased, illness reckoned with, and the relational connections between the living and the dead reconfigured in some beneficial way.

The same could be said of other ritualized contexts where possession is the engine of healing. In his work on Balinese possession trances, for example, David Napier (1992) argues that the entranced are empowered to push themselves beyond the conventional limits of personhood, the idea being to return changed but unharmed. Critically, it is the encompassing presence of the group that protects the individual trancer from harm. In this sense, the performance is distributed across the group, creating a dynamic and contingent engagement between the trancer and his or her contiguous relational field—a field that encompasses both living and dead. In accordance with classic studies of ritual, such as those of Victor Turner, a successful healing ritual is one in which the people at the center of it return to the world of convention changed in some way, the crisis averted. Such affordances for change, though, are bound up in the limits and possibilities governed by a given culture’s style, to evoke Wagner once again. This idea, then, can help us understand why, compared to Daribi ghost-men or Balinese trancers, the Itchy Park residents, following their blackouts, continue to return to convention not just unchanged, but often harmed—stuck in the same recursive cycles of suffering they sought escape from: crisis *unaverted*. Urban London, historically grounded in the social, political, and material order of neoliberal capitalism, is constituted by its own cultural style—one that emphasizes the autonomy and responsibility the self-contained individual. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the individualizing trajectory of this cultural style has overseen the general collapse of dissociative ritual structures, thereby leaving the body (and particularly homeless bodies)

stranded and forced to work on/heal itself—with the blackout emerging as a simulacrum of these rituals.

So, while the blackout follows the obviational logic of other dissociative ritual practices, deindividuating the subject so as to recreate the self, it ultimately always falls short of its transformational telos.² Instead, it becomes stalled at the point of takeoff, co-opted into the broader cultural logic of the dominant order, in which existential suffering (and alleviation thereof) is viewed as a matter of personal responsibility. In this regard, one could reasonably argue that the therapeutic movement of the blackout—in which crisis begets agentic action which begets self-transformation—is a perverse reflection of the prevailing biopolitical response to addiction that underpins Western recovery narratives: hit rock bottom, make a choice to change your life, take responsibility for your actions, pull yourself back together (and when this fails, repeat). Viewed in this light, it is no surprise that the blackout takes the form of internment even as it is sought as a mode of escape. Be that as it may, to reduce the agentic transformations at the heart of the blackout to psychopathology (or indeed biopolitical reproduction) is to ignore its creative potential, even in spite of its obvious limitations. For people such as Jay, the chain of obviational transformations is ontologically and socially real, the paradox being that its therapeutic potential is itself obviated by the temporal disjuncture that hums at its core.

In the next section, I attend to this irreconcilable tension by introducing another of Jay's art brut pieces, demonstrating how the obviational analysis of the blackout as described above can be laminated onto his artwork.

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2. There are echoes here of the "moral torment" described by Joel Robbins (2004) in relation to the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Robbins describes how the ontological transition from a "big men" society to a Pentecostalist one meant that actions which were previously dedicated to the external assertion of willful desires were now replaced with a deep internal attention to management and suppression of those same desires, the result being a pervasive moral tension that, owing to their ongoing entrenchment in subsistence living, can never be truly reconciled. Robbins suggests that the closest they get to the *telos* of a Christian ethics, itself unreachable due to their material and relational conditions, is during ritualized performance where the participants become possessed by the Holy Spirit, who briefly absolves them of all their sins.

Booth

By February of 2017, the fieldwork part of my project had drawn to a close. Nevertheless, given that I had the rare luxury of writing up my project in the same city as where I had conducted my fieldwork, I was still able to maintain connections with my interlocutors, Itchy Park a short cycle from the anthropology department at University College London where I was still working and teaching. So, when I was asked by the Wellcome Collection to present ethnographic stories from my work in *The Wild Ones* exhibition—a night dedicated to exploring marginalized others who test social norms through performances, artwork, and interactive lectures—I asked Jay if he wanted to be involved. Initially enthusiastic, Jay and I had planned on giving the talk together, using his artwork as a platform to discuss his experiences of homelessness and substance use and also to demonstrate how our relationship and his artistic practices figured in the collaborative enterprise of ethnography. However, as the date of the exhibition neared, Jay became increasingly agitated at the prospect of being stuck in a room surrounded by a large “well-dressed” crowd—his onrushing sense of anxiety and claustrophobia part of broader mental health issues that, as I have already discussed, were both rooted in and exacerbated by his homelessness.

After some back and forth, Jay decided he couldn’t attend. Notwithstanding his absence, the night was a success, epitomized by the buzz and enchantment that Jay’s paintings inspired among the crowd. A recurring theme that emerged was how much the image, *Booth* (Figure 5), evoked Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Many wanted to know if Jay had been influenced by this iconic painting. Not knowing the answer, I said that I would ask him when the next opportunity arose. Perhaps demonstrating the gulf in cultural capital between Jay and the “well-dressed” audience he perceived in his anxiety at the thought of attending the event, Jay had no knowledge of Munch’s work. When I showed him *The Scream* on my phone to show why so many had made the connection, Jay seemed unconvinced at first. As he reflected on the piece further, though, he began to see their point of view: “I suppose I can see it in the way the faces are drawn. Screaming in horror or whatever, trapped—like him. I bet that sold for a few quid didn’t it?” I looked the figure up and told Jay: \$120 million at Sotheby’s Auction House. “Fucking hell! Maybe I’ll become an artist full time then!” he joked, shaking his head in disbelief that a single painting could fetch such a vast sum.



Figure 5. *Booth*. Artwork by Jay, used with permission.

While, in so many ways, the gap between Munch's work and Jay's could not be more profound (both in terms of cultural recognition and monetary evaluation), their images arguably share a common ethos and aesthetic imperative: to give creative expression to hallucinatory states of mental illness and existential distress. While anthropologists like Emily Martin (2007), herself a sufferer of bipolar disorder, have rightfully warned against retroactively diagnosing historical figures like artists with mental illnesses as explanations for their creativity—her argument being that diagnostic categories like bipolar are themselves culturally sensitive and historically contingent—there is ample evidence to suggest that Munch suffered from major shifts in mood that were often connected to visual and auditory hallucinations. Take, for example, the 1891 diary entry that describes the state-of-being he experienced that inspired *The Scream*:

I was walking along the road with two of my friends. Then the sun set. The sky suddenly turned into blood, and I felt something akin to a touch of melancholy. I stood still, leaned against the railing, dead tired. Above the blue-black fjord and city hung clouds of dripping, rippling blood. My friends went on and again I stood, frightened with an open wound in my breast. A great scream pierced through nature. (Heller 1972: 109)

Munch would eventually end up hospitalized later down the road as these hallucinations grew in intensity, leading to depression, suicidal ideation, and destructive bouts of alcoholism (Rothenberg 2001). Jay—struggling with a not dissimilar set of symptoms—ended up painting *Booth* after he learned about the death of a cousin with whom he was close growing up. Finding himself without a phone for several weeks after losing it (or quite possibly having it stolen) during one of his binges, Jay only found out about his cousin's passing some time after the funeral had passed. Enraged and ashamed that he had missed out on this crucial family event, Jay hit the K-cider even harder than before. This binge, he would later find out after regaining consciousness in a police holding cell, had culminated in him trying to break into Charlotte's flat, accusing her of knowing about his cousin's death but intentionally failing to notify him, as if to punish him. Jay escaped with a suspended sentence, but the incident left an indelible mark on his sense of self and further damaged his already precarious hopes of reconciling with his estranged family.

They had to go through the whole thing in court—piece by piece. I had no idea I'd been round there. Not a fucking clue. It was like she was telling me a story about somebody else—somebody I didn't understand at all. Stormed in there, called her a fat cunt, scared my son, caused all kinds of mess. No memory of it at all—like it didn't even happen.

In this moment where Jay was held legally accountable for actions that, subjectively speaking, lacked the fundamental quality of internal agency or mineness, the chiasmatic nature of Jay's blackout self again reveals itself: *you become somebody else as somebody else becomes you*. Sobering up and finding himself in a cell with no memory and facing criminal charges was thus, in Wagner's terms, the "self-abnegation of the chiasmus divided by itself in the realization of what I have called 'obviation'" (2019: xvi). What is especially interesting is that Wagner, like Jay ("it's a black hole where I become somebody else"), likens the dialectical self-closure—the "triasmus"—of obviation to an event horizon. Crucially, Wagner's instrumentalization of the black hole metaphor is very different from the psychiatrist Alistair Sweet's—whose work I discussed in an earlier chapter. Recall that for Sweet, the black hole is used to describe the psychopathological and temporal dead zone of the addicted self whose hallmark is destruction, not creativity. Wagner's obviational approach, in contrast, allows for creativity and destruction to mutually fold into one another (a coextension than then collapses in on itself). As such, his version is far better equipped as a conceptual trope to articulate intoxicated dissociations in which the self (as embodied space) disappears into time(lessness), thereby rearticulating presence as absence (and vice versa).³ We can, quite literally, see this obviational transformation in action by laminating the triangle or triasmus (A, B, C) onto Jay's artwork.

3. The notion of the self as embodied space has been powerfully theorized by Steph Grohmann (2020), who, in her own work among urban squatters in England, also used the phenomenological category of mineness to capture the embodied quality of the self, engaged as it is in constant negotiating between insideness and outsideness. The internal space of the self—that which is *mine*—is to be taken as both fragile and permeable, rendering us forever vulnerable to both hostile and caring forces alike. We don't just take up spaces; in other words, we *are* spaces—and it is this spatialized element of existence that is the precondition for our extension into other layers of spatiality—such as the home. Home, as an extension of the spatial self, refashions the self-body-world boundary in such a way that physical shelters also begin to encompass mineness. Just as the body can be violated spatially, so too can the home. As Grohmann notes, it is this fear



Figure 6. Becoming somebody else in blackout, obviation sequence.

In many ways, Jay's experience in the courtroom, in which he was told a story simultaneously about himself and not, echoes the post-blackout search for memories I described at the start of the last chapter. Both situations exemplify a collective, socially mediated forensic investigation into the interior of his black hole. Jay can hear all the evidence, can read all my fieldnotes, could even see himself on video trying to break down Charlotte's door—but so long as he lacks the auto-noetic episodic component of these memories, these experiences will never be re-experiences. As such, they will always lack the flavor of embodied, synthetic mineness that grounds the self in its first personal givenness (Zahavi 2005). The experience thus belongs to a different ontological field or dimension, a time-space where ipseity and alterity chase each other's tails. Where the courts—as they are ideologically and morally inclined—locate his actions in the responsibility of the autonomous subject, Jay's art paints, quite literally, a more complicated picture. Here, I am not seeking to become an apologist for Jay's behavior which, by his own admission,

of intrusion that the United Kingdom's conservative powerbrokers have stoked in their (ultimately successful) bid to criminalize squatting, articulated through the trope—dripping in moral panic—of the home (and thus by extension self) invader. For those interested in a deeper exploration of her work, I would direct the reader to a recent book symposium on her work in *HAV: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11 (2).

has been destructive and at times deeply unsettling for his family. Rather, what I am saying is that we should not let this moral suspicion, tempting as it might be, occlude what these kinds of dissociative experiences reveal about the arbitrary (and therefore adjustable) nature of convention, especially when it comes to what constitutes the possible ontological premises that shape our understandings of self and other, subject and object. Whereas the legal system—arguably the institutional apotheosis of our culture’s conventional standards—stares into Jay’s black hole and sees the closed subjectivity of autonomous responsibility, Wagner’s system—if it can be called that—sees something very different. Instead, it sees “a subject/object shift, a mutual inversion, or figure-ground reversal, of eventual ends and means” (Wagner 2019: 6).

Amnesiac Ballads

In this spirit of mutual inversion, then, the things that happen to Jay during the lost time of his blackouts can be said to, simultaneously, unhappen. By way of an example less harrowing than him tearing his face to shreds with an empty cider can or violently confronting his ex-wife, it was not uncommon for me to find Jay alone having taken himself off from the group, sitting on some lone bench or on the ground, singing lines from Gypsy Traveller ballads. Haunting and beautiful, I was sometimes able to take down and record verses and fragments of these songs:

*A beggar, a beggar, I could never love again.
I had a daughter and Jeannie was her name
She ran away with the beggar man-o
Laddie, with my tow row ray.*

The songs Jay would sing were varied but most were concerned with themes of kinship, loss, belonging, landscape, and mobile corporealities. The above extract comes from a ballad called *The Beggarman*. It tells the story of a young couple who elope and return to the girl’s family some years later, their marriage endowed with children and prosperity. When I told Jay that I had heard him singing and showed him the few lyrics I had managed to jot down, he was taken aback. For one, this was his mother’s favorite ballad, and one of the many they had sung as a family around her deathbed. The tale it weaves—of seduction, family bliss, freedom, mobile possibility, and triumphant return—can be seen as deeply elegiac when

placed in the context of Jay's current isolation. What seemed to hurt and unnerve Jay just as much, though, was not only that he had no memory of singing it, but that he was singing it alone: "Fucking depressing, to sing these words by yourself. Embarrassing, to be honest. I'm embarrassed. We used to sing these songs together. That's how it's meant to be."

In this example, the breakdown between episodic memory and ipseity that Jay is confronted with in these blackout ballads points to a deeper breakdown in his own sense of belonging—namely that the material, psychological, and existential conditions of his homelessness have dislocated him from the foundations of a communal identity. To sing alone is, in Jay's eyes, a shameful activity that betrays the shared ethos of his Gypsy Traveller heritage. At the same time, these songs can also be seen as a longing for belonging, something that Jay can use to cocoon himself, however briefly and melancholically, from the pain of his alienation. Much of the reparative potential they might offer, though, is denied to him, sealed off within the psychoactive liminality of his blackouts. "I would never sing these songs when I'm sober, in my right mind. Like I said—it's not right. When I'm in that state I'm not myself—that's not me. Maybe that's it."

Liminality, says Wagner, is a point of no return, inferable only by its effects on other things. This, he claims, is how Victor Turner intended for the term to be used when he developed the notion of antistructure—the turning inside out of sociocultural and symbolic reality during certain ritualized events. In this regard, Wagner sees obviation and antistructure as synonymous with one another in that both are energized through experiences of liminality. Likewise for Jay, the liminality of the blackout—understood here a self-ritualized mode of dehistoricification—is a point of no return, and yet it is also one he returns to again and again. In this regard, the "somebody else" he becomes in blackout truly is an in-between surrogate—neither presence nor absence, neither self nor other. Like all other liminal forms, the blackout cannot be witnessed directly (Wagner 2019). Which is to say I could watch Jay and the others drink and drug themselves silly, but I could not directly observe the moment where memory slipped away and a new, liminal state-of-being was transitioned into. Instead, I could only infer based on the way circumstances and interactions shifted, scribbling down my fieldnotes, waiting for retroactive confirmation further down the line when the park's residents reflected on their blanks of lost time.

Booth can thus also be seen as a profound site of inference through which to make visible, however partially, the invisible. Not only does it

provide a keyhole into the chiasmatic liminality at the heart of the black-out, but it also opens a window into the broader existential and material conditions that drive him to transform, however briefly and incompletely, from one *kind* of being into another. What I seek to do now, then, is to foster a dialogue—or better yet (with a nod in Wagner’s direction) a *tri-
logue*—between the artwork, the artist, and anthropological theory. By taking Jay’s artwork not as a static object, but rather as an ethnographic particular that dynamically evokes the self-abnegating phenomenology of the blackout, I hope to bring Wagner’s work into closer engagement with Mattingly’s notion of the perplexing particular. My lamination of the obviational triasmus in Figure 6 is important in this regard. This is because to laminate means the mutual layering of surfaces—in this case between ethnography and theory—rather than the collapse of one into the other (which has been one of the central criticisms of the ontological turn).⁴ In this regard, I hope to substantiate a claim I made in chapter 4, namely that the phenomenological and ontological traditions are indeed isomers of one another and not, as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) contend, parallel universes held in asymptote from each other.

It’s Somebody Else

The title of Jay’s piece, *Booth*, concerns the building at the center of the artwork. Short for Booth House, the building refers to an infamous Whitechapel hostel that Jay has yo-yoed in and out of.

That’s Booth House—right there, in the middle. You can see it from the park, almost. That’s where I ended up when it first happened—when it all went to shit. You think you’ll be safe in there. But you won’t. It’s dark. All the windows are drawn, you know—keep people from looking in. It’s all drugs and darkness. I don’t know how long I was in there, few weeks maybe. Could’ve been months. Can’t remember. They threw me out, anyway. Course I kept coming back didn’t I?! Like a bad fucking smell. That’s the thing, right? You always end up back in the places you don’t want to be. You think, must be better than here, on the pavement. But it ain’t.

The red and black motif that seeps through the painting mirrors the color scheme of the K-cider, manifesting itself along the side of the central building as if somehow structurally supporting it. Across the image, triads and triangles abound. To go with the three aces, there are three

4. See Heywood 2017, 2023, 2018.

faces, held together in the self-inverting triangular scheme of obviation (A, B, C).

The face, the one on the bottom left [A]—that's me. Empty, fucking empty. That's what happens when you lose everything—you feel empty. Charlotte. My boys. That's the worst thing about all this—not being able to see them. But that's what happens when your life falls apart. That's why I need the drink, the K, you know—makes things feel okay for a bit. But I'm scared of not seeing my sons again. Not death, not this. Not seeing them again—that's what fucking terrifies me. But, you know, alcoholics don't deserve family, do they? That's my weakness. It's a weakness in my heart. Right here. What else can I do? The K is the only thing that stops me from being so angry—the only thing that takes me out of this situation; this fucking shite. I cry about my kids. I don't like to admit it, you know, but I do. Only thing that's ever made me cry. Every day—it's not good for my depression, this situation. The drink—it helps me forget. Don't need to worry about crying any more. That maybe sounds pathetic, but it's true. I mean it's not like there's much else to do around here!

Encircled by multiple forms of crisis that compound on one another—the disintegration of his family, the splintering of his Gypsy Traveler identity, the social suffering of homelessness, the exacerbation of his mental health issues, the stagnant spatiotemporality of street life (versus the mobile corporeality of traveling)—Jay feels empty. In *Booth*, we can see this in Jay's first face (A), with its mouth and eyes drained of color and content. There is, as he says, a stark emptiness to its form, as though looking at a mask with nothing beneath it. As a reminder that this sense of emptiness is bound up in the material conditions of his homelessness, the face is a structural cornerstone of the building itself, flowing directly into the wall that holds the K-cider can at its core.

This, then, is not just an existential emptiness, it is also social emptiness, an *emptying out* of possibilities brought about by his slippage into the everyday violence of homelessness and hostel life. Brutalized, punctured by loss, this is Jay's self—his presence—as reduced to the hollow form of a faceless mask, now at one with an edifice that has alcohol built into its very foundations. Faced with this crisis of presence, Jay begins to drink.

That face, the one on the right, that's the feeling you get when you drink—the feeling when all the shit starts to fade away. Like sometimes I'm so angry about everything—like it consumes me. It's like, I feel like I constantly want to beat the fuck out of someone—anyone. But once the K hits—I'm not so angry anymore. It's like I've pulled it out the mains. Maybe it's still there—but I'm somewhere else, y'know, away from it. That's the thing,

right—you can lock away all your emotions when you're on it—booze, pills, gear, whatever. You'd rather not feel the shit that makes you feel so bad—the low feelings, the emptiness...the fucking voices in your head. Fucking going on and on and on. What do they call them, intrusive thoughts? This stuff, in the middle [referring to the K-cider], it helps me not to feel my depression. That's what's going on there—I'm getting rid of the intrusive thoughts; I'm replacing them. I let the booze take their place—I couldn't give a fuck about any of it, cos nothing matters anymore; nothing feels real.

As he lets the alcohol fill his body, the second face (B) begins to fill, no longer empty but brimming with an obsidian darkness that echoes the K-cider's black integument. His eyes—vacant before—twist and contort into an abstract pattern, his left eye forming into a hypnotic spiral. Where before there were no clear boundaries between the face and the hostel, there is now a distinct separation as another presence, now alcoholically activated, slowly begins to form, peeling itself into existence.⁵

You start to forget as the booze takes over. You lose yourself. Helps you get out of the pain...the memories. It's like things are in a dream, at first. For a while I sort of know what's going on, but when I think about it the next day it's like I'm looking' down on myself, like I'm not really there. When people fill in the blanks for me, when I find out what I've done, I tell them: it's the alcohol, it's not me, it's somebody else. It's him.

As self/presence and Otherness/absence cross into another, we are confronted with the emergence of an alternative being—not from within the semi-structured spaces of the hostel, but from the outside—an indeterminate, liminal zone where red and black are no longer bound by the rigidity of formal containment, allowed instead to disintegrate and amorphously spread as liquid floods empty space. Emerging within this black-red soup is the third face (C), its eyes a swirl of manic spirals, its mouth a concentric vortex of mouths swallowing other mouths. What's more, below this new face a body has emerged, or at least part of a body, everything but the upper left part of the torso remaining eclipsed by Booth House. This partial body is the *somebody else* of Jay's blackouts, a lived absence that—hijacking his being-in-the-world—emerges from within a particular blind spot, creeping up on the first two faces from behind their backs, beyond the conventional constraints of agency, time, and memory.

5. Both faces, while still tethered to the hostel's bowels, remain bodiless—a reminder that part of the social death of homelessness is that you become a *no-body*.

Beware of Snug Fits: Possession without Spirits

According to Dubuffet, the role of artist—like the poet—is to “blur normal categories, to disrupt them, and by doing so restore to the eyes and the mind ingenuity and freshness” (Minturn 2004: 256). Like Wagner, Dubuffet was wise to the arbitrariness and historical specificity of conventional categories, noting that their familiarity arises from force of habit, and they are thus far from immutable, even if they might appear as such. The same goes for anthropological theory, says Mattingly (2019): the more canonical concepts become, the more invisible they become. Concepts, in this Arendtian view, are approached as constellations of frozen thought. Many, if not most, of the concepts we use in everyday life, be they large-scale models or singular words, are harmless. The concept of a sofa, for example, is unlikely to be politically or morally problematic, no matter how stubbornly it hangs around in our vocabulary. Concepts like race, class, or addict, however, are more consequential, becoming especially dangerous when they get entrenched in group identity dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Such concepts, history has shown, resist challenge and reproduce normative evaluations that then crystallize as dogma, the effects of which can be, and have been, catastrophic.

The lesson for anthropology then, is to be conscious of our own dogma, to be constantly ready to defrost our own frozen thoughts. Because of their experiential enmeshment in the daily lives of other human beings, anthropologists, Mattingly argues, are well poised not only to critique the social world as it stands, but also to simultaneously disrupt the very concepts we draw upon to leverage such critiques. This, the reader will recall, is the methodological impulse of the perplexing particular: an encounter that “interweave[s] with concepts and categories so as to call those very concepts and categories into question or reveal their limits” (Mattingly 2019: 427).

The self-abnegation of the blackout does precisely that, disrupting taken-for-granted ontological categories through its perplexing liminality, within which someone is not themselves, but not *not*-themselves. Conceptualized as such, becoming somebody else through blackout “deconventionalizes” the self-Other/presence-absence boundary, forcibly unyoking memory from self-awareness and thus disrupting the quality of mineness from which experiences of subjective agency draw meaning. As a result, interconnected conceptual clusters around notions of autonomy, responsibility, self-contained subjectivity, and individual

psychopathology start to lose their “aura of certainty,” becoming defrosted, as it were, by the perplexing particularity of the blackout state.

What Jay’s artworks do is add another dimension to this process of perplexification, disrupting not just established sociocultural categories, but anthropological ones too. Again, Mattingly’s observations are instructive here. With reference to Sherry Ortner (2016) and others, she notes the rise of “dark anthropology”—a subgenre of critical anthropology aimed at exploring the various structural forces that lead to oppression, domination, and inequality in conjunction with the subjective experiences created by these forces, such as despair and hopelessness. From this focus on the most brutal dimensions of the human experience have emerged what would now be understood as stock concepts within the field—concepts like structural violence and biopolitics, for example. The risk, Mattingly notes, is that these very concepts, now so long in the tooth and ubiquitous, become overdeterministic to the extent that human agency and potentiality become dwarfed by the overarching focus on power and its consequences. What is required, she argues, is a form of anthropology that continually unsettles its own insights and thus prevents conceptual inventions from ossifying into conventional (and thus unquestioned) doxa. Such an anthropology requires engaging in a constant dialectic between the irreducible singularity of human experience (i.e., perplexing particulars) and the descriptive categories we use to order and articulate these experiences. Mattingly gives two examples of this, drawing from the seminal work of Angela Garcia (2010) and João Biehl (2005). Both authors, she argues, frequently conjure juxtaposing images in their work (such as between death and beauty in Garcia, and abandonment and hope in Biehl) so as to destabilize the very conceptual frames their anthropological theorizing seeks to bring about.

There is, to my mind, a third example worth engaging with here, one that deeply resonates with the conceptual work and ethnographic particulars expounded over the course of this book. I am talking here of Morten Axel Pedersen’s (2011) ethnography, *Not Quite Shamans*. Set in the remote Ulaan-Uul district of postsocialist Mongolia, the book concerns the emergence of repressed occult spirits following the collapse of the socialist state. With social, economic, and political institutions previously thought of as immutable falling apart at the seams, Pedersen describes postsocialist Mongolia as thrown into a kind of “ontological meltdown” within which shamanic forces collide and coalesce with the newly unleashed forces of the free market, creating an “occult excess” that

can trap certain people (and communities at large) in dangerous states of perpetual becoming (2011: 8).

One such state is *agsan*—a condition of violent drunken rage that totally possesses a person, often sending them on a warpath across their communities (including Pedersen, who had more than a few near misses). The *agsan* state—like other forms of blind rage, such as *amok*—is deeply dissociative, with those who go through it having no memory of their actions while under its unique spell. Given that it is alcoholically activated, it is not unreasonable to think of *agsan* as a kind of black-out state. Crucially, though, *agsan* is neither understood nor experienced through the kind of psychopathological frameworks we would expect to see in mainstream addiction discourse. Rather, those prone to *agsan* (almost exclusively men) are, because of their ancestral connection to former shamans, “over-exposed” to the occult excesses unleashed during the transition out of socialism. In other words, these shamanic spirits are irresistibly drawn to these men, but because—following decades of religious repression and violent persecution—they lack the training, equipment, and spiritual resources, they are ultimately unable to appease and control these external agencies. The result is that these men become trapped in quasi-shamanic states—*agsan* being the most prevalent one. Unable to become full shamans, these “half-shamans” oscillate between alcoholic rage and sobriety, caught up in a perpetual state of incompleteness, always becoming, never arriving. For Pedersen, the *agsan* state is at once a response to, and a reflection of, the endemic uncertainty of the postsocialist Mongolian polity—a world turned upside down and now permeated with unstable shamanic potentialities that are themselves inexorably imbricated with the chaos and dislocation of an ill-designed market economy. The “not-quite-shaman-ness” that is embodied within the *agsan* state, then, gestures to the paradox at the heart of social life in Ulaan-Uul, namely that shamanism is alive and well, thriving even, just without any shamans.

In this regard, the *agsan* state is very much a perplexing particular in Mattingly’s sense of the term. Not only does it bring to light the irreducible singularity of shamanic potentiality as emergent in Ulaan-Uul, but it also enables Pedersen to disquiet a number of entrenched anthropological and political concepts, notably shamanism and transition, respectively. He does this by juxtaposing the potency of shamanic forces as manifest in the cosmopolitical “atmosphere” of these communities with the impotency of the half-shaman men caught up in these forces. The shamanic, as a stock category of anthropological doxa, is thus opened up

from a discrete, singular entity and reconceptualized as a labile constellation of ontological possibilities and occult practices that have diffused into every fissure of social, political, moral, and cultural life in the region. In disquieting the category of the shamanic as such, the notion of transition—an established politico-economic category—becomes disturbed also, rearticulated not only as a change in the existing nature of the state (i.e., from Soviet socialism to Western neoliberalism), but as a state of change in the nature of existence. In this new world, where ancient shamanism and modern capitalism spill across one another's boundaries in the constitution of "impossible forms" (like *agsan*), transition is revealed as an ontological shift in the order of things, as much as a politico-economic one.⁶

Jay's blackouts, held alongside the images he has painted to articulate these experiences, bear a profound similarity to the *agsan* state. They both exemplify paradoxical forms of intoxicated embodiment that sit at the intersection of complex social, political, historical, and material forces. In both cases, the person involved is trapped in the liminal phase of becoming—neither this nor that—often leaving a trail of destruction in their wake, including to themselves. Of course, Tower Hamlets is a long way from Ulaan-Uul. Nevertheless, just as the condition of *agsan* both mirrors back and reacts to the sociopolitical turbulence and ontological uncertainty of postsocialist "transition," the blackouts experienced by people experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park can likewise be understood as a reflection of, and a response to, the endemic precarity and ontological insecurity of austerity Britain. Furthermore, where *agsan* men attract a variety of occult forces, the Itchy Park residents attract a variety of (frequently punitive) biopolitical forces, typically in the form of police and psychomedical intervention.

These forces, as I have tried to illustrate throughout the book, are deeply consequential, impacting their lives on a daily basis. That does not mean, however, that their lived experiences are reducible to them. The innovative forms of embodiment that they enact to sidestep these forces gesture to this irreducibility. What's more, they also disquiet the very concepts that anthropologists deploy in order to represent these forces. Jay's artworks are again instructive in this regard, their vivid depiction of these slippery dissociative states also trading in paradoxes and juxtapositions. This is because these works are not just representations in the

6. As we can see from this example, one anthropologist's ontological turn is another's critical phenomenology. Tomayto, tomahto.

traditional sense of the word, but *re*-presentations, eliciting that which is absent and otherwise inaccessible to consciousness—the somebody else of his blackouts. Both the images *Booth* and *Lost Time* evoke the wounded and tormenting nature of street homelessness, along with the despair of addiction that is laced into these conditions. In this regard, it confirms the societal ills and systemic inequalities that our critical social and political theories have taught us to both assume and detect. No wonder we think, hearing Jay's story, that people experiencing homelessness—by virtue of the very category they inhabit—find themselves caught up in conditions of biopolitically driven violence, structural abandonment, and chronopolitical alienation. Indeed, it fits the expected pattern to a T. Locked and loaded, our critical concepts at the ready, we might be disturbed or upset by Jay's situation—but we are not surprised or, to borrow from Mattingly, perplexed. But then we are confronted with Jay's painting—in all its irreducible singularity. The image is immediate, tangible, concrete—in and of the world. And yet, even as we consider the concepts cluttered within it—homelessness, addiction, self, nonself—something of it confounds us, perplexes us—for it cannot be reduced to these concepts. More than that, it challenges their very validity as descriptors, literally forcing us—through the viscosity and poesis of the paint across the canvas—to consider things otherwise.

Is this not, above all else, what art does best: challenge established modes of knowledge? Indeed, this is arguably what the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard meant when he said that the art object unsettles the “fantasies of realism.” For Lyotard, the work of art is to serve as a cultural object that “harbors within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all determinations of its ‘reception’ and ‘production’” (1991: 93). This is the same kind of overflow that has so consistently occupied Mattingly and other like-minded anthropologists working in the critical phenomenological tradition. It is, as Pedersen has since acknowledged, also a fundamental concern of the ontological turn: the idea that forms of experience, and the concepts thus entangled, are forever spilling over into new forms (and thus new concepts). Indeed, it is this very notion that leads him to consider the way in which certain people in Ulaan-Uul “contain a hidden potential to ‘spill into shamans’ while still not quite getting there” (2011: 92).

Indeed, just as Pedersen uses his ethnography to call attention to the paradox of “shamanism without shamans,” Jay's artwork makes visible the blackout as a state-of-being that might, under certain conditions, be understood as “spirit possession without spirits.” After all, spirit possession,

in its typical conceptual garb within the anthropological episteme, does not really fit the blackout states I have used this book to describe and theorize. Certainly, they have the dissociative and amnesiac aspects in common with what is generally understood, in spite of its heterogeneity, to constitute spirit possession. But what it does not have are the *conso-ciative* aspects outlined in the previous chapter, that is the integration with a spiritual pantheon—malevolent or otherwise—and its adjoined human community of devotees, audience members, and ritual specialists. At this point, then, the temptation might be to group these nonself experiences with one of the psychiatric conditions discussed in chapter 4, such as dissociative identity disorder (DID), previously known as multiple personality disorder or, more colloquially, “split personality.” Again, there are common elements this condition shares with blackouts: blanks in memory that remain unaccounted for, patterns of unusual and extreme behavior, a sense of one’s self being abducted.

It is worth recalling here those—such as Laurence Kirmayer (1996) and Roland Littlewood (2002)—who have described diagnostic categories such as DID as culturally inflected means of describing possession, grounded in the sovereign role of the individual in Euro-American culture. Unless there is functional context (such as religious belief) to account for these experiences, alternative identities are typically classed as psychopathological. Appreciating the crossover between possession and DID, efforts have been made through collaborations between psychiatrists and anthropologists to help mental health practitioners discriminate between mental illness and culturally patterned behaviors such as possession. This can be seen in the part of the DSM-5⁷ that offers guidance for clinicians to better recognize and understand culturally supported idioms of suffering and healing, which may include trance-possession states that bear some of the hallmarks of DID.

As I have sought to illustrate throughout this book, the kinds of blackouts experienced in Itchy Park—as expressed so vividly in Jay’s paintings—do not fit into either the spirit possession or dissociative disorder categories like DID. It is not, as in the case of spirit possession, a culturally supported mode of healing. In point of fact, notwithstanding its particular sociality in the context of Itchy Park’s moral and psychic

7. DSM-5, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, is the authoritative guide published by the American Psychiatric Association used by healthcare professionals to diagnose and classify mental disorders.

economy, the blackout is a fundamentally solitary journey and one that frequently attracts forms of harassment and abuse (from the police, the public, and other people living on the street) that are often anything but supportive. At a more fundamental level, these blackouts are not connected to any kind of cultural or religious practice that involves established spiritual agencies. Likewise, while it is possible to squint and see aspects of DID (notably the coexistence of some kind of double-consciousness within a single physical body), inducing blackout states in oneself through heavy substance use is not enough to earn somebody entry into this diagnostic category, even if dissociative amnesia can be part of its broader symptomology. In all my time spent within the Itchy Park community, at no point did I encounter evidence of the kind of “identity switching” typically associated with DID, in which a person’s alter ego will often possess its own unique name, personality, fashion style, accent, or even spectacle prescription (Littlewood 2002). Moreover, given the levels of exposure that many of the park’s residents have had to psychiatrists over the years, if there was a DID diagnosis to be made among them, it almost certainly would have been. As it was, among the many psychiatric diagnoses floating around the park, DID was, to the best of my knowledge, not one of them. As it happens, the DSM-5 explicitly discounts a DID diagnosis if the disruption in identity is “attributable to the physiological effects of a substance” such as blackouts brought on by intoxication.⁸ Tellingly, the same diagnostic guide also rules out DID if the disturbance is “a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice.”⁹

And yet there I was each day, bearing witness to these huge stretches of lost time where people slipped into amnesiac states that were ascribed to some nebulous agency that was simultaneously self and non-self. So, if this was neither an act of spirit possession nor an episode of DID, just what was I confronted with? This book has been dedicated to just this question. By now, the inadequacy of existing neuropsychiatric frameworks that conceive the blackout as a maladaptive coping mechanism bundled up within some more extensive disorder has been, I hope, well illustrated. Here, it is not hard to imagine some arguing that simply adjusting the DID diagnostic criteria to allow for psychoactively driven disturbances would offer a tidy way of dealing with the conceptual ambiguity created by the drug-induced blackout. Tempting as this

8. DSM-5 (2013): Dissociative Identity Disorder. Code 300.14. E.

9. DSM-5 (2013): Dissociative Identity Disorder. Code 300.14. D.

sleight of hand might be, such a move would ultimately run aground on the same reef I have been arguing against throughout this book: the reduction of blackout experiences to psychopathological process at the expense of critical phenomenological inquiry. As those working within the phenomenological tradition have long argued, any concept—be it culture, possession, biopolitics, dissociation, mental disorder, whatever—serves as a kind of shorthand for the worldly conditions and existential singularities that encompass a particular experience. Concepts can never fit snugly around an experience, for experience itself will always wriggle free and spill out, revealing its perplexing particularity. Indeed, we are warned by Mattingly to be especially wary of those concepts that seem to fit the snuggest, their tightness a harbinger of the kind of canonical ossification that, if left unchecked, works to impede conceptual creativity and experimentation. That does not mean that some concepts do not make better fits than others, nor that we should stop trying to come up with new ones. On the contrary, as I have sought to emphasize throughout the book in line with thinkers across the isomeric phenomenological-ontological divide, anthropology is perfectly placed, by virtue of its immersive methodology, to call forth ethnographic particulars that rattle the foundations of our own culture's most enduring concepts, including those within our own disciplinary bounds.

Inspired by the perplexing particularity of the blackout as emergent within the Itchy Park lifeworld, and buttressed by Jay's paintings, "spirit possession without spirits" can thus be thought of in such foundation-rattling terms. As an exercise in ethnographically informed conceptual experimentation, this notion of spiritless possession has the advantage of capturing the nonself and amnesiac qualities of becoming somebody else in blackout without having to account for the absence of any kind of cosmologically or religiously specific alien entities. Likewise, it also avoids becoming tethered to the psychopathological associations that are baked into dissociative disorder diagnoses, allowing us to consider its experiential texture outside of any deficit frameworks and instead move the lens of analysis towards what are, to my mind, more fitting domains centered around existential questions of crisis, memory, presence, self-ritualized transformation, liminality, obviation, and so on. Further, by zooming in on the experience of the blackout through this novel conceptual lens, the zooming out that dialectically accompanies this sort of phenomenological hermeneutics works to train our critical gaze more acutely on the still understudied interplay between homelessness, addiction, and



Figure 7. *Lost Time* and *Booth*, side by side.

temporality, and in particular how these phenomena have become knotted into the politico-economic structures of austerity Britain.

Getting Lost

In Jay's artworks, we see these entanglements revealed in technicolor: the lost time of his blackouts—understood here as a chemical conduit for the emergence of this nonself being—as indivisible from the chronopolitical and material regimes of homelessness, manifest in the exclusionary spatiotemporalities of the hostel (represented by the building in *Booth*) and Itchy Park (represented by the patch of green in *Lost Time*). What I have presented in this moment, then, is very much the kind of “scaling up” that has been the hallmark of anthropological knowledge-making, that is, a theoretical generalization raised up from an ethnographic particular, in this case Jay's artworks (and indeed the embodied experiences they elaborate).

The goal of this upscaling is to add something, ideally something new and innovative, to existing bodies of theoretical knowledge about how different people—and the cultures they inhabit—come to be. The problem, however, as Marilyn Strathern (1991) notes in her critical analysis of anthropological knowledge production, is that for every epistemological gain in the scaling process, there is an equal and opposite *loss*. Or perhaps more accurately, it is not the loss or “remainder effect”—as she calls it—that is in itself problematic, but rather the way that these leftovers are neglected in the course of the construction of generalizations. In this respect, Strathern’s intervention is to try and instill within anthropology its very own third law of analytical motion, to pay the same level of attention to that which is lost as towards that which is gained. Inspired by the geometry of fractals, and more specifically their capacity to be simultaneously fragment and whole as they repeat themselves across increasingly smaller scales, Strathern addresses the gaps between discrete levels of social and intellectual categorization, taking them not as dead space but teeming with interrelationality. In so doing, she problematizes generalizations made about cultural practices and the comparisons we take for granted within (or between) them. For example, she uses this fractal model as a means of thinking through the kaleidoscopic interconnectivity of Melanesian society, noting how the driving force of social action is not to make stable connections between different scales or units of cultural life (such as between individual, household, and/or society) but rather how to elaborate them (1991: 47–48). This because these connections already predate those who are thrown into the world and, as such, require not construction but expression, such as through artifacts, ritual performances, bodily adornments, and other forms of elaboration. It is for this reason that Strathern describes connections in terms of their fractal partiality, thereby indexing the inevitability of the remainder in activities of scaling and comparison.

The reason I draw attention to Strathern’s critique is because I want to guard against the kind of neglect that she warns of, not just in respect to Jay’s artworks, but the whole host of other ethnographic particulars I have sought to describe and theorize over the course of this book. Worth noting here is that Strathern’s notion of the partial connection, though worded in very different terms, has much in common with what phenomenological anthropologists describe as the excessive singularity of human experience—the stuff that, as I have outlined earlier, invariably leaks out from even the snugness of conceptual containers. Something, in other words, always remains. In this way, the teasing out

of new conceptualizations through experimentation with ethnographic particulars (Holbraad 2019)—even conceptualizations that, for all intents and purposes, appear to be a better fit for the human phenomena thus encountered—must not overlook the remainders.

To understand what this means in practice, let us take one final look at Jay's paintings and the connections that I have sought to scale up through my engagement with them. As already noted, both pieces abound with connections between psychoactive intoxication, blackouts, selfhood, and the materialities and spatiotemporalities of urban homelessness—connections that have been extensively explored throughout this book. To offer a quick recap: having “zoomed in” on the particulars of Jay's experience, it was through a dialectical “zooming out” that his blackouts could be synthesized and integrated into a novel conceptual category (i.e., spiritless possession) that simultaneously offered a critical examination of the sociopolitical structures conditioning his daily existence. Following Strathern, though, what remains crucial here is to acknowledge that these connections were already there—they *could not help but exist*. Likewise, Jay's artworks came about without my help, as did the connection between his blackout drinking, his family breakdown, and the current existential conditions of his homelessness. Jay's concern, then, is not creating these connections (that would be impossible), but *elaborating* them, which he does with extraordinary power through his art. In much the same way, any connections I have made in this book between the experiential singularity of Jay's blackouts, his artworks, and the broader sociopolitical and economic structure are not really “made” at all but are instead another elaboration amongst a fractal constellation of partial connections.

In other words, when Jay first showed me his paintings, they were not “for” this book, even if I was eventually given permission to reproduce them. Indeed, this very act of reproduction—wherein the images have migrated across the lens of my camera phone all the way through my computer software until they became digitally embedded into these pages—is a fitting example of the “not quite” replication of fractals. This is because the images reproduced on the screen (or paper) have lost the textural intensity and sensorial depth that can only come from experiencing a work of art in its original form through the lived immediacy of human perception. So, given that these paintings were not (originally at least) intended for this book, what were they for?

There is no simple answer to this question, if there even is one at all. Rather than seeking one, then, it is perhaps better to settle for the

intrinsic excess of ethnographic data, and in so doing find a way to dwell within its ambiguity and complexity, to find life within the leftovers. In many ways, we can see echoes of this very imperative within Jay's artistic impulse.

I still need to have a couple before I start—otherwise I can't keep a steady hand, [the] shakes and all that. There's a zone I get into a when I'm painting. It's hard to describe...like it totally sucks you in. Once I'm in, it's like I'm a cocoon or something. One of the staff'll tap me on the shoulder and tell me they're closing up, telling me I need to get out. Crazy that I can be there for hours without knowing, just lost in it—like completely absorbed or whatever. It can actually be quite knacking, y'know, being like that—it's like you're inside the painting. That was how it was with Booth, it was like I blinked, and it was just there, right in front of me. I remember being exhausted, confused—like when they called my name at closing. I was like what? Where the fuck am I? Still, I felt better for doing it, you know, actually making something, putting my hands to work.

There are elements here of what Tanya Luhrmann (2011) has described in terms of absorption, a psychological capacity that can be understood as a kind of myopic focus on one object or sensation, causing attention to dilate over that particular experience as the world outside of it contracts or else disappears completely. She sees this capacity as built into “trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations” (2011: 74). To this list, then, we might also add the absorptive experience of losing oneself in the act of creating something, such as a piece of art (art always coming in pieces, never whole). Indeed, Jay's experience of becoming lost inside the zone of his artistic creativity is sufficiently absorptive to quell any coherent sense of his surroundings or the flow of time. In this respect, his cocooning is reminiscent of the enchantment that slot machine gamblers in Las Vegas experience as they enter “the zone,” the distorted temporality and existential mystique of this dissociative state actively cultivated by the assembled spatial, technological, and commercial design of the casino environment (Schüll 2012). What all these different absorptive experiences have in common is a discombobulation of self and time in the context of a given interaction, whether that is hearing divine presence, playing a winner, or crafting a piece of art.

With respect to the zone that Jay slips into, the extent to which the suspension of self and time he experiences appears to echo the very liminality of the blackouts they depict is telling. Unlike his blackouts, however, he feels better on the other side of it. Moreover, he does not ascribe

the painting's creation to some foreign agency. Which is to say, he is lost in the act but not from himself. This is because the artwork, unlike the experiences they represent, contains something of the unique flavor of mineness that his blackouts, by their very nature, lack. As those who study and practice art therapy have noted, images that emerge out of this process harbor multiple and often contradictory selves that challenge ideas of unitary selfhood (Hogan and Pink 2010). As these authors note, making a piece of art and reflecting upon its creation can involve for the artist profound moments of internal conversation, the experience of ephemeral states, moods, as well as deep embodied sensations that can be activated not only by the product, but by the tangible and tactile aspects of the materials used. The focus, they argue, should not be so much on the finished article (cautioning in particular against the application of preexisting interpretive orthodoxies) but on the emotional and psychological labor and liminality of the process itself, what Hogan (2003) has described in terms of "pictorial struggle."

This sense of struggle is something that Jay continues to grapple with, continuously going back and forth over particular parts of his paintings, making him feeling looped into what can feel like ceaseless episodes of reworking. In *Booth*, for example, the nonself entity that loomed from behind the building was an especially tricky section for him. Once he had established the initial structure of the painting, he obsessed over its form, sketching and resketching its contours and features until, eventually, it "felt right." In many ways, it is not surprising that this part of the painting—his somebody else—was so difficult for Jay to make manifest. After all, the figure occupied the lacuna of his memory, actively resisting the kind of "memory imagework" (Edgar 2004: 10) that is often used in art therapy contexts to guide the artist through the temporal labyrinth that links past, present and future selves in dynamic constitution. His struggle to rework this figure into something coherent and existentially intelligible reflects not only his own sense of interior disturbance and ambivalence regarding his blackouts, but also the paradoxical interplay between presence and absence that lies at their very heart. Nevertheless, whereas the self-absentia of blackout can, in experiential terms, never be re-presented through memory, in Jay's paintings a kind of re-presentation is possible. In this respect, these paintings can be thought as a foil to the social relations underpinning the collective forensics described at the start of this chapter, where a person's authorship over what they have done is forfeited in the course of tug-of-war of memory as different people and groups—all with their own motivations, memories, and

forgettings—rake the past into the present. Instead of others telling his story on his behalf, his paintings are able to elaborate, however partially, his own story and transform what is essentially a nonexperience, an absence, into *his* experience—reclaiming mineness, presence, and meaning in the face of this spiritless possession.

It is this reclaiming of narrative, Hogan and Pink argue, that distinguishes these artistic practices as therapeutic. This is because they offer nonlinguistic “routes to interiority that allow the shifting, contingent, and transformative nature of the self to become known” (2010: 171). In Jay’s case, of course, there are limits to what can become known about this hidden self—his painting not so much a filling-in of the blanks as a penciling-in of their outlines. Perhaps, then, Jay’s painting is not so much art therapy as therapeutic art. The distinction here is subtle but important. It points to the fact that Jay’s artworks are not produced in the kind of semi-structured group sessions that typically shape the art therapy process. Much like his blackouts, his artmaking is a solitary journey that takes place in a public social space, in this case the hustle and bustle of the day center. Unlike art therapy sessions where, under the guidance of the supervising therapist, themes—such as loss and hope—are disclosed by one individual before setting off a domino-like, imaginational cascade that ripples through the group before emerging pictorially, Jay’s work distinctly lacks this kind of collectively “guided fantasy” (Edgar 2004: 6).

The extent to which Jay’s solitariness might limit the therapeutic potential of his work in the long run is arguably a question worth exploring further. At the same time, however, the unique blend of extemporaneity, solitude, and happenstance that spurred Jay’s creativity—he simply discovered the raw artistic materials near the table he was sitting at and, in a moment of impulse, found himself drawn to their potentiality—should not be underestimated when placed in the broader context of Jay’s life and situation. Nor, as will hopefully become clear, should it be underestimated when trying to address the potency of fractal remainders and their implications for the anthropological episteme.

Double Images

To better understand why Jay’s spontaneity is so instructive in this regard, we can again lean on surrealist tropes that are often evoked in the context of art therapy, notable the notion of “psychic automatism.”

Appearing in André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1972), psychic automatism was deployed as a concept and technique that, like a manhole cover being burst open by a subterranean explosion, sought to lay bare through art the spontaneity of human thought, let loose from the unconscious and thus unbound from rational control or any kind of preexisting ethical or moral concerns. We can see elements of this in Jay's absorptive experience of self-suspension in which he begins the painting process only to blink and find himself several hours in the future, his artwork staring back at him. At the same time though, this state of automatism, no matter how consuming, is counterbalanced by highly conscious processes of reworking that emerge in the ebb and flow of Jay's own pictorial struggle to re-present his blackout self.

This, then, is a reminder that we ought to be suspicious of Breton's claim that artwork, no matter how seemingly automatic, could somehow exist outside of any kind of existing social, moral, or ethical framework. Indeed, in this balancing act between self-abandonment and self-engrossment, what emerges in Jay's artmaking is not his unconscious mind unfettered by "moral preoccupations"—as Breton might put it—but rather his self-memory system as an object of what Foucault would have called "ethical substance." In Foucault's (2005) line of thinking, ethical practice in the form of continuous labor upon the self requires some kind of raw material, an object on which to enact possibilities of transformation, care, and repair. As anthropologists have demonstrated, there is no prerequisite for such materials to be solely of the body. Indeed, they can be of the soul, as in the cultivation of piety and divine proximity in contexts of religious devotion (Mahmood 2004; Robbins 2004; Scherz 2017), of shared spaces—as in the construction of homefulness through practices of urban squatting (Grohmann 2020)—or of dreams, as in contexts where external agencies and cultural concepts intermingle with the inner psychological life of the dreamer to catalyze novel forms of self-making (Mittermaier 2012; Stewart 2002). Whatever the substance might be, it is through acting upon it that the person initiates processes of subjectification—the molding of the self as a particular kind of subject. In Jay's case, it is his memory—or rather his forgetting—that functions as the raw material here, the practice of painting allowing him to attend to his own oblivion, to recover a sense of authorship and agency in the face of a jarring ontological uncertainty. As the uncertain labor of reworking reveals, though, the blackout state is a difficult raw material to work with. His obviational forgettings remain slippery, a moving target that resists adhesion.

That he has managed to adhere anything to them is a feat in itself, in both the aesthetic and existential sense. It is a reminder that the blackout, and indeed any human experience, is not only perplexing to interested ethnographers, but to the very people themselves. As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, Jay reckons with this perplexity primarily through this artwork, finding solace and meaning not only in its creation, but in its *creating*. In emphasizing the importance Jay places on the complex and ongoing labor of his artmaking, I hope to have found an analytic “space of life” between the particularity of Jay’s experiences and the conceptual abstractions, novel and doxic, that have been raised up from them. In so doing, I have tried to avoid two interlinked processes of reification: 1) the reification of Jay’s artworks into some kind of stable product or fixed snapshot of his inner world or subjectivity; 2) the reification of my own ethnographically grounded reconceptualizations into anything like a static category of experience.

On the contrary, by adopting the analytic spirit of the perplexing particular—in which concepts are thawed as quickly as they are frozen—I have challenged any kind of static rendering of Jay’s blackouts. Far from static, I have illustrated the ecstatic potentiality of these images, taking them as an invitation, no matter how partial, into the obviational logic of the blackout’s triasmus: to the moment of *ek-stasis*—being rapt out of one’s self—when somebody slips away from their status as one being and transforms into somebody else. As uncanny echoes of the blackouts they depict, Jay’s paintings provide him a means of losing enough of himself without having to totally abdicate his being-in-the-world—the therapeutic paradox of the former inspiring the therapeutic possibility of the latter. Which is to say that even in spite of his social suffering and asphyxiating sense of stuckness, he is still able to find moments of escape. And, even though he cannot actually remember his blackouts, he has nevertheless discovered a means of accessing them—the sweep of his paintbrush bringing into partial view an ecstatic reality that, by all other conventional measures, is dismissed as either a neurological glitch or else a by-product of some deeper psychiatric or biological disorder.

Of course, none of this changes the fact that Jay remains impoverished, neglected, and marginalized. His art does not lift him out of homelessness. It does not put his broken marriage back together, repair the damage he has wrought, or reconcile him with his estranged family. His art, in other words, does not save him. But it does save him a little. For one, it sends him to the day center where, for the duration of the painting at least, he doesn’t need to drink as much. This may seem trivial

given the scale of his drinking. Nevertheless, there is always a tipping point between fatal and nonfatal levels of alcohol consumption. While the alcoholic units he avoids during his painting sessions might not be enough to save him in the long term from the sort of liver complications he is undoubtedly courting, they go some way in buying him some extra time in the short term. Outside the very real risks of biological death, they also keep his social death at bay, offering not only a reprieve from the existential crises that otherwise smother him, but a means of doing so that does not, like his blackouts, collapse in on itself. For once, then, his escape route does not double as his prison.

In Strathern's terms, we might take Jay's artworks as the remainder of the remainder, or in the language of existential phenomenology, the excess of the excess. What I mean by this is that his work forces us to confront the great dilemma at the heart of anthropological knowing. That is to say, no matter how intensely or diligently we might try to empathize with, comprehend, illuminate, and conceptualize other peoples' worlds, experiences, subjectivities, and practices, we are destined to fall short. Again, the issue is not so much the falling short, but rather that this shortfall is, at best, neglected or, at worst, disguised behind modes of ethnographic writing that reify our interlocutors, whether by freezing them in time (Fabian 1983), prematurely foreclosing their stories (Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013), flattening their experiences (Throop 2012), or objectifying them in the static typologies and social categories (Grøn 2017; Irving 2007; Leistle 2016). While ethnographic writing as a mode of epistemological expression can hardly be expected to avoid all, or even most, of these risks in their entirety, this should not mean that there do not exist a number of avenues through which anthropological texts can aspire to access and call forth the worlds of those we study, however imperfectly. My elevation of Jay's artworks and the creative labor underpinning them to the iris of analysis is, I suggest, a good example of what such an avenue might look like.

As Hogan and Pink (2010: 170) have noted, the process of making art is one in which a person can be said to be actively engaged in the interrogation of their lives and selves, both interior and exterior. What these artworks do, then, is provide not so much a knowing about as a knowing *with*—an important epistemological shift that not only emphasizes the coequality between ethnographer and interlocutor but also foregrounds the need to preserve the intrinsic ambiguity, excess, and unfinishedness of the ethnographic encounter. Or, as Jackson so eloquently put it: "to fully recognize the eventfulness of being is to discover that

what emerges in the course of any human interaction overflows, confounds and goes beyond the forms that initially frame the interaction as well as the reflections and rationalizations that follow from it" (2009: 235). Echoing Strathern, Jackson's message here is that all ethnographic data is partial, reminding us to be wary of reducing the experiential, intersubjective, and always multiple worlds of others to predefined theoretical perspectives and patterns. Hence why thinkers like Hogan and Pink advocate for a "social art therapy" that approaches artmaking, like all human activity, as situated within the particular crosswinds of a given place, time, and sociocultural setting. Rather than seeking to theorize what gets made through presupposed orthodoxies, as though art were to somehow emerge from within a vacuum, the authors, adopting a critical feminist stance, see art therapy as a site of resistance where contradictions and inequities within the social, political, and discursive spheres can be explored, subverted, and creatively worked through by women who find themselves at the center of these forces (Hogan and Pink 2010: 166).

This vision of social art therapy mirrors the analytical level of critical phenomenology 1.0—the convergence of critical social theory and perspectives with phenomenological techniques of inquiry that focus on narrativized subjectivity and lived experience. As I have already noted, Jay's blackouts, along with the artworks he uses to make sense of them, can certainly be analyzed through this lens, emerging as a deductive site through which to establish critical links between Jay's subjective experiences of homelessness and the structural factors that condition this daily reality. However, rather than just critiquing existing exclusionary systems through the established conceptual tropes of structural violence, social abandonment, alienation, and the like, what I have striven for by placing Jay's artworks at the center here is to demonstrate their capacity to unsettle anthropological concepts, old and new, and thereby elevate them to the 2.0 level, so to speak.

Like a built-in insurance policy, these images serve as an *aide-mémoire* to always probe the limits of the reconceptualization of the blackout I have spent this book building up. Just as even the freshest bread will always turn stale in the end, they are a reminder that—like any other concept—it too exists in its own uniquely frozen form, ossifying ethnographic particulars in a way that, despite its utility as a thinking tool, can all too easily undermine its own intentions. This recentering of Jay's art—along with the processes that bring it life—allows for the remainders, the overflow, to become the engine of analysis, rather than

tagging along for the ride in a merely adjunctive capacity. In this regard, I have tried to situate his artmaking in a “third space” between the scales of the particular and the general in the hope that such a move will leave my own reconceptualizations stable only in their instability, caught in the semifluid state between freeze and thaw.

Popularized in feminist cultural studies to describe entities (such as female or subaltern identities) that sit in the interstitial domain between fixed poles, third spaces have been used to describe the place where negotiation unfolds, where life in all its uncertainty plays out and that which is neither this nor that becomes its own (English 2004; Gutiérrez 1999; Haraway 1991). This notion, I feel, captures the ineffable quality of Jay’s “artworking” as it unfolds in the context of his everyday life, more broadly denoting the way in which alienated people are able to forge new modalities of being in reaction to, and in resistance against, their alienation. In Jay’s case, this sense of alienation is twofold to the extent that his structural estrangement dovetails with the self-estrangement of his blackouts. As a kind of existential third space, the zone that Jay enters into when he paints can be understood as a dynamic site where he reconstructs his blackout being based on the therapeutic potential of art and in reaction to exclusionary forces that tyrannize him on a daily basis. This, then, is not about Jay reversing the processes of alienation—self- and externally inflicted—that await him on the other side of the day center’s walls. Rather it is about him interrogating and elaborating these processes and, in so doing, providing a back door into the paradoxical form of his blackout nonself. It is, in Indian cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s words, a straining to live on “the cusp, to deal with two contradictory things at the same time without either transcending or repressing that contradiction” (Mitchell 1995: 82).

In this respect, Jay’s is a cuspidate world where escape and internment are caught up in one another’s bounds. The double images, though, do not end there. As Jay’s artwork reveals, there can be motility even in the heart of stasis. Homelessness—a situational reality we have come to associate with stuckness, confinement, and futility—is also a site of radical movement, of extraordinary, if always partial, becoming. Even the most repetitive and damaging cycles of substance use and self-immolation can, and do, give way to moments of novelty, spontaneity, and healing. Jay’s paintings are proof that his story, as with the others in Itchy Park, are not finished. As Anne Line Dalsgaard and Martin Demant Frederiksen (2013) remind us, the stories and lives of those we study do not become paused when we exit the field. Instead, they go on, always

open in potentiality even as old patterns continue to repeat themselves. The task, the authors argue, is to find a way to let this strange tension between recurrence and possibility be reflected, not only in our mode of analysis of the field, but in the text itself (2013: 58). The elevation of Jay's artworks to the epicenter of this project, taken here to exemplify the remainders that get left behind in processes of ethnographic representation, is an attempt to grapple with this task. Indeed, these artworks are more than just a static reflection of his interiority or his wider social circumstances. Rather, they are part and parcel of his situated and embodied being-in-the-world, inexorably caught up in the differing scales of hope and hopelessness, escape and captivity that constitute his homelessness. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the fate of the paintings themselves.

Lost and Found

The last time I saw any of Jay's paintings, they were being ferried around in a double layer of plastic garbage bags—the only things Jay could find that were big enough to hold them that also offered any kind of water protection. It was late afternoon, and Jay was especially agitated, convinced that someone else in the park had informed on him to the police. This was not unusual in itself. In fact, it was a pretty common anxiety that Jay would often air when intoxicated—one that the rest of the group had gotten used to ignoring. Still, he continued to pace up and down, K-cider in hand, occasionally pulling his paintings out and making a show of them to anyone who would engage with him, which was mostly just me at this point. Coupled with his suspicion that someone had betrayed him to the authorities was the corollary fear that, in retribution for whatever his transgression was, the police were going to take his artwork from him. Again, this was a fear he had expressed before, and something that he could get very emotional about as he ruminated on the thought of the police confiscating and disposing of his creations. "I did this with my hands, my bare fucking hands," he snarled, pointing at the canvas, "and they want to fucking take it. They don't want me to have anything left." The next part of this pattern that could be relied on, so to speak, was that the next day Jay would have no memory of his accusations of betrayal, his fear of police action, or even the crime that he had supposedly committed that might have led someone to inform on him. The difference this time, however, was that the next day the garbage bags

and the paintings concealed within them were nowhere to be seen. They were gone, and Jay had no clue where they might be.

The irony that Jay's paintings—his most profound artifacts of mine-ness—had been swallowed up into the same oblivion they had been created to elaborate on was as cruel as it was perhaps inevitable. Jay, when he realized they were gone, was at once crestfallen and enraged, his memoryless void from the day before initially ripe for the projection of paranoid fantasies in which everyone in the park, the police, the day center staff, the public—everyone but him—was responsible for their disappearance, stolen by some predatory opportunist to sell on the illegal art market. Though these suspicions continued to linger in some deeper part of him, as the day went on Jay began to concede that he had just as likely left them on some street corner, alley, or public park. Shut out of his own memories, and with nobody in Itchy Park able to help him remember, he had no means of retracing his steps to find out where he might have left them. To anyone else, he realized, the paintings would have looked like any old bag of rubbish, indiscernible from the thousands of other black garbage bags that are left outside of London's shops, restaurants, and residential buildings and collected each day. The overwhelming likelihood, then, was not that Jay's paintings were making their way through the black market, but rather that they were aboard some nondescript refuse lorry, surrounded by the city's waste objects and destined for the anonymous grave of some municipal landfill.

Seeing that the thought of his artworks being absorbed into the endless mass of the city's garbage was upsetting him, I tried to cheer Jay up by reminding him of the photos I had taken, proposing that I get them blown up to the equivalent size. This promise of reanimation, though, did little to move Jay. This is because it was, at its heart, a flawed promise. "Wouldn't be the same," he shrugged, telling me to keep the photos and use them however I saw fit, that he'd make do with the memories. "I'll keep them up here," he said, tapping his temple with his finger, as though with each tap they could be made to sink deeper into his memory bank. He would have to get back to painting, he realized, if he wanted to get past losing his pieces. "That'll help me forget about it," he said as he pulled another K-cider from his rucksack.

Here, even as Jay committed the images to the same memory vault that had been so spectacularly compromised through the obviational temporality of his blackout drinking, he simultaneously sought the less radical temporal dissociation of the artistic process as a therapeutic modality to move him beyond his feelings of loss and guilt. As this moment

exemplifies, when it comes to the dynamics of healing in contexts of loss—be that losing treasured relationships or treasured objects—memory and forgetting are indivisibly implicated in one another. Indeed, as Jay figured out what needed to be retained in his memory and discarded in his forgettings for him to get through their loss, the more slippery question of what remained of these paintings—that is to say what was being reproduced and what would be left behind in any such reproductions—rippled out across the unique boundary of the ethnographic relationship that existed between us. In other words, Jay’s commitment of these images to his memory and any digital copies I might fashion for my own purposes were both reproductive acts in the sense of re-presenting an absence through the power of memory—the difference being that where Jay’s memory was embodied and neurological, mine was digital.

Thus, to suggest that the digital images embedded in the pages of this book are the only copies remaining of Jay’s paintings would be false. So long as Jay is alive, another copy exists in his memory. In true Strathernian style, then, we are back in the realm of the fractal. Recall that fractals are fragments that contain within themselves a copy of the whole, such that these replicas are “the same but not-the-same” as the original (Green 2005). Memory, then, as that which re-presents absence, can be understood as following a fractal logic to the extent that with each *gain* that comes about through reproduction, a gap or loss simultaneously appears. Such gaps, though, are not to be understood as empty spaces; rather, they denote a fundamental interrelationship between the fragment and the whole. If the fractal analytic is applied to memory, the core interrelationship that emerges is between presence and absence or, put another way, that which comes to be and that which ceases to be.

If it looks like I am attempting to wedge in a new theoretical framework right at the end of this book, I can assure the reader I am not. This is because the logic of the fractal is what inspired Wagner’s notion of obviation—the same model I have used to conceptually map the liminal becoming of the blackout state. Wagner based his obviation triangles on a fractal device known as the Sierpiński triangle, captivated by its internal recursivity.

Like Strathern, Wagner was drawn to the relationality of fractals or, put another way, to their resistance to containing any kind of a clear edge. Compared to other geometric figures, fractals cannot be broken down into different parts with any kind of intelligible boundary between them. This is because, each fragment simultaneously produces a whole, and vice versa. Deconstructing the fractal, in other words, does nothing

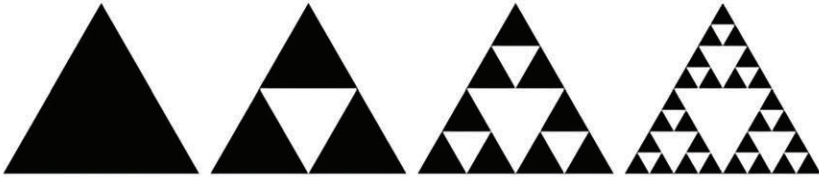


Figure 8. Sierpiński triangle.

to reveal its particular geometric qualities (i.e., its potentially endless capacity for internal self-division). This can only be achieved by looking at the relations *between* each self-similar part. As I demonstrated in my lamination of Wagner's obviational triangle onto Jay's artwork, *Booth*, the "spiritless possession" that is enacted when Jay transforms into somebody else through blacking out is defined by the blurred boundary between being present and being absent, between self and nonself. Abducted into an anesthetic state-of-being where he is simultaneously himself and not, Jay's blackouts are, as I demonstrated earlier, driven by the fractal energy of obviation, sealing him in a liminal black hole between ontological states of being and nonbeing. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine Wagner envisioning one of Jay's blackouts when he wrote that "an obviation figure divides itself by itself and keeps on dividing itself until there is nothing left but an event horizon" (2019: 100).

With these ideas in mind, let us briefly remind ourselves of the different fractal fragments that co-emerged in the course of that twenty-four-hour period when Jay's paintings transformed from treasured artwork into waste object and then back again into memorized copy and, ultimately, digitally reproduced ethnographic artifact. First up, we have Jay's blackouts, driven by the fractality of obviational division. Then, we have Jay's artworks, which are themselves fractalized, scaled-down reproductions, or perhaps more accurately, re-presentations of his blackout states. Faced with their loss, in which one fractal (the artwork) has, in one sense, been absorbed into the event horizon of a self-similar fractal (the blackout), Jay is compelled to enact another kind of fractal replication (i.e., memorization) at the same time as he commits to creating new artworks so as to induce in himself another fractal state (i.e., the liminality of artistic self-suspension) that will, in turn, enable him to *elaborate* (in Strathern's sense of the term) the social and existential fragmentation of his homelessness, an activity that carries its own unique therapeutic potential. What's more, mixed up in this fractal configuration is the

reproduction of Jay's artworks—and more broadly his story and experiences—in ethnographic writing and anthropological theorizing. By taking this situation not as a chain of individual parts linked through linear causation or coincidence but rather as a constellation of interdependent fractal fragments, I am—following Wagner and Strathern—seeking to emphasize the intrinsic relationality that binds these parts together. The aim here, then, has been to draw focus not so much on what things mean, but *how* things mean (Green 2005: 142).

This constellatory focus on the how over the what is exemplified best in Figure 6, the lamination of the obviation triangle onto the digital copy of Jay's lost (but not quite forgotten) artwork. Recall that, earlier on, I specifically chose the term lamination to evoke the mutual layering of theoretical and ethnographic surfaces, distinguishing this from the image of mutual collapse. As historian of science James Gleick (1997: 106) notes, "contacts between surfaces have properties quite independent of the materials involved." This is because in moments of contact between surfaces, their fractal dimensions are brought into being, described by Gleick as the "quality of the bumps on the bumps on the bumps" (1997: 106). In physical terms, what this means is that things that touch do not touch everywhere—there will always be a gap somewhere, even if you have to move into infinitesimally small scales to find them. This, as Gleick deftly notes, "is why two pieces of a broken teacup can never be rejoined, even though they appear to fit together at some gross scale. At a smaller scale, irregular bumps are failing to coincide" (1997: 106).

This fractal image of imperfect joinery evokes the Japanese artistic tradition of *kintsugi*—the mending of broken pottery. In this tradition, the mender uses gold-laced seams of epoxy to repair broken fragments and rebuild an object, not as it was before, but as something new that still carries the scars of the past. As a practice, *kintsugi* speaks to the tension between beauty and fragility as well as between pain and healing. At a more abstract level, it speaks to the complex dialectics between fragmentation and consolidation or, in anthropological parlance, between particularity and generality. Used to fill the gaps between broken fragments, the golden lacquer can be thought of as elaborating not just the interaction between the pieces but also the gaps that ultimately sustain this interrelationality.

In making Jay's artworks integral *to* the argument of this book, rather than just an illustration *of* the argument, I have sought to enact something like an anthropological version of *kintsugi*. Here, it is my reconceptualization of the blackout that acts as the lacquered veins of gold holding

in constellation the multitude of ethnographic fragments (or perplexing particulars) that have come to form the *whole* of this book. Crucially, just as the reconstructed teacup is not a reproduction of the original but the elaboration of something else entirely, so too should this book be viewed as its own singularity, complete with its own gaps, fractures, and incongruities. As I hope to have accomplished, a sustained focus on both the gaps and touchpoints between ethnographic and theoretical surfaces—framed through the relational logic of fractality, obviation, and liminality—is a powerful means of guarding against the objectification not only of the people we study but the very concepts we ultimately fashion and deploy under their tutelage. As such, the re-presentational work offered in this book—like the paintings, stories, and encounters they are inspired by—should not be understood as static, but rather as one node in a limitless field of potential elaborations.

Perhaps here at the end, then, we should sit one last time with the escapist imperatives that I broached on the very first pages of this book. Having since poured so much, and yet ultimately so little, into these *kintsugi*-like cracks, we can perhaps more fully grasp not just what these imperatives mean to those who enact them, but *how* they mean them. Accordingly, if this book could be reduced to a single goal, it would be to foreground above all else the endless human capacity for escape, not just of Jay and his fellow Itchy Park residents from the conditions of their existence, but of the ethnographic subject from the snare of conceptualization, regardless of how diligently built, ubiquitous, or well-meaning.

No matter how tight we make a seal, something will always find a way to escape, one way or the other.

Conclusion: Towards a Poetics of Blackout

The Strange and the Familiar

On a planet interconnected like never before, there now exist few frontiers of humanity that have not, in some way, shape, or form, been touched by the double helix of exclusion and substance dependency. The helical figure is helpful here as it points to the asymmetry between the two intertwined strands. Though they might mirror one another, they are not identical. One cannot be reduced to the other. Indeed, as they spiral their way around a shared axis, each point of convergence can be seen as simultaneously marking a point of divergence, each crossover emerging as a unique moment of intersection that is not repeated anywhere else along the formation. Itchy Park, then, can be understood as its own intersectional site between these two strands, unique in its social, cultural, political, and historical constitution. Nevertheless, those who have studied, lived within, or even just strolled by these kinds of sites will likely recognize something familiar, its itchiness comparable with innumerable other zones of exclusion and addiction dispersed across the globe. Hopefully, though, that same familiarity should now, after reading this book, be rendered a little stranger.

Those who have taught or sat through any kind of introductory anthropology class will likely have detected that relentlessly quoted disciplinary maxim: to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Ubiquitous to the point of cliché, the reader can be forgiven for rolling their eyes, at once weary of its chiasmic wink and wary of what more this wrung-out cliché could possibly have to offer. However, as the fiction writer and essayist David Foster Wallace (2009) deftly noted,

clichés—so drab and dreary on the surface—can often reveal important truths. Look hard enough, he tells us, and you can locate inside the cliché the skeleton of some far greater story. This old sponge isn't wrung out just yet. There are still a few more drops left.

Despite what one might think based on its omnipresence across introductory textbooks, monographs, course descriptions, departmental websites, and the like, the story of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar does not begin in anthropology. Rather, when Melford Spiro (1990) became one of the first anthropologists to explicitly highlight this idea, he was actually emplotting it within a far broader story arc of Euro-American intellectual thought. Spiro had spotted the term in T. S. Eliot's classic essay on the poetry style of Andrew Marvell, within which Eliot located "the making [of] the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, which Coleridge attributed to good poetry" ([1921] 1950: 259). The stuff of good poetry was, Spiro realized, the stuff of good anthropology as well. The anthropologist Robert Myers (2011), acting as a kind of amateur etymological sleuth, turns history's clock back even further and traces this poetic impulse back to the early German Romantic movement. Like a virus leaping across a species boundary, Myers describes how this idea eventually jumped out of Romanticism and spread into different intellectual domains, inspiring philosophers like Nietzsche and William James as well as playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, all of whom advocated denuding familiar experiences of their obviousness so as to enliven a radical, even disturbing sense of curiosity in them. Understood in this historical context, T. S. Eliot's appraisal of Marvell's approach was not a new idea at all, but rather a reflection of what was in effect a widely distributed intellectual mood that had been diffusing across disciplinary boundaries for some time.

Nevertheless, even though what we tell our first-time students makes us special is, well, not so special after all, this does not mean that anthropology has not added its own unique take on the notion. Notwithstanding the deeply problematic and now widely recognized entanglement of anthropology with European colonialism, anthropology has historically made its name in making the strange familiar, its cross-cultural fieldwork techniques providing a route into the strange that was demonstrably different from those typically offered by literary, philosophical, or positivist realms of inquiry. Of course, as denoted by the very nature of cross-comparison, the familiarization of the strange is indivisible from the estrangement of the familiar. This, then, has arguably been anthropology's most pervasive unique selling point (USP)—its promise to emphasize in simultaneity both sides of the chiasmus and, in so doing, offer

a more “holistic” approach to the dynamics of sameness and difference than could poetry, for example.

In point of fact, despite its original emergence from the poetic tradition, anthropologists have on the whole been wary of incorporating poetics into this supposedly foundational mission of ours, far more eager to court the approval of the so-called “hard” sciences—such as through mimicking their language of objectivity, emphasizing equivalent forms of systematic “rigor” in method, or else adopting the prosaic form of reporting the results from a given study. For some, this tendency for impersonation has gone beyond flattery and entered the realm of sycophancy. Whether one thinks this harsh or fair, it remains a fact that the vast majority anthropologists, if applying for a job, would describe themselves on their CVs as social scientists and not as social poets. The implicit idea is that poets—and by extension poetics—fall short of whatever it is that science, in all its implied seriousness and objectivity, does.

The old political slogan, that those who seek office must campaign in poetry and govern in prose, appears to have found its way into the orthodoxy of anthropological writing to the extent that the poetic density of fieldwork is all too readily flattened into the standardized prose of academic writing. This idea of poetic density comes from Rupert Stasch who applied the idea to the Korowai village space in Indonesia. Drawing on linguist Roman Jakobson’s (1960) analysis of poetic artistry as constituted by semiotic interconnection between shifting poles of identity and difference, Stasch argues that Korowai village life is laden with its own poetics—what he describes as a multiplicity of qualities that do not fit into any kind of discrete social, cultural, or historical register, teaming with relational connections between fragments that coalesce in a complex but never static coherence (2013: 565). Stasch’s emphasis on the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and indeterminacy of social life is not unique in anthropological circles. Indeed, few scholars conducting ethnography in the contemporary moment would challenge these ideas, even if they would not necessarily describe what they experienced in the field in terms of poetics. And yet human life, in all its messiness, boundlessness, and kaleidoscopic intensity, cannot help but dabble in the poetic.

Anthropological Poetics

If poetry is, at its heart, a linguistic experimentation with an otherwise, then critical phenomenological anthropology—alongside its isomers

within the ontological turn—can likewise be understood as a distinctly poetic mode of analysis insofar as it also seeks alternative possibilities for conceptualizing not just the strange worlds of others, but the familiar worlds of ourselves (Brady 1991; Wagner 1991). Compared to written poetry, though, the raw material for this kind of poesis is not human language but human otherness, experienced in all its intimacy, hospitality, and sensuous excess.¹ Understood in this way, this book can be read as an anthropological poetics of blackout. To make this claim is not to suggest that my writing has been illustriously poetic. I have not, as other more lyrically gifted scholars might have done, subjected the reader to any of my own poetry (for which I can only assure them that they ought to remain grateful). What I have attempted to do, however, is to retain the poetic impulse throughout the course of the book, continuously drawing on the collective hospitality of Itchy Park to emphasize the singular plurality of the world its residents call home (Nancy 2000). Moreover, I have tried to let this impulse be guided by the poetic density of the Itchy Park lifeworld itself, by which I mean the fractal constellation of relationships, stories, embodied moods, social dynamics, spatiotemporalities, moral economies, structural underpinnings, chronopolitical pressures, and existential attunements that together form its unique assemblage.

The blackout, I have argued, is but one intersectional site within this ever-shifting constellation. This analytical approach has enabled me to pluralize the blackout state, articulating it as a point of convergence between multiple elements from broader social, cultural, political, and existential fields. In the first half of the book, I used the lure of pharmacological oblivion offered by anesthetic intoxication (of which the blackout is the apotheosis) to first historically trace out and then explore the structural damage of austerity-based changes to welfare and housing and the deleterious impact these changes have wrought on the country's homeless population. Not only have these politico-economic policies produced the conditions that drive homelessness in the first place, but they also simultaneously punish and marginalize those who are ill-fated enough to find themselves caught up in this deeply pernicious feedback loop. Marginalized in this way, people experiencing street

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1. Linguistic anthropologists (or even just linguists) might argue that language and life are indivisible in the context of the human condition; the poesis of anthropological writing is different from that of “pure” poetry, whatever that might be.

homelessness become estranged from the world they once knew and relied upon, sowing the conditions for a new poetics of existence.

Pushed to the margins, they experience time in problematic ways, caught within the double strands of exclusion and substance dependency. This book has, above all, focused on the temporality of these conditions, paying particular attention to the dynamic tension between subjective time and clock time that emerges as those who dwell in Itchy Park negotiate the entwined pressures of deep boredom, intimate loss, impoverishment, and substance withdrawal. As Jimmy's story exemplifies, the enforced redundancy from formal labor markets for those experiencing homelessness in Itchy Park has propelled them into times and spaces that exist on the threshold of the social, economic, and political worlds that have otherwise excluded or abandoned them. Debarred from productive labor regimes and dislocated from the intimate rhythms of home-based family life, people like Jimmy, Larry, Tony, Max, and Jay have become incorporated into the social fabric primarily through their exclusion, continually overexposed to a range of interconnected punitive disciplinary regimes. Whether it was through direct policing or welfare suspension, these regimes of control targeted and punished their very existence. These interventions radically limited their future possibilities for personal or structural change, each sanction pushing them even further outside of an already fiendishly competitive labor market and thus deeper into the folds of social abjection and existential crisis. This foreclosure of the future, bracketed as it was by painful memories of structural and intimate loss, established the social and temporal conditions for existential boredom to set in, each day on the streets emerging as an exhausting repetition of the one that preceded it.

Stuck in this distended present—a time emptied of meaningful possibility and filled with looming threats from the past—Itchy Park's residents established an alternative reciprocal economy using the sparse resources they had to hand—not least of all their bodies. For the homeless, whose extreme socioeconomic precarity means that access to any kind of resource is intrinsically limited, the body remains the primary—and oftentimes only—instrument of control and transformation, and thus also of care and escape. As the cheapest, most readily available, and ultimately most effective means through which to catalyze an escape from the triad of self, memory, and existential boredom, it was only logical that drugs and alcohol should have figured so prominently within the park's moral economy and the constellations of care underpinning it. Further, this imperative to escape the conditions of their temporal dislocation was

inseparably connected to their enduring chemical dependencies along with the portentous shadow of withdrawal that loomed from within these addictions. As such, the burning need to attend to these psychocorporeal and existential demands meant traveling through the cityscape's human swell at great bodily and moral risk, the capricious and castigatory nature of the welfare system providing little more than driftwood to cling onto as they struggled to keep their heads above water and evade the punitive attention of the police and the justice system.

Accordingly, it was their relationships with each other that provided the most enduring form of buoyancy in these choppy waters, the shared realities of their situation providing the interpersonal grounding for complex webs of care, (mostly) reciprocal obligation, friendship, and other forms of intimate sociality. With neoliberally driven structural reforms to labor, economy, and welfare emerging in lockstep with the increasing criminalization of poverty—such as via the Public Spaces Protector Order (PSPO) legislation—the importance of these webs became amplified as my interlocutors carved out ways to make a living on the spatial and temporal periphery of the current politico-economic order. At the same time, though, it was the infiltration of this systemic precarity—the “not-enoughness”—into everyday life that rendered these same relations of care open to abuse, manipulation, betrayal, and subterfuge. In a world where mutual care, interpersonal betrayal, juridical abuse, and structural violence intermingle to form the conditions of everyday life, the grinding ache of existential boredom emerged not so much as inactivity, but rather as a gray-zone scramble to “unstick” themselves from the repetitive cycles of meaninglessness and empty time that constituted their homelessness. Indeed, the extreme scarcity of street living meant that there was always something that required action and attention—be it begging, scavenging, cultivating reciprocity, sharing stories, performing generosity, buying (and sometimes selling) alcohol or drugs, rolling and smoking cigarettes, avoiding certain public spaces, ripping off their fellow residents, frequenting day centers, making welfare claims, or even creating art. It was through these actions that the Itchy Park homeless co-shaped the boundaries of the world they found themselves caught up in, their enduring sense of social death and chronic boredom navigated above all else through the pursuit, sharing, and consumption of time-(and self-) killing chemicals.

It is these chemicals, and more specifically the dissociative black-out states they induce, that I turned to in the second half of the book. Challenging reductive understandings embedded in the psychiatric and

neuroscientific literature, I have attempted to lift the blackout from its psychopathological cradle by placing it in experimental dialogue with post-possession forms of amnesia. Here, the intention has not been to equate the blackout with spirit possession, but rather to stimulate new forms of anthropological imagination in relation to the unique interplay of memory and forgetting that underscores the blackout state within Itchy Park, deeming existing conceptualizations unfit for purpose. This move was not designed to disregard the neurochemical mechanisms that catalyze blackout states, but rather to demonstrate how even molecular processes are always mutually enmeshed in complex configurations of sensory experience, sociocultural context, subjective becoming, and interpersonal exigency. Taking Ash's life history as the key ethnographic touchstone for these ideas, I theorized his becoming somebody else by integrating the pioneering theoretical work of Ernesto de Martino on crisis, grief, selfhood, and presence with neurophenomenological understandings of memory, forgetting, and subjectivity. In so doing, I retooled his model of dehistoricization to illustrate the paradoxical interchange of presence and absence that occurs in blackout, recasting its liminality as an embodied simulacrum of collective ritual therapeutics. As Ash's experiences so poignantly demonstrated, however, the transformational goal of his blackouts was cursed by the self-negation baked into their very form, effectively stalling his becoming at the point of takeoff.

Whereas psychoanalytically trained thinkers such as Alistair Sweet and Ian Miller have taken the hermetic seal of the blackout as the psychic equivalent of a black hole or singularity from which no meaning can be derived, I have taken it to exemplify a different kind of singularity. Drawing on phenomenological rather than astrophysical understandings, I have taken the black hole at the heart of the blackout experience to be teeming with social and existential meaning, irreducible to the kind of deficit frameworks typically deployed by psychiatric approaches. Instead, by taking seriously the blackout as a novel modality-of-being that shapes, and is itself shaped by, the unique social, psychic, and moral life of Itchy Park, I have sought to elevate it into the realm of the perplexing particular as theorized by Cheryl Mattingly. In taking this critical phenomenological approach, I have sought to destabilize the predominant conceptual clusters around the blackout that have marked it as a pathology that can be reduced to its neurobiological or psychological mechanisms.

If the blackout is constituted by the boundary blur between presence and absence, then a poetics of blackout must necessarily deploy analytical

tropes that both reflect and are informed by its embodied reality. This is why the fractal mode of Roy Wagner's obviation, as evidenced by its lamination onto Jay's artworks, is so important. This is because it takes the experience of the blackout as liminal and self-negating—helping us approach it as an event horizon that simultaneously rescues and annihilates the self from, ironically, itself. Buttressed by the work of Wagner and Marilyn Strathern, a poetics of blackout thus implicitly recognizes the obverse relationship between memory and forgetting, presence and absence, and self and nonself. In this regard, it is a site in which each obverse side reveals itself as a fractal fragment of the same whole. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Jay's art brut, which elaborates in uniquely vivid and emic terms the spiritless possession of his blackout states. Indeed, it is the closest he ever gets to the nonself entities that abduct him, the liminality and emotional labor of his artworking offering him something of the therapeutic escape his blackouts promise but inevitably fall short of delivering. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they overdeliver, a ritual with an abundance of (self)death but ultimately devoid of rebirth.

Indeed, it is this overabundance that Jay elaborates through his paintings, re-presenting that which, by its very constitution, cannot help but be held in absentia from him. As that which is impenetrable to consciousness, the blackout is an imitant of death. It is not alone, of course, in its emulation. There is *la petit mort*, the momentary blackout of orgasmic pleasure borne from the micro death of ego. The loss of self-consciousness during blackout is arguably a little bigger, a mid-sized death, so to speak, that, despite its expanse, still pales in comparison to the real deal. Nevertheless, its death-like qualities are such that, like its bigger sibling, it too constitutes something of a blinding darkness. How, then, to scrutinize the ultimate fate that is our nonexistence, the moment when our made selves slip into their unmaking? This is precisely the question that Robert Desjarlais (2016) has posed in his ethnographic study of Buddhist funerary practices of the Hyolmo people in Nepal. For Desjarlais, while it may be impossible to look steadily upon death, no such rules apply to the forms of life and creative meaning-making that engirdle the act of dying, nor to the dead themselves. Indeed, by paying sustained phenomenological attention to Hyolmo mourning and funeral rituals, practices, and attitudes around the end of life, Desjarlais demonstrates how these processes come together to form a technology of poesis, creatively transforming the brute finality of death into something unfinished and thus breathing existence into non—.

This book, I hope, has offered something similar. Through the intimacy and hospitality of ethnography, I have attempted to tiptoe around the death-like vacuum of the blackout, elaborating the complex forms of life, the penumbral, shifting membrane of its experiential and social contours, and the swiss cheese memoryscape that form its edges. Like Jay's artworks, the perspectives offered in these pages are only partial and, by extension, always experimental. Partiality and experimentation, though, are the very stuff of poesis. This is why Jay's art has been such a central part of this book's argument. In his creative experimentation with his artistic materials, his unmade self is, however partially, remade. His art brut, then, is not a static object but what Gilles Deleuze (2004: 5) might call a practice of living, "*techné* rather than *epistémè*." As I hope to have shown, we can see how Jay utilizes his creativity as a mode of sensemaking—of both the conditions of his homelessness and the hidden world of his blackouts. Further, the process allows him to exist as *himself* in the present, something that—as his blackout abductions evidence—is otherwise unbearable. Using his artworking to find a crack, however thin, that enables him to catch a glimpse of something through the hermetic seal of his blackouts is a major thing for Jay, offering up a place of healing from within a place of pain.

White Holes

Just as Desjarlais located in Hyolmo funeral rituals a witness box into the "the ontologization of death, in which the loss is given concrete, tangible form" (2016: 221), so too can we witness in Jay's artworking the ontologization of his blackouts. While both Hyolmo funeral rites and Jay's artworking can be understood as technologies of poesis in their own right, the latter is infinitely more fragile than the former. This is because, for all its subjective creativity, it fundamentally lacks the *intersubjective* intensity, communal support, and mutual structures of care that underpin Hyolmo death and mourning rites. Not unlike the blackouts it gropes towards, it too is experienced as a solo mission. Nevertheless, we might locate in his artworking, for all its fragility, a possible site of therapeutic intervention for those who, like the residents of Itchy Park, are pinched between their homelessness and their substance-use issues. Indeed, this pinching is not just existential, but institutional—made concrete by the particular ways that austerity measures and state welfare bureaucracy have woven together to shape the spaces of homelessness—like the day

centers, hostels, soup kitchens, and clinics—that Jay and his contemporaries must inevitably pass through and between in order to survive each day as it comes. To hark back to the psychodynamic language of Sweet and Miller discussed at the end of chapter 4, we can begin to detect, at this intersection of the existential and the institutional, the first inklings of a white hole. Recall that white hole therapeutics—in which the patient is collaboratively guided through a kind of bungee jump descent into what would otherwise be the abysmal and unbearable darkness of their own psychic annihilation—are driven through the dyadic meaning-making between patient and therapist that emerges through talking.

One key problem, as I stated back then, is that existing mental healthcare infrastructure in the United Kingdom simply does not, except in the rarest of circumstances, provide vulnerable groups like people experiencing homelessness with access to these kinds of relationally deep, longitudinal forms of psychotherapeutic care. Art therapy, however, as something which can be institutionalized in existing homeless service structures—like Booth House, the building at the center of Jay’s second painting—at far less cost and with far fewer barriers to entry, might well be our best bet of establishing white hole possibilities within these chronically distressed communities whose need for care, intimacy, and deep therapeutic engagement cannot be overstated. Compared to the dyadic, closed-door interaction of traditional psychodynamic therapies, art therapy provides a triadic, open-door, group-based form of therapeutic engagement that sees the artist-patient engaged in a three-way process between themselves, the therapist, and the artwork (for those sessions that take place in group settings, we might add a fourth pillar to this interrelational process—the therapeutic community). Here, then, we start to see where the fragility of Jay’s artworking springs from, and why it is closer to therapeutic art than art therapy—it is missing the third vertex of the triangle: the therapist.

In this regard, he is missing what Sweet and Miller (2016: 167) describe as the “joint witnessing” that underpins the guided descent into the white hole. In the triadic context of the art therapy session, then, what we start to arrive at is its own form of joint witnessing. The difference here, though, is that with the introduction of the artwork as something that necessarily exceeds the elastic limit of language, the phenomenological boundaries of who is joined, to whom, and in what capacity and to what end, starts to shift quite dramatically. For one, the artwork—by its very nature something creative, unstable, and irreducible—escapes the imposition of psychopathological categories. As enterprises in white hole

experimentation, they offer therapeutic possibility without foreclosing (as traditional psychiatric approaches are prone to do) the meanings and possibilities of the black holes they seek to elaborate. What the art therapist offers for someone like Jay is the dance of eyes between themselves, another human being, and the art object itself—a triasmic dynamic that turns the making of art from a solo mission into an interaffective experience. This experience is enabled by the therapist's sensitivity and embodied attunement to each artist-patient, which is itself contingent on the patient's capacity to seek affective and emotional connection to the therapist vis-à-vis the artwork. As the therapeutic relationship deepens and develops, this sharing of experience might become verbalized and explored in more private, one-on-one settings. But it also might not. It might instead operate through an intimate economy of bodies, of shared gestures, of pedagogical coaxing, of silent expressions and joint attention. All of which is, of course, immaterial if there is no therapeutic relationship in the first place. The fact is that the vast majority of homeless services do not offer art therapy, and those that do are often unreliable in their scheduling and frequently suffer from a combination of oversubscription and understaffing.

While art therapy has been a state registered health profession in the country since 1999, it remains on the periphery of the United Kingdom's therapeutic infrastructure, consistently undervalued and underfunded when placed in comparison to pharmaceutical intervention and more traditional forms of talk therapy, with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) currently the most predominant genre in public health circles. CBT, with its emphasis on rigorously training the mind to modify thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through targeted coping strategies, is worlds away from the nonverbal, imaginal therapeutics of art therapy. And yet art therapy, precisely because of these features, means that it possesses a number of major strengths that make it an especially powerful tool for supporting vulnerable and marginalized people, especially those who have had negative experiences (such as feelings of coercion, misdiagnosis, overmedication, clinical disregard, or stigmatization) with other kinds of mental health and addiction services. Indeed, some of the most compelling research regarding its efficacy as a therapeutic modality comes from studies involving substance users (Aletraris et al. 2014), victims of domestic violence (Bird 2018), military veterans suffering from PTSD (Schouten et al. 2015), prisoners (Gussak 2019), people with autism and learning difficulties (D'Amico and Lalonde 2017), and those suffering with severe mental illness (Spaniol 2003).

These studies have unequivocally shown how the establishment of art therapy programs can have a profound impact on how homeless services are experienced by those who frequent them, effectively turning places of survival, rest, waiting, and crisis (such as day centers, shelters, hostels, or rehousing hubs) into places of transformation, exploration, interpersonal care, and mutual regard. Moreover, the installation of a permanent creative arena in which to work enables the artist-patient to construct not only new intersubjective boundaries—both with the therapist and other people in their position—but also new spatial and temporal boundaries, creating a reliable rhythm of routine and constancy that simultaneously allows for the extemporaneity of artistic creativity and experimentation. Further, these kind of clinically supervised, stably bounded time-spaces also allow for the safeguarding and storage of any works that might come out of the process, something that Jay's garbage bags were ultimately unable to do.

Despite these, and multiple other proven benefits, art therapy in contexts of homeless service provision is all too readily dismissed as a kind of optional extra, a frivolous appendage or afterthought that must not get in the way of the more serious business of providing survival calories, hygiene facilities, legal and housing advice, medical referrals, and the like. Undoubtedly serious and essential as all these services are, one cannot help but feel that a trick is being missed, given that for people experiencing homelessness—as for any human being—one's material and biological survival is indivisibly tethered to one's psychosocial and existential survival. As Jay's continual return to canvas and paint demonstrates, art-working can offer a space of transformation, healing, and self-knowledge that few other activities can. It is one of the most powerful existential resources we have at our disposal, requiring little more than the most basic of raw materials, a willing and engaged body, and a safe space in which to practice. The self-knowledge alluded to above should not be understood in the narcissistic sense of excessive self-interest but rather in the sense of unearthing existential possibilities, experimenting with what it means to be a person, and shining a light on the paradoxes, elisions, and complexities that reside at the core of our being.

Monica Carpendale, who utilizes phenomenological approaches both to theorize, practice, and teach art therapy, tells us that the artwork speaks to us, always in multiple tongues (2008: 4). More specifically, she says, it calls forth an Other, one that needs and cares as much as is needed and cared for. For people experiencing homelessness—who in their very being remain radically Other—it is because of this polluting alterity that

they find themselves embedded in such a precarious form of life. This precariousness, as I hope to have shown throughout this book, is one that exhibits an extraordinary vulnerability. Vulnerability—the primal possibility of being wounded—is common to all human beings, grounded in our embodied coexistence. It is our intrinsic interdependence, in other words, that leaves us open to care and exposure in equal strokes (Butler 2004, 2012). Likewise, in Jean-Luc Nancy's phenomenology, it is the sensate capacity of the body—its ability to feel—that is the domain where being together and being apart converge, each bond we make in the world simultaneously a site of potential isolation. Which is to say that any relationship that forms always holds the potential to fall apart. The residents of Itchy Park know this only too well, their structural precarity and depth of personal tragedy affirming Judith Butler's notion that the vulnerability of our embodied existence is inexorably tied to the sociopolitical distribution of precarity, forcing some to experience their vulnerability under conditions of "unlivability" as others enjoy the "good life" a few blocks or even a few feet away. Within these otherwise unlivable spaces, Jay's artwork emerges as a poetic force unto itself, offering a parallel narrative that both echoes and exceeds the anthropological poetics of time-space dissolution that I have sought to conjure through the course of this book. Art therapy rooms—as a space where sociality, poetic experimentation, and collective therapeutics intersect in the creation and sharing of art objects—can thus be thought of as a site of enormous ethical potential for turning unlivable lives into livable moments. This is because, as Emmanuel Levinas (1998) might have it, it is a space where people become connected to Others rather than being torn away from them, obliged to remain in mutuality as that which is created by someone is simultaneously seen by someone else. This, then, is the flipside of vulnerability—the primal possibility of being cared for, of having one's wounds treated. Once understood as a site where human vulnerability is negotiated in the pursuit of shared meaning-making and ethical interdependence, art therapy starts to look far less like a frivolous appendage and far more like something that should be elevated to the core of any homeless service.

Limitless

On a dreary London day as I sat with Jay on one of the benches and discussed his artistic process, he said that what he liked most about his

artmaking was that there were no limits to it and no “wrong” way to do it, that it was just down to how he felt in the moment. Jay’s sense of limitlessness and self-freedom, I suggest, gestures to the unique potentiality of art therapy compared to other forms of therapeutic intervention. Though all therapy, to one extent or another, is concerned with human vulnerability—that is, our innate capacity to be both wounded and healed through others—the texture of this vulnerability is worked out in art therapy through a set of embodied techniques (both inter- and intrasubjective) that point to a different horizon of possibilities than we might expect to find in, say, dyadic talk therapy or pharmaceutical modalities. In these cases, whether it is a discrete block of therapy sessions or a pharmaceutical regimen, there is an implicit understanding that once that block has concluded or the prescription has finished (or indeed been refilled), the person should be finding themselves arriving at some kind of conclusion or resolution. Notwithstanding the possibility of recurrence, what the block booking and the pill packet have in common is that, in their very quantification, there exists an imagined end point in the process: a last session with a therapist, a final dose. Of course, all too often these end points can be said to arrive prematurely (for economic or insurance reasons in the case of talk therapy) or else are postponed repeatedly (for epistemological reasons in the case of pharmaceuticals as more and more conditions acquire chronic status). Still, there is an implicit sense that the patient will, in an ideal if not a real world, be “well enough” for the therapeutic intervention to end. It is fiendishly hard to imagine this, though, in the context of art therapy. Always tentative and incomplete, the practice of making art is, as Jay says, limitless. The artist-patient may find great therapeutic relief in the process, and their relationship with the therapist, the wider therapeutic community, and their craft itself may deepen exponentially. However, it remains all but unimaginable that one day someone might look at what they have created and feel *finished*, that there could be a single brushstroke, pencil smudge, or sculpted angle where they could punctuate the full stop of the healing process, where one could be “well enough” to stop creating art. One simply does not complete a course of art as though popped daily from a blister packet. There are always new meanings to be revealed and elaborated, new possibilities to experiment with and make tangible, new vulnerabilities to texturize, and new shadows to illuminate.

This book began under the shadow of a joke—of Max and his fellow Itchy Park residents “dropping like flies.” Or, perhaps, more accurately, the joke of a shadow, the ultimate shadow: death. This form of

joking, as a kind of social poetics, creates a space where the community could express solidarity and resistance, while simultaneously critiquing the very conditions of extreme vulnerability that bring about such dire outcomes. Inspired by Max's ability to irradiate this darkest of shadows, I have sought to cast an anthropological light on the obsidian world of the blackout along with the complex vulnerabilities that lie immanently within its bounds. In this respect, the poetics of blackout offered in this book can be thought of as a writing of a particular kind of vulnerability, with the blackout emerging as a site where exposure and closure, wound and healing, have entered into a kind of mutual enfolding—light years away from the absolute negation of time and self that psychopathological models have long taken it to be.

The goal here, it is worth repeating, is not for anything like full illumination. Indeed, our critical phenomenological toolkit is there to guard against precisely this seduction, imploring us to not just accept the shadows cast by this light but to willfully and even gleefully slip into their unknowability, and in so doing, remain open to the residues, remainders, excesses, and unclaimable meanings that lurk within them. Indeed, it is this embrace of the shadows that has, I hope, demonstrated the fallibility or, perhaps better yet, the vulnerability of all anthropological light, my reconceptualization of the blackout being no exception. It too, like any other concept, exists in a distinctly concrete form, ossifying ethnographic particulars in a way that, despite its utility as a thinking tool, can undermine its own intentions. To guard against this, I have striven throughout this book, wherever possible, to always return to the stories, experiences, vulnerabilities, creativity, and perplexities of Itchy Park's residents, relying on their ineffable singularity and poetic density as an irrepressible counterweight to the theoretical webs spun up from their precarious worlds.

This commitment has, I hope, elevated the homeless body beyond a mere trope or rhetorical device used to advance a cultural or political analysis of homelessness. As Nancy (2008: 87) tells us, the body cannot be read if the goal of such reading is "decipherment," as though it were a code waiting to be cracked, a symptom waiting to be diagnosed. The body, in other words, cannot be stored within epistemological containers. Every time we attempt to box it up as such, the body blows the lid and finds a way out. In this regard, an anthropological poetics of the body—the homeless body, the blacked-out body, *anybody*—can be thought of, to again evoke Wagner, not as a body of knowledge, but as a body of anti-knowledge (or maybe even an antibody against knowledge). These,

then, are bodies that resist representation through established categories of thought. This book has attempted to sketch out the labile contours, ever-fuzzy edges, and fractal subjectivities of Itchy Park's blackout bodies, cognizant that whatever marks I might have drawn will not, like sand furrows in the tide, stay drawn for very long.

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