

YOUNG and **HOMELESS** in **HOLLYWOOD**



MAPPING SOCIAL IDENTITIES

SUSAN M. RUDDICK

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Routledge
New York & London

Published in 1996 by

Routledge
29 West 35 Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain in 1995 by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ruddick, Susan M.

Young and homeless in Hollywood: mapping social identities / Susan M. Ruddick
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-91032-3 — ISBN 0-415-91031-5 (pbk.)

1. Homeless youth—California—Los Angeles. 2. Homeless youth—Services for—California—Los Angeles. 3. Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.)—Social conditions.

I. Title.

HV4506.L67R83 1994

362.7'08'6942—dc20

94-21839

CIP

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people for broadening my horizons in the research and writing of this book. Ever the dialectician, Ed Soja has provided me with thought-provoking and often productively unsettling commentary, while at the same time giving me enough space to find my own argument. Michael Storper's insightful critique cut to the kernel of what I was trying to say, and his support and feedback has been crucial throughout the project. Peter Marris has shown me (although I haven't always managed) the beauty of saying things simply. Both he and Eric Monkonnen provided helpful feedback on an early draft of the work. Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear gave me practical support far beyond the call of duty.

As a friend and fellow traveler through the program at GSAUP, Robin Bloch expanded both my practical and theoretical perspective on youth subcultures, and provided intellectual inspiration (and humor) on a wide range of issues. Talmadge Wright's work on the spatial strategies of homeless people in Orange County sustained me in the knowledge that we were working on parallel tracks. Katherine MacMahon supported my interest in the semiotic side of life and taught me on the more practical side, that the only way to

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break a writer's block is to apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.

On the issue of youth gangs, which became a counterpoint to the study of homeless youth, I am indebted to Mike Davis for getting me started in a collaborative project. Working with him taught me a great deal about crafting an argument. Marjorie Robertson fanned the flame from afar, sending me articles on California's juvenile penal system while I was in Germany. Thanks to her also for information about her own work on homeless youth in Hollywood. Michael Zinzun's inspired dedication and commitment to inner city youth made it impossible to think about the issue solely in academic terms.

While I was in Germany, Jost Müller and Klaus Ronnenberger shared insights from the German debate on politics and space. Both helped me in different ways to fuse the presence/absence of Hollywood with the absence/presence of Frankfurt. Deborah Redman's gift of *Less than Zero* provided the inspiration on youth and modernization, and Sabine Brock's careful commentary on an early draft of that chapter helped me hone my argument. In Toronto, I would like to thank Kim England for turning an eagle's editorial eye to a final version of the introduction, and to Linda Hershkovitz for her comments on chapter five. Laura Van de Bogart did the painstaking work of formatting footnotes and bibliographic material and Jane Davies, in the cartography lab of the University of Toronto helped by transforming my cartographic scribbling into readable maps. In Germany, Connie Eichhorn gave me "a room of my own" for my moveable feast of Post-its and papers so that I could finish up the project, as well as an insightful discussion about Judith Butler and the politics of difference which helped me think through my conclusion.

While I was in the field in Los Angeles, young homeless people, service providers, local political actors and planners provided hours of interview time and information. In particular, I would like to thank Dale Weaver, Greg Carlson, and Mindi Levins for the hours of their time that they gave, discussing the dynamics of service provision. John Kaliski provided me a very thoughtful interview in the most hectic of circumstances. Steven Flusty is living proof that some of the so-called "ordinary practitioners" of the city have a far-from-ordinary grasp of their own spatial practices. His insights enriched the manuscript immeasurably. Sheryl Madonna braved the streets of Los Angeles from Venice Beach to Skid Row (both depicted on the cover) and back through Hollywood with

Acknowledgments

her camera to capture the most elusive tactics of young homeless people on celluloid. Her photos appear on the cover and throughout the book. Special thanks to Anne Sanow and Adam Bohannon at Routledge for careful and painstaking editing.

Finally, I would like to thank Roger Keil. His careful editing of an entire draft of my manuscript helped to make the document readable, but his love and support made it possible.

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INTRODUCTION

The last evening of my most recent trip to Los Angeles was April 29, 1992. I spent it in the newly gentrified and eminently successful Santa Monica Mall on Los Angeles's wealthy Westside. It was the evening of the Rodney King verdict, and rumor had it that there would be some trouble in town, but no one in the mall seemed to think much of it. The place was crowded with the typical array of tanned beachgoers, smartly dressed office workers stopping off for a drink, and a few homeless people whose passage through the mall with their shopping carts seemed exactly synchronized with the exit of two "bike police"—the latter clad in sporty shorts and lemon yellow alligator shirts, scanning the mall for "undesirables." As darkness fell, a handful of homeless (white, male) youths gathered at the south end of the mall under a topiary, part of the new, upbeat, design features of the mall—a leafy dinosaur, spouting water from its mouth. The youths were dressed in the latest heavy metal gear, with black-painted fingernails, tattooed, strumming newly composed tunes on guitars to the delight of my three-year-old. When I was out of earshot, they confided to one of my friends that they lived in a squat, spent their time on the streets, and survived most recently by selling their blood. To me (in my social role as "mother"

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perhaps) they claimed it was all a ruse, an act to support their music image—that tattoos were for show, the squat an invention—they actually led quite normal lives, lived in apartments, drove big cars. They began to play a song they thought would appeal to my son—"The Child and the Beast"—but we never got to hear the end. My husband waved me across the mall to a local restaurant/wine store/deli which offered, among other things, Moët & Chandon at thirty-two dollars a bottle. Inside, on the overhead TV screen, the riots had begun.

The scene is seared into my brain with the clarity of a hologram. It was, in capsule form, the expression of a problem which has dogged me for five years now: on the one hand, the absence/presence of "homeless youths"—there, in the new social space of the mall, inscribed into the new public space of the city, yet there only by virtue of their invisibility, by their ability to appear as something else; on the other hand the presence/absence of "youth gangs," exorcised from this public space, and from virtually all the new spaces of the city, yet continually evoked within them, in this instance as part of the "mob" that erupted in violence following the Rodney King verdict.

Both the "youth gangs" to be found among rioters on the TV screen, and the "homeless youth" on the stone ledge of the fountain in Santa Monica Mall represent two new social *imaginaries* (collective mythologies) that have been constructed in Los Angeles over the past fifteen years. My book deals properly with only one—homeless youths. Yet it is impossible to think of one without thinking of the other.

As Berger notes in *The Look of Things*, "It is scarcely possible to tell a straight story in sequentially unfolding time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story-line laterally. . . . Such awareness is the result of having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities."¹ Laclau has expressed a similar sentiment elsewhere when he talks about the *radical contingency of the social*—the maintenance of identity that depends, not on any *a priori* law of history, but on its immediate relation to a constitutive outside, a set of contingent social practices against which and in relation to which we all define and redefine ourselves. In this sense, the imaginary "homeless youth" was constructed and is being constructed against the imaginary "youth gangs" as one of its many constitutive outsides. In my book I try to explore the one, with the other as an ever-present backdrop. But this gets too far ahead of my argument.

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The substantive focus of my book—the development of services for homeless youth in Hollywood, California (no doubt patronized by the youths I met in Santa Monica Mall)—could be read as the continuation in a long tradition of the good and charitable works of women. With this topic in hand, I join a venerable “community of women reformers,” beginning with child-savers of the turn of the century such as Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, founders of Hull House. The qualities of my topic give me entry into this community: it appropriately “tugs at the heartstrings,” it is suitably domestic in its referent, and it is appropriately focused on victims as opposed to militants. However, my intentions in choosing this topic (acculturation aside) were different ones. My fascination with the topic was largely theoretical. Homeless youth pose a challenge to a series of theoretical premises that have become fashionable within critical theory, but are all too often agreed upon by fiat. These include the transformative possibilities of agency in the structure/agency dyad; the role of space in the constitution of social subjects; the role of symbolism and culture as material forces which produce their own effects, rather than as epiphenomena which reflect predetermined meanings. Admittedly, some of these connections between my chosen empirical object and the theoretical questions that continue to intrigue me were clarified only in the course of research and writing. But I felt them early on in the selection of the topic, although I was able at the time to express this only by taking a bungee jump between epistemology and ontology—mumbling that my topic was “not really about homeless youth,” but “had more to do with the construction of the social.” In hindsight, there were four major issues that I wanted to explore.

First of all, I wanted to test the premise that *agency matters*. My “object” was, fittingly, those people who are denied agency in all but the most banal forms: adolescents. Adolescents, in the common view, are generally considered too old to be ascribed the power of “nature”—we do not look on their activities with awe and wonder, the way we do those of small children. Yet adolescents are generally considered too young to be reasoned actors in the sense one might consider adults. When it comes to any form of sustained and serious agency, adolescents are depicted as awkward, simple-minded—“stupid and contagious.” They live in a state where agency is continually denied them, as a recent grunge rock song suggests.²

Secondly, I wanted to test the premise that *new social subjects are created and create themselves in and through the social space*

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of the city. What better test case than a subject which denies itself, which hides itself, a subject which presents itself to you as something other than it is (or at least than you believe it to be), a subject whose "true identity" remains hidden, sequestered from view? Homeless youths fit this criteria. Homeless youth, I was warned, could not be trusted—they would tell you what you wanted to hear or something calculated to shock. They had an overwhelming desire to please, and a limitless capacity to deceive. The purpose of my investigation, however, was not to surface the "true story" of homeless youth, in the spirit of a Charles Loring Brace, bringing back my photos and taped interviews from the uncharted inner space of Hollywood's squats. The purpose was rather to investigate whether and how the control of public social space might play a role in privileging one story over another, in creating and sustaining a social imaginary.

Thirdly, I wanted to investigate *the material power of symbolism* in the creation and maintenance of social identity in and through space. The two sets of literature dealing with this issue that are most appropriate to my topic are literature on oppositional youth subcultures, and literature on the role of space in the marginalization of the homeless. The first deals with the role of symbolism and culture in maintaining and transforming social identity, the second with the role of marginal space in maintaining and transforming social identity. The problem is that they never quite meet in the middle. The literature on oppositional youth subcultures says little about space itself as a medium of subcultural and symbolic production. Space is a container where subculture "takes place." The literature on the homeless has much to say about the role of space in confirming cultural identity, in this case the marginal status of homeless people, but here space and its symbolic meaning are pre-given. Marginal status is predetermined and confirmed by marginal space, never transcended. Homeless youths, again, presented an interesting challenge. In California, they had been able to sustain an image which negotiated between the Scylla of "the homeless" and the Charybdis of youth as "the dangerous classes." Unlike other marginalized youth and other homeless people, they had developed a social identity which confronted their stigma.

Finally, my choice of homeless youth, and in particular homeless youths in Hollywood from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, grew out of a conviction of the need to focus on something concrete and specific "in all its humble individuality and materiality." This choice of empirical object was itself an act of theorizing. I am not

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uninterested in "larger" questions of space and social subject, but I believe we are at the limits of what can be said, operating exclusively at the level of metatheory, about new forms of marginality, and worse, we are in danger of seizing upon those we perceive to be in the most extreme positions of marginality with the view that they can somehow "speak" for the others, or reveal dynamics of marginalization and resistance that are common to all. The study of specificities is much more than and something other than simply the exploration of "outwardly apparent or contingent forms of an essential reality."³

In this case, the choice of homeless youth was a tactical one. In a rush to claim the "theoretical high ground" of difference, one strategy appears to be to choose the "most marginalized" of our sisters. In trying to come to grips with marginality and difference, one might reason that if the white, middle-class male is the "marked" representative of the species, the black, working-class female is the "most unmarked," and should be the starting point for all discoveries about "difference." The danger here lies not in the choice of object, but in those studies which conclude that black, working-class women might come to stand for "all" difference. Race is not always black, and gender is not always female. And to take black, working-class women to "stand for difference" is to risk drawing a thick straight line between the marked and the nonmarked of the species, in a simple polarity of marginalization and resistance that obliterates the specific histories and geographies of struggles of marginalized people and, more importantly, the space- and time-contingent strategies they use, to challenge their difference in some times and places or even to seize difference in others, including those of black, working-class women themselves. It is to risk missing the space-time-contingent character of social identity.

To this end I chose empirical investigation rather than theoretical exposition as a mode of inquiry, but with the full conviction that to identify a social subject is *itself* a theoretical act and not an empirical one. In choosing empirical investigation, I have integrated my theoretical concepts into the analysis. These are addressed more fully in the concluding chapter. For now I will provide the reader with a road map of my argument.

Why was it necessary to construct an image of homeless youth? In the first chapter, I address this question by situating the appearance of homeless youths on the streets of North American cities in the context of a wider breakdown in concepts of adolescence and juvenile delinquency as hegemonic, modern notions

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about acceptable and unacceptable youthful behavior. Drawing on the works of social historians, I examine arguments advanced in the early 1970s, in the wake of campus and ghetto riots of the 1960s, that adolescence itself was a social construction, which crystallized in America around the turn of the century and became dominant in the 1920s. Under contemporary processes of modernization, many social forms deemed normal during the modern period are once again being called into question, including adolescence, specific gender roles, and the nuclear family. In the 1960s this took the form of a challenge to hegemonic notions by a cultural avant-garde, and by numerous political and social movements. By the 1970s however, this was a crisis within the hegemonic forms themselves. There are certain parallels in the current period with the social ferment of the *fin de siècle*, and much to be learned from the way social historians related changes in social forms of the family and adolescence to processes of industrialization and class reproduction. I take issue, however, with the role social historians accord to the space of the modernizing city in the development of new concepts of social life and social behavior. For these social historians, the environment invoked in the proper socialization or rehabilitation of adolescence was simply a mask, concealing larger imperatives of social control. For me, this space was a constitutive medium, not a mask but a *means* by which they constructed an ethos of appropriate behavior.

The first chapter provides some clues to the first line in the story of homeless youth—that of a fundamental restructuring of conceptions of youth and adolescence. The second chapter, to return to Berger, looks at the simultaneous development of images of the homeless and scholarly attempts to explain their marginalization. Here I examine contemporary works on the geography of homelessness, and the role that space is assumed to play in this marginalization. While this literature adequately captures the process by which the homeless are marginalized, it accepts almost without question the label of stigma, missing important ways that homeless people, through the use of space, challenge preconceptions about themselves. This is crucial if we are to begin to understand how homeless youth (and service providers) have managed to construct a sympathetic image of themselves—especially when many of the activities they reportedly engage in could link them through a chain of equivalences to their inner-city counterparts, “the dangerous classes.” How have service providers managed to break this chain of equivalences? Before addressing this question I

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examine, in Chapter Three, many of the tactical uses the homeless have made of space in Los Angeles to challenge stigmatization, to be recognized as citizens, as political actors, as campers, as couples—any range of selves that transcend the “simple fact” of homelessness.

Chapters Four through Seven address the historical and geographical shifts in concept and context of runaway and homeless youths: from their placement in juvenile halls and county camps with “other juvenile delinquents” until the mid-1970s; to their affiliation with the punk squatting subculture, following deinstitutionalization and in the absence of state intervention until the early 1980s; and finally to their assimilation into services and shelters, with the destruction of a punk squatting subculture and the growth of services in Hollywood, California. It is clear that these youths were unequal partners in struggles around the control of space and definition of self. But through their agency, through their tactical inhabitation of space, they made some gains nonetheless: in forcing a recentering of services from Los Angeles County to the Hollywood area, which had until the early 1980s attempted to decenter them throughout the county; in forcing further relocation of services once they were within the Hollywood area and, equally important, in influencing the organizational ethos and programmatic content of programs simply by forcing them to operate *in a different space*. Service providers, for their part, were able, in their use of space in Hollywood, to recuperate the concept of troubled youth as juvenile delinquents who might be rehabilitated. This impulse towards rehabilitation was all but destroyed in the wake of deinstitutionalization. Chapter Seven addresses the final moment of stabilization of service network and social imaginary of homeless youth in Hollywood. This moment was the incorporation of service providers into the local growth coalition, a move which linked homeless youth and their services to the emergent symbols of growth and modernization of the area. Here I examine the ways that local service providers both negotiated the latent and territorial interests of the local community, and themselves came to stand for “the community,” acting as a pivotal support in a reconstituted local regime that had threatened to split over issues of growth and redevelopment. The principal point here is that, by negotiating the social and symbolic meaning of the space of Hollywood, service providers were able to integrate themselves within a new, local, social configuration of growth which would ensure their place and the place of youths in Hollywood for the foreseeable future. In this way they were directly engaged in

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the reconstitution of a social identity through a new (albeit local) political imaginary.

It would perhaps be comforting at this point to conclude with some sweeping statement about the stabilization of a social imaginary that homeless youths in Hollywood represent, or to speculate about the attempts of service providers to use Hollywood as a base point to reach out to other communities and introduce services for youth who would otherwise be ignored by the juvenile system until they "turned up" in youth gangs. The riots in 1992 introduced an unstable element into the tenuous stability between self and space and the social imaginary constructed for homeless youths in Hollywood. The destruction of commercial space in Hollywood along Hollywood Boulevard has sent tremors through the local community, and has raised questions about the presence of youths in the area and the meaning of services in the area for the community. Whether this will result in the development of yet another social imaginary which includes both homeless youth and youth gangs, and, if so, which of these will become the organizing principle of the other, remains to be seen.