Public Rhetorics and Homeless Chic

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Hobolicious: *adjective: Looking homeless and yummy at the same time. Example: Robert Pattinson was seen in London buying extra large underwear and looking hobolicious.*
—[The Urban Dictionary](#)

It's terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people.
—Christian Lacroix[1]

As a rhetorician and writing teacher who has spent more than a decade working with homeless writers at [street papers](#) in Chicago, Boston and around the world, I want to admit up front that I know very little about the world of fashion. Evaluating the work of designers like Christian Lacroix, John Galliano, or Vivienne Westwood is far outside my academic, writerly, or personal purview. As a writer with interests in public rhetorics, however, I look at the rise of homeless chic – and more importantly its migration to other media and cultural locations – as an issue worth exploring. Rather than asking, "Why do designers create expensive fashions that mimic stereotypical images of homeless people?" – a question for which I can offer no real speculation – instead I will ask questions like these: What kinds of publics are being hailed into being under the banner of homeless chic? What gets highlighted and what gets hidden in such depictions? Who benefits and who gets hurt from these depictions? Why might this be happening now? And does our academic attention to this matter enlighten or merely fuel this spectacle? While I offer no concrete or definitive answers to these questions, I share some speculations as well as ways to think about this issue from the purview of public rhetoric. Rather than merely dismissing homeless chic and other homeless depictions as harmful, I would like to see what happens when we consider them as complex, important cultural material that helps shape public culture.

What kinds of publics are being hailed into being under the banner of homeless chic?

What began from John Galliano's 2000 boho-meets-hobo-chic haute couture collection and was brilliantly parodied in the Derelicte campaign in the 2001 comedy *Zoolander,* quickly spread to hipsters and celebrities dressing in rags, and even further to having contestants on America's Next Top Model pose as and with homeless women. All of these actions, whatever the motives, were initiated by celebrities, so I'm not sure if they're representative of much beyond the fact that celebrities continually seek attention through various stunts. These actions become culturally

important, however, because they take place before a global media that is fascinated by celebrity, allowing these images of homeless chic to break free from their original rhetorical context and circulate widely, especially via the Internet. As people in the wider public repeatedly see images of homeless people conflated with fashion objects, some people pick up on and respond to the idea of homeless chic and morph it beyond the runway into other cultural venues. As Michael Warner argues, publics are formed by nothing more than the circulation of discourse itself: "a public is self-organized: it exists by virtue of being addressed."[2] In other words, the widespread circulation of homeless-chic images has created public forums and products based upon the aestheticization of real homeless people.

   A first example is a public-forum website, called homelesschic.com, which encourages visitors to view and "catalogue images of people living on the street that exhibit a unique sense of personal style." The site claims that this work is in no way "made with the intention of mockery, but rather as a source of inspiration and social study." And while the site boasts its "positive intention" and "keen eye," it accompanies photos of purportedly homeless people with captions like this:

> "She's telling us it's alllll about oversized, plaid, and on the move looks. The legendary Cookie never fails to impress, and she's the reason we always carry a camera with us downtown! We LOVE the shoelace necklace!! More pictures added regularly of our favorite Lil Tokyo homeless inspiration. "I get all my clothes from black people," explains Cookie. But of course."

The tone of the commentary seems to undercut its claimed intention, by echoing the very mockery it speaks against. Plus, it's unclear for whom or how the forum is intended to function as a source of inspiration.

   A second example began in 2007, when three California 20-somethings found their inspiration to start a fashion label in John Jermyn, a roller-skating homeless man they dubbed, "The Crazy Robertson." The "Crazy Robertson" clothing offers a range of products, including a $98 hoodie that bears Jermyn's likeness and the slogan, "No money, no problem." The entrepreneurs call Jermyn "their friend," and offered him 5% of "net profit" from clothing sales, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. He signed the contract, without speaking to an attorney or family members. But so far he has refused to accept cash, according to one of the label's founders, preferring to be paid in food, liquor and paper for his art projects: "He tries not to involve money in his daily life," one of the entrepreneurs told the *Wall Street Journal*.[3]

   While those involved with The "Crazy Robertson" see it as a win-win situation, Jermyn's sister Beverly is less happy with the situation. She told the *Wall Street Journal* that she believes "The Crazy Robertson" founders are exploiting her brother's condition to build their brand. She reports that she seeks to manage disability compensation for her brother who suffers from a form of schizophrenia, refuses to take medication, and has slept in an alley near her house since his condition began deteriorating in the late 1970s.[4]

The irony of a $98 hoodie proclaiming "No Money, No Problem," seems so obvious as to hardly warrant mention. While this direct use of a homeless man as the "mascot" for a fashion label is controversial, to say the least, the owners have, perhaps more curiously, found a public interested in buying its products. The clothing line is sold online and at Kitson's, a trendy boutique frequented by Paris Hilton and others.

A third example began when a member of the public in Ningbo, China, saw a handsome-looking homeless man on the street in March 2010, took a photo of him and posted it online. "Brother Sharp" as online viewers named him became a web "meme," a phenomenon of homeless-chic style. As his image circulated virally via the Internet and was repurposed into various movie posters and fashion ads, online writers began speculating about him, spinning elaborate tales about a possible breakup with a college girlfriend that might have sent him to the streets, although news reports claimed he appeared mentally disturbed and not verbal when approached.[4] As photos and discussion of him proliferated online, people began roaming the streets of Ningbo, hoping to catch a glimpse of "Brother Sharp," to talk with him, or get his photo. An online video shows a confused and scared man being chased by people with cameras, while he screams in fear or pain.

Because of the intense media attention, Brother Sharp, whose name is Chen Guorong, became reunited with his family, and has become a bit more accustomed to the public spotlight. But his life remains strikingly public. He has appeared in fashion shows and plans are at work for a movie about his life.[5] Whether or not this is a "happy ending" for Guorong remains to be seen.

What's also worth noting about these stories is that each represents public uptake of homeless chic fashion: people who were not celebrities deliberately taking and circulating images of actual homeless people, for their own edification or profit. The intense media attention given to Guorong – or similarly to Ted Williams, the "homeless man with the golden voice" in the United States – is both unexpected and uninvited, and the ethics of such intrusion and its long-term effects remains unclear. Additionally each of these images builds its reality merely *by looking at* homeless people, by what Robert Desjarlais calls "spectral means":

> The homeless can also be identified by how they look. To describe someone as 'homeless' announces a lasting identity. . . .Homelessness denotes a temporary lack of housing but connotes a lasting moral career. Because this 'identity' is deemed sufficient and interchangeable, the 'homeless' usually go unnamed. The identification is typically achieved through spectral means: one knows the homeless not by talking with them but by seeing them.[6]

All the information that visitors to homelesschic.com, buyers of The Crazy Robertson apparel, or internet follows of Chen Guorong have about their objects of interest is gathered exclusively by visual means, by looking at images that other people created about homeless people. People have become interested in looking at homeless people, as spectacles, of either pity, envy or shame. This visual focus seems to be common in homeless-chic culture in general. John Galliano

claimed that his original inspiration for his boho-meets-hobo-chic collection came to him by looking at homeless people along the banks of the Seine River as he embarked on his morning 6-mile jog.[7] Designer Vivienne Westwood, who created a 2010 line of homeless-chic clothing featuring men wearing makeup so their faces and hands would *appear* frost bitten, admits that her closest experience with homelessness was misplacing the keys to her house.[8]

Many have argued that homelessness is hidden in our culture – that to be homeless is to be rendered invisible in plain sight – and that making the invisible visible is important. To that limited extent, one could argue that homeless chic does useful cultural work by reminding viewers that people are homeless. For example, Vivienne Westwood argues that circulating images of homeless fashion does "raise awareness" about homelessness. She says, "I want to involve the privileged people in the fashion world in the homeless scene."[9] Within that logic "looking at" homeless fashion constitutes or stands in for actual involvement in the homeless scene.

What gets highlighted and hidden in these public images?

As images of homeless chic are disseminated in wider circles and media, this visual understanding of homelessness begins to circulate more broadly as societal metaphor, one that highlights and hides aspects of its referent. For example, a woman who writes a blog, "Sunshine Cupcakes," uses homelessness to describe how disoriented she feels during a move, titling her entry "[Homeless Chic](#):"

> Since I moved out of my apartment in May and have been living with Ryan ever since, all my stuff has been in three different places. THREE. DIFFERENT. PLACES. […] I moved a minuscule amount of things into Ryan's house where I'd be temporarily homeless. People. DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH IT SUCKS TO HAVE YOUR THINGS SPREAD OUT ALL OVER THE VALLEY OF THE SUN?! I'd go to take off my nail polish only to realize that my polish remover was at the new house. I'd want to wear this super cute yellow flowery top out on Mill but would remember that it was at my parents'.[10]

Accompanying this writing is a black-and-white photograph of a haggard-looking woman in a hooded sweatshirt, slumped against a concrete wall, sitting next to a shopping cart, filled beyond the brim with knapsacks, a blanket, and bottles of water. There's no caption to the photo and no explanation of its use other than, "I had a lovely idea about how to lay out this post and WOW were there going to be pictures. Instead, I realized that my camera battery is dead and the charger is in another city. NEAT." Absent pictures of her own, the blogger uses an image of a probably-homeless woman to illustrate her own 'homeless' predicament. In the picture and the entry's title, "Homeless Chic," homelessness operates as a metaphor for any kind of displacement or inconvenience. In a similar fashion, the *Urban Dictionary*, a sort of wiki for current uses of

language, contains several definitions of homeless that show it operating as a metaphor for someone or something troublesome, annoying, or "amazingly lame beyond belief."[11]

In such comparisons, homeless people are both familiar and alien. One can claim, "I am homeless when I move," and then, in turn, insult another by calling him or her "so homeless." The concept of being "hobolicious," homeless and good looking, as in Brother Sharp, circulates simultaneously. Homelessness thus both functions as a metaphor in society and becomes represented by metaphors that highlight a narrow visual stereotype of what homelessness looks like, and as a result hides everything else. And as language scholars Lakoff and Johnson tell us, metaphors fundamentally structure our conceptual system and deeply shape what we believe and feel: "A metaphor in a political or economic system, by virtue of what it hides, can lead to human degradation."[12] When one merely looks, one doesn't listen, feel, taste or smell the reality that they're describing, thus issues of pain, frostbite, or squalor become erased or aestheticized into a visual tableau. What all of these depictions hide is the complexity of actual homelessness: its pain, its causes, who becomes homeless and why, and everything else the individuals are or do in their lives other than being dislocated from housing. Also, in these depictions, homelessness functions as an identity or "look" that exists for some – not a social condition that is caused or created by anything. British filmmaker Ken Loach, who in 1966 made a BBC teleplay about homelessness, told reporters in 1993 that he now feels that any depiction of homelessness is useless – or worse, voyeuristic – if it does not offer clear solutions to the problem. "People must be shown that homelessness isn't an act of God," he says, "but a function of the way in which our society is organized."[13] Images of homeless chic not only frame the idea of homelessness without a focus on solutions, it gives little hint that it's a problem at all. The danger is that such widespread images further normalize homelessness as part of the status quo, not as a problem to be addressed.

Who benefits? Who Doesn't?

In 2009 the American Girl Company introduced a limited-edition homeless doll named Gwen Thompson. She wears simple-looking clothes and her back-story includes a father who walked out, nights of sleeping in the car with mom, and relocation to a shelter. The doll sells for $95 (not including accessories). The company claimed that the purpose of the doll was to raise awareness about homelessness and to prevent children from bullying or tormenting other kids who might be homeless. How the doll was meant to do that is not specified, but no proceeds from its sale benefited any homeless or any anti-bullying organizations. And while the idea of a $95 dollar homeless doll might seem oxymoronic, if not absurd, it was likely bought by many well-intentioned parents, happy for an easy way to raise awareness of homelessness. On the Internet, one can easily buy other items sporting homeless images, both for the benefit of charities and not. Calendars, for example, depicting hand-drawn images of homeless people are on sale to benefit a Montana shelter, while others featuring photographs of homeless people on Venice Beach, benefits only the photographer. Under this vague banner of "raising awareness," various

interests sell and profit from homeless chic as an act of or possible replacement for social involvement.[14]

More sinister portrayals of homelessness also bring profits to a select few, while directly harming vulnerable others. In 2002, Ray Leticia, co-created *Bumfights,* a video series that has sold hundreds of thousands of copies on the Internet, in which homeless people harm themselves or others on film by, for example, pulling a tooth or breaking a limb, in exchange for small amounts of cash. The first installment of the series grossed more than 6 million dollars in one month.[15] Leticia explains the rapid sales of the video this way: "Society has a fascination with homeless people, people living on the streets, almost a perverse fascination."[16]

In 2005, a director of a Showtime documentary entitled *Reversal of Fortune* planted a suitcase filled with $100,000 cash in a dumpster for a homeless man to find, as part of a filmed social experiment to see what he would do with the money. In part because the homeless man feared that the money was discarded by criminals, he quickly spent the money on cars and gifts for family and friends. The documentarian and the homeless man both later appeared on Oprah to discuss how and why the man ended up broke a year later – emphasizing the man's personal failings, and not the coercive set up of the project.[17] In these instances, homeless people were harmed and their lives interfered with in the name of entertaining others. That such a broad public appetite for this kind of coercive entertainment exists speaks is a troubling and perplexing reality of our culture today.

Why is this happening now?

Since I'm not a psychologist or a sociologist, I can't speculate about the complex psychological processes that must be at work in the rise of homeless chic as an object of public fascination. I can say, however, that it's not entirely new and it also responds to this specific historical context.

While homeless chic and its many manifestations is relatively recent, it is part of a much older and much broader context of public fascination with homelessness that extends well beyond the realm of fashion. Since 2001 I've been teaching a course at Boston College entitled Literature of Homelessness, which allows students and me to examine representations of homelessness in a wide variety of public venues, including literature, news sources, pop culture, film, TV, and consumer items. In the class we read academic studies, policy papers, journalism, popular literature, science fiction, memoir, children's books, self-help books, etc. The field of "homeless literature" itself is staggeringly big, indicating that lots of people are interested in reading and writing about homeless people; and increasingly homeless people are writing about their own lives. The public appetite for homeless stories is longstanding. As early as 1879, we see examples in popular literature of a now well-worn cliché of homeless literature and film: the idea of a prosperous person "trying out" the homeless lifestyle on a wager, who either becomes lured to evil or learns how to be a better person. One such title itself tells the story: *A tight squeeze, or, The adventures of a gentleman : who, on a wager of ten thousand dollars, undertook to go from New York to New Orleans in three weeks, without money, as a professional tramp.*[18]

And while the field of homeless literature is surprisingly broad and does not easily fit into simple generalizations, one can find a recurring theme of fascination with homelessness that walks the line between benign and sinister. For example, in her 2001 nonfiction essay, "Following Nancy Home," which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Linda Lawson chronicles the weeks she and her friends spent surreptitiously following a homeless woman around Cambridge, MA. In the story, Lawson admits to a deep-seated resentment toward "Nancy," whom she believes has a better life than she and must not really be homeless.[19] When teaching this essay, I engage students in sharing stories they have heard about panhandlers driving Porsches or other longstanding myths that pair a simultaneous distaste for and envy of homeless people.

Public images of homeless people are also widely circulated in film. And while this topic is way too broad to engage here, I will make a few passing comments to help inform the context in which homeless-chic fashion arose. US films have played a key role in circulating both stereotypes and archetypes of homeless people for more than a century. Film scholar Linda Fuller has found that nearly every top director has tackled homelessness. Early portrayals tended to stereotype homeless people as tramps, capable of villainous actions; later representations painted them as lowlife or streetwise mystics. Films both define and circulate powerful cultural stereotypes of homelessness, as seen during the 1991 filming of *Curly Sue*.[20] For a scene that called for homeless people, the filmmakers decided to put out a call to hire extras from Chicago shelters. Ultimately, none of the homeless people were hired, because casting directors thought they looked "too clean."[21] In more recent years, Fuller notes, portrayals have shifted toward having homeless characters painted as intellectually or spiritually superior, mystical, or magical. An example of this archetype is the "homeless man with a heart of gold," such as Joe Pesci in *With Honors*,[22] who plays a homeless man who teaches a Harvard student important life lessons. Fuller argues that both the negative stereotypes and idealized archetypes offer cultural excuses for not dealing with homelessness as a problem and function to maintain the status quo.[23]

The status quo of the current moment includes widespread homelessness and economic insecurities. Growing up in the 1970s, I didn't regularly see homeless people on the streets, not even in urban centers. When I tell students that homelessness was not a "normal" part of my urban landscape growing up, they are usually quite surprised. Today's youth live in a country where visible homeless can be seen almost anywhere, at the same time that the vast majority of homeless people are not visible to passersby.

According to reports published by the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), the number of homeless people in the United States is on the rise at the same time that emergency shelter is decreasing, and cities are passing legislation that criminalizes homeless activities. Additionally, violent, random crimes against homeless people are at record levels.

Over the course of a given 12-month period, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that approximately 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the US, and this number is may increase in the future due to the foreclosure crisis, increases in poverty, and a pattern of steady increases in family homelessness.[24] Several cities, in their reports to the US

Conference of Mayors, reported an increase in employed homeless people and homeless families, which according to the survey account for 25% of all homeless people. Most homeless people work hard not to be visible.[25]

At a time of additional needs for emergency shelter, many cities do not have adequate shelter space, leaving homeless people no choice but to struggle on the streets. The streets, however, are doubly more dangerous than before: cities are increasingly adopting laws that criminalize sleeping, sitting, loitering, or panhandling in order to move poor or homeless people out of a visible downtown areas; and more disturbing, random violence perpetrated against homeless people in public places is an increasing worldwide trend.[26] According to the NCH, 2010 was the most violent year in recorded history for hate crimes against the homeless: More than 100 violent attacks against homeless people in public spaces was recorded, and a third of those attacks were fatal – setting people on fire, public beatings, group attacks by young men on people on the street.[27]

Given that homelessness is more visible at a time when the economy remains shaky, it is not surprising that homeless chic arises now. Homeless chic is occurring at a time when many legislators respond with gestures to hide or push homelessness off the main stage. As Maureen Dowd asked in the *New York Times*, "So which is worse? A Paris fashion designer who wants to look at the homeless as aesthetic objects, or a New York mayor who does not want to look at them at all?"[28] We live in a moment of deep cultural contradiction. In many ways, one could see homeless chic as a continuation and expansion of the homeless archetype: homeless are more beautiful and have a better fashion sense than those of us who actually have money to spend on clothes. And perhaps this depiction functions as a kind of cultural pressure valve during a time of increased economic vulnerability of the middle class and increasing homelessness.

Does academic attention enlighten or further fuel the homeless-chic spectacle?

In agreeing to contribute to this discussion, I worried whether my description and analysis would add anything productive, or whether I'm merely facilitating the broader circulation (and broader public reception) of aestheticized, spectral homeless images. In *The Economics of Attention* Richard Lanham argues that we have transformed from an information economy to an *attention* economy, and what is valuable in today's world is eyeballs. Attention to an issue makes it valuable.[29] It doesn't matter if the attention is positive or negative, applause or critique. I think his description of our current moment has merit. And while my concerns did not preclude me from writing this article, I think it's useful to acknowledge the limits of academic critique within the broader realm of public rhetoric: while I believe that depictions of homelessness that circulate publicly are worthy of critical attention, critique must be the beginning point of an effort to circulate fuller and more humane images, and not an end in itself.

Many writers, artists and alternative press publications around the world take on the mission to tell different and richer stories about people living in poverty. Take, for instance, in 2000, a group of homeless writers and artists in Chicago staged *Not Your Mama's Bus Tour*, an

alternative public bus tour of Chicago, in response to city efforts to hide homeless people.[30] Or another example, Michèle Ohayon's 1993 documentary, *It Was a Wonderful Life*,[31] chronicles the lives of six women who once lived prosperous lives and became homeless. These are women who try hard not to be visible, to blend in, and are homeless because of illness, divorce, and unemployment. It's a hidden story of homelessness but it's strikingly common today. Stories that create greater empathy and more complex understanding of people and situations help us move beyond specters to see more of the picture rather than less.

   In the years I've worked with homeless people, I have found that fewer and fewer generalizations about homelessness are true, even most of the time. There are so many different images, faces and stories of homelessness. The Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie, speaks about how impressionable people can become in the face of a "single story," when we see poor people as only poor, or see homelessness only through a visual lens. She calls on us all to move beyond "the danger of a single story" about any place or person toward more complex understandings of the world.[32]

   Homeless chic is a single story, one that can't exist without homeless people – who are not merely specters or public spectacles. Having homeless people on our streets is a statement about our entire society. They should not be enjoyed or overlooked as fashionable parts of the scenery.

Notes

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