

“Homeless Chic” as Domestic Poverty Tourism: Street Retreats, Urban Plunges, and North American Class Boundaries

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In January 2010, a Toronto yoga studio advertised a 48-hour “street retreat” led by “psychotherapist, Yoga teacher, author and activist,” Michael Stone.¹ The description of the program reads:

This intensive three day street retreat involves going into the streets with no money and just the clothes on our back. The streets are our main teacher and the focus of the retreat is examining interdependence and looking deeply into who and what we are and our place in the vast web of beings. We eat in soup kitchens. We sleep outdoors together. Most meditation retreat exist [*sic*] in quiet, protected settings. Here, we use the myriad activities and forms of life in our streets as a means of paying attention and waking up. We don’t call ourselves homeless; we’re simply living on the streets for several days, relying on the generosity of the streets to take care of us. While at times we break up into smaller groups, we come together several times a day to share our experiences in a council practice with Kosu, sitting meditation with Michael, encouraged by dharma talks and chanting.²

Stone recommends that participants “not shave, nor wash [their] hair for 1 week to 10 days prior to the retreat,” “wear old clothes,” and “bring only an empty bag (shopping, plastic) for collecting food from shelters.”³ He seeks to “wake up” the consciousness of his middle-class yoga students by encouraging them to dress up in street costumes, eschew their material possessions, sleep rough, and consume the scant resources of soup kitchens and shelters.⁴ While there is a long North American tradition of similar “downclassing experiments”⁵ – from late nineteenth-century literary and photographic forays by middle-class men into impoverished American neighborhoods to more formalized “urban plunge” group programs made popular over the last two decades by National Coalition for the Homeless (Washington, D.C.), religiously affiliated street retreats, and Alternative Spring Break programs for university students – Stone’s version adds a new twist to an old practice. Unlike other urban plunges, the ad describing Stone’s street retreat makes no mention of “raising awareness about” or “bearing witness to” the social consequences of our affordable housing crisis, lack of supportive and transitional housing, and overflowing emergency shelters. Instead, it is “homeless chic” writ large. The participants wear homelessness like an outfit, engaging in a form of domestic poverty tourism that relentlessly reinforces the privilege and mobility of the North American neoliberal subject.

John Urry defines tourism as the objectification of members of another culture through a “tourist gaze,”⁶ a process that usually entails accumulating superficial signs (mass produced kitsch in the form of souvenirs, for example) that represent a stylized version of the host country or community.⁷ He emphasizes the importance of tourism as a means for acquiring the capital of cultural knowledge that is mediated by the tourist’s position within a protected resort district. Urry explains that the tourist’s journey is “to, and in, sites which are outside the normal places of residence and work. Periods of residence elsewhere are of a short-term and temporary nature. There is a clear intention to return ‘home’ within a relatively short period of time.”⁸ The return home is particularly significant when we consider that while some tourists engage in the sort of tourism that simply re-creates the everyday amenities to which they are accustomed, there is another kind of tourism – what cultural critics such as Greg Ringer, Stephen Britton, and Anita Pleumaron refer to as “poverty tourism” – that facilitates a deliberate expedition into the poorer districts of a host community in an effort to obtain a more “authentic” cultural experience. While we usually think of poverty tourism as something people from the global North do in the global South, there are also instances, like the urban plunge, when the middle-class citizens participate in a similar practice on the domestic front. In this context, the gaze that Urry identifies is a portal that permits the middle-class tourist to cross over the threshold between classes and bear witness to the spectacle of the poor and homeless other. At the same time, this temporary transgression simultaneously serves to reinforce class boundaries because the tourist traffic only flows in one direction. There are certainly no reciprocal “suburban plunge” programs that might, for example, allow homeless people from the inner city to spend a weekend in a well-appointed four-bedroom house in the suburbs where they rely on the “generosity” of the crescents and cul-de-sacs to take care of them.

Like any fashion, the urban plunge has had its historical ebbs and flows, modifications, and adaptations. In North America, the practice has its roots in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American socialist literature, muckraking journalism, and social advocacy, when writers like Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives*, 1890), Jack London (“A Tramp Diary,” 1894; *The Road*, 1907), Stephen Crane (“An Experiment in Misery,” 1894), Josiah Flynt (*Tramping with Tramps*, 1901), and Hutchins Hapgood (*The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 1902) sought to tell the middle classes about the harsh realities of urban slums, poverty, and homelessness. These early incarnations of the urban plunge usually took one of two forms: third party documentation of social ills and human suffering, such as Riis’s powerful photographs of the impoverished living conditions in the Lower East Side tenements; or, first-person accounts of temporary, clandestine downclassing experiments that mark the day-to-day challenges of homeless life. While both approaches transport the middle-class reader into a lower-class milieu vis-à-vis a form of literary poverty tourism that rely on the construction of a homeless other (one that, I would argue, ultimately re-inscribes the American self), the urban plungers usually did so in support of tangible social, economic, and architectural reforms.

In *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), for example, Jacob Riis approaches the representation of poverty with deep contradiction. On the one hand, he offers middle-class Americans a

spectacular glimpse at another world: a rag picker holding her baby, a sweatshop filled with Jewish immigrants, police lodging houses full of homeless women, a man sleeping on a bare mattress atop two barrels in a dirty coal cellar, a family laboring together on a loom, a woman fighting tuberculosis in a tent atop a snowy tenement roof, and homeless children sleeping in groups on the street. Riis is a passionate tour guide, taking his reader deep into the darkness, the lack of ventilation, and the chronic overcrowding. He writes: “A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of the elements God meant to be free, but man deals out with such a niggardly hand.”⁹ On the other hand, Riis’s primary trope for homelessness is a surge of water that threatens to overwhelm the barriers raised by middle-class members of a “civil” democratic society, barriers that ultimately separate Americans based on class, ethnicity, and cultural difference. He writes, “not all the barriers erected by society against its nether life, not the labor of unnumbered societies for the rescue and relief of its outcast waifs, can dam the stream of homelessness that issues from a source where the very name of home is a mockery.”¹⁰ Later, he re-inscribes the same metaphor: “The sea of a mighty population, held in galling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenements. Once already in our city, to which have come the duties and responsibilities of a metropolitan greatness before it was able to fairly measure its task, has felt the swell of its resistless flood. If it rise once more, no human power may avail to check it.”¹¹ The social and architectural reforms for which Riis advocates will not only improve the conditions for the inhabitants of the Lower East Side tenements, they will also quell the coming flood that imperils the existing social order.

Most of Riis’s contemporaries did not employ photographs or produce third party accounts of poverty, but, instead, chose to write about poverty via undercover urban plunge experiences. While their stories – journalistic, biographical or fictionalized – often provided sympathetic points-of-view, they did not advocate for tangible legislative changes in the same way as Riis. Jack London, for example, saw homelessness as a means of representing American energy, idealism, liberty and chauvinism. London’s stories romanticize homeless life by suggesting that tramping offers a liberating alternative to the mundane oppression of a capitalist society. When he participates in his own urban plunge, London’s tramp alter ego exudes the fortitude, freedom and mobility of the ideal American white male subject. In “The Tramp Diary,” for instance, London chronicles his homeless journey across America with his friend, Frank Davis. On the fifth day, London reveals that his companion can no longer tolerate the hardships of an unhoused life: “This afternoon Frank & I had an understanding. The road has no more charms for him. The romance & adventure is gone & nothing remains but the stern reality of the hardships to be endured. Though he has decided [*sic*] to turn West again I am sure the experience [*sic*] has done him good, broadened his thoughts, given a better understanding of the low strata of society & surely will have him more charitable to the tramps he will meet hereafter when he is in better circumstances.”¹² Davis’s departure receives only a passing note in London’s diary, but his account of the incident reveals that, in London’s opinion, the single most important element of

any downclassing experiment is an education about the plight of the impoverished. And like Riis, he uses narrative to maintain a significant boundary between the middle class urban plunger and the members of the lower classes he has infiltrated.

After a second peak of sympathetic poverty tourist writing during the Great Depression of the 1930s (most notably the work of Tom Kromer, a journalist who wrote an urban plunge exposé that was critical of panhandlers, followed by a much more nuanced autobiographical novella, *Waiting for Nothing*, that chronicled his own struggles with unemployment and homelessness), the urban plunge practice enjoyed a renaissance in the 1980s as the “new homeless” population exploded onto the streets. Like the writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the contemporary generation of plungers generally use two methods: sensational third party accounts of homelessness, like Jennifer Toth’s *Mole People* and Margaret Morton’s photographs in *The Tunnel* and *Fragile Dwellings*; and formalized urban plunge programs, such as National Coalition for the Homeless’s alternative spring break program for university students.

As a recently graduated journalism student interning at the *Los Angeles Times* New York City bureau in 1990, Jennifer Toth was one of the first writers to profile the lives of homeless tunnel dwellers in the mass media. Toth published an account of the tunnel people on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* and followed it up with *The Mole People*, a book-length account of the homeless netherworld that examines the infrastructure of tunnel communities, police outreach programs, tunnel art, and Toth’s own “adventures” underground. The original article, published September 2, 1990, begins with a physical description of the tunnel that evokes Riis’s descriptions of the tenements: “On a dark ledge under the Grand Central Station Terminal, just five feet directly above the IRT train’s deadly electrified third rail, a fine stream of sunlight filters down through 20 feet of stagnant air onto a makeshift table.”¹³ The conflicting visual ideas in Toth’s opening sentence reveal her divergent assessments of the tunnel as both utopia and dystopia. For Toth, the underground is simultaneously stale and sunlit, a space that includes a “deadly” electrified rail and the ingenuity of a “makeshift table.” Toth describes the tunnel dwellers with similar incongruity in *The Mole People*; they are fearsome, animalistic, rat-eating “mole people” and they are, at the same time, progressive, community-oriented survivalists who forge a new frontier, squat in abandoned subway stations, and develop “private” shanties on public land. Although Toth’s stated goal in *The Mole People* is to “bring a better understanding of the underground people” and “dismiss the myth of animal-like underground dwellers,”¹⁴ her repeated use of abject images – corpses, dismemberment, vomit, rats, blood, feces, birth, and wounds – creates a much more dubious and sensational depiction of homelessness. Scholar Kim Hopper, calls Toth’s *Los Angeles Times* article a “preposterous concoction [that] [...] may be read as part of an enduring theme in the history of homelessness in New York: an affirmation of the ‘otherness’ of the homeless poor, even to the point of casting them in the mold of the grotesque.”¹⁵

Unlike Toth, who entered the tunnels as a journalist, the myriad versions of organized and formalized urban plunge and street retreat programs that emerged in force in the 1980s and 1990s generally encourage their participants to enter streets and shelters in disguise. While the

urban plunge is becoming increasingly fashionable, the most prominent of these programs is National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH)'s "Urban Plunge 101."¹⁶ NCH plungers, who are usually middle class university students, spend anywhere from one day to one week living on the streets in small groups, led by a homeless or formerly homeless guide. The NCH plunge manual traces the phenomenon to the 1960s and "the advent of the War on Poverty."¹⁷ NCH suggests that the purpose of the plunge is to "familiarize and sensitize middle class people with the realities and hardships of inner city life;" "to see a different side of the city;" "to gain firsthand knowledge of the growing crisis of homelessness;" "to bring homelessness to a very personal level;" and "to see the world through the eyes of a homeless person."¹⁸ The manual insists that the plunge is "more of an educational experience for yourself than helpful to homeless people," but that it is "not a chance for you to masquerade as a homeless person or be a 'tourist' looking at poor folks."¹⁹ Yet the list of elaborate preparations contradicts these statements by clearly directing participants to embody a homeless stereotype. The manual suggests that plunge participants refrain from bathing and shaving prior to the plunge, "rub unscented baby oil in your hair to make it look like your hair hasn't been washing for sometime" [*sic*], "rub your scalp, face, neck, arms and hands with wet coffee grounds" to imitate dirt, and "bring along a paper bag and a bottle (empty beer or wine)"²⁰ and a shopping cart. The manual also strongly encourages plunge participants to document the spectacle by securing an "empathetic reporter/photographer to cover your plunge experience from beginning to end" in an effort to "educate others."²¹ The ideal urban plunge, then, has all the elements of an inverted fashion shoot: a professional photographer; a university student model dressed in coffee grounds, grease, and old clothes; and a runway of streets, alleys, and park benches.

Like the early twentieth century urban plunges by Jack London and Stephen Crane, the NCH plunge in Washington D.C. – and other programs like it (including Alternative Spring Break programs and spiritual street retreats) in Seattle,²² Toronto,²³ Austin,²⁴ Ottawa²⁵ and many other urban centers – are organized around a stated desire to increase the middle class understanding of poverty and encourage advocacy for homeless people. However, no matter how convincing their homeless costumes are, the plungers can not simulate the most defining requisites of chronic homelessness: the grinding hopelessness and desperation, the unique sense of community and the "street family," the long-term struggles with addictions and mental illnesses, the monotony of standing in lines day after day, and the relentless bureaucratic violence of the shelter system, social assistance, disability, Medicaid, and unemployment insurance. As Urry suggests, the single most important moment of a tourist's experience is the return home. Regardless of the temporary hardships – both real and dramatized – the poverty tourists who participate in urban plunges and street retreats know that they will soon return to comforts, houses, safety nets, families, jobs. In the context of the incongruities between the stated purpose (raising awareness about homelessness) and the likely experiential outcome (personal growth) of the urban plunge, Michael Stone's trendy adaptation of the street retreat and his extraction of the socialist and reformist goals of the early twentieth century urban plungers is not that much of a stretch. Domestic poverty tourism may or may not involve varying degrees of social conscience,

advocacy, and calls for reform, but it is, first and foremost, a commodification of experience that reinforces class boundaries.

Notes

1. “Michael Stone,” Centre of Gravity, <http://www.centreofgravity.org/teachers/>.
2. “Toronto STREET RETREAT,” Centre of Gravity email newsletter, January 22, 2010.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Stone’s street retreat (and virtually all of the text I’ve quoted from his ad) is borrowed from a street retreat program offered by Bernie Glassman at Zen Peacemakers in urban US centers since 1991. “Street Retreat” Zen Peacemaker’s Website: http://www.zenpeacemakers.com/mi/programs/street_retreat.htm. Glassman is very active in homeless advocacy, resource development, and philanthropy.
5. Patrick Chura, “‘Vital Contact’: Eugene O’Neill and the Working Class,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.4 (2003): 522.
6. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel and Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).
7. *Ibid.*, 3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 38.
10. *Ibid.*, 147.
11. *Ibid.*, 218.
12. Jack London, “The Tramp Diary,” *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1979), 34.
13. Jennifer Toth, “N.Y.’s ‘Mole People’ Shun Society in Transit Tunnels,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1990, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-09-02/news/mn-2047_1_mole-people.
14. Jennifer Toth, *The Mole People* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1990), x.
15. Kim Hopper, “A Poor Apart: The Distancing of Homeless Men in New York’s History,” *Home: A Place in the World*, ed. Adrien Mack (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 108.
16. In addition to “Urban Plunge 101,” NCH also offers advanced courses in homeless experience, such as Freight Train 102, Hobology 103, Shelter Plunge 104, Rural Plunge 105, and Honorary Doctorate of Hobology (Ph.D).
17. National Coalition for the Homeless, “Urban Plunge 101”: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/65091051/manual-07>.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Nick Perry, “Seattle Pacific students spend 5 days on streets to feel pain of homeless,” *The Seattle Times*, March 26, 2009, http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/education/2008925900_spuhomeless26m0.html.

23. "Students humbled by Toronto Street Retreat," *Kingston This Week*, November 17, 2010, <http://www.kingstonthisweek.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=2251099&archive=true>.
24. "CNN Features Homeless Students," *St. Edwards University Media Centre*, April 4, 2007, http://www.stedwards.edu/market/newsmedia_center/news_center_archives/04_07_04.html.
25. Paula Richardson, "Facts and Arguments: Lessons Learned on a Street Retreat," *The Globe and Mail*, July 25, 2007, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/lessons-learned-on-a-street-retreat/article104665/>.