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# Editor's Introduction

Research is a long process from conception to execution. But what is rarely discussed is presentation. Like an unobserved tree falling in the forest, ethnographic insights only matter if they are shared. As ethnographers we don't pursue subjects for our own self-reflection or self-realization, we are engaged in a dialogue with our peers about social life.

Behind each of the papers in this issue is a commitment by their authors to present their findings. The authors worked through multiple rounds of review and revision. For undergraduate researchers this is a challenge they are unaccustomed to with the cycle of semesters and terms that place deadlines on a project. There are few opportunities to polish and refine one's ideas. But the payoff from publication is a chance to see ideas and data mature.

The articles in this issue derive from research sites across North America. De Salvo's auto-ethnography examines American national identity when teaching and living in a rural community in Baja California, Mexico. In Central Texas, McCollum illustrates the use of art among the homeless as a vehicle for collective identity formation. Macrae, Van de Vooren, and Witherbee explore patron usages and perceptions of change at a beloved local library in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

A note about the JUE, we are now regularly publishing two issues a year. Our submission deadlines are January 31st and July 31st.

See you in the field.

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# Family in Foreign Spaces:
## *Leaving Home to Find Home*

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**ABSTRACT**

In the spring of 2012 I participated in an experiential education course. I taught English and lived with a family in an economically poor and rural community situated in Baja California, Mexico. During this process I began to explore how people in different social realities experience place, nationalism, and identity. I was faced with my own privileges as a U.S. citizen as well as my socialized habits of individualism. This auto-ethnography combines my specific experience with larger social themes of national identity construction and the influence that stereotypes and national stories may have on social experiences.

Keywords: Auto-ethnography, Collectivism, Mexico, Domestic Space, National Identity

"I WONDER HOW THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES WOULD LOOK IF WE WIPED OUT THE NATIONAL BOUNDARIES OF THE WORLD, AT LEAST IN OUR MINDS, AND THOUGHT OF ALL CHILDREN EVERYWHERE AS OUR OWN. THEN WE COULD NEVER DROP AN ATOMIC BOMB ON HIROSHIMA, OR NAPALM ON VIETNAM, OR WAGE WAR ANYWHERE…" (ZINN 2003, 658)

## INTRODUCTION

Crossing the border into Mexico was among the strangest experiences of my life. Filled with both fear and anticipation, my classmates and I gathered at the border's wall and prepared to cross a bridge into a new country. We called our parents for the last time on our U.S. cell phones and smoked cigarettes while we observed the barrage of armed men patrolling the area. The uniforms and guns put me on edge and I began to second-guess my every move, wondering, "Am I breaking a law by standing here?" The presence of the U.S. police force seemed severe. Why is their presence so concentrated at that spot? Why had I not felt so uneasy in the streets of San Diego just minutes before?

As soon as we had neared the border and as we crossed the bridge, we stood out more and more; we are not from Mexico, we are "Americans". I felt different from the people around me and the realization that I was now the foreigner became clear. I realized that despite all of my knowledge surrounding the construction of race and politically enforced economic disparities, and though I intended to see the people in Mexico as inherently no different than me, I was petrified to be in such a foreign place. All the media depictions of people disappearing in foreign countries, of the drug wars in Mexico, of violence and crime as everyday occurrences, and all of my mother's warnings and questions about my safety, transformed from abstract thoughts to a concrete understanding of my experience to come. I could not deny that I would rather be safe than sorry, so I rationalized a newly-faced distrust of the non-white people that populate Mexico. I began to think, "What kind of person am I, really? Am I really full of hate? Where are these feelings coming from?"

My whole life had been spent adjusting to the society into which I was born to face and conditioned to navigate. Particularly, I had been coping with a culture that pretends our dying planet is a non-issue and that the lifestyles of even many poor Americans (U.S. citizens) comes at the cost of the well-being of communities, human and otherwise, that exist, to us, mostly as abstractions. Going to Mexico, a country whose misfortune has come at the behest of the economically wealthiest nation on the planet, hit me with a wave of realism and reconnection with the complexities of my life and its interconnection with all of the people of the world that I have never met. Almost all of my individualistic social behaviors, such as cooking, eating, sleeping, and studying alone, when and where I chose, were stripped during my stay in Mexico; yet I was simultaneously freed of the burden of individualism and the isolation that it encourages. I noted at the culmination of my journey that "I'm more myself with the people in Buena Vista" than I have ever been.

Why was I so frightened to go to Mexico? It was important to understand why it seemed so engrained in me to fear Mexico and Mexican people despite my rationality. Why have I never experienced life outside of my white identity? Why are we taught to identify with one group of people and deny groups whom we do not actually know ourselves? I want to share why I felt such fear; how I was conditioned to feel in a way I knew was wrong. I want to ask people to really understand the sources of our alliances and enemies. Ultimately, I want to process the implications, for me and for all my future work, of having found family with such ease in a place I so feared. I found a home in a place I knew nothing about that was more comfortable than anything I have found in the places that I have lived thus far. I believe, based on my observations and on the history of U.S.-Mexico relations, that the racism, fear, and disdain I was enacting has been socially constructed in order to maintain the United States identity. Our privileges and sense of entitlement, which are mostly unnoticed and taken for granted by U.S. citizens, require us to identify with and participate in a culture that denies basic human rights and opportunities to the people just south of the border. Zinn captures this best in the following:

> *I wonder how the foreign policies of the United States would look if we wiped out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds, and thought of all children everywhere as our own. Then we could never drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or Napalm on Vietnam, or wage war anywhere… (2003, 685)*

This statement resonates strongly with my ultimate summation from my journey to Mexico: If we recognize that the people of Mexico, and all people whose "other" identities stand in juxtaposition to U.S. citizens' identity, are equal to us and a part of our family, our social, political and economic structure would not be possible. My research is an exploration of how national identity is formed and perpetuated through stereotypes. It is my goal to show the humanity and commonality of the people and physical

spaces I was so hesitant to interact with by sharing my personal exploration of socially constructed divisions based on nationality, class, and cultural differences. I examine how the use of domestic space acculturates differences in social experience and perspective and how these differences are often used to create generalizations and stereotypes that keep people divided. Through my own journey I grew to become an integral part of communal family and social structure antithetical to all of my own previous experiences and the overarching individualistic and isolationist tendencies that I see here in the United States. Founded in the feminist standpoint theory, it is clear that my experiences are unique and exist because I stand at a particular intersection of race, class, nationality, and previous lived-experience, thus my reflection is limited.

This auto-ethnography is guided by my experience through the Mexico Bloc Program, provided by Fort Lewis College, in the spring of 2012. A Fort Lewis history professor named John Baranski led the program. He supported us through the experience and taught us two classes: "Movements of Resistance" and "U.S. Topics: Work and Immigration". Professors of Fort Lewis College have run this program for over twenty years. Academically, the program fills service-learning practicum requirements that make up the core of the sociology curriculum. Yet, the teachers that promote its continuance admit that it is unique and important for the ways that the students collectively confront their privileges, understand their particular experiences as educated U.S. citizens, and receive the guided opportunity of facing the stereotypes that are so normalized in our social reality. Students are urged to go regardless of their grasps of Spanish or English, the main requirements are character and perseverance. I was told in my interview with Baranski, months before our departure, "The more Spanish you know, the less you'll suffer."

In retrospect, I can admit that I signed up to participate in this program for a couple of reasons. One reason that I chose to go to Mexico was this urgent feeling that I had to leave Durango, CO and separate myself from the social aspects of North-American culture that were beginning to weigh heavily on my experience in life. Another cause for my participation was a desire to finish school. I foolishly thought that I would be able to cram two-semesters of college courses into this trip and come back to graduate. I was urged by previous participants that I could do no better for myself than to go on the Mexico trip, though the best reason that anyone could articulate was that, "it will change your life."

**"ONE REASON THAT I CHOSE TO GO TO MEXICO WAS THIS URGENT FEELING THAT I HAD TO LEAVE DURANGO, CO AND SEPARATE MYSELF FROM THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF NORTH-AMERICAN CULTURE THAT WERE BEGINNING TO WEIGH HEAVILY ON MY EXPERIENCE IN LIFE."- DE SALVO**

The other Fort Lewis students and I converged in San Diego, CA and proceeded to travel together to the border at San Ysidro. Over the course of the month before the course began I traveled with my partner towards San Diego, CA, hitchhiking and ride-sharing. We caught a ride with a group of radical folks from Boulder all the way to San Francisco. We drove through the night in a caravan of two cars. We only first met these people when we got into their car to drive across the country. It is strange to me now how quickly we trusted this group of white 20-somethings who dressed and thought like us when I think about the fear I had for my life when I first entered Mexico. Racing across the desert at 3 am I talked with the driver about the cause for our trek to the west, explaining, "I'm going to Mexico to teach English and live with a family." At this point I knew I would be in the smallest town in the valley, living on the beach and off the grid; I was going to live in a whole new world. They responded by saying, "That will change your life. You will never be the same." I shrugged it off and closed my eyes, thinking, "Yeah, it'll be great…" But I did not know then where I was going nor how many different borders I would cross to get to where I am today.

I spent three months living with a family and teaching English in a *Telesegundaria*, comparable to a U.S. middle school, in a town that I will be referring to as *Buena Vista*, which means "beautiful view" in Spanish. The majority of my data was collected through my participant observation as I got to know the people and the unique economy of Buena Vista. Because this is an auto-ethnography and because this experience has already happened, I am going to rely on my field-journal, my memory, and my subsequent reflections as my main methods of data collection. I explained that I was conducting research as a sociologist, trying to understand the lives of Mexican People, with the intention of using the data to compose a scholarly paper. To respect confidentiality, I am keeping the identities of the subjects and the places in my ethnography hidden. As the town is so small and family oriented, were any person to visit Buena Vista it would be no great task to piece together the identities of these people based on any information that I give.

Buena Vista is a small town consisting of nearly thirty homes. It is known as the "squatter's town" because it was, in fact, squatted by four families in the 1950's who simply moved to the beach and built four homes and a small school. The town is located on a peninsula that hugs a large bay, so it exists on a thin strip of land between a bay and the Pacific Ocean. The people in the town make their living harvesting the clams, mussels and seaweed that grow in the ocean. They have also introduced oysters into the bay that are collectively owned by the town and are another important source of income.

I gained access into this community because I was paying a family, whom I will refer to from hereon as my family, to house me. Filling a highly respected role as a teacher, and telling the people that this was my *servicio social*, or "required-for-college volunteer work", I was trusted from the outset and given access to formal and informal settings such as school-life and home-life.

I conducted my class at the school only 2-3 times a week, and had eight students. I attempted to teach English, with no background in teaching nor a firm background in the complexities of my "native" language. There were few resources and there were not enough English books for each student so I created my own materials: flash cards, bingo boards, and memory cards. Sometimes I would visit the school and observe, but the teacher was often not present and so school was frequently cancelled. Most of my time was spent in the private settings of my home, my host-uncle's home, and the home of an English-speaking friend that I made. Other settings for observation were the school, which was semi-private, and stores/restaurants/hotels, which were semi-public because money was required to access them and, finally, at bus stops and on the streets around the valley, which were all public.

The town is now mostly populated by these initial squatter families; they have grown over the last sixty years and spread out across the beach in Buena Vista. I once asked my host-mother to estimate how many houses the town consisted of. In response she began counting the heads of each household and their relations to each other. She counted thirty-one. Her method of answering indicates to me a strong connection to place and exemplifies the ties between the people who inhabit this particular place. Here in Durango, I do not know my next-door neighbors by name nor the population of this city in which I live. Because of the small size and connectedness of the town, I was no stranger to the people. I walked to and from school every day along the one road and quickly made friends with different households that I ultimately visited often for coffee and conversation.

From the outset, I felt fraudulent for my lack of experience as a teacher and grasp of both languages involved. I felt I had no right to be welcomed into the community if I was not holding up my end of the deal. As time went on and I shared my fear of failing the students with many of the locals, however I was reassured with sentiments like, "we are proud to have you here," which my host mother told me repeatedly. It also became clear that the students

I taught and the general community members were all facing the same opportunity as I was: to meet the people from the other side of the border that we tend to know only through stereotypical depictions seen in the media and passed through social networks. This realization that the connections we formed as people were more important than the words that my students or I could learn helped to give me a new perspective and more confidence as a person and thus, a teacher.

The family that I found in Buena Vista has always been there and they still are. They will likely never visit me here because of the long, arduous process and large amounts of money that are required to purchase a visa, let alone the tickets for transportation and cost of a vacation. The tears we all shed the day that I left were inspired by a deep connection that had formed over my three-month stay, a connection that took time to forge. I did not know when I arrived what beauty and love I would come to know.

## HOME IS WHERE YOU ARE: *MY FIRST DAY IN BUENA VISTA*

I was the last to go to my town; I stayed a day more waiting to know where I would be for three months. The teacher that I worked with in the *Telesegundaria* picked me up at 7am and we drove for nearly an hour up a rocky, one-lane road along and around the bay to my town. The bay is vast and some say as large as the one in San Francisco. The drive was uncomfortable, mostly because communication was difficult. She said the only English word that she knew was "okay" and I could barely tell her about where I was from. As fear and doubt welled up within me, all the words I knew in Spanish were quickly forgotten. So I looked out the window and repeated, "*Que bonita! Que hermosa es la tierra aqui!*" This translates to, "How beautiful! How handsome the land is here!"

We stopped at a house standing alone, right off of the bay. A boy and his father were standing by the road. When we stopped, the boy jumped into the back seat and positioned himself around my bags. There was a sign so small I would have missed it had it not been pointed out to me; sitting beneath a tree, in hand painted letters, "Buena Vista" was displayed. A woman sat on the steps of the third house on the only road through town, which takes less than five minutes to drive through, and I knew I had arrived. She stood when she saw us pull in and as I opened the door two dogs came barking and would not let me out. The woman of the house gave them a stern yelling and they cowered away from me.

My first observations of the house revealed the strangest disparity that I could have imagined. There was, at once, no door to the house, only a doorway and a blanket held aside with a bungee cord, as well as a small solar panel atop the roof with a cord leading into the front window, which also had no pane. I thought it was a bit progressive to have a solar panel, a technology that, in the United States, is only available to a very small percentage of very wealthy people. After introducing me to my host-mother, the teacher reminded me to arrive at the schoolhouse at 10am to meet the eight students that I would be teaching, and then she drove off down the road.

My host-mother also knew the word "okay", but that was similarly the extent of her English vocabulary. She led me into the house. The front room is open to the kitchen and contained a very particular selection of furniture. There were two couches, covered with large blankets colored with Disney characters and horses. There was one candleholder on the wall but it hung upside-down on its nail. There was a calendar that displayed the wrong month and a very colorful picture of Jesus. There was an entertainment center that I would not notice until two days later. Strangest to me, at the time, was a hoard of flies buzzing about in the center of the dark, dank room, just out of the sun's rays that shone through the holes in the walls. I would learn to accept their presence, with time, at the heat of the day, and come to identify with their escape from the sweltering sun.

Through the living room was the kitchen. Only an archway in the wall separated the two rooms, as was the case throughout the house. The kitchen separated my room from the living room, barely. My room was windowless and dark at all times. There were names covering the walls in big letters to memorialize all the people who had lived in that room before. I came to know them all, throughout my time there. There were two queen-sized beds covered in blankets like those covering the couches. One would be both my bed and my bookshelf while the other was shared by both of my "sisters". The older girl would scarcely be present because she was attending the *Prepatoria*, the "high school" in the city in the valley, where I had just come from. I would be sharing my room with my fourteen-year old host-sister and student, whose language I did not speak. There was a dilapidated dresser covered with schoolbooks and perfumes and a large vanity mirror that the sun would grace for three or four hours each afternoon. Between that dresser and the corner farthest the doorway, was a pile of clothes half my height.

To say the least, I was overwhelmed by the new home and the family I could not speak to. So, I took my sleeping bag out and, fully dressed, climbed in and took my first nap since middle school. My mother woke me with the news that class time was near and I must eat before I begin my teaching. She fed me *caldo de pollo*, or "chicken soup". On my last morning she fed me *caldo de pollo* again while she reminded me with tears in her eyes that that was the first meal we shared together. We ate together, mostly in silence. The meal was sprinkled with my attempts to express that I knew little Spanish. She told me not to be scared, that they were glad to have me there and after we ate she walked me to school.

The school is isolated from the rest of town, down a road that follows the beach. I arrived in time for my class to begin, but did not know until that moment that I was meant to teach on my first day. The nearest building is owned by a former U.S. citizen who became a Mexican citizen to prove to the people of Buena Vista that he was truly invested in the town and thus could be trusted to help organize the town's venture in abalone reintroduction. His house is the only building surrounded by a wall and the school is the only one surrounded by a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire. The school was one room. There were four computers along the back wall but there was no electricity. I had eight students. My host-brother and my host-sister were two. One was my next-door neighbor and the son of my mother's sister. Another was the nephew of my host-siblings. Four of the eight students were in my family. Of the other four, two were brother and sister. On this first day they laughed at me as I told them I was unprepared. I wore tight, black, patched up pants; my face was riddled with piercings. We were very strange to each other at first.

## FACING THE BOUNDARIES OF AN INDIVIDUALIST

On the first page of my field-journal I wrote the mission that Baranski assigned us: "Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." There are no better words to describe what happened in the following three months.

"The culture of the U.S. is generally described as individualistic" (Shkodriania & Gibbons 1997, 766) and Pader's (1993) research explores the ways that the spatial layout and the negotiations of domestic space influence the acculturation of behaviors, such as individualism or familism. One of "the most fundamental factors differentiating Mexican and Mexican American families from U.S. families" (Pader 1993, 117) is the cultures' respective emphasis on interdependence and independence.

Growing up, I always had my own room and my room was always a place I could go to be alone. This trend has continued throughout my life. In Mexican households, traditionally, infants sleep with their parents only until they are old enough to share beds and rooms with their siblings. In my Mexican home, my sisters shared a room and my brother slept with his parents or on the living room couch with his nephew, whose parents lived down the street and did not have a room for him. For me this extreme closeness was new and uncomfortable. Again and again my field-journal displays a want of privacy and a want of control over a space that is mine; "I just want to be alone," "Privacy is a great and powerful thing," "I have no privacy," "To have no privacy is infuriating at times." I felt it was my right to have privacy because I always had. Pader claims that "the lack of personal rooms and the copossession of space enculturates a sense of continual physical connection among household member," (1993, 126) and goes on to support that statement with a quotation from a woman in her forties: "When you're brought up with it, I think it just makes it easier for you to share things with other people later on" (1993, 126).

The homes in Buena Vista and the way of life there display a strong connection and understanding between the people that live there. One male, John, referred to the town as "an extended family." He and his wife were attacked in their home and beaten nearly to death in the summer before I arrived. He told me that the people who attacked him were not from there because they could not be. "They wouldn't have done it if they were from here because they would be a part of the community. The community is just an extended family and you don't do that to family." The couple's survival was made possible by the efforts of the people in Buena Vista. John told me that not only did the people of Buena Vista call the police and follow the assailants until they were caught, but they followed the couple in the ambulance all the way to Ensenada and stayed in the hospital until they had come to. This person now says that they would "stick [his] hands in the fire for the people of Buena Vista because they saved [his] life." I see this persons experience and their perspective as evidence of collectivism in community. Shkodriania & Gibbons define collectivism as:

What I experienced in Buena Vista was a family-oriented

> *…Related to solidarity, concern for others, and integration with other people. Collectivistic societies emphasize the goals, needs, and views of the [collective] over those of the individual; the social norms of the [collective] as opposed to personal pleasure… cooperation instead of competition (1997, 766).*

community where everyone shared everything. There was no private space because people had nothing to hide. There was no door to my room because everything was public. At the end of it all I commented that I felt that I could be more myself than ever before; all of my social anxieties had quelled, and I believe that this is due, in great part, to the lack of privacy. Everybody saw me brush my teeth, which I did on the porch for lack of a sink. Everybody in the town saw me walk to the outhouse because it sat along the one road. Everybody who entered my house could see when I slept because there was no door and my bed was visible from the kitchen.

In retrospect, it seems so strange that it is normal to hide such behaviors that are common to all people. Pader's "Spatiality and Social Change: Domestic Space Use in Mexico and the United States" examines how the common design of U.S. homes evolved to hiding bedrooms, bathrooms, laundry rooms, and workrooms from the public eye in order to inculcate and maintain a sense of privacy. I realized that, through the normalization of privacy which forces people to hide behind the scenes, we have created, in the U.S., a culture where we leave out all common parts of our life; our family lives, our cooking, cleaning, bathing, and emoting become secrets. Because we don't acknowledge these aspects of ourselves to others, it becomes hard to recognize how these behaviors are normal and evident of the fact that, as humans, we are fundamentally the same, regardless of class, race, and national lines.

In Buena Vista, there are no washing machines or dryers, people hand wash their clothes in front of their houses and hang them up to dry outside. The whole town knows what color your underwear is and there is no shame in this. My students kept toothbrushes and cotton swabs at school and they brushed their teeth together. The feeling that I had nothing to hide, other than my taboo cigarette-smoking habit, was liberating. Towards the end, I spent less time worrying about my public performance and spent more time coexisting as a family member, as a part of the collectivist community.

## THE POWER OF NARRATIVE: *"THEY DON'T LIKE ME EVEN THOUGH THEY DON'T KNOW ME."*

Madan Sarup's *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* is an exploration of what our collective and individual identities represent and how they affect our interactions with the world. Sarup writes that "Public narratives become powerful myths and, even though we know how they came to be constructed, the still have a powerful force, they impel" (1996, 18). This quotation affirms my belief that many of the stories that we are told and the stereotypes that are agreed upon are tools to more easily organize our reality. When instead of seeing people we see assumptions, stereotypes that we project onto them, we are doing them and ourselves a great disservice by not seeing them as unique individuals, but as caricatures. After two days across the border I noted in my field journal "there have been many feelings of apprehension regarding genuine interactions with people here… In America [U.S.] it seems we are meant to see all Mexicans as being the same… and I've only met nice people! Really Nice People! Helpful and curious and genuine!" While I was aware that I was trying to fit the people I was interacting with into the pictures that the media and political theater in the U.S. had painted, the people I met were confounding this attempt by proving themselves to be unique and welcoming.

Every other weekend all of the Fort Lewis students migrated from their respective towns and met up for class in the city in the valley, Valle Hermosa, meaning "Beautiful Valley". We all stayed at a particular motel that stood on the side of the one highway that moves from the border to the southern tip of Baja. The owner of the hotel, like many people that I met in Mexico, had at some point crossed the border to find work in the U.S. Joaquin lived in San Diego for two years working as a bouncer. I expressed to him that I felt like I did not belong in Mexico, that I was an outsider; I was ashamed to be from the United States. I had assumed from the moment I had entered the country that Mexicans must hate/resent people from the United States, and rightfully so, because of how our political and economic policies, like NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), kept wages low and working conditions abysmal. Joaquin reassured me with his perspective. "I don't hate Americans. I like to talk to people, but sometimes they don't talk to me. America tells them all the bad things to watch out for in Mexico." His face is permanently scarred from a fight he found himself in against a group of people he believed to be white supremacists in San Diego. "I don't have problems, but they don't like me even though they don't know me."

What I came to learn each time I met and spoke with a new foreign friend is exemplified by the statement that "What a passport does is to show who you are so that you can be recognized in a bureaucratic sense… it says nothing about you as a person" (Sarup 1996, XV). What Joaquin experienced was the product of people

giving into stereotypes; people hated him, not because of who he is, but because of where he was born and the color of his skin. Sarup explores the experience of being foreign and how our identities are "not free floating; they are limited by borders" (1996, 3). My confusion and guilt were the result of being deemed a citizen of the U.S. and thus the inheritor of all the rights that are granted to anyone who holds this title.

The national identity of the United States is one of entitlement and great wealth. My very first day in Valle Hermosa, I walked along the dusty highway that the city sprawls beside. Two local males greeted and walked with me inquiring about my purpose for being there. We talked about America and one of them commented, "There is no poverty in America. Anybody can have a car there for it is the land of opportunities." This statement took me by surprise because it conveyed the common notion that people in the United States are wealthy. Of course, in comparison to the people of Mexico, U.S. citizens are very wealthy and are often afforded more material property and experiential opportunity. My ability to travel in order to come to these realizations is, in itself, proof of this fact. This national story of wealth and prosperity, through the lens of a global, capitalist culture, where to have is more important than to be, perpetuates a romanticization of the superiority of the United States. Sarup states that, "Places are created, expanded, then images are constructed to represent and sell these places" (1996, 4). I believe that this is why both U.S. citizens and Mexicans all know this same story of the United States; in order to maintain its position as a fetishized place that, in reality, is a fiction restricted by agreed upon imaginary lines.

These imaginary lines, borders, succeed in maintaining the places wherein our identities are valid. In exploring the process of forming national identities scholars suggest that a nation or a group of people must simultaneously create "other" identities against which the identity in question can be understood (Hall: 1996, Sarup: 1996, Zinn: 2003). The identity of the "other" is as much a fiction as the national identity that sparks its creation. Stuart Hall explains that, "A national culture is a discourse- a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves" (Hall 1996, 609). On one side of the line, there is wealth and prosperity while, on the other side, there are those whose poverty and disenfranchisement lays the foundation for that very wealth (Gonzales: 2011, Zinn: 2003).

## BREAKING DOWN THE BORDERS BETWEEN US

When I arrived in Mexico I was looking through the eyes of a U.S. citizen, rather than a person, and I was seeing Mexicans, not family or friends or simply people. Towards the end of my time in Mexico I noted, "I and other Fort Lewis students feel as if we don't have families after experiencing what family looks like in Mexico." This auto-ethnography has been for me the first step in processing my experience in Mexico. Since returning to the U.S., I have been hypersensitive to and overwhelmed by the disconnection I see between different groups of people, as well as between U.S. citizens and the plight of the rest of the world. I believe that this disconnection between people across borders and this inability to see ourselves in others is rooted in the walls that have been put up around this nation and its particular nationalistic story. We do not need to worry about the rest of the world, only the economy and political climate here. Inspired by the Howard Zinn quotation that begins this writing, I want people to learn to recognize all people as equals. Our individual lives are inextricably connected to all other lives, be they human, animal, plant. The façade of wealth and prosperity that veils the United States does not reflect the true cost of imperial 1st world wealth. It is profound impoverishment and exploitation of those who live on the other side of the border that makes this wealth possible.

My classmates and I wondered how we would share our experiences and what we had come to learn. We wondered how we could change the social and political climate that had created the power-dynamics that uphold the structural socioeconomic inequalities we had been coming to understand as unreasonable and undeserved. We asked, "How can we make changes on individual and structural levels that would lead to an equalization of opportunity?"

We posed the idea of sending U.S. citizens to live with Mexican families, as we had done, to spark individual shifts towards empathy and a more profound understanding of the impact an average U.S. lifestyle has on the rest of the world. Yet, the very fact that we were afforded this opportunity exemplifies the power and class dynamics inherent in the current socioeconomic climate. This type of experience is a privilege that is only available to college students or people who maintain class privileges. Even the ability to cross borders with such ease is a privilege that many United States citzens take for granted. We tend not to realize that the majority of mexican citizens will not be allowed to visit the U.S. because of how stereotypes and certain narratives have

shaped legislation and border policy. It seems contradictory for me to have gained this understanding of the supreme powers of socially-constructed socio-political narratives, only by accepting and benefiting from the privilege that these very same tales have afforded me, yet I believe there is merit to this type of experiential learning.

Experiential education by itself is not a practical approach to social justice or social change. What it does offer, however, is the opportunity to confront the physical, cultural, and ideological borders we construct and maintain that keep us isolated. In order to dissolve the power of stereotypes, on an individual level, we must carefully examine the sources and merits of our biases. This type of exploration is often most genuinely conducted when we personally interact with those people or ideas that we have prejudices against. The types of human-interactions that I experienced, combined with two college courses that contextualized the forces that were shaping the setting, led me to see through my biases and encourage me to reevaluate the roots of my behaviors and beliefs, but how can these types of interactions occur outside of these circumstances?

The context of the experiential learning must be fully recognized in order to make the social constructions visible as foundations that support social stratification. How can we de-stigmatize collectivity and acculturate a non-hierarchical acceptance of cultural differences? Political transformations regarding border policies, as well as economic policies such as NAFTA, policies that encourage the continued impoverishment and dehumanization of people on the grounds of their nationality, could take on and advocate for the rights of all people and a leveling of opportunity across national borders, across class lines, across gender and cultural lines. Radical revisions to the institutions that organize our social reality could find systemic practices influencing personal attitudes, just as transformations in personal attitudes can influence systemic change.

This auto-ethnography has been only one step in a process. It has benefited me by giving me a cause and forum to explore my experience and a way to communicate my story. I cannot say what, if any, benefit this project might have for the communities and my families in both Mexico and the U.S. It seems that if one person can relate to my thoughts and continue this dialogue with even one more person, then I will have sparked some positive social reflection. I wish to continue beyond my college career to raise awareness and keep asking these same questions through art, conversation, social work, and continued research. I want to understand more clearly how we maintain our identities as separate from other populations. Beyond that, I want to understand how we can break down these barriers that have been created. My goal with this project and future projects is to connect people to both individuals and whole populations whom they would likely never consider as important parts of their lives. I think that people need to talk more and listen more to people they normally would not know. I believe that this is one step towards actualizing Zinn's insightful goal of wiping out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds.

**"IN ORDER TO DISSOLVE THE POWER OF STEREOTYPES, ON AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL, WE MUST CAREFULLY EXAMINE THE SOURCES AND MERITS OF OUR BIASES. THIS TYPE OF EXPLORATION IS OFTEN MOST GENUINELY CONDUCTED WHEN WE PERSONALLY INTERACT WITH THOSE PEOPLE OR IDEAS THAT WE HAVE PREJUDICES AGAINST."**
**- DE SALVO**

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# The Art of Collective Identity: *How an Art from the Streets Program Fosters a Sense of Community Among the Homeless*

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## ABSTRACT

The current paper explores the role that identities play in creating and maintaining a sense of community in an organization supporting homeless artists in the South. Couched in the social movements literature on collective identity, this study examines the ways individual identities contribute to an overall collective identity of artists and volunteers within the organization Art from the Streets (AFTS). Relying on organizational materials, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation conducted from August to December 2011, the current research finds that AFTS creates a space where homeless individuals can negotiate the stigmatized identities they experience on the streets and adopt a more empowering identity. In the process, the organization fosters a collective identity among all members. This paper adds to the existing social movements scholarship by examining how an empowering collective identity is formed among members with individual identities that are traditionally considered stigmatized in larger society.

Keywords: Collective Identity, Stigma, Social Movements

## INTRODUCTION

It is a hot August afternoon in central Texas, and in a downtown community center, over twenty local artists gather in the cool air conditioning. The white walls display colorful paintings, neatly placed between the windows that reveal the busy sidewalks of a street corner. Sitting at long tables covered in paint-splattered plastic sheets, the artists talk to each other while simultaneously working intently on the pieces of art in front of them.

I interrupt one artist from his work to have a conversation. He tells me he has only started attending these art studios for four months now, but he comes every chance he gets. When I ask why, he responds, "It's community outreach. It's help… they're just not thinking [each of us is] a dreg of society."

His statement is both poignant and hopeful. I know he is referring to the fact that he, like all of the artists in the room, is homeless. The reactions he receives from people outside of the studio are rarely friendly, but here in the Art from the Streets (AFTS) studio, he finds a supportive community.

The AFTS organization hosts art classes twice a week to any homeless people in the area who might be able to take a short, though regular, break from their oftentimes difficult and dangerous life on the streets, in order to create something beautiful. I ask the artist what the organization means to him, and he replies, "Just fellowship, in a way. I really am speechless on that… you'd have to cut my heart out and figure that out. My soul."

The current paper explores this topic: the "fellowship," or sense of community that is fostered by this local organization that supports homeless artists in unique although meaningful ways. Specifically, I explain the role that stigmatized identities play in the formation of collective identity, and how the organizational structure supports a sense of community that de-emphasizes stigma and empowers members.

**"IT'S COMMUNITY OUTREACH. IT'S HELP...THEY'RE JUST NOT THINKING [EACH OF US IS] A DREG OF SOCIETY."**
***- HOMELESS ARTIST***

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper relies on two bodies of literature to address different dimensions of collective action (Jasper 1997; Johnston et al. 1994; Melucci 1996) and the formation of collective identity (Gamson 1991; Jasper 1997; Jasper 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Valocchi 2008). The work of Johnston et al. (1994) and Melucci (1996) describes collective action beyond the previously limited category of "social movements," illuminating the need for research on social movements focusing on identity formation and confirmation (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Snow and Anderson 1987). The studies of Valocchi (2008), Gamson (1991), Jasper (1998), and Polletta and Jasper (2008) lay the empirical foundation for the analysis of collective identity in collective action.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION, STIGMA, AND IDENTITIES

Scholars have recently begun to examine new forms of social movements, in an attempt to re-conceptualize their meaning, and to identify a wider array of different types of collective action (Jasper 1997; Johnston et al 1994). Melucci (1996) is frequently cited for his elaboration on collective action, claiming a specific type of collective action can be categorized by its relation to 1) solidarity within the movement, 2) conflict against outside actors, and 3) the social system in which the action takes place. While most social movements experience aspects of solidarity, Melucci argues that collective action includes movements that are not necessarily oriented toward any political conflict, and instead focus on building solidarity while working within the surrounding social system (Melucci 1996). Whereas social movements have historically been perceived as emphasizing political activism, "New Social Movements" (NSM) tend to be self-referential in nature, where "the action within the movement is a complex mix of the collective and individual confirmations of identity" (Johnston et al. 1994, 8).

Indeed, in today's social movements, the reshaping of identities is oftentimes the primary goal (Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Johnston et al. 1994). Jasper (1998) asserts that members in social movements at times participate to garner a new sense of self-worth through moral expression, and not necessarily to accomplish external structural goals. In other words, some social movements may be focused on re-conceptualizing identities that have been stigmatized by others (Jasper 1998). Here, stigmatization refers to:

> *"the cumulative consequence of a history of failing to possess desirable attributes and evoking rejecting responses from conventional membership groups…The end result is a self-perception of possessing a stigmatized personal identity, perceiving oneself as stigmatized and as the object of collective stigmatization (Kaplan and Liu 2000:, 216)."*

Some social movement organizations focus their efforts on challenging the stigma associated with individual members' identities through the use of *identity work*, or a "range of activities" that serve "to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1348). It is important to note that identity work is not just an individual effort, but may be accomplished by and for a larger group of individuals or collective (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In fact, the New Social Movement Perspective suggests that collective attempts at identity work are the most important dynamic within movement formation, because they act as both a means of empowerment and way to challenge hegemonic identities and thus, to some extent, the existing social order (Johnston et al. 1994). Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) describe cooperative identity work as *subcultural identity work*, and argue that it involves four major parts: *defining* the identity; *coding*, or creating a way to express this identity; *affirming* the identity through validating an individual's claims to the identity; and *policing* the identity by protecting and enforcing the code that signifies it. Stigmatized individuals engage in subcultural identity work to resist stigma and redefine identities to have a more positive meaning (Kaplan and Liu 2000; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, Snow and McAdam 2000).

To illustrate how members of a group with stigmatized identity employ identity work to empower themselves as a group, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) examine the case of a support group of transsexual individuals. The group *defined* the identity of transsexual by claiming the category is biologically determined – those who are not born with a male sex and feminine gender (or vice versa) do not fall into their identity category. The expression of this identity involved telling stories of gender non-conformity such as cross-dressing as a child, and thus these stories served as the *code* for a transsexual identity. The group members also compared themselves with other groups that face discrimination, such as gays, lesbians, and African Americans in order to *affirm* their identity as a legitimate minority group. Finally, the group *policed* the transsexual identity of members by avoiding talk about sexuality, which the authors contend challenged the stereotype that transsexuals are "perverted" or "hypersexual," while also helping to foster a more multi-faceted and positive transsexual identity among group members.

Additionally, members of social movements use identity work to match the identities formed as a group to their own self-conception (Snow and McAdam 2000). One important way this connection is developed is through *identity amplification*, which

"involves the embellishment and strengthening of [a member's] existing identity" (Snow and McAdam 2000, 49). The previously understated identity of a member becomes more salient so as to motivate that member to associate with the identity claimed by the group. When this process is successful, the nexus between a group's definition of an identity and each member's own self-conception results in the formation of a collective identity, or a "perception of group distinctiveness" that resembles a community more than a category (Jasper 1997, 86). I provide a more in-depth discussion of the concept of collective identity, as well as its implications for those with stigmatized identities, in the next section of this paper.

In a study of homeless individuals in Austin, Texas, Snow and Anderson (1987) find that a significant part of identity work of the homeless involved distancing themselves from other homeless individuals. Thus, the study demonstrates the unique challenges that may arise when attempting to create a consistent identity among the homeless, while also connecting this identity to each individual's self-conception. Furthermore, social movements that focus on identity formation as the means *and* the end have rarely been studied empirically; especially those whose members possess stigmatized identities. As a result, the current research fills a gap in the social movements literature on identity work among stigmatized individuals by examining a collective action organization that is comprised mainly of homeless individuals.

## COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, STIGMA AND THE PUBLIC

Polletta and Jasper (2001, 285) define collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution." Collective identity occurs when members feel that they share the same status or relation with one another, resulting in positive feelings between members of the group (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Gamson (1991, 40) elaborates on the concept of collective identity by identifying three dimensions – the largest being solidary group identity, where members of a movement collectively identify based on a similar biographical location such as race or class. Within solidary identity, collective identity might be formed based on members having similar ideologies and thus supporting the same movement. Lastly, collective identity can be formed through identification with a specific organization within that movement (Gamson 1991). The current research focuses on one of these three types – solidary collective identity.

To illustrate, Valocchi (2008) describes the collective identity of one group of gay rights activists. The activists' connection to each other centered around their shared identities as gay individuals, more so than their similar ideologies surrounding the gay liberation movement or their affinities for one organization within this movement. He claims that the goals of "biographical activists," or members experiencing the equivalent of Gamson's solidary-based collective identity, are cultural. For these types of activists, "the work of consciousness raising is itself a social change goal and not solely a prelude to or byproduct of 'real' political action" (Valocchi 2008, 77). The goal for biographical activists is to challenge stereotypes and build new identities (Valocchi 2008).

The relationship between individual and collective identity is significant – the stronger a group's collective identity, the more likely each member will identify with the group as his or her own individual identity (Jasper 1997). We see this relationship at work when considering homeless individuals, specifically. Because stigmatized identities occur when individuals fail to conform to standards expected by a dominant group, a stigmatized individual may participate in a social movement in order to reject conventional norms and join a group in which the expectations are more easily navigated (Kaplan and Liu 2000). In turn, the "act of joining the movement increases the perceived value of one's social identity – a collective identity becomes a valued ego extension of one's personal identity and so enhances one's self-worth" (Kaplan and Liu 2000, 233).

However, a study by Norris and Milkie (2007) finds that homeless individuals were *not* in fact eager to collectively identify with other homeless individuals. While studying interactions in a small, northeastern city's homeless shelter, the researchers discovered that all adults in the homeless shelter rejected a collective "we" identity. When considering stigmatized identities, the scholars claim that the perceived mutability of one's identity, or how changeable an individual feels his or her identity is, determines one's propensity to collectively identify with others holding the same identity. Individuals with identities that seem "fixed" are more likely to collectively identify with others of that identity. For example, being an African American can be perceived by some as a fixed identity.[2] Thus, according to the authors, African Americans would be more likely to collectively identify with other African Americans than homeless individuals would with other homeless individuals, especially if those individuals perceive their homeless condition to be temporary (Norris and Milkie 2007).

Collective identity is reinforced in part by how non-members perceive the group in question (Jasper 1997). Johnston et al. (1994) call the external recognition a movement's "public identity," which creates a boundary between members within the group and the public, or individuals outside of the movement. Public identity serves to both maintain collective identity by creating a "we-them" distinction that further defines who the group *is* and who it is *not* (Johnston et al. 1994). Additionally, by soliciting attention from an audience, a social movement may garner support from observers who can then report on the movement's activities and messages favorably (Hunt et al. 1994).

To express collective identity publicly, members of social movements often use cultural materials, such as narratives, symbols, or rituals (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Because many social movements today emphasize the identity aspects of action, they necessarily emphasize cultural issues to differentiate themselves from the dominant group, or those outside the movement (Johnston et al. 1994). In an analysis of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Roy (2010) finds that the movement's music allowed for a crowd of people, experiencing similar adversities, to engage in prolonged collective action that required the same coordination and community that proved necessary for the movement as a whole. Thus, "many people *doing* art… not just consuming it, is an extraordinarily powerful mode for… solidifying commitment to social movements" (Roy 2010, 86). However, while recent scholarship has studied the effect that the cultural materials of a movement have on that movement's solidarity (for another example, see Sarabia 2005), little research has been done on how collective action through art also facilitates a public identity for individual social movement organizations.

Though some studies have shed light on the factors that support or impede the formation of a collective identity among stigmatized individuals (Snow and Anderson 1987; Norris and Milkie 2007; Kaplan and Liu 2000), there is a lack of scholarship on the mobilization of stigmatized individuals for the primary purpose of forming a counter-stigma collective identity. The current research addresses this gap by examining how collective identity is formed within an organization whose membership is mainly comprised of homeless individuals who, as a result, experience stigmatized identities

## ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

In 1991, a group of local artists Art from the Streets (AFTS) began hosting weekly art classes as an attempt to improve the lives of homeless individuals in their community. One founder, Hank, explains the birth of AFTS, saying, "The premise of the class was that, creating things and being an artist and doing art – whatever that means – is good for people. It's good for our lives. And that it would be helpful to them." The program began as weekly art classes held at a local community aid center, and in November of 1993, volunteers hosted an Art Show to display and sell the work that participants had created. Seventy pieces of art, painted by the homeless artists in the class, were put up for sale to the public, netting $1,650 in sales. All proceeds of each sold art piece went directly to the artist who produced the work, and the Show "had a tremendous effect on the homeless people who had participated" (Art from the Streets 2011a).

Since then, the Art Show has been an annual occurrence for AFTS, and in 2006, AFTS sold a record $81,000 in art. The Show continues to attract between one and two thousand attendees each year. And while the Art Show is still the most publicized feature of AFTS, the organization claims it is not the most important aspect. The now twice-weekly art classes reflect "the core of the program," where homeless individuals can interact with each other in a positive environment (Art from the Streets 2011b). Every Tuesday and Thursday, one can expect to find about fifteen to twenty homeless individuals in the AFTS studio, using the paints and resources provided by AFTS to make their artwork for the next Show.

Today, AFTS classes are held in a community center run by (and located adjacent to) a local Episcopal church, just across the street from a downtown resource center for the homeless. AFTS has eight board members (all of whom are non-homeless volunteers), and approximately twelve additional volunteers. The board, which only recently formed in January of 2011, is comprised of the original three AFTS founders, plus five additional members who have been invited to join the board to aid in the coordination of the Art Show. AFTS began applying for 501(c)(3) status in 2002, but has yet to finish the process due in part because of a lack of funding for the application fee. Its financial support comes primarily from individual donations and sales of admission to the Art Show.

| Date | Time | Event | Total Hours |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9/6/11 | 1:45 p.m. - 3:45 p.m. | Studio Class | 2:00 |
| 9/13/11 | 1:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m. | Studio Class | 2:00 |
| 9/15/11 | 1:15 p.m. - 2:45 p.m. | Arists' Meeting | 1:30 |
| 9/23/11 | 12:25 p.m. - 2:40 p.m. | Board Meeting | 2:15 |
| 10/4/11 | 1:15 p.m. - 3:30 p.m. | Studio Class | 2:00 [3] |
| 10/11/11 | 2:00 p.m. - 3:45 p.m. | Studio Class | 1:20 [4] |
| 10/18/11 | 1:10 p.m. - 3:15 p.m. | Studio Class | 2:05 |
| 10/20/11 | 1:35 p.m. - 3:05 p.m. | Studio Class | 1:30 |
| 10/28/11 | 12:25 p.m. - 2:40 p.m. | Arists' Meeting | 2:15 |
| 11/8/11 | 10:55 a.m. -1:00 p.m. | Art Show Prep Meeting | 2:05 |
| 11/15/11 | 1:05 p.m. - 2:05 p.m. | Art Show Prep Meeting | 1:00 |
| 11/16/11 | 6:50 p.m. - 9:00 p.m. | Public Art Viewing | 2:10 |
| **Total Hours In Field: 22 hours, 10 minutes** | | | |

**TABLE 1.**

## METHODS

My analysis is based on data from three qualitative research methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and a textual analysis of organizational materials. Between August and December of 2011, I conducted over twenty-two hours of participant observation at various events and gatherings held by AFTS. Over half of these hours were spent in the art studios. During these classes, I would act as an observer and as a participant. I spent my time walking around the studio and recording in my field notebook the conversations taking place among artists and between artists and volunteers. I also took notes on the physical surroundings, non-verbal interactions, and the artwork being produced. Additionally, I attended two board meetings and one artist meeting, carefully recording the agenda of the meetings and the conversations. Lastly, I attended two workdays aimed at preparing for the annual Art Show, where I played the role of a more active observer, helping with the work while making conversation with others in attendance (see Table 1 for a list of the events, times, and dates of my observations). Except for the board meetings, all gatherings were attended by both volunteers and homeless artists. Board meetings only included non-homeless volunteers. My observations were simultaneously recorded in a notebook, which I kept with me in the field. I then went home and typed up the field notes.

In addition to my observations, I completed seven face-to-face interviews. Before conducting an interview, I advised each interviewee that participation was completely voluntary, and that he or she may pause or stop the interview at any time. Once the interview was completed, I assigned a pseudonym to the interviewee to be used throughout my research and in the current paper. The interviews averaged nineteen minutes in length. I chose my interviews with three objectives in mind: 1) to obtain a sample of both volunteers and artists; 2) to reflect the demographics of the population in each category as closely as possible; and 3) to have respondents reflect a wide range of amount of time spent participating in the organization. Four interviews were conducted with homeless artists. Of these, two were men and two were women. The length of time the artists had been participating in AFTS ranged from four months to nineteen years. In addition, I conducted interviews with three volunteers – two women and one man. Ages of all interviewees ranged from mid-forties to mid-sixties.

All volunteer interviewees identified as white (in fact, all of the AFTS volunteers are white). One artist identified as black, one identified as American Indian, and the other two identified as white. Although all interviewees currently live in the city, six of them claimed hometowns outside of the state (see Table 2 for a list of demographic characteristics of the respondents). Interview questions focused on multiple aspects of the organization, although most centered on the identity of the respondent and how he or she perceived and interacted with others in AFTS. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author.

Finally, I examined a variety of materials pertaining to the organization, including the organization's official website and a documentary about the organization titled *Art from the Streets* (Blaylock 2006). Additionally, I analyzed text from the organization's website to shed light on the ways the group's collective identity is portrayed to the public. Materials were analyzed according to how each represents the formation and maintenance of a collective identity of the homeless artists.

| Respondent | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Age | Home State | Length of Time With AFTS[5] | Role In AFTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nelson | Man | White | 58 | Mississippi | 18 years | Artist |
| Davis | Man | Black | 47 | Tennessee | 4 months | Artist |
| Shannon | Woman | White | 51 | Arkansas | 3 1/2 years | Volunteer |
| Hank | Man | White | 65 | Colorado | 20 years | Volunteer |
| Faith | Woman | White | 60 | New York | 20 years | Volunteer |
| Julie | Woman | American Indian | 40s | Texas | 3 years | Artist |
| Martha | Woman | White | 53 | Unknown | 9 months | Artist |

**TABLE 2.**

## FINDINGS

### *COLLECTIVE ACTION, STIGMA, AND IDENTITIES*

As an organization that is largely comprised of homeless participants AFTS experiences the same challenges at constructing a collective identity that is described by Norris and Milkie (2007). The homeless individuals from AFTS are aware of a negative label they receive from society, and the reactions garnered by that label. For example, one homeless participant, Davis, describes the responses of people from the community when they come to the shelter just a block down from the AFTS studio: "So kind of wealthy people sometimes feel a little unease with the environment of the people hanging outside [the shelter]… it's sort of like a challenge for them." This negative perception of homeless individuals is sometimes even held by homeless AFTS participants themselves, creating a potential obstacle in the formation of a collective identity with other homeless participants. In fact, two out of the four homeless respondents conveyed some type of ambivalence toward the homeless population in Austin. Nelson, who, it is important to note, has only recently begun participating in AFTS studios, expresses this reluctance to associate himself with others, saying "I see people all the time [outside of the studio]. But I kind of stay to myself. I hang with them, you know, but I don't participate in a lot of the stuff they do." Nelson's ambivalence toward identifying with other homeless individuals demonstrates a type of distancing identity work which is characteristic of those with stigmatized identities, specifically the homeless (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Because almost every homeless individual experiences this stigma, it seems reasonable that an organization of homeless participants would focus some efforts on navigating the stigmatized identities of their members. When Hank, a former volunteer and now chair of the board, describes the goal of AFTS, he recognizes the role that stigmatized identities play in the organization's efforts:

> **"…[T]HE VALUE THAT [THE HOMELESS ARTISTS] CARRY FROM THIS IS THEY HAVE SOME WORTH. AND I THINK THE IMPRESSION OF HOMELESSNESS, AND…HOW PEOPLE WHO LOSE THEIR HOMES, WHO LOSE THEIR WAY IN LIFE, INTERNALIZE THAT FAILURE, AND THEY JUST SEE THEMSELVES AS A PARIAH. WHY WOULD ANYBODY CARE ABOUT ME? AND [AFTS] GIVES THEM SOMETHING ABOUT THEMSELVES TO CARE ABOUT."**

As the above quote suggests, AFTS establishes a space where homeless individuals can de-emphasize the negative identity that is given to them by society, and can adopt a new sense of self. During one class, a homeless participant described the AFTS studio as a place where he can "rekindle [him]self and [his] creative juices without being dictated by society." As an organization that exhibits traits reflective of those associated with New Social Movements, a majority of the efforts in AFTS involve the "collective and individual confirmations of identity" as described by Johnston et al. (1994). Homeless participants in AFTS find ephemeral freedom from their stigmatized identity in the studios, and this potential for relief constitutes an important source of motivation for their participation in the organization.

How do members of AFTS navigate the identity of homelessness? Though not always a conscious effort, a large part of the interactions within the studios and other events held by AFTS serve as identity work that refuses this stigmatized identity. Participants in AFTS come from a variety of backgrounds, with a broad range of artistic experience, ranging from simply drawing cartoons as a child, to attending a few training courses, to receiving college degrees in the Fine Arts. However, in the AFTS studios, homeless participants are always referred to as "artists." Faith, a co-founder of AFTS, explains the decision to implement this label:

> *[We] decided that, you know to really honor that part. I don't like the whole thing of identifying people as homeless. I'd much rather identify them as* being *homeless, but they're like* people *first. They're not homeless – "the homeless" – which I really don't like. They're people. And then, they're people who happen to be expressing themselves artistically.*

Here, the process of identity amplification is evident, as the previously subordinate (and at times almost non-existent) identities of "artists" become more salient to the participants in AFTS.

Faith's description of "artists" – those who expresses themselves artistically – serves to *define* the artist identity in a way that is accessible to the homeless participants. The structure of AFTS then acts as a *coding* mechanism to help construct the means of expressing this identity. Volunteers ensure that the homeless participants have significant agency within the organization, which provides various avenues to exercise their artist role. For example, participants are invited to help with preparation for the annual Art Show, which takes place outside of the bi-weekly studios. During the prep sessions, artists price their artwork, with little imposition from the volunteers. Volunteers choose a space for preparation that is easily accessible by bus or by walking, so that artists don't face obstacles in attending. Additionally, volunteers use a local company to mount the artwork that will appear in the Art Show. While I was attending one of the monthly board meetings, I witnessed a conversation among volunteers about how their choice of a local company to do the mounting may not be the least expensive route. However, a volunteer quickly pointed out that they needed to continue doing business with a "local mom and pop place," because they can be sure that the homeless artists will be allowed inside to turn in their work.

It is important to note that all but one of the volunteers at the studios are artists themselves – many even professionally trained to some extent. This aspect of the program proves important to the construction of identity within the studios, since the volunteers, as artists themselves, can give credit to the artist identity of participants, thus further affirming that identity. For example, volunteers become very familiar with the work of artists in the studios, to the point where they can identify which pieces were created by which artist, without looking at a signature on the artwork. During one instance in the studio, I observed a volunteer pick up a small piece of art that was drying on the rack, and say with excitement, "Oh, look! A tiny Pete!" referring to the piece's creator. This comment introduces the symbolic nature of the art created in AFTS – acting as a cultural material that solidifies identity – and illustrates how volunteers strongly associate homeless participants with their art, thereby validating their identities as artists. This process of identification is recognized by the artists themselves. In one instance, a volunteer picked up a piece of artwork from the drying rack and commented to the artist standing next to him, "This is yours." The artist smiled and said, "You know my work!" in a proud tone, to which the volunteer replied, "I know your work – it's beautiful."

As the above conversation illustrates, interactions in the studios among homeless participants, and between the participants and volunteers, further support the participants' identities as artists. The studios are arranged in a very egalitarian manner. Volunteers do not cluster in a group or attempt to visibly separate themselves from the artists in any fashion. Rather, volunteers are found seated or standing throughout the room, most often having one-on-one conversations with artists as equals. In fact, Hank, the chair of the board of AFTS, specifies that the term "art classes" is actually a

> *misnomer… They aren't really classes, and they never have been. There's never been any instruction, or just almost none… the way [volunteers] treated people in the class was so respectful and nurturing. And just kind of encouraging, nonjudgmental, people loved being there with them.*

Shannon, a volunteer and board member, testifies to this supportive type of interaction between volunteers and artists by remarking, "For the most part I really enjoy just hanging out with [the homeless artists] and being on their same level, and equal with them. And just talking about art and their lives." The "nonjudgmental" attitude from the volunteers helps *police* the artist identity, as it prevents a dichotomy between the artists who are homeless and those (the volunteers) who are not. Thus, the egalitarian structure de-emphasizes the stigmatized identities of members and fosters a positive identity as artists for the homeless participants.

One can observe the effects of the identity work in AFTS in both the perceptions of the identities of homeless participants by themselves and by volunteers. Faith describes the outcome of her work with AFTS by saying the organization,

**"... SLASH[ES] ALL THE STEREOTYPES. IT'S BEEN VERY GOOD FOR ME PERSONALLY TO KEEP BEING REMINDED OF HOW WE ALL STEREOTYPE EACH OTHER AND IT JUST BREAKS THAT. IT JUST COMPLETELY BREAKS IT."**
***-FAITH***

Shannon confirms this sentiment by saying,

**"I HAVE TO SAY THERE'S A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW I PERCEIVE THE ART FROM THE STREETS HOMELESS IN CONTRAST TO THE – WHAT DO YOU CALL THEM WHEN THEY'RE ON THE STREET CORNER? PANHANDLERS.... "**
***-SHANNON***

And whereas Shannon expressed having "very little tolerance" for homeless individuals that she saw on the streets of Austin, she described the artists in AFTS as "really down-to-earth, nice, good people," demonstrating that the identity she ascribes to participants in art from the streets is separate from the stigmatized identities one is more likely to assign to other homeless individuals.

Additionally, one can see the results of the amplification involved in identity work when considering the artists' self-perceptions. In the documentary, *Art from the Streets*, one volunteer expresses how the homeless participants in AFTS have "learned to identify themselves as artists" rather than just homeless people (Blaylock 2006). My research confirms this process. In the interviews of participants, I asked them how they identify as a person. All four of the homeless respondents self-identified primarily as artists. For example, Davis responded with, "I just see myself as… an artist that's going through a lot of trials and tribulations and trying to maintain a positive edge." And Nelson responded similarly, claiming, "I'd say I'm a homeless artist for now. And then I'll be the artist formerly known as a homeless artist." Both of these responses demonstrate how participants in the organization experience amplified identities. Additionally, the work produced by an artist rarely, if ever, alludes to the artist's status as a homeless individual. During my observations in the studios, I saw a painting of Lake Austin in the style of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, a work inspired by scenes from a Hemingway novel, and numerous colorful portraits and landscapes. The only work of art I witnessed in my observations that even subtly called attention to the author's homeless identity was one labeled with the words "Street Artist Birthday." By making the identity of "artist" more salient, the AFTS program allows individual members to ascribe to the artist identity established by the group, rather than to individually emphasize their identity as homeless.

## COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, STIGMA, AND THE PUBLIC

The two quotes mentioned in the previous paragraph demonstrate the seemingly non-mutable nature of their identities as artists, compared to the transient nature of their identities as homeless individuals. Although Davis has been involved in AFTS for about nineteen years he still talks about his homeless status as if it is a stage in his life, and not a permanent identity. He *does,* however, refer to himself primarily as an "artist," suggesting that he perceives this identity to be both salient and fixed. In this way, the identity work performed during the studios and other events in AFTS puts the stigmatized identity of homelessness in the background, and foregrounds what participants perceive to be a non-mutable artist identity, which is more likely to support the creation of a collective identity (Norris and Milkie 2007). Indeed, when I asked one artist, Martha, if she felt she had anything in common with the other homeless participants, she confidently replied, "Yeah… they're artists. So we have artistic ability in common."

Four out of the seven total interview respondents expressed some form of collective identity, by either referring to others as "a team," or "an artist like myself," or some other expression of shared status. To illustrate, the film *Art from the Streets* documents one artist remarking, "it's good to paint with other birds of a feather" (Blaylock 2006). A prevalent theme in both informal conversations and interviews involves artists in AFTS identifying other artists and volunteers in the organization as "family." For example, Davis explains the studios as "a family setting. Because we see each other and… try to be supportive towards other artists." During the studios, participants often ask other artists or volunteers for advice on their artwork, demonstrating that each artist affirms others' identities as artists, as they present the collective identity as an "ego-extension" of their individual identity (Kaplan and Liu 2000). Additionally, the artists display a solid understanding of a "we-they" distinction between the artists in AFTS and other homeless individuals outside of the organization. The door separating the studio from the street is a symbolic reminder of such distinctions. AFTS artists easily discern who "belongs" inside the studio, and who does not. Because they recognize fellow artists, AFTS participants know who to let in the door, which is locked from the outside. When other homeless individuals, who are often looking for services from the community center

attached to the studio, knock on the door, artists do not open the door and instead wait for a volunteer to direct the visitors elsewhere. In this way, the door symbolically reinforces the collective identity by creating a distinction between artists inside, and the homeless individuals outside of the studio.

Notably, the collective identity not only includes homeless individuals but non-homeless volunteers as well. Davis attests to the sense of collective identity at AFTS, saying "Yeah it's a community. It's sort of like a big family, coming together. Volunteers as well. You build a bond with people." Faith claims that this community is one of the most important aspects of AFTS:

> *"I think the community that's been developed is very important…between the artists themselves, between the artists and the volunteers…They're like, in some kind of identifiable group together. And they, you know refer to that in a way that is positive. I mean, it doesn't mean all kinds of stuff doesn't come up between them, but that's any family."*

And Shannon expresses this sense of collective identity from the perspective of a volunteer:

> *"I think that [the homeless artists] think a lot like I do, like an artist does. Which is very different than most people, more creative or whatever. And I feel like I know where they're coming from... I see them as myself, or "wow how easily that could have been me had I not had the resources that I had as a child."*

Shannon's perspective sheds light on the sense of collective identity that is fostered in AFTS. As illustrated by this quote, she affirms the homeless participants' identities as artists, but also collectively identifies *with* these artists.

The inclusion of volunteers in the collective identity of the organization supports the dismissal of participants' homeless identity, as it demonstrates that the identity of AFTS artists does not delineate between homeless and non-homeless. In this way, the collective identity formed in AFTS demonstrates a unique type of Gamson's solidary collective identity. Initially, the most obvious biographical location that the participants have in common would be their similar class as homeless individuals. However, this commonality does not lend itself to forming a collective identity, as Norris and Milkie (2007) previously explained, because of the seemingly changeable status of homelessness as an identity category. However, when engaging in identity work to establish a new biographical location as "artists," AFTS can build from a less stigmatized biographical location, and thus successfully create a collective identity among the homeless participants.

Art from the Streets makes occasional efforts to publicly display art made in the studio. The most notable of such displays occurs regularly with the annual Art Show and Sale, which is open to the community. As a form of public identity described by Johnston et al. (1994), the Art Show is an important part of solidifying the collective identity in AFTS. In his interview, Davis enthusiastically commented on the importance of the Art Show to AFTS artists like himself, saying, "It's almost like an NFL team or a college team going to a national championship… and the crowd is cheering you on." Through the Art Shows, the "crowd," or public, is obliged to recognize the "team" aspect, or collective identity of members in AFTS. This in turn validates individual artist identities. Participants wear nametags at the Show, stating their name, followed by the word "Artist." Hank affirms: "Within the context of the Show," he says, "they *are* artists."

The public acknowledgement of a collective identity, and the public validation of individual identities, result in a solidified effort against the stigmatized homeless identity that artists would otherwise be burdened with in public settings (Kaplan and Liu 2000; Johnston et al. 1994). Shannon emphasizes the importance of the show and its opposition to stigma:

> *"[It is important] that we get a lot of people in to see this art. And how creative these otherwise "rejects" as some people like to think they are, are. And how astonished that some people – I mean, even within the last two years of the Show, people come up to me and told me, "Wow, I just cannot get over this." And it gives [the homeless artists] a chance. That to me is what's important. For them to have that opportunity to show what they're capable of doing, despite their hardships."*

Faith agrees, saying,

"CAUSE IN THEIR LIVES, MOSTLY [THE ARTISTS] ARE JUST REALLY PUSHED ASIDE. SO IN THIS VERY UNIQUE LITTLE BUBBLE, ESPECIALLY AT THE SHOW…THE ATTENTION IS ON THEM AND THEIR CREATIONS, NOT ON "WHY DO YOU LIVE ON THE STREET?"" -FAITH

"NOT UNTIL LATER DID WE REALIZE THAT WHEN WE SAW [THE ARTISTS'] REACTIONS TO SELLING THEIR WORK, AND HOW PROFOUND IT WAS… BEING IN THAT POSITION WITH THE PUBLIC, TO INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE THAT USUALLY JUST WALK RIGHT BY THEM… IT WAS JUST OVERWHELMING TO SOME OF THEM." -HANK

The public confirmation of the artists' collective identity, and the subsequent affirmation of individual artist identities, then makes a significant, empowering impact on the participating artists. Hank explains the effect:

Thus, the Art Show functions as a cultural material used to generate a public identity which reinforces the collective identity of AFTS. And since a stronger collective identity results in each member being more likely to individually identify with the group (Jasper 1997), the Art Show further strengthens the participants' identities as artists, while de-emphasizing their stigmatized identities as homeless.

In sum, the identity work fostered by interactions and other efforts in AFTS serve to create a positive individual identity for the homeless artists involved in the organization. By doing so, homeless individuals can more readily adopt an empowering collective identity that is affirmed by the public, and in turn de-emphasize the stigma experienced with the identity of homelessness.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Relying on an analysis of organizational materials, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation conducted from August to December 2011, this paper has explored the roles that identities play in an organization supporting homeless artists. Specifically, the current research has explained how the organization employs identity work to create an empowering collective identity that de-emphasizes the stigmatized identities of its homeless members.

Because of the stigmatized identity that accompanies homelessness, homeless individuals are often hesitant to collectively identify with others experiencing homelessness (Norris and Milkie 2007; Snow and Anderson 1987). My research finds that the members of AFTS exhibit the same reluctance. However, utilizing a range of activities that serve as identity work, the members of AFTS successfully navigate their stigmatized identities and adopt more empowering identities as artists. Exemplifying the process described by Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996), the activities central to the organization serve to define, code, affirm, and police the artist identity that is continually being emphasized and confirmed.

The act of participation in the program – namely, routinely expressing oneself artistically in the physical space of the studio – defines homeless participants as artists rather than simply as homeless. By allowing the artists to have some agency in the organization, AFTS provides participants with a safe and nurturing space to express themselves using the newly emphasized identity as an artist. The volunteers, most of whom are artists themselves, then affirm this identity by consistently associating each artist with his or her art, and showing sincere appreciation as fellow artists for the work that participants do. Finally, the seemingly non-judgmental behaviors of the volunteers, and the unstructured nature of the art "classes," serve to police the artist identity, ensuring that the collective identity of the group does not delineate between homeless and non-homeless members.

During my observations of AFTS, I did note a few discrepancies between the structure of the organization and its attempts to provide a nonjudgmental, empowering atmosphere for participants, which merit attention here. The most glaring of these discrepancies involved the organization's board, which did not have any homeless members. The board's non-homeless membership is troubling, given that the board makes many large decisions concerning the Art Show without immediate input from the artists who will be featured. However, within about nine months of the board's formation, members resolved to restructure the organization at the start of the new year, proposing that there be three committees rather than one board. One committee would be comprised of artists, one of studio volunteers, and the other of original founders (who currently comprise most of the current board). Under the new structure, representatives from each committee will meet regularly to exchange information and opinions, thus strengthening the agency of all members of the organization, especially the artists. Thus, while the fact that there are no self-identifying homeless people on the board could certainly be raised as a self-reflexive critique of the organization, the fact that within nine months of the board's formation, members sought to make it more inclusive is indeed, promising.

In contrast to the research of Norris and Milkie (2007), which found that homeless individuals in a homeless shelter did *not* collectively identify with each other due to the perceived mutability of their homeless identity, the identity work in AFTS facilitates a community that resembles Gamson's (1991) solidary collective identity. What is particularly noteworthy is that this community exists between homeless participants *and* non-homeless volunteers, suggesting that the formation of a collective identity has permeated the boundary dividing homeless and non-homeless, and instead draws a distinction between artist and non-artist. Additionally, the annual Art Show and Sale allows participants to engage the public with their identity as artists highlighted, and their stigmatized identity of homelessness de-emphasized. In this way, the Art Show functions to create a public identity for AFTS, as defined by Johnston and his colleagues (1994). The participants of AFTS are re-introduced to the public as artists rather than homeless, a practice which also serves to demarcate a we-them distinction between AFTS participants and those outside of the group in a way that emphasizes and affirms the participants' artist identities.

Using AFTS as a case study to examine a form of collective action in which identity formation constitutes the means *and* the end, the current study fills a gap in the emerging literature on

New Social Movements. Additionally, the results suggest ways that collective action organizations can navigate the stigmatized identities of members in order to form an empowering collective identity that de-emphasizes this stigma. It is important to note that the work of AFTS does not necessarily help homeless individuals off the streets. In fact, a few of the homeless participants in the organization today have been participating since AFTS first began in 1991, which suggests that they have been homeless for at least twenty years. The documentary relates the story of one artist who, after participating at an annual Art Show and Sale, earned enough in sales to pay for a year's worth of rent for his own apartment. But the monetary outcome of the following Show was not as successful for him, and he returned to living on the streets that next year (Blaylock 2006). The chronic nature of participants' homelessness further reveals the power that identity work has on individual members of AFTS. To the participants, it proves difficult to ignore their longstanding identity as homeless individuals. However, in light of their newly amplified identity as artists, their homeless identity moves to the background. The identity of "artist" takes on a kind of permanence that participants do not associate with their homeless identity. That is to say, participants in AFTS speak of their artist identity as if it will last a lifetime, whereas their identity as homeless may not. As a result, the ability to take on a more empowering identity – which is perceived as more permanent than the stigmatized identity of homelessness – serves as an important respite for members of AFTS.

During my observations at AFTS, not one volunteer claimed that the goal of Art from the Streets was to end homelessness. Although many volunteers recognized that the program offers financial benefits to some artists, they expressed that the AFTS mission was to provide a space for homeless individuals to creatively express themselves, escape the difficulty of homeless life, and to build relationships in a supportive community. In this way, the approach that AFTS takes regarding homelessness is unique in comparison with other homeless service providers in the area, as it does not directly address structural issues, but rather builds community among homeless individuals. While this approach certainly invites criticism – is the organization merely putting a band-aid over the critical social problem of homelessness? – many of the other local homeless service providers support and promote the efforts of AFTS by distributing information about the program to their own clients and encouraging them to participate. In an email with a member of a local homeless advocacy organization on January 7, 2011, AFTS is described as "a wonderful *client*-centered, *client*-run community outreach organization...that meets clients' needs, just as they are."

The findings of the current research shed light on a potential aspect of social problem alleviation that often remains unaddressed in more direct structural approaches. When attempting to find solutions to social problems involving people with stigmatized identity, the work of AFTS suggests that it may be necessary to first de-emphasize the stigma and create an empowering collective identity for the individuals involved. My study does not address the effect of the empowerment of members in AFTS, or their potential for future involvement in activism involving ending homelessness. Future research should address the impact that empowerment of stigmatized individuals has on their propensity to support social justice or promote further social change related to their marginalized status. Regardless, the current research suggests that identity formation is an essential part of collective action involving stigmatized identities, and that an empowering collective identity can be formed despite this stigma. While AFTS members produce beautiful works every week, perhaps their most interesting craft is mastering the art of collective identity.

[1] While I recognize that there are many differences between the transsexual communities and homeless communities, I believe the work of Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) lays a useful foundation for the analysis of group identity formation, which I believe can be applied to various contexts, including the current one of collective identity among the homeless.

[2] This example is taken from the work of Norris of Milkie (2007). As a sociologist, I recognize the problematic nature of this particular illustration. Race is, in fact, socially constructed and, as such, varies across time, locale, and situation and can even change within a person's lifetime (see, for instance, Takaki 2008 and McDermott 2006). However, I am using the example given by the authors to illustrate their argument of the perception of a fixed identity.

[3] I conducted a 15 minute interview on 10/4/11 and have adjusted the total hours accordingly.

[4] I conducted a 25 minute interview on 10/11/11 and have adjusted the total hours accordingly.

[5] The length of time the respondent had been participating in the organization at the time of the interview

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# More Then Just Shelves: *Patron Perceptions of a Downtown Halifax Library*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how patrons conceive of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Library (SGL) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Built in 1951 to commemorate local residents who died in the world wars, the SGL will be replaced by the Halifax Central Library by the end of 2014. Our study combines on-site observation and interviews with library patrons to determine how users' behavior at the SGL relates to their opinions of the current building, and the future Halifax Central Library. Although policy documents highlight the shortcomings of the SGL building, many patrons value the SGL because of its connection to local history, as well as its place in their everyday lives. The contrast between physical conditions and individual perceptions demonstrates the interplay between tangible and intangible factors in shaping urban space.

Keywords: Halifax, Library, Public Space, Social Construction, Social Production

**The Spring Garden Road Memorial Library (SGL) is the oldest and largest branch in the network of Halifax Public Libraries. Centrally located next to a popular public park, the library also occupies a prominent position in the city's downtown core. Built as a living memorial to local residents who died in the world wars, the SGL is caught between its commemorative origins and the contemporary needs of its users. The SGL is of particular interest not only because it is a historically significant institution[1] that serves a diverse population, but also because the Halifax Central Library, proposed for completion by the end of 2014, will replace the Spring Garden Road branch. Research into the existing library is important because attitudes towards the SGL influence both the planning process and the public reception of the new Halifax Central Library.**

**Our research considers how physical space shapes the way that patrons think about and use the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library. Informed by sociological theories of public space, our research question is:**

***How does the social production of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library contribute to its users' social construction of the space?***

**In order to address this question, we use documentary research in combination with on-site observation of the physical space and interviews with library patrons. In this way, we gain insight into how users' behavior at the SGL relates to their opinions of the current building, and the future Halifax Central Library.[2]**

## AN EVOLVING ROLE

The SGL opened in November 1951 as a memorial to the Halifax casualties of World War I and World War II (Halifax Central Library 2012a). In the decision to build a war memorial, Halifax residents believed the library was most suitable not only due to the need for a library, but also because it would be a "living memorial," promoting the same tenets which Haligonians were defending in the wars: "freedom of speech and freedom of study" (para. 9). The social and political contexts of the time were thus built into the very fabric of the library building, including the many memorial symbols such as the two books of remembrance and Silver Cross replica, and confer a special historical meaning to the library for the Halifax community (Halifax Central Library 2012a).

However, as a result of the amalgamation of the Halifax Metropolitan area, the growing service area and population needed a central library to fulfill the expanding and changing needs of the citizens (Halifax Central Library 1996). Although the SGL was the hub of the Halifax City Regional Library system, surveys and reviews of the physical structure and library users' experiences and perceptions of the library found the building inadequate to serve as the central library (Halifax Central Library 1996). A building expansion in 1973-1974 failed to meet space demands by 1987. By the 1990s it was clear that high costs made renovation of the existing structure unfeasible. (Halifax Central Library 1996, 2004).

Recent opinions of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library reflect the tension between the library's historical roots and physical design and modern-day expectations and needs. Halifax Central Library surveys (in 1996, 2004, and 2008) and focus groups with local residents found sentiments such as appreciation for the setting and atmosphere of the building, its staff and programs, but dislike for the building's confusing layout and cramped space, lack of accessibility, and limited seating and quiet space. The report "Central Library Project: Study for the Halifax Regional Library" states, "The building defies almost every aspect of current standards and building codes regulating this type of facility" (Diamond, Schmitt and Company 1997, 13). Therefore, the material space of the library, together with its conceived intent, contributes to user experience and perception, which in turn affect the desirability of the new central library.

Overall, the history of the SGL reflects broader changes to the city of Halifax including: the role of local citizens in world wars; population growth; and different approaches to municipal governance. All of these factors contribute to contemporary expectations of the library that have evolved out of but are different from the ideas that shaped the original construction of the library. A range of policy documents demonstrate that municipal authorities in Halifax recognize that public libraries reflect social values and play a role in urban vitality. While the existing SGL is an expression of Halifax's past, the future Halifax Central Library is part of a vision for the revitalization of downtown Halifax and the provision of services to people across the HRM (Halifax Public Libraries 2012b).

## THE PLACE OF LIBRARIES

As a result of its history, the SGL thus is a special physical and symbolic entity in Halifax's landscape. Our research builds on the unique position of the library in the city and focuses on the relationship between the social production and social construction of space. According to Goheen (1998, 479), the SGL's status as a public space means that the library is a dynamic resource venue where interaction occurs freely between citizens, institutions, and the surrounding physical area. In addition, the users of a public space define and shape the space, which in turn will reflect the attitudes and cultural meanings of that society. The physical space of the library refers to the interaction between the various elements of a built environment, as well as the environment's relationship with the surrounding context of a larger region (485). Low's (1996, 861) concept of the social production of space describes the "social, economic, ideological, and technical" components that together create a physical space. Such components can include planning and design, the intended purpose of the space, and construction materials. The social construction of space, on the other hand, is the process of attaching meaning and symbolic value to a space through personal experiences, memories, images, and ideas of the space (861-862). The social production of space is relevant to the social construction of space in determining the context from which a space develops, and its potential influence on current experiences of the space. Low coined the concepts of the social production and social construction of space to examine the ways in which the histories and designs of two different public plazas in San José, Costa Rica, influence the social experiences and uses of the spaces. Conflict between plaza users, the general public, and businesspeople arise over the social claim to the spaces by different interest groups. Diverging beliefs of what the plazas represent in Costa Rican culture, what they are intended for, how they should

be used, and how they should be presented to the public create mixed perceptions, feelings, and experiences of the plazas (Low 1996). Therefore, the public does not encounter a space in isolation, but rather as a culmination of several interconnected factors.

Low's (1996) discussion of the social production and construction of space parallels the distinction between design and use found in the research of public libraries in North America (Leckie and Hopkins 2002; Mattern 2007). Mattern's 2007 book *The New Downtown Library* analyses recent constructions of public libraries in American cities within the context of urban revitalization initiatives and explores the relationship between a library's architecture and its objectives. Mattern finds that social dynamics are just as important as material considerations in determining how public libraries are built and used. Similarly, in their article, "The Public Place of Central Libraries: Findings from Toronto and Vancouver," Leckie and Hopkins (2002) acknowledge that both physical space and social interactions define public libraries. They outline the factors that contribute to a successful public space and consider the function of libraries in contemporary society. Leckie and Hopkins analyze the intended purpose of public libraries in relation to the range of spontaneous, individual activities that their research uncovered at the central libraries of Toronto and Vancouver. As a result, they also discuss the broader social role of public institutions. In particular, Leckie and Hopkins (2002, 327) state, "The physical library itself is a material expression of shared meaning and values of public life." As a living memorial, the SGL is a prime example of such a marriage between physical design and public values, and can be better understood through Low's conceptual framework of social production and construction of space. Thus, our research examines how the physical space of the library, including its construction and physical arrangement, in combination with the historical context and intended purpose of the library, affect the way users engage with, experience, think about, and remember the Spring Garden library.

## RESEARCH DESIGN: STALKING THE STACKS

We combined two distinct methods to capture how users of the SGL experience the physical space. First, we conducted unobtrusive observations of the main floor of the library, which contains the circulation services and the general adult collection. Second, we conducted short personal interviews of library users as they exited the space. The articles of May (2011) and Leckie and Hopkins (2002) informed our research method. May (2011, 355) details the importance of researching "the library in the life of the user" versus "the user in the life of the library." In addition, Leckie and Hopkins (2002, 326) introduce various observational and interview techniques to capture the "big picture" of the space.

Prior to conducting our fieldwork on this topic, we drew some preliminary hypotheses relating to the users' social construction of space. Since the SGL itself is inadequate to serve the Halifax population and their needs, we believed that the social production of the library detracts from users' perceptions of the space. We thought such factors as cramped space, insufficient lighting, and poor physical accessibility might combine to create negative associations and experiences of the space. However, pleasant memories of long-term library users familiar with the institution's history might create a positive social construction of the space despite the building's physical limitations.

In total, we visited the library eleven times to gather data. We conducted the first visit as a group to observe elements of the physical space, including temperature, light, odor, and noise level. Additionally, we made note of the approximate dimensions of the space and how the arrangement of furniture contributed to the atmosphere of the library. We used this data to create floor plan maps for noting location-based details and movement patterns.

We divided the main floor of the library into three separate areas: the Main Room, the Reading Room and the Stacks (Figure 1).

Following the preliminary visit, each researcher visited the library three or four times so that, in total, our team visited the library ten times to make unobtrusive observations of the people and activity within the library. Each research visit lasted forty-five minutes to an hour. Our observations took into account both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of user activity, noting where users gathered, how long they stayed, and approximately how many users were in each area at one time. In addition, we noted whether visitors conducted their activities in groups or individually, and observed visitors' movement patterns throughout the library.

During our visits, we interviewed a total of thirty-one users as they were leaving the main floor of the library. In order to minimize disruption within the library, we stopped users in the foyer outside the quiet inner space. Leckie and Hopkins (2002) provide a model of interview questions from which we developed our own version. The interview questions (see Appendix) aimed to capture the intent of library users, their interactions and activities within the space, and their overall feelings about the library's layout and purpose within the community. Additionally, we included questions about memories associated with the space in order to

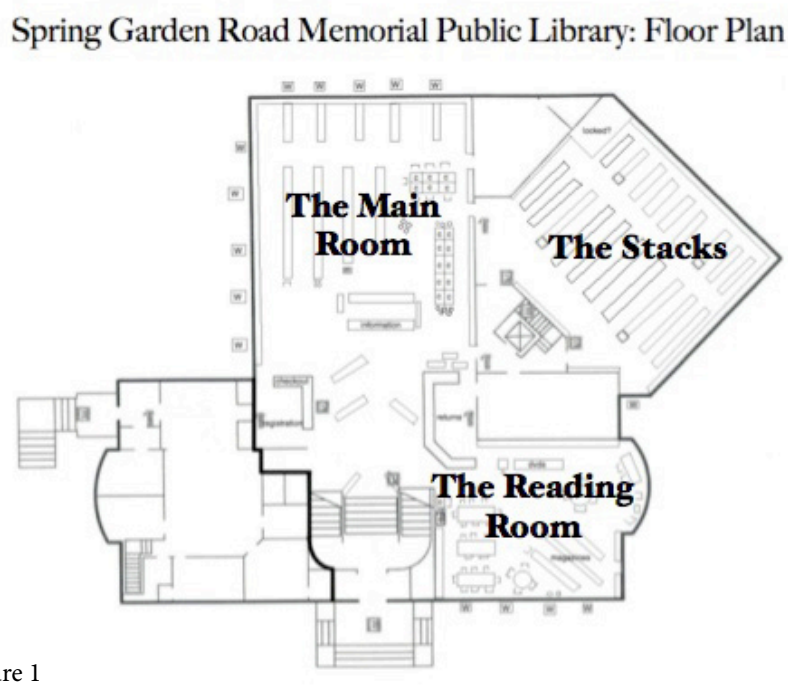


Figure 1

examine any long-term negative or positive perceptions. Finally, we asked what users would change about the library to improve it for the community. To analyze our data, we entered the responses from our interviews into an interactive online spreadsheet, which allowed us to compare and contrast the answers to each question and compile data from each of our individual visits to the library. We classified responses as positive, negative, or neutral based on the interviewees' verbal and non-verbal cues. We noted recurring themes and responses that deviated from the norm. We summarized our individual observations of the space, highlighting what developing trends and anomalies we found, and then compared summaries to draw out broader patterns, themes, and incongruities.

Specifically, we compared the activity in each of the three areas by day of the week and time of day. We focused on patterns of use and movement throughout the space. We assumed a correlation between preference and the number of visitors engaged in an activity within a space at one time. For example, fewer users of a certain space might indicate that the area is less desirable. We also considered how aspects of the physical space such as light and temperature could influence visitors' choices.

When considering the ethical implications of our research, we addressed two main issues before entering the field. First, we sought permission from the Branch Manager of the SGL. Although the library is a public institution, we felt it was still important to request permission so as to minimize intrusion and potential disruption to the library setting. Additionally, we established a pattern of identifying ourselves with the librarians at the Information Desk at the start of each observation session. In this way, our slightly irregular behavior would be expected. Second, we considered the ethical implications related to the interview process, including informed consent and confidentiality of information. Since our interviews were both anonymous (no names were collected) and about five minutes long, we decided that written consent forms were unnecessary. Instead, we read a script at the beginning of each interview to ensure that the respondent understood the aims and conditions of the research and how his or her answers would be used (see Appendix).

## "ALL THE NOOKS AND CRANNIES": *HOW SPACE SHAPES USE*

Furniture and architectural features shaped users' activities in the Main Room. The entrance area of the library, which consists of an open space between the doorway and the three customer service desks, facilitated brief, focused visits (Figure 2). Waist-high bookshelves funnelled arriving patrons in the direction of the Information Desk but attracted the attention of several visitors on their way out. This suggests that although many people came to the library with specific tasks in mind, towards the end of their visit they were more inclined to browse and explore other aspects of the space and collection. Many users entered the Main Room, went straight to the Check Out, Return or Information Desks and left in less than five minutes. As Interviewee #18 explained, "I don't really hang out here – just get books and go." This attitude may be a response to the limited seating and congestion of certain areas of the library. For example, the shelf displaying special interest books was located next to the computer stations and was often surrounded by a crowd of both browsers and computer users. In addition, several interviewees noted that the lack of seating throughout the entire library discouraged them from "settl[ing] down for a while"

(Interviewee #23) and enjoying a quiet, comfortable read, which likely accounts for the large number of quick door-to-desk-to-door visits. Despite the limitations of the arrangement of furniture, architectural features contributed to a positive atmosphere. The high ceiling and ample natural and artificial lighting of the Main Room provided a sense of space that compensated for and relieved the tension of a density of people and objects.

The arrangement of the two computer stations in the Main Room influenced how patrons used these electronic resources. One computer station, the "standing computers," is a long table of elbow-height bearing ten computers that require patrons to stand while they browse, as there are no chairs provided (Figure 3). The other station, the "sitting computers," is a set of six computers on desks with chairs. Despite the close quarters, walled partitions separate each of the computers and provide a sense of privacy in the midst of a public space (Figure 4).

Patrons used the standing computers on average for no longer than ten minutes; most referred to the library catalog, and then proceeded to other areas of the library. In contrast, patron use of the sitting computers was constant and most often neared the capacity of the station at any given time. Although the library


Figure 2

Figure 3

designates a thirty-minute usage limit on the sitting computers, patrons often stayed for more than forty-five minutes, taking advantage of the relative privacy of these partitioned stations and using the computers for personal purposes. For example, describing his use of the sitting computers, Interviewee #25 exclaimed, "I just paid my taxes in 8 minutes!" Conversely, dividers did not shelter the standing computers. The lack of privacy combined with the height of the station made the computers awkward and uncomfortable to use, especially for senior patrons. Overall, the different arrangements of the two groups of computers reflect each station's intended use: quick, library related activities, and prolonged personal activities.

Observations of the Reading Room demonstrated that the space of the library accommodated both conventional activities and spontaneous individual behavior. Initially, we had assumed that the DVD collection would be less important than the print resources in the library. However, the DVD wall was one of the most highly trafficked areas in the library, often crowded with visitors perusing the tight space (Figure 5). Approximately one to four users browsed the DVD section at any one time, which is significant considering the space's small size. The continuous interest and activity around the DVDs showed that, as Interview #21 expressed, users valued the library for "more than just books," and the area's popularity had been underestimated in the SGL's design, as reflected in the limited amount of shelf space allocated for DVDs.

Figure 4

Figure 5

The three rectangular tables and two comfy chairs in the Reading Room provided seating for a range of activities, which was absent from other areas on the main floor. We assumed that these tables are intended for people to sit and read books, magazines, or quietly work. We found that patrons used the tables for these expected activities as well as other purposes. On a few occasions, groups of youth literally surrounded the rectangular tables and engaged in audible conversation rather than quiet activity. In other cases, browsers of the DVDs used the tables as a surface to display their materials and free up their hands for further browsing. Some people sat at the chairs without using the tables and engaged in quiet cell phone calls and text messaging. One weekend morning, an individual even ate a take-out breakfast sandwich at a table in the Reading Room. However, for the most part, patrons used the tables for their intended purpose: reading and working. Finally, in addition to the seating provided at the tables, several interviewees identified the comfy chairs in the Reading Room as their favorite place in the library, explaining that these chairs had "more padding" and were good for "people watching" (Interviewee #23).

Both the activities and the physical features associated with the non-fiction Stacks discouraged visitors from lingering in this area. In contrast to the natural light, high ceiling and carpeted floor of the Main Room, the Stacks had fluorescent tube lights, a lower ceiling, and tiled floor. Additionally, the area sported one solitary window, tight spacing between shelves, and a colder temperature accompanied with the musty smell of old books (Figure 7).According to Interviewee #23, the atmosphere was "dingy," similar to "a records hall in the basement of a high school." All of these elements made the Stacks the least welcoming section on the library's main floor. Consequently, visitors spent less than five minutes in the Stacks on average and rarely browsed the shelves, instead searching for particular items after consulting the online catalog or a librarian. Yet, users appeared to have difficulty locating materials, as Interviewee #10 admitted, "I get lost," and patrons often left empty-handed after a few minutes of searching (Figure 8).

## RETHINKING A FAMILIAR PLACE

Our interviews both confirmed elements of our observations and highlighted the complex ways that people use and think about the library. First, interviewees reinforced the importance of electronic resources, particularly computer access and the DVD collection. As well as noting the importance of these services, respondents also suggested possibilities for expansion. Interviewee #1 said that he would change "the computer system, put them all against the wall, have it open in different areas." Another interviewee (#29) suggested that the library could have a program to lend laptops to library users. A third interviewee (#21) expressed interest in extending the lending period for DVDs. Second, although our observations of the Stacks identified infrequent

Figure 6

use and an unwelcoming atmosphere, not a single interviewee identified this area as his or her least favorite place. Third, just as we observed both advantages and disadvantages of the natural and artificial lighting, users also gave lighting mixed reviews. Interviewee #4 said, "I like the way the light comes in there, and along there," gesturing to the windows itn the Reading Room and in the Main Room. Interviewee #30, however, listed "lighting" as the aspect of the library that he would like to change.

Comparing the responses to three questions gives insight into the users' perceptions of the library. Specifically, the questions investigated interviewees' favorite and least favorite places, and any changes they would make to the library. Interviewees most commonly reported the Reading Room as their favorite place, highlighting the comfy chairs, the useful workspace provided by the tables, the DVD and magazine collections, and the natural light from windows. A significant number of respondents could not identify a favorite place. However, interviewees also had difficulty settling on a *least* favorite place; eighteen out of thirty-one could not name a least favorite place. The absence of both favorite places *and* least favorite places could be a result of unfamiliarity with the physical layout or general impartiality towards the library as a space. On the other hand, patrons familiar with the library may be accustomed to experiencing it as a whole, making it difficult to distinguish specific sections of the library as favorable or unfavorable. Some respondents, however, listed the washrooms and the basement as their least favorite place.

The question "If you could change one thing about this library, what would it be?" yielded diverse responses. Respondents identified changes to both the structure and the services of the library. Some interviewees did not specify what kind of renovations they desired. However, others mentioned layout changes that would create "more space for sitting and reading comfortably" (Interviewee #11). Interviewees listed the overcrowding, limited collection, and inconvenient hours of the library as other areas of improvement. Interviewee #4 was dissatisfied that the library "has to close down in the summer when it gets too hot." Finally, four respondents said that they would not change anything about the library. The contrast between interviewees' ideas of how to improve the library and their hesitance to share a least favorite place indicates that although users may not have strong feelings about any one place in the library, they still recognize general flaws in the library's design and services.

When asked to describe the library in one word, the majority of interviewees responded with positive descriptors. The positive answers fall into five thematic categories: utility of the library, with

Figure 7

Figure 8

words such as "necessity" and "convenient"; the library's warm atmosphere, such as "comforting" and "welcoming"; historical relevance of the library, such as "has a story" and "historic"; the library as gathering space, such as "node" and "community"; and miscellaneous positive descriptions, such as "magnificent" and "flows." Three interviewees provided negative responses, two of which hold the library as "outdated," and one as "small." Three other responses are neutral, two relating to libraries in general as "books" and "learned," and one relating to time and space as "present." The interviewees' responses indicate that the interviewees have overall positive experiences and ideas of the library, and appreciate first and foremost the usefulness of the library and the services it offers. Contrary to our observations of the physical space of the library, which found the physical condition and layout of the building lacking, interviewees feel the library has a pleasant environment, with several noting fondness and respect for the library's historical background. However, the positive responses focus on subjective experiences and perceptions of the space, rather than the actual physical state of the library. Considering that several of the same interviewees desired changes to the physical space, the interviewees' emotional connection to the SGL may override the negative aspects of the building and produce a general satisfaction with the library.

## NEW LIBRARY, OLD OPINIONS

When asked about the Halifax Central Library, many patrons hesitated to embrace the new facility. The contemporary aesthetics of the Halifax Central Library challenged many patrons' loyalty to the older architectural style of the SGL. Interviewee #1 explained that the Halifax Central Library will "not [have] the class of the old building, this has history to it." Similarly, Interviewee #3 said, "I'm kinda scared for the new library. I like the old building." While Interviewee #10 described the design of the Halifax Central Library as "too glassy," Interviewee #7 went so far as to say that it "looks like an aquarium, all you need is fish." In some cases, misgivings about style were also linked to finances and, according to Interviewee #13, "it seems like the architect got carried away." Concerns about the utility of the new library exacerbated patrons' anxiety about the project's cost. For example, Interviewee #17 worried that the new library "could be a waste of money," because the existing building "seems sufficient." Committed to preserving the integrity of the current library but also improving its services, Interviewee #26 expressed this tension, saying: "I have mixed feelings about the new library. I understand the need to expand the library to give more access to the general public, but I would prefer if they instead renovated the existing building."

Nevertheless, users recognized the positive potential of the Halifax Central Library. Many interviewees believed that a new facility would allow more people to take advantage of library services. Interviewee #12 thought that the Halifax Central Library will be "better for current patrons and will attract new patrons." Interviewee #22 described it as "a bigger and better space that is more inviting for people," which may also address the physical accessibility issues of the current library (Interviewee #24). Additionally, users were optimistic that the Halifax Central Library would offer expanded electronic resources and increased operating hours (Interviewee # 7; Interviewee #8). Interviewee #27 was confident that "It'll be very nice, more modern, more computers, more services," and even suggested that the new library could offer a laptop checkout program. In this way, patrons looked forward to certain elements of the new library even as they remained connected to the history of the SGL.

## FINDINGS FROM SIMILAR STUDIES

Just as we heard many positive comments about both obvious and unexpected aspects of the SGL, other studies find that, by accommodating both intended and unintended activities, public libraries serve a beneficial role for many people. Leckie and Hopkins (2002, 353) conclude that libraries serve the diverse needs of two groups of users: the first group sees the library "as an extension of their living room" and visits on a regular basis, while the second group prioritizes "quick and convenient access to a large collection" and visits less frequently. In this way, our observations were consistent with the findings of other researchers. Patrons who lingered in the comfy chairs, gathered around the large tables with friends, or ate breakfast in the Reading Room treated the SGL as a comfortable, familiar space. Indeed, the SGL's rooted history in Halifax fosters positive emotional attachments not only to the building, but also to what the institution represents. Conversely, for patrons who visited the SGL on occasion for specific purposes, the library held less emotional value. Several of these patrons cited the physical limitations of the building as reason for their brief visits or weaker attachment to the library. Following in Low's (1996) framework of social production and social construction, we see how the historical and social contexts, as well as the physical space of the SGL, created diverging attitudes toward and feelings about the library.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Although we aimed to investigate users' perceptions of the library, short interviews provided limited insight into whether or not users had an emotional connection with the space. Despite the fact that most respondents had been coming to the library for a long time or were frequent users, few people shared memories of the space. People may have been uncomfortable sharing personal stories in the informal context of a short interview, or they may have found it difficult to think of a specific story connected to this very familiar space. Longer interviews, in which interviewees have an opportunity to elaborate on a variety of topics, might encourage greater discussion of individuals' feelings towards the library.

Another limitation of our research is the small sample size, and the lack of sample diversity. The thirty-one patrons we interviewed cannot be representative of the large body of patrons who use the SGL. However, their answers point to the possible range of responses, feelings, and experiences relating to the library.

We observed whoever made use of the library's main floor during their visit without selecting for a certain gender, age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Similarly, we interviewed anyone who exited the main floor of the library during our interview period. As a result, our observations and interviews reflect the prevailing demographic of library users. White males aged thirty-one to sixty composed a significant portion of this group. Although we made an effort to speak with different patrons, the gender imbalance among our interviewees corresponds to trends we observed among library users. A larger sample size would allow us to expand the scope of our research and consider how age and gender, among other factors, shape how people use and perceive the SGL.

In addition, the time of year we completed our research, late winter, may have affected who used the library and when, and for what activities. For instance, the cold weather or snow may have deterred or made it difficult for some users to visit the library. A six-week-long Halifax public transit strike also occurred during our research, and may likewise have affected library usage. A year-round study would provide the most representative and varied results, such as revealing how the library's high temperature in the summer dissuades some from going to the library, as one interviewee reported.

Another limitation of our study was that we did not interview any library staff. As people who spend a great deal of time at the library and who are trained in library science and information management, library staff are excellent sources of information. Over the course of their regular activities, staff may have developed insights into the habits of people at the library and the strengths and weakness of the space. Also, staff may contribute to our understanding of the extent to which user behavior is controlled by the library's design. Specifically, they may be able to explain the intentions behind the layout of furniture, books, and other materials.

## "THIS HAS HISTORY": *A MEMORIAL LIBRARY*

We found that the social production of space informs the social construction of space for users of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library. Municipal policy documents explained

the library's history, its role within the city of Halifax, and its current limitations. In addition, direct observation highlighted specific physical features of the building, such as how the arrangement of library material and furniture influenced patrons' use of the space. Observations of and interviews with users offered insight into the social construction of space. In general, respondents' comments about the library did not reflect the physical limitations that we observed during our fieldwork and read about in policy documents. Users' positive feelings about the historic building seemed to be more powerful than their complaints about inadequate elements of the space. Many interviewees described the library's age in positive terms, noting, for example: "the class of the old building" (Interviewee #1) and "the historic feel" (Interviewee #27). In particular, Interviewee #25 explained, "I would make the inside of the library look more like the outside. The outside is epic and historic...much more than the inside...It doesn't seem to match." Overall, users' responses reveal an emotional and aesthetic rather than pragmatic attachment to the library, which constructs this building as a historic whole that is greater than the sum of its outdated parts. In the case of the SGL, the building's original intent is more important than its current condition in shaping the way people view the space. Therefore, users' ideas about the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library contribute to the meaning of this institution in the past and present of Halifax.

Appendix:
Interview Questions and Verbal Confidentiality Agreement

Hello, my name is _____. I am a student at Dalhousie University doing a sociology study on the library. Would you be interested in answering some questions? It shouldn't take more than 5 minutes.

Just to let you know a little bit more about the project -- We are studying how people use and think about the library. This information will be used for a written paper as well as a presentation to the class at the end of the year. Your identity and responses will be kept confidential and will remain anonymous in the report.

What are you doing here today?
Did you talk to the library staff today?
Did you talk to any other users while here? Strangers or not?
Did you use the electronic resources today?
Do you have a favorite place in the library? Why?
Do you have a least favorite place? Why?
How long have you been coming to this library?
How often do you come to this library?
Do you have any memories associated with this library?
If you could change one thing about this library, what would it be?
Are you aware of the construction of the new library? How do you feel about it?
How would you describe this library in one word?

May (2011) suggests visitor tracking as a method of observation, whereby the observer inconspicuously follows users from entry to exit to track movement, activity and progression of use. However, we determined this method was not suitable for our research as the SGL is not large enough to allow inconspicuous tracking without disrupting user activities and privacy.

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