

*On the
Under Bridge*

on the under-bridge

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introduction

This study will focus on the reading and interpretation of urban bridges, the spaces created underneath their spans - the 'under-bridge condition' - and the different experiences that these spaces generate.

City bridges have two distinct types of users - those passing above/through, and those wandering below - and these users engage with two opposing realms of the bridge. The spaces created by bridges are of a special kind of complexity that maintains a delicate balance between the realms by allowing the space to be shared by two user groups, while keeping them disconnected.

The focus of this report is on the 'below' users, the 'abject', whose activities elicit a kind of moral disgust in the center of society. By analyzing concepts such as borders, disgust, identity, and the nature of abjection in relation to the under-bridge condition, this study will attempt to find a correlation between the materiality of urban bridges and the accumulation of this type of activity. The report will also focus on the social structure of the abject, and will place the under-bridge condition within the discourse on the street and place-making in the city.

The first portion of the report, entitled *The Democracy of the Under-Bridge* will a) extend the idea of public space from the street to the under-bridge, while discussing the three most pressing obstacles for achieving this purpose: psychological borders, the preeminence of the street as loci of urban activities and attention, and issues of disgust; and b) discuss the social structure of the abject

starting from trust as a common element that holds societies together, passing through a discussion on the role of filth in identity-making, and ending in an interpretation of Foucault's concept of heterotopias as applied to the under-bridge condition.

The second and third portions of the report will attempt to draw geographies of prostitution and homelessness, as these are elements of abjection that can be consistently found in under-bridge spaces. The focus will be on place-making and geographic narratives traced through the pervasiveness of these models of urban depravity and filth.

It is important to note the relative difficulty in locating sources that treat the urban abject as a unique group: either the interpretation is too limited (which is the case with specialized studies on one or another kind of abjection - of these there are many) or it is too broad (as is the case with definitions of abjection in relation to racial, gendered, or religious considerations, none of which are of interest to this study). The sources used were chosen for their involvement in the fields of study which I believe can best relate to the under-bridge condition as distinct from the concepts of 'the city' and 'the street'.

Finally, in order to illustrate the various concepts discussed in the study, photographic evidence has been accumulated throughout the summer of 2007 in the city of Newark, New Jersey. There are also images of Burnside Bridge in Portland, Oregon, and Borough Market and the National Theatre in London. The appendix includes a selection of images that are not part of the text, but will illustrate the concepts discussed in the study.

on the under-bridge

the democracy of the under-bridge

"Everywhere, where the interests of two elements are directed at the same object, the possibility of their co-existence depends on a borderline separating the spheres within the object." (Simmel; 143)

bridges, borders, control

The under-sides of bridges are spaces in a constant state of flux; at the same time, they maintain an explicit identity, one that resonates clearly in the minds and bodies of those who interact with them. This identity is based on territoriality, the contestation of space, and is reinforced by the presence of markers that create borders of varying visibility under, above, and around the bridge.

If one is willing to accept Georg Simmel's contention that "space in general is only an activity of the mind"¹, then it follows that the "psychological contents" Simmel claims are necessary to achieve uniform interpretations of the same space must also be uniform in origin. In other words,

¹ Simmel; 138.

Simmel argues that there is an unspoken yet uniform human understanding of space, and it is this homogeneity that constructs the notion of space, and all its sub-classifications and boundaries.

This argument leads to a problematic conclusion: spaces in themselves would lack the ability to create or destroy, to separate or join, to allow or forbid; rather, it is people that create, destroy, separate, join, allow or forbid. This conclusion seems to imply that spaces are powerless in those sociological processes and that bridges do not contain in themselves a specific meaning of connection (from point A to point B) or disconnection (above and below), but that it is through the human 'agreement' that the above is for crossing and the below is for filth that the space gains meaning.

This is an incorrect assumption. The physical and structural configuration of a bridge always creates ambiguous spaces below, and the possibility of these spaces becoming repositories of urban filth is ever-present and undeniable. What's more, even when a particular bridge has never been used for such a purpose (of such bridges there are many, especially in less densely populated areas), the ominous architectural conditions of the bridge itself imply said use and contribute to perpetuate the notion that bridges are dangerous places.

In short, while it is evident that the human psyche is capable of constructing the idea of 'dangerous space' out of the bridge, this construct has a very real and very tangible basis in the structure of the bridge itself.

Simmel's position that all boundaries are psychological² is both accurate in its interpretation of social relations and damning of said society. In theory, there should be little distinction between the above and the below of the bridge; as a public space, the entire bridge belongs to all. The sociological distinction between the above and the below, Simmel would argue, is nothing but a construct,

² Simmel; 142-144

a segregative subjectivity, imposed on the matter by those whose fear excludes them from occupying the under-bridge.

Simmel argues that it is sociological relationships that break the continuity of space and create subjective borders. While it is true that the borders that maintain a delicate balance between the above and the below are subjective - and perhaps sociological - in nature (fear, disgust, etc.), they are sustained indefinitely, and quite objectively, by the physicality of the bridge span and its overbearing tectonic presence. The straight lines of the span, the retaining walls, the lines that divide the sidewalk from the street in road bridges, are all clear boundaries that maintain the binary condition and keep each side securely confined.

As such, the boundary created by the bridge is at once 'psychologically active' and objectively fixed. A prime example of the psychological animation of the boundary is seen when a transgression occurs. A pedestrian, firmly ensconced in their position as the non-filthy 'other', happens to walk under a bridge occupied by a homeless person. What could have once been nothing more than a simple objective conjecture ('a homeless person *might* live down there') is now a blinking red light ('I don't belong here. I'm intruding. I might be in danger.'). The psyche becomes acutely conscious of the boundary and leads to direct action, thereby reinforcing the objective observations the person might have made when facing the bridge ('there is a bridge; there is the under-side; there might be people living under there').

The effect of the bridge itself, when considered as a physical border, is quite strong. However, what is most influential is the psychological imagining of the threat of the other⁴, intensified by the under-bridge location that carries a heavy imagery of danger in itself and, as a border, is anything

³ Simmel; 141.

⁴ van Houtum and Strüver; 142.

but constructed, imaginative, or mental.



5 Ibid.

6 View from beneath the Newark/Kearny bank of the Pulasky Skyway.

7 Road bridge at the intersection of Intrastate 280 and Passaic Avenue.

Space is significant in that it ‘fixes’ its contents in reality; for this to happen, for space to be ‘fixed’, the surrounding borders must be clear. Because the spaces under the bridge remain, for the most part, structurally unchanged, the relationships between these spaces and the city, and between them and society, are preserved. The psychological boundaries, as they are pegged to the physical boundaries of the bridge as a signifier of urban filth just as much as they are pegged to the filth itself, are also fixed, even though the filth itself is in a constant state of flux. Thus, the under-bridge, in all its fixed glory, manages to contain both the reality of filth and its illusion.

“All close coexistence continually depends on each person knowing more about the other through psychological hypotheses than the other person directly and consciously indicates.” (Simmel; 143)

the dual use: passersby vs. dwellers

The nature of bridges, their ability to create this dual condition, and their potential to encourage space-making within its boundaries is absolutely uniform. All bridges are capable of becoming paradigms for the dichotomy of use, though not all dichotomies are of the same kind. While it is the norm to assume filth lies in the under-bridge, there are several examples of re-appropriation of under-bridge space for un-filthy purposes. Burnside Bridge, in Portland, Oregon, is one example of this condition. Once a typical receptacle of all things filth in the city of Portland (homeless, drunks, prostitutes, and drug addicts)⁸, the under-bridge was reclaimed by a tenacious group of skaters with no place to go and the dream of a public place to skate at will. The result was a free-form skate park with few rules and many followers under the east bank of the Burnside Bridge.

⁸ Hosaka.

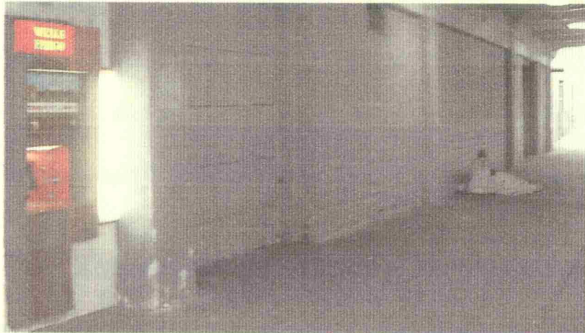
Aside from the appropriation process itself, what is interesting about this bridge is that the group of people that took over the space were not your usual under-bridge suspects. Instead, it was a group of young skaters who quite correctly understood that their skating activities, as perceived by the rest of society, were just as undesirable and filthy as the activities of the homeless or the drug dealers who regularly populated Burnside Bridge⁹.

They also understood that the under-bridge was just as public as public parks, but unlike those, the under-bridge was not contested in the same way or by the same people. They knew that the appropriation process would be relatively easy because those who had a stake in the space under Burnside Bridge, the filthy, had no real voice in the matter. They made a cynical bet - they assumed that the city of Portland would rather deal with a group of unruly skateboarders, most of which are educated, middle-class, than deal with the delicate problem of homelessness and prostitution; as such, the city of Portland welcomed this appropriation because it would resolve the urban problems that plagued the bridge without any political or financial investment on their part.

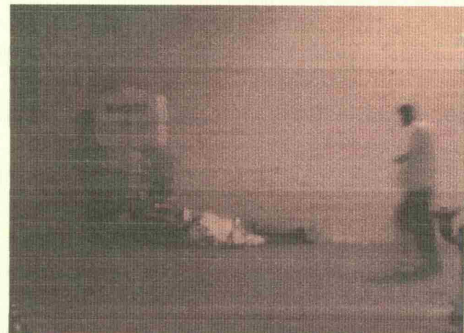
Burnside Bridge presents an interesting dilemma. The under-bridge is now shared by two diverse groups that belong to a larger 'object' group. Both the skaters and the homeless, as social entities, exist on the fringes of society and are usually regarded as a nuisance (albeit to different extents). As such, both groups found in the under-bridge an appropriate place in which to conduct their activities (to skate, to dwell) undisturbed. The place offered a limited interaction with the rest of society, and the borders could always be depended on to maintain ownership of the space they claimed. However, the two groups are not necessarily sharing the space. In strict terms, the achievement has been a stratification of the under-bridge space, one that is maintained by the construction of ideological boundaries and strict distance. The borders are never mediated: the west

⁹ Skaters often complain about not being allowed to practice their hobby in public spaces, claiming that they are constantly being chased out of public spaces by business owners or local authorities. See Hosaka; also Jocko Weyland's essay "Attractive to the Unattractive" in *Life and Limb: Skateboarders Write From the Deep End*.

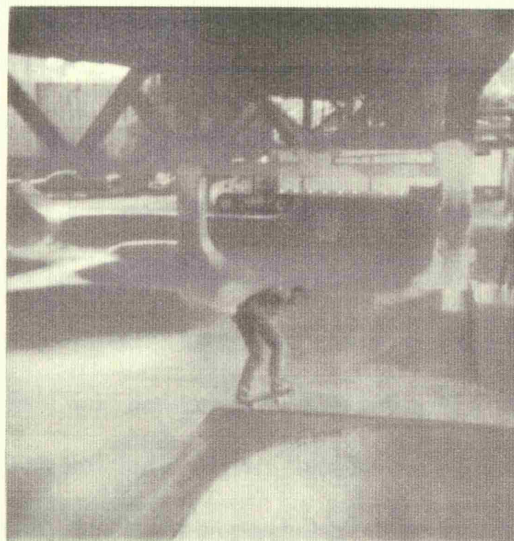
bank belongs to the homeless, the east bank belongs to the skaters, and there is the entire Willamette River in between the two. There is only so much proximity that these groups will tolerate before entering into a spatial conflict with one another.



10



11



12

This lack of mediation can be understood as a protective measure¹³ against elements that could disrupt the space-making process. If one of the groups were ever to transgress the tacitly

10 Photograph taken by gobicyclego.

11 Photograph taken by breathinglife.

12 Photograph taken by seorsa.

13 Simmel; 154.

agreed upon borders, the spaces would lose their identities, if only momentarily. Imagine this dialogue: 'I don't like to skate at Burnside anymore; there's always bums there hanging around...' It would be inaccurate and naïve to assume that both groups hold an equal amount of power in relation to one another, however. The first bank of the skate park was built in defiance of the local government in 1990, though it was formally sanctioned two years later due to the park's almost immediate popularity and its status among local and international skaters as a particularly challenging location. The Burnside homeless can be forced to leave at any moment and for any reason.

Regardless of their relation to one another, any two groups that share the under-bridge space, enter into a functional process¹⁴ that allows the sharing to occur in a relatively systematic and orderly manner. When considering two common binaries, for example, the filth and the passerby, the existing relationship is a constant avoidance: a mutually agreed upon respect of the social boundaries that separate both entities.

This respect is further exacerbated by what Webber calls the 'structural form phenomenon'¹⁵ of the spatial arrangement of the under-bridge and is essential to the links between social structures he discusses in his essay on the problematic of place-making in urban planning. For Webber, spatial distribution modifies the fluid links between individuals and groups that maintain a short or close distance between them¹⁶. This position is distinct from Simmel's contention that spatial configurations, which are fundamentally dependent on psychological barriers, are mostly a figment of a society's collective imagination. While it would be disingenuous to disregard the potent effect of intangible boundaries on human relations, it would be equally disingenuous to assume that spatial distributions carry no intrinsic meaning. Webber's interpretation of social relations is, I would argue, much closer to reality in that regard.

¹⁴ Webber, et al: 80.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid; 97

According to Webber, the whole of spatiality can be understood through three components¹⁷: the physical space, the “activity places”, and the human element¹⁸. What is interesting about this argument is that Webber draws a very clear line between the *whole of physical space*, which includes the spaces and the links between them, and the *activity places*, which he describes as a subset of the whole of physical space. This distinction is important because it argues that the three components of space exist in a very organic relationship with one another; the components affect each other deeply, yet never lose their individual characteristics.

Webber’s characterization arrives at another interesting conclusion: space is affected much more by what individuals or groups *do* in spaces than by what they *feel* in those spaces. Of course, this characterization can always be justified by returning to both Webber’s and Simmel’s relative positions in their fields of study (one is a sociologist - at a time when such divisions were blurry and people were perfectly content with their blurred vision; the other is an urban planner and theorist firmly entrenched in his post). However, there are two reasons why the distinction between their positions is quite relevant to the study of the under-bridge condition.

First, both positions are concerned with the field of study whence the inquiries originated. As such, both authors will attempt to explain the relationship between society and space in the terms they understand best. In attempting to process the ideas of both authors viewed through the prism of the under-bridge, this study can attempt to generate a formal interest in the under-bridge as a special or unique kind of space, one that has not been appropriately studied.

Second, these two views are almost perfectly situated in the two sides of the under-bridge condition: those who are excluded from the society and find a home under the bridge (who would

¹⁷ Ibid; 96. In his essay, Webber discusses urban environments, but later on he aims to use the same language to describe non-urban or sub-urban environments as well; for Webber, when it comes to spatial relationships, the distinction between the city and the non-city is merely a question of density - the fundamentals and rules of place-making remain the same.

¹⁸ Ibid.

most likely cling to Webber's ideas on place-making in order to defend their encroachment - 'we have *made* or *activated* this space, we have a right to this little bit of the *whole of space...*', and those who are excluded from the under-bridge (who would, in turn, shield behind Simmel in order to justify their fears and borders - 'we do not belong there... there is a barrier between us and them, and that barrier is of a great *psychological* importance... one must not interfere with such serious processes').

"To understand images of the street, it is necessary to attend to its margins, to what happens in the corners, what is seemingly off the street, and where it connects, leads, anticipates." (Crouch; 163)

street vs. bridge

Attempting to draw a relationship between the street, when understood as a "broken series of bits"¹⁹ or as a commodity of egalitarian ownership, and the under-bridge is challenging. The under-bridge is one of the many "bits" of the street, even though in commercial terms it is just as valuable as a brownfield, and similarly used.

However, when considered against all the other bits that make up the street (the curb, the alleyways, the surface changes, the traffic signs, the litter boxes, etc), bits that have been written about, mapped, and studied with an almost obsessive devotion throughout the 20th century, the under-bridge suffers from a painfully loud un-mapping reflected in the lack of formal scholarship on the subject. It is almost as if the spaces didn't exist, and it is just as well.

¹⁹ Crouch, in Fvrie (ed); 162.

Of particular relevance are the rail bridges. These curiosities of engineering fare worse in the urban recognition process because they tend to be located mostly in isolated areas - they are alone in the prairies. Road bridges have, at the very least, a direct connection with the city through their link to the street: they are informed by the processes that take place in their surroundings, and adapt accordingly. For example, a highway bridge crossing over Newark's South Ward (pictured below) is a perfect representation of its surroundings (there is a auto repair shop, an industrial glazing warehouse, and a small bodega nearby. What else can possibly result from that?). The under-bridge allows the street, the bits, the people, the city to shape its personality, resulting in a place that is simultaneously generic (one can find these types of industrial wastelands everywhere, no?) and localized .



Contrast with a rail/highway hybrid near the border between Newark and Belleville. The underside of this bridge is an abandoned line of tracks for the Erie Lackawanna Railroad, which used to

service routes between New York and Chicago; a section of Route 21, which begins in Newark and ends in Clifton, juts overhead.



The first bridge, the one located in the South Ward, shows clear signs of activity and life. It is a prime example of place-making as per Webber's interpretation of the structure of space; the under-bridge gains spatial meaning because of what the locals do there, how they use the space, and how they protect it from intruders. Their articulation of ownership extends beyond the under-bridge and spills out unto the sidewalk, where camera-wielding strangers wearing white summer dresses and flip-flops are immediately singled out, their presence violently questioned and challenged.

David Crouch discusses the idea of the spatial fluidity of the street and its relationship with memory²⁰; the argument is based on individualistic interpretations of public spaces and the process of personal map-making which Giuliana Bruno talks about in *Atlas of Emotion*. Crouch is concerned

²⁰ Crouch, in Fyfe (ed); 163.

with temporal appropriation of the street: “football crowds walking to and from a match, along the streetway itself; youths using the street to meet in; people in the park [...]”²¹. Crouch believes that this dynamic ‘play’ with space, which magnifies the influence leisure activities exert on the public sphere, is key to understanding the image of the street. Likewise, it is personal map-making that makes under-bridge appropriation possible, perhaps not in the obvious manner of those who take ownership of the space and situate themselves on the fringe of society. Rather, the appropriation is finalized through the disgust-fueled avoidance of the ‘center’ of society and their map-making activities. In other words, the map is drawn by the personal experiences of those who are fearful of the under-bridge and allow it to enter their geographical consciousness as a place of exclusion or imminent danger that must be avoided at all times.

The second under-bridge space, the rail tunnel under Route 21, underscores the importance of the body in “making geographical knowledge”²². The garbage piled under it, accumulated throughout the years and scattered across every inch of rail track, immediately calls to mind the image of a person placing it there; the sofa, rusted and dirty, the broken sneakers, the flippant syringe, the broken cash register (now, wouldn’t that subject make an interesting short story?) are all evidence of human interaction within the confines of the space. It is through the body that public space (the street, the under-bridge, the skate-park) gains meaning.

In this case, the image of the under-bridge as we perceive it, as the camera lens captured it, could not have existed had it not been for the individuals or groups who put it there. Also, and running the risk of stating the obvious, without the lawless hoodlum with the tin can and the speed-tastic running shoes, the art on the wall could not have existed either. The fact that there was no one

²¹ Ibid: 164.

²² Ibid: 166.

under that bridge at the time the photograph was taken has little meaning: if once focuses hard enough, one can almost hear the red paint hissing insolently out of the can.

"Ordinarily, that which is filthy is so fundamentally alien that it must be rejected; labeling something filthy is a viscerally powerful means of excluding it." (Cohen; ix)

disgust and the fringes

The role that fear and disgust play in the sociological act of boundary-making is quite important. The generalized notion that bridges are places of danger and that dirty things meander below them increases the width of the physical boundaries, allowing to extend beyond the actual confines of the bridge span. Fear is a powerful deterrent; for as long as the under-bridge can instill that sense of fear, it will reinforce the physical boundaries and maintain the parallel life under the bridge.



23

23 Ambiguous spaces surrounding Intrastate 280, near Orange Avenue; filth spreads beyond the highway and its bridges.

The power of fear in the under-bridge condition, as everywhere else in life, lies not in what is seen, but in what is inferred from what is seen. Much can be inferred from the under-bridge and its perils, even if the root causes of danger (from a 'non-under-bridge-dweller's point of view) are seldom fixed or even visible. Aside from graffiti, under-bridge filth tends to move around, shifting in tandem with the weather conditions, police surveillance, opening or closure of soup kitchens, or the wild swings of the 'market' forces (for prostitutes or drug dealers). Even graffiti, arguably the most permanent of all under-bridge detritus, has a tendency to appear and disappear sporadically, depending on city cleanup efforts.

Bridges behave as 'pivot points'²⁴ of dirty activities, as they continually attract elements of a particular kind which, in turn, attract one another. It is not unusual to find abandoned cars, rats, and garbage under bridges - especially railroad bridges, which tend to be surrounded by semi-deserted or under-developed areas. And as one follows the other, people looking for a certain kind of undisturbed peace will populate the space as well.

One might even say, cynically, that they rely on other people's fear in order to protect themselves from intruders and keep them in the relative anonymity they require in order to continue to conduct their business or simply survive.

This phenomenon has been extensively explored by scholars of disgust. William Ian Miller, for example, talks about the reciprocity of certain kinds of emotions and the ambiguity of others²⁵. As an emotion (and not a reaction), disgust lacks a clear opposing emotion like the one existing between justified wrath and guilt²⁶; however, insofar as the emotion of disgust is of ambiguous origin, it

²⁴ Simmel: 146.

²⁵ Miller: 49.

²⁶ Ibid

can be tied to any number of corresponding or opposing feelings and responses, i.e. search for approval, humiliation, shame, indignation, aversion, etc.

Miller describes a unique relationship between disgust and fear, which is of special importance when discussing spaces of abjection. Both emotions have the common element of aversion²⁷, a rather primal emotion that can have a powerful influence in the actions of an individual and can often cause the individual to lose self-control. These emotions differ in that one provokes a need to remove oneself from a threatening situation in search of safety (fear), while the other causes one to remove the offending object from sight and often results in the psychological need for purification (disgust). Both are powerful emotions, but one (disgust) has the tendency to persist in the psyche for longer and carry a stronger presence²⁸.

Samuel Johnson, as quoted by Miller, discusses the relationship between vice and disgust in such clear and narrow terms that it might be difficult to find behaviors that Johnson will consider 'moral'; however, it is Johnson's interest in pegging an individual's capacity for disgust (or lack thereof) to that individual's moral quotient²⁹ that is relevant here. One's ability to distinguish between what is disgusting and what is acceptable changes throughout one's life - even when admitting moral relativism and assuming that every individual's disgust scale dances to a different tune. Johnson can surely appreciate this shifting of disgust values, just as long as there is moral clarity between one's actions and beliefs, and only when the spectrum of change is not so great as to have a larger effect on one's personality, i.e. one may change views on the edibility of deep-fried worms after a trip to Thailand, but rats (in any cooked form) will always be non-negotiable. For Johnson, an individual who is in constant violation of his or her own 'disgust-o-meter' is most likely of deficient moral char-

²⁷ Ibid: 5.

²⁸ Ibid: 52.

²⁹ Ibid: 253. Johnson, 3:24.

acter; for William A. Cohen, filth is just as immoral as it is inappropriate or obscene³⁰. An individual who, either by choice or necessity, dwells in the under-side of a bridge could eventually lose the capacity to even feel disgust, which leads to a complete abdication of that individual's moral responsibility towards him/herself and is evidenced in their preference of dirty spaces that they can 'call home' under the bridge over the relative cleanliness of a homeless shelter.

Of course, the reasons for this preference are varied and will be considered in another chapter. For now, we will accept Johnson's moral argument as explicative of the process through which an individual can gradually come to 'accept' his or her filthy condition, while simultaneously reducing the effort to improve it.

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas claims that defilement is "never an isolated event"³¹. She argues that dirt is cultural, much like everything else, and that any effort to generalize it is futile. Individuals within a society attempt to influence one another's behavior, while striving to belong to a larger organizational structure where order is the norm and anything that lacks order or that threatens this social order is dirty³². By that definition, any under-bridge creature is considered 'dirty', even if they have just showered, shaved, and trimmed their nails, simply because they do not conform to the established order of dwelling in a house. This is not necessarily true, though that is not the point being discussed here; what is relevant is Douglas' contention that the notion of 'dirty' is largely pegged to a collective social agreement rather than to individual systems of morality.

By those standards, there will always be something 'dirty' because in any organic system (such as a society), there are always elements that do not quite belong. The morals and values of a society, the 'collective agreements' of moral behavior, if you will, are understood in retrospect to be in a con-

³⁰ Cohen: 1.

³¹ Douglas: 51.

³² Ibid.

stant shift - the moral thermometer of any given society heats up or cools down depending on circumstances either created by the system or extraneous to it.

This theory works perfectly with the society around which it is structured, or those who belong, but it does little to explain the position of the ones situated on the fringes of society. It also gives perennial and absolute power to the collective, thereby reducing the validity of individual assessments of morality, especially when these are in conflict with the assessments of the collective.

What is problematic about this argument is that the relative positions are fixed: on the one hand there are those who belong, who are 'clean', and superior; on the other hand, there are those who are 'dirty' and inferior. Either you are in one position or you are in the other, and it is the existence of the other position that provides a sense of identity for both groups. In other words, those who belong can always situate themselves by constructing 'unassimilable others'³³, namely the ones that do not and could never fit.

"The lived body encounters the placeworld by going out to meet it. [...] But, the body not only goes out to reach places; it also bears the traces of the places it has known." (Casey: 7)

Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life. This otherness is defined by moral depravity, lawlessness, disregard for authority, a generalized *ennui*, lack of cleanliness, or an overall 'wretchedness' through which the others become untouchable (all of these characteristics are meant to be understood subjectively and always from the point of view of the center of a society that is looking at its fringes). There is virtually no intended semantic distinction between these terms as used in this study, and this is a purposeful decision. The debate over the meaning of these words, and the negative connotation arguably inherent in some of them, is irrelevant to this study and to many other studies which have attempted to describe boundaries of interpretation around these concepts³⁴. This study intentionally disregards these concerns, and focuses on the sociological characteristics that define these groups, regardless of what they may be called.

One point of contention, however, is the debate over whether certain objects are inherently abject or not³⁵. On the one hand, Georges Bataille argues a systematic definition of abjection, assigning immovable values to objects relative to their acceptance within or rejection from mainstream society - a fixed center and a fixed 'other'³⁶; Julia Kristeva, instead, attempts to carve out a third space between the center and the fringe, between the subject and the object. In doing so, Kristeva argues that abjection is not a fixed position on a plane, but rather one of many states which are in constant movement and are ruled by the individual's constant re-assessment of the boundaries that separate him/her from the other³⁷.

³⁴ See, for example, Rosalind Krauss' *Informe Without Conclusion*, where she argues that it is Julia Kristeva's incorrect reading of Georges Bataille's meaning and usage of the word 'abjection' in his unfinished work on the subject that has led to a virtual hemorrhage of works on the topic. Krauss' argument is based on the fact that the primary texts in which Bataille discusses the term are, in fact, unfinished and were only published after his death. As such, any argument that claims to be based on Bataille's conception of the abject are probably more closely related to Kristeva's interpretation instead due to the ubiquity of her work on the topic against the relative obscurity of Bataille's work on abjection.

³⁵ Foster, et al: 3.

³⁶ Bataille, as quoted in Foster, et al.

³⁷ Lotringer.

This seems to bring us back to Mary Douglas' concept of filth as a matter out of place, always maintaining a binary relationship with the center, as opposed to Miller and Johnson's more fluid ideas on disgust (which could be culturally subjective and anecdotal) and morality (which is subject to change throughout an individual's lifetime).

The under-bridge seems to be situated on Bataille's ideological camp. Even though Bataille's considerations are related to individuals within a society rather than inanimate objects, the idea of two forces heading in opposite directions (the center of society pulling away from the dirty; the dirty pulling away from society - or being pushed?) and represented spatially in the under-bridge condition is explicatory of the conditions observed in the field for the purposes of this study. Under the bridge there is no mediation; there is either dirt or something other than dirt, completely opposite to it - it is either the image to the left or the image to the right.



38



39

Filth exists in relative obscurity, and revels in the outsider status it commands (otherwise it would not function with the unapologetic freedom it does). It is a powerful boundary in itself, encasing a society of sorts that is held together by the commonality of dirt and abjection rather than the commonality of class (or lack thereof) which frequently holds the poor together spatially.

38 Restaurant in adapted space underneath a rail bridge in Borough Market, London.

39 Spaces underneath rail bridge in downtown Newark, NJ.

As a society, those living in under-bridge spaces behave in a similar manner as those who appropriate spaces in public parks and abandoned buildings: there is a high level of distrust of others which is not limited to constructed others (i.e. 'clean' others) but virtually any other individual that may be considered a threat to their survival. Because the filthy are considered a persistent nuisance, a bothersome speck on an otherwise 'clean' environment, they can only exist freely in obscure, abandoned, rejected, or concealed places. Abject societies can only truly exist and function in spaces of limited to no contestation from the non-abject; anywhere else, the social groupings all but disappear because of the battlefield⁴⁰ condition which regulates public space.



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The under-bridge is such a space. While being somewhat negotiable for someone on foot, the under-bridge is normally inaccessible to vehicles and rail passengers. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of structural gaps of varying sizes in any given city and they are infrequently monitored.

⁴⁰ Lees, in Fyfe (ed); 236.

⁴¹ Man drinking on sidewalk in front of undeveloped site. Intersection of Orange and Clifton Avenues in Newark, NJ

Unlike many other public spaces where urban filth tends to congregate - such as parks, beaches, alleyways, or abandoned buildings - bridges are not contested in the same way by the same people. While it is in the interest of the city government to maintain public parks in clean, socially acceptable conditions for use by moral, tax-paying residents, the under-bridge, under the fundamental idea that it is not meant to be a habitable space to begin with, does not enjoy the same level of municipal attention.

Similarly, trespassing old buildings only becomes contentious when the building is about to be razed to give way to new developments. Otherwise, it is, and will always be, fair game.

"Trust involves a degree of cognitive familiarity with the object of trust, that is somewhere between total knowledge and total ignorance." (Simmel, in David, et al; 970)

trust and the abject

The socially excluded can be considered in many ways a natural extension of mainstream society (albeit to the end directly opposite the aspirations of the middle class), sharing many of its characteristics. Trust among individuals is crucial to establishing relationships; fear of bodily harm or theft is ever-present; individuals situate themselves in relation to distance or access to the basic things they need (food, medical assistance, companionship, etc). The main difference is that a large number (studies place that number at two-thirds⁴²) of individuals living on the streets, for example, suffer from mental disabilities exacerbated by alcohol or drug use. This situation further erodes their

⁴² Daly, in Fyfe (ed); 117-122.

ability to foster sustainable social relationships. Communication between the different elements is limited, and the risk of violent attacks is high⁴³.

These circumstances create an environment of extreme distrust that prevents an effective level of social integration or homogeneity under the bridge⁴⁴. It follows that relationships emerging from such precarious conditions must also function precariously; due to the absence of trust and in the presence of conflict, these inherently individualistic groupings - in which the only common link is the sharing of public space for personal use - tend to disintegrate⁴⁵.



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⁴³ O'Flaherty.

⁴⁴ For more on the relationship between trust and social structures, see Simmel's arguments on trust in *The Sociology of Space*.

⁴⁵ Lewis, et al; 976.

⁴⁶ Homeless encampment under the Intrastate 280 bridge. This individual's possessions sprawl across the entire under-bridge, extending even unto the Montclair/Gladstone Line rail bridge which runs parallel to I-280 at this juncture. See Appendix for more images.

Data shows that these conflicts are quite common⁴⁷ among those living on the streets, and since this study has been considering the under-bridge as a space of abjection that shares certain similarities with the street, it is reasonable to assume that the under-bridge also shares this particular problematic with the street.

The concept of trust, underpinned by fear of betrayal, is the mainstay of the society of the abject, regardless of spatial location; as trust is necessary for maintaining social structure, it therefore performs a sociological function, even if the origins of trust itself can be traced to psychological or emotional affectations⁴⁸.

It is important to unravel the process that allows trust to appear or disappear from social relations among the abject and between them and the rest of society. The levels of distrust among these individuals maintains a relationship that is directly proportional to the number of years they have been 'sleeping rough' and the degree to which they are subject to substance abuse⁴⁹.

J. David Lewis describes three concepts upon which social trust is based: rational or cognitive differentiation of trustworthy or untrustworthy elements based on experience, emotional components, and behavioral enactment⁵⁰. It is the third element that is the most relevant to the process of creating and maintaining social relationships due to its direct link to individual action. Ultimately, it is action - in the form of either a betrayal or an articulation of implied trust - that cements the emotional components of trust and provides foundations for the formation of experiences from which future rational assignments of trust and distrust are made.

47 Daly, in Fyfe (ed): 117-122.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid; 122.

50 Lewis, et al; 970.

In spaces of abjection, on the streets and under the bridge, there is a constant opportunity for action that affirms or destroys trust among the individuals that make up that society, and research shows that these opportunities are mostly invested in destroying trust (in a 'survival of the fittest' manner) rather than in furthering it. As such, under-bridge societies are practically dysfunctional as far as conventional societies go.

"Other changes I discovered were wrought in my condition by my new garb. In crossing crowded thoroughfares I found I had to be, if anything, more lively in avoiding vehicles, and it was strikingly impressed upon me, that my life had cheapened in direct ratio with my clothes." (London; 15)

filth and identity

The state of being considered dirty, of not being accepted into the established society, often confers a sense of identity, either individual or collective. In art, there is a constant flirtation with the notion of dirt and its interaction with the body⁵¹. In literature, one prime example of the use of filthy signifiers to ascribe moral values to characters can be found in Émile Zola's *Germinal*, where the main character, Étienne Lantier, suffers a transformation from an average coal miner to a leader of the workers. During this process, Zola takes care to note that with every approximation towards intellectual enlightenment, Lantier shows more concern about his physical appearance and hygiene, furthering the association of 'clean' with 'intellect' or with the bourgeoisie and 'dirty' with 'brutishness' or with the proletariat.

⁵¹ See, for example The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the 'Informe' and the Abject in which Richard Serra's film entitled Hand Catching Lead (1968), and Robert Mapplethorpe's Self-Portrait (1978) are both thought to be concerted attempts from the artists to portray themselves and their work as 'dirty' and thus position themselves within the 'filth' discourse.

Similarly, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pigs - which, oddly, are commonly considered to be classic representations of filth - are portrayed as having an intellect that is naturally superior to the rest of the animals in the farm. As the main pig characters begin to emulate humans, whom they consider to be 'cleaner' than animals, they adopt the very human concern for external appearance and hygiene. One example of this concern can be seen when the pigs refuse to eat with the rest of the animals (considering the trough to be too 'dirty' and unworthy of their intellectual superiority) and decide to eat sitting down on a table, with silverware and china left behind by the former owners of the farm.

This rejection of dirt as a logical step towards becoming more intellectually able in both Zola's and Orwell's work is evidence of the relationship between dirt and identity. Filth, either as perceived by others or by the self, is a powerful signifier and it regulates the relationships between the individual and the social groups the individual belongs to.

Aside from ascribing moral values to characters, filth in literature has the added value of feeding what Hal Foster refers to as a "fascination with trauma, an envy of abjection"⁵², though Foster contextualized this notion within the realm of abject art. One possible explanation for this almost infantile interest in the dirty other is that, similar to Cohen's "unassimilably others", the center of society is able to utilize the gaze as a tool to permanently position an other that in turn fixes their position in the field. These identities are reciprocal, to the extent that one cannot exist without the other; the center can never know how 'clean' it is without a dirty other with which to compare itself. This confrontation can, and indeed often is, traumatic; it is the ultimate identity-forming exercise - to see an 'other' that is so fundamentally different from the observer that the separating gap can never be negotiated. And according to Foster, abject art fulfills this desire to position oneself in the field by reinterpretation of these experiences with traumatic undertones.

⁵² Foster, 121-122

"There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." (Foucault; 24)

bridges as heterotopias of modern society

Foucault's work on the construction the notion of heterotopias as the ideological 'other' of utopias relates to the writings of Jacques Derrida in its intention to discover, through a process of disassembly, underlying structures that have meanings beyond the apparent.

Like Simmel, Foucault stresses the point that physical space, as we have come to understand and argue about, is a direct result of social interactions and behaviors throughout time. This mirrors Simmel's ideas on the psychological dimension of the boundary (one can argue that without boundaries, there is no space).

In *Of Other Places*, Foucault is interested in what he calls "medieval space", which refers to a sense of emplacement in the Middle Ages brought about by the combination of spaces that had clear and distinct relationships between them, e.g. sacred places vs. profane places, urban places vs. rural places, etc. With Galileo's discovery that space is infinite, the sense of emplacement of the Middle Ages was replaced by "extension", or the movement of an object through space/time. Extension was in turn replaced by "the site" or what can be defined as a combination of the emplacement (which attempts to define the relationship between elements) and the extension (which attempts to explain the elements' passage through time).

Foucault claims that the 20th century defines space as a relationship between sites and that this relationship minimizes the sanctification that comes as a result of emplacement and extension, and maximizing the importance of space itself. He argues that even though time was detached from the appreciation of space in the 19th century, the same hasn't happened with the sanctification of space in the 20th. I agree with Foucault when he says that the idea of emplacement as a generator of relationships among spaces is still part of the contemporary discourse on space. For example:

"Now, despite all the techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or formalize it, contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified (apparently unlike time, it would seem, which was detached from the sacred in the 19th century). [...] And perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions have not yet dared to break down. These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example, between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred." (Foucault; 23)

These oppositions he speaks of can be produced by function and use, or maybe by culture, customs and history, all of which determine interaction between man and space. The sanctity originates from the boundaries created around each space he describes, and many he does not. Heterotopias, as defined by Foucault, are defined and protected in their sanctity by boundaries that deter transgression and contribute to forming identities.

Foucault distinguishes between what he calls the "internal (and therefore imagined) space"⁵³, which relates more to the subconscious and the world of imagery than to the sacred; and the "external (real) space"⁵⁴, which relates to the materiality of things and the human interaction in the physical realm. It is this second kind of space that Foucault refers to when he talks about space being a set of relations as opposed to a void where things and people are 'dropped into'.

⁵³ Foucault; 23.

⁵⁴ Ibid.



55

It is also as this kind of space that the under-bridge condition can be better explained: it is the relationship between all of the physical and human elements that shape the bridge (the span of the bridge, the street or rail tracks above, the river, street or valley below, the people who drive or ride by, the people who stay) that creates the condition being studied. Introducing hierarchies into the fray merely assists in positioning the different elements in terms of height; the relations that govern interaction between these elements remains unchanged.

In that sense, Foucault's theory that space in our times is conceived as a combination of relationships seems to be verified: the hierarchical relationships that exist between spaces are obvious and undeniable, among other considerations that are no less important.

55 Homeless man taking in the sun under the Newark/Kearny bank of the Pulasky Skyway. There is a soup kitchen facility nearby.

Foucault's definition of heterotopias can also be directly applied to the under-bridge: spaces that could be of utopian or dystopian nature if only they didn't exist⁵⁶ in the material world. As such, the under-bridge is a heterotopia of deviation, because the kind of activity it fosters is directly opposite to the norm⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Ibid; 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid; 25.

prostitution under the bridge

"Although it is difficult to make sweeping generalisations about attitudes towards social practice, few would disagree with the assertion that paying for sexual services has always been regarded as morally problematic."
(Hubbard; 1)

geographies of prostitution

In *Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West*, author Philip Hubbard writes about the way in which prostitutes are shaped by the sites in which they work, claiming that prostitution tends to occur in certain areas within a city and that this localization is related to issues of "power, desire, and disgust"⁵⁸.

Hubbard argues that cities are indeed sexualized but that "geographies of prostitution can only be understood in reference to specific moral discourses"⁵⁹; considering the imagery of the under-bridge as an inherently immoral space where filth accumulates, this space can be understood as an extension of the streets in which Hubbard demonstrates prostitution tends to take place. Thus, sexualizing the under-bridge belongs in a discourse similar to sexualizing the street itself, as well as the alleyways, side streets, and abandoned industrial sites unto which Hubbard claims sexuality can be mapped.

This portrait of the female prostitute as a toughened version of the female ideal is often portrayed in film. Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver*, for example, depicts a female child-prostitute named Iris who exhibits behaviors that cannot be ascribed to 13 year old girls living in 'normal' cir-

⁵⁸ Hubbard; 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid; 5.

cumstances: as such, her personality and demeanor has been adjusted for the spatial environment in which she lives, which is one of constant threat to her sexuality. The nature of her work and the spaces in which she is forced to conduct her activities have had a profound effect on her personality and the way in which she engages with strangers, both on and off the street.

Hille Koskela argues that fear leads women in the street to take spatial precautions, such as physically distancing themselves from men or avoiding dark and concealed spaces at night, in order to protect themselves from a potential attack⁶⁰. Koskela does not specifically refer to prostitutes, but rather to the generalized woman. Her argument leads to the conclusion that public space is inherently male dominated and that women are consistently excluded (by either perceived or real threats) from the street. If so, then the process through which female streetwalkers appropriate the street and the under-bridge is one of gender questioning - prostitutes must adopt male characteristics and affectations (toughness, perhaps) in order to endure the threat of violent attacks. In other words, female streetwalkers must behave in a 'masculine way' or adopt a male gender role in spaces where the standard female relationship with the environment would be mediated by fear.

Koskela relies on personal interviews to trace a map of gendered exclusion in the city. The spaces mentioned by the women interviewed have the common characteristic of being public and open to all (the women mentioned underpasses, tunnels, car-parks, and alleyways as spaces in which they felt fear). What is interesting to note is that Koskela's study was limited to women who were representative of the center of society; none of the women interviewed were prostitutes, at times even intentionally excluding the female sexual worker. See for example:

"Although in Kallio crime related to prostitution has not - at least not yet - become a problem, incidents of sexual harassment in the street have increased. This harassment, and the

⁶⁰ Koskela: 112.

reputation of the area created mainly by the media has increased the feelings of uneasiness and fear especially among women.” (Koskela; 114)

In this quote, the issue of prostitution is discussed in a very abstract way - the intention is to portray prostitution as a face-less or gender-less urban problem (by making a powerful semantic association of the word 'prostitution' with the word 'crime') while at the same time placing the women interviewed in a separate realm and distinguishing them from the female prostitutes whose activities have criminalized the Kallio district in Helsinki.

Another example of this approach can be seen in the following passage:

“Tove’, who lives near the prostitution district in Kallio, writes: I’m not afraid for myself but for my little year and-a-half-old girl. I’m already planning to move out from this area because I wouldn’t dream of letting my girl walk alone to school... This fear makes me distressed and unhappy. Tove, 34 (in writing).” (Koskela; 120)

homeless under the bridge

public spaces and the homeless

The under-bridge, much like the street and the plaza, is a space of continual contestation, though the concerned parties - as indicated in the Burnside Bridge example - are entering the "battlefield"⁶¹ with unequal weaponry and level of interest. On the one side, there are those for whom the under-bridge is the only solution to their housing or commercial needs; as such, they will be quite concerned with the outcome of the battle (after all, having to lug their belongings to another space can be tiresome, or needing to move their business elsewhere might have an adverse effect in their ability to survive financially). There is also the danger in not finding a free spot, or in finding one that is so far removed from the center that is unsuitable for their purposes.

In *Homelessness and the Street*, Gerald Daly describes in quasi-journalistic form the state of homelessness in urban centers in the United States. Daly talks about the ways in which homeless individuals are vulnerable (lack of adequate health care), and what groups threaten their encroachment upon public space. See, for example:

"Life for many is a struggle to gain, reclaim, or to assert control over contested space, contending with others intent on excluding or ignoring them. In addition to the police, these include shopkeepers, punks and skinheads, drug dealers, tourists, members of the general public, as well as other homeless people." (Daly, in Fyfe (ed): 123)

Daly underscores the importance of political or social identity when interacting with public spaces, noting that in the relationship between the destitute and the public sphere, the latter is dominated by the center of society and the power balance between the center and the fringes main-

⁶¹ Lees, in Fyfe (ed); 236.

tains creates spaces of unequal contestation⁶². Despite these existing conditions, Daly contends that homeless people prefer the contestation and struggle to the often patronizing solutions presented to them by politicians and others who are involved in dealing with homelessness⁶³.

For Daly, the street, plazas, and public parks are preferable solutions to the lack of privacy that the homeless must endure in public shelters. The generous size and relative isolation from law enforcement of the under-bridge contribute to their use as dwelling spaces for the homeless and the poor. They are free, open to the public, easily accessible, and relatively comfortable. They offer a sense of home that state-sponsored or religious shelters cannot provide, and the homeless can stay for as long as they want, provided they are not caught by the police. And they usually aren't.

In the uncommon case that they are forcibly removed from under the bridge, they can always find another spot in which to set up a home. There are so many bridges to choose from.

In this sense, the bridge itself acts both as a boundary and as a space, and the act of crossing this boundary, both for the travelers from above, the "surface people", going below and for the under-bridge dwellers going above can be a disconcerting experience. Sibley writes that "crossing boundaries, from a familiar space to an alien one which is under the control of somebody else, can provide anxious moments"⁶⁴, the key words being 'under the control of somebody else'. Once the surface people cross the boundary set by the underbelly of the bridge and realize that they do not 'own' the entirety of the space surrounding the bridge they cross on a regular basis, the desire to cross quicker emerges.

This is an issue of control. Bridges are public property, and as such, anyone should be allowed, in theory, to walk, stand, sit on them, or otherwise interact with them. But this presupposes

⁶² Daly, in Fyfe (ed); 124.

⁶³ Ibid; 125

⁶⁴ Sibley.

that bridges are used for a single purpose, that is to negotiate gaps, when reality indicates that this is not the case. When control for the uses of a bridge shifts from the authorities that are in charge of deciding on these uses to the individuals that modify the uses to suit their needs, then the boundary between above and below becomes clearer.

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appendix

The following is a collection of images taken in London, Newark. All images created by author, unless otherwise noted.











