

**NAME OF PROJECT (OBLIGATORY)**

'The Changing Mood of the Needs of the Country': Vagrancy and Homelessness at the Edge of the West, Canada and the United States, 1900-1972

**SHORT SUMMARY OF PROJECT (50-100 WORDS)**

Despite a recent proliferation of studies on homelessness in North America, scholars have paid little attention to historical questions such as when and how "the vagrant" of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became "the homeless" who lay claim to the streets today. Using police court, jail, and church records, legislative and congressional debates, newspapers, and conducting interviews with both providers and recipients of "relief," I will examine this shift and provide both a historical and comparative perspective on homelessness in Canada and the United States.

**LONGER DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT (250-500 WORDS)**

In a February 1972 report on the Trudeau government's proposed amendments to the Criminal Code, the *Globe and Mail* explained: "Known as the poor man's crime, the [vagrancy] section enables police to arrest anyone 'not having any apparent means of support' and wandering abroad." In June of that same year, the vagrancy section was repealed; it was no longer illegal to be homeless. According to the *Globe and Mail*, "Justice Minister Otto Lang has said the amendments are part of the continuing Government efforts to keep abreast of the changing mood of the needs of the country and its laws." The questions that motivate my project stem from what might be called this "legalization of homelessness" in both Canada and the U.S. in 1972. How did public spaces, the bodies that occupied these spaces, and the nations which enframed both change between the beginning of the twentieth century and 1972? What did it *mean* to be homeless in this period and what socio-cultural, political, and economic factors shaped and altered these meanings? How and by whom have urban spaces been regulated? What were the "changing moods of the needs of the country and its laws" over the course of the twentieth century? How have these needs been made manifest, with what material consequences, and for whom? And finally, what has changed with regard to homelessness in Canada and the U.S. between 1972 and today?

In my MA thesis I looked closely at those charged in the police court in Victoria, British Columbia between 1871 and 1901 for what I call "embodied infractions of public space," such as being drunk and disorderly, causing a disturbance by screaming, or being a vagrant. I used both quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis, which permitted an examination of the tensions between the results of number crunching and the fruits of a sensitive reading of descriptive sources. First, I sampled the police court records for selected years to accumulate over 4000 cases for examination. Next, I developed a detailed system to code the police court charge language, scrutinized the punishments and disciplinary regimes to which public-space violating offenders were subjected, and examined the local newspapers to explore public perceptions of courtroom proceedings.

My Ph.D. project builds on this preliminary work. Most North American studies of vagrancy concentrate on one city and none have analyzed similarities and differences between Canada and the United States. I propose to investigate whether and how the nation-state has mattered to – in Leonard A. Feldman's words – "citizens without shelter." Focusing generally on the west coast region of both countries, I look specifically at four urban centres: Victoria and

Vancouver, British Columbia and San Francisco and Venice Beach, California. Many transnational studies of the west coast are set in the Pacific Northwest (northern Oregon, Washington, British Columbia). By contrast, a comparison of British Columbia and California permits me to investigate the effects of geo-social features such as climate, seasonal and migrant labour, and border crossings between the United States and Mexico, on experiences of and responses to vagrancy and homelessness. In addition, I can assess the impact of different municipal government structures and policies, state and provincial politics, immigration patterns, indigenous relations, and tourist interests.

After 1972 it was no longer a criminal offence to be homeless. However, as a result of both the dismantling of the welfare state, and a shift in focus from national economies and the well being of citizens, to global transfers of capital, and the desire of nation states to compete, unimpeded, in an increasingly globalizing market, homelessness has become a critical social issue in Canada, the U.S., and indeed around the globe. In order to make my research meaningful to those whose lives it is designed to serve, a final component of my project is to take stock of the changes of the last 30 years. To do so, I look at municipal, provincial/state, and federal government policy and legislation with regard to homelessness as well as gather and present the stories of people who have lived on the streets of the cities in which my research is focused. Finally, I intend to make my results available to policy makers in both Canada and the U.S., in order to ensure that those engaged in implementing strategies to serve the homeless incorporate an indispensable, yet often overlooked, historical perspective.

**Please describe your study objectives and career goals. Please also reflect upon an event or a person having greatly influenced your personal philosophy and/or your approach and attitude towards academic study. Your statement should be approximately 750 words in length. In the assessment of your application your statement will be heavily weighted.**

"How is this a story for you?" These were the words uttered by professor Christine Welsh on the first day of a third year class entitled, *Narrated Lives: First Nations' Women's Autobiographies*. "Given that most of you are not First Nations," she continued, "how can you make sense of these women's lives? How are their stories of colonization, of celebration, of loss, of recuperation also stories for you?"

Her words rang mantra-like in my head for the remainder of the semester. How *were* these women's stories for me? How was *I* implicated in their lives, in the process of colonization? How *could* I reconcile my position of privilege as a white middle-class university student attending school on what is still native land? How could I negotiate between responsibility and shame for a history that I have benefited from but was not part of? Finally, and most importantly, how could I make the answers to these and other questions of social justice that I had been asking myself for some time resonate beyond the seemingly impervious walls of the academy?

Christine's question transformed me. When the question was, "How is this a story for you?," I learned to listen differently.

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One must only wander through the streets of any major North American city to encounter people reaching into garbage cans for five-cent pop bottles, congregating in green spaces, selling *Street Newz* on the corner, squatting on sidewalks attempting to make contact with the averted eyes of passersby. "Spare any change today?" Most of us, perhaps, walk on, stepping over outstretched legs, around dirty bundles, past people curled, asleep in doorways, steering clear of the homeless bodies. My question – as I step – is how is this a story for me? If, as the political scientist Serena Kataoka suggests, many North Americans are only one paycheque away from being homeless, we are all – housed and homeless – implicated in the situation of the person on the street. How can I not "spare some change"? Not just a loonie tossed into an upturned baseball cap, but *really* spare some change?

While my research projects over the past few years have been an attempt to explore issues of social justice and human rights, to begin to set Canada's homelessness crisis in a wider context, and to interrogate precisely what citizenship entails and who counts as a citizen, my desire has been to make some change with the work I am doing both in the academy and beyond. Since beginning my M.A, I have presented papers at eight academic conferences. In the spring of 2005, I gave guest lectures to undergraduate history and women's studies classes sharing some of the findings of my Master's research. In October 2005, I organized a panel on perceptions of and responses to homelessness for the annual meeting of the Canadian Studies Association in Edmonton, Alberta. I have also submitted articles for consideration to a number of academic journals. I do feel strongly, however, that ideas generated and disseminated within academia must reach a wider audience for their full potential – as propellants of meaningful action – to be realized. To this end, I gave six lectures in the 2004-2005 school year to a range of people including the Victoria Council of Women, the Kiwanis Club Seniors, and the inmates of the William Head Penitentiary. In January 2005, I participated in the City of Victoria's first homeless count. I am presently vice-chair of the Board of Directors of the Fernwood Community Centre Society in Victoria, which has recently purchased a derelict building in a low-income neighbourhood (where I live) and is in the process of converting it into affordable housing and much-needed neighbourhood services. I am also currently helping to plan a Sleepout in Solidarity with homeless people in Toronto to put pressure on City Council to create affordable housing.

As I complete my Ph.D. at the University of Toronto, secure a teaching position and mentor students of my own, and as my research interests spiral out from an investigation of the history of homelessness to related and divergent issues, I will continue to make connections between what I am teaching/studying and how I am living. I will persist in asking, "How is this a story for me?" Furthermore, I will pose this question to my students, even (and perhaps especially) in a first year "Introduction to Canadian History" class: How is Confederation, for example, a story for you? How are you implicated in this story? How has it shaped the world that you live in? How can you shape the world in response?

People often ask me how it is that I have time to do all that I do. "Do you sleep?," they query, jostling me gently. Sometimes my response is that I learned hyper-efficiency as a tree planting cook for five summers when I had to feed 80 hungry planters using two domestic ovens out of a 24-foot trailer powered by a generator in the middle of a clearcut – no time for mistakes or miscalculations. Other times I invoke the need to create balance between my academic pursuits and social justice work. Often I simply chalk it up to being an activist-scholar. My most genuine response, however, the one I hesitate to utter aloud, is that I don't have time – given the state of the world – *not* to do all that I do. None of us do.

