

## Living in Isolation

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### Motel Families in Ontario and the Neoliberal Social/Built/Physical Environment

*In the past three decades, neoliberal economic/social ideology has created a singular focus on “productivity” and market-driven initiatives, producing an affordable-housing crisis in Ontario. Since the 1993 federal government cancellation of funding for new social housing, there has been an unequivocal increase in families experiencing homelessness in Canada, the majority of which are female-led. This paper will explore the intersection between this neoliberal social/economic ethos and the social, built and physical environments in relation to families experiencing homelessness in Ontario. Neoliberal discourses have impacted the built environment in terms of the direct loss of social housing. Dominant societal narratives regarding “homelessness,” “family” and “good mothering” have impacted the social environment in terms of policy initiatives regarding homeless families. The neoliberal focus on “productivity” has produced particular social categories for those marginalized from these dominant discourses, thereby producing and justifying specific physical environments. It is by examining these dominant neoliberal narratives that we can begin to understand how the partnership between the owners of aging motel strips and social services became the privatized solution to the increasing crisis of families experiencing homelessness in Ontario.*

Since the 1993 federal government cancellation of spending for new social housing, there has been an unequivocal rise in homeless families in Canada, the majority of which are female-led (Layton 50). In Ontario, one short-term “solution” to this issue has been to create a partnership between the owners of private motel strips and social services to establish road-side motels as “temporary” emergency shelters within a system that can no longer meet the increasing demand of families requiring shelter. Consistent with neoliberal

ideologies of privatization, the neoliberal “free market” ethos has infiltrated the very consciousness of society to produce a neoliberal social ethos that prioritizes “productivity” and “efficiency.” Despite the staggering statistics regarding the increase in mothers with their children experiencing homelessness, this neoliberal ethos has served to frame such mothers within a particular “bad mother” paradigm negatively reflecting the dominant “good mother” and patriarchal suburban nuclear family idealization promoted by neo-conservative rhetoric. The result: a focus on the representation of homelessness superseding concrete public policy measures leading toward the eradication of homelessness.

By framing homelessness within an environmental framework, this enables a much-needed return to discussions regarding material realities. As long as “homeless mothers” are positioned within a neoliberal framework of “productivity,” they will continue to be individually blamed for not living up to “proper neoliberal subjectivity.” However, if we move the public policy discussion regarding homelessness to an environmental framework, the primary question is altered. No longer will the question be: how can we better train these mothers to fit within the normative standards of neoliberal “productivity” but rather, how can we create more sustainable cities to prevent the presence of homeless families?

In the introduction to *Urban Health: Readings in the Social, Built and Physical Environments of U.S. Cities*, editors Patricia Hynes and Russ Lopez write, “...the environmental justice movement has recast the paradigm of environment as *nature remote from people* by redefining environment as the *place where we live, work, play and pray*” (Hynes and Lopez xvi). With increasing urbanization, accompanied by increasing income polarization and segregation as a result of post-1980s neoliberal policies eroding the social welfare state, the significance of urban geography and social spaces has become paramount. Within the domain of social environment, Hynes and Lopez include structures of poverty, income inequality, economic isolation, racism, segregation by race and ethnicity, discrimination by sex, and lack of neighborhood services (Hynes and Lopez 1). In terms of the built environment, Hynes and Lopez discuss the relationship between urban sprawl, poor housing, pollution and health risk factors. The paramount centrality of the urban social/built/physical environment to health and well-being is evident, in addition to the erosion of this environment due to increasing urban strain.

By framing homelessness as an environmental rather than individualized concern, the eradication of homelessness then becomes a social rather than individual responsibility. Considering homelessness through an environmental framework enables the recognition of the human right to a sustainable living space. It also provides recognition for the social and economic failure of cities that do not meet the requirement of sustainable living conditions for marginal-

ized sectors of the population. However, social and built spaces are ideologically constructed. The normative social imaginary can be directly connected to public policies governing social planning and the construction of urban spatiality. The intersection between public policy, the built environment and the post-1980s neoliberal ethos reveals how it became “acceptable” to shelter homeless families in Ontario motels. However, we need to consider the social environment to understand why this temporary measure has become a long-term and inadequate “solution” to the “problem” of homelessness.

### Homeless Families

In the “Better Off in a Shelter?” Cities Centre paper, researchers reveal the predominance of single-parent families, particularly women-led single-parent families, in the North American shelter system (Paradis et al. 3). According to the Wellesley Institute Report, there are over 22,500 children currently homeless in Canada (Sky). Cathy Crowe, Toronto street nurse and author of *Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out*, says she has seen a shift in the demographics of homelessness over the past 15 years. “Across the country, the fastest-growing group of homeless people is families with children” (qtd. in Banks).

In September 1986, the City of Toronto established an agreement between two shelters operated by the city, Family Residence and Birkdale Villa, and local motels to serve as “emergency shelters.” Between 1988 and 1999, the number of homeless children in Toronto increased by 130 percent (City of Toronto 2001: 5). Over 50 percent of the motels utilized to shelter homeless families are located along Kingston Road in Toronto. In 1997 and 1998, in response to increasing family shelter admissions, Toronto Hostel Services contracted motels in Burlington and Hamilton. In 1999, the city reviewed its use of motels for homeless families. Consistent with neoliberal rhetoric, the review was conducted, not in response to material concerns regarding the sustainability of families living long-term in motel environments, but due to the concerns of residents in the ward of Scarborough Bluffs and Scarborough Highland Creek. Residents were concerned about illegal activities and the lack of city by-law enforcement at the Kingston Road motels, in addition to increasing pressure on local schools to accommodate children from Family Residence and adjoining motels. Residents were requesting an enrollment cap on the number of children from Family Residence (and adjoining motels), thereby necessitating a review to determine the viability of such requests. (City of Toronto 1999: 2)

The 1999 city review indicates the need to consider alternative options for housing homeless families (although no alternatives are suggested), in addition

to the need for increased federal and provincial income support programs and investment in long-term solutions—although suggestions regarding what those long-term solutions could be are also not mentioned. Questions regarding the “appropriateness of motels for accommodating homeless families” are raised, in addition to the lack of consistent monitoring and enforcement of city contracts. Since more than 50 percent of the families housed in Family Residence and the adjoining motels are newcomers to Canada, the review includes recommendations for greater access to settlement services in Scarborough. The city does acknowledge the serious implications of imposing a quota on students enrolling in the local schools, mentioning how when a similar cap was imposed on residents from Birkdale family shelter, many school-age children were turned away because the “quota” had been reached (City of Toronto 1999: 2).

However, the “emergency solution” to the lack of shelter space for homeless families established in 1986 continues to be the only “solution” to the increasing presence of families requiring shelter in Ontario. The primary motels currently contracted by the City of Toronto are the Lido motel and the Gateway Inn along Kingston Road. In Ottawa, the primary motel contracted by the city is the Stardust motel along Carling Avenue. In order to understand why these motels have become incorporated as long-term “solutions” to family homelessness in Ontario, we need to consider the primary motivations behind public policy initiatives.

The primary question in the 1999 review was: how can we best mitigate the increasing presence of homeless families in Toronto and how can we best appease the concerns of local residents? Consistent with the neoliberal economic discourse of “productivity” associated with tax-paying citizens, it is the concerns of the local residents that are prioritized, thereby resulting in particular public policy agendas. Although the viability of living long-term in a motel environment is questioned, it is through the lens of community disruption and impact on local residents. As the review recommends in Section III Proposed Directions, “Because the number of homeless families accommodated along Kingston Road is of particular concern to the local community, the options paper will identify the implications of re-directing family shelter capacity from Kingston Road to new family shelters in other locations” (City of Toronto 1999: 4). The question is not how can the city establish sustainable housing policies and programs to prevent the presence of homeless families in Ontario, but how can these homeless families be sheltered in a way least disruptive to surrounding communities? The solution, therefore, becomes one of “re-direction.” Meeting the needs of homeless mothers with their children is not even part of the discussion. Rather, the discussion is framed in terms of meeting the needs of local “tax-payers.”

Framing the discussion in terms of the environment places the primary focus

on the *material* rather than the *representational*. If voters and tax-payers form the basis for the discussion, then the concern becomes one of representation. How can the presence of homeless families be represented in the least evasive way? In other words, how can their presence be made invisible to local tax-payers and voters? If a too-high concentration of homeless families along Kingston Road is causing concern for local residents, then the “solution” is to disperse the families to other locations. However, if the discussion is framed in terms of the environment, then the issue becomes not one of representation, but rather social need. The increasing presence of homeless families in Ontario becomes a social concern including all members of society. Initiating the discussion through an environmental framework means the primary questions will be about long-term sustainability, not short-term “solutions.” It is a pro-active rather than reactive response. Instead of the discussion being framed in terms of the concerns and needs of voters and tax-payers, the primary focus becomes one of meeting the needs of homeless families, particularly mothers with their children.

### What Is “Homelessness?”

David Hulchanski, Associate Director of research at Cities Centre, wrote an article in *The Toronto Star* called “The Invention of Homelessness.” According to the *New York Times* historical database covering 1851 to 2005, before the 1980s, it is rare to find the word “homelessness” used to designate a social problem (cited in Hulchanski). Canada in the 1960s had homeless individuals but no problem called “homelessness.” The word “homelessness” came into common use in developed countries in the 1980s to refer to the problem of dehousing. By the 1990s, the “homelessness crisis” had become part of everyday language use. What happened since the 1980s to make the term “homelessness” so normalized we no longer even recognize it as a construction?

### The Construction of Poverty and Homelessness

While the global economy of advanced capitalism is creating opportunity for some, or at least the language of opportunity, for many others it means an increased gap away from this presumed world of opportunity. In the context of de-industrialization and the shift from the Fordist to service-sector economy, how are these global changes directly impacting the creation of poverty in the midst of corporate wealth in North America?

Thirty years of neoliberal economic and political governance has created increasing poverty and income polarization. The “free” market economic discourse bolstered by the social discourse of “productivity” have unified to cre-

ate a hegemonic alliance that rhetorically silences the presence and needs of those most impoverished by the neoliberal ascendancy. Due to the increasing financialisation of society leading to a “marketization” of nearly every aspect of social/cultural life, the neoliberal ethos has penetrated our very consciousness, effectively taking “poverty” and “homelessness” off the agenda in terms of both public policy and public awareness. In *The New Poverty Studies*, Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky define this rhetoric of silence as “a regime of disappearance: a mode of governance, economy, and politics in which the poor are not so much vilified as they are marginalized or erased by the institutional and ideological aspects of work, social welfare, and politics that are dominant under neoliberalism” (10). One group of individuals rhetorically silenced by the neoliberal discourse includes mothers with their children experiencing homelessness.

In *The New Poverty Studies*, Ida Susser writes, “It is somewhat disheartening to recognize that the poor, the homeless, and the hungry have dropped off the political agenda” (vii). The neoliberal entrepreneurial ethos creates a picture of universal self-improvement, utilizing the liberal discourse of “freedom” and individual “agency” to justify draconian welfare measures such as the implementation in the 1990s of the work-to-welfare programs. Social “value” is determined by “productivity.” Those who embrace the neoliberal discourse and become entrepreneurial subjects become “deserving,” while those unable to embrace this constructed discourse of self-improvement are designated “undeserving.” Given this marketization of the social domain, it is no surprise “the poor, the homeless and the hungry” have dropped off the political agenda. Increasing de-politicization in favor of market demands has ensured the silencing of any forces existing outside the constructed boundaries of the hegemonic neoliberal influence. Susser writes, “There have always been poor people under capitalism. One of the ‘new’ aspects of the poverty today ... is the ‘regime of disappearance.’ Under the neoliberal agenda, the poor are portrayed as individually to blame for their lack of funds, and there seems little in the media or the public eye to contradict this perspective” (viii).

### **The Built Environment and the Structural Causations of Homelessness in Ontario**

From WWII until 1993, Canada had a national housing program responsible for building 650,000 units and housing two million Canadians (Layton 2008: x). Consistent with the post WWII modernist Keynesian focus on federal funding for urban infrastructure, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation was established in 1946 (now known as Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation or CMHC) as a crown corporation to administer on behalf of the Canadian government federal participation in housing as

described by the 1944 *National Housing Act* (Layton xxvi). CMHC developed an integral role in creating new affordable housing across Canada. However, in the 1980s, the federal Conservative government began the process of slowly eroding the federal housing program by cutting almost \$2 billion in housing spending, and then in 1993 canceling funding for new social housing. Consistent with neoliberal economics, faced with recession and debt, the neoliberal solution was to give the market “free reign.” In 1995, the Ontario Conservative government made policy changes to “liberate” the private rental housing market from rent control as part of the Ontario Premier Mike Harris’s “common-sense revolution” (Layton 138). Then in the 1996 federal budget, most of the national housing programs were downloaded to the provinces (Layton xxvii).

Since the 1993 cancellation of funding for new social housing, the waiting lists for affordable housing have become so backlogged that as of April 2011, there were 67,714 households on the social housing waiting list in Toronto (City of Toronto 2011). As of August 2009, many families were waiting up to twelve years for rent-g geared-to-income social housing in Toronto (City of Toronto 2009: 31). In 1996, the United Nations Centre for Housing and Human Settlements recognized Canada’s co-operative housing program as a “global best practice.” (Layton 7) In May 2006, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended homelessness and inadequate housing in Canada be addressed as a “national emergency” (9).

### **The Social Environment and the Context of Neoliberalism**

The extreme funding cuts to social housing programs in the 1980/90s coincided with the larger picture of neoliberal initiatives directly targeting social welfare. In *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society*, University of Toronto anthropology professor Jesook Song writes, “The major difference between neoliberalism and liberalism is the ascendance of finance capital over assembly-line industrial capital and the seeming withdrawal of the state (which is instead working through quasi- or nonstate agencies)” (Song x). The federal cancellation of funding for new social housing in 1993—which the effects are being felt today—needs to be positioned within this larger global neoliberal narrative.

Jesook Song defines neoliberal as “an advanced mode of social governing that idealizes efficiency and productivity by promoting people’s free will and self-sufficiency. Thus, both liberalism and neoliberalism do not just refer to political economic principles but to social ethos” (x). The state’s regulatory role becomes one of promoting the “free” market to ensure its “unhindered” functioning. The market then becomes the defining element of society. The



primacy of profit leading to privatization, the allure of tax cuts, the financialisation of daily life due to bank de-regulation and the increasing need for credit as a result of job losses and demands for “flexible” employment in the post-Fordist era, have all contributed to increasing income polarization and the current affordable-housing crisis.

Song effectively describes the particularities of this neoliberal process as it occurred in the realm of the South Korean debt crisis. Consistent with a neoliberal financialized ethos, self-worth became commodified according to measures of productivity. As such, individuals in society were thus categorized according to those defined as “productive” by this neoliberal ideology and those defined as “unproductive.” These measurements of productivity were differentially determined according to the categorization. As Song illustrates, for educated, unemployed youth, the measure of productivity was in their ability to be entrepreneurial and creatively contribute to a rapidly transforming economy. For homeless men recently laid off, the measure of productivity was their ability to be reintegrated into the normative space of “home” and “family.” However, within these constructed categories of productivity, there was no category for homeless women because they represented an ideological oxymoron and therefore “did not exist” (Song xi-xii).

While the particularities of the context differ, we can consider these categorizations of neoliberal “productivity” within the social welfare discourse in Canada as it pertains to homeless mothers. The increasing presence of homeless families since the post-1980s active incorporation of neoliberal policies in Ontario represents the failure of neoliberal promises of advancement and success. Policies giving “free reign” to market-driven initiatives did not result in the construction of affordable housing. Discordant with dominant narratives, homeless mothers’ voices must thus be silenced. And there is no more effective measure of silencing than through categorization and isolation. According to the neoliberal construct of success and “productivity,” homeless mothers are then categorized as “unproductive” and thus given no “value.” To justify such a draconian categorization, “bad mother” constructs must also be applied to explain the lack of resources and the intentional segregation of homeless families into roadside motels. Consideration of structural issues such as the lack of affordable housing, steady and well-paying employment, childcare services, or services for new immigrants, become superseded by the individual discourse of blame.

## **Housing Affordability**

Putting the pieces of this narrative together, we can see how decreased funding for social housing coincided with increased job losses and precarious employ-



ment, which coincided with increased housing and rental costs. Rental housing construction has disappeared in the past decade. Non-profit and co-operative housing has been severely reduced. Accompanying the increasing dispossession of social housing is the construction of new, luxury new condos wherein the cost per square footage is prohibitive. There are few units larger than 1000 square feet, and they are constructed primarily as investment opportunities rather than living spaces.

Placing an emphasis on the built environment and revealing the multiple ways in which the built environment is socially negotiated enables a movement away from the neoliberal construction and categorization of homelessness in terms of individual pathology. The intersection between the neoliberal economic and social imaginary and the resultant impact on public policy initiatives regarding the construction of affordable housing is apparent. Neoliberal categorizations according to differential levels of “productivity” have directly impacted public policies regarding homelessness. But how does this neoliberal ethos intersect with dominant societal understandings regarding “good mothering” practices? And how do these narratives then impact public policies regarding homeless mothers in Ontario?

### **The Neoliberal Construction of the “Bad” Mother**

Just as neoliberal discourses impact urban planning regarding the built environment, so, too, is the social environment directly impacted by hegemonic discourses. In “Manufacturing ‘Bad Mothers’: A Critical Perspective on Child Neglect,” Karen Swift, professor in the school of social work at York University, discusses the role of ideology in relation to child neglect in Canada. Swift explores how it is the “different and often antagonistic social locations of the members of a society” that “produce contradictory ways of experiencing and knowing social reality. However, the class that dominates or rules a society wants its own vision of the society to be reproduced — and ideology is central to this reproductive process” (22). If we connect this concept of ideology to neoliberalism, we can see how the dominant neoliberal narrative has served to determine all other societal discourses including conceptualizations of “good mothering,” “family” and “homelessness.”

In “Manufacturing ‘Bad Mothers’” Swift discusses discourses of race and culture in constructing the “Other.” She utilizes Robert Miles’s concept of “racialization” to indicate how “through racial signifiers, groups of people are characterized in such a way that their assignment to particular ‘posts’ in the social and economic arrangements of a society seems obvious and justified. Through racialization of a population, groups can be established as inferior in various ways—and as appropriate to exclude from decision processes. In

defining the Other in particular ways, the Self is also defined. Implied in the definition of one group as inferior is the contrasting view of the definers as superior” (Swift 32-33). Swift applies this “racialization” concept to child welfare discourse in Canada to reveal its impact upon Native populations. The same concept can apply when discussing “homelessness,” whereby through the process of “racialization,” mothers and their children living in Ontario motel rooms have been stigmatized and categorized in such a way that justifies and replicates their differential treatment in a socially “acceptable” way.

If we consider the rise in the 1990s of the “intensive mothering” paradigm, we can see how particular discourses regarding “good mothering” as defined through neoliberal ideologies of “productivity” have impacted societal perceptions of homeless mothers. In “Why Can’t a Mother Be More Like a Businessman?” Sharon Hays defines “intensive mothering” as “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 414). Western discourses of motherhood have presented mothering as an all-encompassing and financially expensive endeavor placing impossible standards on white, middle-class mothers, and value judgments upon all others. The same workplace standards of “efficiency” and “productivity” are applied to North American child-rearing. Copious opportunities for “self-improvement” and “intellectual enhancement” must be provided. Education becomes paramount in a neoliberal world governed by social capital. And the pressure to produce socially appropriate neoliberal subjects properly enculturated to be free-thinking beings capable of independent “choice” by age two rests solely with the mother.

In *The New Momism*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels reveal the interconnections between the political/economic milieu, the motherhood discourse, and dominant social discourses as expressed through media. The way motherhood is defined and the ensuing dominant discourse that becomes naturalized as “truth,” is always consistent with the dominant societal ethos determined by the political/economic structures (Douglas and Michaels). The current singular focus on “productivity” and the increased demand on the “family,” specifically “mothers,” to reproduce socially appropriate neoliberal subjects is consistent with the free-market focus on choice and individual responsibility. Homeless mothers with their children represent an aberration of the neoliberal promise of success and advancement. Their silencing, both socially and physically, becomes paramount to the continuance of the neoliberal project. Spatially, their segregation into undesirable and marginal motel strips ensures their invisibility. Socially, the individualized discourse of pathology constructs homeless mothers as “bad” mothers, and through this Othering process, enables the rest of society to feel justified in their marginalization.

In *Homeless Mothers: Face to Face with Women and Poverty*, Deborah Connolly explores how discourses of “good motherhood” directly impact poor, white, homeless mothers in a medium-sized northwestern American city. Connolly reveals how the dominant patriarchal discourse naturalizing maternal love within a particular western, white framework of selfless devotion has created a singular conceptualization of “good mothering” utilized to judge those who exist outside these constructed perimeters. (Connolly 2000a) In the article, “Mythical Mothers and Dichotomies of Good and Evil: Homeless Mothers in the United States,” Connolly asks the question: “How do myths of the sacrificial, devoted, and fulfilled mother resonate for women whose lives are characterized by negotiating such things as adequate housing, personal safety, child care, and government bureaucracies?” (Connolly 2000b: 263). Connolly advocates for close attention to the complexities and ambiguities of concrete lives to avoid simplifying entire segments of the population into stark and formulaic categorizations of deserving/undeserving or good/bad.

In Anna Tsing’s article, “Monster Stories: Women Charged with Perinatal Endangerment,” Tsing reveals how mothers who could be identified as white, middle-class thus “normal” received far greater leniency than mothers labelled “ignorant” or “obstinate” and outside the normative middle-class nuclear family discourse. Replicating the psychological development theory of the 1950s, it was believed white middle-class mothers could be “cured” and “reformed.” The case of perinatal endangerment would be classified as an isolated incident. However, since black mothers, and other mothers falling outside the normative white middle-class discourse, were constructed as “deviant,” there was no hope for their rehabilitation (Tsing 295). Tsing points out how “By setting a ‘bad example,’ these women, in all their diversity, direct those who hear their stories toward the singular path of propriety” (Tsing 296).

In a society governed by impossible mothering standards, the recent North-American surge in “bad mother” popularity as expressed through social media, mothering blogs and mom-lit, retains its safe middle-class normative perimeters through contrast with “homeless mothers.” Rather than viewing the increasing prevalence of homeless families, particularly mothers with their children, as a social issue that requires a response through concrete measures, the presence of “homeless mothers” becomes naturalized through neoliberal discourse as an unfortunate “by-product” of capitalism, revealing the imminent dangers of subverting normative categorizations. The presence of “homeless mothers” or “deviant,” “bad” mothers provide a measure of social control, thereby explaining the lack of public support for social/economic policies leading to the eradication of homelessness. The neoliberal market-driven identification of individuals as tax payers rather than as citizens further vilifies “homeless mothers,” who are perceived to be eroding the “system.”

In *Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women*, Rae Bridgman discusses the direct connection between architectural design of a homeless shelter, public policy and normative social discourses regarding “homeless women.” Motivated by participatory and inclusive practices, the initial design question focused on: “What spatial and social or institutional structures would support the needs of women street survivors?” However, when it came time to do public consultations, it was decided that “having consultation processes with ‘women who are fragmented, who lead fragmented lives’ ... would probably not offer much constructive feedback on what the project should look like” (Bridgman 62). Even when there was recognition of the need to incorporate inclusive practices within social policy and urban planning initiatives, neoliberal normative perceptions regarding “homeless women” dominated along with market-driven imperatives. The result was a design consistent with funding demands. Residents wanted a “home.” Municipal and provincial pilot funding stipulations mandated a temporary, transitional “shelter” (Bridgman 105). Dominant perceptions regarding “homeless women” superseded efforts to be inclusive.

### **The Daily Lived Realities for Homeless Mothers**

The intersection between dominant neoliberal narratives impacting how homeless mothers are perceived and the direct correlation with public policy initiatives is apparent. But what are the results of these policy initiatives? What are the daily material realities for mothers and their families living in motel rooms along Kingston Road in Toronto or in the Stardust motel along Carling Avenue in Ottawa? How have these neoliberal policies and ideologies created particular social/built/physical environments, and what is the impact of such environments?

If we return to considering the elements of the social domain as identified by Hynes and Lopez, it is clear these motel rooms do not meet the basic standards for a sustainable living space. They are not directly accessible to reliable public transit since the motels were specifically built off the highway to function as a road-side stop for individuals with vehicles. They were also not built as part of a community. In Toronto, the local community schools are becoming overcrowded due to increasing demand from families being sent by Family Residence to nearby motels as “overflow” (Layton 76). These families do not have access to neighborhood services such as grocery stores, banks or community centers, nor do many of them even have access to kitchen facilities. Given the lack of nearby healthy eating options, this lack of food availability leads directly to increased health risk.

Nardelie, a mother living with her nine-month-old daughter in an Ottawa motel for two months said in French, “I arrived in Ottawa and went to social

services. You know, that one on Catherine Street. There were problems with the baby's father, some violence. I had to change my life. For my child. But I didn't know anyone." Social Services told Nardelie<sup>1</sup> the wait time to get into a family shelter is six months. "They told me they had space for me, but not for my baby. What was I supposed to do?" She shrugged her shoulders. "So they sent me here." *Here* for Nardelie and her baby is the Stardust motel along Carling Avenue in Ottawa.

The physical and social isolation of these motel environments is apparent, as is the resultant difficulties associated with meeting the basic necessities of life. While some motels, such as the Lido motel in Toronto, may have communal kitchens, the Stardust does not. "There's no kitchen in the motel room. I go to the Food Bank, but I can't cook anything." Nardelie pointed to the busy commercial strip surrounding the roadside motel. "We have to eat in these places. But I only get \$300 a month from social services." Carling Avenue is a bustling picture of emerging re-development with the shelter across the street situated beside a multiplex movie theatre complex, all co-existing in the midst of one of Ottawa's largest low-rental housing neighbourhoods. In all the discussions of urban intensification and diversification, the Stardust motel remains as an aging remnant, surviving only because of its arrangement with social services.

The framing of these mothers as "bad" mothers has only increased their invisibility in the public sphere. And yet the realities of their lives belie the dominant narratives. Nardelie has a Bachelor's degree in International Relations and has worked in the publishing industry. She moved from the Congo four years ago with her husband to Montreal. Two months had passed since she left her abusive husband and came to Ottawa, fearing for her safety and the security of her child. She said, "I'm living in this motel because I need to keep my baby safe." She would like to take university courses to learn English and find a job but there is no childcare available. When asked about social services provided, Nardelie said she had not seen anyone since the day she arrived in the motel.

Also escaping an abusive marriage, Saran<sup>2</sup> came to the Stardust motel and lived there for eight months. When Saran first arrived in Ottawa with only \$300 in her pocket, she was told she had to spend all her money before she could qualify for the shelter system. She proceeded to spend three nights at the YMCA with her two children before they could stay at the Stardust motel. With a Bachelor's degree in sociology from Guinea, Saran came to Canada on a student visa to do her Master's degree at the University of Montreal. Once she finished her degree she returned to Guinea for six months and came back to Canada as a refugee. When her husband became violent, Saran decided she had to leave Montreal for the safety of herself and her children. As Saran says in French, "The moment you become part of the social welfare system, you are

isolated. Social welfare equals isolation.” Saran said during the eight months she lived at the Stardust motel, she scarcely saw anyone from social services. She said she received no resources other than the motel accommodation and \$188 monthly from her employment insurance since she had previously worked in Montreal. Because she received EI, Saran said she did not qualify for other income support from social services.

Nardelie’s and Saran’s stories reveal how their presence and the lives of other mothers living with their children in Ontario motel rooms have become obscured. The little media attention given to the issue of homelessness spotlights individuals either living on the streets or in the shelter system, advocating for much-needed harm reduction strategies and access to safe injection sites. While this media coverage is crucial, these stories share no semblance with the everyday lives of mothers living with their children in Ontario motel rooms.

Both Nardelie and Saran were desperate to find work. But without resources such as childcare or English-language classes, living in an isolated motel room prevented them from being able to utilize their knowledge and education. Saran also spoke of how difficult it is to find work when your address is a motel room. These motel strips are a product of 1950s auto-oriented suburbanization. Despite these motels being filled to capacity, their ample parking lots remain empty. A privatized “emergency solution” initiated in the mid-1980s context of de-industrialization remains as the primary family shelter system—an agreement that keeps these aging motel strips solvent. And yet, it is a system that is cut off and segregated from centralized social services coordinated through Family Residence or the Carling Avenue family shelter.

### **Categorization and Isolation**

In Catherine Kingfisher’s article “Discursive Constructions of Homelessness in a Small City in the Canadian Prairies,” Kingfisher writes, “Policy, then, is not simply a response to already constituted needs but, rather, entails the interpretation of needs, which must be recognized, designated as legitimate, and then translated into administratable form” (91). Kingfisher goes on to discuss how the cultural construction of social problems involves the production of particular kinds of persons. In other words, what discourses and debates inform the identification of particular categories, and how do certain segments of the population become associated with these categories? How, then, do the categorizations take on their own meaning in terms of providing the direction for public policy? Kingfisher analyzes how variants of a “drunken Indian” stereotype served to inform the policy agenda despite overt discussions of “diversity.”

Kingfisher's approach in terms of revealing the connections between discursive categorizations and public policy can also be applied to the context of mothers experiencing homelessness in Ontario. The categorization of "homeless mother" becomes not only a discursive tool of segregation and ostracization, but also implicitly informs public policy initiatives normalizing the long-term use of motels as family shelters. The neoliberal discourse of "productivity" pathologizes "homeless mothers" as "bad mothers," creating a circular and reinforcing paradigm of justification for economic cutbacks and social isolation.

### Research Implications

Placing the discussion of homelessness within an environmental framework enables a movement away from neoliberal discourses of pathology. Prioritization must be given to the voices and needs of homeless mothers. However, it is equally necessary to utilize a holistic, multi-sited research methodology that also encompasses the voices of social workers, nurses, and all social actors directly engaged with the mothers and their children living in Ontario motel rooms. Structural causations have actively contributed to the current lack of affordable housing in Ontario, thereby leading directly to the increase in families experiencing homelessness since the late 1980s. However, a post-structural analysis is required to understand the social context within which such public policy decisions regarding the built environment were enabled. As Kingfisher illustrates, public policies are themselves the result of social negotiation and dominant cultural discourses.

Much of the literature regarding homelessness originates from a sociological, psychological or medicalized perspective in which "homeless mothers" and "homelessness" is conceived in terms of individual subjectivity. In "Medicalizing Homelessness: The Production of Self-Blame and Self-Governing within Homeless Shelters," Vincent Lyon-Callo discusses the medicalized discourse of deviance that constructs "homelessness" in terms of individual failure to govern oneself properly. Homeless individuals must "look within their selves for the 'cause' of their homelessness." As Lyon-Callo writes, "Alternative discourses suggesting the need for practices challenging broader political economic processes are thus marginalized as peripheral and unreasonable" (328). Such focus on individual subjectivity is consistent with the neoliberal discourses of "productivity" and "individuation." Rather than directing funds towards long-term structural change, funds are directed toward short-term pilot programs targeted at "training" or "self-realization."

Such a focus on individual subjectivity leads directly toward categorization. How funds are directed is determined by constructed categorizations of "risk." Young pregnant mothers are categorized as "at-risk" and therefore



“deserving” of resources to enhance their education and ensure they become “productive” future members of society. Consistent with the neoliberal ethos, youth is prioritized because the potential for future “productivity” is enhanced. While there are some social programs targeted toward young homeless mothers, the cutoff age for the majority of these programs is 27. For “homeless mothers” existing outside this constructed category of “deserving,” there are few resources. And even for young homeless “at-risk” mothers, should they become “non-compliant,” they, too, become categorized as “undeserving.” Once a mother is placed into the “undeserving” category, they are no longer even labeled “at-risk” because they no longer exist within the system. They have been socially, physically and ideologically “erased,” in much the same way the South Korean government during the Asian debt crisis had no existing category for “homeless women.” Not only does categorization create differential access to social support and resources, it can also effectively isolate an individual from the system itself.

Given how discursive frameworks lead to differential paradigms, initiating the public policy discussion within an environmental framework will lead to a prioritization on long-term sustainability. Utilizing a social environmental framework enables recognition of the need for services focusing on social, institutional and governmental programs pertaining to income and socio-ecological factors. A social environmental framework takes the singular focus off of the individual and places the responsibility on society. It creates a necessary focus on long-term sustainable urban strategies rather than short-term immediate solutions.

As Hynes and Lopez indicate, there is a transition in terms of societal conceptualizations of environment. The “environment” is actively becoming incorporated within daily living and urban spatiality. Such a focus on the environment contrasts sharply with the neoliberal economic/social ethos prioritizing the individual, the market and the representational. Environmental discourses prioritize the collective, the social and the material, indicating a potential space of re-imagining our current political-economic framework in North America. In terms of homelessness, positioning homelessness within an environmental discourse re-frames the discursive context. The environmental discourse requires immediacy and concrete solutions. No longer is homelessness an unfortunate “by-product” of advanced capitalism, but the material effect of public policy decisions resulting from the neoliberal ethos of advanced capitalism.

## Conclusion

Returning to the individualized focus on “productivity” as the dominant neoliberal narrative, it can be seen how this neoliberal social/economic ethos has

become so infiltrated within dominant discourses, it has impacted our very understandings of “good motherhood,” “family” and “homelessness.” If homeless families, who are predominantly homeless mothers with their children, are constructed as individually to blame for their inability to perform “proper neoliberal subjectivity,” then their segregation in isolated motel strips becomes “justified.” This discourse of pathology prevents the possibility for examining long-term sustainable strategies to address the increasing presence of families experiencing homelessness in Ontario.

An increasing focus on the social/built/physical environment will help bring back a much-needed emphasis on material realities. However, the multiple ways in which the social/built/physical environments are themselves products of social discourse and hegemonic narratives must also be recognized. Modernist theories dividing “nature” from the “metropolis” resulted in the construction of insular social housing projects, but it did produce necessary affordable housing. Recent understandings of urbanity and spatiality revealing the necessity for mixed-use spaces has enabled our ability to envision more sustainable urban planning. But within this neoliberal picture of intensification, urbanization and development, there must be a corresponding language of social need.

<sup>1</sup>Name has been changed to protect identity.

<sup>2</sup>Name has been changed to protect identity.

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