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Materials of Movement: Homeless bodies and mobile technologies in a feminist new materialist lens

The deafening sound of passing cars thundered overhead in a rattling tsunami of wheels that reverberates underneath Houston's Interstate Highway 69. The bridges, feeder ramps, and columns that support the highway system above form a concrete valley that feels simultaneously protective and claustrophobic to dozens of residents living on the dirt floor of the underpass. Below the solidity of a cement sky, and between the surrounding walls of concrete, stand a community of nylon tents, trembling with each car's movement. In stark contrast to the immobile columns they leaned against, tents, shopping carts, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags composed a makeshift space of repurposed items that appears fragile compared to the sturdy roads above, as if the slightest breeze would be enough to tip them over and send them crashing to the ground. Homeless persons merged their tents with cardboard boxes and blankets in a makeshift symbiosis. The residents of this concrete valley seemed ephemeral as they darted between the tents and conversed outside of their polyester homes.

After volunteering at Loaves and Fishes, a local soup kitchen beside the interstate, I walked through the homeless encampment beneath the highway, where I spotted police officers informing the homeless residents that they would need to move within the week. The City of Houston, by public ordinance, had been actively moving homeless people from their communities, forcing them to pack what they could take, and leave the rest under the underpass.

When I returned to the soup kitchen the next week, the encampment had disappeared. In its place there were clothes, newspapers, boxes, suitcases, and food scattered on the ground. Some tent-box-blanket structures, outside of which homeless persons had been conversing a week earlier, had been collapsed and taken on homeless persons' uncertain journeys. Others that were too large were left behind. They had been too burdensome to be taken upon the drifting paths of their builders. The next week, a black gate was erected around the space and the remaining belongings were dismantled by the police and swept away by the city's deep-cleans.

Homelessness is often associated with certain materials, technologies, spaces, and infrastructures found in inconspicuous areas of the urban landscape. These materials, such as the cart and tent, are frequently entangled with the marginalized persons that live within them or through them, interacting with and forming different experiences of transience. Rather than interpreting these objects in a functionalist fashion, as atemporal tools in homeless persons' lives, this paper utilizes a feminist new materialist and STS approach to understand the various encounters homeless persons make with these technologies and how new assemblages give rise to new subjectivities as things resist or facilitate "transience". I ask: how do these material-infrastructures afford certain mobilities for homeless residents, what are their political ecologies in the urban spaces that they inhabit and that they simultaneously construct, and how do their intra-actions create new homeless subjects that are disciplined as "transient"? This paper serves as a framework for understanding the technoscientific construction of urban transience among the homeless and offers an alternative starting point to the pathologization of homeless populations in Houston, Texas, who are frequently at the intersections of vulnerabilities based on gender, sexuality, and race. The ethnographic data for this paper comes from three years of

fieldwork involving participant observation and interviews along the Houston homeless service-corridor (adjacent to Highway Interstate-69).

I draw from theoretical work surrounding feminist new materialism (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Coole and Frost 2010) and assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) to understand the entanglements of homeless bodies and materials and technologies. Feminist Science and Technology Studies have done extensive work on upturning the notion that biology and matter are inert. In combining the feminist critique of discursive practices and the social construction of gender (Butler 1990), scholars such as Fausto-Sterling, Elizabeth Grosz, and Karen Barad have denaturalized both embodiment and material objects by paying attention to the “forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies with which bodies, organisms, and material objects act both independently of, and in response to discursive provocations and constraints (Frost 2011, 70).” From this standpoint, we can approach inter-subjective encounters surrounding homelessness in Houston, Texas with a particular attention to the marginalized experiences of the largely brown, black, and trans bodies that must move through the city-space. This paper criticizes the situated knowledges that police and other authorities construct regarding homeless persons, the materials that they act through, and the transience that they generate.

I define transience as characteristic impermanence, disconnected narratives, and mobility. Although the concept has been approached in anthropological studies of transnational migration to describe the physical disconnectedness of migrants (Brettel 2018), I extend this concept to include movement as an embodied practice. Bodies are not transient as a feature of their substance, or as a characteristic of their being. Rather, transience emerges from their actions with other bodies, and the mobilities produced simultaneously. The homeless person acts upon the surrounding materials such as the cardboard box or the shopping cart in as much capacity as

these materials act upon the person. New materialism distances itself from modernist notions of matter as discrete and monadic, a Descartes and Newtonian understanding of matter as moving only when an external force interacts with it to imbue it with the force of action (Coole and Frost 2010, 8). Instead, matter is lively and acts upon the things around it. Their interrelations produce capacities for im/mobilities between human and non-human bodies. This paper analyzes the entanglement of homeless persons and materials and approaches social understandings of transience as an abstracted feature of these mobilities.

In the following sections, I will focus on two materials whose encounters with homeless bodies produce experiences of transience within the larger political economy of displacement and policing of homelessness. The first is the cart, a metal structure with five interlocking sides with a protruding attachment, and a base with four wheels. This technology, which is designed as a shopping device capable of transporting large amounts of consumer items, forms assemblages with homeless bodies in a similar way to its combination with shoppers. As an interconnected machine, the cart-human assemblage can facilitate certain forms of mobility while resisting others. Their movements through the city resist police discipline by avoiding detection and affords certain subjectivities as a result of their embodied encounters with the material, more-than-human world (Braidotti, 2002: 62). Second, I place my focus upon the tent. The tent operates as a technology that mediates the encounters between homeless bodies, materials, and their landscapes. They construct places from the materiality of location, converting mobilities into new structures and environments (de Certeau 1984: 117). The tent, in assemblage with homeless bodies generate transience. I locate transience within the ecology of these material encounters (Bennett 2010).

Cart

Carts are materials that can often affect the mobility of the human bodies that encounter them. They are a common material among homeless encampments, next to street-sleepers, and in front of abandoned buildings. However, they are not particular to homeless use, and in many ways are used in the same capacity as they are in shopping centers. Yet the materiality of the cart affords a particular degree of mobility. Carts act upon the bodies that encounter them, resisting certain forms of movement, while streamlining others. Their wheels make it possible to traverse flat terrains with great ease, while hindering any movement to different elevations or across fissures. This capacity for movement that often orients humans towards its use. Sarah Ahmed argues that materials such as the table are “orientation devices” in which people become directed towards some materials/technologies more than others (Ahmed 237). When someone physically maneuvers themselves around the material, for example climbing under a table and pulling oneself up from underneath it, the material is reoriented through the actions that it does to the body, and the body does to it. In a similar way, the cart reorients itself when it encounters different bodies. These encounters create certain modalities of action, certain tactics (de Certeau 1988: 29), in which the homeless person will act upon a cart in a shopping center and place his/her livelihood into its spacious container.

Through these orientations, or their “multiple modalities of action” as Foster describes them, materials are socially constructed and likewise socially construct our worlds (Foster 14-15). Drawing from Karen Barad’s definition of agency, the cart “intra-acts, ‘doing or being in its intractivity” (Barad 2007: 21). Carts do not simply react to the human’s push, they allow the human to move. The cart may facilitate quick movement as a homeless person pushes it along the street, but it also resists other forms of movement. Houston’s topographically flat landscape

is more or less an ideal space for carts to inhabit. As a paved city-space, Houston's urban environment induces the material combinations of bodies and carts. However, fissures and cracks in the ground can quickly turn this smooth-traveling to a sudden halt. In this way too, the cart can act contrary to others' desires, lodging itself into a crack in the ground or hitting a ledge and then tumbling down. The cart facilitates and it resists (Foster 14). Homeless persons can only push their belongings through designed pathways in the city. There are no off-roading carts. When the cart is taken off of their concrete trails, they are usually rendered stationary, an indicator that someone does not want it to be moved.

In my fieldwork, I encountered the multiple modalities of the cart, and the social worlds that they produced. As I was traveling to my fieldsite downtown on the Houston Metrorail, I observed people entering the train. I noticed that a large number of homeless riders had also entered. My attention fell onto one man in particular who boarded the train first and pulled a metal cart into the car. The cart was full of bedsheets, clothes, and food. A twin-sized mattress lay over its top. I was appalled by how much he had placed into its seemingly fragile metal frame. This structure held the homeless man's livelihood. With great effort, he crossed the gap in the platform and then dragged the cart into place in the wheelchair section. When the Metrorail lurched forward, he placed his weight on the cart and steadied it. The cart and the man were mechanically attached, resistance from one created the necessity for more action from the other. They worked together like a well-oiled machine as the Metrorail sped up, slowed down, and came to a halt.

Additionally, the cart had been combined with further modifications, an indication that matter is indeterminate and constantly forming and reforming (Coole and Frost 2010). A rake jutted out of the interstices on the side of the cart, upon which the homeless man had attached

several plastic bags and his coat. The device's materiality thus extended beyond its original metal frame and into the hangers that swung quietly by its side. As the train continued to speed forward, the man fished into his cart to pull out a backpack, which he attached to the end of the rake. At this point, I realized that the cart could not be considered a single entity. It was an assortment of different material relations that combined similarly mobile items. To return to Barad, there exists no fixed or stable substance (Barad 1987). Instead, there is a constant process of becoming through which materials can change their actions in unpredictable ways.

When the man came to his stop, he and his cart entered into a new landscape through which their capacity for mobility rapidly changed. I chased after the pair, hoping to speak to the man and inquire about his relationship with his metallic companion, but the incoming crowd of people that bustled in after the man successfully exited the cart held me in place. By the time that I left the Metrorail I spotted the man crossing the street towards the McDonalds. I followed to the street light and waited for the walking indicator as I watched the man push the cart behind the McDonalds and disappear. I was startled by how quickly he had moved from the Metrorail platform to the other end of the street, but I believed that his heavy burden would keep him close-by. When the crossing-light changed to green, I jogged to the McDonalds and turned the corner, expecting to see the man hobbling down the parallel street or pushing the cart up a hill or over a difficult curb, but he was no where to be found. Incredible to me, was how he could simply slip away into nothingness. The mobile capacity of his union with the cart made a dramatic shift from his strained efforts to drag it into the Metrorail. The concrete sidewalks turned into his hyperdrive.

The intra-actions between the homeless man and the cart device generated multiple encounters that arranged different orientations towards both the body and the material with

regards to mobility. The homeless body and cart incorporated different “agencies” (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 2-3) as they entered into different landscapes. On the Metrorail, the homeless man faced a resistant cart that threatened to lurch forward with each stop or pull the man backward with each start. Yet, when they exited the car together, the cart’s wheels transformed the duo into a soaring machine as they rolled across the concrete sidewalks. These modalities are strikingly similar to Kate Boyer and Justin Spinney’s article, “Motherhood, mobility and materiality: Material entanglements, journey-making and the process of ‘becoming mother’”. Boyer and Spinney likewise analyze shifting mobilities in the combination of mother-pram-baby. They address how material practices of journey-making among new mothers requires a particular politics of im/mobility as mothers negotiate with their prams (or baby carriages) to traverse across the urban landscape (Boyer and Spinney 2016: 1114). Analogous to the cart’s capacity to carry, store, and expand into appendages such as the rake and hangers, the pram provides a means to carry babies and also offers compartments for pacifiers, wipes, sun hats, and a container for a bottle or snacks (Boyer and Spinney 2016: 1120). The pram could also be cumbersome, destabilizing the patterns of movement that mothers would normally take, with some mothers opting for slings to carry their babies onto busses or trains.

For the cart, as for the pram, its various modalities of action intra-act with a variety of movements from the human body to form assemblages. Returning to Barad, assemblages can be understood as the flowing of “agency” between materials, bodies, and spaces.

“(Assemblages) are themselves phenomena. For example, assemblages are not performed interchangeable objects that sit atop a shelf waiting to serve a particular purpose. They are constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings... The ongoing flow of agency through which “part” of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another “part” of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized. The world is an ongoing process of mattering through which “mattering” itself acquires

meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities.” (Barad 2008: 134-135)

Barad’s model of the assemblage is drawn from several examples by Deleuze and Guattari. The wasp-orchid assemblage, for instance links the wasp’s mechanical movements to liberate the orchid’s reproductive system in a process of continuous becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293). Further, in a lengthy discussion of tools and weapons Deleuze and Guattari argue that machenic assemblages with human bodies constitute “technical elements” at any given moment in their usage, extension, and comprehension. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 398). Assemblages are always discovering potentials for action as they reform and take on new parts. Thus, the cart-human assemblage is in a constant state of becoming im/mobile. Homeless bodies encounter the cart as a different assemblage with every physical maneuver that they have to make: onto the Metrorail, across streets, or into grassy lots. These assemblages mediate different types of mobilities, and by extension, how the homeless bodies that constitute these intra-actions, experience mobility.

The experience of moving is constantly affected by materialities. Tim Ingold approaches this by relating the experience of walking to the use of different shoe technologies. When someone walks upon the ground with their bare feet they can feel the coarse terrain, often very painfully. Varying landscapes become new encounters that must be approached in entirely new ways. Someone does not venture into a field of gravel or the ragged edges of cliffs by simply walking upon their naked feet. Shoes, of a variety of forms, mediate this experience (Ingold 2011: 43). The padded soles and sturdy fabric of hiking boots transform the body’s experience of the most ragged terrain into a plane. Although Ingold does not extend his inquiry much further than to say that materially-mediated experiences construct new social worlds, this analysis can be furthered to argue for the intimately political lives of these assemblages.

To explore how assemblages are actants upon the political realm, I return to the earlier ethnographic account of the disappearing homeless man and the simultaneously participatory/recalcitrant cart. After losing sight of the man from the Metrorail, I doubled-back and started walking towards the train station. As I was re-crossing the street, I spotted another cart further down the road. Similar to the first, this cart was filled with variety of other materials. Clothes, gallons of water and cleaning supplies were haphazardly thrown into its form. Above the metallic frame, a plastic trash bag was intertwined. It had been pulled off the road and brought onto the platform of an auto-body shop. Perched upon the concrete docking bay of the body-shop and placed into the corner of the garage door entrance, the cart had been rendered stationary with plastic container lodged in-between its wheels. A metallic bumper cone on the side of the garage door held the cart's front wheels within the small alcove of the garage door and the wall. When I turned the corner of the auto-body shop, my eyes fell upon a man sleeping on the concrete ground. He had no pillow and no blankets. He was using his arm as his cushion while lying in the shade of the auto-body shop. I considered talking to him, but I would have had to wake him up, and from his uncomfortable position, I assumed he was already exhausted.



As I was about to turn around, a Metro police SUV drove up. He had been patrolling the area, and I had seen him circling previously as I followed the first man leaving the Metrorail. The officer had obviously spotted the shopping cart first as he was driving alongside the Metrorail tracks. As he approached, he flashed his siren lights and drove up to the platform before driving around the corner and coming to the sleeping man. Surprisingly, despite the siren and the rumbling of the SUV's wheels, the man remained asleep. The police vehicle maintained its pace until it came within inches of the man's body. Sensing the massive vehicle practically above him, the man jumped awake and backed up. He looked at the car. The officer lowered his window and asked the man to approach. Although I was too far to hear their conversation, I did hear the homeless man offer his name. They exchanged a few words and the police officer asked for the man's ID. When he had finished checking the ID in his computer system, the officer let

the man go, but stayed in the lot to see the man's destination (and also to presumably monitor me).

I followed the man to ask him some questions about his experience. We sat down at some chairs in front of the Metrorail. His manner was reticent as he rejected all of my questions about the nearby shelters. It was apparent that he had suffered traumatic experiences at several Houston shelters, and so he preferred to sleep outside. When a group of young women and men approached, the homeless man solicited one of them to sell him a joint. As they were making a deal, the officer returned and flashed his lights once more, prompting the group to quickly leave and the homeless man to stand up to move once more. In contrast to his cart, which remained stationary in the corner of the auto-body shop, a marker of temporary fixity, the homeless man was forced to constantly move. Presumably, if he returned to his cart, the officer would still require him to move throughout the city rather than remaining on the property of the auto-body shop. Alternatively, the cart offered the man a point of collected affordances—in the form of his clothes, cleaning supplies, food, and water—which enabled a degree of temporal permanence from its immobility in the secluded corner of the auto shop.

As in the case of the man and the cart stationed at the auto-body shop, they formed an assemblage with a plastic box, metal bumper-cone, and garage door wall that afforded a degree of fixity that allowed the man to rest upon the concrete ground behind the shop while his cart remained more-or-less immovable in its position. However, the same assemblage rendered the man visible to the police patrol that had spotted the cart on the auto-body shop platform. Attached to the private property of the shop, this assemblage was subject to the disciplinary gaze of law enforcement, which acted to disassemble it by separating the homeless body from its machinic relations with the cart and its corresponding stationary technologies. Mariana Valverde

addresses these relations in the multifaceted feature of jurisdiction when she claims that jurisdiction works silently, in the forms of homeless programs and transit stations (Valverde 2009: 146). This mirrors Kyle McGee's examples of technical objects that extend the force of law into everyday life. These "value objects" serve the purpose of both enforcing the law by limiting behavior in a disciplinary fashion as well as projecting a biopolitical force of law upon legal subjects to encourage correct behavior.

Mobilities are experienced in resoundingly political forms, owing to the embodied experience of moving through different assemblages. When homeless persons pull carts over the gap between the platform and the Metrorail, they encounter a certain politics of the infrastructural landscape that they must navigate through. It is clear that the Metrorail is not designed for the heavy burden of carrying or pulling one's livelihood through the metal doors of the cars. In a similar manner, when they push carts down the roads or wheel its metal body across cement pathways, their movements are afforded by the infrastructural design of Houston's road network. These are pathways that have been intricately planned as a web of movement throughout the city. The new assemblage that is formed between the human-cart-sidewalk enhances mobility as the wheels of the cart swiftly roll along the smooth terrain.

The facilitation of and resistance to movement between the cart, the body, and the landscape engage with the "politics of movement". The politics of movement include factors such as: why certain bodies and materials move, the velocity of their movement, their rhythm of movement, the pathways that moving bodies take, and the embodied feeling of moving (Cresswell 2009: 11-26). Bodies are often compelled to move due to internal and external factors. For homeless residents, this can include how acts of policing frequently keep them in a state of movement. Emma Jackson refers to this phenomenon as being "fixed in mobility", an

embodied experience of constant movement that homeless people often face when they are frequently displaced by the police and forced to drift between spaces (Jackson 2012: 726). What is important to add to this description is the role that materials play in fixing homeless bodies in mobility. Homeless persons must develop tactics for maneuvering around police patrols or responding to danger and uncertainty by remaining mobile (de Certeau 1988: 36) through their intra-actions with materials.

In linking the political ecologies that materials and homeless bodies inhabit and intra-act within, we can address what Jane Bennett calls materials' "thing-power", their agency within formed assemblages that convey homeless persons' mobility into larger ethico-political attachments surrounding homelessness (Bennett 2010: 21-21). As noted above, assemblages between the homeless body and the cart can enhance or deter mobilities. The movements that are produced in these machinic relations will not only allow the homeless person to escape detection by utilizing certain pathways conducive to mobility with the cart, but can also magnify the risk of detection by the police when rendered stationary. Homeless persons are thus rendered "fixed in mobility", not only in terms of the policing of brown and black bodies that displaces and disciplines them, but through the material relations that they must form. In the next section, we will address how these material encounters are also important elements in the subjectivation of homeless persons as "transient".

Tent

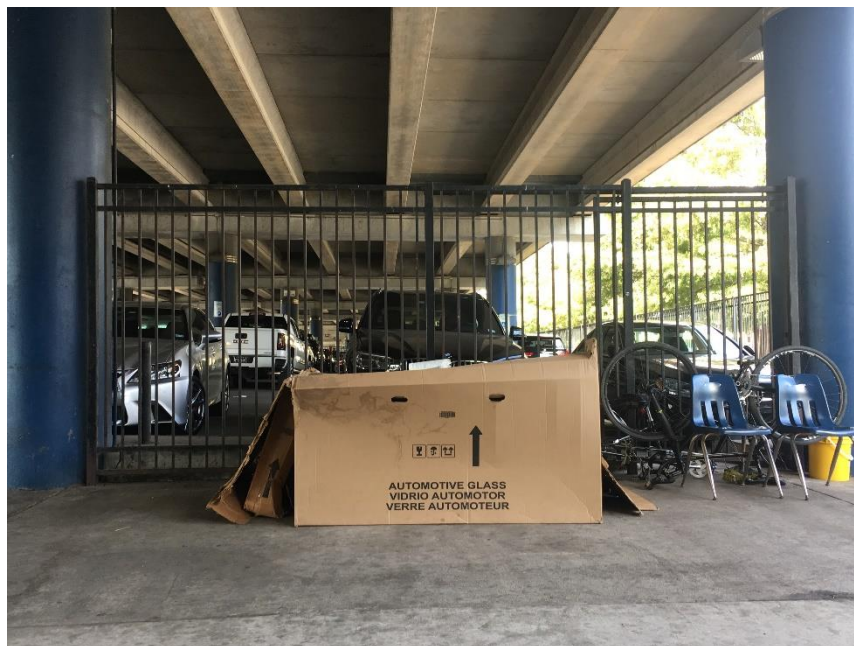
Whereas carts are frequently associated with moving structures, tents are often considered more fixed. They are usually tethered to the ground, a plastic or canvas sheet that remains attached to its rope fixtures. Of course, the tent can be easily folded into itself either through the effort of human hands, or sometimes after a particularly strong gust of wind, but

unlike the cart, the tent is a difficult material to maintain in movement. Instead, its orientations with the human body (Ahmed 2010: 234) often reshape it to stretch its sheet across an expanse of terrain and tightly bind it to the ground. Whereas the cart can afford the body constant movement (unless it is rendered stationary as discussed above), the tent takes on a more peripatetic style of movement. Tents occupy space in one instance, are collapsed, and then occupy space once more in another place.

Tents form assemblages with homeless bodies and can include a variety of additional materials that modify its position in space. I return to the first ethnographic vignette I presented. I was traveling along the Interstate 69 Highway when I passed over a grassy hill directly below a feeder ramp. On the other side of the hill were ten to twenty nylon tents spread out throughout the region. They varied in size, from small domes that could accommodate two people, to large canopies that seemed to fit fifteen. They were crowded together in a small block, a strange sight surrounded by the massive ramps that circled around it like concrete halos. The tents were very visible, occupying the majority of the hill. However, further down the road there were more tents that were sporadically placed underneath trees or under the shadows of the overpasses, hidden from sight. In many instances, the nylon tents were combined with plastic bags that were taped along the sides or the top of the structures. Presumably, these bags kept rain from dripping through holes in the fabric. They also worked to insulate the space inside. In other cases, tents were combined with yoga tiles or wooden planks to create walkways, walls, or patios.

The materialist approach to the tent is crucial because tents can take a large number of forms that do not necessarily represent the nylon structures that we usually think of. Frequently, assemblages take on forms that are unpredictable, owing to the complex intra-actions between the different materials that they consist of (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 7). Directly underneath

the bridge I spotted a large cardboard box that was placed against one of the black gates that had been recently erected. Holes had been cut into the walls of the structure that allowed the resident to peer outside. In front of the box were two plastic chairs that created a front porch to the makeshift shelter while simultaneously holding a bike in place. Plastic bags were scattered around the base of the box, and blocks surrounding the base structure, indicating that the bags could be added to the top to create a wide rain-proof canopy.



These variable forms of tents reveal that “objects are not only shaped by work, but take the shape of the work that they do” (Ahmed 2010: 244). Both the nylon and cardboard tents are constructed assemblages that act upon the human body by holding rain outside of the shelter or acting as a barrier against frigid wind. They are also acted upon by human bodies when they are collapsed, rearranged, erected, or supported with additional materials. A feminist new materialist approach denaturalizes these structures as “shelters” and instead examines the intricate actions that take place within the homeless encampment. As is often reiterated among feminist new materialist literature (Coole and Frost 2010; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007), materials

act as agents with “thing-power”, or as Jane Bennett calls it, *vital materiality*. Vital materiality, for Bennett, is a “continuum of becoming, of extensive and intensive forms in various states of congealment and dissolution” (Bennett 2010: 62-63).

With this lens, we can make the shift away from analyzing the camp in a way that ascribes to it normative interpretations of homelessness as criminal, toxic, or wasteful. Feminist new materialism decolonizes the encampment by examining how materials and bodies generate certain practices in their intra-action that are extended into gendered and racial categories (Foster 2017: 6-10). Homelessness is often associated with certain marginalized bodies. The large majority of those that are experiencing homelessness are African American, American Indians, and Hispanics, owing to long histories of slavery and the displacement and criminalization of black, brown, and indigenous peoples (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2019). Additionally, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender individuals are also overrepresented in homeless populations, owing to social stigma and discrimination in the federal re-housing process. In particular, there is an extremely disproportionate number of transgender individuals that experience homelessness (roughly 1 in 5), and transgender persons are also likely to face sexual violence and abuse when they are homeless (NCTE). All of these demographics indicate that homelessness is largely constituted of brown, black, and trans bodies, and their displacement has taken a colonial, racist, and homo/transphobic trajectory. At the intersection of so many vulnerable communities, homelessness is often ascribed semiotic/discursive meaning as a biopolitical disease or health and security threat. Feminist new materialism questions this depiction of homelessness by incorporating materials within these relations of power and subjectivity.

Tents act upon these relations of power by mediating certain forms of mobility by generating environments that accommodate movement. Gustavo Ribiero demonstrates this by noting how people, and their built environments, “build and transform spaces” depending on the means/materials available and position in society (Ribiero 1996: 133). Ribiero studies shantytowns in Brazil, where poor residents encounter similar items (plastic bags, plywood, metal sheets) to construct new assemblages in their urban environments. Rather than approach these communities as larger sociological wholes, a lens through which these residents are often evaluated, he focuses on the intra-action between materials and bodies. He concludes that built environments and people have a clear impact on one another. Since squatters had little access to “standard building materials and techniques given that they were poor”, they decided to employ nonstandard materials such as flattened tin cans or cardboard in a kind of improvisation (Ribiero 1996: 133). Likewise, persons experiencing homelessness use nonstandard materials in constructing various types of tents. These materials are light, and often fragile or precarious, which produce a degree of flexibility in their layout. Thus, the homeless encampments are dynamic, frequently changed as some materials are passed from one tent to another (Ribiero 1996: 141). Changes in spatial arrangements conform to peoples’ movements between camps as well. Tent communities shouldn’t be considered materially predisposed, but as a mediated entity that incorporates the movements of homeless bodies.

Encampments incorporate movement because tents act as place-making technologies. Although place-making is often interpreted in symbolic terms, it is also afforded by materials. For instance, in the above ethnographic examples of tent communities, the tent engages in a material-semiotic role by both acting against environmental factors such as rain and wind and reacting to human bodies that reside within them, but also by affording symbolic attachment.

Frequently homeless residents would set up chairs or couches around their tent where neighboring homeless persons could drop by to talk. Sometimes, homeless persons found a power outlet to connect a television. They would then invite passing groups of people to watch movies with them. These infrastructures presupposed the mobility of homeless bodies in which materials acted upon these bodies to facilitate their movement (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Vincent Pham argues that place-making can occur when mobile elements become materially embedded in geographic location (Pham 2018: 370-371). Homeless persons experience the embodied mobility of their tents, chairs, or television set-ups. In Pham's ethnographic analysis of Drive-by Cinemas, he also incorporates feminist new materialism to argue that the materiality of the cinemas direct the velocities and temporalities of movement to form certain subjects. The film screenings "encourage participants and passerby to see and feel places differently, as sites of racialized and gendered histories constrained and enabled by bodies making their way through places" (Pham 2018: 380).

Similar to the drive-by cinema, tents literally "DO place-making". By acting upon the movements of brown, black, and trans homeless bodies they engage with intra-actions of "transience". Pham discusses how the drive-by cinema was set up in Filipinx communities to display Asian American film screenings. Pushing back against the concept of an "ethnic enclave", he argued that Asian Americans, who had been displaced from their home countries and resettled in San Diego, could create spaces through the mobile technology of the cinema (Pham 2018: 372). The tent also acts as a mobile technology that is entangled with equally mobile bodies. The homeless person, like the migrant, experiences similar trajectories of dispossession and disruption with "some degree of spatial and temporal dislocation" (Ferrell 2018: 5). They face massive uncertainties about their present residence, their ability to return to

their families or their histories, and of course the unpredictability of where they will move to next.

I observed these experiences of dislocation when I accompanied several homeless caseworkers through Interstate Highway-69. I sighted a tent under a small bridge and investigated. I called out to see if the resident would be comfortable with my presence. To my surprise, there was only a dog inside. As I was walking back, a young man and a middle-aged woman were returning from the pharmacy across the street. The older woman, Sarah, greeted one of the case workers tearfully and expressed how disconnected her life had been. "I'm trying so hard" she whimpered. She had been abused by several men that had robbed her. When she had received supportive housing, she maintained the social interactions that she had cultivated in the encampments: inviting other homeless persons to share the space, allowing them to move freely within the apartment premises, and expecting little more than nominal assistance in return. However, the apartment complex that she was residing in viewed her actions as dangerous and evicted her. When she spoke with us she was distraught. After losing her son recently, she had become very depressed. However, she was "fixed-in-movement" in the camps, giving her little time to grieve.

Her companion, Mike, was less emotionally distraught, but he too revealed his constant mobility and the material affordances that afforded him constant movement. He said that he had been pushed out of his apartments, attributing their decision to "racism against white tenants". When he too had been evicted, he was forced to move in-and-out of his girlfriend's apartment. When he got into a fight with his father-in-law, he returned to the streets. He claimed to have a degree in mechanical engineering, but he hated the idea of working in an office. Instead, he wanted to "be able to look out the window, and know that he could always leave." So, he took up

truck driving, where he said he could “just jump on a truck and start going”. He proudly declared that he had burned his degree in mechanical engineering. Although he remarked that the social conditions in the encampments were severely dangerous, it appeared that the mobility that defined his life was afforded by the tents, carts, and other materials that he found himself interacting with. The disconnectedness of his life’s narrative, from his eviction, to his spat with his father-in-law, to his current probation and desire to drive trucks across the country, constituted a similar embodied experience of movement that emerged through his interactions with materials.

Sarah and Mike’s stories described what I term, “transience”. Transience is an embodied experience of disconnected narratives and mobility. However, it is not a characteristic or substance, as Jeff Ferrell portrays his concept of “drift”. Rather, transience emerges from the intra-actions between bodies, materials, and spaces. It is the performance of an act, similar to Elizabeth Grosz’s account of freedom in a feminist new materialist lens (Grosz 2010: 141). Transience is linked to the action that is connected to an “active self and embodied being”, where it cannot be separated from its entanglements with other beings and objects (Grosz 2010: 147). Materials such as the tent and the cart mediate the narratives and mobilities of humans through their intra-action by providing avenues for certain types of movement. Sarah’s embodied experience of mobility through the encampment did not transfer well into her residence in supportive housing. Likewise, the disconnected narratives of her movements between camps, her efforts to receive money from passing cars were compounded into severe depression when she couldn’t grieve the loss of her son due to being trapped-in-mobility. Mike, although he resented the danger of living underneath the underpass, found himself similarly oriented towards mobility. The materiality of the tent afforded his transience.

Tents operate as knowledge objects that generate transience in their intra-actions with homeless bodies. Homeless persons, in assemblages with tents, carts, and a variety of other materials construct transience in their afforded mobilities. In her analysis of apparatuses for measuring the natural world, Barad argues that there are no “inside” or “outside” of the instrument, its user, and its production of knowledge (Barad 1996). When a homeless person acts upon the tent, erecting it, modifying it, or collapsing it when he/she is displaced by police, their intra-actions generate transience as a performance. In the same way, the tent acts upon the homeless body, storing heat within its structure and fending off rain and wind. Thus, the tent affords peripatetic movements among homeless persons. As an assemblage, human and non-human actants jointly construct the transient parameters of homeless persons’ social world.

Police, caseworkers, volunteers, and Houston residents also intra-act with tents and encampments to produce certain understandings of transience. Although their direct interactions with homeless persons will be addressed in the next section (next section of the thesis), I wish to initiate a connection between the moral economies surrounding homelessness and its corresponding materialities. There has been a recent slew of ordinances from the City of Houston regarding homelessness. These include restrictions on blocking sidewalks or doorways, sleeping in tents (or any makeshift shelter), trespassing on abandoned lots, using electronic devices like heating technologies, and service providers cannot offer food (Flynn 2017). Such legal restrictions frequently target both homeless bodies AND the materials that they come into contact with: such as tents, heating lamps, or boxes. They operate on prevalent moralities of dealing with homeless persons and the materials that they are often found with, and are indicative of a sweeping approach towards homelessness found nationwide. Citing the potential

health hazards and criminality of homeless encampments, the federal government is moving towards increasingly punitive actions against homelessness (Capps 2019).

Approaching this trend from a feminist new materialist lens, we can observe that many of these understandings of transience are generated from the relationship that actors such as law enforcement have with homeless persons, as well as material actants. Tents, like carts, heating lamps, or plastic trash bags can act as knowledge objects that generate what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), and Sandra Harding calls “strong objectivity” (Harding 1992). Police, social workers, and the general public act upon the aforementioned materials from positions in history and power that often understand the tent-box-bag assemblage as a unit of garbage, or the cart as a stolen and displaced shopping cart. However, these orientations towards materials preclude a moral stance on homeless persons that is often translated into a certain objectivity (Haraway 1988). They naturalize materials with inequalities surrounding homeless bodies, constructed as extensions of negative qualities that society ascribes to transience. This isn’t to say that health concerns such as toxic environments in homeless encampments or security concerns regarding homeless persons’ safety or criminal activity do not exist. It is merely to state that ordinances against homeless persons’ movement originate from situated knowledges generated from authorities’ orientations to assemblages.

Ultimately, police encounter the transient performances that are produced in intra-actions between homeless bodies and materials and discipline the brown, black, and trans bodies that are often found in these relations. Homeless persons, carts, and tents are kin (Haraway 1988) to performances of transience. In these entanglements, and heavily criminalized through incessant city ordinances, they become “transient subjects”. They are frequently trapped in their movements, and even when they find a degree of fixity, their mobility is embodied, carried over

into their social relations which are likewise disciplined, as in Sarah's case from her eviction. Similarly, when authorities orient themselves to the generation of transience in homeless persons' entanglements, they are also drawn to the disconnected narratives that these subjects often experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to provide a nascent approach by analyzing homelessness through a feminist, decolonial new materialist lens. I hoped that such an endeavor could possibly denaturalize common and problematic ethico-political orientations towards the topic of homelessness by focusing on the materialities that constitute the experiences and understandings of "transience". Although some detractors may argue that a focus on materials insufficiently addresses the human disparities that exist among homeless populations, I contend that attention to the vitality of materials offers an important starting-point for addressing the marginalized experiences of brown, black, and trans bodies experiencing homelessness. I point to the works of Karen Barad, Laura Foster, Sara Ahmed, Stacy Alaimo, Susan Hekman, Jane Bennett, Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost to argue that human and non-human, organic and inorganic materials are all actants. One is not imbued with agency while the other is not. Rather, they all intra-act in a vitalist fashion. These intra-actions produce embodied experiences among homeless persons.

I offered the cart as an ethnographic example of the entanglement between homeless bodies and materials and the assemblages that they construct. The human-cart assemblage mediates mobility by enhancing or resisting movement in a variety of different landscapes and when encountering other materials and forming new assemblages. Carts act upon bodies to carry other materials and rapidly traverse smooth spaces. Simultaneously, bodies act upon the cart to resist certain forms of movement by fixing the cart to other materials and rendering the

technology stationary. In this way, the assemblage is in a constant state of becoming, in which homeless persons must navigate their urban environments and both the cart and body afford each other a multiplicity of capacities. The assemblage between the cart and the homeless body also engage with certain political ecologies, where the thing-power of the cart allows homeless persons to evade law enforcement and discipline. However, the homeless are often “fixed-in-mobility”, both when they are constantly displaced by police officers, and when their carts make it difficult for the homeless to remain stationary because they form assemblages with regulated infrastructures such as private property. Thus, materials and their assemblages engage with the politics of movement.

Part of the politics of movement involves materials’ acts of “place-making”, which translate homeless bodies’ movements into their spaces and the formation of certain subjects. Homeless persons’ movements are afforded in the peripatetic mobilities of tents, for example, which situate bodies in communities that generate constant movement and disconnected narratives, what I call “transience”. Thus, these materials create situated knowledges of transience in their entanglements with homeless bodies. Transience, however, is also a situated knowledge among authorities such as law enforcement, which understand assemblages that generate it as a health hazards or security threats. What follows this particular objective lens is the criminalization of brown, black, and trans bodies and the materials that they perform with.