About Us Without Us: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Homelessness at the United Nations

Joanna Louise Padgett Herz

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ABOUT US WITHOUT US: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF HOMELESSNESS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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New York

by

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Date Submitted ______________ Date Approved ________________

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Joanna Padgett Herz Dr. Anthony Rodriguez
ABOUT US WITHOUT US: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF HOMELESSNESS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Joanna Padgett Herz

The United Nations plays a major role in creating, changing, and challenging international discourse on social inequities and injustices. Homelessness has historically been an underrepresented social problem within the UN system. To date, no official definition has been established. How has discourse on homelessness been shaped at the UN, if no official definitions have been established? What are the implicit meanings that representatives have used over the years? Homelessness was ignored for many years at the United Nations, and when it was talked about it was described vaguely. How was the discourse on homelessness created and how has it changed? This study examines the culture of discourse production within the UN by focusing on the ways it has understood “homelessness” as a social issue.
DEDICATION

To Argy, Erin, J’mi, Megan, and Sedariest for the laughs and friendship even when things got rough. To Edan, for eight years of listening to my sociological ramblings even when they made no sense. To my family, for always believing I could do anything. Especially, to my mom for pushing me to go to the interview that got me here. I love you all very much. This is dedicated to everyone in the world who is or has experienced homelessness or poverty. You deserve a better system than we have. I hope one day we can make that system together.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Rodriguez and Dr. DeSena for your feedback and patience. Thank you to Lydia Stazen for your support and encouragement at work. And thank you to all of my colleagues at and around the United Nations. And a special thank you to “John,” whom I owe much of my professional success to.
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Introduction

The International Telecommunication Union, the Universal Postal Union, and the Permanent Court of Arbitration all existed well before the establishment of the United Nations. World War I proved however, that these organizations were not as strong as they appeared to be. During this period, President Woodrow Wilson became optimistic about the League of Nations, an international organization designed to settle disputes peacefully. However, the U.S. Congress refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty, dashing Wilson's hopes that the U.S. would even join the League. The League was dominated by European powers, with France, Great Britain, Japan, and Italy in seats of power. Although The League managed to settle some land disputes, it would be unable to stop World War II. The economic downturn of the 1930s made European powers reluctant to take any action against the axis besides appeasement. This ultimately failed, and the League had clearly failed as well (Hanhimaki, 2008). The League of Nations was built to be a peaceful international body designed to avoid future world wars. The United Nations however, was founded as a body to fight against, and establish dominance over the Axis powers. In 1942 the “Declaration by United Nations” was signed by twenty-six nations that pledged to “continue fighting together to defeat the Axis powers and to obtain a ‘just’ peace” (Hanhimaki, 2008). Once World War II was finished, and the allies had decided to expand the United Nations into a further governing body invested in keeping the peace, they wrote out the Charter of the United Nations. One of the key features of which was The Permanent Five. The P-5 are the five nations that permanently sit on the UN Security Council, one of the most powerful bodies at the UN. Not only would these nations always have a seat at the table, but they also had veto power. If even one of them
says no to a decision, it could not be ratified. The P-5 are China, France, Great Britain, the United States, and the USSR (now Russia), all members of the alliance during World War II (U.N. Charter art. 23). The United Nations was and remains built for one group of nations to have power over the others.

Discourse production is a fundamental feature of the UN Charter. Meetings of bodies such as The General Assembly, The Security Council, The Trusteeship Council, and others are required typically at least once a year (UN Charter art. 20, 28, 72, 90). There are resolutions on things as small as budgetary guidelines to sanctions are commented and voted on. Furthermore, required discussions are written into the rules of The General Assembly and The Security Council, two of the most powerful bodies at the United Nations (UN Charter art. 10, 11, 31, 32). The UN was designed to establish a language of “human rights,” “justice,” “freedom,” and “progress.” The UN is a space where organizations and people must balance out the explicit and implicit goals of their nation with entirety of the UN. Programs like the Millennium Development Goals, and the current Sustainable Development Goals have explicit goals: end poverty, end hunger, end all social problems for good, and live in an equal global society. The implicit goals can be seen in the formal and informal structures of the organization. The P-5, the various specialized agencies, who gets to sit on various commission bureaus, and the ever-important security council elections are all explicit ways the United Nations creates power dynamics between nations. Just because these campaigns have explicit objectives does not mean that member states who engage in them are explicit about their goals for power. A nation may argue they want to be on a bureau because they care so much about women’s rights, even if it’s implicitly about the power that being on the bureau for the
Commission on the Status of Women holds. Then there are the implicit power structures: nations with and without social influence. Many other power dynamics play into UN discourse: colonizers vs. formerly colonized, past and current violent conflict, and even who contributes the most money to the UN.

Today, the increase of nationalist politics in some parts of the world has been a strain on the United Nations (Bieber, 2018). The United Nations has openly condemned nationalism. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged nations to strengthen global multilateralism (2018). Nationalist discourse within the United Nations space threatens the very foundation that the UN was founded upon. The UN’s hegemony as an apparatus of modern international relations is contingent upon member states agreeing, at the very least, in the notion that internationalism is a valuable political ideal. What is at stake in maintaining consensus with this ideal, is nothing short of the UN’s political legitimacy and power. The UN’s power as an international institution depends on its ability to define and direct attention for social issues that nurture productive discourse among its member states. In Seeing Like a State, James C Scott outlines the many ways nations have attempted to impose order on societies that had none via a high-modernist worldview. This “uncritical, unskeptical, and thus scientifically optimistic [view] about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production” (2018) often colors the discourse of those at the United Nations. It can feel like everyone in the two-block radius of the United Nations headquarters has the exact right way we could organize society to fix a problem. Scott makes the case for “the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of
unpredictability” (2018). These values are not part of the United Nations’ DNA. The UN meticulously defines, categorizes, and monitors the problems they are willing to address.

The Sustainable Development Goals are seventeen goals and 169 data indicators that were formally developed over two years. Why is homelessness not one of those issues? Because, it has been notoriously difficult to create a consensus about what constitutes “homelessness” within the UN. As Scott argues, attempts for states to make sense of the senseless almost always fail, and end in distrust between the state and its people. Homelessness is incredibly hard to define across national borders. Is a 35-year-old living with their parents homeless, is someone who lives in a hotel homeless, or is someone who could be evicted whenever their landlord feels like homeless? These questions are difficult to answer within one’s own nation, let alone across cultural contexts. It is easier for states to just not do it. But on top of that it is beneficial to ignore it. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guarantees the right to adequate housing (United Nations, 1948). The UN Charter gives the Security Council authority to investigate any nation that appears to be violating the articles of the UDHR. This can result in directives to end the violation, and could end in enforcement measures such as sanctions, financial penalties, travel bans or other measures (United Nations, n.d.). Nations have incentive not to create real lasting discourse on homelessness, because they do not all want to face financial penalties for human rights violations. What would it mean to include those displaced by colonization and imperialism? What would it mean for Palestinians, indigenous peoples pushed into reservations, or descendants of victims of the transatlantic slave trade? This could upend the UN’s view of justice entirely.
So, if there is real discourse at the United Nations that is important to its survival and success, but there is incentive to ignore homelessness, what has the process of discourse production looked like at the United Nations?

Ida B Wells-Barnett ends her book, The Red Record, by asking the reader to “tell the world the facts” in an effort to solve social problems (1894). This is the ultimate goal of this work. What is the history of discourse creation around the word homelessness at the United Nations? How have the meanings, contexts, and purposes of homelessness discourse at the United Nations taken shape and changed throughout the organization’s history? In this study I combine archival research with autoethnography in order to answer these questions. This approach will be advantageous for our look at the historical archives. It will allow us to see both overarching trends, while analyzing what they may mean sociologically. I am not and never have been homeless. My connection to those who have experienced homelessness is my extensive experience serving them. The perspective I offer is that of an advocate who has only fairly recently entered the United Nations ecosystem. Although my relationship to the discursive process within the UN was limited, I was still a part of it. As of writing this I am the United Nations Advocacy Project Coordinator for the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH), an NGO with advisory status with the Economic and Social Council at the UN. The Institute of Global Homelessness’ vision is that “within a generation we will live in a world where everyone has a place to call home – a home that offers security, safety, autonomy, and opportunity” (n.a, 2019). During the 58th Commission for Social Development, in February 2020, I served as the Chair of the Civil Society Forum, series of panels by and for NGOs at the UN focused on homelessness. This commission is the focus of my autoethnography.
Autoethnography Part 1: Getting Started

As an undergraduate, I was part of a service-learning scholarship, where I worked in many different settings for those experiencing poverty and homelessness. For four years I was a Project ID Caseworker for St. John’s Bread and Life in Brooklyn, where we helped people get different forms of vital documents. I served in soup kitchens, clothing donation centers, schools, and food pantries. I went on service trips to South Dakota, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and Ghana. This was how I understood how to help: find out what they needed and provide it. I didn’t care to categorize their living situation, or what got them there.

I began working at a United Nations advocacy non-governmental organization (NGO) in February of 2019, my junior year of college. I was an intern at a religious organization, focused almost entirely on ending homelessness. Although I dabbled in some other areas, such as human trafficking and gender equality, our main focus was always homelessness. I had come in just as it was decided that 2020’s 58th Commission on Social Development (CSocD58) would focus on homelessness. This meant international legislation would be passed addressing homelessness. One of the main goals was to define homelessness internationally. They would not define it the way I understood it. It would be based on their current housing situation: are people living on other people’s couches homeless? Are people living in hotels homeless?

I met “John” in 2016, when I first started working with the UN. John was a UN Representative for the Congregation of the Mission at the time set out to put homelessness on the agenda at the United Nations. He was passionate and relentless in
these efforts. His unending love for “the most vulnerable,” and his ability to work a room was very inspiring. His efforts were ignited by the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian congregation, which included a mandate to refocus the mission’s efforts on ending homelessness. John’s goal was to make homelessness a prevalent, important, and central issue at the United Nations for years to come. John understood that the UN was, as one of our colleagues once put it, “the softest of soft powers.” John understood that when a social issue becomes a consistent focus of discussion among key member states it then gains legitimacy as a problem that can and ought to be addressed.

John aligned himself with other Vincentian, religious, and non-religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the UN to create the Working Group to End Homelessness (WGEH). I will never forget this acronym: not just because of the numerous times I have had to write it out, but because of one colleague's insistence on saying it phonetically instead of spelling it: “weh-geh!” The WGEH decided to target the Commission for Social Development, lobbying for the priority theme to be on homelessness. With much tact and negotiating during CSocD 2019, the priority theme “affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness” was adopted for 2020.

I began as an intern for John and the Congregation of the Mission in February of 2019, just as this priority theme was being adopted for 2020. Besides managing social media and the Congregation’s website, I also worked on several research projects, such as a paper on the UN Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. I also drafted the advocacy guide “Ending Homelessness Through the SDGs,” complete with my own knock off SDGs centered around homelessness (as pictured below). In my role as an
As an intern I did advocacy work to prepare for the commission, I co-wrote the first draft of the Civil Society Declaration with another intern. This work provided me with access to areas designated for representatives. From early on, I wondered if the UN handed out these advocacy passes as liberally I experienced.

**Figure 1. A graphic guide I created on the intersections of ending homelessness and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.**

After all of this work I was quite familiar with the Working Group to End Homelessness, and the NGO Committee for Social Development (NGO CSocD). These two committees would work hand in hand as the commission approached, making sure their messages were cohesive, and that they would retweet each other every day. A lot of
The summer of 2019 I spent working on documents, research, going to meetings, and taking Spanish classes at night. In August, John asked if I would be interested in a job. Having just worked for free all summer, I jumped at the opportunity. This is how I ended up as the UN Advocacy Project Coordinator for the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH). IGH’s goal is to end homelessness on a global scale by connecting academia, activism, companies, and policy makers. They have a close relationship with
the WGEH, officially their strategic partner, but are based in Chicago. They needed a part
time person to liaison between the two and start strategizing for the upcoming
commission in February. I was quickly onboarded and focused my efforts on the WGEH
and NGO CSocD. I had a long list of responsibilities around communication, advocacy,
and organization. What I did not quite understand was the last bullet point: “chair of the
Civil Society Forum.” I would then spend the next 7 months running around preparing an
entire day’s worth of expert panels on homelessness for the commission.

The 7 months leading up to the commission are a bit of a blur of emailing back
and forth, meeting with potential speakers, moderators, and my UN Contact, who I will
call Ivor. He worked for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)
in the Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD). Ivor had a lot of
responsibilities when it came to the CSoCD. While I was never exactly sure what he was
in charge of, it seemed like a lot. He would every now and then mention “his colleagues”
who seemed to tangentially work on the commission with him, but not solely. From my
view, it appeared that Ivor was the in charge of a week and a half of high-level panels,
side events, registration, and making sure no one burned the UN headquarters to the
ground in the process. I did not envy him. One of his many tasks was meeting with me
semi-regularly to make sure I took care of all of the conference services, registration for
the forum was going smoothly, and our internal communications around the commission
was in sync. When Ivor first suggested we meet every week when we were 2 months
away from the commission, I thought that was a little heavy-handed, but I knew he had
been through this many times before. Not only did we meet every week, but we
frequently called and texted about whatever small emergency had suddenly arisen. At one
point, we were involved in a nearly two-week dispute with the communications department hanging the banner announcing the commission outside the UN building.

Amidst all of this, the United Nations was clearly going through a financial crisis. The Secretary-General pronounced that the UN was having a cash crisis in October of 2019, warning they may be unable to pay their employees in November. At some point during the process of working with Ivor, a colleague of mine asked him if he was certain about his next paycheck coming in. He was not. At the time, America was withholding membership dues along with some other countries who were following America’s lead. Ivor’s paycheck depended upon the executive decisions of countries who he spent a lot of time with. What was it like to sit in a room with representatives who had a say in whether he would get to eat in a month’s time? Did that ever influence how he spoke to them? It is an obvious power dynamic that I did not envy dealing with.

Navigating the United Nations’ bureaucracy was tedious and convoluted. Not just with regard to the different branches, committees, and specialized agencies, but also in the literal sense of gaining access to the building, organizing events, and speaking in the commission. Without Ivor I would have broken down crying on the phone every time I had to call the UN Special Event offices to gain access to conference room four.
I. Literature Review

In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault outlines four elements that influence the production of discourse: historical/cultural context, creation of the relations between institutions, “the specificity of these discursive relations,” and the establishment of discourse itself as a practice (Foucault, 1972). Foucault argues, “one cannot speak of anything at any time.” Historical/cultural context requires a place in time in which the object of discourse has a real and complex relationship to other things. The object of discourse must have consequential relationships with other legitimate objects of discourse. It is not only the existence of a topic that gives it historical/cultural context, but its relationship to other existing topics. Those relationships are created between institutions. An object of legitimate discourse’s relationship to other legitimate objects of discourse are brought about by important institutions within the society. These institutional relationships “do not define its internal constitution, but what enable it to appear, to juxtapose itself with other objects…” The specificity of discursive relations refers to the more micro discursive relationships between groups of people within these institutional relationships. That is, interpersonal discursive relationships and those that exist between institutions, are mutually constitutive. Understanding the social influence of an object of discourse, furthermore, requires inquiry at both the interpersonal and institutional scale (Foucault, 1972).

A critique of critical discourse theory is that it assumes that actors intentionally engage with convention, resistance, and reproduction when engaging in discourse, which tends to not be true in everyday life. That is, we are often unaware of how our language challenges, perpetuates, or creates hegemonic relationships. However, within diplomacy,
it is explicitly the aim of a representative to engage in those dialogues. Generally, powerful member states intend to perpetuate their dominance, rising powers intend to establish dominance, and smaller member states and NGOs intend to challenge dominance. States, organizations, and corporations are not people having conversations at a water cooler. In assemblies and commissions, they are reading prepared statements approved by their capital government, not speaking off the cuff about their real opinions. Even in more informal settings, they have an agreed upon opinion with agreed upon language that they stick to. Thus, it would be difficult to divorce their discourse from their clear intent.

Kiersey and Hayes’ critical discourse analysis of Ireland’s Second Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2010) has some elements that may be helpful in this study. They set up the sociopolitical context quite well, giving background on Irish politics, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the world’s highest legal rules on human rights regarding children. However, they employed analysis based on Fairglough and Hastings who believe as they quoted, that “detailed aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, metaphor and idioms can be ideologically significant” (Hastings, 1998). The intricacies of grammar, semantics, and vocabulary can be analyzed when both the speaker/writer and the analyzer are native speakers of the same language, but otherwise it gets quite tricky. At the United Nations, there are six official languages: English, French, Mandarin, Russian, Arabic, and Spanish. However, especially in the early days of the United Nations, transcripts were only saved in a couple languages. This means that many of the statements by member state representatives have been translated into English. These intricacies are then lost in that translation. It would therefore make
more sense to focus on the overarching ideas, implied definitions, and purposes surrounding the discourse on homelessness.

James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State* looks at case studies of different attempts states have made to organize the unorganized. He describes these cases as “[having] the character of maps. That is, they are designed to summarize precisely those aspects of a complex world that are of immediate interest to the mapmaker and to ignore the rest.” He describes these state projects as attempts to map, transform, and yield power over things and people that may not make sense to them. One that particularly struck me was the study of forestry: an attempt to organize forests to maximize the growth of trees in order to sell wood. Scott writes,

> If the natural world, however shaped by human use, is too unwieldy in its “raw” form for administrative manipulation, so too are the actual social patterns of human interaction with nature bureaucratically indigestible in their raw form. No administrative system is capable of representing any existing social community except through a heroic and greatly schematized process of abstraction and simplification (P. 22).

Although Scott’s use of case studies are not exactly what I will be employing here, his analysis of how states “think” is incredibly insightful for this work. Homelessness is a “raw” form of human interaction: a complicated and messy symptom of poverty that does not always fit into our bureaucratic understandings of life. The United Nations and member states are attempting to create digestible bureaucratic understandings of incredibly complicated things. In this study I hope to gain some insight into their attempts at this (1998).
Performing Diplomatic Decorum: Repertoires of “Appropriate”

McConnells’ *Performing Diplomatic Decorum: Repertoires of “Appropriate”* frames “diplomatic culture, practice theory, sociological models of dramaturgy, and the role of emotions.” She examines the performative behavior of us “unofficial” diplomats as we attempt to fit into the diplomatic spaces at the United Nations. This is a review of literature on the history of diplomatic culture, breaking diplomatic decorum, and conforming to diplomatic decorum. Although there is no methodology to follow, the practice of decorum analysis will be important during the autoethnography portion. Although my main focus is on definition and meaning creation, it will be impossible to discuss my experiences within the UN without discussing the role decorum plays. Within every interaction and statement, discourse is taking place and meanings are being made. These interactions, however, are all subject to different rules of decorum based on their time, place, and persons involved. Thus, the rules of appropriate behavior will have to be examined when analyzing my interactions in the United Nations.

McConnell characterizes this decorum as “impression management, whereby an individual attempt to shape how others perceive them by modifying behavior, appearance, and manner.” I can testify to how much diplomatic spaces revolve around these characteristics; even when you do not mean to, you are constantly managing and modifying the impression you give off. I often find myself dressing overly formal for meetings in an attempt to counteract often being the youngest person in the room. Although I could easily dedicate an entirely different study to decorum and impression management, it would be a disservice to ignore it completely in this study. It will be important to keep these theories in mind as I analyze my experiences.
In chapter 5 of Dr. Natalie Byfield’s *Savage Portrayals: Race, Media and the Central Park Jogger Story*, she tells her experience as a journalist attempting to cover racial harassment from the police in the wake of the “Central Park five” case. In detail, she goes over her experience coming across the story, having to fight to get it published, collecting the information, and finally having it delayed and gutted. Byfield writes this as a clear narrative from her perspective, while also adding her analysis of the social relations she was engaging in and observing. She manages to both capture her raw emotions as the subject of the ethnography, unafraid to critique her own thoughts and actions, while also looking at the larger picture of race relations in America. She balances being the subject and the analyzer deftly.

Dr. Byfield manages to explain exactly to the reader how discourse is being created in real time. Discourse is not charted out on a map but created in the everyday conversations between people. Her experiences in the newsroom with co-workers are just as important as what gets printed in the newspaper. This is what I hope to capture with my autoethnography: the discourse creation that takes place outside of the officially written documents. I borrow this form of narrative autoethnography, compiling multiple smaller experiences from CSocD 58 in order to analyze a larger picture of discourse on homelessness at the United Nations.
Autoethnography Part 2: Breakfast at The United Nations

9AM, February 5th 2020

A tradition, as I understood it, was that the Committee for Social Development would have a breakfast meeting with the Bureau of the Commission leading up to it. It happened much later than usual this year, as it was quite a process to get member states for the bureau. There were a few complications: CSocD was becoming overshadowed by the High Level Political Forum and other high profile commissions, and the GRULAC group could not agree on a bureau member, so much so we never got a GRULAC member state on the bureau.

The breakfast was held in a small meeting room in the UN offices. This was one of those meetings that would not end up on official UN documents. Those in attendance were the bureau members, other key member states, key DESA employees (such as Ivor and some of his colleagues) and key members of the Working Group to End Homelessness and the Committee for Social Development. As the Chair for the Civil Society Forum I was deemed a key member. I was by far the youngest person in the room. I tried to ignore that fact, and most of my colleagues did as well, but it always felt like it was at the back of everyone’s mind when they spoke to me. Comments like, “this is nice isn’t it?” and “make sure to get all the food you can!” made me feel as though I had been invited out of the goodness of someone’s heart instead of the merit of my own work. But I knew this was not the case and laughed off anything that made me uncomfortable and moved the conversation back to event planning and policy.

The meeting began with a round of introductions and led into conversations both around the commission itself and the resolution on homelessness that would be passed.
Each member state reaffirmed their commitment to the goals of the Commission for Social Development: protecting the rights of citizens and advancing the wellbeing of all people. I could not help but look around for the camera for the prank as I knew of many human rights violations by almost every member state in the room. But there is a very specific power and social balance that had to be upheld in this conference room.

The social dynamic of this meeting was held together by outward appearances, and inner realities. Every NGO in the room came from a somewhat loose network based on shared values. Every member state came from an administration with its own set of goals and values, and maybe they belonged to a coalition of member states with a set of goals and values. None of these goals and values were fully displayed to the others in the room. Obviously as an NGO committee we were clear that we wanted a definition of and calls for measurement on homelessness, and the member states were clear that they need to agree on some kind of policy on this topic. But there were so many things not directly communicated. Member states were there to have a seat at the decision making table. More importantly I would argue, they were there to assess the threat of our requests. As a member of the NGO sector, my job was to assess the threat of the member states. Who was going to be an ally? Who was going to make this difficult?

At some point the Chair of the Committee for Social Development mentioned the timing of CSocD. CSocD takes place in the middle of February, which is a difficult time for many reasons. Most people at and around the UN do not work too much during December and January, making the preparation time difficult. In my own experience, I had to start my work all the way back in September to account for this holiday gap. Also, it can often be upstaged by the more famous (and well-funded) Commission on the Status
of Women in March, which draws thousands of people from all over the world, leaving a lot of people having to decide between the two. And finally, it is really cold in New York in February. I never really thought about this point until my non-native New York colleagues brought it up; it is a lot to ask of someone to come to New York in February especially if they are from a warmer climate. These seemed like valid points - could it be moved to May or April in future years?

The chair of the committee politely suggested that the member states consider moving the commission to a less crowded, warmer time. One state representative did not like that one bit. He found this idea intrusive and inconsiderate. To paraphrase his argument, “if we have to move this commission, then we have to talk to the others about moving other events, and then other events, and so on and so forth. You cannot just move events around willy-nilly!” (I am almost positive that he did not say willy-nilly, but he may as well have.) The chair of the committee backed off, realizing he had touched some sort of nerve.

Shortly after this, while others were talking, I looked to my right to see that same representative on his phone, texting in another language. Not a surprise, maybe he was checking in at the office or with family. But then at that moment, I noticed that another representative across the table was also texting. After a moment, the representative across the table looked up at the representative next to me with an inquisitive look. They were texting each other during the meeting. I saw for a brief moment, the mask slip. I could see there were things they were hiding from us. That was the moment I knew that this process was going to be a lot more difficult than I had assumed.
II. Methodology

The following sections analyze the United Nation’s discourse on “homelessness” via two methods: a qualitative archival analysis of the use of the word “homeless” from 1947 to 1987, and a narrative autoethnography of my experiences during the 58th Commission on Social Development.

For the archival research I used the United Nations Official Document System (UNODS). Using the search function, looked up the word “homeless” (catching both the word homeless and homelessness), and sorted from earliest to latest. I then coded every instance of the word via concept-driven coding. When I say “instance” I am speaking about the agenda item that homelessness is being brought up within. This allowed for the coding to include context as well as direct references. For each instance I recorded who, what, when, where, and why? Additionally, I recorded whether data is cited or requested, to help determine how big of a role social science has been in this discourse. Each question in the coding may have multiple answers, which is why I also separately recorded the number of instances as not to confuse the two. Below you will see the possible answers to each coding question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Question</th>
<th>Information Recorded</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who (speaker)</td>
<td>Member State, Organization, or Official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position of person speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who (subject)</td>
<td>Is there a specific intersectional social group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For “what,” and “why,” I took a flexible pattern matching approach. I started with a list of categories I believed mentions of homelessness would fall into and added to it as was necessary. Categories added during the process are listed in the appendices.

“What” is based on the now established description of homelessness that came from the 58th Commission on Social Development in 2020. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote in *A Red Record*, “…there is no better way than to uphold the majesty of the law by enforcing obedience to the same…” (1895). However, limiting ourselves to this description would be unfair, as it would be entirely retroactive and would not allow us to explore the alternative understandings of homelessness that may have or may still exist. Based upon this description and other concepts of homelessness I have come across in my work, the initial coding list was:

1 - Lack of physical space
2 - Living on the streets (AKA Rough sleepers)
3 - Shelters/temporary accommodation
4 - Lack of affordable housing
5 - Lack of access to basic services
6 - Refugees (connected to a specific recent event)
7 - Diasporas (not necessarily connected to a recent specific event)
8 - Spiritual/Emotional homelessness (for references to homelessness as a feeling)
9 - unspecified (absolutely no indication of an interpretation of homelessness - just a mention of the word with no real context)

“Why” is to determine the purpose of the mention of homelessness. Here is the initial list:

1- For another purpose (mentioned in passing while discussing another issue or event)
2 - Urging implementation of a new program, initiative, or legislation (encouraging action at the United Nations)
3 - Mentioning a program or initiative already in place, or slated to begin (at the UN)
4 - Mentioning a program or initiative already in place, or slated to begin (within their own country or organization)
5 - Data requested/needed
6 - Data cited
7 - General awareness of the issue (not necessarily asking for a specific action, but asking for discussion on homelessness)
In addition to the quantitative analysis, I added an overarching sociological historical analysis of the discourse, attempting to find the explanations and implications of the trends I found.

The autoethnography is written in a narrative format with an emphasis on sociological analysis. The goal of this narrative is to analyze my own experiences with discourse and power creation around homelessness at the United Nations. As someone who understood homelessness and poverty from a service perspective, I was able to document my journey of changing my understanding of homelessness to align with United Nations discourse. As a subject, I analyzed my own experiences, thoughts, and interactions. This allows us to have an in-depth look at the discourse creation currently taking place at the United Nations.

*Ethics:*

For the entirety of this study, both the archival and autoethnographic sections, I do not mention anyone’s real name. For the archival section, organizations and member states are mentioned to best collect the data, as well as keep track of changes in rhetoric. For the autoethnographic section, organizations and member state names will have been kept anonymous when appropriate. This means if a statement or position was stated publicly by an organization or member state, then their name has been mentioned. But if it was stated in private, then organizations and member states remain anonymous. Additionally, private conversations will be avoided if possible, and only mentioned if necessary to the narrative or sociological analysis.
This was a Sunday, as every year the chair of the civil society forum hosts an orientation to the commission, introducing people new to the commission and/or the priority theme. I put together some of the people I felt had the best grasp on the inner workings of the CSocD. It would not be until they were all sitting in front of the crowd that I would notice they were all white nuns. We went over the history of the commission, its purpose, its possible legal power, the civil society declaration, and I went over some of the content in this paper, as I was in the middle of developing it. I got largely positive feedback, from both regulars and newcomers. At the end I allowed a lot of time for comments and questions as it seemed that the crowd had a lot of thoughts about the program.

One person in particular asked how we could call ourselves experts on the topic, as we had never been homeless. She seemed very upset. I explained that I had not called myself an expert on homelessness, and never would unless I experienced it myself. But I did say I had some knowledge to share on civil society participation in ending homelessness on a global scale. I also explained that this meeting’s purpose was to lay the groundwork for how the commission works bureaucratically and how we can all contribute in a meaningful and positive way; I knew for a fact there was a whole week of lived experiences lined up because I invited many of them. After the orientation I had a couple of my colleagues come up to me and commend me on this answer.

Let us take peoples endorsement of my answer as confirmation that what I said was a socially agreed upon truth, particularly in regard to the purpose of the orientation.
There was a set purpose to that meeting that was generally understood by the participants: to understand the history of, bureaucracy of, and goals of the upcoming week and a half. This was accepted as worthwhile for the about 100 people who showed up on that day. They accepted that this topic, on this day, with these individuals made sense. If someone were to get up in the middle of the conversation and begin talking about another social issue, it would be considered rude. Everyone in the room might agree that the other social issue is important, but they would still consider this interjection rude. This is because meeting agendas are gospel at the UN. If the UN was a church bureaucracy would be its scripture.

This bureaucracy exists partially for the same reason any bureaucracy exists: it brings order to social actions so that it may regulate our rational thinking. When you work in a system that functions mostly on discourse and social relations, this makes sense. I would also argue it is an emotional safety blanket. In my own perspective, and from conversations I have had with others in the UN NGO space, this work can be daunting. Within my own job I am expected to play a part in moving the large machine that is the UN towards defining and measuring homelessness on a global scale. It can be stress inducing, impossible seeming, and emotionally draining. As you move up the ladder in the UN system, those jobs get more and more stressful, impossible, and draining. If you go to someone like Ivor, he is in charge of an entire week and a half of meetings and events that are supposed to end with a large group of member states all agreeing on four resolutions. If we go all the way to the top, to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, his job is to make sure the whole world does not fall apart. It is an impossible task, especially these days. The bureaucracy of rules, meetings, and etiquette
put boundaries between you and the real horrors of the world. Staying on topic, not challenging conventional wisdom, and sticking to the meeting notes all feels routine. That is the safety blanket of bureaucracy.

So when that woman demanded to hear from lived experiences, she was breaking the etiquette. There was a set agenda at that meeting and hearing lived experiences was not part of that. This is partially because trying to understand the United Nations system at hand, as well as the intricacies of homelessness would be overwhelming. From my own experience I have felt like I need to compartmentalize my understanding of UN systems versus my understanding of what causes homelessness. Understanding the horrifying effects of poverty as well as how long it takes for member states to vote on soft power policy, it can feel like you’re working against a system that does not want to take care of its people.
III. Conceptualizations of Homelessness

A Historical Discourse Analysis

1946-1952, The “Palestine problem”

During this period homelessness was mentioned 13 times; the third highest amount among the time periods I have set. The most common implied definitions of homelessness were refugees and diasporas. Most often, homelessness was mentioned in passing in an effort to make a separate point. It was also often used in general statements on the status of homelessness in a representative’s own country. To a lesser extent it was also mentioned in an effort to urge new programs, initiatives, or legislation at the United Nations. While it is not common that intersectional groups were mentioned in connection to homelessness (~32%), during this period if a social minority was mentioned in connection to homelessness Jewish people were by far most likely to be mentioned (66%) (See Appendices A-E).

The so-called “Palestine problem” was regarded as the first major conflict the United Nations was tasked with settling. With Jewish immigrants fleeing Europe to Palestine as World War II ended, and the long history of violence and civil war in the area, the United Nations saw this as the first in a long line of conflicts they could fix. Several decisions were made by the member states; I will be looking at a series of exchanges in this decision-making process that deliberated upon the camps of displaced Jews in Europe. The types of internal conversations, debates, disagreements, and consensus building that are part of the process by which the UN produces discourse on social issues.
On the afternoon of Saturday, May 3rd, 1947, the 73rd Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly (GA) met, with the representative from Brazil as sitting president. Agenda item 15 called upon the assembly to consider document A/299, a plea to allow representatives from the “Jewish Agency and other organizations requesting that they be permitted to express their views on the Palestine problem.” Poland insisted that there were no rules restricting the GA’s ability to call upon non-governmental representatives to gain more information, in fact articles 71 and 80 encouraged this. They said that they only wanted to have a better understanding of whether or not “the Jewish problem is not closely connected with Palestine.” Poland put forth the resolution to “give careful consideration to the point of view of the Jewish people on the Palestine question…[and]...invite representatives of the Jewish Agency for Palestine to appear before the plenary meeting of the General Assembly…”

The United States felt differently, stating that Poland's argument is tantamount to amending the charter, and this is not the appropriate process to do so. The representative spoke for quite a while on the nature of parliamentary bodies and their need for order. They clarified that their objection had nothing to do with the issue of Palestine, but only to do with procedural rules. The US insisted that it is important that they draw their information from the official report on the matter that had been presented to them. Argentina argued that the report that the United States was upholding came along with many concerning procedural issues - such as five countries being consulted on the research before all fifty countries (the number of member states at the time).

The Soviet Union disagreed with the United States. They argued it was important that the Jewish peoples of Palestine be consulted in this decision. The representative
pointed out that “certain delegations consider that the inviting, or, more accurately, the admitting, of representatives of the appropriate Jewish organizations to the General Assembly is fully justified by the situation and conditions.” This was an instance in which the culture and politics of international relations discourse was laid bare. The Soviet representative reminded their colleagues of the reality of the situation: who gets to be in the room. The use of the word invitation indicated a positive, friendly tenure. The representative twisted the language to remind the others of the inverse: without an invitation they are being kept out. The Soviet representative went on to explain that it was imperative for the GA to invite Jewish organizations to speak if they were to be trusted by the Jewish population to make an informed decision.

The Dominican Republic agreed and said that even if this widens the procedural scope of the General Assembly then so be it. The representative painted a bleak picture of the atrocities that the Jewish people of Europe endured during World War II. “For, apart from the political aspect, the problem of these Jews is a human one, since, before the outbreak of the war, the Jews of Central Europe were persecuted by the merciless hand of evil totalitarian régimes, deprived of all well-being and peace of mind and thenceforward reduced to the sad position of stateless, homeless persons.” The representative then bragged about how the Dominican Republic had taken in a lot of Jewish refugees. “When a hearing is granted, as I hope it will be, to the representatives who have asked to speak, no doubt the case of those Jews who are now called “displaced” will not be neglected.” The representative went on to explain how important it was to include the Jewish people in these conversations, and how much Jewish refugees (my word, not theirs) have been extremely valuable to the Dominican Republic. After noticing it was
time for dinner, the sitting President adjourned the meeting vowing they would pick this 
conversation back up the next day.

The Dominican Republic’s remarks seemed incongruent with their colleagues: 
other member states stuck to procedural language, whereas the Dominican representative 
focused on pathos based reasoning. Other member states argued for and against this 
procedural change based upon the United Nations Charter, the only thing that legally 
binds the General Assembly rules. However, the Dominican Republic did not make a 
clear procedural based argument. Instead their intention was to reframe the conversation 
entirely: the Jewish people of Palestine were victims and the representatives who oppose 
them speaking at the GA are allowing that to continue. The specific mention of 
homelessness was a tool to reframe the Jewish people as victims, and not just procedural 
pawns. But, the representative did not bring up their status as “stateless, homeless 
persons” to brief the room on the situation. They all knew at least somewhat about the 
hundreds of years of discrimination and violence Jewish people have endured. “Stateless, 
homeless persons” is a vague status: what does this actually mean? The representative 
was making a clear distinction between “stateless” and “homeless.” Stateless is a more 
legal term, meaning that a person has no citizenship. But homeless is less clear; we 
cannot say for certain if they meant not having shelter, not having a stable home, or if 
they meant that no country was their home. That did not really matter to the 
representative. What matters was the connotation that homelessness had: it is bad. The 
Dominican representative was using homelessness as a talking point to justify a 
procedural change (General Assembly, 1947).
Four days later, the 48th meeting of the First Committee of the General Assembly took place. With Canada as the presiding Chairman, agenda item number six was

“Constituting and instructing a special committee to prepare for the consideration of the question of Palestine at the second regular session of the General Assembly (document A/C.1/136).” Document A/C.1/136 was a letter from the President of the GA asking the first committee to address this topic. After chastising the other representatives for being late, the chairman read aloud the previously adopted resolution that invited both the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the Arab Higher Committee of Palestine to a hearing.

The goal for that day was to begin creating a special committee for these hearings and to consider the “Palestine question.” The chairman reminded everyone that the conversation was to stay on the creation of the ad hoc committee, and not the Palestine issue itself.

As the member states discussed the two possible resolutions on this matter, the representative from Norway called the attention to the “question of homeless Jews in Europe.” They went on to explain that these two problems have been linked together by the committee, attempting to solve the problem of Jewish homelessness through immigration to Palestine. They questioned if these two problems needed to be so closely tied with one another - does one not complicate another? They proposed that the committee conduct a special study on Jewish homelessness in Europe, stating that “it is a fact that even under the most favorable conditions Palestine is not able to absorb, for a long period, all the Jewish refugees and all the homeless Jews in Europe.” They pointed out that once the problem of Palestine is solved there will still be homeless Jewish people in Europe. The Jewish people needed new, permanent homes. They went on to thank the
Netherlands and the authorities of Dutch Guiana for assisting in the “large-scale Jewish colonization in Surinam” (General Assembly, 1947).

Norway used the word homeless quite a bit more than any other representative in this conversation. Yet, they were still unclear about what they meant by it. They mentioned refugees and homeless individuals, making it clear they meant different things, but not how they were different. “The problem of Jewish homelessness can only be solved by finding places for large-scale colonization somewhere within the overseas areas of the freedom-loving nations.” Fixing homelessness, with colonization? I will not debate whether the resettling of Jewish individuals in Surinam was or was not violent, but it cannot be ignored that this word has a violent connotation. There are two ways we can interpret this: one, that like homelessness colonization was also an unevenly used term that means something different today, or that Norway was comfortable putting the needs of the homeless Jews in Europe over the rights of indigenous peoples overseas.

The next morning, the representatives from the Jewish Agency for Palestine were heard. A representative Rabbi described the Jewish Agency for Palestine as “[speaking] for the Jewish people of the world…” He explained that his organization’s goal was to establish a “Jewish national home.” He argued that the committee should visit Palestine to see the “creative effort and achievement” of the Jewish people. “In Palestine, they will see what the Jewish people, inspired by the hope of reconstituting this national home after the long, weary centuries of homelessness, and relying upon the honor and the pledged word of the world community, has achieved in a few short years against great odds and seemingly insurmountable handicaps.” Later, a representative from South Africa asked a clarifying question about the Rabbi’s mention of homeless Jews in
Europe. However, the Rabbi has actually referred to them as “displaced persons” (General Assembly, 1947).

The Rabbi’s use of homeless seems to point to a relationship with a country rather than physical shelter. In fact, the representative repeatedly referred to a “Jewish national home,” implying the homelessness he spoke about is a national one, and not a sheltered one. He did not, however, refer to the Jewish people in Europe as homeless, but as displaced. This is a more emotional or spiritual understanding of home, rather than a physical understanding of it.

The next day, May 9th, 1947 the conversation continued. It began with a resolution decided upon by an appointed sub-committee stating that they do not recommend that the First Committee hear from thirteen non-governmental organizations that had requested hearings. They did clarify however, that once the special committee was established they could hear from these organizations. After this was settled, they moved onto another resolution put forward by another sub-committee: synthesizing three different resolutions that had been put forward in regards to the creation of this special committee.

Many changes were suggested and adopted; Norway continued their concern for the homeless Jews in Europe. The representative insisted that the problem of Palestine included the problem of homeless Jews in Europe. They pointed out that immigration is a large part of the Palestine problem, and that the representative from the Jewish Agency for Palestine had asked the committee to visit “the camps for displaced persons in Germany.” Asserting that “the problem of the Jewish homeless in Europe is an integral part of the problem of Palestine. I take it, therefore, to be the sense of this resolution that
the committee of inquiry should be instructed to investigate the problem of the Jewish
refugees, and that the committee would be entitled to present such proposals as it may
deem useful for the solution of the problem of Jewish refugees.” Norway used the terms
refugees and homeless people interchangeably. They also did not mirror the language of
the representative from the Jewish Agency for Palestine. The representative from the
Jewish Agency for Palestine only ever referred to the Jews in Europe as “displaced.” He
did refer to the Jewish people as a whole as homeless, insinuating they would be
homeless until they had their own “Jewish national home” (General Assembly, 1947).

It is clear that the representative of Norway and the Rabbi representative of the
Jewish Agency for Palestine were speaking about different things. The Rabbi used these
terms in a way that was familiar to him and (most likely) to the Jewish community he
lived in. He spoke about homeless and displaced people in his community in a very
interpersonal way: asking the committee to physically see them and speaking about
Jewish people as a “homeless people.” Norway, however, spoke about these terms in
academic, legal, and capitalist terms. Norway wanted to categorize and calculate the legal
statuses of a group of people who were not in front of them. These mismatched ways of
looking at this group of people were not only not addressed. The Norwegian
representative mentioned multiple times that they were merely responding to the
concerns of the Rabbi, even when they were not. The nature of these discussions did not
lend themselves to understanding these marginalized groups better either. Member states
allow for certain NGOs to speak for an allotted amount of time, with pre-written and
accepted language. Speaking through stilted, censored, choreographed statements does
not allow for the authentic first-person knowledge that James C. Scott says is so important to actually solving problems.

1953 – 1959, Homeless People as Victims (but not of the economic system)

1953-1959 saw the lowest amount of discourse on homelessness at the United Nations with only four instances. Youth, trafficking victims, and Armenians in connection to homelessness were all mentioned once each. Again, it was most likely to be mentioned in passing to make another point. Most likely it was unspecified what the implied definition was, when specified refugee was the only specification (See Appendices A-E).

A common theme at the United Nations is a focus on homeless children. Children experiencing homelessness face specific challenges that need to be addressed, but they are often mentioned with little reference to the adults that may be with them experiencing homelessness. The first Social Commission in 1948 mentioned wanting to end child homelessness, but no mention of adult homelessness. From 1953 to 1959 the rhetoric on homelessness focused primarily on natural and man-made disasters that caused sudden homelessness, and children experiencing homelessness. This framed homeless people as victims of circumstance, but never victims of the economic system. This section will examine two documents: one that focuses on homeless children, and one document that focus on an event that caused sudden homelessness for a large group of people.

In the 1957 Report on the World Social Situation, in a section focusing on Juvenile delinquency in relation to urban growth, it was stated that “Even youths who
migrated with their parents or were born of migrant parents often do not receive adequate parental supervision and guidance, as mentioned above, and the younger generation, brought up in the city, may regard the older generation as backward and primitive and refuse to be guided by it. In addition to such circumstances the temporary and unstable marriages and liaisons which are quite common among populations in transition produce large numbers of broken homes and abandoned and homeless children.” The report goes on to explain that “the weakening of family, kinship, and community ties” may result in children finding comfort in gangs and other friend groups that commit petty crimes.”

Moreover, children are often recruited by criminals in the city or even imported for purposes of exploitation. It has been reported that in Istanbul, for example, homeless youths are engaged to work in the black market by older established offenders. Indeed, homeless youths coming from remote parts of Turkey form the main source for the recruitment of juvenile delinquents. Practices of this type illustrate the fact that the social problems of urbanization may be self-perpetuating: an urban class of people who live by crime recruit the unwary youth into their ranks and the latter in turn become members of the class. Parents themselves often promote juvenile delinquency by encouraging their children to engage in certain types of undesirable activity. A case in point is begging, which may lead to delinquent behaviour and in certain countries is handled by the same courts and agencies” (Bureau of Social Affairs & United Nations Secretariat, 1957).

The children are painted as victims. They are victims of exploitation and recruitment, but adults are not. Adults are framed as creating broken homes and encouraging delinquency
in their children. They are never called homeless, even if it is insinuated that they may be in the same position as their children. The report created an image of the impoverished migrant as one that could not have stable relationships and encouraged their children to commit crimes. This section made no mention of the economic and racial systems that may have been pushing migrants into poverty and crime. This made the word homeless into a badge of victimhood by other persons, but not by the systems that the United Nations and the member states uphold, but by other impoverished peoples.

On February 15th, 1956 the Report of the Secretary General on “information from non-self-governing [Asian] territories” was released. It included data analysis of colonized territories in the Asian region. Under the “Social Conditions” section for Hong Kong they wrote that “Since the end of World War II more than a million newcomers, the majority refugees, have come to Hong Kong, causing serious overcrowding. During the year some 260,000 squatters were living within or near the urban centre. In 1953 fires in the squatter area made more than 40,000 persons homeless. The acute shortage of fresh water reduced the water supply to four or five hours a day for a great part of 1954 further complicating the health problem” (General Assembly, 1956).

They differentiate between refugees and homeless individuals. The people living in “squatters” areas were not homeless until there was a sudden event that was out of their control. But there was no mention of the system that put them into unsafe housing conditions. This further designated being homeless as being a victim of circumstance that did not include the economic system that created the commodification of housing in the first place.
1960 – 1966, Attempting Academia

Homelessness was mentioned seven times in this time period. Once again, the implied definition was most likely not clear, but when it was, it was most likely to mean refugee. Most likely, it was mentioned to cite data on it. No intersecting social group was clearly mentioned multiple times, with Latin America, children, youth, the aging, Africa, and Asia all being mentioned once (See Appendices A-E).

In this period, we see a couple of new attempts at understanding and categorizing homelessness. Previously, the use of the word was less academic: its use was inconsistent and therefore difficult to create international policy on. These attempts at categorizing homelessness show an interest at this time in state regulation of people experiencing homelessness. As James C. Scott explained, the state will try to make sense out of matters that may not comfortably fit into categories for research. This was an attempt to regulate and get what they want out of a system. One example of this is from the 1963 Report on the World Social Situation. In the introduction they assumed based on “scanty evidence” that “the number of those in conditions of special need - the homeless, the unemployed, the blind and cripples, children without families, youthful delinquents and aged derelicts” had gone up substantially. This language gave homelessness a passive role. It is a condition, the same as a disability, not an act of losing housing itself. This disconnected the governmental responsibility of providing adequate housing to the actual experience of being homeless. If homelessness is framed as a condition inherent to a person, rather than a status thrust upon them by the socioeconomic system, then it is more difficult to imagine how we can solve that person’s homelessness.
The report stated in reference to impoverished countries, “in some countries group shelter has been provided for a few of the homeless aged…” This was the first mention of elder homelessness I had found. Elderly individuals may have been seen as innocent since they may be unable to work, allowing one to avoid the capitalist conversation on “personal responsibility.”

The Thal Colonization Project in Pakistan was then cited as “an outstanding example” of using uncultivated land to alleviate overpopulation pressures. The project created housing in uncultivated areas for “displaced and homeless persons.” This was the first time I found that a specific policy or strategy was cited for creating housing. It also furthered the discourse that being “displaced” was different than being “homeless.”

Finally, the report focused on “urban social welfare services.” They described these programs as addressing “urban life under African conditions.” They listed programs for “homeless children” as one of their priorities. We can see the work on childhood homelessness continuing. However, the use of the term “African conditions” shows the clear view of African countries as more prone to social issues such as childhood homelessness. It is similar to the assignment of homeless as an intrinsic trait to a person. If there is such a concept as “African conditions” then these African nations must have something intrinsically wrong with them that cannot be helped.

1967 – 1973, Colonization and Homelessness

These years’ discourse on homelessness were dominated by colonization politics, with a majority of the eight mentions of homelessness referring to Palestinians, or Arabs
in Jerusalem. All other mentions referred to Africans in South Africa. Once again refugee was the implied definition of its use. It was most commonly used to urge new programs, initiatives, or legislation at the United Nations. But, it was also commonly used to make general statements on homelessness in the representative’s country, and for other purposes (See Appendices A-E).

As we have seen, actors within the United Nations systems had a tendency to use words like refugee, displaced persons, and homeless persons interchangeably. 1967 to 1973 is a great example of that tendency as the United Nations addressed colonization and displacing of people in African nations, and in the Israeli and Palestinian region.

On the 29th of September 1967 the Secretary-General transmitted the report of the International Seminar on Apartheid, Racial Discrimination, and Colonialism in Southern Africa to the General Assembly. In this report, it was noted that in several member states in Africa, South Africa included, minority whites owned most of the farmland, and paid African workers extremely low wages. “Apartheid has been introduced in South Africa solely as a new way of enslaving the African people. It was only by that modern form of slavery, which depressed the value of labour by depriving Africans of human dignity and personal security and making them homeless, that capital invested in South Africa could reap the highest returns” (General Assembly, 1967).

This use of the word was significant as it did a couple things that I had not seen before. First it directly spoke to adult homelessness as a systemic issue, rather than treating people experiencing homelessness as victims of random chance or intrinsic negative character traits. Second, it directly linked racial discrimination to housing. This would prove in the upcoming decades to be an important talking point. By
acknowledging that a government’s inherently racist policies were causing homelessness, the United Nations apparatus was acknowledging that a government could create a systemically oppressive system that could create homelessness that was no fault of those experiencing the homelessness. Governments could then be held accountable for the housing status of its citizens.

In this same year, a special committee on the “situation with regard to the implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence of Colonial Countries and Peoples” was in session. In one meeting, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Zambia stated that

[T]housands of families in Angola, Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia, South West Africa and South Africa were close to death from starvation. Some of them were homeless without medical care. Freedom fighters needed substantial financial and material assistance if they were to wage a successful fight for independence. If the Special Committee was to rise above a status of a debating society, to which the passage of time seemed to have relegated it, it should engage in practical programs designed to assist the oppressed peoples of dependent Africa and to help them attain independence (General Assembly, 1967).

This was a new narrative within the United Nations: that homelessness can be the fault of systems rather than happenstance and poor decision making. What is even more interesting is that the Minister was going directly against the language couched within the special committee’s title. The declaration this committee was assembled under was for “granting independence” not funding for the people within those nations to fight for their own freedom. The Minister was asking the committee to aid an already established
political faction within the region to self-determine their form of decolonization, rather than hash it out via debate politics determined by people who were not from the region or experiencing their struggle.

The Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) also made a statement to this committee. They explained that if the United Nations was not going to step in and help them decolonize they were going to keep fighting “to the bitter end.” They went on to describe the different forms of colonization Africa had experienced:

In recent years another urgent problem had arisen in Africa: that of refugees and displaced persons. Portugal, South Africa and their colonial friends had uprooted thousands of innocent people from their countries and rendered them homeless. Hundreds of thousands of peace-loving Africans had been forced to flee their countries as a result of the manoeuvres of the colonialists and their friends. While OAU appreciated the good work of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, it appealed to the Special Committee to use its good offices to inform the United Nations that the best solution to the problem of refugees and displaced persons was the abolition of colonialism” (General Assembly, 1967).

Here we see “homeless” being used in a wide variety of contexts. Not only in the past has it been used for countries in Europe, and not for countries in Africa, but multiple countries in Africa, all with varying climates, socioeconomic circumstances, and political standings. This set the precedent that homelessness can be anywhere, in any context. This made it a very wide ranging and versatile concept. We also see the word refugee and the
word homeless being used in the same context. This again begs the question: were member states using homeless to mean literally not having shelter, or to mean a lack of community or statehood? I would argue at this point they were using them interchangeably, without much clarification. This allowed the term to be malleable; anyone could shape it to mean what they want. Combined with the fact it elicits sympathy, made it a powerful political tool.

While those important connections between homelessness and oppressive racial and economic systems were being made, none of these connections were being made by member states.

_in 1974 – 1980, UN Habitat_

In the late 70s we see a significant uptick in mentions, with eighteen. Most commonly, it was mentioned in passing for another purpose, but was also often mentioned in general statements about the representative’s country’s homeless population. Again, refugee was the most common implied definition, but in close second was having no clear implied definition. Palestinians were most likely to be mentioned in connection to homelessness, with religious minorities and children in second place (See Appendices A-E).

In 1976 the first ever United Nations Conference on Human Settlements took place in Vancouver, Canada. This conference would lead to the creation of the UN Habitat office. In my research, only one mention of homelessness from that conference came up. In the report of the preparatory committee on its second session, it is explained that a drafting group was gathered to create a Declaration of Principles. During
discussion of the draft it was noted that “Some representatives requested that a special paragraph be devoted to the issue of homeless people displaced by natural or man-made causes and whose rehabilitation should receive the highest priority from the international community” (UN Conference on Human Settlements, 1976).

The use of the word “rehabilitation” framed homeless people once again as having something intrinsically wrong with them. While it was made clear that this is not their fault, by defining them as “displaced by natural or man-made causes” it did frame this as a random happenstance. It was a strange contradiction: it framed homelessness as something that is random that could happen to anyone regardless of economic circumstance, but also something wrong with a person that needed rehabilitation. It reminds me of how people talk about illnesses, like anyone can get them no matter your socioeconomic position but it often takes quite a lot of money to recover from them.

They did acknowledge that homelessness is not completely out of humans’ control, having stated that homeless people can be displaced by man-made causes. However, they describe homelessness as something that occurs from a single event rather than any larger system. You could argue that they are not saying all homelessness occurs from single events, just that they want to focus on that type of displacement. In that case, there was no interest in looking into homelessness that was not caused by a single event. To this day, UN Habitat’s work primarily focuses on what one might call “displaced” persons. They advocate for safe and equal urbanization, access to basic services, and connected issues. The word homeless does not show up in their mandate.
1981-1987, The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless

Our final time period by far had the most mentions of homelessness with 35 instances. However, it was the vaguest of the time periods. Most likely, homelessness was mentioned in passing for another purpose and with no clear implied definition. In proportion to the number of mentions, there were few connections to intersecting social groups, with children being the most mentioned at only two instances (See Appendices A-E).

The lead up to 1987, The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH), was significant. Secretary-General’s reports, negotiations on funding and programs, and policy recommendations. It was the first wide scale action by the United Nations to directly address homelessness. We end here, as it is the product of all the dialogue on homelessness before it. In terms of specific language, I chose to focus on the final resolution, as it acts as the official final conclusions of the work done and what the member states involved have walked away learning.

The final Economic and Social Council resolution on the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless had three operative paragraphs. In neither the preambulatory paragraphs nor the operative paragraphs was the word “homeless” used outside of the title of the year (IYSH). Words that were used instead included: “the poor and disadvantaged,” “the world’s population [that] does not have adequate shelter and lives in extremely unhealthy and unsanitary conditions,” and “inadequate shelter.”

Even while attempting to understand, categorize, and alleviate homelessness the word is avoided and reinterpreted. The member states felt more comfortable addressing those in poverty, those without adequate shelter, and those without access to basic
necessities. A variation of adequate shelter, “adequate...housing” can be found in the 25th Article in the Declaration for Human Rights. The terms adequate shelter and adequate housing are still used to this day. It can be found in the sustainable development goals, and in the 2020 Commission for Social Development priority theme, and its subsequent resolution. Adequate is an interesting word; no shelter at all is inadequate, but the term adequate often implies that something is already there. By insisting that people have inadequate shelter, it can imply to many that they already have some form of shelter (General Assembly, 1987).

It is important when interpreting the use of this term to remember that these are not individual people having a conversation, but individual people representing the interests of states. An individual may think it is fairly obvious that “inadequate shelter” would include no shelter at all. However, this language is ambiguous and up to interpretation. While an individual may stick to what they deem the obvious interpretation of a term on principle, a state has no such morality. A state will interpret language based upon their own goals. If doing the extensive work to house people who have no home is not part of that goal, then inadequate can be interpreted differently. It can mean making sure there is more real estate business, rather than public housing. It can mean construction to already existing housing, which in some cases can lead to gentrification. It can even be interpreted to mean adequate relative to an individual’s wealth rather than relative to their needs.

This is the delicate balance member states attempt when talking about messy issues like homelessness: how do we appear to care but also leave enough interpretation that member states can frame their inaction as local interpretation?
Autoethnography Part 4: Playing the Role

Monday started with the opening session of the commission. Conference room four was packed with representatives from member states, dignitaries, and NGOs. Conference room four is divided by those sitting on “the floor”: the seats on the main floor right in front of the speakers’ podium, and those sitting on the balcony, a large set of seats facing the floor seats. This is a separation of powers via space. NGOs were set up not to participate, but to spectate the meetings. High up on the wall opposite the balcony where NGOs sat there was a little window that tour goers could look through. They could not hear the meeting, but they could see it. It is the most poetic expression of most people’s understanding of the United Nations: this large body of people meeting. It looks important, but they are not really sure what it is all about.

Most main commission events have a similar structure: representatives reading statements directly off a paper. Statements were made on climate change, peace, economics, and pretty much everything else under the sun. While they managed to mention homelessness in the introduction, many representatives found the easiest way to change the topic. There could be a lot of reasons for this: That particular representative is passionate about an issue that is not homelessness and wants to take the opportunity to talk about it, or there is a mandate from capital not to directly address homelessness for one reason or another. Or they simply do not have enough research or understanding on the issue to make a confident statement on it.

You can speculate for each representative what their reasonings were, but the effect is the same: we do not want to talk about homelessness, we want to talk about this. Obviously almost every topic can be brought back to poverty and homelessness, but that
connection was often ignored in favor of boasting about whatever the member state had accomplished, even if it was not really related.

I was there, ready to listen intently and take notes on everything anyone said. I sat there with my laptop ready, staring intently at the large screens in the front of the room that were showing whoever was speaking at the moment. This zealous note taking would wane throughout the commission. Not only because of exhaustion, but a realization that the meetings taking place in the large and public conference room four were not the decision-making spaces. I would come to understand that while the NGOs ran around having side events, and large speaking engagements happened in the conference room, the member states were meeting. I would get my real information in hushed whispers from colleagues as they came back from negotiation meetings: “so and so is trying to influence so and so,” “This person is trying to talk to that person to get them on our side again,” “I do not think we are going to get everything we wanted.”

I asked several times if I was needed in the negotiation rooms but was told by higher ups that I was needed at NGO side events and focused on the Civil Society Forum on Friday. Was I not in that room because of inexperience? Probably part of it, but I knew of people with similar positions as me going in anyways. No, they were not lying when they said I had a specific role to play. Throughout the week that question plagued me - what was the role I was playing? In past positions it was very clear what service I was providing people experiencing homelessness: I was serving them food, I was helping them get vital documents, or any other obvious service. But there was no obvious service at that moment.
I went from side event to side event, mostly just attending, at times speaking, and it felt like the same meeting over and over. No one was getting a place to live, no one was getting a meal to eat, and I was getting more and more exhausted by the second. I felt useless. If I were writing this in the middle of the commission, I would tell you that the purpose of the United Nations is to exhaust activists just so they will stop complaining. I still think that is partially true, but I would not understand my real purpose until the commission ended.

Side events were often not about what anyone had to say, but about who was in the room. What speakers could you get that would excite people? Who was going to come to support you? What organization is putting on the event? When I decided which side event to attend, I would often ask a colleague about it. The decision to go to an event was not typically about the topic, but how much we felt obligated to attend. Did we work with that organization a lot? Do we know someone who worked on it, or are speaking on it?

Side events are not designed to share new, valuable information that can inform the work of NGOs, that is just a side effect. The point of having side events is internal community building and external spectacle creation. The NGO ecosystem around the United Nations is a type of community with hierarchies, its own language, and its own history. As a community building tool side events can:

- Build (or destroy) trust between people and organizations by working together
- Allow people to display (or not display) their support for a cause or organization
- Build new understandings of social dynamics between the individuals, their organizations, and the United Nations
- Help form a community’s understanding and language of a topic

All of these things are important to how advocacy currently works at the United Nations, but not necessarily important to housing anyone experiencing homelessness. As the UN NGO community is developing stances, language, and strategies around homelessness, few to no people who have experienced homelessness are in the room. And they are definitely not at the center of the operations.

Two worlds of discourse were being developed at the same time, in the same building. The state representatives were building their own language and understanding in their closed off negotiations, just as the NGOs were at our side events. While yes, some member states went to some side events, and some NGO leaders were allowed into the negotiation rooms, it was always clear who had control over the narrative in the room.

It points to a flaw in my archival research: it does not capture the discourse of NGOs and activists. It necessarily relies on the official word of the United Nations, which does not include third party advocates such as me and my colleagues. Thus, in this next section, as I recount the trends of homelessness discourse at the UN it is important to remember that we are only seeing one side of the story.
IV. The 2020 Commission for Social Development Priority Theme Resolution

The final document we will be looking at is the draft resolution on the priority theme for the 2020 Commission for Social Development: affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness. This was the resolution that I helped advocate for, but I did not have final control over language or was involved in the negotiations in any substantial way. My goal in analyzing this document is to evaluate if and how the understanding of homelessness has changed since the IYSH in 1987.

The word “homeless” shows up 54 times in this document. It was used mostly outside of the name of the event, already a vast difference from the final resolution of the IYSH. Some causes for homelessness cited included climate change, humanitarian emergencies, abandonment of children, HIV/AIDS, armed conflicts, unaccompanied migration of children, and poverty. All of these issues have ties in systemic issues around the world. This outright acknowledgment of systemic issues causing homelessness is a vast improvement from IYSH. However, those systemic causes end there: there is no clear explanation of how they are connected, who causes them or what we can do to change those systems.

There is a lot in this resolution, so I want to focus on a few key things. First, most of it is clarification. It cleared up what may cause homelessness, what can alleviate homelessness, and what homelessness even is. One of the most important statements is that “...while homelessness is mainly driven by structural causes, including inequalities, poverty, a loss of housing and livelihood, a lack of decent job opportunities, lack of access to affordable housing, including owing to negative impacts of the commodification of housing, lack of social protection, lack of access to land, credit or
financing, and high costs of energy or health care, as well as lack of financial and legal literacy, it could be also related to a number of contributing factors, and social issues including drug and alcohol abuse and mental disorder and other mental conditions.”

There is a direct acknowledgment that homelessness is not the fault of the person experiencing it, but often the fault of systems out of their control. It is important to note that the language around that is passive, as if the reader already understands this concept. There is no deeper explanation of those systems or what they exactly entail. It can feel like it is attempting to explain homelessness the causes of homelessness while avoiding a terrible dirty word: capitalism. I am not saying that I expect the United Nations to denounce capitalism, even if I were to think it's the only way to eliminate homelessness in its entirety. I am saying that there is no larger conversation on homelessness in context to the economic systems that breed this inequality they love talking about.

The resolution later creates a definition of homelessness:

[H]omelessness is not merely a lack of physical housing, but is often interrelated with poverty, lack of productive employment and access to infrastructure, as well as other social issues that may constitute a loss of family, community and a sense of belonging, and, depending on national context, can be described as a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space, which may compromise their ability to enjoy social relations, and includes people living on the streets, in other open spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation, people living in temporary accommodation or shelters for the homeless, and, in accordance with national legislation, may include, among others, people living in severely
inadequate accommodation without security of tenure and access to basic services” (Economic and Social Council, 2020).

This definition is the most thorough I have come across from the United Nations. It allows for a wide range of people to be protected under the umbrella of homelessness. This seems like an obvious win for holding member states accountable for having homelessness. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there are two key phrases that put that negate this definition: “depending on national context” and “in accordance with national legislation.” As I have explained before, a state has no moral qualms interpreting words to further their own agenda. These phrases give member states a free pass to insist that those interpretations of homelessness do not make sense in their own countries. With telling someone else the realities of their own country being one of the most offensive things you can do at the United Nations, you are not likely to be challenged on it. Sure, a non-governmental organization may release a statement, study, or tweet explaining why you are wrong, but they have no real power over whether you will get punished for it. Because obviously homelessness is a human rights violation. Right?

The full argument on whether or not homelessness legally constitutes a human rights violation is a separate paper. Let us just take this resolution, the most recent and most in-depth United Nations resolution on homelessness as an indication of the current thinking on this topic at the UN. Operative paragraph four

Calls upon Member States to ensure the promotion and protection of all human rights, in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law, while recognizing that homelessness constitutes a violation of human dignity and may be an obstacle to the fulfilment of all human rights and that urgent national
and international action is therefore required to address it” (Economic and Social Council, 2020).

There is a complete difference between a human rights violation and a violation of human dignity. Human rights can be defined by a set of agreed upon rules for what humans should and should not be able to do. The most highly regarded piece of human rights legislation is the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which lays out specific things all humans should have the right to do. Human dignity, however, is subjective. What might be dignifying to one person is not for another, and vice versa. This is another effective tool for member states to play with the meaning of legislation. Maybe it is an indisputable fact that a group of people in your country are experiencing chronic homelessness, but you want everyone to stop asking you to fix it. You can then insinuate that it is actually more dignifying to keep them homeless. In 2019, Daniel Cannati a member of the right-wing Lega party made statements against the placement of a Romani family in social housing on the outskirts of the Turin province. He called that family nomads. A nomad implies that they want to or must move homes frequently. Cannati’s language implies that its actually more dignifying for them not to have stable housing. If it is more dignifying to not give them housing then, under this resolution, you have made the right decision (European Roma Rights Centre, 2019). This resolution is a prime example of the dichotomy of goals we see play out at the United Nations: how do we completely understand a topic, and how do we justify ignoring it?
Autoethnography Part 5: Violating Sacred Space

Another event I was in charge of was the Civil Society Networking Event. It was a small dinner event intended for UN advocates from many NGOs to meet each other, learn about the commission and see how we can all work together. Most of the night was that: eating, talking, and praising each other for all the hard work. I was mostly respected for my role; I was often pulled aside to be thanked for the event and handed a business card. For many, it was clear that their purpose was to get their name and organization to whoever they were told was in charge of this thing. While not exactly helpful, it was not a hinderance either. This was expected behavior for NGO representatives.

What was not expected behavior was sexual harassment. Two men in particular spoke to me in a questionable manner that night. The first was a man I had never seen in a committee meeting. He wore a light-colored suit and appeared to be in his 30s. I had finally gotten a second to sit down and eat some food with a colleague of mine when he sat with us. He asked me about the event, what I do, my role in the commission, and about the Working Group to End Homelessness. After providing the same information I had regurgitated over and over in the past week, he began to question the structure of such a commission. Here is a paraphrasing of our conversation:

“So, why have not I heard about any of this beforehand? Why could not I have been included in these decisions?” He asked.

“Well, you could have. The Civil Society Declaration is open to anyone to edit and give comments on, and the Committee for Social Development and Working Group to End Homelessness are both open committees with small dues.” I explained with a mouth half full of bread.
“Well I do not really have the money for dues like that. Why is it structured like this? Why did not I know about this?” He kept repeating.

Reality is that there is not much hype around committees dedicated to UN advocacy. If you want to get involved on a topic, you have to do your own research to determine what committees and events are best for you. I tried to explain this to him, but he seemed very upset about the whole thing. He complained about how so many events require attendees to pay, as he ate the food we provided to him for free.

I have to be honest, I tuned him out after a while and just ate my food. I was running on about 5 hours of sleep a night for the past week, and the forum was the next day, so I just could not be bothered to listen. When I stopped ignoring him, I could hear him say “-and that would really get me to come! Haha I always do.” It was at that point I got up and left.

The next person was a younger man, maybe mid 20s to early 30s, in a blue suit. He came with a friend of his and was never forthright about who he worked for or exactly what he did. He complimented me on the work I had done on the event and pretended to care about the explanation of our policy proposals to him. Finally, he asked if we could get lunch sometime to “discuss ideas.” This is not common in my circles. It is especially not common to ask for a phone number as a contact. I told him to give me his card and I will email him right away! That card sits in the trash somewhere in Queens.

My suspicions of his intentions were pretty much confirmed when a colleague of mine, a young woman, came up to me later, grabbed my arm and in a hushed tone asked, “did he ask you to lunch too?” Gradually a small group of us would congregate to discuss the weird man asking us all to lunch.
At the time I identified as a woman and presented very traditionally feminine. This experience was a harsh reminder of reality: it did not matter how successful I was at something, as long as I was seen as a young woman I was going to be sexualized. I have experienced less sexual harassment at parties than I have at work events. I tried not to let this fact get to me, but it continued to bother me that night. After doing all of this research and work around the UN I realized the system I thought made sense was not there. This was a sacred space in which we were all working towards the equality of all, and these men violated that sacred space for me. I was cynical enough to understand that many representatives were more focused on the recognitions and accolades than the work; I was not cautious enough to be cognizant that I was still in danger here. I could get up there the next day and speak at the United Nations, but any man older could walk up to me and make me feel unsafe and unwelcome. And there was nothing I could do about it.
V. Conclusion

Like it or not, the United Nations currently plays the dominant role in international politics. What is said and agreed upon there, decides the norm for the entire world. This analysis of the discourse on homelessness reveals a lot more about the culture of the UN than it does about homelessness. The goal of this study was never to once and for all define homelessness. Arguably, that is a futile task. I cannot conclude with a synthesized definition of homelessness in the context of the United Nations. What I have found instead, is a dilemma that our neoliberal international politics has brought us: to define or not to define.

We began this study by stating an important conclusion from James C. Scott: that the categorization and measurement of a thing by a state is an attempt at the state to understand and control something they do not understand. In every case, it is clunky, incorrect, and often has disastrous results. The nation state cannot understand and control something with complex on the ground innate social knowledge. While there have been isolated attempts at understanding homelessness via data and categorization, on the whole, UN member states were not interested in categorizing and understanding homelessness. Why is that, do not nation states want to have control over things they do not understand? Clearly, they do not want to control homelessness.

I do not mean that they do not care about homeless people; homeless people are criminalized and punished for their poverty all the time. I mean, they do not want to end homelessness. Homelessness serves a purpose under capitalism. It is a punishment for not playing your role in a capitalist system correctly. Being neurodivergent, addicted, or a socially oppressed minority are all major barrier to success under capitalism. If you do
not or cannot work for some reason, the first fear is losing housing. If nation states create stable, free housing they would not have that punishment anymore. They think that punishment is necessary in order to keep you in line and working.

Without a metric for categorizing and measuring “homelessness” UN member states will do little to address homelessness within their country. Scott explains that academic attempts at understanding and controlling the uncontrollable can be very oppressive. They can be too exclusive, or too inclusive. They can be wildly misinformed, and do some real damage to a community. For example, many slum dweller activists have asserted that they are not homeless. They have homes, they just need better infrastructure. Under many of the definitions used by NGOs, slum dwellers would be considered homeless. Is it worth categorizing them in that way if it is going to damage relations? Is it worth being right about something when you could just work to help them instead? At the United Nations, you need a way to categorize and understand the relief work you do. You have to justify to your colleagues why that is a worthy effort. What is the group you are helping? Why do they deserve help? Using the label of homeless can be a powerful tool: it elicits feelings of empathy in most people. When does accuracy become more important than effectiveness, or vice versa?

The NGOs, member states, and secretariat of the United Nations are left with a conundrum: define and collect data on homelessness risking being wildly inaccurate and possibly damaging communities, or leave it alone and allow member states to continue not understanding and ignoring the problem?
Autoethnography Part 6: The Civil Society Forum

It was finally Friday, the day of the Civil Society Conference. I had spent 6 months preparing for this day, and it was finally there. I had woken up at 5AM, as I had every day that week, and arrived at work at 8AM. My mother and partner had both come to support me, thanks to a last-minute stress induced breakdown where I begged them to come. The set up was 3 hours of logistics for handing out passes, making sure speaker presentations were working, and getting everything into place. The event that ensued was 6 hours of panels, speakers, and discussion around housing and homelessness.

I worked to get some of the most effective, experienced, and relevant speakers I could. As I sat in the front row, making sure everything was going smoothly and trying not to pass out from exhaustion I was hit with a familiar thought: “What is my role in all of this?”

The obvious answer was to ultimately end homelessness worldwide. That is not wrong, but no one was getting housing by being there that day, so what was all this work for? The forum had many of the same purposes as the side events: creating community bonds. We were gathering to reaffirm shared values. This was not to inform member states, as the only member state representatives in the room were those speaking on the panels. The event would have accomplished the same things if I got on stage said “I worked really hard on all of this so please respect me and my organization, now here is a list of principles we all believe in and a list of other people you should respect as well.”

What I did not expect was a brief moment of niche fame. As the event came to a close, I was bombarded with requests for my contact information, photos with myself and the speakers, and even a man who came up to me already pointing his camera at me.
They probably did not appreciate it when I announced that they all had to leave the conference room immediately, but I was going to be charged more money if we stayed much longer.

After the event my organization had a congratulatory dinner, where my bosses insisted, I drink to my heart’s content. Toasts were made, thank yous were exchanged, hugs were given, and speculation ensued: what was the final resolution going to look like? The member states had come to a conclusion at that point, and we were just waiting for them to release the final draft.

After just a drink or two I was practically falling asleep at the table. Someone noticed and insisted I go home and get some sleep. I nodded lazily and began the exhausted journey from midtown to my apartment in Queens. As I walked alone in the freezing night of a New York City February, I realized I was beginning to cry. I was not really sure why. Everything had gone well, my bosses were very happy with the work I had done, and it was looking like we were going to get our major asks for the resolution. I was crying because I was exhausted. I had run on five or so hours of sleep for a week or so at that point, running from meeting to meeting. I was just so exhausted I started crying.

I do not just tell you that to embarrass myself; I tell you that to put a United Nations document into perspective. I was not the only one walking home crying from exhaustion that week. It took countless hours of hard work from so many people to make everything happen. This would all translate into one official UN document on homelessness policy. For every document there is a huge amount of physical, academic, and emotional labor that goes into making it happen. What may seem like a natural or
casual document on a topic may have included a large amount of emotional labor and negotiating between people we will never learn about.

**Notes on Author’s Positionality**

As of writing this I am the United Nations Advocacy Project Coordinator for the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH), an NGO with advisory status with the Economic and Social Council at the UN. The Institute of Global Homelessness’ vision is that “within a generation we will live in a world where everyone has a place to call home – a home that offers security, safety, autonomy, and opportunity” (n.a, 2019). During the 58th Commission for Social Development, in February 2020, I served as the Chair of the Civil Society Forum, an all-day series of panels by and for NGOs at the UN focused on homelessness. This commission is the focus of my autoethnography.

The death of my hope that the UN could make immediate material change in the world was a slow one. The UN is a large confusing system, so it is easy to assume that someone is doing something about all the poverty, war, and destruction humans are doing. There are relief programs via the UN special agencies, and there are attempts at peace deals. But as the last decade for the Sustainable Development Goals begins poverty and inequality is at a record breaking high. You learn quickly that the platitudes and facts NGO advocates share in their meetings fall on the deaf ears of member states. Who was at all of these events put on by NGO advocates? Other NGO advocates; preaching to the choir is a common activity. Clearly our constant flow of events and meetings are not move the needle on the issue.
As I began to understand the performativity of NGO advocacy, I began relying on the backdoor negotiations between us and member state representatives. I knew they were happening, even though I was not allowed to tell anyone about them. I would provide those going into these meetings with as much research as I could, then cross my fingers that it would work. This turned out to be unreliable as well. It is true that the Commission on Social Development would have never focused on homelessness if it were not for these secret meetings, but a priority theme and real legislation are very different. When it came time to create that legislation, the 58th Commission for Social Development resolution, member states put in every loophole they could.

Cynicism is an understandable feeling under these conditions. It is easy to do what I see a lot of NGO advocates do: put on events, write statements, and attend working group meetings on an endless loop until you get tired and move on with your career. It is how UN advocacy is set up, it is what you are told you should be doing, so why would not you do it? If you want to influence the system to care about your issue, then you have to play by their rules. At the United Nations, those rules are not designed to make meaningful change. Member states have the ultimate power to affect the lives of their citizens, and as we have established, they are not chiefly there to do that. They are there to be part of the international discourse creation so that it will benefit their state as much as possible. What benefits them the most is having NGOs run around in circles talking to each other with the illusion of change. As a professor of mine once put it, it is diplomacy theater. Member states want that diplomacy theater so they can appear to be peace-loving and reasonable. It gives them leverage to argue why their human rights violations are actually fine.
NGOs are allowed into the building as lobbyists. Not like the corporate lobbyists we see on the United States national or state level. We are lobbyists in the purest sense; we often have little funding and use research, reasoning, and emotional testimonies to change the minds of state representatives. We see little to none of this in the official documents from this study. The United Nations is more interested in honoring the history of the member state’s words and discourse than the NGO advocates. It is impossible to know what work was put in behind the scenes to get member states to say certain things or take up certain positions.

Let us be clear, I am not the most innocent well-meaning person on the planet caught in a system where no one cares or is trying to make a difference. The people I have worked with are some of the most kind, thoughtful, and passionate people I have met. I have also dedicated my life to improving the lives of marginalized peoples. But we all work within the United Nations system, which is an oppressive one. We contribute to its endurance and power by legitimizing it. I own a United Nations jacket, five UN pins, and a UN wine glass. Last year for the holidays, I bought all my family UN themed gifts. How could I be so invested in merchandise for an institution that I do not have my full faith in?

The United Nations headquarters in New York City is an intoxicating place. With its high ceilings, marble everything, and masterpieces of artwork around every corner it can be awe inspiring. The architecture of the grand conference rooms is so outdated it is charming. You could walk through it every day and find something new that is your favorite bit. This is doubly true for the representative only sections that you get access to as an NGO advocate. Work there long enough and you will gain all of this weird
inconsequential knowledge about the place. Did you know you can get your passport stamped there because it is technically not US soil? Did you know that when a new secretary-general is named a tapestry is made of them and then hung up outside of conference room four? Did you know there is a rose garden on the water that you can only access if you have a UN pass? Why am I so obsessed with these little fun facts about a building? Going on a tour of the building can be awe inspiring: it elicits a feeling that important people are doing important things there for the good of humanity.

If you spend enough time working in the building, you begin to believe that you are that important person doing important things for the good of humanity. You can start to believe that it is where you belong: among the high ceilings, marble everything, and masterpieces of artwork. I have made a couple jokes about not feeling like I was meant to be there, but after just a few months of working there I felt right at home. You flash your badge, skip all the tourists in line for security and roll your eyes when they do not follow security protocols. I felt like a fixture at the UN as much as the Nelson Mandela statue at the entrance. It does not help that outside of the United Nations social sphere I got a lot of praise for my work. I was told I was doing a great thing for the world and, that it is very cool that I spend so much time there. It can easily create an inflated sense of self-importance. With this inflated sense of self-importance, you can become defensive of the system you are a part of.

At the Civil Society Forum there was a glimpse of another possibility. The last panel we put together was made up entirely of people who had experienced homelessness. They were asked to share their experiences; we wanted them to tell this group of advocates whatever they felt like they needed to hear. They then asked this
audience of advocates questions, allowing them to either get a better understanding of the United Nations process or force them to think about it in new ways. It was not perfect by any means: there were little to no member state representatives in the room to hear their perspectives, meaning their discourse was not going to have as much of a direct impact on policy. Yet, there was a vision of a better form of discourse creation within that panel: people who have experienced the social oppressions coming together in an international context to talk about what could be done to end it.

There is a common saying at the United Nations: *do not talk about us without us.* When speaking about a particular issue it is important to include those affected by said issue in the discussions. It is important an important practice if you want to get meaningful solutions. This panel was that principle in practice; however, it could be so much more. What if it was *let us talk about us?* There could be international mechanisms that allow people facing social issues to initiate and lead the conversations with policy experts, represented officials, and most importantly one another. It is a flaw that those experiencing poverty are not involved in the conversations at the United Nations, but it is a systemic failure that they are not the ones leading the conversations.

The United Nations is run by and for the nation states. They fund it, they vote on the policy, and it is their discourse creation that is meticulously recorded and studied. As long as the current system remains the UN will pass policy that indicates progressive values but not enforce them for fear of retaliation from their most powerful members. If we are going to have an effective international policy body then that one needs to be run by and for actual people, instead of capitalistic state representatives.
Appendices

Appendix A

Frequency of the mention of "homeless" vs. Year

Appendix B

Frequency vs. Year (by speaker number)

Appendix C
Appendix D
Appendix E
References:


Vita

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Joanna Padgett Herz</th>
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<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate Degree</td>
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