

**The body, the shelter, and the shebeen: An affective geography of homelessness in South Africa**

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Abstract:	<p>Geographies of homelessness mainly address issues of social exclusion, especially in contexts of urban public space. Recent research focuses on spatial regulation and surveillance, and strategies used by homeless people to resist these forms of control and create spaces for themselves in the city. Relatively little attention is paid, however, to the embodied, affective, emotional and relational geographies of homelessness. We address this absence through an exploration of how material spaces and practices shape a sense of belonging for a group of men living in a homeless shelter in Cape Town. Theorising belonging as constituted through the materialities of both self-identity and social connections, we examine the three spaces that are most affective in our participants' everyday lives: (i) their bodies, (ii) the shelter where they live, and (iii) the shebeen (tavern) where they drink. The discursive and embodied accounts of two participants in particular serve as a case study that illuminates the complex ways in which belonging is shaped in spaces of homeless life. These men's experiences reveal some of the ambivalences and ambiguities of homelessness which are only rendered visible through a theoretical lens that respects their status as emotional and relational subjects, rather than as objects within structures of exclusion. Drinking in particular emerges from this research as an important factor in understanding the contradictory behaviours and feelings in these men's daily lives. Damaging their bodies and social relationships, alcohol nonetheless provides a sense of belonging by facilitating both a sense of self and connections with others.</p>

**The body, the shelter, and the shebeen:  
An affective geography of homelessness in South Africa**

**Shari Daya and Nicola Wilkins**

**Introduction**

Homelessness is not just about a lack of housing. It is about a lack of connectedness with friends, family and the community, and a lack of control over one's environment'.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from the shelter at which our research was conducted captures something of the multi-dimensional nature of homelessness, and indeed of 'home-ness',<sup>2</sup> in highlighting social connection, and individual autonomy and control, as central to achieving a sense of belonging. The concepts of homelessness and belonging are mutually dependent, yet are surprisingly seldom theorised as such. Existing geographies of homelessness offer much insight into the mechanisms by which homeless people are excluded from and 'transgress' into urban places, but tend to neglect the affective experiences and relationships that constitute everyday spaces of homelessness. This absence of attention to what matters to homeless people themselves dilutes their subjectivity; rather than emotional, relational beings with complex feelings, problems, ambitions and desires, they are objectified and homogenised within structures of exclusion.

To frame a more productive understanding of homelessness, we look to a wider geographical literature on place, belonging and the politics of home. One of the most useful aspects of this work is its theorisation of the roles of everyday materialities – bodies, objects, and physical practices – in creating and sustaining both the sense of self and the connections with other people that are fundamental to belonging. Informed by these insights, our analysis of the discursive and material accounts of men living in a homeless shelter in Cape Town reveals the pivotal role played by drinking, in particular, in their everyday geographies. This embodied and spatial practice illuminates some of the social and embodied ambiguities and contradictions that complicate their senses of belonging in the places that structure their daily lives.

The story we tell here is resonant with accounts of homelessness, shelter living, and homeless drinking that have been written from elsewhere – Russia, America, Britain<sup>3</sup> – illustrating both the universality of certain experiences of homelessness and the always

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3 unique micro-geographies of those experiences in particular everyday spaces. We argue  
4 therefore that attempts to understand the conditions of homelessness require a sensitivity not  
5 only to the spatial strategies of homeless people excluded by the state and city-scale  
6 regulation, but also to their affective, often ambivalent engagement with spaces, things and  
7 people in their daily, mundane, intimate-scale processes of trying to make themselves feel at  
8 home.  
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### 13 14 15 **Geographies of homelessness and belonging**

16 Geographical literature on homelessness focuses mainly on urban settings.<sup>4</sup> Questions of  
17 access to public space, or issues of social exclusion more broadly, form a strong thread in this  
18 literature. A major concern of this work has been to critique what is often seen as an  
19 increasingly regulated urban sphere, with homeless people subject to greater surveillance and  
20 harsher, more punitive exclusionary measures as city spaces are actively regenerated and  
21 ‘improved’ or as more ‘organic’ gentrification takes place.<sup>5</sup>  
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26 Smith’s<sup>6</sup> conceptualisation of zero-tolerance policing as ‘revanchism’, a policy of  
27 revenge against the poor and especially the homeless, under the pretext of reducing crime,  
28 has been particularly influential in this area of inquiry. Smith argues that homeless people in  
29 the United States and Britain have effectively been subject to practices of social cleansing,  
30 and shows how this highly authoritarian and often brutal model has been widely exported, in  
31 various guises, to countries such as South Africa, Spain, Germany, Australia, New Zealand  
32 and Argentina, among others.  
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38 Building on (and as influential as) Smith, Mitchell<sup>7</sup> offers detailed critiques of anti-  
39 homeless laws in the United States, arguing that:  
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43 by redefining what is acceptable behaviour in public space, by in effect  
44 annihilating the spaces in which the homeless *must* live, these laws seek  
45 simply to annihilate homeless people themselves, all in the name of recreating  
46 the city as a playground for a seemingly global capital which is ever ready to  
47 do an even better job of the annihilation of space.<sup>8</sup>  
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53 The tone of this critique against what DeVerteuil et al.<sup>9</sup> call the ‘punitive turn’ in  
54 official approaches to ‘street culture’,<sup>10</sup> carries through much recent research on  
55 homelessness. Often following Mitchell,<sup>11</sup> this work frequently employs Lefebvre’s notion of  
56 ‘the right to the city’ to denounce exclusionary policies and attempt to legitimise the presence  
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3 and activities (sleeping, eating, cooking, and performing ablutions) of homeless people in  
4 public city spaces.<sup>12</sup>

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6 A parallel focus of this literature, closely linked to the discourses of claiming the right  
7 to public space, has been on the transgressive tactics employed by homeless people to create  
8 places for themselves in the city, using marginal or interstitial spaces – such as doorways,  
9 underpasses, beaches – and in the process re-drawing the boundaries of public and private, or  
10 re-mapping the lived city. Thus, Hodgetts et al.<sup>13</sup> explore the ways in which homeless men in  
11 New Zealand use a local public library as a place of safety and social participation, and  
12 Nichols and Cázares<sup>14</sup> consider how public transportation in the United States is similarly  
13 employed by homeless men and women as a place of shelter and safety. Others examine  
14 examines homeless people's re-shaping of public space – such as Sheehan's<sup>15</sup> analysis of  
15 homeless people's transgressive use of an historical/tourist site as both home place and  
16 workplace – often conceptualising such accessing of public space by homeless people as  
17 'strategies of resistance'.<sup>16</sup>

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19 This research is valuable in highlighting the controls to which homeless people are  
20 subject in their everyday lives, and their strategies for resisting and overcoming the  
21 regulatory and punitive structures of the state, businesses and civil society. In its focus on  
22 exclusion and transgression, however, this work sheds less light on how homeless people  
23 create spaces of *inclusion*. More precisely, it neglects to explore the ways in which  
24 homelessness is experienced not just as a series of obstacles to be overcome, but also in  
25 embodied and affective ways, through relationships and emotional connections.

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27 As Cloke et al.<sup>17</sup> point out, even work on homeless people's re-mapping of the city  
28 misses out on the aspects of their lives 'not governed by the rationalities of either regulatory  
29 strategies or the tactical rationalities of reinscription, transgression, and resistance.' These  
30 researchers 'suggest that not all of the journeys or pauses made by homeless people in the  
31 city, or the traces they leave behind, are tactical in nature'.<sup>18</sup> A more nuanced understanding  
32 of the homeless city therefore needs readings of places of emotion and relationships as much  
33 as it needs analyses of regulation and resistance. As noted by Brickell,<sup>19</sup> for example:

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35 despite the fact that trauma and family conflict are acknowledged as key  
36 factors in initial exits from home, the focus of responses to homelessness  
37 remains on 'structural issues' and grief and trauma are never examined  
38 seriously as key structuring principles of homelessness.

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3 The omission of these fundamentally human responses to loss and social exclusion has even  
4 more profound implications; ignoring these aspects of everyday life in fact reduces the  
5 subjectivity of homeless people, or their active roles in making meaning ‘through embodied  
6 and emotional interactions’.<sup>20</sup> Imagining them only as problem-solving and transgressive  
7 entities emphasises their agency, but denies them the mundane yet vital sensory, feeling  
8 capacities that both precede and exceed such strategising and resistance.  
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13 Pain and fear, as well as reciprocity, hope, fun, and aspiration, are just some of the  
14 many embodied, emotional and relational ways in which space is made meaningful by  
15 homeless people. Some of these affective dimensions are recognised by May<sup>21</sup> in his  
16 exploration of the ‘search for a feeling of home as place’ experienced by several of his  
17 homeless respondents. Recognising homeless people’s feelings of homesickness,  
18 disorientation and isolation, as well as (their dreams of) belonging, safety and security are  
19 essential, May suggests, if we are to move beyond a construction of them simply as Other to  
20 the housed, and come instead to a point of understanding their experiences of home and  
21 mobility.  
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28 A handful of studies explores not just the emotions structuring experiences of  
29 homelessness, but also the ways in which feelings, identities and senses of being-in-the-world  
30 are *embodied* in particular ways for homeless people, providing a framework for a fuller,  
31 affective understanding of their experiences. Higate,<sup>22</sup> for example, in his study of the  
32 physical experience of ‘sleeping rough’ among ex-servicemen, examines the body as a site of  
33 resource and resilience, as well as fragility and vulnerability. Kawash’s<sup>23</sup> exploration of ‘the  
34 homeless body’ takes a broader view, but like Higate, she emphasises the affective  
35 materialities of experiences of homelessness which take shape through publics, spaces,  
36 bodies and the ways in which they are constructed, regulated and contested. Dirt and  
37 dishevelment, possessions such as bags or trolleys, and activities such as begging, are just  
38 some of the corporeal factors that constitute the condition of homelessness. Both studies  
39 demonstrate how material and discursive constructions of the body shape the condition of  
40 homelessness – as perceived and as experienced – though these are seldom directly addressed  
41 in the literature on the topic.  
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51 Complementing these studies of homelessness, geographies of home and belonging  
52 help to fill some of the gaps that remain in theorising the connections between emotion, affect  
53 and place. Though tending to focus on questions of identity and difference on a larger scale  
54 (specifically relating to issues of citizenship, migration, transnationalism, race and ethnicity),  
55 this body of work as a whole has value for studies of homelessness. Specifically, its focus on  
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3 the affective *materialities* of belonging offers particular purchase for an understanding of the  
4 multi-dimensional process of finding a place for oneself, and it thus helps to develop the  
5 insights, exemplified in the work by Higate and Kawash, into how notions of home and  
6 belonging are embodied.  
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9 Probyn's<sup>24</sup> recent work on belonging is particularly useful here. She argues that the  
10 question of belonging expresses modes both of *being* and of *longing* or desire. This  
11 formulation allows entry into both the emotional geographies (longing and desire) that  
12 structure people's experiences of home, and into the nodes of embodied self (being) upon  
13 which feelings of belonging depend to a significant degree. Indeed Probyn<sup>25</sup> emphasises the  
14 need to examine individuals and bodies in as much depth as we consider relationships with  
15 others if we are to understand  
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23 how people get along, how various forms of belonging are articulated, how  
24 individuals conjugate difference into manners of being, and how desires to  
25 become are played out in everyday circumstances.  
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29 Probyn's<sup>26</sup> conceptualisation of belonging as 'something more than the term *identity*  
30 can catch' takes her to the notion of 'a sociology of the skin', an attentiveness to the material  
31 sites and surfaces through which allegiances may be constituted among elements that 'have  
32 no necessary "belongingness"'.<sup>27</sup> These ideas emerge from and are resonant with a  
33 substantial feminist literature that destabilises the boundaries between public and private  
34 space, including for example Pratt and Rosner's<sup>28</sup> recent work on the need for a re-connection  
35 of the global and the intimate, and the need to pay attention to feeling and affect as way of  
36 connecting 'the discourse of intimacy ... to that of the global' or the general. The body is  
37 central to such a project, and has long been of concern to feminist and gender theorists, but as  
38 Pratt and Rosner argue, the concept of affect provides something more, gesturing 'toward  
39 something excessive to both emotions and the body'.<sup>29</sup>  
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48 The importance of the embodied self and its complex, affective modes of being and  
49 longing are demonstrated in numerous fields of research concerned with questions of cultural  
50 articulation. These include, to take a few examples, the geographies of citizenship,  
51 transnationalism, and migration mentioned earlier,<sup>30</sup> as well as through geographies of young  
52 people,<sup>31</sup> ageing<sup>32</sup> and sexual orientation.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the findings of Walsh et al.<sup>34</sup> from  
53 one of the few studies on the perspectives of homeless people themselves on questions of  
54 belonging, foreground the significance of home as a place that allows the creation of an  
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3 autonomous self particularly through bodily safety and physical privacy. For Walsh et al.'s  
4 participants, the last point emerges as the most important,<sup>35</sup> highlighting again the primacy of  
5 the body in experiences of homelessness.  
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8 The body and its material environments are enmeshed in such accounts with the more  
9 abstract ideas of self and sociality that typically serve as the reference points for ideas of  
10 belonging. As Gorman-Murray<sup>36</sup> argues, the narrative of self provided by a home in fact  
11 *materialises* the self, making it real through 'the accumulation and arrangement of  
12 meaningful possessions in... space.' Not just the body, then, but also material things and  
13 material practices are highlighted in this literature as affective elements through which  
14 belonging is shaped. Tolia-Kelly<sup>37</sup> provides a rich example in her study of the connections  
15 between material cultures and memory for members of the South Asian diaspora. As she  
16 argues: 'Material cultures... are critical in the formation of new political identities, carving  
17 out new landscapes of belonging'.<sup>38</sup> Artefacts, and the sensory practices of looking, touching  
18 and worshipping that accompany their installation, are not incidental to feeling at home, but  
19 are 'the solidified tangible points of connection to... past narratives... landscapes and  
20 environments of belonging'.<sup>39</sup>  
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30 Similar arguments are put forward in the growing literature on the relationships  
31 between food and belonging, where the physical practices of consumption are seen as  
32 'resonant sites for identity performance' where 'the fragile act of cultural positioning' is  
33 undertaken.<sup>40</sup> This literature, too, tends to concern itself with issues of national and/or ethnic  
34 identity. A rather different literature on consumption and homelessness, specifically that  
35 which explores the consumption of alcohol and drugs among homeless people, provides  
36 another perspective. As Garapich<sup>41</sup> argues in his work on Eastern European migrants in  
37 London, and as our study, too, indicates, the sense of dislocation among homeless men can  
38 result in an 'urge to seek companionship in drink' which helps 'to rebuild a broken sense of  
39 belonging and community'. Similarly, Bourgois and Schonberg's<sup>42</sup> ethnography of 'a  
40 community of addicted bodies' in San Francisco, and Højdestrand's<sup>43</sup> research on how  
41 communal drinking creates solidarity among rough sleepers in St Petersburg, explore  
42 drinking and drug-taking as both coping mechanisms and a means of creating social  
43 connection, rather than simply as a problem to be solved.  
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53 Collectively then, this work is helpful in its theorisation of the material constitution of  
54 belonging. That is to say, it provides tools for understanding not simply the production of  
55 spaces of homelessness, nor merely its emotional aspects, but the ways in which the material  
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3 and the affective are always already one dimension. It is with this insight that we move into a  
4 discussion of the nature of homelessness for our participants in a Cape Town shelter.  
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### 7 8 **Discursive and embodied methods**

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10 South Africa is experiencing a crisis in housing that encompasses street homelessness and the  
11 sheltered homeless, as well as those living in shack housing. The causes lie partly in the  
12 failure of post-apartheid governments to deliver adequate housing and social support to the  
13 majority of the population, and partly in the wider dynamics of poverty and unemployment  
14 that continue to exclude many from formal housing markets. However, as Cross et al.<sup>44</sup> point  
15 out, poverty and housing shortages do not on their own explain the presence of street and  
16 sheltered homeless people: 'if formal subsidy housing is not being accessed, self-build  
17 informal housing should offer a cheap and generally available alternative ... we ... need to ask  
18 why the street homeless are not living in shacks'.  
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22 The answers to this question need to consider such issues as social alienation,  
23 resistance to social norms, loss of support networks, addiction, personal misfortune, mental  
24 illness, and downward social mobility. However, little is known about the experiences of  
25 street and sheltered homeless people in South Africa, beyond that for the 'many who have  
26 descended into true homelessness',<sup>45</sup> few options are available. 'Shelters are few and far  
27 between',<sup>46</sup> and those that do exist are typically under-resourced, run by faith-based or non-  
28 profit organisations with no state funding. While they offer some material and social support  
29 to residents, who usually pay a small fee for a shower, a meal and a bed, homeless shelters  
30 can provide only a very limited and partial solution to the widespread problems of  
31 homelessness in South African towns and cities.  
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35 The shelter at which our study was conducted was for a long time one of a 'chain' of  
36 shelters run as a non-profit organisation in the Western Cape, with most of its branches in  
37 Cape Town's suburbs. Now independent, the shelter accommodates 80 people, and at the  
38 time of our research around 68 men and 12 women were resident. In accordance with the  
39 aims of the broader project<sup>1</sup> of which this study was a part, volunteers were initially requested  
40 for participation in a study on alcohol consumption; seven men consented to take part but no  
41 women were willing, typically giving the reason that they did not drink nor did they know  
42 anyone who did.  
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<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted as part of a larger project exploring the lived experiences of alcohol consumption in the Western Cape. As we explain towards the end of this section, the focus of this paper on a broader set of questions about homelessness reflects the shifts in our understanding of what was important in our participants' lives.



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3 The men who participated were interviewed informally, several times over the course  
4 of three months. To deal with one of the challenges of research on alcohol consumption – the  
5 fact that people are often reluctant or unable to articulate their experiences – the embodied  
6 methods of auto-photography<sup>47</sup> and body tracing<sup>48</sup> were also used. Participants received  
7 disposable cameras with which to take pictures of things and places that were meaningful to  
8 them. They also completed, with varying degrees of success, ‘body books’ in which they  
9 recorded feelings of pain, sadness, joy, and so on, over the course of the research. These were  
10 marked on photocopied images of their body that they themselves drew at the start of the  
11 research. The men also chose their own pseudonyms, which are used here.

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13 While seven men formed the ‘core sample’ of this research, the participants in fact  
14 included a large number of the shelter residents, as well as the supervisors, the administrator,  
15 the social worker and the skills developer. This paper is therefore informed by numerous  
16 voices, but it focuses mainly on two men – BMW and Mot – whose accounts offered  
17 particular insight into the challenges of being homeless alcoholics living in a shelter. Defying  
18 the stereotypes that often accompany those labels, these men expressed the complex  
19 emotional challenges of everyday life in a homeless shelter.

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21 As white men in a country where the homeless population is overwhelmingly black,  
22 BMW and Mot were somewhat unusual. Privileged under the apartheid regime for most of  
23 their lives, personal circumstances, including alcohol addiction, nonetheless resulted in both  
24 men being rendered homeless, estranged from their families and alienated from former  
25 friends and colleagues. Since they received a basic government pension, neither was  
26 destitute, but nor could they afford to live independently, given their limited income and lack  
27 of personal support networks. BMW and Mot’s particular racial and class positioning in post-  
28 apartheid South Africa – especially the ways in which they challenge assumptions about who  
29 ‘the homeless’ are – highlight the importance of moving beyond structural understandings of  
30 homelessness as a problem caused by failures in service delivery and entrenched poverty. The  
31 discursive and embodied accounts of our two ‘protagonists’ help to illuminate some of the  
32 diverse life trajectories, experiences and feelings of homeless people.

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34 Thus, as BMW and Mot shared their stories with us, it became clear that the more  
35 interesting questions were not only about how and why they drank, but more broadly, how  
36 they responded to the multiple ways in which being homeless challenged the achievement of  
37 a sense of belonging. Drinking emerged as an important means of addressing those  
38 challenges, but also as a practice that needed to be contextualised within other aspects of their  
39 lives, rather than being isolated and narrowly conceptualised simply as problematic. The  
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everyday geographies of BMW and Mot demonstrate how drinking and belonging can shape each other, in sometimes unexpected and often contradictory ways.

### **The vulnerable spaces of the embodied self**

A sense of belonging is challenged by homelessness on the most intimate scale – that of the embodied self. Usually comprising both familiar surroundings and familial connections, home is for many people the most powerful site of identity formation. Feminist and other literatures have shown that home by no means carries unequivocally positive connotations for everyone.<sup>49</sup> Miller,<sup>50</sup> for example, argues that home is often ‘a turbulent sea of constant negotiation rather than simply some haven for the self.’

These critiques notwithstanding, cultural narratives of what it means to ‘be at home’ are still pervasive and powerful. Even if, in practice, one’s experience of home has not been of comfort and security, the idea of home remains generally idealised as a place where one can achieve a sense of control over the self and the immediate environment, feelings that are essential to creating feelings of belonging. As Scott<sup>51</sup> argues, ‘for most of us, home is a word loaded with emotional, spiritual, and heartfelt emotions, which run deep.... Home is where we can be ourselves’. Becoming homeless in a society where so much is invested in the idea (and ideal) of home, can therefore severely disrupt one’s sense of self and autonomy. As Snow and Anderson<sup>52</sup> note, ‘salvaging the self’ is therefore often an important process for homeless people, who have been displaced from the surroundings and relationships through which their identities have been shaped and which they see as meaningful, even if their homes were not, as Sibley<sup>53</sup> puts it, ‘benign’ environments.

One way in which the men in our study attempted to ‘salvage’ a sense of self was by providing physical proof of their existence,<sup>54</sup> establishing their presence and legitimacy through identification documents. On several occasions residents produced their papers, unprompted by researchers. These included identification booklets, letters from past employers and even a birth certificate. One of the men, Pea, was particularly protective of his documents, always carrying them on his person out of fear of theft. On every research visit, he insisted on unpacking his rucksack to produce his latest letter from the bank or the shelter administrator, and to emphasise again how important the documents were to him.

Most striking, however, were the ways in which the self, and processes of ‘salvaging’, were not just documented but embodied, supporting Imrie’s<sup>55</sup> argument that ‘a person’s feelings about, and experiences of, the home cannot be dissociated from their corporeality or the organic matter and material of the body.’ Our participants’ experiences illustrated how the

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3 body, 'the geography closest in',<sup>56</sup> can be a challenging site in the context of homelessness,  
4 demanding daily negotiation. Being homeless means being physically vulnerable: to violence,  
5 weather, hard surfaces and, especially for the men in the shelter, to illness and pain, since  
6 they had access only to the most basic services in a healthcare landscape dominated by  
7 private insurance and medical providers.  
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11 For many of the men, their bodies thus constituted the first of many places in which  
12 issues of self and belonging were faced. Bodily pain was a common complaint among them.  
13 Pea, for example, often mentioned having pain in his shoulder, caused by constantly carrying  
14 all his belongings – even his blankets – in his rucksack. Not only his possessions, but also his  
15 body itself, were vulnerable to the petty threats that come with being homeless.  
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19 BMW and Mot, too, lived with and were constantly having to adjust to their corporeal  
20 vulnerability. Mot seemed to have several health conditions for which he would take pills '[as  
21 if they were] Smarties', according to one participant. He took pills for indigestion and blood  
22 pressure, and would take mild painkillers, over-the-counter headache powders which cost  
23 around R1 each, every day.  
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28 The effects of both chronic and more acute illnesses were exacerbated by the men's  
29 homelessness, which made it more difficult for them to access help and support. On one  
30 occasion during the research, BMW fell ill, and around the same time, injured himself while  
31 fixing a car for someone. He had no medicines to alleviate his pain or the symptoms of his  
32 illness, and indeed the shelter supervisor was unaware of his condition, even though BMW  
33 spent much of his time lying in bed during this period. Unable to sit in his usual spot outside,  
34 work in the garden or go for a drink, BMW suffered even more from the boredom and  
35 loneliness of everyday life in the shelter, which we discuss in more depth in next section.  
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41 For BMW and Mot, drinking was a major cause of their ill health, but also a means to  
42 alleviating both the effects of alcohol abuse and other feelings of pain and discomfort. BMW,  
43 for example, suffered from tremors, a common symptom of long-term alcohol abuse, and the  
44 only available 'cure' for his shaking was a drink – or several. His lack of control over his  
45 body caused him great unhappiness. On one occasion, having not had a drink for several  
46 days, he requested help to stop the tremors. His eyes filled with tears:  
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53 If the drink can make me stop shaking, surely the doctors can make a little pill  
54 which can do the same? I don't want drink in my life anymore, it's made me  
55 lose everything – my house, two wives, my car, my kids, everything! But I  
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3 wake up in this dump and I'm shaking and only that drink, just one, will stop  
4 it.<sup>57</sup>  
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8 The links between the corporeal, emotional and psychological effects of alcohol abuse  
9 have been explored in some depth in recent qualitative health research, particularly in the  
10 field of nursing.<sup>58</sup> Smith<sup>59</sup> for example, notes that while the initial effects of drinking may be  
11 pleasurable, withdrawal symptoms for alcoholics are often unpleasant, leaving the drinker  
12 feeling out of control and 'not themselves', which encourages further drinking to 'find relief'.  
13 Yeh et al.<sup>60</sup> term this pattern the 'Indulgence, Ambivalence and Attempt (IAA) cycle'.<sup>61</sup> The  
14 body is trapped in a vicious circle where drinking seems both the illness and the cure, and  
15 their dependence on alcohol leaves the drinker feeling powerless and unable to control their  
16 addiction, which can in turn contribute to a diminished sense of self.  
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23 BMW himself made these connections, indicating, moreover, the ability of alcohol  
24 not just to give physical pleasure or relief but also to enhance his sense of self: 'After half a  
25 bottle of wine, my shakes stop and I feel more in control of my body'.<sup>62</sup> He explained that he  
26 felt more confident when his tremors were under control, and found it easier to be sociable.  
27 On days when he had not drunk, the effect was clear – BMW looked old and frail. In contrast,  
28 both he and Mot became more talkative and outgoing after a few drinks, clearly more able to  
29 express themselves and engage with researchers, other residents and staff at the shelter. Mot,  
30 in fact, not only became more chatty, but also felt that his stutter, present before he drank,  
31 was eliminated by the effects of the alcohol.  
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38 In his body book, BMW depicted his bodily changes. In the morning before a drink,  
39 he felt insecure both physically and emotionally: he had 'the shakes' and sore eyes, and felt  
40 nervous. After a drink he noted that his shakes had stopped, and he felt relaxed and joyful.  
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45 [Figure 1 here]  
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48 BMW and Mot drank to alleviate the pain and discomfort of withdrawal and to  
49 function more effectively in their everyday social environments, but both were fully aware  
50 that their alcohol consumption was harmful. BMW was under no illusions about either the  
51 nature or the bodily effects of the 'wine' they bought at just R6 (about US\$0.50) per litre. As  
52 he said several times: 'But it's not wine, it's all chemicals, no wine in there, just different  
53 chemicals and it... really messes you up'.<sup>63</sup> Mot concurred: 'It's real plonk, hey. No grapes in  
54 there, just chemicals. It comes in any bottle because they decant it from bigger bottles'.<sup>64</sup>  
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3 BMW and Mot knew that they had damaged their bodies, their careers, and their  
4 family and social lives, and that they continued to be ‘messed up’ by drinking. Nonetheless,  
5 alcohol played an important role in providing bodily comfort and thus also greater emotional  
6 and social ease. Drinking ‘salvaged’ their embodied sense of self in a context of  
7  
8 homelessness that allowed them little autonomy or control, as we discuss in the following  
9  
10 section. The men’s bodies were ambiguous spaces that, much of the time, compromised their  
11  
12 sense of belonging, and it was often only, and paradoxically, through the damaging  
13  
14 consumption of alcohol that they were able to regain some control and ‘feel like themselves’  
15  
16 again.

### 17 18 19 20 **The regulated spaces of the shelter**

21 Like their bodies, the shelter where the men lived was an ambiguous space, one where the  
22 awareness of their homeless condition was inescapable and a sense of belonging was difficult  
23 to achieve. The shelter appeared open and welcoming; the communal space was clean and  
24 light, with bright murals, trestle tables and chairs, and a television set. Outside was a large  
25 vegetable garden, maintained by residents and staff and surrounded on three sides by brightly  
26 painted shipping containers. These served as workshops for residents who had small  
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28 businesses, or for socialising and card-playing on rainy days.

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34 [Figures 2 and 3 here]

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38 The shelter thus appeared to be a safe and pleasant space, but the men perceived it  
39 differently. As quoted above, BMW referred to it on one occasion as ‘a dump’, and others  
40 described it as ‘grim’ and ‘rough’. This perception rested in part on the fact that the shelter  
41 was a controlled environment where residents were always observed, or felt that they were.  
42  
43 Woken by a 5.30 am bell, they had time to shower or wash before breakfast at 6.30 am.  
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45 Those who did not go out to earn money then had duties such as cleaning bathrooms,  
46  
47 watering plants or manning the gate. For the rest of the day they were largely free to do as  
48 they pleased, however, several residents complained that they constantly felt watched in the  
49  
50 shelter, and consequently struggled to relax. This is not uncommon, as Desjarlais<sup>65</sup> notes in  
51  
52 his theorisation of the spatial arrangement of an American shelter, likening it to a  
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54 Foucauldian panopticon where feelings of being watched encourage residents’ self-  
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56 regulation. Williams<sup>66</sup> makes a similar observation, also drawing on Foucault to explain how  
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3 the homeless shelter as institution relies upon constant observation and  
4 recording of resident actions, as well as their social and sexual histories, as  
5 techniques of power that allow staff to ‘know’... residents and to measure and  
6 judge them against... the productive, sane, and moral norm.  
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11 Such discipline did not seem deliberately engineered at this shelter, and staff were  
12 always pleasant, supportive and helpful towards the residents. However, as DeVerteuil et al.<sup>67</sup>  
13 note, ‘the line between “care” and “control” is not always easy to determine.’ (Johnsen and  
14 Fitzpatrick<sup>68</sup> conceptualise such ambiguous relationships as ‘coercive care’.) Indeed, the  
15 imposition of order and discipline on their living spaces, and even the constant willingness of  
16 the staff to help them, were ever-present reminders of the men’s failures to be full  
17 participants in society.<sup>69</sup>  
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23 Another such reminder, and a further way in which particular behaviour was  
24 ‘disciplined’, took the form of a sense of shame that surrounded drinking and drunkenness at  
25 the shelter. This was illustrated by a small incident that took place one afternoon, when Mot  
26 was trying to unlock the gate to the garden. As he struggled with the padlock one of the staff  
27 joked: ‘Mot normally has the magic touch but today he doesn’t. Or maybe it’s something  
28 else; we won’t say what’. She winked at the researcher. Some of the other residents laughed  
29 and echoed the staff member: ‘*Ja*, let’s not say what.’ The implication that Mot had been  
30 drinking was clear.  
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36 Mot became irritated and defensive: ‘What? What are you trying to say? Fine, you  
37 come and open it yourself then!’ The lock was eventually oiled and opened, but Mot  
38 remained upset for some time – out of a sense of shame, or because he felt he had been  
39 unjustly accused, or both. Whatever the reason, it was clear from this incident that drinking  
40 was viewed negatively, even stigmatised at the shelter, and that those who drank could be  
41 excluded and reprimanded in subtle ways by both staff and fellow residents, despite drinking  
42 and drug-taking being far from exceptional among the residents.  
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48 The men’s sense of not being at home in the shelter was compounded by the forms of  
49 sociality in which they were – often unwillingly – embedded, and by the lack of privacy not  
50 just from the disciplining gaze of the staff but also from close contact with other residents.  
51 The only personal spaces available to the men were their bunk-beds, closely packed in a large  
52 dormitory housing 60-odd others, and their lockers, which were often broken into. Within the  
53 sensory geography of the shelter, they were subject to seeing, hearing and even smelling  
54 others at close range, whether they wished to or not.  
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5 [Figure 4 here]  
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8 The lack of shared identity with other residents was resolved by some of the men  
9 through an emotional distancing of themselves from these undesired, undesirable others.  
10 Among the men in our study, this took three main forms: dwelling on memories of  
11 'normality', focusing on current family connections, and expressing hope and aspirations for  
12 a better situation in the future.  
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16 The first, reflecting and insisting on the 'normality' of their lives before entering the  
17 shelter, was often a means of establishing themselves as different, even superior to the other  
18 residents, as illustrated by several comments from BMW, including:  
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23 I'm not used to this, it's rough here. I'm struggling to adapt.<sup>70</sup>  
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26 But I'm not used to this place, hey, I wasn't brought up like this. I grew up  
27 normal, you know, we lived in a house and had a car and a dog and  
28 everything.<sup>71</sup>  
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33 BMW emphasised his separation from the other residents on several occasions,  
34 complaining about their low standards of personal hygiene, which he found disgusting:  
35 'Some don't even wash, they don't care'.<sup>72</sup> In another conversation he expressed amazement  
36 at residents whom he had never seen wash in the year that he had been at the shelter.  
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39 BMW hinted that his upbringing and social class made him different from the other  
40 residents, seeing his own behaviour as more mannered: 'You won't believe it, the swearing is  
41 so bad, every night there's swearing, f-this and f-that. I'm not used to this place, hey, I wasn't  
42 brought up like these people. It's really rough here'.<sup>73</sup>  
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46 Another resident, Ockie, constructed his superiority to the other residents by focusing  
47 on his previous work as a nurse. He claimed that this work had equipped him to deal with the  
48 kind of men who lived at the shelter, and seemed to see himself in the role of a staff member  
49 or carer rather than as a resident himself: 'That's why I'm ok with these guys, you know, I  
50 know how to treat them'.<sup>74</sup> Although encouraged to elaborate, he simply repeated 'These  
51 guys here, you know', gently distancing himself from all the other residents.  
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56 Other men continued to ground their identity within the more 'normal' family and  
57 domestic spaces that BMW invoked. That they located their own identities in these spaces,  
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3 rather than in the shelter where they spent far more time, was demonstrated by the many  
4 pictures of family gatherings in the auto-photographic part of this study. Most of these were  
5 taken at the homes of family members on days spent away from the shelter. These  
6 photographs suggested that the emotional geographies of family connections and domestic  
7 spaces were more important in shaping a sense of belonging than the constrained geographies  
8 of the shelter, where constant vigilance and protective strategies were required.

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11 Similarly, Mot gave an account of his granddaughter that demonstrated the depth of  
12 his emotional investment in his family, even though he had little actual contact with them,  
13 and that only on their terms. He expressed vividly his delight in being with his  
14 granddaughter, and his pain at being kept at a distance from her by his daughter:  
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21 She's seven, and she's magic. *Ja*, it's like magic you know, especially when I  
22 see little Kirsten and I think, jeez, you know it's unreal, I get cold shivers you  
23 know, it's just that I love her so much. And it's like I can't really spend time  
24 with her 'cause somehow I think my daughter doesn't want me to spend time  
25 with her, you know, so it's just a visit, like when she comes here and it's  
26 maybe half an hour, you know?<sup>75</sup>  
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33 BMW was even more isolated from his family members. He had a young daughter with a  
34 woman in Port Elizabeth, but said he hadn't seen them for five years. He wondered aloud  
35 whether he should go back, 'but maybe she's married now, maybe she won't want to see  
36 me'.<sup>76</sup> His son, too, in his 40s and living in Johannesburg with his three children, had no  
37 interest in seeing BMW.  
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41 For BMW and Mot, alcoholism was a central cause of estrangement from their  
42 families. Having exhausted, through their drinking and drunken behaviours, 'the patience or  
43 resources otherwise available in their social network'<sup>77</sup> and having consequently become  
44 homeless, BMW and Mot had little choice but to take up accommodation in this shelter.  
45 While neither felt able to stop drinking to create a better chance of re-connection, family  
46 remained a source of both comfort and pain to the two men.  
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51 Finally, emotional distance for BMW and Mot was also created through aspiration.  
52 They talked about moving out of the shelter, where they had been living for around one and  
53 five years, respectively. Reliant on one another for company and support, they did not want to  
54 be separated, and imagined finding a place where they could live together. This 'just needs to  
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3 be one room with some mattresses. We can buy a small hotplate and some pots and we'll be  
4 fine. Maybe somewhere near the sea but we don't care – just somewhere away from here'.<sup>78</sup>

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6 This move was not a concrete plan, but rather a dream that enabled them to deal with  
7 their circumstances at difficult times. At times when they felt more at ease in the shelter, the  
8 aspiration to move was put aside. This was made clear a few weeks later when Mot, asked  
9 how their plans to move were going, replied: '*Ja*, I guess this is my home now. I've grown  
10 attached to this place and I'd hate to leave it'.<sup>79</sup> Although the two men would no doubt have  
11 liked to find more independent housing, they had limited financial resources. Moreover,  
12 having lived in the shelter for so long they were unsure whether they could survive on their  
13 own. Being able to hold on to the possibility, however, allowed them both a sense of hope  
14 that made their present environment tolerable.

15  
16 These three strategies of emotional distancing from the controlled environment and  
17 enforced socialities of the shelter, were often encountered during the research. Our work thus  
18 supports the suggestions of others, such as Cloke et al.<sup>80</sup> and May,<sup>81</sup> that the rules governing  
19 life in shelters and hostels can undermine residents' senses of privacy, autonomy and control,  
20 and that in these spaces 'it is difficult to find anything equating to a sense of home'.<sup>82</sup> A more  
21 powerful, physical form of distancing, however, was also common for our two 'protagonists',  
22 BMW and Mot. For them, the unpleasantness of the shelter was countered through frequent  
23 visits to a nearby shebeen, a space which was as ambiguous and contradictory as those of  
24 their bodies and the shelter, but which facilitated most powerfully a sense of belonging for  
25 the two men.

### 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 **The convivial spaces of the shebeen**

41 One of the most regular complaints about shelter life was that it was boring. This was  
42 mentioned in several different contexts, but particularly, for BMW and Mot, as an  
43 explanation for their drinking.

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Every day is the same, we just sit here and do nothing. Like today we work  
and we do our duties there in the dorms and we clean the bathroom but then  
we're bored. So we borrow ten rand from that guy, a few bucks from that guy  
and we go and have a dop [drink]... It helps break up the day. In fact I could  
go for another now.<sup>83</sup>

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3 At least we read sometimes, when we can read, that is, but otherwise it is so  
4 boring!<sup>84</sup>  
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8 Although they did in fact read a great deal, did crossword puzzles and worked in the  
9 vegetable garden to pass the time, their days often dragged at the shelter. The shebeen  
10 provided a space of relief from the monotony, with different forms of sociality, and the added  
11 benefit of alcohol to lift their moods. As Mot explained, 'to go sit and have a few sparks  
12 [drinks] and a chat makes the day go faster'.<sup>85</sup>  
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16 The shebeen where they most often went for a 'spark' was about fifteen minutes'  
17 walk from the shelter, in a tiny, densely populated informal settlement. It was described by  
18 the men as a 'rough', 'terrible' and 'shocking' place that was also 'dirty' and 'crowded', and  
19 indeed the space was oppressive and unpleasant in many respects.  
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24 BMW and Mot led us... into the shebeen; it was just a woman's shack from  
25 which she sells alcohol. The roof is low and made from chipboard and heavy-  
26 duty plastic. The door is made of thick wood and is so sunk in the mud that I  
27 can't imagine it being able to close. The first room we step into is roughly 2m  
28 x 5m and nine people sit on plastic chairs or a wooden bench around its edge.  
29 One woman is smoking a pipe and the others smoke communal cigarettes –  
30 the smoke makes the room hazy and a thick layer is trapped by the low  
31 ceiling.<sup>86</sup>  
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40 [Figures 5, 6 and 7 here]  
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43 Despite the impoverished surroundings, the men received a cheerful welcome from  
44 those already present, and the shebeen had a certain warmth and homeliness.  
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48 As we walk in Mot is greeted with a cheerful chorus of 'Oupa! [Grandad]  
49 How are you? Come and join us.' Mot takes us through to the next room,  
50 down a step into a darker and more stuffy room although this one smells  
51 pleasantly of frying onions and garlic. There is no floor to the shack and so the  
52 rooms feel damp and unstable. The walls are made of different materials, some  
53 wood and others chipboard. There are white lace curtains on the windows,  
54 which make the inside room even darker.<sup>87</sup>  
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5 In seeming contradiction to their negative descriptions of the shebeen, quoted above,  
6 Mot compared it favourably to the shelter on one occasion: 'After a drink I feel lighter and  
7 less down, and then we come back [to the shelter] and I think, ugh, back to the same old  
8 grime again'.<sup>88</sup> This seemed ironic since objectively, the shebeen was far more 'grimy' than  
9 the shelter. However, visiting the shebeen with BMW and Mot on several occasions, it  
10 became clear that for them this was a far more liberating space than the shelter. This was  
11 partly because the shebeen was simply a cheerier, more affable place, as the men pointed out:  
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18 It's nice to go have a spark. We'll often go and sit there for a few hours and  
19 relax. Everyone knows us there so we just sit and talk nonsense.<sup>89</sup>  
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22  
23 It's nice to go and sit there. Sometimes Mot starts singing golden oldies and  
24 gets everyone to join in.<sup>90</sup>  
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28 Their sense of belonging at the shebeen was facilitated, too, by the ease with which  
29 their drinking, an important aspect of both their lives, was accepted. This was in stark  
30 contrast to the way in which drinking was viewed at the shelter, where, as suggested in the  
31 previous section, there was a general sense of shame surrounding drinking, and a reluctance  
32 to speak about it, such that gestures or allusions tended to be used instead by both staff and  
33 residents. BMW, for example, rather than being explicit, would tilt his hand towards his  
34 mouth to indicate that he had been drinking. Mot would use euphemisms, such as speaking  
35 about one weekend being 'oops', indicating that he had been drunk and was now hung over.  
36 On another occasion, Mot arrived drunk at an interview, and his shame was evident:  
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45 Mot appears – he is holding his left side and in a whisper says to me, 'I'm  
46 sorry but I'm very drunk'... and again repeats 'I'm so drunk,' while looking  
47 around to make sure no-one can hear him. 'It's ok,' I say. 'I'm coming back  
48 on Tuesday and I'd like to talk to you then.' He agrees and winks at me, again  
49 apologising for being drunk.<sup>91</sup>  
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55 At the shebeen, of course, drinking was accepted and welcomed and the men had no  
56 need to feel judged, since everyone was engaged in similar drinking behaviour. Not only did  
57 alcohol provide bodily ease and restore the men's sense of self, as discussed above, but the  
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3 shebeen enabled a sense of social belonging through conversation and shared activity, which  
4 were not available in the same way at the shelter. As emergent geographical work has begun  
5 to show, the consumption of alcohol can play a significant role in shaping diverse forms of  
6 identity and belonging<sup>92</sup> and drinking itself is often constitutive of a sense of community<sup>93</sup>  
7 and of feeling at home.<sup>94</sup>

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11 Finally, the location of the shebeen in an impoverished informal settlement also  
12 conferred on the men a certain status. Both expressed pity for the people living in the  
13 settlement, since they had no electricity or running water, and only four toilets shared among  
14 200 residents, according to BMW. This environment was a reminder to our participants of  
15 their own good fortune in having accommodation at the shelter, and an example of how their  
16 lives might be worse, a not uncommon response among those whose situations are  
17 uncertain.<sup>95</sup> Although they felt a sense of belonging at the shebeen, they did not identify with  
18 the settlement dwellers. Rather, by being able to visit as and when they wished, they were  
19 able to exercise control over their environment and thus establish more firmly an identity of  
20 their own choosing.

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28 This is perhaps the most important point – that the men entered the shebeen on their  
29 own terms. As they repeated several times during the research, they drank not with the  
30 intention of getting drunk – i.e. losing control – but rather ‘to relax’. The space of the  
31 shebeen, then, was one in which they felt most *in* control. They entered and left freely, they  
32 enjoyed themselves while they were there, and no one was overly watchful or critical of their  
33 behaviour. Although their relationships with fellow shebeen-goers were contradictory, both  
34 creating a sense of belonging and actively working against the men’s stated desires to break  
35 their dependence on alcohol, the shebeen was the most liberating space for BMW and Mot. It  
36 was a powerfully affective space where they felt at ease and accepted, stimulated and  
37 unashamed, in clear contrast to the experiences of pain, loneliness, boredom and  
38 embarrassment that characterised most other spaces of their everyday geographies.

## 47 48 **Conclusion**

49  
50 BMW and Mot’s stories clearly demonstrate that what matters most to them is less the  
51 rational development of strategies for accessing space, and more feelings of belonging,  
52 comfort and connection with others. While they yearned for such security, these feelings  
53 were difficult for them to achieve in a homeless shelter that offered little privacy or freedom.  
54 The everyday living spaces of the shelter and even the intimate spaces of their own bodies,  
55 instead of being comfortable, ‘homely’ places, had constantly to be negotiated and managed.

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3 Indeed, feelings of being at home were compromised or prevented in many different ways in  
4 these spaces – through pain, through noise and smells, through constant surveillance and  
5 judgemental gazes.  
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8 The shebeen, by contrast, was a space where a sense of belonging could be achieved,  
9 despite the basic, even unpleasant surroundings and the damaging effects of the alcohol that  
10 they consumed there. For BMW and Mot, a sense of feeling in control of their own bodies,  
11 feeling responsible for their own behaviour and having the freedom to choose their own  
12 environment, were crucial in creating this sense of belonging. Although the comforts they  
13 found in the shebeen were often ambiguous and even contradictory, it was the most liberating  
14 place available to the two men, and the one where they were most able to feel in control and  
15 at home.  
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21 The accounts of these two men highlight the importance of exploring the affective  
22 dimensions of homeless people's lives, connecting their embodied and material experiences  
23 with their emotions, feelings and desires, in order to try and understand them as more than  
24 simply socially and spatially excluded Others. These affective dimensions of everyday life  
25 shape the condition and experience of homelessness as much, if not more than, its structural  
26 causes and effects. While it is obviously important to consider and critique the social and  
27 political dynamics that produce and exacerbate homelessness, this must be done with the  
28 awareness that the experience of being homeless is different for different people,<sup>96</sup> and that  
29 what is lacking for many homeless people is not simply money or shelter, but also, and more  
30 fundamentally, a sense of belonging that is to be found in both material and emotional  
31 comforts.  
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<sup>1</sup> Shelter, information pamphlet (2011).

<sup>2</sup> C. Robinson, ““I think home is more than a building”: young homeless people on the cusp of home, self and something else’, *Urban Policy and Research* **20/1** (2002), pp. 27-38.

<sup>3</sup> T. Höjdestrand, *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2009); S. Kawash, ‘The homeless body’, *Public Culture* **10/2** (1998), pp. 319-339; P. Cloke, J. May and S. Johnsen, ‘Performativity and affect in the homeless city’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **26** (2008), pp.241-263.

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent review, see S. Herbert, ‘Contemporary geographies of exclusion III: to assist or punish?’, *Progress in Human Geography* **35/2** (2011), pp. 256-263.

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### **Biographical note**

Shari Daya is a lecturer in Human Geography in the Environmental and Geographical Science Department at the University of Cape Town. She explores the embodied and emotional geographies of everyday life in the global South, particularly India and South Africa.

Nicola Wilkins has recently completed her Honours degree in the Environmental and Geographical Science Department at the University of Cape Town. Her research explored geographies of drinking and homelessness in Cape Town.



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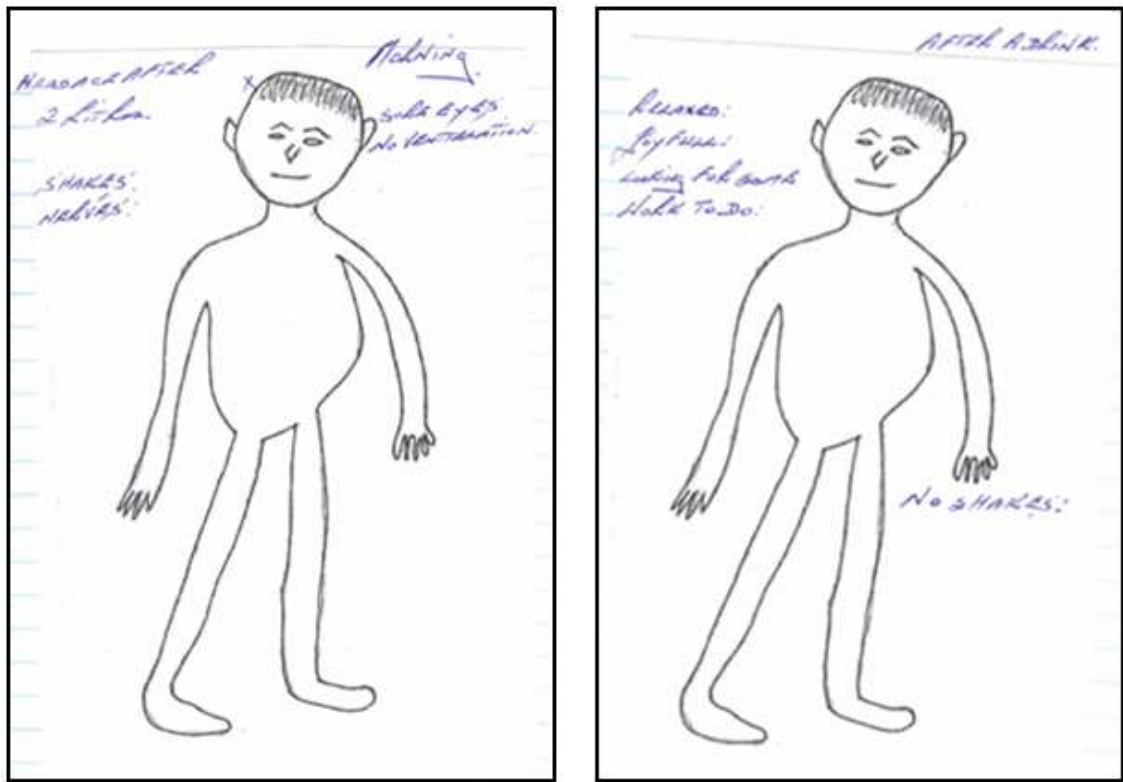


Figure 1: Example from BMW's body book

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Communal shelter space  
694x462mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Vegetable garden  
1388x925mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Men's dormitory  
520x347mm (96 x 96 DPI)

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Path through informal settlement  
925x1388mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Shacks  
1388x925mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Shebeen  
694x462mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Review



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For Peer Review