Abstract

This essay combines literature on gentrification and neo-liberalism within a framework that examines how consumerism is constituted performatively within and by an urban redevelopment area in downtown Denver, Colorado. Through participant-observation and reflexive personal narratives, we consider how the popular 16th Street Mall becomes a stage for diverse performances of consumerism, particularly vis-à-vis the presence of non-consumer others. Though there are other possible identity performances for this space—most notably carried out by the homeless, transients, and buskers who also traverse The Mall—our analysis suggests that liberal capitalist ideologies threaten to erase or subsume non-consumer subjectivities. By ignoring non-consumer others, registering complaints about them, or regarding them with pity, consumers perpetuate neo-liberal ideologies.

“The street is an intermediary between human lives, and its commodities are exchange values elevated to sovereign heights.

Richard G. Jones, Jr. is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Human Communication Studies at the University of Denver. His research examines performance of marginalized identities using reflexive, qualitative methods. Christina R. Foust is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Communication Studies at the University of Denver. Her teaching and research engage rhetoric, power, and social change in a variety of contexts. The authors wish to thank Roy Wood, Kate Willink, Daniel Makagon, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this project and manuscript.

ISSN: 1557-2935 (online) <http://liminalities.net/4-1/16thstreet.htm>
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Raised to its zenith, fetishism attains a kind of splendour; and, in an astonishing subterfuge, things, goods, and objects join forces with symbolism again to become the symbols of wealth and pleasure without limits and without end.\(^1\)

Hundreds of people are going about their business on the 16th Street Mall in downtown Denver, Colorado. People in business suits, tourists with fancy packs, and urban hipsters wearing Diesel jeans exchange fleeting but voyeuristic glances. I can’t take my eyes off an older, unbalanced man carrying two large trash bags, walking between the lanes for the Mall Ride. It looks like people aren’t paying attention although I feel they’re only pretending to ignore him. The man’s movement refocuses my attention, and I watch as he takes off his dirty blue jeans to reveal his white briefs. He pulls another pair of jeans from his trash bag and changes into them. Again, there is no noticeable reaction from the passers-by even as he struggles to get the second pair of pants on without falling over.\(^2\)

Cities throughout the United States are attempting to “revitalize” their downtown centers, following increases in suburbanization which rendered many unused and empty.\(^3\) As the downtown’s diversity cedes to a more homogenous class of affluence, people who are “out of place” in gentrified space become increasingly unwelcome.\(^4\) This essay examines one such urban center in downtown Denver, Colorado, with an eye toward how identities are


\(^{2}\) Throughout the manuscript, we share, in italics, reflexive narratives from our observations on Denver’s 16th Street Pedestrian Mall. The first author conducted research from March, 2006 through December, 2006 culminating in approximately one hundred hours. Both authors formally observed The Mall for 6 hours spread over two days in June of 2007. We offer these ethnographic vignettes in the spirit of illustration and self-reflexivity, inspired by how our own identity-performances became implicated in the social text of The Mall. At times, we found ourselves becoming swept up in consumption, keenly aware of the privilege of being able to depart The Mall to theorize its significance in late capitalism.


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constituted performatively within, and by, the space.

The 16th Street Pedestrian Mall (or just “The Mall”) refers to an entertainment-business corridor that occupies 16 blocks, or one mile, of the downtown portion of 16th Street. The street is home to many shops and restaurants, as well as skyscrapers that house law and financial firms, advertising agencies, and other Denver businesses.\(^5\) As the oil and gas boom of the 1970s facilitated the construction of the high-rise buildings lining 16th Street, the bust of the 1980s left many of those offices vacant.\(^6\) Construction of The Mall was completed in 1982, re-developing the area of downtown that used to be home to Denver’s grand department stores.\(^7\) The 16th Street Mall is the number one tourist attraction in Denver, offering free shuttles (named The Mall Ride) which are heavily used (over 60,000 people ride on an average week day).

Denver is already a tourist destination for people wanting to engage in winter and summer outdoor activities. Downtown developers want to build on this existing reputation by making Denver a shopping and cultural destination, encouraging people to stay longer and spend more money. Particularly attractive to the Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau are leisure travelers who spend an average of 93 dollars per day.\(^8\) And particularly unattractive to Denver’s redevelopment efforts are the transient and homeless who traverse The Mall. Combined with recent publicity surrounding the 18th season of MTV’s *The Real World* which was set in lower downtown (or “LoDo,” located on the northwest side of The Mall), and the lead-up to the 2008 Democratic National

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\(^8\) About 11.7 million overnight visitors came to Denver in 2006 spending a record $2.76 billion dollars, which is up 13 percent from the previous year. The Visitors Bureau states, “people are staying longer and spending more money [which] creates jobs, lowers taxes and is good for our economy.” Kelly Yamanouchi, “Denver Sky High Over Tourist Data,” *The Denver Post* 14 Jun. 2007: A01.
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Convention to be hosted in the city, those who do not “fit” along 16th Street are being more heavily surveilled.

As an urban space, The Mall reflects the diversity that scholars have ascribed to the city as a social text. However, the city’s heterogeneous, vibrant currents of bodies and identities are simplified by liberal ideologies. We argue that the dialectic of subject and other is reinforced along the 16th Street Mall each day through structural and performative othering—material and symbolic mechanisms which legitimate consumerism as the purpose of the space. The Mall accommodates a diverse array of consumer performances, while the presence of non-consumer others—who threaten the liberal capitalist ideologies which sustain gentrified, tourist spaces—is outlawed or more subtly policed. Both methods of othering sustain consumerism at the expense of more rich social interaction outside of liberal ideologies, and, as we conclude, may exacerbate the economic inequalities which fuel homelessness. We conclude that structural and performative othering have implications for how cities treat those who are “out of place” and how critics and residents approach postmodern cities.

The City as a Social Text in Late Capitalism

Several scholars interpret the city’s “diversity” as a refuge against stifling provinciality, with the potential to transgress the social order. DeCerteau captures the lure of urban spaces, as he describes walking in the city, where:

Things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order.9

More generally, the city may be interpreted as a “social text” that is comprised of elements of great significance for those who walk its

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streets: “We are not only readers; we are also read, deciphered and explained (or not).”\(^{10}\) In other words, our presence in the city means we are always already caught-up in dramas of recognition or unintelligibility that inform our identity in the space. For Lefebvre, the city is a rich social text because its symbols are layered and ever-changing. This polysemic richness can create innumerable possibilities for identity performances, even those that subvert or contest dominance. Following Richard Sennett, Simpson describes the city as text: “good spaces are like good stories; they are initially attractive because they hold some as-yet-unexplained promise.”\(^{11}\)

However, the city’s promising “diversity” takes on peculiar hues when imbued with liberal capitalist signs and gestures. It is as though the city’s richness is co-opted by consumerism, a pursuit which distracts us from seeing the sieve-order around us, a series of identifications which prevent us from transforming the sieve-order. Though spaces like the 16th Street Mall have potential to stage interruptions and challenges to consumerism, as we elaborate below, structural and performative othering reinforce neo-liberal purposes for the space, repairing the punches and tears of DeCerteau’s sieve-order— with consequences not only for more privileged city-dwellers (like ourselves), but for the material reality of those who live on the street.

The vibrant malleability of the city as social text cannot be read apart from the context of liberalism, consumerism, and gentrification. The 16th Street Mall is necessitated and legitimated by liberalism, which we identify as the root ideology of contemporary capitalism (neo-liberalism). Though a comprehensive treatment of liberalism and its relationship to consumerism and gentrification is outside this essay’s focus, we identify its basic features. Our goal is not to suggest causal connections between liberalism and the development of The Mall, but to identify the larger ideological forces and contextual factors which undoubtedly influence the play of place, space, and

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\(^{10}\) Lefebvre, *The Critique* 306-307.

bodies in downtown Denver (as in other cities across the globe).

Liberalism is a system of ideas characterized by the Enlightenment virtues of “individuality, autonomy, and moral self-development.” While proponents of liberalism are diverse, they share a common commitment to the sovereignty of the individual, as grounded in human nature. As it has been developed in political theory and practice, classical liberalism thus emphasizes individual rights and democracy as key means to progress toward the realization of human potential. In other words, liberalism advances the “universal applicability” of its “values and institutions…based on notions of progress and a teleological view of development and civility.”

More particularly, two versions of liberalism have emerged from the classical philosophy: liberal humanism and liberal capitalism. The more cosmopolitan liberal humanism advocates for education and the cultivation of liberal values, resulting in “a world society of individuals who share a common humanity.” Here, citizens “are diverse in their goals and individualized and rationalized, but most importantly, they are capable of appreciating the moral equality of all individuals and of treating other individuals as ends rather than as means.” Liberal capitalism considers the free market and private property as the keys to cultivating peace, and therefore permitting the development of individual sovereignty.

Liberalism, in its classic and more contemporary forms, has been

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15 Greener 296.
16 Greener 297.
18 Doyle 1153.
thoroughly critiqued. Through its often violent imposition of tolerance and freedom, its use of war and forced marketization in the name of peace and civility, liberalism appears self-contradictory: It “is both egalitarian and inegalitarian, it stresses both the unity of mankind and the hierarchy of cultures, it is both tolerant and intolerant, peaceful and violent, pragmatic and dogmatic, skeptical and self-righteous.”\textsuperscript{19} Some argue that liberal capitalism (and elements of liberal humanism) have expanded into one of the most destructive forces of our time, neo-liberalism.\textsuperscript{20} This “new” liberalism is characterized by a focus on economic rather than social policy; a vertical integration of economic policy-making into international bureaucracies such as the World Trade Organization; and the privatization of social services and programs.\textsuperscript{21} Neo-liberalism advances liberal capitalist ideals to an extreme, de-regulating and expanding markets across the globe.

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest, today’s neo-liberal capitalist Empire can “include and manage difference within its constitution” by directing the post-industrial production of communication, affect, and subjectivities.\textsuperscript{22} Put differently, liberalism survives its contradictions through consumer capitalism, as a means of producing not only goods and services, but “Who we are, how we view the world, and how we interact with each other.”\textsuperscript{23} Capitalism interpellates consumers as “differentiated and cultivated” individuals who construct unique personalities through the commodities they

\textsuperscript{19} Parekh 82.
consume. Individuals are driven to consume, as they are encouraged to view themselves as imperfect and to view commodities as the tools that will help them attain uniqueness: “The modern consumer will desire a novel rather than a familiar product because this enables him [or her] to believe that its acquisition and use can supply experiences which [she or] he has not so far encountered in reality.”

The newly attained uniqueness is short-lived, as consumerism relies on a process of obsolescence and need/want manufacturing which creates a forever unstable and insatiable consumer-subject.

Neo-liberalism and consumerism have a sort of symbiotic relationship that is quite apparent in the redevelopment of urban spaces. Here, in the more localized context of neo-liberalism, lifestyle marketing and branding encourage “scripted idea[s], such as the all pervasive Irish pub or the Las Vegas style Casino,” as the replacements for “blight.” Consumption is not simply an economic exchange, but an alteration of meaning: “the gentrifiers are considered to constitute an emergent consumer class, concerned with consuming those amenities and attributes of the inner city conducive to the expression of their identity.” As Gotham convincingly argues, contemporary gentrification “is commercial as well as residential and reflects new institutional connections between the local institutions, the real estate industry and the global economy.”

The result of these relationships is a “new urban landscape” in which “gentrification and tourism amalgamate with other consumption-oriented activities such as shopping, restaurants, cultural facilities

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Within the neo-liberal context, then, the “hermetically sealed living-working-playing environments” created through gentrification are infused with consumerist aesthetics and values that clearly convey who is welcome, and who is not. The homeless, transients, “[u]nemployed, low income and welfare dependent groups literally have no space here and instead are objects of suspicion and surveillance.” Public space in this sense is not a shared, unconstrained space but an “open space for recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is allowed in.” It is a “controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city.” Within this space, the working, playing, and consuming white middle class replaces and excludes the heterogeneity of the urban social landscape, presenting instead a false image of a homogenized public.

As our analysis of the 16th Street Mall suggests, spaces of consumption, and the movements of bodies within these spaces, creates a stage upon which one can perform the unquenchable desire to set oneself apart. The endless quest for identity fulfillment serves as a useful demarcation in our conceptualization of consumers and non-consumer others, which informs our analysis below. In spite of the heterogeneity of consumers we observed on The Mall (e.g., shoppers, tourists, business people, people-watchers, and conventioneers), they are homogenous in the sense that they operate smoothly within and through the space. Consumer subjects are “in place,” performing “properly,” and (for the most part) complementing, rather than interrupting, each other’s performances. Consumer capitalist discourses inscribe themselves upon the body (actor-in-practice), reproducing consumer performances that then become legible scripts for meaning and interaction on the part of other

29 Gotham 1116.
30 Hollands and Chatterton 369.
32 Mitchell 115.
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consuming subjects. Non-consumers do not perform “properly” the consumer quest for unique identities; instead, their performances offer varying degrees of interruption or transgression to the neo-liberal order of The Mall. Some teens, for instance, may appear to seek public identifications, while simultaneously resisting a mass-produced consumer aesthetic (e.g., looking “Goth” rather than Gap). As part of the city’s spectacle, teens, transients, and buskers are swept into consumerism, becoming objects for people-watchers who may stroll The Mall for its “difference.” While some resistance to consumerism can be tolerated in a space, for example loitering teenagers, the homeless represent a rupture in public space as conceived of by city planners.

As we further sort through the performances of consumerism in the re-developed city, Lefebvre’s distinction between the layers of space is useful. “Representations of space” speaks to the “conceptualized space” of engineers and planners who “identify what is perceived with what is conceived.” Business interests also fall into this category as they inscribe upon the materiality of space their own desires for generating revenue through redevelopment. In contrast, “Representational spaces […] overlay physical space, making symbolic use for its objects.” Inhabitants and users of the spaces themselves live through the images and symbols of the space rather than expert-identified, or sanctioned, purposes. We detail below how the reiterative performances of consumption maintain the coherence of representational space in downtown Denver.

Performances of Consumerism and Othering on the 16th Street Mall

Gestures and enactments, discourses and identities constitute performances that become a dynamic reality for others and

36 Lefebvre, The Production 39.
ourselves. In conversation with the spaces around them, these ways of being, or performances, become *habitualities* that organize social meaning through bodies. In short, as the previous section supports, the play of bodies, identities, spaces and symbols forms a complex text. In the following analysis, we identify the ways in which the city’s complexity is simplified, in favor of neo-liberal capitalism. We first discuss structural othering, drawing from Lefebvre’s conception of representations of space. Expert planning, zoning, and legal restrictions work to create spaces in certain ways, and exclude those who are out of place. Secondly, we discuss representational space where performances and symbols overlay spaces in ways that reinforce or resist expert intentions. We illustrate how representations of space and representational space influence The Mall along a continuum that stretches from benign variation to enforced hierarchy, all the while reinforcing consumerism as The Mall’s legitimate purpose.

**Structural Othering**

As we sit outside at the Paramount Café, the best place to people watch on The Mall according to most, we take in the bustle. The Mall Ride buses pass by, decorated with various themes, sponsored by the transit authority: “Sports & Culture,” “Colorado Wildlife,” “Colorado Recreation.” The sketches in pastel shades depict jetskiing, biking, skiing, and kayaking. The buses, like the people who pass by, offer something to look at, prompting commentary and conversation. Although we’re not surprised that the bus-sides have been colonized by advertising space, we’re momentarily proudful of the beautiful state in which we live and think aloud, “That’s nice!”

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The “Then & Now” bus sprints and then slows, its images of Denver as a cowtown and new metropolis scurrying by and pausing in front of others like us, dining al fresca. The bus hearkens back to Denver’s frontier past but reminds us that the surrounding bustle is the telos toward which those “early days” were always meant to head.

A few days later, we stroll down to LoDo which is more residential and more indicative of a gentrified space full of former warehouses/industrial buildings turned brownstone urban lofts. Three police officers on bicycles and one on a motorcycle ride The Mall this morning. It is a spectacle of safety, appearing early, we suppose, for the residents to see and take comfort in as they make their way from downtown loft to work or play.

The spectacle of cleaning is also underway before most tourists and business travelers hit the streets. It is early morning and workers are out scrubbing and sweeping the surfaces of The Mall. We are struck by their appearance of work, busy-ness, and business. Their purple polos embroidered with the creed, “Downtown Denver. Clean, Safe, and
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Vibrant” marks them as employees of the Downtown Denver Business Improvement District (DDBID). Given the activities we’ve observed on The Mall this morning, they’re working to make the motto reality.

Returning to Lefebvre’s representations of space, it is clear that urban revitalization projects like the 16th Street Mall are infused with varying degrees of structural othering. “Expert” city planners, often in conversation with the local business community, create and control conceptual space, imbuing it with institutional (often legal) mechanisms for “othering.” Structural othering designates the primary purpose of city spaces as “consumption.” As Simpson discovered in his ethnography of a redevelopment project in Ybor City, Florida, business and civic leaders may become annoyed when the uses of a city space “do not correspond with [their] interests in the space as a spot” that would “appeal to moneyed visitors.” In New York City, Duneier found that the creation of business improvement districts (BIDs) helped reinforce experts’ authority over a space’s purpose, bringing about “civil order” by deploying “their own security forces and sanitation workers.”

As we experienced through observations at the Paramount Café and in LoDo, structural and performative othering reinforce con-

39 A report from the National Coalition for the Homeless and National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness, chronicles several examples of cities that responded to business complaints by banning “activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and begging in public spaces” (8). For instance, the Downtown Lawrence Inc. business group lobbied this Kansas college town’s council to ban panhandling and loitering in order to prevent non-consumer others from “intimidating customers” (26). A coalition of business and residents in Houston, Texas, seeks to expand an anti-camping ordinance to protect the city’s “struggling business” from the homeless (33). National Coalition for the Homeless and National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness, A Dream Denied: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities, Jan. 2006, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/crimreport/report.pdf>.


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sumerism with a kind of discursive synergy, as a space’s official purpose weaves into peoples’ use of it, and vice-versa. Structural othering may be as severe as passing laws that criminalize homelessness, sometimes enforced by police who jail non-consumer others following “sweeps” of urban areas.\(^{42}\) Denver, for instance, has banned “aggressive panhandling,” and passed ordinances to diminish the presence of transients or loitering teens on the 16th Street Mall.\(^{43}\)

However, Denver’s structural othering typically appears in more subtle, discursive practices, such as the DDBID’s pamphlet discouraging visitors from giving change to panhandlers. The pamphlet, readily available at kiosks along The Mall is entitled, “Panhandling. It’s a lose/lose for all.”\(^{44}\) A manly palm and fingers stretch down from this headline, with the words “Please help. don’t give.” printed neatly on the palm. After suggesting that panhandling is a massive underground economy (with Denverites offering “$4.5 million annually to panhandlers”), the DDBID identifies why panhandlers threaten The Mall: “much of the money given to them is spent on cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. By providing a regular supply of money to panhandlers, we further enable and encourage that lifestyle.”\(^{45}\) The DDBID encourages visitors to feed meters throughout downtown Denver, rather than giving straight to non-consumer others. The meters look just like parking meters, but channel coins to the Campaign to End Homelessness: “With your help, real change is on the way.”\(^{46}\)

The DDBID pamphlet echoes other efforts to oust non-

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\(^{42}\) National Coalition for the Homeless and National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness 9.

\(^{43}\) Specifically, as Chacon reviews, Denver passed three ordinances in response to homelessness downtown: “One prohibits panhandlers from stepping into traffic and another from begging within 20 feet of sidewalk eateries. A third ordinance prohibits sitting or lying in the public right of way in the downtown area from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., with some exceptions.” The ordinances are enforced through “up to a year in jail and $999” in fines. Daniel J. Chacon, “Beggin for Trouble,” Rocky Mountain News 26 Jul. 2006: 4A.


\(^{45}\) Downtown Denver Business Improvement District.

\(^{46}\) Downtown Denver Business Improvement District.
consumers from the 16th Street Mall by scapegoating panhandlers. As perhaps the most visible non-consumer others—for they do their “business” along one of Denver’s most visible and visited streets—panhandlers appear as a form of pollution, disrupting the purposive strolling, window-shopping, dining, and general “experiencing” of the outdoor pedestrian mall. City government, planners, and local business organizations are all institutions concerned with the impacts that panhandlers have on the revenue potential of the city. As recent reports from the Metro Denver Convention and Visitors Bureau suggest, conventioneers have expressed negative views toward panhandlers. In the words of a local newspaper columnist, “We have a new image: the Calcutta of the Rockies.”

Granted, some discourse situates panhandling within larger structural causes for homelessness, including employment and housing. Denver mayor, John Hickenlooper, has instituted an aggressive plan to end homelessness in ten years, called “Denver’s Road Home.” The program supplements the city’s criminalization efforts with more proactive ways to help the homeless. Many of the program’s goals place the burden of aid on the city rather than on the homeless.

However, other goals reinforce structural efforts to make The Mall a pseudo-public space of consumption, a stage upon which the

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48 According to Carman, “With an estimated 9,725 homeless people, a statewide jobless rate of 5.6 percent, housing prices well above the national average, and city and state budgets for programs slashed for the third year in a row, business and civic leaders face increasing numbers of panhandlers and few real solutions.” Carman B01.
49 Specifically, Denver’s Road Home is a “Housing First” program supported by Denver city government and business officials who have teamed to resolve a housing crisis throughout the city. For more details, go to <http://www.denversroadhome.org/>.
50 For instance, the goals include creating over 3000 “permanent and transitional housing opportunities,” developing a “safe and legal shelter” system with over 100 new beds in the first year, promoting “better access to supportive services that promote long-term stability and improved functioning.” Denver’s Road Home, The Plan: Goals, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.denversroadhome.org/plan.php>.
spectacle of othering non-consumers is encouraged. The sixth goal of the program is to aid the homeless in acquiring “skills and knowledge necessary to participate in the workforce,” while the fifth goal expresses the program’s desire to “Improve public safety by increasing homeless outreach efforts to reduce panhandling, loitering and crimes.” What is troubling about the Road Home initiative—particularly as it may affect panhandlers, transients, and homeless people on The Mall—is that “normal” life is premised upon consumer-capitalist standards. Furthermore, we see here the liberal tendency to frame homelessness as an individual issue, or as a threat to consumerism, rather than a social problem resulting from structural and economic inequalities which primarily threatens the poor.

Representations of space, beyond expert discourse, reinforce The Mall’s purpose. The physical lay-out of The Mall offers segregated enclaves for comfortable consumer experiences—some of which are more or less exposed to Denver’s “diversity.” The 16th Street Mall is a public space designed for pedestrians, with two traffic lanes accommodating the Mall Ride and emergency and maintenance vehicles. Along the length of The Mall there is a median/space between the two lanes, which are less marked by performances of consumerism. This space, which can be as wide as 40 feet or as narrow as 10, is a place where non-consumer others often gravitate. Removed from the bustle of the sidewalk but squarely in the middle of the overall spectacle of The Mall, there are secured and stationary benches that are often occupied by people carrying bags, backpacks,

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51 Denver’s Road Home, The Plan: Goals.

52 Importantly, we do not wish to romanticize homelessness, or present a “beat” lifestyle as the only alternative to “normal” consumer capitalism. As Tompkins recently argues, the legacy of Jack Kerouac’s On the Road continues to constrain efforts to help the homeless, as Denver’s “Skid Row” became a spiritual center for the book. This romanticism joins liberal capitalism in preventing people from fully appreciating the negative material consequences that come from being homeless, and from pursuing policy change, and other structural and individual efforts, to help the houseless find homes. Phillip K. Tompkins, “On the Road and Down and Out: The Unexpected Consequences of a Rhetorical Vision,” Social Justice and Communication Scholarship, ed. Omar Swartz (Philadelphia: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006) 69-89.
or suitcases who sit as if in some liminal waiting area. Other sitting spaces on The Mall more markedly enforce hierarchy, rendering others as objects to “experience” as part of the city space.

Railings about three-feet high surround restaurant and café sitting spaces, demarcating the public space of the sidewalk from the private space of consumption. I begin the morning at one such place, the Corner Bakery, where restrooms are marked for “Customers Only.” Displayed near them is the “Safe Place” Award. This chain establishment seems to resonate with the DDBID’s mission of a Clean, Safe, and Vibrant Denver; at least with “customers.”

I move to Starbucks, pausing to write and observe more of The Mall. Fearing I don’t have enough money for the garage, I decide to use my debit card. To justify my use of the card, I get a full-blown snack (coffee cake and a bottle of water). The clerk asks me if I want it to go, or for here. I indicate that I’d like to sit outside and the clerk suggests a ceramic plate as “it’s better for the environment.”
I sit outside Starbucks in the shade. Sparrows eye my cake for crumbs. People have what I assume is a business meeting at the table next to me. This is a pretty space with trees in large planters, hanging flower baskets, birds, and shade. There are degrees of tourism, shopping, and leisure. A woman with two girls and a boy skitter past. An older man in cargo shorts and sandals follows. A cashier passes by in black pants, maroon shirt-tail hanging out. A security guard in uniform walks ahead of a muscular man wearing jeans and sunglasses, his silver phone pressed to his ear as he enters the Starbucks.

There are so few “others,” not only in the small perimeter of Starbucks tables but within this whole quaint courtyard. The space itself invites consumption of products, not just to meet basic needs (food, water), or even perform certain lifestyles (though these are certainly parts of the consumption experience). But, at the basic level, one feels the need to justify one’s presence—which is to say, make oneself comfortable—in spaces along The Mall. I am not immune. Like the coffee cake and water (which satiate my light hunger and heavy thirst, which fulfill my desire for something tasty but not totally unhealthy), consuming products legitimates my presence here. Here, consumption of products integrates seamlessly with consumption of time and space. It forms a consumption of experience.

When space and place combine to form a consumption of experience, the moment envisioned by downtown developers and their stakeholders has become reality. Here, it is easier to cleanse revitalized spaces of others’ presence, reinforcing neo-liberal ideologies and identities.

**Performative Othering**

Performative othering manifests on a continuum ranging from banal performances of consumerism that are not intentionally othering to intentional abjection of others. Everyday acts such as wearing particular clothing designated for one’s actions or participating in a lunch ritual create distinctions that reinforce the separation between consumers and non-consumer-others.

People “dress the part” for their respective interactions on and
with The Mall, adding nuances of sartorial distinction. From the fast-moving people in dark business suits on the southeast side of The Mall to the urban hipsters walking small loft-dogs and carrying yoga mats on the northwest, LoDo side, clothing and accessories help constitute the performances taking place. The body’s adornments facilitate the drama of recognition for diverse consumer subjects who include business people, tourists, shoppers, and conventioneers.

On the southeast side of The Mall, surrounded by the two largest skyscrapers in the city, the convention center, and several hotels, local and visiting business people with ID cards or name-badges dominate the busy weekday scene. The number of tourists here, especially during the summer, also increases. It is not uncommon to see families, in small packs, walking about. Large drink containers, souvenir bags, shorts, tennis shoes, and fanny packs, stand in sharp contrast to the harried business women and men navigating the slow moving crowd.

Business people usually carry only portable electronic devices or briefcases while shoppers and tourists carry bags, which mark their consumer identities for the moment. Still others are carrying much more “stuff,” marking them as transient.

A small group of people who look “out of place” walk by me on the sidewalk. They have camouflage cargo pants on, dark colored tank tops, wallets with chains and huge backpacks. They have a toddler walking with them and are pushing a baby in a stroller. Having had several friends in high school and college who elected to “drop out” of the rat race of society and live transient lives on the streets, I identify them as “street kids,” possibly making their way to the train station.

I’ve also noticed many people with rolling suitcases. It’s obvious that they’re not going to the airport but are, instead, using the suitcases to transport belongings. The people have neither the rushed, purposeful, or sometimes frantic look of those beginning a trip; nor the curious-eyed, tired-but-excited look of someone who’s recently arrived at their destination. They are going about their daily life, rolling suitcase in tow.

This contemporary sign of consumer capital, of being able to travel in bourgeois comfort by rolling, instead of carrying, one’s bags, has been adopted by people who spend a lot of time on the streets.
Rolling suitcases, instead of carrying large trash bags or pushing a shopping cart, can be a tactic to thwart surveillance given the cases’ familiarity. Whether out of necessity or as an agentic move to co-opt dominant symbolic meaning, non-consumer others’ use of objects such as strollers and rolling suitcases strengthens their legitimacy within the space. However, upon closer inspection, these familiar markers are revealed to be older, beat-up, or used models that would be rendered obsolete by the drive to produce and consume newer and better products. Their use is more utilitarian and stands in juxtaposition to the lifestyle marker of the heavy-duty “mega-stroller” that accompanies pedestrians on The Mall, or designer luggage that marks one’s class status and fashion taste.

Businesspeople join the parade of passers-by, smart casual and stylish. Three to six groups of thirtysomethings, about four to a pack, walk by, ready for lunch at their restaurant of choice. Those who are on The Mall for pleasure as tourists, shoppers, or conventioners may splurge on lunch time cocktails and leisurely people-watch. But eating on the go seems to be the epitome of late capitalism’s fluid efficiency; illustrated by the young woman carrying her giant white Styrofoam Jamba Juice cup, sipping a vitamin-powdered fruity iced lunch; and the man eating his salad out of a plastic container while purposefully walking toward his destination. Contrast those images with the bearded, somewhat dirty, older man who just walked by checking trash containers and us, the two observers consuming our cobb salad and turkey sandwich (as well as the spectacle around us), and you see the diversity of consumptive performances.

Clothing choices and lunch rituals fall on the less violent side of the performative othering continuum. But, as we move toward face-to-face interactions, ignoring non-consumer others when they interrupt the performance of consumerism seems to be a standard way to abject them (thus avoiding a direct encounter with difference). Certain props, or accessories, aid in such avoidance rituals, while some people’s comportment makes them seem almost impenetrable.

The people we read as business men talk very loudly on their cell phones—louder than the women. We wonder about their privilege in this space and how their loud voices combined with their nice suits and up-to-
date cell phones, and the embodied performance of uninterrupted/uninterruptible confidence permits them to talk so loudly and so freely.

Later, we take the Mall Ride for the length of 16th Street. A man stands far from others who enter, taking up space to avoid them. Gradations of consumer quality mark the bus passengers: Jamba Juice versus McDonald’s, Ross Clothing versus Ann Taylor Loft. Even with the diversity of consumerism displayed in the space, and with no non-consumer others present, people keep a safe distance by taking up space with their bodies or with the artifacts of their consumerism, like their shopping bags on the seat next to them.

On the LoDo side of The Mall, a man appearing to be transient—his Target bags seemingly filled with his belongings—sits on a bench outside of the Tattered Cover Bookstore. He asks a young man walking out of the store for change. The man is on his cell phone, he waves no and walks a few lamp-posts’ distance before removing the phone from his ear. He wears dress pants, a white shirt, and has a wide, confident stride. On the same block, a man solicits money to help fund the 2008 Democratic National Convention. People appear to turn him down with the frequency of the homeless, as he smiles and offers embarrassed half-waves of his hand to them.

The man on the bench and the DNC solicitor interrupt the workers’ and loft dwellers’ morning rituals of consumerism. The averted gaze, bag in seat, and cell phone are all props in the ritual of avoiding contact with difference on The Mall. However, for those who work on The Mall—who are engaged in immediate capitalist pursuits of work—tourists, shoppers, political party solicitors, and non-consumer others threaten to interrupt their expedient pursuits. The jumbo convenience store cups and brightly-colored clothing, the leisurely pace and four-person-path berth, for instance, does not match the sophistication of many of downtown’s loft-dwellers, or the hustle of 16th Street’s businesspeople.

More passive-aggressive routes of retaliation against non-consumer others appear on the pages of the newspaper. For instance, one editorial claims the following: “Try walking down Denver’s 16th Street Mall without being panhandled. Most days it’s impossible, and
the problem is only getting worse." One column begins by discussing some of the rituals of avoidance performed by consumers on The Mall:

For downtown denizens, it’s practically an urban survival technique, the way we’ve learned to stride down Denver’s 16th Street Mall. Walk with purpose. Keep your eyes locked straight ahead, yet with sort of a far away look to them….And that way you don’t see, nor do you make eye contact with, the beggar perched on the street corner.

Like the broader liberal ideology of which it is a part, intentionally refusing to acknowledge non-consumer others is a “natural” part of daily life on The Mall. Ignoring non-consumers frees consumers from having to implicate themselves in, or even acknowledge, structural inequalities.

I depart Starbucks and head down The Mall. A tall man wearing jeans, socks and sandals, with a blue-striped shirt and rasta-looking hat strums a guitar. He solicits a man, whose hand stretches out with some change. He keeps strumming as two delegates from a convention pass. They keep talking to each other, not giving any money. He picks up the beat as people pass. People walk by with averted gazes, leaving a 1-2 foot berth. A man protectively clasps the hands of two small boys at either side of him as he passes the guitar player. I ask myself: Who will engage him? Will anyone allow him to interrupt them? A woman missing a few teeth pauses to talk to him as he’s playing. He solicits and she gives him a cigarette. She turns to solicit from a young man who replies, “Oh, I don’t have any” to her request for “change for the bus?”

I move toward the median, sitting next to an older man with dirty clothes who gazes blankly as a transient drummer pounds along for passers-by. We are in a less gentrified block. The drummer plays beneath a sign reading, “Denver Gifts & Souvenirs” near the wig shop and vacant jewelry store. He is white, has long hair, a beard, wears soiled jeans and a white t-shirt that looks to be an extra-extra large. He gets

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more looks than the guitar player, perhaps because he is rhyming along with the drum beat—louder now, and more aggressively. He is a novelty here, fitting, like the wig shop. A woman in a Toby Keith t-shirt and white capri pants smiles wryly as she and her male companion pass by with their kids, shopping bags in hand. Conventiongoers cross the street before they reach the invisible line separating the drummer from the consumer traffic. After fifteen minutes or so the guitar player finishes his song, lifting the instrument to his chest, as people respond with patronizing smiles. He stoops over the guitar, rearranging the green bills in the clear plastic cup every few minutes. It gets little attention. He packs up for another corner.

Our observations confirmed that consumerism often functions to shield subjects from being interrupted by those asking (or performing) for spare change. Our observations also show how people employed on The Mall keep watch for potential customers and potential nuisances, reinforcing neo-liberal ideologies by maintaining the proper purpose of the street.

Like me, people working on The Mall are people-watching—or maybe conducting surveillance. I’m in a seating area outside the Starbucks, which is next to a sports souvenir shop. The young white man who works at the sports store stands in the doorway on this sunny, spring afternoon. He is definitely taking notice of the attractive women that walk by but pays no attention to business men. He smiles and nods at people who are leisurely strolling, including one family in typical tourist gear. A man with a cigarette butt in his mouth, dreads, and ragged clothes is making his way down The Mall checking every purple and green trashcan he passes. The sports store employee watches him with an expressionless face. As the man continues to check the cans nearer the store, the clerk’s posture changes from relaxed to defensive.

I’ve noticed a lot of transient people sitting inside the Starbucks and I ask one of the baristas about her experiences working on The Mall. I note the interesting people I see coming in and out of her store. She seems unconcerned and agrees. I ask her if they cause problems and she says no. One man in particular seems to have a relationship with some of the employees. He’s usually sitting at the bar facing the street. Today, he’s finishing his coffee and rolling a cigarette. It looks like he’s wearing the
same thing I've seen him wear every other time I've been here. He's got a worn blue t-shirt and jeans on. His hair is greased back and thick with a loose curl. He's skinny and has older thick-framed glasses. He is very fidgety. When he comes outside to smoke there is a Starbucks employee conversing with a friend while on his break. The man joins the conversation. When he leaves, the Starbucks employee says, “That’s Chuck. He’s a regular in the window. It’s an interesting cast of characters.” I don’t think Chuck would be welcome at the sports store, but his presence in Starbucks seems unproblematic.

The above instances reveal some stock performances of consumer recognition and non-consumer othering played out in downtown Denver. Even though Chuck is objectified as a “character”—part of the city’s “diversity” to be experienced by consumers—he interacts with consumers on The Mall and represents the potential for more complex encounters between consumers and non-consumer others. However, as revealed in the encounters between consumer subjects, the guitarist and drummer, performative othering often forecloses the possibility of rich urban interactions.

During our observations, we became increasingly aware of the complexity of the site and our performance within it. Our privileged position as observers has allowed us to spend more time watching interactions between consumers and non-consumers; in the process, our desire to quickly cast them as one-dimensional, view them with pity, or other them, has decreased. As DeCerteau suggests, we find things extra and other walking in the city. Like many of the people in our observations, we have glossed over or avoided these “extras” when they have posed as an interruption to our experience of consumption. Why is excess acceptable when couched in capitalist ideologies of “more and bigger is better” but not in terms of an ethical diversity of experience? Why are we so quick to protect the ontological ease of our consumptive practices through performances of avoidance that abject others? Perhaps the threat of confrontation, an encounter that would force us to be more reflexive, pushes us to other people or performances that are “extra.” Regardless, the prevalence of structural and performative othering sustains The Mall as a neo-liberal space, discouraging us from a greater awareness of
the sieve-order as a space for possibility beyond consumerism.

From Accommodation to Possibility

The presence of non-consumer others, in summary, contests or produces a hiccup in the synchronicity of the material and symbolic aspects of The Mall. For academics, the hiccup could easily become an abstract distraction, permitting us to forget the harsh material reality of homelessness. For developers and investors, the hiccup becomes a concrete target for elimination. Indeed, the presence of non-consumer others is met with great resistance, from both those structures that create representations of space, and those inhabitants who perform properly (as consumers) within representational spaces. The framing of non-consumer others in everyday urban encounters, newspaper articles, and broader discourses surrounding revitalized downtown centers, reflect a staunch ideological and material investment in promoting consumerism. Though cities like Denver offer more or less “diverse” spaces that incubate potentially subversive hybridity, consumer capitalism accommodates the city’s excesses into pleasurable “experiences.”

Our analysis of the 16th Street Mall invites a brief discussion of reading the city as a social text; homelessness; and the possibility for opening out the sieve-order. Initially, we argue that the city’s “diversity” cannot be read outside of the liberal ideologies which continue to structure urban pathways, especially as old downtowns are gentrified and converted to tourist attractions. No one is exempt from the consumerist representations of space. We recreated it throughout this project, to the material benefit of downtown businesses, who fed and caffeinated us, and offered us a shady perch from which to experience Denver’s bustle.

Importantly, though, Lefebvre, DeCerteau, and other urban critics did not conceive of the city’s transgressive polyphony as “pure.” Arguably, consumption has always figured into the city’s diversity. However, when this marketplace is distilled to consumer spectacle, when the representational spaces are policed so severely that they lose their open and public quality, the sieve-order seals itself off to the possibilities that make the city such a wondrous place. As
more cities turn to urban revitalization projects, it is imperative that the city’s “diverse” social text be read in the context of liberalism (especially as it is being extended through gentrification and consumerism).

The very public nature of homelessness is translated as a threat to the “pleasurable experiences” of the middle class who drive urban revitalization, and to society at large. Homeless people (like the man in the essay’s opening vignette) do not have legitimate private spaces so they must use public spaces for private functions, while simultaneously being repelled from public areas through structural and performative othering. Our society, which is anchored in the liberal ideology of private property, does not make material or discursive room for homeless people who are in this “double bind.” Rather, “the presence of homeless people in public spaces suggests in the popular mind an irrational and uncontrolled society in which the distinctions between appropriate public and private behavior are muddled.”55

Working outside all sanctioned channels of consumerism (save the liberal humanist notion of “charity,” as we elaborate below), panhandlers contribute little to the “experience” of walking The Mall; perhaps, with the exception of being “interesting characters.” But the institutional stakeholders (especially the DDBID) cast panhandlers as a threatening distraction that must be ousted, for the “safety and comfort” of Mall visitors. In other words, for a pure, undistracted performance of consumerism, all others (especially panhandlers) must go. We are wary of efforts to rid gentrified space of others as part of the process to sanitize consumerism.

The structural and performative othering of panhandlers raises interesting questions about how cities frame and handle their housing crises: Does the criminalization of homelessness serve the interests of consumerism, more than the interests of the public—and how does the conflation of “public safety” with “consumer comfort” impact city policies toward homelessness? How do developers use social programs like Denver’s Road Home to advance their investments in profiting from urban space? How might housing crises be handled

55 Mitchell 118.
more ethically—without legitimating consumerism as the predominant use of urban space, or enforcing liberal capitalist lifestyles for all?

The last question is perhaps the most daunting. It has haunted us more as our project evolved, especially as we have seen how some impulses to feed, clothe, clean, shelter, help the homeless, are premised upon a liberal ideology. While these impulses may be a humanist (rather than strictly capitalist) variation of liberalism, they nonetheless carry the baggage of Reason and Self-determination, as though spare change can help free the panhandler from her dismal street life—or, as though just a little assistance may allow the homeless to “return to a normal life, like mine and yours.”

And yet, as Denver’s Road Home attests, many homeless desire the normalcy which has been denied them, by the same development practices which encourage the scapegoating of panhandlers along the 16th Street Mall. Neo-liberalism results in a kind of two-pronged attack on the poor: the imperative for freer and wider markets persuades governments to slash and/or privatize social services, at the same time that development practices relocate a wealthy consumer class in spaces once affordable or open to the poor. In Denver, there is an affordable housing shortage which may contribute to the estimated 4500-4700 homeless persons living in the city.56 According to a report commissioned by the city, in 2004, 15% of Denver’s population (about 82,000 people) lived below the poverty level (of $20,000 for a family of four). Only 4% of multifamily rental units were considered affordable for them. The housing market is particularly bleak for the very poor who earn less than $10,000 per year, where “there were fewer than two [affordable rental] units actually available” for every 10 households in need.

We hope that programs hold city planners and developers accountable for structural causes of homelessness, as in the eighth goal of Denver’s Road Home, which seeks to “Reform Denver’s zoning, building and development codes to facilitate an adequate

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supply of emergency and affordable housing.”

Is it possible to resituate (even if temporarily) the encounters between consumers and non-consumers outside the complex of liberal ideology? Along with loosening liberalism’s hold on structural approaches to homelessness, we believe that city-dwellers may consider more ethical performative engagements. Such engagements may begin by attending to the interruptions that non-consumer others create in gentrified/tourist spaces. Through the performative lens given by DeCerteau and others, we were aware of how non-consumers created moments of punctum, or interruptions to “the flow of expectation that resists the repetitive and hegemonic power to reinscribe identity and value.”

But when people on the street ignore these moments of interruption, or abject those who are not consuming, the vision of elite stakeholders in downtown development—for a sanitized, comfortable “urban experience”—is materialized. Perhaps by refusing to perform as “good consumers” (which may include ethical acknowledgement of non-consumer others, and alternative uses of gentrified tourist spaces), we may encourage downtown developers to stop pursuing projects that perpetuate material inequalities, projects that become consumer playgrounds.

57 Denver’s Road Home, The Plan: Goals.