

Fashion/ing Statements: Reading Homeless Bodies in Contemporary Fiction

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Alex Shakar's satiric novel *The Savage Girl*,¹ published in 2001, addresses the ironies of "homeless chic." The title character of the novel is a nameless homeless woman whose adventurous outfit inspires trend spotters to create a "savage" trend. While the marketing experts observe, sketch and exploit her style, the homeless woman's identity remains mysterious. At one point in the novel she is seen lying asleep in the street, her body "curled up like a question mark" (53). While her clothes signal the message – the fashion statement, as it were – of an "authentic," anti-consumerist lifestyle, her body is fashioned as a sign that challenges this very readability.

What is the question that the homeless body poses, and to whom is it addressed? What is the answer, if there is any? And, more abstractly, what are the functions of the homeless body and its dress in this novel and in others? How is the discrepancy between social concern about and cultural fascination with homelessness negotiated in fictional texts? These questions gain relevance given the large number of homeless characters in contemporary North American novels.² The following exemplary readings of their bodies search for answers to these questions through a focus on the relationship between bodies and clothes. This relationship tends to be constructed as an opposition between a material body that to a certain extent remains outside of representation and a readable message that is located within the homeless person's attire. In locating the homeless both inside and outside of representation, literary texts, I claim, explore the political practice of inclusive exclusion.

At the beginning of *The Savage Girl* aspiring trend spotter Ursula Van Urden watches the homeless woman whom she has nicknamed "the savage girl" stitch together pieces of pelt; her gear consists of clothing and accessories made from fur and bone. It is not only self-made but also self-hunted, combined with second-hand clothes and found objects. Her initial description of the outfit shows that it is filtered through Ursula's consciousness, through the lens of a fashion or lifestyle scout:

The sleeves and sides of her olive-drab T-shirt are cut out, exposing her flanks and opposed semicircles of sunburned back [...]. Her pants are from some defunct Eastern European army, laden with pockets, cut off at the knees. Her shins are wrapped in bands of pelt, a short brown fur. Her feet are shod in moccasins.³

Ursula reads the woman's dress as a message of primitivism and anti-consumerism and starts the successful marketing campaign of a "savage" trend. Her pitch of the savage girl as an advertising image contains powerful keywords that explain the cultural fascination for homelessness: she is "sick of modernity," she "tries to live authentically," she "may be deeper than the rest of us. She may be superior."⁴ In Shakar's novel, then, this is how the marketing industry answers the question that the homeless woman's body poses.

The list of clichés with which Ursula explains the symbolic power of the homeless woman reverberates in contemporary representations of homelessness. A popular parallel for the savage girl's superiority, authenticity and flight from modernity is, for instance, Robin Williams's character Parry in Terry Gilliam's 1991 film *The Fisher King*,⁵ who invites his middle-class friend Jack (Jeff Bridges) to lie naked in Central Park, to feel the air on his body, free from the constraints of civilization. This metaphorization, idealization, and romanticization is part of a larger cultural ambivalence about homelessness, the other extreme of which is the violent exclusion of homeless persons from the public and political realm, which is enacted not only through political and juridical, but also through cultural practices like the *Bum Fights* series that construct the homeless as the ultimate abject.⁶

The savage girl's "sick[ness] of modernity" circumscribes the prominent yet paradoxical position of contemporary homeless characters. As a sign of a critique of modernity, the homeless embody modernist discontent itself;⁷ they thus simultaneously symbolize and critique the culture that has turned them into a symbol. If, as an emblem of alienation, the homeless are inherently modernist figures, as an emblem of paradox, fragmentation, displacement⁸ and the postmodern "lack of 'home,'" the homeless are simultaneously recognized as the "soul of Postmodernity."⁹ The "other" to the system, they are its symbolic embodiment; a socially peripheral figure that becomes symbolically central.¹⁰

Shakar is obviously aware of this discourse and the cultural significations of homelessness. His satire uses the homeless woman to reveal the absurdities of postmodern consumer culture. What is interesting, however, is how Shakar dramatizes the difference between the homeless woman and the image she becomes, as this difference indicates the powers and the limits of representation itself.

From the start, the homeless woman is represented as the savage girl. "The savage girl kneels on the paving stones of Bannister Park," are the first words of the novel. However, this identity is entirely the creation of trend scout Ursula. The woman is always already part of Ursula's concept of her: there is no person prior to the savage girl in the novel. As a savage girl, she "naturally" cannot speak. Ursula is so convinced of her own invention that she has never tried to talk to her. The homeless woman disappears behind the idea of the savage girl, that is, behind a particular representation of herself. In pointing to the powers of representation, Shakar's fiction parallels the procedure by which unhoused persons lose their individuality behind the moniker "the homeless."¹¹ But Shakar carries the idea even further. In the course of the novel, the homeless woman is not only figuratively replaced, but literally so. While she disappears from the text (she is arrested for killing a pet dog), the savage trend has become omnipresent: images of a professional model in savage girl gear adorn the buses city-wide. Sprawled out in a tenement entranceway, and dressed in a one-shouldered hide minidress that exposes much dirt-streaked flesh, the model promotes a new brand – "litewater," a mineral water that is advertised as fat-free.¹² The homeless woman thus becomes the (absent) center of a satire on consumption that promotes "useless product[s]"¹³ that – irony of ironies – promise to boycott consumerism in the act of consumption.

Shakar thus situates homelessness at the intersection of a social and a cultural agenda, wherein the social satire attacks postmodern capitalism and consumption and the cultural satire lashes out at the nostalgia for primitivism. But Shakar does not stop at the observation that these two agendas are connected. In a further, more abstract, move, he demonstrates the removal of the

ground on which the whole operation is founded: the homeless woman is excluded from the operation, she disappears – figuratively behind her representation, and literally behind the image of that representation. The power of the homeless sign is accompanied by, if not conditioned on, the removal of the homeless body.

The question mark that the savage girl forms thus also asks about the difference between the homeless and their representation. It asks about the relationship between body and discourse: is there such a thing as a body outside of discourse? A body prior to representation? The question signals a longing for the freedom expressed in an autonomous body, an authentic body, a body free of representation. When the clothes can be read as signs (of authenticity, of freedom), does the “material” body stay free of signification?

Representations of the homeless body amplify a tendency inherent in the representation of all bodies, namely the implied reference to that which is outside of discourse, to the body’s prediscursive materiality or “naturalness.” The fantasy of the homeless body’s hyper-materiality not only ignores the harsh physical realities of homelessness, it also participates in the exclusion of the homeless body from the body politic.

English scholar Samira Kawash analyzes this practice with the example of an everyday subway scene. A body “is folded up” in the limited space of a subway seat: “I can tell very little about this person,” she writes, “I see what the others on the train see, a body folded impossibly small, a body marked by its position and its effects as a homeless body.”¹⁴ The question that this body poses for Kawash concerns the powerful effect it has on the other subway riders, who, “as a body,” “studiously avoid” looking at it.¹⁵ In her scene, Kawash describes the formation of a public that is sketched out as a body politic (“as a body,” the other passengers close ranks against the homeless person). But since the public is always an idea, and always in negotiation, Kawash argues, it is in constant need of expression, visualization, materialization. The homeless body is one such materialization. Through its denial of societal wholeness, it makes visible, *ex negativo*, what is generally invisible: the concept of a public sphere.

Kawash’s observation explains both the body’s “necessary” materiality and the exclusion or abjection it is subjected to. The romantic notion of the freedom, authenticity, and prediscursiveness of the homeless body perpetuates the exclusion of the homeless from the public realm for the sake of the construction of a public (a community – of citizens and readers). In this move, homelessness connotes the “bare life” outside of the public through which the public constitutes itself, as Leonard C. Feldman argues in his reading of the homeless person as a *homo sacer*.¹⁶ The homeless body – turned into bare life – is politically excluded yet symbolically included. This practice of inclusive exclusion is exemplified and, to some extent, analyzed in Alex Shakar’s novel. The marketing success of the “savage trend” demonstrates that a postmodern consumer culture constitutes its identity through the simultaneous appropriation and exclusion of the homeless body.

In looking at homeless “chic,” fictional texts have repeatedly explored the tension between the notion of the supposedly prediscursive body and the semantics of its clothing. If the savage girl connotes the wish for the return to a “primitive” and “authentic” lifestyle within postmodernity, the homeless parade in Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* connotes the absurdity of the American Dream:

There is the man wrapped in the American flag. There is the woman with a Halloween mask on her face. There is the man in a ravaged overcoat, his shoes wrapped in rags, carrying a perfectly pressed white sheet on a hanger – still sheathed in the dry-cleaner’s plastic. There is the man in the business suit with bare feet and a football helmet on his head. There is a woman whose clothes are covered from head to toe with Presidential campaign buttons [...].¹⁷

Auster’s text performs the ambivalence of representation: the repetition of the phrase “there is” signals the inability to see the homeless in context;¹⁸ yet the focus on the homeless’ colorful accessories shows that the observer – Auster’s protagonist Quinn who “discovers” the homeless in a moment of crisis – has become a skillful master of the objects of his observation, whom he contains in a text that focuses on the spectacular. His catwalk parade of homeless “freaks” plays with the strong visual effects that the street persons’ accessories create – flags, masks, football helmet, campaign buttons – and that make them visible at the same time as they hide them from sight, which the Halloween mask implies in particular. The insignia of American society, “abused” (or appropriated in a subversive manner) by the homeless, become a grotesque caricature of American cultural values. Significantly, this description is the culmination of a longer scene in which Quinn attempts to make sense of the homeless, who “seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them,”¹⁹ recording his observations in his notebook. It is as if one of his prospective literary objects stages a last revolt against his act of capturing her reality into prose, when – directly before the paragraph quoted above – a homeless woman shouts (the reader does not know at whom, about what): “What if I just fucking don’t want to!”²⁰ Her protest signals an outside of representation that invites comparison to the savage girl’s questioning posture: when the savage girl questions the semantics of her own body, Auster’s homeless woman refuses to be turned into text.

Her protest anticipates that of another novel character, namely the homeless protagonist of George Dawes Green’s novel *The Caveman’s Valentine*, Romulus Ledbetter. He protests against being read by a social worker who tries to remove him from his cave in a New York City park to a shelter:

You figure now you got me in your clutches, you going to *read* me, like a book, right? – going to look right into my *brain* and you going to read it page by page, like I was some cheap-jack midnight entertainment to make you forget the mess *you’re* in – right? Get you chuckling, get your greasy thumbprints all over my thoughts, get you through another miserably lonely night, *right* [...]?²¹

This beginning paragraph of the novel introduces what will soon be revealed as the speaker’s clinical paranoia, but of course it also self-reflexively catches the book’s readers in their act of reading and puts up for discussion the novel’s contribution to the cultural fascination for homelessness (signaling that *The Caveman’s Valentine* intends to be more than a mere escape fantasy). Green describes reading as an act of control that he contrasts to the visual spectacle of the homeless man’s bodily presence at the end of the opening scene, which announces the social worker’s defeat:

Romulus Ledbetter glared at his visitor.

Then he slouched off his blankets and came out of his cave and rose up to his full height. Rose up before the social worker the way in a nightmare a grizzly will rise on its hind legs and it's too late to run. His hat was a Teflon saucepan lined with the furs of squirrels killed on the Henry Hudson Parkway. His stink was enormous. For a scarf he wore the "Week in Review" section of the Sunday *New York Times*. [...]

He stood there and simply loomed. Until at last the social worker shrugged and went away.²²

Romulus refuses to be read/controlled and – uncovering his body, stepping into view and rising to his full height in a strong dramaturgy – offers the spectacle of his body as a sign of freedom from social coercion. However, the opposition between reading and the spectacular body does not hold very long: his body is immediately turned into text; the comparison to a grizzly bear reminds the reader of adventure novels, which are also suggested in the image of the hat lined with squirrel furs, parodying a trapper's outfit. While the savage girl is compared to a Native American (*viz.* her "moccasins"²³), Romulus rather connotes their European counterparts, as the references to trappers and the allusion to Henry Hudson suggest. But like her, he also is a savage, an animal. This is the effect the body has on the social worker: its "enormous stink" and menacing posture affect him immediately. Thus this opening passage oscillates between a reading of the homeless body and its suggested unreadability, its hermeneutic freedom. And indeed, this latter quality is what Romulus claims for himself at the end of the scene: "I'm still a *free* man."²⁴ This freedom, however, is deeply ambiguous as it is also a sign of the inclusive exclusion of the political abject.

What these examples suggest is that fictional representation, although clearly an integral part of cultural representation and an agent of cultural discourse, negotiates the discursiveness of homelessness and thus makes it visible. At the same time as Shakar, Auster and Green connote homelessness with freedom, individuality, and originality, they also make visible the processes of inclusive exclusion involved in this romanticization. Even if the homeless body becomes unreadable and unspeakable – hidden behind its representations, under its clothing – it is still discursively produced: as an unnamable materiality that embodies cultural signification.

What then, if the discursive parameters are changed? Samuel R. Delany suggests a change in the parameters of genre in what at first sight looks like a very provocative take on the subject of homelessness. For genres, Shakar had chosen satire, Green and Auster variations of detective fiction (if we agree to call the latter's novel a "metaphysical detective fiction"²⁵). Delany, however, opts for the genre of pornography (or rather, he uses a similar cocktail of genres as Auster does, one important element of which is pornography). The homeless bodies in his novel *The Mad Man* (2002)²⁶ are significant not for their symbolic meanings, but because the novel's protagonist, a young philosopher, desires them sexually. In contrast to Green's social worker who is driven away by the homeless man's smell, Delany's protagonist is attracted by stinking, dirty, leaky bodies. On the one hand, the fetishization of the homeless body can be interpreted as just another act of romanticization and appropriation. But on the other hand, a different frame – that of physical desire – inverts the received notion of the abject and of exclusion. In the novel, sexual attraction is part of a larger social interaction: the protagonist and the homeless men share not only bodies and beer, but stories, feelings and relationships. In its representation, therefore,

the homeless body is neither abjected nor symbolically elevated or appropriated. Here's an example:

A refuse drum [...] stood on Broadway's island. With his curly hair, curly beard – both gray-shot brown – in a blue sweatshirt, the bottom of which hung high above the stretched-out waist of his brown woolen pants, too tight and too hot for summer, a thick and hirsute giant gazed down into it. [...]

The beltless pants were low on a broad gut, pelt thickening to pubic density below his waist – low enough on his hips so that if I'd been behind him, I would have seen inches of fur clamped in his buttock's bevel. He bent over the drum's rim and swept a hand with a dessert plate-sized palm through what was inside. [...] ²⁷

The precision with which physical details are described here is owed to the refusal to differentiate between the significant and the banal.²⁸ There is no metaphor in the description above, rather a somewhat stubborn realism mixed with hyperbole (“giant”) likely to be found in pornography. In contrast to the other excerpts analyzed here, the homeless man's clothes signal no message other than that they cover up and – luckily – also reveal the desired body. Furthermore, a first-person narrator directs the reader's gaze to the sexually stimulating parts of this body (in fact, the narrator operates with knowledge gained from subsequent physical contact with his future lover, whose behind he can describe although he cannot see it at this moment). The materiality of the homeless body is acknowledged but not metaphorically appropriated. No additional signification diverts the reader from its presence: this body may be on the lowest rank of the social scale, but it does not carry the meaning of bare life. To the contrary, as potentially sexual object, it is not excluded from the social/political but part of it.

Delany is well aware of processes of abjection and representation. His close description of the body does not lead to the conclusion that there is nothing abjected from discourse, nothing unspeakable. To the contrary, in Delany's work the unspeakable is the explicit precondition for the speakable;²⁹ but in his case it is not the homeless body that is abjected from representation but the contents of the refuse drum: “what was inside” indicates the unspeakable. The strategy of circling an abject (note the mentioning of the drum's rim) is the trademark of this novel that rescues the homeless body from abjection.

Delany's decision to change the representational parameter sheds light on the reading of the excerpts from Shakar, Auster and Green in that it makes visible the exclusion that is produced through metaphor and symbolization. As long as the homeless body is covered in semantically significant gear that turns it into a sign for something else (savagery, primitivism, the absurdity of civilization or the freedom thereof), as long as the homeless body is supposed to convey a meaning outside of itself, it is at the same time abjected, pushed outside of representation and the public.

To some extent, then, narrative containment of homeless bodies in fictional representation parallels the policing of homeless bodies as well as their exclusion from the public and the political. It is important to recognize the act of violence committed in these representational acts, which is sometimes implicit, as in the sarcasm of Shakar's novel, and sometimes made explicit, as in the examples that dramatize the futile refusal against representation in Auster's and in Green's novels. The paradox of representation – the fact that it acknowledges presence at the

same time as it contains it – becomes particularly apparent in these texts. “Homeless chic,” it turns out, is the epitome of homeless representation, a practice that rarely operates without inclusive exclusion.

Notes

1. Alex Shakar, *The Savage Girl* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
2. The lists of novels, memoirs and films on homelessness fill as much as eight pages of *The Encyclopedia of Homelessness*, ed. David Levinson, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2004), 627–634). Some important contemporary novels are: William Kennedy, *Ironweed*; Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness*; Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace* and *Timbuktu*; Don DeLillo, *Mao II*; Robert Majzels, *City of Forgetting*; and, Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*. Detective fiction is rich in homeless characters; see the works of Sara Paretsky, Andrew Vachas, John Grisham and many others.
3. Shakar, 3.
4. Shakar, 97.
5. *The Fisher King*. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Columbia, 1991.
6. See Amanda F. Grzyb’s argument about “contradictory images” of homelessness in “Images of Homelessness in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Literature” in Levinson, 296. Many other scholars have commented on the conflicting images (Kenneth Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)) and polarities (Leonard C. Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter: Homelessness, Democracy, and Political Exclusion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)) of homeless representation. See also John Allen, *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (NY: Routledge, 2004). The *Bumfights* video series (2002–2006) was a highly controversial reality show in which (mostly intoxicated) homeless men were asked to fight each other, to hurt themselves, or to do reckless stunts.
7. See Chaplin’s tramp figure or the homeless figures in Samuel Beckett’s work. Paul Auster, although clearly a postmodern author, has inherited much from these characters, particularly in his early work.
8. Grzyb, “Images of Homelessness,” 300.
9. Dean MacCannell, “Postmodern Community Planning: Notes on the Homeless and Other Nomads,” in *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (London: Routledge, 1992), 111.
10. Cf. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 5.
11. See, e.g., Anthony Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone? The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 51.
12. Cf. Shakar, 145.
13. Shakar, 95.
14. Samira Kawash, “The Homeless Body,” *Public Culture* 10.2, 319.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter*, 14–24; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
17. Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (1985), in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 110.
18. Cf. Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 109.
19. Auster, 109.

20. Auster, 110.
21. George Dawes Green, *The Caveman's Valentine* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 3.
22. Green, 4.
23. "A true redskin, more so than any Indian ever was, her skin more red than brown," is a further element from the homeless woman's initial description commenting on her sunburn (Shakar, 3).
24. Green, 4.
25. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds., *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1–2.
26. Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (Rutherford: Voyant Publishing, 2002).
27. Delany, 277.
28. See Mary Catherine Foltz, "The Excremental Ethics of Samuel R. Delany," *SubStance* #116 37.2 (2008), 47.
29. See Samuel R. Delany, "On the Unspeakable," in *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan UP/UP of New England, 1999), 58–66.