

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Non-Places of Homelessness: Mobility and Affect in *Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes* and *Borb*

Wibke Schniedermann

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Abstract:

This essay explores the links between home(lessness), place, and affect depicted in two graphic narratives, *Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes* (2012), edited by a team of scholars based in the UK, and *Borb* by the U.S. comic artist Jason Little (2015). Homelessness is understood in both publications as a set of conditions that divests persons of their ability to relate to the places they inhabit. Most places accessible to the urban homeless are those that, according to French anthropologist Marc Augé, impair the social connections and practices which foster community, identity, and understanding. As non-places, these public sites facilitate consumption and economic trade, but inhibit the communication of those who cannot participate in these activities. The case studies in this essay look at the aesthetic and narrative strategies with which the two books criticize and undermine the common hierarchical distribution of urban space and problematize the ambivalent affective bonds between places and human practice. The stories approach the contentious mobility of homelessness, as well as the disruptive capacity of representation, from different angles. One addresses the links between affect and space through experiences of familial abuse and eviction while the other provides comical exaggerations of disgust.

Keywords: graphic novel; non-place; homelessness; *Somewhere Nowhere*; *Lives Without Homes*; *Borb*; affect.

Author contact: wibke.schniedermann@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

To have a home is a prerequisite for the ability to relate to other places in a meaningful way. This at least is a common diagnosis in artistic representations of home. Graphic narratives such as *Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes* (2012), edited by a team of scholars in the UK, and Jason Little's *Borb* (2015) foreground how homelessness divests persons of a fundamental way of being in the world. With the drastic changes to late-capitalist cityscapes, a shifting sense of security, and the increasing privatization of public space (see Harvey 2012; Mitchell 2003), the situation of the urban homeless has deteriorated considerably over the last decades (see Howard 2013; Mayer 2006). This essay looks at the aesthetic and narrative strategies with which the two graphic narratives criticize and undermine the common hierarchical distribution of urban space and problematize the ambivalent affective bonds between places and human practice. *Somewhere Nowhere* combines excerpts from ethnographic interviews conducted in Stoke-on-Trent with illustrations by Sam Dahl, who was not a member of the ethnographic team. The book is an example of what Michele Lancione has termed 'creative methodologies' in ethnography and other disciplines 'interested in producing new temporary alliances for social change' (Lancione 2017: 995). *Borb*, on the other hand, is a fictional story that pays homage to the traditional daily newspaper comic strip. In *Borb*, Little imagines a series of episodes in the life of a homeless man in New York City, mapping the drastic deterioration of the character's physical health over the course of the story and harnessing the subversive potential of slapstick humor for his critique of the spatial politics enabling and escalating urban homelessness.

Homelessness will be understood here as a manifestation of poverty that entails the loss or absence of a private dwelling place and thus forces individuals into a precarious state of constant mobility. The homeless characters in both case studies are persons who lack the socioeconomic means and/or the ability to secure long-term housing. They either rely on temporary public shelters (hostels in the UK) or live on the street. This is not to say that the term 'homeless' cannot be applied to many other experiences of migration, eviction, and displacement; the definition for the present essay is a heuristic one.

The ways in which homeless persons are imagined to be place-bound and place-related matters for the question how cultural productions reflect notions of "home" and what it means to forfeit it. Both texts interpret home as a geographic location and a material place. A certain emotional connectedness is usually believed to be required to enable the practices of care and cultivation that turn a place into a home. The material reality of a place can itself prevent this connectedness—for instance in the public urban spaces portrayed in *Borb*, which afford no or little privacy—or the connection can be severed by the experiences of trauma, emotional abuse, and eviction on which *Somewhere Nowhere* focuses.

Loss or lack of home is imagined in both books as physical and emotional debilitation and disconnection, which projects the forced mobility of homelessness onto a metaphorical plane of being emotionally adrift. The texts thus integrate the economic-material side of home(lessness) and the bodily-emotional one. By acknowledging, on the one hand, the bodily exposure specifically of homeless individuals and, on the other hand, the tradition of casting the severely poor as disgusting, criminal, or anti-social (see Kusmer 2003; Ocobock 2008) both case studies frame home(lessness) as affective and affect-

releasing, as material place—or placelessness—and as a socio-culturally conditioned state. The extent to which characters are enabled to relate to, interact with, and move between the places accessible to them determines their bodily experiences, affective responses, and ability to establish an exchange with their direct environment.

Borb and *Somewhere Nowhere* approach the link between mobility, affect, and place from opposite ends of the traditional representation spectrum that either vilifies the homeless or depicts them as victims (Allen 2004). While the ethnographic groundwork of *Somewhere Nowhere* feeds into a narrative that explicitly targets readers' empathy by foregrounding characters' affective involvement, *Borb* exaggerates the abject sides of long-term homelessness and thus creates a deliberate emotional distance between character and readers. As a result, the texts assign specific functions to place and mobility. Each episode in *Somewhere Nowhere* posits an earlier or childhood home as the main reference point for the characters' experience of homelessness and follows a similar causal chain: eviction forces the characters into a precarious mobility, which then generates emotional and bodily instability. *Borb* complicates the relation between its protagonist's mobility and the places he frequents by providing a fragmented, non-linear biography while amplifying the reader's disgust and strategically de-humanizing the character.

Both works explore their protagonists' relation to home and homelessness through a foregrounding of how the characters interact with the places they inhabit. The following readings will therefore benefit from a specification of 'place' as an analytical category. In Marc Augé's anthropological conceptualization, a site is defined as a place if it meets the criteria of historicity, relationality, and identity. Consequently, any space that 'cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity' is, in Augé's words, 'a non-place' (Augé 1995: 77-8). His notion of non-place proves helpful here insofar as mobility and social-emotional connectedness are among its indispensable reference points. Non-places, according to Augé,¹ are homogenized sites that look the same and function in similar ways everywhere, like airports and highways. They are dedicated mainly to 'consumption and communication' (76) and designed to facilitate the circulation and mobility this requires.

At the same time, non-places are conducive to solitary practices and indicative of a loss of communal obligations. Communication serves the non-places' purposes (commerce, mobility, consumption) instead of the ends of identity formation or community building. Consider, for instance, the market square of a pre-capitalist town and the practices commonly performed there. These practices structure the place according to reciprocal obligations that transcend the monetized activities of trade because they include communal bonds. Certain practices may retain or reinstate such structures even in non-places—farmer's markets, communal festivities, or public protests among them—whereas shopping malls or toll bridges usually exclude the social commitments of community and reduce interactions to the contractual obligations of commerce and mobility.²

Augé's non-place is also understood in relation to the elusive feeling of being at home, which makes the concept doubly meaningful for the representation of homelessness. For one thing, non-places are the standardized, ever-familiar yet impersonal spaces in which 'people are always, and never, at home,' in Augé's words (1995: 109). This 'being at home' refers to the ability to understand and to be understood, which the

familiarity of non-place affords, but within limits that Augé fails to mention. One understands the way any specific subway station works even if one has never entered it before; all passengers understand each other in their role as passengers and only in that role. Anyone who is neither a passenger nor offering services to other passengers—like a panhandler or a homeless person seeking shelter—is an alien body who does not serve that non-place’s purpose. The homeless therefore contradict Augé’s understanding of the non-place’s synthesized homeliness as they will, by definition, not be at home in any place or non-place.³

For another thing, non-places are constituted by both a sense of being at home and a very specific mobility, which clashes with the forced mobility of the homeless. Non-places proliferate as a result of globalization and its attendant mobilities, required by global trade and economic progress: people, goods, and money are in constant movement to serve economic ends. Homelessness has historically always been associated with a different kind of mobility—the criminalized mobility of the unwanted poor: the vagrants, hobos, day laborers, and tramps (Cresswell 2011). The mobility of poor persons is traditionally considered as disruptive and threatening to the social fabric (see Beier 1985; Chambliss 1964). While non-places provide a simulacrum of homeliness to those who can use them in the intended way—facilitating the “correct” kind of mobility—, they are also precisely the sites left to those who live on the street and who thus inhabit public space: shopping areas, parking lots, sidewalks. The material and social reality of homelessness, then, contradicts and disrupts the non-place’s homogenized familiarity as well as the specific mobility that characterizes it. The non-places meant to make everyone feel at home throw the exclusion of the homeless into even sharper relief.

The standardized design of public and semi-public places induces standardized behaviors and aims to prevent deviant ones (see Rogers 2012). This exacerbates the condition of the urban homeless, whose day-to-day lives are increasingly treated as deviant behavior, e.g. through so-called sit-lie-ordinances or the removal of free-of-charge public bathrooms. The mere presence of the visibly poor is regarded as disruptive to the commerce and the activities of urban centers. To stay in one place in those areas is acceptable only for those who either spend money or receive payment under specific conditions. When no transactions or purchases are imminent or taking place, one is supposed to be in motion. Economic trade and mobility thus signify acceptable behavior while immobility becomes deviant.

The following readings draw upon the notion of non-place precisely because it reveals certain blind spots regarding the social-political significance of homelessness and, what is more, of the function non-places have for the homeless who inhabit them. Arguably, this significance cannot be appreciated without considering the affective dimensions of home and homelessness respectively. Graphic narratives’ ability to address the tensions arising between spaces and their entanglement with personal histories is being discussed across different disciplines (see Dittmer 2014). More than other, firmly canonized media, comics ‘speak to us in very personal ways,’ Juliet Fall states (Fall 2014: 91). Comics can straddle the gap between the urgently political and the personal-emotional, especially where they are concerned with bodily responses to conflicted geographies.

As the two representations discussed below demonstrate with their contrasting modes of depiction, the irrepressible processes of affect—at once bodily and emotional—help to define well beyond Augé’s anthropological deliberations what it means to be evicted from the place of home and to the non-places of late-capitalist cities. *Somewhere Nowhere* explores its characters’ affects in relation to home and homelessness through a focus on individual biographies, while *Borb* harnesses its audience’s affective reaction to project its protagonist’s loss of place onto a larger social plane by casting him as a type rather than an individual. Representation, as Augé stresses, is not only itself ‘a social construction, but ... any representation of the individual is also a representation of the social link consubstantial with him’ (1995: 19). Through their aesthetic and formal strategies, which visualize how place, affect, and mobility are enmeshed in the experience of homelessness, *Borb* and *Somewhere Nowhere* are particularly effective in addressing how connectedness to and disruption of (non-)places determines their characters’ ability to relate to their social environments and vice versa.

Home as Affective Space in *Somewhere Nowhere*

Somewhere Nowhere evokes home as a specific, geographically bound, and formative place. The five chapters represent an editorial selection from a total of 104 interviews. This selection is significant for the connection the book draws between home and place in so far as all five protagonists remain in or return to the immediate vicinity of the last place they considered home. Even those who have spent time away from Stoke, escaped the sites of abusive and traumatic upbringings, and found themselves elsewhere in better circumstances financially, emotionally, mentally, and physically, have returned by the time they tell their story. With this emphasis on the bond between person and place, the collection of stories suggests spatial connectedness to one’s personal history as a crucial element of what defines home. At the same time, it highlights how this bond can be detrimental when geographical proximity to what one considers home takes precedence over physical and emotional well-being. Spatial mobility is thus cast as ambivalent: on the one hand as a potentially liberating ability and, on the other, a personal risk that can jeopardize a fundamental connection. The chance to benefit from mobility’s liberating effects, then, becomes the privilege of those who are enabled to forge a connection to the place of home that is strong enough to withstand spatial distance.

Several illustrations address this conflicted attachment to home by visualizing a divide between wanting to remain close to home and having to keep one’s distance because of eviction. In the second chapter, Becka recalls camping near her family’s house after having been kicked out by her step-father (*Somewhere Nowhere* 2012: 37). The panel shows her in her tent on a hill overlooking the street where her family lives. The tent is rendered in black; only the shape of Becka’s body inside the tent is visible in thin white lines. She is propped up on her elbows and looking towards the houses below. Even though she wouldn’t be able to see the buildings through the canvas of the tent, her posture suggests that she has chosen this spot to be able to see her family home.

The illustration positions Becka in a place that still provides a connection to home but cancels out part of her own presence and connectedness by rendering her in

incomplete outlines (Figure 1). The tent is an old-fashioned rooftop tent imitating the shape of the houses along the street rather than the more likely domed shape of one-person tents. In the quote from her interview, Becka gives no indication of the shape of her tent or how she chose the location; the rooftop tent, her posture, and her line of sight are the product of the illustrator's imagination. With shapes and black-and-white contrasts, the illustration negotiates issues of proximity, similarity, distance and opposition between Becka's space and that of her home. The relationship between person and place is characterized by tension and incongruity.

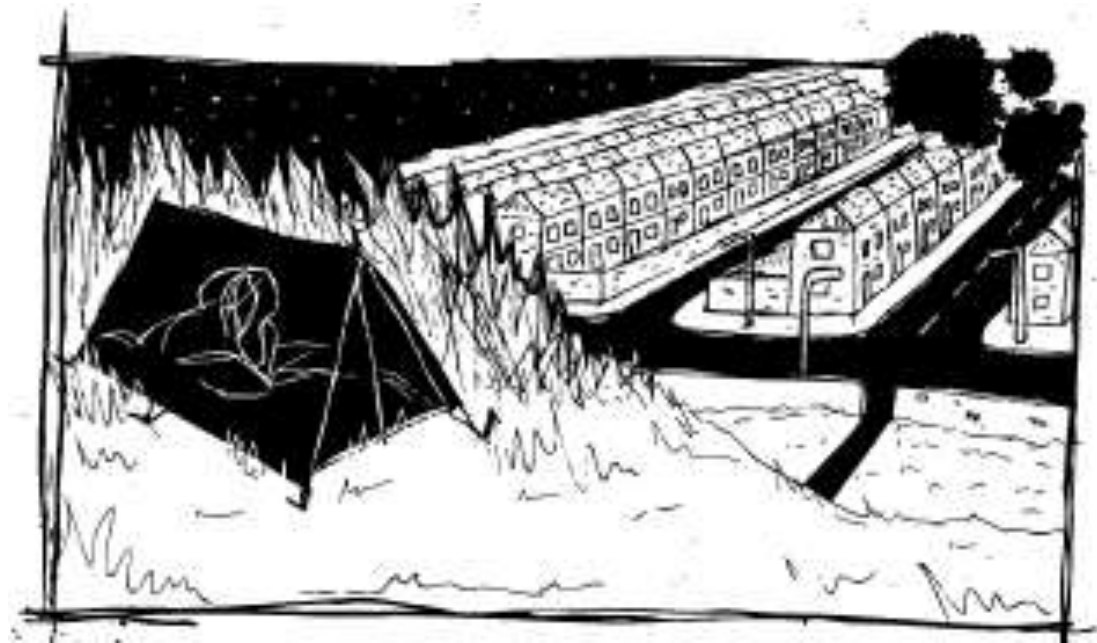


Figure 1. Becka in her tent, at once connected with and disconnected from home (*Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes*)

Through its combination of verbalized memory in the written words and a foregrounding of affect in its visual rendering, *Somewhere Nowhere* utilizes the two channels of engaging the reader that are specific to graphic narratives. These 'verbal-visual conjunctions' as well as their potential to 'shape[...] affective engagement' have been particularly scrutinized in the sub-genre of 'autographics' (Whitlock 2006: 966, 978). While *Somewhere Nowhere* is a hybrid text not fully within Whitlock and Poletti's (2008) definition of autographic (as the narrating agent's avatar—together with the material space in which these avatars act—is created by another author), it renders autobiographical narrative through verbal and graphic means. The written text of *Somewhere Nowhere* is composed of direct quotations from the ethnographic interviews and retains the vernacular grammar and jargon of the interviewees. This makes their stories appear as particularly personal and truthful. However, the words rarely relate details about complex emotions; these are captured in illustrations. Panels often unfold a series of experiences in single images that exemplify strong affects.

The contrast between the matter-of-fact verbal narration and the emotionality of the illustrations is most pronounced when situations of violent conflict are represented. On

the first page of Billy's story, a panel condenses the protagonist's experiences in his abusive childhood home. The black-and-white contrast appears to divide the page-wide panel into two separate images.



Figure 2. Billy on the stairs (*Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes*).

Billy is sitting on a flight of stairs in the right foreground. The stairs lead straight down into a room in which a man is standing in front of a woman, his left hand raised. The mother's posture—wide stance, head bent, one hand covering her face while the other arm is stretched out to the side for balance—and the word 'SMACK!' illustrate Billy's narrative, which recounts his step-father regularly beating his mother (*Somewhere Nowhere* 2012: 77). The image is divided into a predominantly black left half, where the beating looks as though in a photographic negative, and a white right half where Billy sits on the stairs.

Billy is thus clearly separated from his stepfather's violence, but the panel frame embracing both halves of the image also emphasizes his exposure and inability to escape at this youthful age. This is also the only time in Billy's story when the words of his interview are included inside the panel: 'I'd seen some horrible things. Like, I'd seen my step-dad whack, batter my mum...', it says right under the spot where he is sitting (*Somewhere Nowhere* 2012: 77). In all other cases, the words are separated by the panel frame and appear only in the gutters. His act of witnessing domestic violence is thus given a particular significance. Instead of existing on different planes on the page—the written word that originates with the protagonist in the captions outside of the panels on the one hand, and the illustration of that verbal account within the panel frame on the other—the words from Billy's interview are moved into the panel. This is where his path towards exclusion and homelessness starts, the panel suggests (Figure 2).

The image also reflects the body-mind duality inherent in the concept of affect. As the 'primary innate biological motivating mechanism, more urgent than drive deprivation and pleasure, and more urgent than physical pain,' affects are defined as the bodily emotions from which drives 'borrow [their] potency' (Tomkins 2009: 163-64). At the same

time, in Michael Hardt's words, affects 'refer equally to the body and the mind ... [They] involve both reason and passion. ... They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it' (Hardt 2007: ix). Billy's words, narrated in past tense, are rendered more immediate by the image, which condenses the 'horrible things' he has witnessed into one picture. The representation of his body on the stairs and his verbal reflections about what happened in his family merge on the page. Billy's story thus showcases the duality of affecting and being affected on a bodily as well as cognitive level.

Another important graphic element facilitating the exploration of home and affect in *Somewhere Nowhere* is the use of ink splatter as an indicator for strong negative affect. It is used to visualize screams and loud noises, cursing, spit or blood, violent and angry thoughts, or physical and emotional exhaustion. When Scott remembers a change in his behavior after having been sexually assaulted by his father, the accompanying panel shows a boy in traditional portrait format—head and shoulders fully visible and close to the frame—, whose outstretched hand with a raised middle finger protrudes sideways out of the left frame like a *trompe-l'œil*. From his opened mouth erupts black splatter that extends upwards across the gutter and into the panel above, which illustrates Scott's experience in his family after his father's arrest. 'From that day to this day, the family don't talk to me,' the written text quotes him (*Somewhere Nowhere* 2012: 12). The panel shows his mother, surrounded by five children of different ages, with Scott standing to the side. The ink splatter from the panel below is directed precisely at this gap between Scott and his family, suggesting a causal link between Scott's deviant behavior, his inability to control his outbursts, and his experiences in a family that excluded him. Scott's words do not make this connection explicit, but the illustration does (Figure 3).

The 'affect spray' always originates from inside the panels and is part of the story content rather than simply associated with the intentionally careless drawing style. In all five narratives, this spray of anger and violence is first shown inside the home before it reoccurs in later images. Transgressing the individual panel frames, the spray reaches across the gutters and into neighboring images, polluting them, as it were. On the last page of Becka's story, she recounts the fits of rage that still afflict her and interrupt her recovery process. In this image, the spray erupts from her entire head and 'infects' the image above, which shows a scene in which her boyfriend is helping her study for college (*Somewhere Nowhere* 2012: 42). The anger issues dominating her childhood family travel across the pages and into her adult life, still polluting her tentative steps towards a home.

Home in *Somewhere Nowhere* is a place in Augé's sense of the term; a relational site, defined by its history and its social contexts. It is not just a potential source of identity but *the* main identity-(in)forming space for the protagonists. The forms of practice that produce this connectedness and are equally capable of severing the connection are represented as directly dependent on affect. As the bodily emotions of affect are absent from the verbal narratives, it is left to the illustrations to draw attention to the overwhelming physical dimensions of losing one's home. *Somewhere Nowhere* draws on its audience's personal experiences of home to evoke an empathetic and affectively involved response.

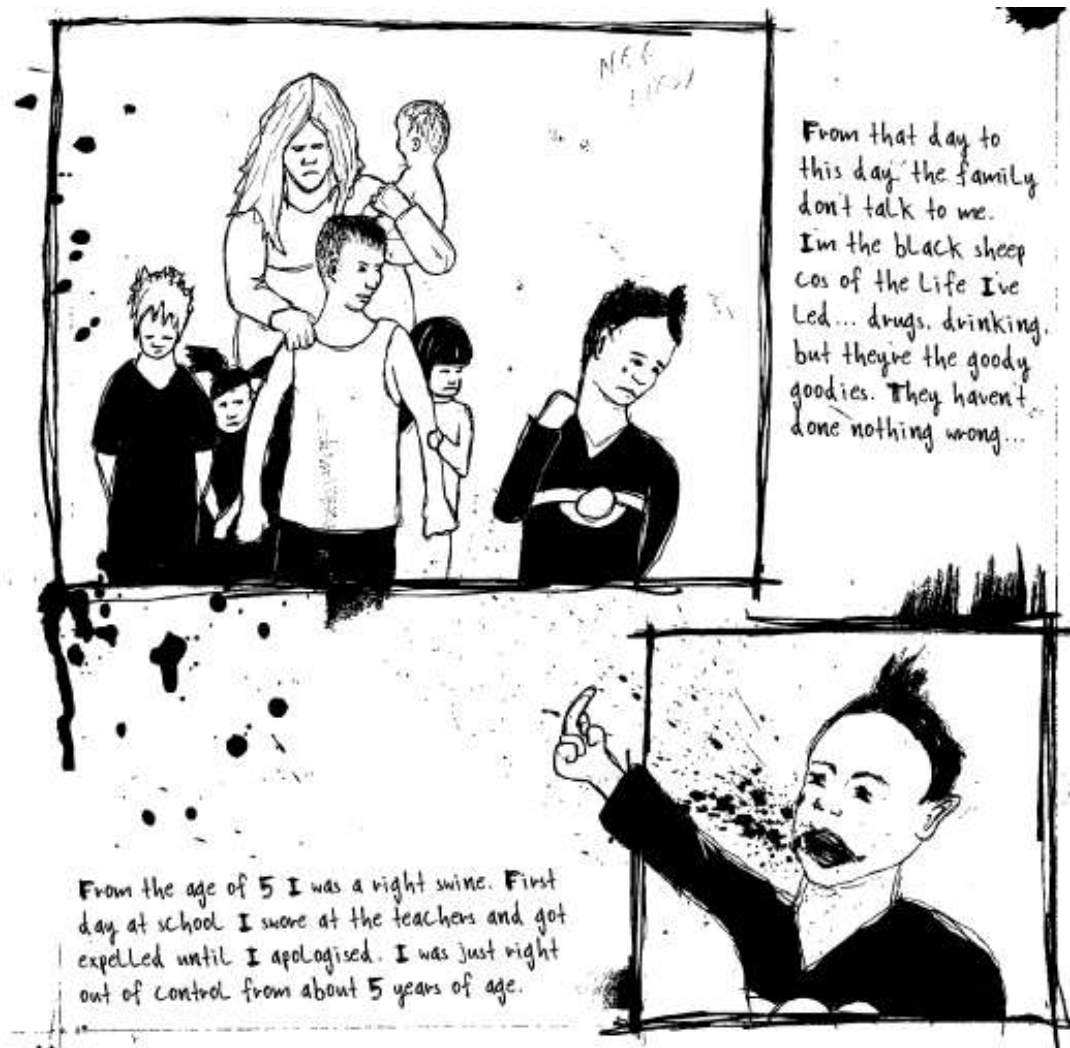


Figure 3. Scott's outbursts confirm the disconnection from his family (*Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes*).

In its focus on individual biographies and the personal consequences of traumatic homes, *Somewhere Nowhere* aims to provide what Fall describes as 'graphical alternatives to the geopolitical "view from nowhere" [via] ground-level, local, and embodied sites' (Fall 2014: 93). Its radical personalization, multi-perspectivism, and materialist foregrounding of bodily (affective) experience generates a specific and intentionally partial view from 'somewhere' to counter the disembodied, superior view adopted by geopolitical research and certain omniscient narrators alike. Yet the book occasionally loses sight of the systemic dimension of homelessness and how systemic conditions affect the privileges of place and mobility. Precisely through its aim to personalize the stories it tells, then, the book runs the risk of declaring its protagonists as victims instead of humanizing them. By striving to reduce the emotional distance between audience and characters through elicitation of affect and reader empathy, the individual biographies foreground the characters' emotional responses while neglecting to address the systemic conditions under which these responses thrive. The tension the book evokes between an ambivalent mobility and the reliable—yet often disastrous—immobility of home thus remains underexplored at times. *Borb*, by

contrast, does not shy away from this tension but amplifies it and relates it to the distribution and increasingly unequal uses of urban space. Its cityscape is a hostile one, but only to those who, like the character Borb himself, cannot perform the forms and forms of mobility for which it is intended.

Empathetic Slapstick in *Borb*

Before the story, rendered in the 4-panel-row format of classic daily comic strips, begins, Borb's sleeping body appears on a splash page next to the publisher's credits. Three dogs gather around his feet, one urinating against Borb's exposed leg. The disgust this stirs in the reader—certainly in this reader—is the dominating affect elicited by each of the episodes documenting the protagonist's physical and mental decline. The first panel row shows Borb eating from a trash can and hurting his derelict teeth. The injuries pile up after this. Borb loses his dentures when vomiting into a river, breaks a leg falling down a flight of stairs, and breaks the other one stumbling over his crutches. His temporary housing is infested with bed bugs, and he is injured after accidentally setting fire to his room. He falls into a construction pit, gets food poisoning, develops trench foot, is beaten up in prison as well as on the street, loses a finger to frost bite and a foot to necrosis, is diagnosed with a bleeding gastric ulcer as well as diabetes II, and eventually ends up naked and barely conscious next to the subway tracks where an oncoming train kills him.

His ordeal reads like a modern-day version of Job's biblical sufferings. Unlike the faithful Job, however, Borb only finds relief in alcohol, of which he consumes copious amounts, and dies miserably in the end. He repeatedly vomits onto the street and on himself and shows no regard for his physical health. The illustrations amplify the abjectness of his decline and render his injuries in dramatic detail. When Borb's legs break, the shinbone pierces through his skin each time; his broken teeth take up almost the entire panel, framed by blood-shot eyes and saliva. His belly balloons with cramps and diarrhea, and his swollen, blistered foot with long black toenails fills one panel all by itself. *Borb*, in short, tells an appalling story in appalling images. The character's physical repulsiveness is exaggerated to such a degree that its effect is partly reversed, subverting through its hyperbole the tradition of representing the poor (as well as other marginalized groups) as dirty and disgusting. By radically confronting its audience with their own disgust, *Borb* points to the socio-cultural roots of physical decay and the role representation plays in endorsing or counteracting the neglect that results from shying away from the abject and the disgusting.

By catering to the genre conventions of the slapstick comic strip on the one hand, and strategically frustrating them on the other, *Borb* creates a generative dissonance between form and content. While the abject disgust evoked by Borb's situation as well as his character flaws could have the effect of de-humanizing him, slapstick generates audiences' affection for the character(s). The dissonance escalates through the book. From the beginning, and unlike the most famous homeless slapstick protagonist, Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, Borb is not a likeable character. Halfway into the book, the reader is made privy to Borb's memories, in which drug abuse led him to abandon his pregnant partner (Little 2015: 58-62). Many of his accidents are caused by intoxication or

carelessness. It should seem impossible to empathize with Borb and much easier to blame him for his condition. The book, however, endears Borb to the audience through slapstick, i.e. hyperbolic accidents and physical pain that the hero miraculously survives with few and only temporary consequences, or so it seems at first.⁴ He stubbornly and indestructibly carries on in search of booze and bathrooms until he has survived more than any human body reasonably could. What distinguishes Borb from a traditional slapstick character is that the accidents, violence, and injuries he suffers are not without physical consequence in the end. Borb's death, accompanied by the dismissive comment 'Ahh, it was just some homeless guy' by the police officer on site (Little 2015: 86), is a radical reminder that he is, after all—and contrary to how he has been treated and represented—a human being.

Slapstick also accentuates the incongruities in Borb's way of relating to the places he frequents. In addition to the typical sound effects that accompany accidents and mishaps in cartoons—like 'Crunch,' 'Splotsh,' and 'Bang'—and characters' overdrawn facial expressions, *Borb* features a number of lavatorial jokes that drive home the protagonist's disrupted and disruptive relation to the urban space he inhabits. When he drinks a bottle of perfume found in a subway passenger's shopping bag—a bag that happens to look identical to the one Borb just defecated into—and urinates against a wall shortly after, the stains he leaves are dotted with little flowers, making the dirty pedestrian tunnel look like a summer meadow (Little 2015: 38). The reader is encouraged to identify with Borb rather than the subway passengers in this sequence. The owner of the perfume and her companion—the only other characters in this sequence—are represented as mindless consumers who take no notice of Borb, prompting the reader to dislike them. Borb manages, despite his extremely limited means, to transform the platform, through an act of soiling, into something funny, cute, and at the same time disgusting. His subversive abilities may be harmless, but they are admirably effective on a small scale.

While bathroom humor elevates Borb's status as comical anti-hero, the use of verbal and written language is used to highlight the grave personal and physical consequences of his condition. Borb rarely speaks, and the characters who speak the most play the least significant roles in the story. They are doctors delivering diagnoses and treatment at the hospital, Borb's attorney (when he is sent to jail), and the subway passengers who find Borb half-dead by the tracks. His own utterances are mostly limited to onomatopoeia of drinking ('Glug Glug') and vomiting ('Retch! Barf!') as well as inarticulate exclamations of pain, discomfort, and, more rarely, happiness. When Borb talks, his slurred speech is rendered through missing letters ('Cn y' gt me a belt?' (Little 2015: 58)) and approximations of mispronunciation ('Spur change?' (55)). The title, *Borb*, is in fact a disfigurement of the name by which the hospital staff refer to the protagonist: Bob (81). The name discrepancy conveys that there is another version of this increasingly crippled, possibly brain-damaged alcoholic. His old identity lives on within bureaucratic contexts and the institutions they serve: he is still "Bob" in places like the hospital, even if he himself cannot properly pronounce his name anymore.

The disruption of Borb's relation to place is foregrounded by his severely impaired ability to read. He cannot make sense of written words. As this condition seems to worsen during the story, it is likely to be the effect of neurological damage rather than illiteracy. Apart from signaling Borb's mental and physical deterioration, this inability also impacts

the way in which Borb navigates the city. After leaving the hospital for the first time, he cannot read the street signs anymore. In the panel, Borb stands in front of a jumble of signs, pointing in all directions, adorned with meaningless letters and symbols. Not being able to read eradicates meaning from the places he experiences. More than other places, Augé interprets home as a space that enables understanding and being understood, metaphorically but also in the literal, rhetorical sense. ‘The sign of being at home,’ he writes, ‘is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations’ (1995: 108). Borb has lost this ability, which leaves the non-places he is condemned to wander utterly incomprehensible.

The illustrations use shifts in focalization⁵ to convey how Borb experiences places differently from those who can read. Before he falls into the pit of a construction site, he looks at window displays advertising products on posters filled with gibberish. In the next panel he walks past a sign showing only random consonants that do not cohere into any words. After he’s passed behind the wall in the next panel, the sign reads ‘Danger / Open pit’ and from behind the wall comes the ‘Thud’ of Borb falling into the pit (Little 2015: 39). The first panels show what Borb sees: signs that make as little sense to him as any other written words. The last panel, delivering this strip’s gag in zero focalization, shows what everyone who can read English sees. The same place has a radically different meaning for Borb than it does for non-homeless, able-bodied persons. Narrative perspective thus fulfils the double function of critically exposing this gap while also facilitating comical effects (Figure 4).

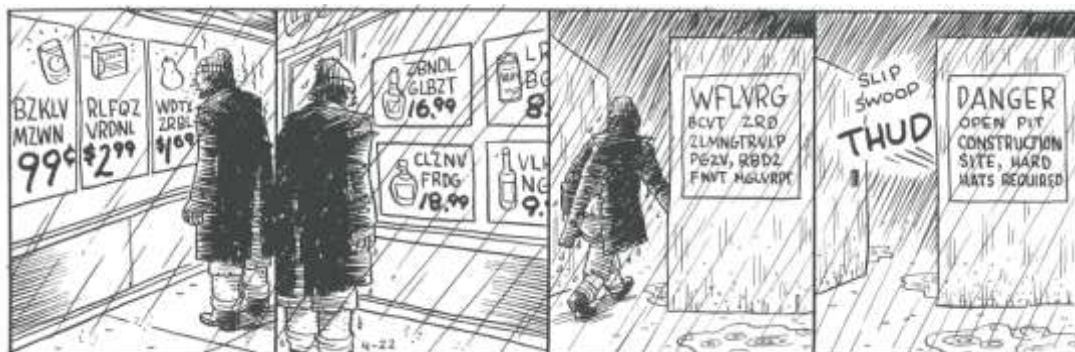


Figure 4. The contrast between Borb’s perspective and that of a literate, able-bodied person (*Borb*).

Borb’s perspective reveals the absurdity of the spaces he frequents. The cityscape he experiences may be one that springs from his damaged brain and the alcoholic’s perception, yet it accurately reflects the inconsistencies of an urban space designed to cater exclusively to those who do not inhabit it but only pass through it. As the archetype of the contemporary urban homeless, Borb converts the non-places of subway stations and underpasses by re-assigning deviant meaning, such as “toilet” or “bedroom.” By literally pissing away the overpriced perfume, his compulsive drinking mocks and simultaneously nullifies the compulsive consumption that dominates the city and dictates the way space is organized and distributed within it.

Borb employs incongruencies and evocations of distaste to challenge its audience's perspective of the relation between the desperate poverty of the urban homeless and the cityscapes they inhabit by necessity. By adhering to the illustration style and format of the daily comic strip, it evokes the expectation of short humorous sequences whose gags refer to easily relatable and harmless subjects. *Borb*'s disregard of authority, of possessions (his own and others'), and of the acceptable uses of urban spaces cast him as a subversive if powerless comical hero for whom one can root even when disapproving of his choices. However, when the book lays greater and greater stress upon the repulsive side of homelessness and its common corollaries like substance abuse, mental and physical illness, and inadequate hygiene, it breaks out of the genre standards of the comic strip and can thus serve to problematize disgust itself as a common affective response to urban homelessness. *Borb* thus uses the radical de-humanization of its protagonist to invite its audience to recognize and critically address their own perspective.

Reflections of Social Position, Place, and Intention in Style and Paratext

Borb signals its awareness of this discrepancy between the character's perspective and the author's/audience's frame of reference before one has even opened the book. The gap between the social position and lived reality of its protagonist, on the one hand, and that of its author and target audience on the other, is reflected in the cover image. In fact, both works discussed above indicate their respective intentions and their position vis-à-vis the political dimension of their representations through their overall style and paratext. A term coined by French narratologist Gérard Genette, paratext is composed of all those 'verbal or other productions' (Genette 1997: 1) that are part of a book but not part of the main text that tells the story or lays out the argument. Among the most common paratextual elements are author name, genre designation, cover blurbs, forewords, and epilogues.⁶ These elements impart information about the book and create a frame of expectation. They are therefore considered important factors influencing how readers approach, interpret, and respond to any text. The category of paratext is particularly helpful to situate a book in relation to its authors' as well as readers' social context and, in the present cases, to explore how, beyond the story proper, intention is communicated to readers.

The paratexts of *Somewhere Nowhere* are instrumental in inviting readers to relate the protagonists' stories to their own sphere of experience. An epilogue informs readers about each protagonist's situation at the time of the book's publication, thus prolonging their engagement with the protagonists' lives beyond the time span covered by their respective chapters. The cover blurb of *Somewhere Nowhere* stresses that the narratives describe the protagonists' experiences 'in their own words,' designating it as a collection of life writings with a documentary intention and inviting the audience to expect truthful and authentic accounts. *Borb* is dedicated to a specific homeless man in the acknowledgements section but includes no indication that the story is based on that particular person's experiences. The last pages, however, provide information about relief organizations and encourage readers to donate, which suggests an intention on the author's part to raise awareness and activate his audience.

The overall style of *Somewhere Nowhere* further supports its documentary ambition. The entire volume is monochrome and the drawing style deliberately messy, with what looks like ink splatter and fingerprints on most of the pages. The illustrations often spread into the gutters, the panel frames are scratchy and uneven. The unfinished look lends the work the appearance of a sketch book, as though the illustrator had drawn the images as part of a field diary during the study that yielded the interviews. The immediacy suggested by this connects the illustrations to the interview situations and thus renders them part of the study rather than something produced later. To imply immediacy can also increase readers' emotional involvement by reducing the distance between characters and audience. *Somewhere Nowhere* wants its audience to trust they are reading a representation that gives an immediate and unembellished account of actual lived experiences.

This impression is reinforced by the volume's cover and cover blurb. The cover page is mostly black. A street lamp, rendered in white outlines, runs along the left side and casts a cone of white light across the page. Inside the cone the title is written in large capital letters; the rest of the page is uniformly black. With the lamp as a synecdochic reference to a residential street in the dark, the cover conjures up a small-town or suburban scene by night. The harsh contrast between the cone of light and the surrounding darkness leaves invisible the street on which one would expect the lamp to be located. Houses, sidewalks, or parked cars are left in the dark and thus to the imagination of the viewer. The street lamp hence fails to fulfil its usual function, which is to make the street and its immediate surroundings visible, navigable, and to inspire a sense of safety in those who use the street in the dark. On the cover of *Somewhere Nowhere*, spatial safety and certainty of place have been abandoned, the function of the object representing an indeterminate yet possible place has been inverted, and the title itself declares the represented site as a place that is 'nowhere.'

In announcing itself as an alternative and as a rare source of usually inaccessible information, *Somewhere Nowhere* delivers a critique of the conventional methods with which media productions represent the poor—when they do so at all. On the back cover, the mirror image of the same street lamp illuminates the cover blurb, informing readers of the book's intention to address the 'pressing social issue' that homelessness poses and to do so by representing 'the needs and experiences of people who are, or have been, homeless.' The clearly expressed objective—to raise awareness of a social problem and to give voice to those who suffer under its consequences—is further elaborated in the foreword, which criticizes the tendency to caricature 'vulnerable and excluded people' (3). Illuminating only 'the most unusual, dramatic, or sensational aspects' of marginalized lives, as is often the case in mainstream media, means that the daily personal struggles of poverty 'are often ignored or misunderstood' (3); in other words, they are left in the dark, just as the cover image's street lamp fails to shed light onto the sidewalk.

The sidewalk as an iconic rendering of an urban non-place appears also on the cover of *Borb*. The color palette of this image is subdued, dominated by soft pink, orange, and light blue, which gives it a mild sunny atmosphere. It shows a stretch of sidewalk on a street corner. The left foreground is taken up by a bearded man of indistinct ethnicity,⁷ who is lying on the sidewalk on a piece of cardboard, surrounded by empty cans and a bottle. A puddle of vomit is half visible in the lower left corner. The man is facing the

viewer and appears to be asleep, which is indicated by his slack face and a speech bubble above his head showing a single letter 'Z.' His coat is ripped at the shoulder seams, his trouser legs are torn off below the knees, and the waistband has slid down to expose the top of his natal cleft. Squiggly lines around his back and head suggest bad smells are emanating from his body and clothes. Towards the right, a white man wearing shorts and sunglasses is standing on the corner a few feet away from the cardboard bed. His back is turned to the viewer as well as to the man lying on the sidewalk. He is looking at the screen of a mobile phone in his raised right hand. In his other hand, he is holding a dog leash. The small dog is perched on the sidewalk between the two men, in the process of defecating onto the cardboard right next to the sleeping man's head. The title, *Borb*, is written in a light-blue graffiti on the wall behind the sleeping man, while the author's name appears on a billboard on a wall across the street from the dog owner.

Borb's cover signals a deliberate dissonance between format, style, and content. The hard cover, smooth to the touch and sturdy, almost doubles the book's thickness and gives it a certain heft. Together with the mild, appealing colors it suggests value and pleasantness. The depicted scene, on the other hand, is one of abject poverty, humiliation, and mutual ignorance. Neither of the two men acknowledges the other's presence. Each dominates one half of the picture, separated and simultaneously connected by the dog that has its hind legs on the cardboard and is tethered to its owner by the leash. The title, right above the sleeping man, denotes him as Borb while the author's name is located next to the other man's head. Dog owner, dog, and Borb are arranged along a diagonal line from top right to bottom left corner, an alignment mirrored by the capital Z in the speech bubble. The arrangement thus reflects the social hierarchy of those in the picture, including the dog, and at the same time gestures towards the social position of the author in relation to his subject, homelessness. The combination of high-value print edition, cover design and image content signals a critical awareness of the cultural work performed by representations of homelessness as well as a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the author's privileged position (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Mutual ignorance and social hierarchy on the cover of *Borb*.

At first sight, the street corner appears to be imagined here as the proverbial social microcosm, a place where a range of social strata may be condensed into one quasi-encounter. The homeless man sleeping off his intoxication between garbage, vomit, and dog feces is being ignored by those who walk past. His sleeping body dominates the image, taking up most of the sidewalk space. In his unconscious state, he is a passive presence, he is more obstacle than human agent, whereas the dog walker's attention is entirely focused on his phone. He may be conscious but is equally unaware of his surroundings and does not relate to the place in which he stands. This rejection of connectivity, the lack of interaction, and the contrast between mobility (walking one's dog) and immobility (sleeping on the pavement) marks the street corner in this cover image as a non-place. The dog owner can pass through on his walk, but Borb's immobile body impedes the sidewalk's proper function.

Conclusion

Both *Somewhere Nowhere* and *Borb* depict homelessness as a condition that entails a diminished ability to interact with or relate to one's living space. Part of this limitation is directly linked to a contradictory sense of mobility as, on the one hand, a liberating part of human interaction and, on the other, a form of constant displacement of those who have nowhere else to stay. The characters have trouble making sense of the places in which they move; they can neither contribute to them in any meaningful way nor follow the practices that are socially accepted and expected. Both takes on homelessness reveal the inconsistencies that characterize especially the urban spaces that the homeless inhabit, places that are not and cannot be home. By deliberately taking part 'in the constitution of particular places' (the non-places of homelessness), both comics explore the nexus of homelessness, mobility, and affective involvement on the level of what Dittmer refers to as 'place in comics' (Dittmer 2014: 17). At the same time, they generate much of their affective and communicative strength through a conscious negotiation of the relations between text and images, composing the topologies of 'space in comics' (17).

Somewhere Nowhere reflects the aims of an activist scholarship that works towards exposing the cultural effects of marginalization and the social dimensions of spatial exclusion. By appealing to its readers' empathy and employing the techniques of life writing that aim to reduce emotional distance, the book bridges the social gap between the subject of homelessness and those who do not experience it directly. Home in *Somewhere Nowhere* is characterized by immobility, which can be a source of personal safety only under the condition that this potential is realized through emotional connection. In the absence of such connectedness, immobility becomes as constraining as the mobility into which the characters are forced. The illustrations impart the difficulty of escaping this impasse by depicting outbursts of negative affect that move across the page and thus across the distances of time and space between the panels. By merging interview excerpts with the artist's illustrations, the hybrid form of *Somewhere Nowhere* generates a specific alchemy⁸ between words and visuals which allows the editors to communicate the more personal results of their research.

Borb demonstrates the far-reaching connotations of homelessness as a category. Its protagonist is the epitome of ‘just some homeless guy,’ a phrase used three times in reference to Borb (Little 2015: 16, 33, 86). As a term that categorizes people based on what they lack, ‘homeless’ sums up more than the temporary absence of housing. It entails, as in Borb’s case, an attribution of deviant behavior and lack of self-control. This can fulfill the contradictory functions of either reaffirming victimhood, thus denying personal responsibility, or character damnation that shifts all responsibility towards the individual. *Borb* captures the unresolvable tensions between these two perspectives in its protagonist’s character flaws as well as his experiences of being disregarded, expelled, physically abused, imprisoned, misunderstood, and generally humiliated by individuals and institutions alike. Nobody suffers the consequences of this friction more than Borb himself, whose body eventually succumbs to both his own mistreatment and that which he endures at the hands of others.

Somewhere Nowhere lays great emphasis on the affective charge that characterizes a place as a home and that, in all individual cases the editors chose, puts an emotional burden onto the protagonists. The way in which the original home is loaded with negative affects such as fear or anger directly impacts the characters’ ability to create alternative homes for themselves. The book thus invites its audience to reassess homelessness as a state of affective detachment, which manifests itself in dysfunctional relationships not only with spaces but also with other people. *Borb* explores homelessness as an expression and a symptom of the socio-spatial incongruities of today’s metropolises. It encourages its readers to review the spatial organization of cities and to recognize the homologies between social stratification and the hierarchical distribution of space that one tends to take for granted.

Notes

¹ For an overview of different conceptualizations of non-places, see Arefi (2007).

² A certain sentimentality for the “good old times” resonates through Augé’s book and might eclipse the oppressive functions fulfilled by the bonds and obligations of pre-modern times. The fluidity and subjectivity of ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ also remains somewhat underexposed. While Augé mentions that neither usually occurs in its pure form, one misses examples to illustrate the resultant hybrid spaces. Long-term work-relations among, e.g., hotel employees or supermarket staff would turn the non-places where they work into places in Augé’s sense, if only temporarily and only for certain people. For a detailed critique of Augé’s concept, see Korstanje (2015); and Harvie (1996).

³ Augé himself explores the topic of urban homelessness in the hybrid genre of *No Fixed Abode: Ethnofiction* (2013), which tells the fictional story of an aspiring writer who is forced to live in his car. The author’s best-known concept is notably introduced through the character of an artist whose work depicts non-places, but the relation between the politics of representation and the experiences of the protagonist remains underdeveloped.

⁴ The relation between slapstick, empathy, and affect has been examined mostly in film studies looking at classics like Charlie Chaplin’s or Buster Keaton’s works. Part of the

empathetic effect of slapstick film is considered to be a form of intra-audience empathy that relies on the ‘contagious’ effect of others’ laughter. While this is not applicable to the solitary act of reading a book, *Borb’s* formal gesture towards newspaper comic strips conjures the context of a more communal reading experience. One could expect others to have read the same paper or even observe them while doing so and thus share their experience. For approaches to and categories of empathy enabled by slapstick see Peacock (2014); and Bolens (2012). Plantinga (2006) investigates specifically the elicitation of disgust in visual media.

⁵ Focalization refers to an aspect of narrative perspective, namely the filter (e.g. of a character’s consciousness) through which a story is recounted. A much-discussed concept in narratology, the notion of focalization in comics and graphic narratives is especially contested. See Horstkotte and Pedri (2011) for an overview. Karin Kukkonen also operates with the concept of focalization in *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (2013).

⁶ It is worth noting here that, even though Genette considers illustrations to be part of a book’s paratext, his classification would have to be reconsidered in the context of comics and graphic novels. Genette refers almost exclusively to traditional novels where the story proper does not consist of illustrations the way comics do.

⁷ *Borb’s* skin-tone in the cover image is light with an orange tinge, his features throughout the book are obscured by facial hair and grime. His former partner and their daughter are unmistakably African American, but even *Borb’s* younger self in the flashback scenes could represent a Latino, a Caucasian, or a light-skinned Black man. Leaving *Borb’s* racial identity open seems another deliberate strategy to cast him as a type, not a specific person.

⁸ I’m borrowing this term from Jason Dittmer who speaks of ‘the way that images and text in comics are alchemically set in relation’ (2014: 17).

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