

# Homelessness as the Unforgiving Minute of the Present: The Rhetorical Tenses of Democratic Citizenship

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*Popular discourse and advocacy efforts characterize homelessness as a social problem bound by the present-centered concerns of physical affliction and material deprivation. Wayne Powers's documentary film Reversal of Fortune exemplifies this tendency by performing a "social experiment" to investigate how giving a homeless man \$100,000 would change his life: the film chronicles the intervention in terms of an ever-fleeting opportunity that the man ultimately fails to utilize. Such discourses deny the future-oriented grounds for identification between homeless and housed as citizens sharing a common political destiny. Discourses of homelessness thus provide an important opportunity for questioning how the rhetorical tenses of democratic citizenship can be cultivated or suppressed, and how such rhetorical work can contribute to a more dynamic democratic culture.*

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“What happens when a homeless person is given \$100,000?” So begins Wayne Powers’s documentary film *Reversal of Fortune (ROF)*, a self-described “social experiment” that purports to demonstrate whether and how direct financial assistance will improve or exacerbate the already precarious position of the homeless.<sup>1</sup> The documentary explicates its motivation from the start, asking, “Will it solve his problems? Will it create new problems? Will it turn his life around?” The film begins with a brief, general introduction to its main subject, a chronically homeless man named Ted Rodrigue, and then shifts its attention to the ups and

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downs of his life after he finds a briefcase containing \$100,000 planted by the film crew in a dumpster where he usually searches for recyclables to return for money. Ted runs through the money relatively quickly, making both practical and indulgent purchases for himself and giving generously to his friends and relatives; by the end of the film, half a year has passed since Ted's windfall, and he finds himself worse off than he was at the outset.

*ROF* and its filmmaker offer little commentary on why the large cash infusion fails to change Ted's life in the long term, but the initial release of the film on Showtime in 2005 and its subsequent feature on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* the following year prompted audience members to debate the meaning and lessons to be drawn from Powers's project.<sup>2</sup> Many "question[ed] the ethics of this documentary," judging it to be a duplicitous act of charity in which Ted "was exploited (and set up to fail)."<sup>3</sup> Others rejected the documentary's "premise . . . [as] insulting and disingenuous—the idea that a degenerate homeless man stumbling onto 100K in cash would do anything besides blow it."<sup>4</sup> Whether or not they believed the film to have been executed in poor taste, viewers largely agreed that Ted "was grossly irresponsible," and therefore proof that "homelessness is far more likely to be the fault of the homeless person himself than of someone else."<sup>5</sup> Those who applauded *ROF* saw it as a vital piece of evidence demonstrating the reality behind Ted's misfortune: "If Ted were just given vouchers for a modest apartment and a daily buffet meal, \$100,000 could have lasted a decade. Well, that's optimistic: He probably would have traded access to food and shelter for liquor, and gotten evicted once the neighbors started to complain."<sup>6</sup> Others explained Ted's failure to maintain his newfound wealth because "[t]he majority of homeless people have a serious untreated mental illness. . . . They need us and someone to manage their money."<sup>7</sup>

Viewers reached no consensus about what factors exerted the most influence in assuring Ted's failure, but as their comments indicate, audiences read the film as indisputable evidence of his (poor) choices, a simple report "in which the viewed is to be taken as effectively indistinguishable from the real."<sup>8</sup> In doing so, they rehearsed many of the stereotypical views of homelessness that advocates have worked tirelessly to counter.<sup>9</sup> But though *ROF* may have been received by audiences as transparent evidence of Ted's deficiency in character, the film, like "[a]ny form of documentary accounting involves . . . a process of 'fact production.' This is always a process with a purpose."<sup>10</sup> As John Tagg argues, the use of media thought to be neutral and objective, like photography, to document social ills and reform subjects considered to be deviant has generated a powerful tradition of legitimating "centralising, corporatist reform" as "seemingly benevolent social provision" able "to represent, reform and reconstitute the social body in new ways."<sup>11</sup> The documentary photography that Tagg explores initially operated as an official mechanism of increasing state control over general social life, but came to be "addressed not only to experts but also to specific sectors of a broader lay audience, in a concerted effort to recruit them to the discourse of paternalistic, state-directed reform."<sup>12</sup> Bearing Tagg's argument in mind, we see how *ROF* emerges as an extension of a larger documentary tradition whose strategies of representation, knowledge production, and governance

significantly influence contemporary social reform efforts like those that aim to rehabilitate aberrant homeless bodies.

While documentaries are styled as transparent and uncomplicated chronicles of events, films like *ROF* activate particular attitudes toward their subjects more than they simply provide evidence. This essay interrogates the view of homelessness *ROF* cultivates through the specific way in which it crafts Ted's story. The primary claim that I advance here is that *ROF* constitutes "homelessness" as a problem of present-centeredness by casting it as an affliction of those who are simultaneously helpless in the face of extraordinary external physical dangers and imperiled by overwhelming internal imbalance; homelessness is therefore imagined to result from the inability to escape a perpetual "focus upon passions, desires, and appetites—upon what is linked more directly with the needs of the body, and upon the certainty of pressing ends rather than the ambiguity of long-term projects."<sup>13</sup> Whether viewers invoke mental imbalance, physical addiction, or general unsociability in their explanations of Ted's failure, their reactions confirm the film's depiction of homelessness as a fundamentally unique condition, an affliction whose causes and consequences can only be identified and treated moment to moment. In framing the homeless as bodies trapped by an unforgiving and insurmountable present, *ROF* trades opportunities to reclaim the citizenship of people experiencing homelessness for calls to compassionate response justified by the harsh materiality of homelessness. In doing so, the film underwrites a popular discourse of homelessness that is blind to the ways in which structural inequalities contribute to the lack of universal housing, that stifles opportunities for identification between homeless and housed individuals, and that tacitly lends support to the continued disenfranchisement and exclusion of people experiencing homelessness from a shared political future. In contrast with its charitable intentions, *ROF* operates as one iteration of a broader rhetoric of homelessness that constructs a significant and largely unarticulated obstacle to advocacy that would challenge the exclusion and marginalization of the homeless in contemporary life.

Powers's social experiment thus fails twice: not only does the assistance provided Ted fail to catalyze a reversal of fortune, but the film itself reinforces a seemingly transparent vision of homelessness as a present-centered condition, rendering those who suffer it incapable and unsuited for the future-oriented collective life of a democratic citizenry. As such, *ROF* offers a critical opportunity to interrogate how and at what cost rhetorics of homelessness employ a narrowing of tense to document, and by implication to constitute, the experiences of homelessness. In what follows, I reorient discussions of homelessness in terms of democratic citizenship to highlight the importance of temporality in accounts of how citizens' bodies hinder or empower their participation in collective political life. I then turn attention to *ROF* and Ted's interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to demonstrate how the framing of homelessness in the present tense drives the representation and interpretation of his experience as the failures of a body ill equipped to escape the trappings of homeless life and to engage in future-oriented civic action. I conclude by exploring the implications of a present-centered conception of homelessness for broader social

issues, suggesting how attention to the rhetorical tenses of democratic citizenship might provide an important resource for scholarly critique motivated by the pursuit of social justice.

### **Suffering the Present Tense**

Faced with the growing prevalence of legislation that criminalizes life-sustaining activities people experiencing homelessness must, by necessity, carry out in public, advocates currently struggle to compensate for the physical toll of street living as well as the civic harm perpetrated by public safety measures that deprive the homeless of mobility, dignity, and civil liberties. As Kathleen R. Arnold contends, “[w]hen one can no longer inhabit public space, have one’s possessions and shanty towns (home, by some definitions) burned or bulldozed, be arrested for one’s status rather than a crime (hence signaling a loss of civil rights), and only exercise political power with extreme difficulty, one cannot be said to be a citizen.”<sup>14</sup> Arnold notes “the incredible vulnerability the homeless experience not only physically but also politically. They do not simply fall through the cracks but are deprived of citizenship due to their status.”<sup>15</sup> Don Mitchell accounts for this civic vulnerability in terms of a growing disciplinary imperative to secure the order of the city, an institutional norm that takes the form of “demonizing homeless people—making homeless people seem somehow less than human, endowed with fewer rights than those of us who live in houses. If there has been an overriding discourse about homeless people over the past decade, it has been that they are nuisances (or worse) to be rid of—pests and vermin who sap the economic and social vitality of the cities and the nation.”<sup>16</sup> Though homelessness at first glance simply comprises a lack of housing, it is also “a problem of politics,” and as Leonard C. Feldman argues, “to think seriously about what it means to say that homeless persons are (and ought to be) citizens, requires a thorough analysis of the mechanisms and dynamics of political exclusion. . . . [I]t is time to pry homelessness loose from its usual frame as a social problem and to see the state and sovereign power as deeper causes, not as superstructural with respect to society.”<sup>17</sup>

Though they explicate the erosion of homeless people’s citizenship in slightly different ways, these writers concur that the stakes of homelessness extend beyond the physical survival of people living outside shelter. Debates about the causes, consequences, and resolutions of homelessness implicate what vision of citizenship underwrites democratic politics and on what conditions citizens might legitimately invoke a right to public and political participation. In the case of the homeless, citizens are betrayed by their bodies. Lacking private spaces to occupy, their presence on the streets and sidewalks, in alleyways and parks, becomes a violation of legal regulations limiting what activities people may properly carry out in public. As highly visible bodies in need, the homeless become scapegoats for the insecurity of public space: “The solution to the perceived ills of urban public spaces over the past generation has been a combination of environmental change, behavior modification, and stringent policing. The putative reason is to assure that public spaces remain

‘public’ rather than hijacked by undesirable users.”<sup>18</sup> But while Mitchell, Arnold, and Feldman each trace the second-class subjugation of the homeless to overly disciplinary institutional imperatives, the punitive measures that strip the homeless of their citizenship also result from a broader rhetorical articulation between civic empowerment and multiple temporalities of the human body.

The relationship between particular temporalities and specific views of the human body underwrites political philosopher Eyal Chowers’s interpretation of major schools of modern political thought. Chowers focuses attention on how developments in medical knowledge translate bodily experience and functioning into “temporal languages” that weight the past, present, and future in various proportions.<sup>19</sup> Less compelling than the accuracy of competing accounts of human physiology is the degree to which they imagine the functioning of the human body as compatible with the political requirements of citizenship:

In the Renaissance, the uncertainty of the external and internal worlds could be mitigated by consistency of character. This character encompassed modes of conduct (virtue) as well as bodily constitution; in fact, according to humanist thought, the two dimensions of the self cannot be separated. During the seventeenth century, however, the notion of consistent character loses its force in both political and medical thought, and this depersonalization diminishes the idea that human beings may transcend their present and overcome the precariousness of tomorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Put differently, Chowers considers how medical knowledge rhetorically constructs the human body and its maintenance so as to enable or obstruct a temporal disposition that accommodates good political judgment. This approach confirms Gerard Hauser’s assertion that “limiting our understanding to its [the body’s] status as a biological organism ignores the body’s symbolic significance and the numerous ways in which it is used as a form of signification.”<sup>21</sup> In tracing the characteristic features of civic humanism and reason-of-state philosophies back to their justifications in human anatomy, Chowers joins rhetoricians who investigate the ways in which “the body is a rhetorically useful and flexible argumentative locus that reflects the attitudes, values, and biases of a culture.”<sup>22</sup>

Civic humanism characterizes the world as fundamentally contingent. As a political philosophy, civic humanism grounds its legitimation in a corresponding view of human corporeality that “suggests that the body is located in an ever-changing environment and naturally changes in the course of a human lifetime; however, this medical school also claims that one could tame change and remain healthy by husbanding internal balance among the four humours.”<sup>23</sup> In this vision, disease impairs the human body not through outside agents that infect it, but “from internal imbalance.”<sup>24</sup> Good health, like good politics, is “not focused on remedies at the moment of illness but rather on molding an entire way of life, a regime, *in advance of illness*.”<sup>25</sup> This understanding of the human body and its place in the world generates the particular “conception of time and the ability of citizens to deliberate about the future and act in order to shape events in advance.”<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, early moderns replace a humanist vision of politics and the body with absolutist and reason-of-state philosophies that challenge the future-oriented characterization of human physiology and civic action. Here, “[o]rdinary people (*esprits communs*) lack the special training and skills necessary for grasping the body of knowledge and public interest vital for fruitful politics; they are immersed in the momentary needs and emotions springing from their own bodies.”<sup>27</sup> Advancements in medical knowledge recharacterized the human body as one “immersed in compacted and segmented time units,” thereby “provid[ing] physiological justifications for the claim that human beings live mostly in the present.”<sup>28</sup> Whereas a future-oriented model of health imbues citizens with the ability and responsibility to actively pursue their physical and political well being, a present-centered citizen body leads “[b]oth the practitioner and (especially) the philosopher [to] suggest that the human body is unstable and cannot serve as a ground for solid character or judgment. Politics, consequently, cannot be a domain in which individuals engage to shape their futures but instead must be a realm kept distant from them if they are to have a future at all.”<sup>29</sup>

In contemporary democracies, Chowers argues, the temporal picture blurs the clear inclinations earlier philosophies displayed for either a future-oriented or present-centered view of human life. Though contemporary democracies empower citizens to participate in political decision making, the increasingly prevalent view of democracy as a political system in which representatives cater to the immediate needs and preferences of their constituents tempers the emancipatory potential of unshackling citizen-bodies from a physiological containment in the present. “[I]t would be a mistake to suggest that late moderns are interested merely in their individual and global present,” but echoes of reason-of-state philosophies’ justification for denying citizens the possibility for political action still compete within the “alternative and incommensurable visions of temporal homes [that] have evolved—an irreducible plurality.”<sup>30</sup> And while the philosophies and physiologies that once viewed *all* people as inextricably bound to the present may have waned, their impulse to exile citizens based on the present-centeredness of (some kinds of) bodies persists today, perhaps most clearly in the case of homelessness.

Dominant themes in discussions about homelessness in various spheres (public discourse, policy decisions, advocacy efforts, academic critique) resonate in devastating ways with the medical and philosophical views of early modernity that imagined human bodies as present-bound entities constantly at risk from both external uncertainty and internal imbalance. Whereas early modern theories envisioned all bodies as inescapably present-centered beings, contemporary discourse about homelessness distinguishes between present-centered, and therefore damaged, homeless bodies and the healthy body of housed citizens.<sup>31</sup> Whether the homeless are condemned or aided because of physical affliction, handicap, or mental illness, the underlying explanation remains largely the same: both advocates and critics generally frame homelessness as a condition of being overwhelmingly imperiled by immediate, physical needs and risks, which destines people suffering homelessness to an existence

outside the coordinated, future-oriented communal life of a citizenry whose secured private survival frees them to pursue political interaction.

The specific example of homelessness should prompt us to consider how, even in the absence of totalizing theories of bodies and politics, citizen empowerment still significantly relies on rhetorical characterizations that affirm the legitimacy of citizens' experience of the present and anticipation of the future; further, we find here that the marginalization and exclusion of some groups may occur subtly through a rhetorical narrowing of temporality or a resistance to viewing certain social problems in terms of a multiplicity of tenses. *ROF* typifies this narrowing of tense as it rhetorically constructs homeless existence and assistance alike as fundamentally present-tense phenomena.

### **Present-Centered Homelessness in *Reversal of Fortune***

The tenses attributed to the human body have implications for how we understand citizens' physical and political existence because, as Chowder demonstrates, temporal characterizations have long functioned as justifications for civic empowerment or restraint. His focus on physiology directs our attention to two complementary registers in the construction of present-centeredness: the characterization of the body and the form of intervention. Whether Ted Rodrigue is living on the street or in the housing his windfall allows him to afford briefly, *ROF* frames him as an always homeless body, plagued by the same immediate instabilities and insecurities; as a result, the intervention documented in *ROF* takes its cues from this particular depiction of Ted's homelessness, administering to the symptoms of a present-centered condition.

#### *The Present-Centered Body*

By Chowder's account, attributions of present-centeredness are "founded upon a certain view of the self" that highlights the "internal discontinuity" of the human body, "wherein each experience of the self is dissociated from what precedes or follows it."<sup>32</sup> *ROF* follows such a formula when it characterizes Ted's homelessness as a profound isolation from his past mistakes and future potential. In doing so, it calls into question whether homeless bodies like Ted's "can stay the same (both physically and morally), navigate character and body in the pursuit of consistency, face future changes and uncertainties by anticipatory actions (both medical and political), and take an active part in shaping their physical and communal future."<sup>33</sup>

*ROF* opens with a series of images of homeless residents of urban streets in the downtown area of an unidentified city. Interspersed among these shots are plain black intertitles establishing the premise of the documentary, which aims to discover how \$100,000 can change a homeless person's life (or fail to do so). But while the documentary shares this intention with the audience from the start, the subject of the social experiment remains in the dark. He speaks directly to the audience, introducing himself as "Ted Rodrigue. I'm from Sacramento, California. Forty-five

years old. I am now homeless in Pasadena, California, and I reside under a bridge” (1:10). After Ted’s bare-bones introduction of himself, the disembodied, voiceless narration returns in the form of another intertitle: “Ted has agreed to participate in a documentary about being homeless” (1:25). In the scenes that follow, *ROF* documents Ted’s day-to-day life. “When I wake up in the morning,” Ted tells us, “it’s all about survival. Make sure I go out and hustle, do my recycling, so I can eat that day, have cigarettes, and drink my beers, and that’s as far ahead as I look” (2:00). After leaving the highway overpass under which he sleeps at night, Ted rides his bike to various dumpsters and public trash cans to gather recyclables. He takes a coffee break and speaks with an acquaintance, Johnny, outside a convenience store about the best place to watch the coming Fourth of July fireworks. Ted identifies his informal relationship with Johnny as an exception to his typical daily interactions: “Johnny’s been coming here almost every day, for about four months. If I’m short on coffee money, he’ll give me coffee money. . . . He actually remembers my name, which is weird; a lot of people don’t” (3:31). When Ted returns to his recycling work, he clarifies its appeal, musing, “I kind of like recycling, because I don’t have nobody telling me what to do. I go do it when I want, quit when I want, take a break when I want; I have nobody to answer to. If I choose not to go out today, I just want to sit in the park, I can do that” (3:51).

After he’s finished collecting recyclables, he stops to watch a little league game in a park, cheering the teams on with the other spectators. On his way back to his residence under the overpass, he discusses his estrangement from his family and stops to make a collect phone call to his mother. “Bitch,” he mutters. “She wouldn’t accept my call. Too much time has gone by. They’re all set in their ways. I think my heart’s gotten too hardened, and I don’t think it can be fixed. If they didn’t know the life I led, it’d probably be different. But they do know” (7:07). He pedals his bike, alone, in the dark, to retrieve his sleeping bag and other belongings to make camp for the night. After straightening out the sleeping bag, he positions a knife and a gun next to him on the ground and lies down. Ted closes his day with a large bottle of beer and what appears to be either a hand-rolled cigarette or a joint before turning in. “I’ve been living this way for about twenty years,” he observes. “Surviving on the streets” (1:44).

This opening sequence establishes the salient features of Ted’s current lifestyle: he is largely disconnected from family and the people around him; his primary concerns are immediate, physical ones; his future seems destined to unfold as nothing more than the repetition of his present. Each day comes as a minor variation on the fundamental facts governing his existence, one where most people do not remember him (and those that do give him coffee money at best), where he can accomplish nothing more than provide for the most basic needs of his body, and where, at the end of the day, he finds himself back where he started in the morning—alone and having used up whatever resources he was able to acquire. Moreover, the sense that Ted remains trapped in a cycle of living that never escapes the present is confirmed by the form of the film itself; in the first few minutes of *ROF*, we see two key features of this social experiment. First, the filmmaker has extracted himself as much as possible

from Ted's life. His voice does not narrate Ted's experience, let alone comment on it; the stark black intertitles with nondescript white text obscure Powers's role in attempting to change Ted's life. Second, the passive voice of the opening question—"What happens when a homeless person *is given* \$100,000?"—establishes Powers's hands-off approach and suggests that we can only appreciate how money will affect Ted's lifestyle and decisions if he receives it without knowing what is coming. While ordinarily that amount of money would necessitate substantial planning and forethought to be utilized well, *ROF* implies that within the present-tense world of homelessness, the money can only intervene as a jarring deviation from the endlessly repeating pursuit of physical sustenance.

From the very beginning, then, Ted seems doomed to fail, though perhaps not for the cynical explanations that viewers gave subsequent to his interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Depicting his existence as conducted from a limited orientation to the present, and proposing its possible solution as a similarly present-centered intervention, *ROF* itself is constrained to documenting Ted's windfall as one that will slip by as surely as each passing day ends, bringing with it the return of his essential homelessness, taking him back to the point from which he started. Previewing this cycle, *ROF* follows Ted on a second typical day, where again he collects recyclables to provide for his immediate needs. This second day offers one unusual interruption: Ted goes to the Fourth of July fireworks, where he makes small talk with people nearby and where, once the sun sets and the fireworks begin, he blends in with the rest of the assembled public to watch the patriotic display. Afterward, however, he returns to his customary isolation as he gathers recyclables from the appalling amount of trash left behind by the departed spectators. "Can you believe the fucking garbage people leave?" he exclaims, outraged. "It's disgusting. People are fucking pigs. They look down on me because I'm homeless, I'm supposed to be lower than them, but they do shit like this? That's why I hate fucking society so much. If being in society is living like that, then I don't want to be in society. I'd rather just be who I am, because I couldn't live like that" (14:31). The day ends with Ted affirming his disconnection with the world around him, and the following one returns Ted to his usual routine: returning bottles to the recycling center for money.

The next few interviews with Ted accelerate across the span of two days. After his stop at the recycling center, where he encounters a rude woman unwilling to listen to him, the film cuts to a night scene of three women walking away from him on the street, cracking jokes about his being followed around by a film crew. We next see Ted sitting in the afternoon sunlight, presumably the following day, on a park bench, and then the scene shifts once more to Ted alone again, at night, drinking and smoking beneath the overpass. The rapid cycling through daytime and night confirms the essential and dreary repetition of Ted's days: there is no need to show the particulars, because in the end, each twenty-four-hour period presents a largely identical collection of moments characterized by social disconnection and physical want.

*The Present-Centered Intervention*

Having framed Ted's homeless body as isolated from both past and future, *ROF* designs an intervention tailored to the vision of homelessness as a problem of present-centeredness. Like the medical trends Chowder investigates, *ROF* offers a cure that modifies "the emphasis in care from a general molding of the patient's way of life through the manipulation of nonnaturals to immediate cures and formulas specific to the type of disease."<sup>34</sup> The immediate remedy for the disease of homelessness comes in the inelegant form of a briefcase full of cash stuffed in a dumpster, administered on a day that begins like any other, with Ted rising and heading off in search of recyclables. He moves from dumpster to dumpster, lowering himself in each to dig through its contents. But one dumpster—where a camera is planted to capture Ted's reaction—holds a surprise: among the usual refuse, he finds a spotless black briefcase, which he pulls out and examines. "Oh my god," he cries as he opens it to find it full of cash and a note that reproduces the opening question of the film (18:42). Stunned, Ted initially reacts by backing away from the briefcase slightly, holding his hands up as if he has found something he has no business examining. His mouth moves as he reads the enclosed note, and his immediate reaction is one of disbelief: "Oh no, this can't be real" (18:55). He clutches the side of the dumpster as the shock sweeps over him; his breathing now ragged, he sits among the trash and stares at the briefcase for a long moment while the faint sound of a drumming heartbeat plays in the background. The camera zooms in on his face as he starts shaking and begins to cry, looking both overwhelmed and frightened by what he has just found. Finally, Ted hesitantly removes one paper slip-bound stack of bills and turns it over in his hand, as if he suspects this freely given wealth cannot be real. He flips through a wad of hundred-dollar bills, which seems to convince him that he has, in fact, stumbled on an unthinkable turn of good fortune.

Soon, Ted is pedaling up an alley on his bike overloaded with bags of recyclables, the briefcase afforded the place of greatest stability, clutched in his left hand. He returns to his residence beneath the overpass and hides the briefcase in a concealed hole in the concrete while he takes his day's collectables to the recycling center—compelled, it seems, by the daily routine he has never before had the power to escape. Once there, he keeps his discovery to himself, though he asks the young man who works at the center, his friend Michael, if he needs any money, and he offers his voucher to another homeless man, who cannot believe Ted wants to give it away. A caption on the screen reveals the value to be \$16.36, and as he shows it to the other homeless man, Ted asks, "Could you use that?" The man replies, "Oh, yeah," as he hands the voucher back to Ted. "Guess you don't want it, huh?" Ted asks, and the man turns back, takes the voucher again, and says, "Yeah, I want it; give me that. You shitting me? Oh, man, I owe you" (21:52). Ted makes his next stop at a bicycle store where, a close-up of the cash register screen shows us, he spends \$781.81 on upgrading his means of transportation with new bicycle accessories like a small trailer and a heavy-duty lock (22:49). "I don't want much," Ted's voiceover explains as we watch him pedal home. "Little one-bedroom apartment, able to pay the rent, a

place to lay my head down and be safe, a nice hot shower every day—probably two or three times a day. That’s all I want” (23:03).

Though Ted leaves the bicycle shop to gather his few possessions from under the overpass and move them to a hotel room he rents (interestingly, at an establishment called the Vagabond Inn) for another \$171.76, he does not immediately pursue the modest desires he has just outlined (23:50). He first calls his family members to relate the exciting events of the day, and this time, each of them takes his calls. He showers, shaves, dresses, and counts out his money on the hotel bed, after which he leaves to take his friend from the recycling center, Michael, for a night out on the boardwalk. Ted notes, “It was important for me to spend the day with Michael, because he’s the only friend I have” (24:59). The two spend the day exploring the attractions, Ted treating Michael to any ride or game that might appeal to him. Ted returns to his hotel room and continues trying out the features of his newfound lifestyle: from the comparative security of his now stable physical existence, he devotes his time to reconnecting with his family, speaking with one of his sisters and his mother about traveling to see them. Though the adjustment is not a seamless one (he still sleeps on the floor in his hotel room, rather than on the bed, for example), he appears to be set up in a position where the daily strain of pursuing his physical needs might no longer stymie his ability to make long-term plans and goals for his life.

After his initial celebration upon discovering his windfall, “Ted is asked to consult with a professional homeless advocate to discuss his future” (29:13). The advocate, Bob Erlenbusch, visits Ted in his hotel room and asks him to talk about his reaction to finding the money, specifically inquiring about what fears Ted may be facing. Ted answers that he has not thought much about what the money means for his life, or what problems it might cause, but he can articulate how his daily existence has changed: “I have a lot of free time that I didn’t have before, ’cause I was out hustling, trying to—you know, recycling, trying to make money during the day, and now that I don’t have to do that, I have a lot of time” (29:59). Erlenbusch offers little in the way of advice for breaking out of Ted’s exclusive attention to the present; he suggests that Ted *should* perhaps feel daunted by the amount of money he has received and the responsibility for using it well, but other than advising him to avoid “fucking it up,” he does not counsel Ted in how to make the transition from a present-tense to a future-oriented perspective (30:20). He asks if Ted has made the decision not to blow the money, and Ted agrees he has, but Erlenbusch seems satisfied that having the correct attitude today—I will not squander this money I was so fortunate to receive—somehow equals a future-oriented view of the \$100,000’s potential impact on Ted’s life. Erlenbusch’s advisory session with Ted leaves his present-centered view of his life, his needs, and his potential intact, steering the remainder of Ted’s moneyed experience back into the future-blind viewpoint of his recent routine.<sup>35</sup>

Ted later receives additional expert guidance when he “is asked to meet with a financial planner,” Jeff Lambert (45:08). Lambert visits Ted once he has moved in to his mother’s trailer, and Ted expresses interest in learning how to plan to use his remaining money. Lambert agrees that planning is vital to success, explaining to Ted that “it’s scary, because I don’t know if other people have told you this, but more than

two thirds of the people who've come into inherited money or a sum of money go through their money and end up broke. . . . So it'd be real important for me to make sure that you get the kind of support that you need" (45:26). Lambert suggests Ted might first think about securing employment and inquires about Ted's job prospects. "Actually, I'm not worried about that," Ted admits to him. "I don't know; it's just that—just right now, I'm not—I'm not even thinking of the future. I'm just dealing with what I have right here in front of me" (45:56). Their interview ends abruptly with Lambert leaving and encouraging Ted to keep him informed about his plans for the future, once he makes them. On his way out, Lambert warmly tells Ted, "I'm excited for you," and Ted answers cynically, "Lot of people—lot of people are, lot of people ain't" (46:19). Once Lambert departs, Ted explains his skepticism about engaging the services of a financial planner: "I don't think I need his services. To me, I look at him as just another guy who wants to puts his hooks into me. You know, it's like, 'Oh, he got some money, let me see if I can get me a piece of it.' That's the way I look at it" (46:26).

These two meetings frame Ted as the recipient of good fortune who nonetheless fails to appreciate the value of a future-oriented perspective in which prudent planning could protect against the repetition of the past misuses of his time and resources. In spite of encouragement from the two experts to begin looking ahead, he seems only able to articulate how his present life has changed: his immediate needs are met, at least for the moment; he has reconnected socially, with both positive and negative results. But in highlighting his resistance to the counsel of experts presumably better positioned to make prudent decisions, *ROF* directs our attention to the ways Ted "lack[s] the proper instruction and the socioeconomic prerequisites that would foster transcendence of present-centeredness."<sup>36</sup> It is only a matter of time, the film seems to suggest, until Ted's inability to break out of the present-centered mindset finally defeats him.

### *The Limitations of Present-Centeredness*

*ROF* foreshadows Ted's lack of transformation by beginning an ominous countdown that measures Ted's dwindling account balance and, by extension, his decreasing opportunities to use the \$100,000 to improve his life. The first entry in the countdown announces, "One week after finding the money, Ted's balance is \$98,178.10," thus marking the beginning of Ted's end, ticking away steadily until his funds are completely gone, and thereby translating Ted's fleeting present in the terms of (disappearing) monetary quantities (31:01). A slight variation on the counting down of units of time, *ROF* nonetheless establishes a deadline for Ted's transformation (the duration of the \$100,000), which, in Roger Stahl's terms, "is an authoritarian discourse that preempts its own questionability. The countdown is a rhetoric of submission to the authority of the deadline. The two combine symbiotically to perform the primary ritual of chronopolitical participation, whose main theme is inevitability."<sup>37</sup>

The monetary countdown reinforces the film's depiction of Ted as a person plagued by present-centeredness by organizing his experience "into equal, uniform, and unrelated units that can be amassed," a temporal structuring that undermines the "picture of health as dependent upon a long-term, interlocked process."<sup>38</sup> *ROF*'s documentary form may at first tempt the audience to interpret the countdown as the objective rendering of Ted's decline, but John Lynch reminds us how structuring a narrative in terms of chronological time "disguises not just the selection and ordering process of these events from real life or memory but also that the events themselves only assert relevance and a meaning in the light of the overall narrative."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the countdown reinforces the narrow rendering of Ted's experience only in the present tense, as the documentary as social experiment appears to transparently record his actions in real time.

Throughout his decline, we see Ted struggling to find the correct perspective from which to approach his windfall to succeed in changing his circumstances: he passes through three stages, pursuing generosity, comfort, and financial commitment in turn, but none enables him to escape the consequences of his quickly draining money supply. Initially, generosity guides Ted's actions. Back at the Vagabond Inn, he shares his room with another homeless woman, though this generosity seems to leave him unsatisfied. "People coming out of the woodwork, acting like they're my friends all of a sudden," he complains. "A lot of the homeless people, you know, they know what's going on, and all of a sudden they're my friends" (31:14). Perhaps this suspicion that others are extending the hand of friendship solely to benefit from his good fortune leads him to devise a better means to exercise his generosity, which he explains to the woman with whom he shares his hotel room:

Ted: Friend of mine, Michael?

Woman: Yeah?

Ted: He wants to buy a car and he don't have enough to pay for a car. So, he wants a car, I'm going to help him buy it.

Woman: Why do you want a car for Michael? Who's Michael?

Ted: Michael's a good friend of mine.

Woman: You're going to help him buy a car? Why?

Ted: Because he has been my friend, since I've been in Pasadena.

Woman: 'Cause you can? Same reason Elvis bought all his friends cars?

Ted: No, no—well, yeah, because I can, yeah, but I'm doing for him. Now, when he's—he's eighteen years old. And he's going to know what it's like to—to give to other people. You know? You can't just fucking go through life fucking taking, taking, taking. You gotta give. (31:25)

A somewhat awkward statement of generosity (he seems to want to criticize the very woman he has been helping), Ted's impulse to share his windfall with those closest to him makes sense in terms of his struggle to escape the trappings of homeless life: at the start of the film, Ted frequently remarked on his loneliness, his inability to connect with people. Now, given substantial resources in terms of both money and time, he attempts to transform his previously isolated existence through generosity extended toward his friends and family. He does indeed take Michael car shopping and orders him to choose any car he wants. It is easy to see how much the experience of buying Michael his first car

thrills Ted: "I've never in my life, even in a fucking dream, [thought] that I could ever do something like this for somebody" (32:41).

Ted's long journey home culminates in his arrival at his mother's, where his family members embrace him wholeheartedly. They relate to the camera how long Ted has remained separated from them and what tremendous strain and worry the estrangement caused. Ted and one of his sisters pass the evening at a local bar, where he purchases drinks for everyone and his sister happily introduces him to the other patrons. The women in particular shower Ted with attention, eager to hear the story of his recent good fortune and to offer their advice on how to make the most of his windfall. At first, Ted seems encouraged by the frenzy of personal interaction with the other bar patrons, but as the night wears on, he appears to tire of the constant stream of drink sharing and unsolicited advice. He insists that he understands the real source of everyone's interest in him: "I mean, the women were just flocking all over. You know, I'd walk out to the bar just to get away from them and they'd follow me out there. . . . It's not about me; it's about the money. I know that. I'm not fucking stupid" (42:04). Ted's generosity seems to have soured him; since the \$100,000 failed to mitigate his enduring separation from others, he abandons generosity to invest his remaining money in battling a second handicap of his formerly homeless lifestyle: his lack of shelter, physical sustenance, and comfort.

As Ted's focus shifts from generosity to comfort, his three sisters discuss his future among themselves. They note how he has refused their efforts to find him a job and criticize what they see to be his irresponsible use of the \$100,000 thus far. Carrie, the sister who escorted Ted on the first night of his homecoming festivities, bitterly remarks on his frivolous attitude toward his resources. She frames her concern in terms of his unwillingness to take a job that he may not like, and stresses, "And see, the whole purpose is trying to get him not to spend any more of this money, maybe, you know, put it away in some sort of a retirement plan for him, 'cause he really needs that, 'cause he has nothing" (47:09). Instead, Ted shops for vehicles, deciding on a deluxe pickup truck that costs him \$34,084.89. "I couldn't afford a Lexus, so I got a Dodge Ram. Know what I'm saying? . . . I mean—it's what I wanted," he explains (48:29). Ted's choice to remedy his transportation problems is a sensible one, even if his purchase is not. The vehicle potentially enables him to pursue employment in the construction industry, the type of labor for which he does have experience and skills, where he must travel to various job sites to take advantage of work opportunities that change daily. Furthermore, the truck provides him a means to travel to potential jobs he certainly could not have reached on his bicycle, and spares him the physical effort he previously had to exert to go anywhere. But as with his generous interactions with others, this new attention to comfort is bounded by his present-centered mindset, the consequences of which are revealed as his family questions how he will manage such a costly vehicle. When one of his sisters inquires how much Ted will have to spend to fill up the gas tank of the truck, he replies that he does not know. In the next scene, we learn that Ted does not even have the legal means to drive his new purchase; his long-expired driver's license cannot be renewed because of outstanding tickets that he never paid at some point in the past. Discouraged and upset, Ted leaves the DMV and

vents his frustration by declaring, “Fuck this bullshit. Just kiss my ass. I’m just riding my bike, man” (50:16). As his sister drives him home from the DMV, their car passes a man standing on the median of the highway, holding a sign that reads “NEED HELP GOD BLESS” (50:41). Reclined in the passenger seat, Ted does not react to seeing someone in the position he so recently occupied, and the car passes the panhandler without stopping.

“Six weeks after finding the money, Ted’s balance is \$48,278.45,” and his eventual success in purchasing the pickup truck and renewing his driver’s license propel him to seek out other means of utilizing his money to alleviate the discomforts of his former homeless lifestyle (52:48). He turns next to housing, touring a slightly more extravagant rental than the one-bedroom apartment he originally planned to find. The rental agent points out the many amenities of the complex Ted considers moving to—pools, hot tubs, patios, tennis courts—and when he decides to sign a lease, the agent swiftly fires off a string of calculations of the various costs of starting a rental contract. We watch as Ted and others move a full rental truck’s worth of his new possessions into the apartment he has just leased, and while there is no indication of whether the many pieces of furniture, house wares, and decorations are purchases or gifts, we do see Ted standing in the aisle of an electronics store, perusing the various video game systems and accessories available. The scene shifts back to the apartment, where Ted surveys his partially ordered surroundings before returning to the bar at which he is portrayed as having become a regular customer.

Interspliced with images of Ted dancing with women and purchasing drinks is a conversation between Ted and his sister Carrie, who admonishes him for his recent efforts to build a more comfortable life for himself. She confesses, “You’re spending a lot of money, and my biggest concern is that your money is just about gone. You know?” Ted reassures her, but she presses on: “You’re spending a lot of money, you know, trying to entertain girls, and they’re taking up a lot of your money” (54:40). Ted seems unconcerned, but “[s]even weeks after finding the money, Ted’s balance is \$32,040.12,” and thus far, pursuing both generosity as a means to reconnect socially and fortifying his physical comfort in an effort to guard against the hardships of life on the street has left him largely unchanged and financially much closer to his position at the start of the film (58:52). Now Ted makes his final reorientation to the present, working to maintain what luxuries he has managed to accumulate thus far. Visiting him at his apartment, Ted’s sister remarks on the lack of food in his kitchen; she chides him to go grocery shopping, but Ted’s vision has shifted from the physical comforts of his body to participating in rituals of indebtedness that characterize housed life. He considers his schedule, prioritizing his appointment with the LoJack and cable television service people, and organizing his insurance, lease, and utilities paperwork. Although he experiences the same frustration he felt at navigating the red tape of obtaining his driver’s license—“I don’t know how to do all this shit. I can’t keep up with this shit, I’m telling you” (59:47)—Ted seems to be trying out the various routines that his previous lifestyle lacked, pursuing sociality, comfort, and the technologies of housed life in turn. And though this last effort to maintain his housing may seem oriented toward

the future, he is shown approaching it with the same present-centered perspective that characterized his quest for personal relationships and physical comforts: in the final segments of the film, *ROF* features Ted's struggle to enmesh himself in the structures of housed life by entering into a lease, committing himself to various services and utilities, always without considering the costs of such indebtedness in the future. Each commitment seems important to Ted because the act of obligating himself in the present insures him against the consequences of whatever future may come. Whether or when he finds a means to support himself financially matters less than the fact that he is acting correctly in the present: *ROF* depicts Ted as firmly convinced that because he no longer lives apart from the institutions and structures of housed life, his rejection of his previously disconnected lifestyle insulates him from returning to homelessness.

But this final phase is the quickest to pass, indicating that Ted's struggles against the fleeting present will only accelerate. We are informed that "[t]en weeks after finding the money, Ted's balance is \$29,129.15" (1:00:38). His life seems to be spiraling out of control as his family hounds him to heed their advice, stick to a budget, and find a job, and he reacts with increasing indignation and resentment:

I understand what you're saying. I really do. Don't get me wrong, but personally, I think it's none of your fucking business . . . I'm not used to somebody trying to run my fucking finances and my fucking life, or telling me how I spend my money, what to do, where to go, what appointment to keep. . . . I moved back here to be back with my family, and—and all I get is everybody's fucking opinion on how I'm supposed to live my life now. And if I'm not doing it the way they want it to, they're fucking pissed off. (1:03:00)

His family members explain their concerns in terms of Ted's future: they fear he will run out on everyone if the pressure grows too intense, and they predict that if he does leave, he will return to living on the streets, a lifestyle he is becoming too old to endure. But Ted's concern remains focused on his present; his life in the here and now consists of enduring his family members' ongoing interference, which he understands to be the ironic reward for his efforts to build a lifestyle measured normal by their expectations. He gauges the disintegration of his life in terms of his increasingly unendurable present; in the past, his days consisted "[o]f having no responsibilities, no having to make choices, and all of a sudden, it's everything all at once. All these people—everybody wants something out of me. And at the same time, I'm trying to get my shit back together, plus dealing with everybody else's fucking bullshit, emotions, about how I should live my goddamn life" (1:04:55). It seems to be the threat of an endless repetition of his current present—one where he has failed to mitigate his social isolation, physical discomfort, and lack of long-term resources—that finally convinces him that the money he received did not improve his life; it made it much worse. His defensive final comment confirms his despair: "I'd like to see you get a hundred thousand dollars, see what the fuck you do with it" (1:05:17).

*ROF* ends abruptly with a final update announcing that "[s]ix months after finding \$100,000 Ted would not reveal his balance" (1:05:22). Slowly, footage of Ted walking away from the camera down a deserted street replaces the last entry in the countdown

of his good fortune. As Ted moves further away, his back always to the camera, we read that “[h]is sisters suspect his balance is less than \$5,000” (1:05:29).

This running out of the clock counting down to Ted’s impending failure modifies a common convention in the documentary tradition of contrasting images of subjects before and after the social reforms meant to transform them from outcasts to well-functioning citizens. Tagg explains that state institutions like the police utilized photography as a means to document criminal populations, which gave them “a convenient tool for their new strategies of power” whose effectiveness in strengthening disciplinary surveillance also increasingly produced passive subjects inculcated in the power structure of the paternalistic state.<sup>40</sup> Documentary photography became the preferred medium for social reform movements that developed the visual convention of contrasting before-and-after images of subjects as evidence of the success of institutions like orphanages and slum clearance projects.<sup>41</sup> But *ROF* structures Ted’s story in a different way: by the end of the film, Ted has been unable to improve his life, presumably because the present-centered condition of homelessness limits his capacities in debilitating ways, but also because Powers makes no attempt to intervene directly in Ted’s progress. In contrast to before-and-after images of successful reform efforts, *ROF* frames Ted’s experience as one of an inescapable present, where there can be no successful transformation without some kind of outside intervention because, left to his own devices, he cannot overcome the limitations of present-centeredness. Traditional social experiments celebrate the success of reform efforts that rehabilitate abnormal subjects, but *ROF* ends in failure, leaving us with an image of homeless life as utterly incompatible with the requirements of citizenship.

### **The Rhetorical Tenses of Democratic Citizenship**

After Powers’s social experiment concluded and *ROF* debuted on Showtime, Ted was featured on the December 6, 2006, episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where the host, known for her therapeutic approach to individual social problems, took him to task for failing to utilize the incredible opportunity he had been offered.<sup>42</sup> *ROF*’s filmmaker explained Ted’s lack of change because of personal inadequacies: “It was a frustrating process in a way because I think that there were a lot of opportunities sent Ted’s way and while you’re with someone and the closer you get to them and the more that you kind of root for them and understand them, the more frustrating it gets when those opportunities are passed by. I think that shows that from a personal story, people that are homeless, there are certain demons inside them.”<sup>43</sup> Where Powers phrased Ted’s failure in terms of his inner “demons,” Oprah blamed Ted directly:

Mr. Rodrigue: Well, \$100,000, you would think, is a lot of money. And it can change your life. But once you’ve had that kind of money, \$100,000 isn’t a lot of money. And at that time in my life . . .

Winfrey: Says you who’s had it.

Mr. Rodrigue: Right.

Winfrey: Because there's a lot of people watching right now who are saying, "If I got \$100,000, I wouldn't know what to do with it."

Mr. Rodrigue: Well . . .

Winfrey: The truth is, you didn't know what to do with it.<sup>44</sup>

But as I have argued throughout this essay, Ted's inadequate planning skills should be understood less as straightforward evidence of personal insufficiency and more as the rhetorical resource for a nuanced argument that characterizes homelessness as a problem of present-centeredness, implicitly indicting those who suffer from homelessness as unable to occupy the future-oriented perspective that transforms isolated individuals into communally minded democratic citizens. *ROF* frames Ted's life prior to his windfall as severely hindered by the predicament of present-centeredness: Ted lives day to day, compelled to act only to fulfill his physical needs, pursue momentary desires, and feed his various addictions. By showing his life as an unending repetition of his present, the documentary represents Ted's condition in particular and homelessness more broadly as entailing a blindness to the relevance of either past experiences or future uncertainty for decision making moment to moment. Taking the structure of Ted's narrative from the countdown of the \$100,000 reinforces the inevitability of his ultimate failure to change his life significantly. This temporal structuring shapes the audience's experience of Ted's story as an uncomfortable, ever-fleeting present that it has no control to redirect and from which Ted fails to escape. *ROF* thus operates as Burkean form, first creating and then satisfying an appetite in the mind of the viewer: the seemingly transparent medium of the documentary film, the strict chronological rendering of Ted's story, and the countdown that structures and anticipates his impending failure all work not only to frame Ted's homelessness as a problem of present-centeredness, but also to instill in the audience a desire for and commitment to the future-oriented perspective of the empowered citizen.<sup>45</sup>

*ROF* accomplishes this task by drawing on the conventions of makeover reality television where, according to Brenda Weber, "subordination empowers, where a normalized appearance confers individuation."<sup>46</sup> *ROF* justifies the failure of its makeover-like treatment of Ted by highlighting his similarities to the exemplary candidate prior to transformation: Ted is a figure of "failed or imperiled selfhood, the locus of identity stalled or stagnated."<sup>47</sup> Unlike the successful reality TV contestant, Ted never evolves into a model of the "self-enterprising, neoliberal constructions of 'good citizenship'" that typify the reality TV makeover narrative.<sup>48</sup> In structuring Ted's story as an incomplete makeover or failed social experiment, *ROF* disqualifies alternate readings of Ted's lifestyle as anything other than the unfortunate outcome of a kind of disabled citizen: his inability to be successfully made over marks Ted as the kind of subject who "require[s] nothing more than personal responsibility and self-discipline in the wake of shrinking public services," but is "deemed abnormal and often unreformable" because of his unwillingness or inability to reject his present-centered outlook for one that acquiesces to the neoliberal dictates of "a heightened form of personal responsibility and self-discipline from individuals."<sup>49</sup>

In this way, *ROF* contributes to a broader understanding of homelessness in the present tense that makes resistance against the exclusion of the homeless from the empowered citizen body increasingly hard to justify. Advocacy efforts prioritize the dire material struggles facing people experiencing homelessness, thereby suggesting

that ignoring the urgent immediate needs that presently go unfulfilled is a luxury that a compassionate public cannot afford. But as Chowers stresses, “to choose one temporal home at the expense of another will render us superficial and lacking, and will divorce us from our age rather than making us an integral part of it. To be at home in modernity means to have many temporal (and spatial) homes—to bear their tension, contingencies, relativities.”<sup>50</sup> Chowers references our self-positioning in terms of different temporal horizons, but as my analysis of *ROF* indicates, we must also think of the great potential for civic harm that comes from framing others’ bodies as unsuited for the multi-tense enterprise of democratic citizenship. Characterizing homelessness as a present-tense predicament not only legitimates civic exclusion but also calls into question the possibility or productivity of resistance against it by asserting the primacy of meeting the immediate needs of the homeless body. Leslie A. Hahner insists we understand resistance in terms of how “subversion . . . operates as a mode of temporality that undermines the norms of the governing temporal order,” but *ROF* and advocacy like it reaffirm the temporal norm by leaving the present-tense characterization of homelessness intact.<sup>51</sup> And if, as Tony Fitzpatrick avers, a radical politics must “be rooted in the concept of relational time, i.e., in the struggles over the social meanings that are conferred upon time,” advocacy efforts that perpetuate the attribution of the present tense to homelessness unwittingly reproduce one of the most powerful obstacles to their objective.<sup>52</sup> The representation of Ted’s failure as the limitations of present-centeredness constructs in contrast an ideal type of democratic citizen whose mastery of multiple temporal orientations justifies her political legitimation while simultaneously validating the disempowerment of bodies characterized as unable or unwilling to fulfill the same.

To speak of the rhetorical tenses of democratic citizenship returns us, at least initially, to a perennial concern in rhetorical studies. I intentionally select the term “tense” to highlight the markedly vernacular nature of the phenomenon under discussion. The relationship between rhetoric and time or temporality has long intrigued scholars, but rather than approach discourses of homelessness to ascertain their fittingness to their temporal context (as scholars of *kairos* might encourage), I am more interested in investigating how speaking homelessness in different tenses affects the range of available explanations for and responses to the suffering of people experiencing homelessness.<sup>53</sup> This analysis of *ROF* suggests that time governs not just fitting responses to rhetorical situations but also the bodies that speak them. Kevin Michael DeLuca rightly emphasizes the importance of body rhetoric for understanding how some protests “have challenged and changed the meanings of the world not through good reasons but through vulnerable bodies, not through rational arguments but through bodies at risk.”<sup>54</sup> But *ROF* redirects our critical attention to consider how the depiction of vulnerable bodies like the homeless may alternatively insulate against challenging or changing the normative status quo—namely, the temporal norms of democratic citizenship—by confirming the unsuitability of particular bodies for inclusion in an empowered civic community. On one hand, then, *ROF* confirms the suspicion that “embodied arguments do not always or necessarily lead to progressive outcomes”; on the other hand, uncovering the means

by which certain bodies are rhetorically shaped as undesirable or unsuited for democratic life points us to potential sites for the reinvention of typically excluded bodies.<sup>55</sup>

Critiquing the rhetorics of homelessness that perpetuate such social exclusion shows us how housing comes to function as one rhetorical shorthand for signaling legitimate citizenship because it symbolizes a future-oriented perspective that is thought to accommodate good political judgment and investment in long-term ends, a transcendence of the present-centered absorption in immediate and transient individual bodily needs and desires. Rhetorics of homelessness like *ROF* reinforce the assumed dichotomy between “homeless” and “housed” that associates disability and helplessness with the former, and empowerment based on mastery of the present with the latter. Whether a wider housed public views the homeless with contempt (as failed human beings who contaminate society) or with compassion (as inept individuals whose welfare must be managed by others), the underlying rhetorical articulation between democratic citizenship and triumph over present-centeredness remains the same.

As homeless advocates continue to innovate new approaches to addressing a problem that has, for decades, eluded significant resolution, interrogating the rhetorical means by which homelessness is constructed and perpetuated remains more important than ever. As I have argued, one key front on which such cultural intervention must take place appears in resisting the present-centered vision of homelessness that dominates public discourse by attempting to exceed traditional calls for increased monetary and material resources for people experiencing homelessness. The appeal of conventional approaches is understandable, because of both the urgency of the limited range of needs addressed and the straightforwardness of requests for goods that are easily defined and quantified. In contrast, countering the limited tenses of homelessness proves far more obtuse. We might begin by imagining an alternate valuation of homeless lifestyles as ones that challenge the limitations of a consumerist culture, thereby recharacterizing Ted as an exemplar of generosity and responsibility to both self and others, a rejection and critique of the heightened individualism, indebtedness, and passivity to experts typical of the ideal neoliberal citizen. In this view, homelessness signals neither failed selfhood that must be recuperated nor the inevitable outcome of present-centeredness, but a competing model of civic participation available to all. However, resisting the present-centered view of homelessness need not only involve cultivating new visions; it should direct our attention to what is at stake in making distinctions between being homeless and housed in the first place. As this analysis of *ROF* demonstrates, the empowerment of a housed public rests significantly on the displacement of present-centeredness onto homeless others. Until and unless advocacy for the homeless resists perpetuating the rhetorical reduction of homeless life to a problem of present-centeredness, Ted Rodrigue and the millions of Americans suffering a similar existence may continue to be denied both their place in the physical shelter of housing and their inclusion in the rhetorical home of citizenship.

## Notes

- [1] *Reversal of Fortune*, DVD, directed by Wayne Powers (Santa Monica, CA: PB&J Television, 2005). In subsequent citations of the documentary, I will include the time stamp of the footage corresponding to the material quoted in text.
- [2] Ted Rodrigue and Wayne Powers, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.
- [3] Jenna, comment on "A Homeless Man Blows \$100,000 of Free Money as Seen on *Oprah*," Associated Content, comment posted on April 3, 2007, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a\\_homeless\\_man\\_blows\\_100000\\_of\\_free.html?cat=9&com=5#comments](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a_homeless_man_blows_100000_of_free.html?cat=9&com=5#comments).
- [4] Shane Schleger, "Review: Reversal of Fortune," You Can't Miss What You Can't Measure Weblog, <http://shaniaconline.blogspot.com/2006/08/review-reversal-of-fortune.html>.
- [5] William Dwyer, comment on "A Homeless Man Blows \$100,000 of Free Money as Seen on *Oprah*," Associated Content, comment posted on March 24, 2007, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a\\_homeless\\_man\\_blows\\_100000\\_of\\_free.html?cat=9&com=5#comments](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a_homeless_man_blows_100000_of_free.html?cat=9&com=5#comments).
- [6] Bryan Caplan, "The Power of Personality: What Happens When You Give a Homeless Man \$100k?" Library of Economics and Liberty, [http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2006/08/the\\_power\\_of\\_pe.html](http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2006/08/the_power_of_pe.html).
- [7] Michele, comment on "A Homeless Man Blows \$100,000 of Free Money as Seen on *Oprah*," Associated Content, comment posted on September 11, 2007, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a\\_homeless\\_man\\_blows\\_100000\\_of\\_free.html?cat=9&com=4#comments](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/95216/a_homeless_man_blows_100000_of_free.html?cat=9&com=4#comments).
- [8] John Corner and Kay Richardson, "Documentary Meanings and the Discourse of Interpretation," in *Documentary and the Mass Media*, ed. John Corner, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 141.
- [9] Despite the overwhelming data compiled by advocates that attributes homelessness in the main to problems of growing poverty and dwindling affordable housing, perceptions persist that people experiencing homelessness are "lazy, uneducated, alcoholics and drug addicts, and that they want to live on the street." Michael O'Neill, quoted in Jeff Gelman, "Don't Give the Homeless Money, Give Them Your Heart," National Coalition for the Homeless, <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/faces/article1.html>. Notable advocacy efforts to counter misperceptions about homelessness include "Library: Fact Sheets," National Alliance to End Homelessness, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/library/?type=20>; and "Why Are People Homeless?" National Coalition for the Homeless, July 2009, <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/why.html>.
- [10] David Chaney and Michael Pickering, "Authorship in Documentary: Sociology as an Art Form in Mass Observation," in *Documentary and the Mass Media*, ed. John Corner, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 30.
- [11] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 9.
- [12] Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 12.
- [13] Eyal Chowers, "The Physiology of the Citizen: The Present-Centered Body and Its Political Exile," *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 650.
- [14] Kathleen R. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity: The Uncanniness of Late Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1.
- [15] Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity*, 163.
- [16] Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 196–97.
- [17] Leonard C. Feldman, *Citizens without Shelter: Homelessness, Democracy, and Political Exclusion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 15.
- [18] Mitchell, *Right to the City*, 2.

- [19] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 649.
- [20] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 651.
- [21] Gerard A. Hauser, "Incongruous Bodies: Arguments for Personal Sufficiency and Public Insufficiency," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (1999): 2.
- [22] Paul Achter, "Unruly Bodies: The Rhetorical Domestication of Twenty-First-Century Veterans of War," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 49.
- [23] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 655.
- [24] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 655.
- [25] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 656.
- [26] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 658.
- [27] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 661.
- [28] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 665.
- [29] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 669.
- [30] Eyal Chowder, "Gushing Time: Modernity and the Multiplicity of Temporal Homes," *Time and Society* 11 (2002): 240, 234.
- [31] Consider the various explanations for homelessness as the result of mental illness, addiction, handicap, or social maladjustment: each presumes the homeless body is one that is stuck in the present, unable to overcome either the physical or mental conditions in which personal instabilities consume all resources and compel all action. Whether such a characterization is used to justify assistance to people suffering homelessness or excuse a housed public from compassionate response matters less than the common impulse to seek an explanation that understands the causes and consequences of homelessness solely in terms of the present tense. For various perspectives, see John Allen, *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Christopher Jencks, *The Homeless* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Lisa Orr, *The Homeless: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1990); Don Mitchell and Lynn A. Staehelli, "Clean and Safe? Property Redevelopment, Public Space, and Homelessness in Downtown San Diego," in *The Politics of Public Space*, ed. Setha Low and Neil Smith (New York: Routledge, 2006), 143–75; Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Ken Kyle, *Contextualizing Homelessness: Critical Theory, Homelessness, and Federal Policy Addressing the Homeless* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Eungjun Min, ed., *Reading the Homeless: The Media's Image of Homeless Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); and Randall Amster, *Street People and the Contested Realms of Public Space* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004).
- [32] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 650.
- [33] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 659.
- [34] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 665.
- [35] Erlenbusch's meeting with Ted is hardly typical of homeless assistance work because of Ted's unusual circumstances, but Erlenbusch's counsel closely resembles typical strategies employed broadly by the social work community. Most homeless advocates direct their energies toward helping their clients navigate the bureaucratic channels that will grant them access to existing resources, but in the process, they frequently encourage clients "to act and think in terms of self-industry, responsibility, sociability, and independence," operating under the assumption that the problems of homelessness stem, in large part, from a present-centered mindset that prevents such personal characteristics. Robert Desjarlais, "The Office of Reason: On the Politics of Language and Agency in a Shelter for 'The Homeless Mentally Ill,'" *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996): 883; see also J. William Spencer and Jennifer L. McKinney, "'We Don't Pay for Bus Tickets, but We Can Help You Find Work': The Micropolitics of Trouble in Human Service Encounters," *Sociological Quarterly* 38 (1997): 185–203.
- [36] Chowder, "Physiology of the Citizen," 662.

- [37] Roger Stahl, "A Clockwork War: Rhetorics of Time in a Time of Terror," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (2008): 81.
- [38] Chowers, "Physiology of the Citizen," 664.
- [39] John Lynch, "AIDSTimes: Representing AIDS in an Age of Anxiety," *Time and Society* 9 (2000): 250–51. Both Lynch and Stahl ("Clockwork War," 73–99) demonstrate the powerful pervasiveness of chronologies/countdowns in authoritative and disciplining rhetorics of social control, but Robert E. Terrill considers the inventional potential of resisting the chronological in his essay on Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" oration. Robert E. Terrill, "Irony, Silence, and Time: Frederick Douglass on the Fifth of July," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 216–34.
- [40] Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 77.
- [41] Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 81–87; 117–83.
- [42] Oprah Winfrey's television program and public persona have been critiqued for transforming "histories of race- and gender-based oppression" into evidence for "the liberal discourse of individual success" (Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance," 117). With her dramatic and well-publicized rise to extraordinary international acclaim, she "reigned supreme as the paradigmatic instance of the enduring efficacy of American dreaming" (Lofton, "Practicing Oprah," 602). A central feature of this discourse of self-disciplined individual achievement is a reliance on a therapeutic model in which individual suffering is alleviated through victims' public confession, the audience's compassionate response, and a resulting personal transformation. Ted, presented as inescapably present-centered, disrupts this typical formula of therapeutic redemption. See Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 115–37; Kathryn Lofton, "Practicing Oprah; or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 39 (2006): 599–621; Janice Peck, "The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34 (2010): 7–14; for a more general discussion of therapeutic rhetoric, see Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetoric of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).
- [43] Wayne Powers, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
- [44] Ted Rodrigue, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
- [45] Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Los Altos, CA: Hermes Publications, 1953), 31.
- [46] Brenda R. Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.
- [47] Weber, *Makeover TV*, 5.
- [48] Laurie Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself': Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 232.
- [49] Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself,'" 247–48. See also Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Dana Heller, ed., *Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); and Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).
- [50] Chowers, "Gushing Modernity," 246.
- [51] Leslie A. Hahner, "Working Girls and the Temporality of Efficiency," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 304.
- [52] Tony Fitzpatrick, "Social Policy and Time," *Time and Society* 13 (2004): 201.
- [53] See, for example, Edwin Black, "Electing Time," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 125–29; Megan Foley, "Serializing Racial Subjects: The Stagnation and Suspense of the O.J. Simpson Saga," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 69–88; Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Rhetorical Timing in Public Communication," *Communication Studies* 25 (1974): 84–94; Debra

- Hawhee, "Kairoitic Bodies," in *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 65–85; Steven Mailloux, "Places in Time: The Inns and Outhouses of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 53–68; Michael William Pfau, "Time, Tropes, and Textuality: Reading Republicanism in Charles Sumner's 'Crime against Kansas,'" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 385–414; Hans Rämö, "An Aristotelian Human Time–Space Manifold: From Chronochora to Kairotopos," *Time and Society* 8 (1999): 309–28; J. Blake Scott, "Kairos as Indeterminate Risk Management: The Pharmaceutical Industry's Response to Bioterrorism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 115–43.
- [54] Kevin Michael DeLuca, "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (1999): 11.
- [55] Michael L. Butterworth, "'Katie Was Not Only a Girl, She Was Terrible': Katie Hnida, Body Rhetoric, and Football at the University of Colorado," *Communication Studies* 59 (2008): 261.

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