

**A Culture of Fear:**

**An ethnographic exploration of Byward Market and nightlife spaces in Ottawa**

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## **Introduction**

The people living in the city of Ottawa are intimately aware of the contentious space that is the Byward Market. Since my own arrival into Canada in 2019, I have noticed that the tensions between the houseless people living within the market and the police force operating within it have been a rising issue. The space itself seems to be ideal for people looking to busk, socialize, and panhandle, due to the condensed presence of tourists. However, some have concerns around safety within the market; often citing houseless people as the reason for the “dangers” of the area (Abebe, 2023).

The actions of the houseless people in the area are but one piece of a much larger culture within Byward Market. Over the past few years, I have seen a steep increase in political activism and police presence in the area. Additionally, there is an active nightlife that exists within the Market in and around Clarence street, facilitating a litany of situations that come from drinking, dancing, and smoking. This ethnographic study originally aimed to explore the interactions around houseless people as a socially constructed source of fear in the area. However, after the first period of participant observation, much of the “culture of fear” within Byward (and additionally Elgin Street) can more accurately be attributed to substance use, aggression from men, and an abundant police presence that seems to be uninterested in intervention. Thus, partway through the ethnographic process, the direction of my research pivoted. The majority of my analysis is focused on how the nightlife spaces in particular feel unsafe, either through the construction of the places themselves or through the violence that I have discussed and witnessed in these spaces.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on issues surrounding houselessness in Byward Market, the freedom convoy and racism, police brutality in Ottawa and Canada, and the impacts of substance abuse. Lastly, there is literature that explores the risks of nightlife culture and the prevalence of violence and substance use within that culture.

Kennelly (2020)'s recent study examines how Byward Market is a gendered space in the context of houselessness (pp. 281-282). Additionally, it is informed through a sociological framework coined by Pierre Bourdieu, called a "theory of practice" (p. 282), which is a social constructivist framework, that understands, for the purposes of this study, that social perceptions of homelessness create socially "real" consequences in the physical world for the young homeless men in Byward. This study found that the houseless men in Byward felt "shame, anger, and/or helplessness" (p. 286). The young men in the study helped to identify themes of an enforcement of "professionalism" upon them (p. 287) and territoriality (pp. 288-290). Lastly, the police brutality enforced upon them contributed to these feelings of shame, anger, and helplessness (p. 294). Klodawskym et al. (2002) examined the media portrayal of houseless people within Ottawa, noting that it disproportionately problematized the houseless population in the area, portraying them as "stubborn" and painting a negative, stereotypical, picture of addiction as a main source of the problem (p. 126). It was identified that the "social exclusion" of houseless people has served to make the issue worse (p. 128).

Stelkia (2022) provided a policy brief from the Yellowhead Institute that gives insight into racism in the area as a form of social exclusion. They claimed that the Freedom Convoy highlights a greater institutional issue of white supremacy in Ottawa that was revealed through the differing treatment of the protestors by Ottawa police on behalf of racial identity (p. 1). They argue that convoy protestors were offered "lenient and preferential treatment" in contrast to

Black and Indigenous Ottawans (p. 1). Additionally, Ottawa police treated white protesters much better than Black and Indigenous protestors during the occupation (p. 2). Puddister & McNabb (2021) investigated the actions of the Ottawa police, determining that the most frequent charges brought against the police in their sample were assault and sexual assault (p. 390) by a large margin (~35% and ~26% compared the third most frequent charge, driving-related, at only 11%). The study breaks down the kinds of incidents and specific details for both types of assaults (p. 391), occurring both on and off duty. Additionally, the vast majority of police officers have plead “not guilty” and ultimately have either had no disciplinary action or only been suspended, with or without pay (p. 392).

In regard to substance abuse, McVicar et al. (2015) conducted a study in Australia that identified that houselessness seems to have little effect on substance abuse, but the type of alcohol consumption seems to have an impact on the “degree” of houselessness (p. 97). Palepu et al. (2013) concluded that substance use was associated with “unmet physical and mental healthcare needs” (p. 7) in a public health study in Toronto in 2009. Piat et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study from 2015 that investigated the “pathways into homelessness” in Canada (p. 2367). This study highlighted two specific “risk factors” for houselessness, namely mental health struggles and addiction (p. 2368). One indicator of note for “mental health trauma” in houseless men in Canada is physical and sexual trauma (p. 2368).

In regard to the nightlife aspect of the market, there is literature that explores the risks of “clubbing culture” and substance abuse, such as the ethnographic study provided by Anderson et al. (2009), that identifies that there are links between masculinity, crime, and assault, and that nightclubs and bars often experience a disproportionate incidence in violent crimes and sexual assault (p. 302).

It is worth noting that the majority of available literature on the issues surrounding Byward Market and houselessness in Byward Market specifically take on the form of theses or student-led studies on behalf of Carleton University or the University of Ottawa. There is a lack of fully “scholarly” sources on the subject matter, though the “scholarliness” of master’s and PhD theses are up for debate. For the purposes of this study specifically, I focused solely on peer-reviewed articles, and thus I am missing a number of sources that directly address the problem within this study.

### **Methods**

The theoretical framework that guides this study is grounded in an understanding of “patchwork ethnography”, which can be defined as “Ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, fragmentary yet vigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process” (Gunel et al., 2020, p. 3). This ethnography was conducted over a series of two different weekends, and informal study conducted while I was working at a store in Rideau Centre. Additionally, the sites of study were different locations, taking place in Byward Market, Clarence Street, Rideau Centre, and Elgin Street near the majority of the bars and clubs. Interview participants were mostly strangers and exclusively non-men recruited on the street during the ethnographic process, some of which were somewhat intoxicated as they had “pregamed” before their outing. For safety concerns, both periods of participant observation were conducted with a “buddy” who tagged along with me during the nighttime, the first one being my roommate (who will be identified as Roommate 2), and the other being my partner.

There are ethical considerations with this form of fieldwork, primarily in regard to my initial attempts to be interviewing with a vulnerable population. Even after pivoting the direction

of the research, there are considerations to be made about the validity of the statements made by anyone who might be drinking, as they might not be able to consent to their data being collected or to telling certain stories. For that reason, participants who were recruited off of the streets were asked if they had consumed alcohol and if they felt comfortable sharing stories with me. Additionally, any participants who admitted to consuming substances have been completely anonymized in this study and were not asked potentially “traumatic” questions (i.e. questions that would force them to recall uncomfortable situations or incidents that happened to them in the past).

These ethical considerations are informed in part by Fassin (2013)’s breakdown of the politicization of ethnography and the utilization of this form of data. They state that the purpose of producing an ethnography is “to make a difference in the way we comprehend the world” (p. 631). This study will likely need to repay a “double debt” (p. 640), in that this study owes something to both the people being studied and the subjects of social justice that may come from this ethnography. The analysis and writing of this ethnography aims to attempt to repay this double debt through bringing awareness to the issues and instances of violence highlighted in the fieldwork, though more work must be done to make use of this data.

The methods utilized in my analysis of the data are entirely inductive and qualitative in nature. I have recorded field notes and all of my interviews on my phone’s voice recorder app and transcribed the audio files through the use of “Samsung AI” (a language model similar to Chat GPT). These transcriptions have served to inform my own personal analysis, but I have also used them for the purposes of coding through a qualitative software called “NVivo 14”. This software allowed me to conduct qualitative thematic analysis of the transcripts and notes that I uploaded.

Naeem et al. (2023) illustrates the process of qualitative thematic analysis (pp. 2-5). This process was reflected in my use of NVivo, where I transcribed the data, selected quotes, came up with codes via “keywords” or phrases, identified themes, and developed a conceptual model via three different hierarchy charts (see Appendix A) for my field notes, interview transcripts, and notes on informal fieldwork conducted during my shifts at work throughout the process. The themes, categories, and codes are organized on each chart by size; the bigger the size, the higher incidence in the research.

My own positionality as a researcher as a tool of the research is acknowledged through this process, as I identified my own biases to the best of my ability throughout my fieldnotes and coded for personal bias in the research (see figure a2). I am a university student who has spent several years either living, working, or transiting through the Byward Market. Additionally, I have witnessed incidences of violence, participated in activism, had my fair share of interactions with the police and security guards that work in the area, and have my own reservations about the nature of their careers. I have had plenty of my own experiences (both negative and positive) in spending nights clubbing and partying in the areas I have conducted research in in the early years of my undergrad career. These aspects of my own life have their role to play in the analysis. With the understanding that anthropology is never truly “objective”, these aspects have been taken into consideration.

### **Fieldwork**

The fieldwork for this ethnography was conducted over three sessions and a small set of informal sessions during my hours at work. The first session took place over St. Patrick’s Day weekend, starting in the early afternoon and into the evening on a Saturday. The second session, after being pointed in a new direction through an interview, took place on Elgin Street near the

popular clubs and bars, both early in the night before people were partying, and afterwards, when people were attempting to go home. The third session led me back to Byward Market on and around Clarence Street, during the same time frame, to try and compare the experience to the one I had on Elgin Street. Lastly, the informal sessions for fieldwork took the form of informal conversations at work with my coworkers (who will remain anonymous) and my own experience with a shoplifter. The interviews conducted took place with a group of women on Elgin Street who were going to go dancing at Lieutenant's Pump, as well as with a woman named Josie who was acting as the designated driver for her friends.

The first session of participant observation was conducted in Byward Market with Roommate 2 on St. Patrick's Day weekend, the both of us took a seat in the "main square" at the intersection of George Street and Dalhousie, where the Beavertail sits. It was the early evening, during a transition into sunset, so I was able to watch as the crowd that primarily consisted of families and couples on afternoon dates slowly filtered into mostly university students dressed in green regalia to go out and party for the night. These students were much more rambunctious than the previous crowd; singing and dancing, shouting at one another, and loudly making jokes as they walked towards Clarence Street.

As I began my walk towards Rideau Street and Rideau Centre, the overall "vibes" of the environment shifted in a similar way. Music from Buskers morphed into sharp, loud industrial noises and various forms of shouting from strangers as I approached. There, I did witness a slightly higher concentration of people who I might be able to identify as "houseless", though given that there are so many degrees of houselessness that exists, I found it extremely difficult to be able to brand anyone in particular as houseless in the stereotypical sense. I saw a few more people who were asking for money, either through cold-approaching others or through holding

signs begging for help as they sat along the entrances to Rideau Centre and on the sides of the alleyway connecting the market to the mall.

Roommate 2 and I stopped in front of the main entrance to Rideau Centre, underneath the bridge that runs over the street and connects the main centre to Hudson's Bay. The environment there was hostile. Loud noises in the form of honks, screeches, and shouts made the space feel much more industrial and transitional. There were no spots that could be formally used as spaces to just "hang out" in contrast to the market square, where there were plenty of spots to sit and lounge around. As a result, there was a higher concentration of people who seemed to be commuters. Most people seemed to be living in their own bubbles. We weren't acknowledged at all.

As we moved a little closer to Parliament, we approached the doors that led to the entrance to the O-Train next to the Chipotle. There, the environment shifted again. There was a dense concentration of people lingering on the sidewalk on both sides. We were forced to move through the crowd and find a spot to stand along the wall next to a group of conversing people. As I stood there, taking field notes into my phone, I watched as two women engaged in some form of argument. One of the women appeared to be inebriated, and was escorted away by two men into the mall. The other woman took a swig of a large bottle of Hennessy she had been holding. Roommate 2 whispered to me to pay closer attention, that she felt something concerning was unfolding before our eyes, and I tried to understand the situation further. It seemed that there was a high number of middle-aged men with sparse numbers of women amongst them. The men drank and smoke, chatting with one another casually. The women seemed to be much quieter, not speaking much, and lingering against various men in the crowd. I tried to understand further, though I had gotten distracted by a drunken man dancing between clusters of people with a

melodica, but I was noticed by one of the men. He only slightly approached, staring me down with an intense gaze, until I came up with an excuse to leave and quickly departed. In my following interview with Roommate 2, she remarked,

*... It was like a sudden sense of feeling like paralyzed and shocked ... it was more so a thing where it just kind of felt like unsafe. And it was like a lot of AMAB, individuals. And people who were much older... [there] was this one girl who kind of seemed like within our age range.... And it's very much like they stuck out like a pin in a haystack... and this person goes in and meets this man who's much older. And then disappears inside of Rideau. And a couple seconds later, this man follows them, and then this ends up happening again with the two people who were in that altercation, they go and see these two different men, they go into the Rideau, and then these older men follow. So it really felt like something more malicious was happening.*

Though I can't remark on if something malicious was occurring in front of us with any form of certainty, it certainly opened my eyes to an element of the culture of the area that I had not been considering before. One thing that was obvious to me after my observations that night was that the houseless people in the area were not the main source of "disturbance" or "fear" in the area. In reality, I had noticed that most of the houseless people were living their lives ignored by the people around them, while the people indulging in substances and engaging in "nightlife" activities seemed to dominate the spaces in a way that made them feel denser, less friendly, and overall more stressful.

In the interview that followed with Roommate 2, we discussed her positive interactions with houseless people in contrast to her line of work. Her overall sentiments were that the best interactions she had were with people she perceived to be houseless, while her worst interactions were with drunk people and men that she felt might cause her further harm. She mentioned to me that she had to spend a long time unlearning the anti-houseless rhetoric that she was taught and to learn that the real source of danger were men with some form of power, for the sake of her own safety. She said,

*... It takes me back to the time that someone had asked me once, and they're like, "If you see this man in a full suit and he has a briefcase and he looks like "proper" and stuff like that versus someone who looks like like you know, has like ripped clothes and like unkempt hair and like bad hygiene and stuff like that, who would you fear more?" And I literally told them I would fear the person with the briefcase. And that took a while. I'm not going to lie, it took a while, because you're always told the opposite. And it was a lot of years of unlearning.*

Overall, her sentiments rang clear to me. Homelessness is not the source of danger in these areas.

The connections to the nightlife of Ottawa in these places are where I should point my attention to.

This led me to the new focus of my research, which was the nightlife culture of both Byward Market and Elgin Street. The second and third periods of participant observations occurred over a weekend in April. On the first night, along Elgin Street, I started in front of a monument at Minto Park, on its inscription, it read: "to honor and to grieve all women abused and murdered by men- envision a world without violence where women are respected and free". This statement remained in the back of my mind as I traversed the streets, watching as clusters of men chatted with one another casually in the street and women stuck together like glue as they hastily made their way to their destinations. I found it difficult at first to find a stranger to interject and interview, and instead opted to stand aside on the sidewalk until a trio of women who seemed to be my age approached.

Upon asking them for an interview, they seemed apprehensive at first, though they opened up a bit more as we spoke. The three women were recent university graduates who admitted to pre-gaming prior to going out. They said they were going out in a trio out of fear of the unknown; general anxiety over the space in combination with not knowing who they might meet going out. When I asked them how they felt drinking in public, they mentioned that being drunk contributed to that fear, one of them stated, "*I think the [nights] that aren't so good like-it's when you're blackout. And you don't even know if it was good or bad. I wake up, [and I'm]*

*like, 'Oh my God.' ”*. Overall, they said that the only people in these spaces that made them feel safe were other women, or “girl’s girls” as they put it, who make sure that they’re okay and take care of them even when they’re drunk. At the conclusion of the interview, they thanked me and gave me a hug before moving on with their night.

Later on, I witnessed a man and a woman get into an altercation in front of Happy Fish, where the man (a person of color) was struck multiple times by security (who were primarily white) and at one point, was thrown forcefully onto the ground. The people around them seemed to barely notice, and the police were nowhere to be found. The altercation went on for almost twenty minutes before it diffused into the woman lecturing the security team for harming the man so many times. After that, I chose to go home and prepare for the third and final day.

On the third day, I spent the evening in Byward Market again, walking around Clarence Street. The same situations that had occurred on Elgin Street seemed to happen here; women would get catcalled or harassed by intoxicated men, men would linger on the streets in clusters to hang out with one another. On this night, as well as the night before, I experienced my own fair share of catcalling, harassment, and uncomfortable stares, though it never went further than that. It seemed to be a given understanding of the space: where there’s drunk men, there will be jokes made at your expense, “compliments” shouted at you, and overall strange gestures thrown your way.

Partway through the night, I was approached by a girl to ask if I could photograph her and her friends in front of the “OTTAWA” sign in the market. It was there that I came across Josie, who was perfectly sober and very happy to get away from her drunken friends to speak with me. We conducted a very brief interview, where she told me she was reluctant to go to Byward Market due to houseless people being “too persistent” in asking for money. Additionally,

she mentioned her exasperation for seeing people she knew, or “exes” that might bother her. But she primarily had negative things to say about houseless people who overall just made her feel “scared”. Afterwards, she told me she loved me, gave me a hug, and got into her Uber with her friends.

Later on into the evening, I approached the entrance to the nightclub “Rendezvous” and came across a display of violence I was not prepared for. As we approached, there was a man collapsed on the sidewalk who shouted a racial slur, with four white men towering over him. At first, I had thought they were possibly beating up someone who was harassing the line of primarily black people who were minding their own business, attempting to get into a concert that was playing at the club. But as I watched the altercation progress, the man on the ground was a black man who was being beaten up by a white man. At one point, he tried to get away, but was followed and tackled to the ground, ultimately blood-choked into being unconscious for a few seconds. As people in the line attempted to intervene, one of the white men, donning a backwards baseball cap, got in their faces to tell them to back off, claiming he had “control over the situation”, while he tried to tell the other men to stop what they were doing. Regardless, his “interventions” consisted of standing by and watching as this man was choked into unconsciousness, not allowing anyone else to get close to stop it. Eventually, the altercation stopped, and the man being attacked managed to get away, shouting that he had been disrespected. He spit on the ground, did a crip walk, and walked away with his head held high. The situation that I had come across had led me to question where security, or the police, or *really anyone* was to stop it. I knew that I had little power against four tall men, though I couldn’t deny that I had also chosen to stand by and watch, rather than intervene.

The rest of the night consisted of walking around, taking note of the large presence of police parked in front of most of the clubs, and noticing that most of the police lingered in their cruisers on their computers. There was one instance where a police officer roamed the streets, though nothing came about. At the end of the night, one woman shouted at a group of men, and a cruiser pulled up with two officers, who jumped out to intervene. However, that was the extent of the police interventions I witnessed in all three of my nights conducting field work.

Lastly, in my own informal observations at work, I was able to obtain some data from my coworkers who mostly had anti-homeless sentiments. These sentiments typically had to do with a fear of being attacked or exasperation about shoplifting in the store. I had experienced my own shoplifting scenario early on into the process of this ethnography, where a woman who appeared to be very freshly beaten up and bloodied entered the store, grabbed \$360 worth of colognes, and left without a word. I will admit that I opted to go for the official corporate training, which instructs me to “not judge a book by its cover”. Had I followed the behavioural patterns of some of my peers, I perhaps could have prevented such a large loss of merchandise, though my own personal sentiments prevented me from wanting to do so.

In my final analysis of the data, I plugged all of my transcripts and field notes into NVivo and coded for themes around “fear”, “positive sentiments”, “men and AMAB people”, “drug use”, and “mental health problems” (see Appendix A). In my analysis of the interviews (figure a1), I found that fear seemed to overpower any positive opinions about these spaces, primarily rooted in the environment feeling unsafe (such as it being too dark, too cramped, and too densely packed), and fear of being attacked (either by houseless people or by men). However, positive sentiments mostly came from good interactions with other women. In my analysis of my own fieldnotes (figure a2), the same was reflected, though I personally attributed much of the fear to

the violence I had witnessed, harassment from men, and a high police presence with very little actual interventions. In analysing the data from my work (figure a3), fear was mostly reflected in anti-houseless rhetoric, though some had admitted that they had a fear of being attacked by people under the influence or experiencing some form of mental health crisis.

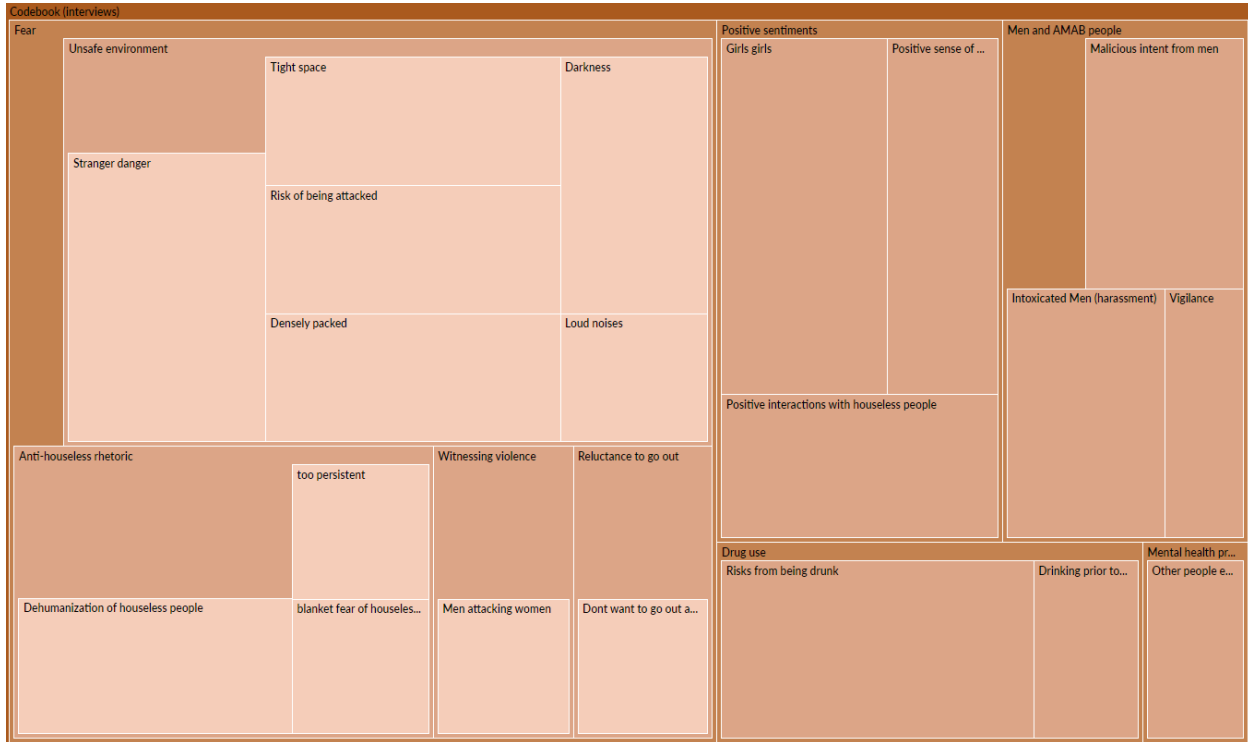
### **Conclusion**

The research, though limited, points to an overarching problem in the intersections of “clubbing culture”, misogyny, racism, and classism. The violence in these spaces was solely perpetuated by men who appeared to be out partying, in contrast to the current problematization of houseless people in the area. I found that the areas that had a higher density of houseless people often had a higher police presence, but were also much quieter than the areas around the bars. I also couldn’t help but find it to be concerning that I witnessed violence against people of color with no help from the police, and that they seemed more interested in surveillance of the overall area.

The field research itself was fruitful, though somewhat exhausting, and I do believe that having a male presence with me on the nights that I was witnessing violence had a protective effect for myself as the researcher. I wish I could have had the opportunity to conduct this research alone without feeling unsafe. Future, in depth research needs to be done on the culture of the area as a gendered, racialized, and classist space. An intersectional lens is crucial in understanding the root of the “issues” in these areas and I have only scratched the surface in my own research.

# Appendix A: Hierarchy Charts

(figure a1)



(figure a2)



(figure a3)

Codebook (work notes and informal conversations)			
Fear		utilization of security	Mental health pr... Other people e...
Unsafe environment being attacked	intoxicated people		
Anti-houseless rhetoric	Dehumanization of houseless people	Witnessing violence Injured people	
Theft			

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