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Love and Collective Resistance:

Lessons from the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

LYNN LEWIS

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project reveals the meaning of being welcomed into collective resistance, the meaning of homeless leadership, and the political impact of centring love and respect in the formation of resistance relationships, directly countering the imaginary of the disaffiliated homeless individual. Through their stories, the homeless leaders and staff of Picture the Homeless (PTH) teach us the importance of listening, and of love, in building collective resistance. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project is a work in progress and integrates elements of community organizing, participatory action, and oral history research toward a participatory oral history research approach.

Le Picture the Homeless Oral History Project attribue un sens à la participation des individus sans-abris à une résistance collective, ainsi qu'à leur leadership et à l'impact politique des liens créés sur les principes de l'amour et du respect. Ce sens conféré s'inscrit directement à contre-courant de l'imaginaire de l'individu sans-abri désaffilié. En partageant leurs histoires, les chefs de file des sans-abris et le personnel de Picture the Homeless (PTH) montrent l'importance que nous devons accorder à l'écoute et à l'amour dans la formation d'une résistance collective. Picture the Homeless Oral History Project est un travail en cours de réalisation qui incorpore certaines dimensions de l'organisation communautaire, de l'action participative et de l'histoire orale afin d'en arriver à une approche de recherche participative.

PICTURE THE HOMELESS (PTH) is a homeless-led, grassroots organization in New York City. Over its 20-year history, PTH shifted public policies around vacant property, discriminatory policing, and social service design by centring the analysis and voices of the homeless leaders of the organization. Using creative and diverse tactics, PTH combined direct action with research and media work to expose the systemic causes of homelessness in New York City. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project documents this history through long-form oral history interviews supplemented by PTH's extensive archive. One of the greatest

Lynn Lewis is a community organizer and oral historian finding common ground between the two disciplines as a strategy to document and share lessons about grass roots leadership and processes of social change led by marginalized communities. A graduate of Columbia University's Oral History MA program (2018), she is conducting a participatory oral history research project of Picture the Homeless (PTH), which reflects on how participation and power within a research project might be structured. This work would not be possible without the engagement of long time homeless leaders of PTH and the support of her family, her social movement network, and the Columbia Center for Oral History Research.

challenges that grassroots organizations have is retaining members and supporting their leadership. If we factor in the daily realities that homeless folks face to survive, work, sleep, eat, bathe, and deal with the trauma of losing a home, all while devising strategies to avoid the abuse that defines homelessness, then we begin to understand the level of commitment to PTH that its longtime leaders have demonstrated. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project centres the group's homeless leaders, who are deeply engaged in PTH's organizing campaigns, because it is their commitment that has made PTH's work possible. Their interviews breathe life into the archive. PTH's organizing methodology offers lessons for community organizing and social movement building and has implications for the design of homeless services. These lessons are revealed in the stories and the analysis of PTH's homeless leaders. Oral history is perhaps the perfect medium to not only tell the story of PTH but to deepen our understanding of what PTH means to its longtime leaders, current and former staff, and political allies. One compelling finding across the interviews is the significance of the interpersonal relationships among members and staff of PTH to sustaining their commitment and to building the individual and collective capacity to engage in community organizing and political leadership. The value of these organizing lessons lies in their potential to create a more just society led by the people most harmed by the current paradigm.

Picture the Homeless was founded in November 1999 by two homeless men, Lewis Haggins and Anthony Williams.¹ The catalyst for PTH's founding was the violent targeting of homeless men by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) under the direction of then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.² Giuliani had already begun a campaign of anti-homeless propaganda

¹ Picture the Homeless (PTH) is a grassroots group that uses community organizing to build political power for homeless New Yorkers. See Picture the Homeless (website), <https://www.picturethehomeless.org>.

² Elisabeth Bumiller, "In Wake of Attack, Giuliani Cracks Down on Homeless," *New York Times*, November 20, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/20/nyregion/in-wake-of-attack-giuliani-cracks-down-on-homeless.html>.

in the media to support his proposed policy changes, which included forcing homeless New Yorkers to work in exchange for their shelter beds.³

At the time of PTH's founding, in November 1999, gentrification was fast encroaching into Harlem, Central Brooklyn, and other communities of colour. In December 1999, there were 22,806 homeless New Yorkers sleeping in the New York City shelter system, an increase from 14,855 shelter residents at the end of 1983.⁴ Homelessness has largely been framed as the result of individual dysfunction and not such systemic causes as the housing market or poverty, allowing the government to respond with punitive measures targeting homeless individuals and families and fuelling an expensive service system that in New York City costs over one billion dollars annually. Punitive measures designed to manage the ever-increasing numbers of homeless New Yorkers included the following: stricter eligibility rules for families who apply for shelter in order to keep them out of the system; shelter rules that sanction "non-compliant" families with children in order to reduce counts on the shelter census. Performance standards in shelter provider contracts that force them to place homeless families into housing or simply harass them into accepting temporary rent vouchers for apartments that they cannot afford over the long term thus creating a revolving door back into homelessness; and removing homeless New Yorkers from public space via "broken windows" policing tactics first deployed against homeless New Yorkers by Mayor Giuliani and NYPD Commissioner William Bratton.⁵ This punitive approach continues to this day. Mayor Bill de Blasio's first mayoral appointment was William Bratton, who infamously attempted to implement a policy of removing homeless New

³ Bumiller, "In Wake of Attack."

⁴ Bumiller, "In Wake of Attack." This number is an undercount and does not include the families—primarily women—and children in the NYC domestic violence shelter system or the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of New Yorkers sleeping in churches, synagogues, and mosques that open their doors to homeless New Yorkers. Nor does it include the thousands of New Yorkers sleeping on the streets or doubled up with friends or relatives and in precarious circumstances.

⁵ Ben Holtzman, "Gentrification's First Victims," *Jacobin*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/gentrification-homeless-broken-windows-police-de-blasio/>.

Yorkers from the subway system less than a month after he was appointed police commissioner in order to reduce the “appearance” of social disorder, not because homeless New Yorkers on subways had committed any crimes.

In 2019, the New York City shelter census continues to reflect the results of failed housing policies of city, state, and federal administrations since the early 1980s. Policing is still the city’s response to visible homelessness. Homelessness continues to increase in the city and nationally, in direct relationship to the shrinking number of housing units available to the very poor. At the end of September 2019, 62,291 New Yorkers were sleeping each night in the shelter system, which, again, is only a partial accounting of how many New Yorkers are experiencing homelessness. The skyrocketing numbers of homeless New Yorkers are rarely contextualized as occurring concomitantly with the loss of affordable housing units during the same period—but the data is there. New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer reported in the summer of 2018 that “between 2005 and 2017, rising rents led to the disappearance of 425,492 apartments renting for \$900 or less (in 2017 dollars) from the city’s housing inventory.”⁶

PTH’s co-founders countered the dehumanizing homeless stereotypes that depicted homeless people as criminal, lazy, and needing social service prescribed rehabilitation to reintegrate into society by supporting the visible political leadership of homeless New Yorkers. PTH focused on identifying the systemic causes of homelessness, such as the loss of housing affordable to the very poor. PTH’s leaders were focused on solutions to homelessness because they needed housing—for themselves and their families—and because they were dismayed at what was happening in their neighbourhoods and in the city as a whole. PTH reframed homelessness as a social justice issue linked to extreme poverty, racism, the feminization of

⁶ Ameena Walker, “NYC’s Housing Crisis Accelerating as Low-Rent Apartment Stock Declines: Report,” *Curbed*, September 26, 2018, <https://ny.curbed.com/2018/9/26/17901946/nyc-housing-affordability-decline-report-scott-stringer>.

poverty, and other forms of systemic marginalization as well the privileging of private property and greed above human rights and dignity.

I was present at the first public PTH meeting in January 2000, and over the next 17 years I held various roles at PTH: volunteer organizer, co-director, civil rights organizer, and Executive Director. I have spent thousands of hours with many of the narrators, in meetings, at protests, conducting research, sharing meals, dancing, and countless other activities. One of the reasons that I left PTH was to study oral history in order to document PTH's work. My intention, at first, was to document PTH's organizing methodology to inspire and educate PTH members and staff who did not know the organization's history. We had created a Homeless Organizing Academy (HOA) for PTH members and it made sense to utilize lessons from our own work in the HOA curriculum. I also wanted our research to be available to other homeless folks engaged in organizing, to amplify PTH's approach to organizing in a way that could support homeless folks in building political power.

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project formally began in September 2017 and utilizes a participatory oral history research approach (POHR) that is consistent with PTH's community organizing model. As of this writing, 38 long-form oral history interviews with 27 different narrators have been completed, with some narrators being interviewed multiple times. The goal at the outset of the project was to conduct 50 oral history interviews and to make PTH's extensive archive—which includes thousands of photos, meeting notes, written testimony, correspondence, videos, and emails covering the first 17 years of PTH's existence—publicly accessible.⁷ Mindful of the contradictions and possibilities of shared authority in community organizing *and* oral history, the project extends the authority (power) of the narrators beyond the

⁷ The goal remains 50 interviews, but it is likely the project will surpass that number.

interview and approval of transcripts into the analysis phase.⁸ An Advisory Board, comprised of long time PTH leaders who have been interviewed for the project, meets once and sometimes twice monthly and their fluid engagement runs the spectrum from participation to collaboration to shared authority and co-creation, changing over time and in accordance with Advisory Board members' circumstances. The project design is one reason I use the collective terms "we" and "our" when I refer to this project and who is carrying out this work. The design is also in keeping with PTH's organizing approach and will hopefully yield knowledge and meaning that would not otherwise be produced.

One compelling finding that is emerging from the 38 interviews completed so far is how collective homeless resistance was supported and made possible by deep relationship building within the organization. As longtime leaders and staff reminisce during these oral history interviews about what PTH has meant to them, the importance of interpersonal relationships emerges as a consistent theme across all of the oral history interviews. Members' relationships with each other and with the mission of the organization, created the possibility for collective analysis, understanding, risk taking, and resistance. The community building and love that results from collective resistance is at the heart of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project because it is what made the work of PTH possible; it is why homeless New Yorkers chose to join and why they committed to PTH. This focus is particularly compelling given the image of homeless folks as disconnected from society and socially isolated. It is important to document what PTH was able to change as a result of its work and to understand how PTH was able to achieve those changes.

⁸ I am grateful for Michael Frisch's work on shared authority and oral history, which has provided me with the opportunity to analyze what engagement and shared authority actually mean. Reflecting on the years I spent organizing among the same group of folks – many of whom are on the advisory board for this project - I have landed on conceptualizing shared authority as a point on a spectrum of engagement. Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority*. State University of New York Press. 1990,

This project utilizes oral history as a tool not only to understand the past but to create tools that can help us change the future. We have begun creating popular education materials that capture PTH's organizing methodology, including short audio clips and zines that incorporate text from the interview transcripts and archival materials. Given the escalation of homelessness around the United States and PTH's leadership nationally within the homeless organizing movement, we will make both the interviews in their entirety as well as the archive and popular education materials available digitally.

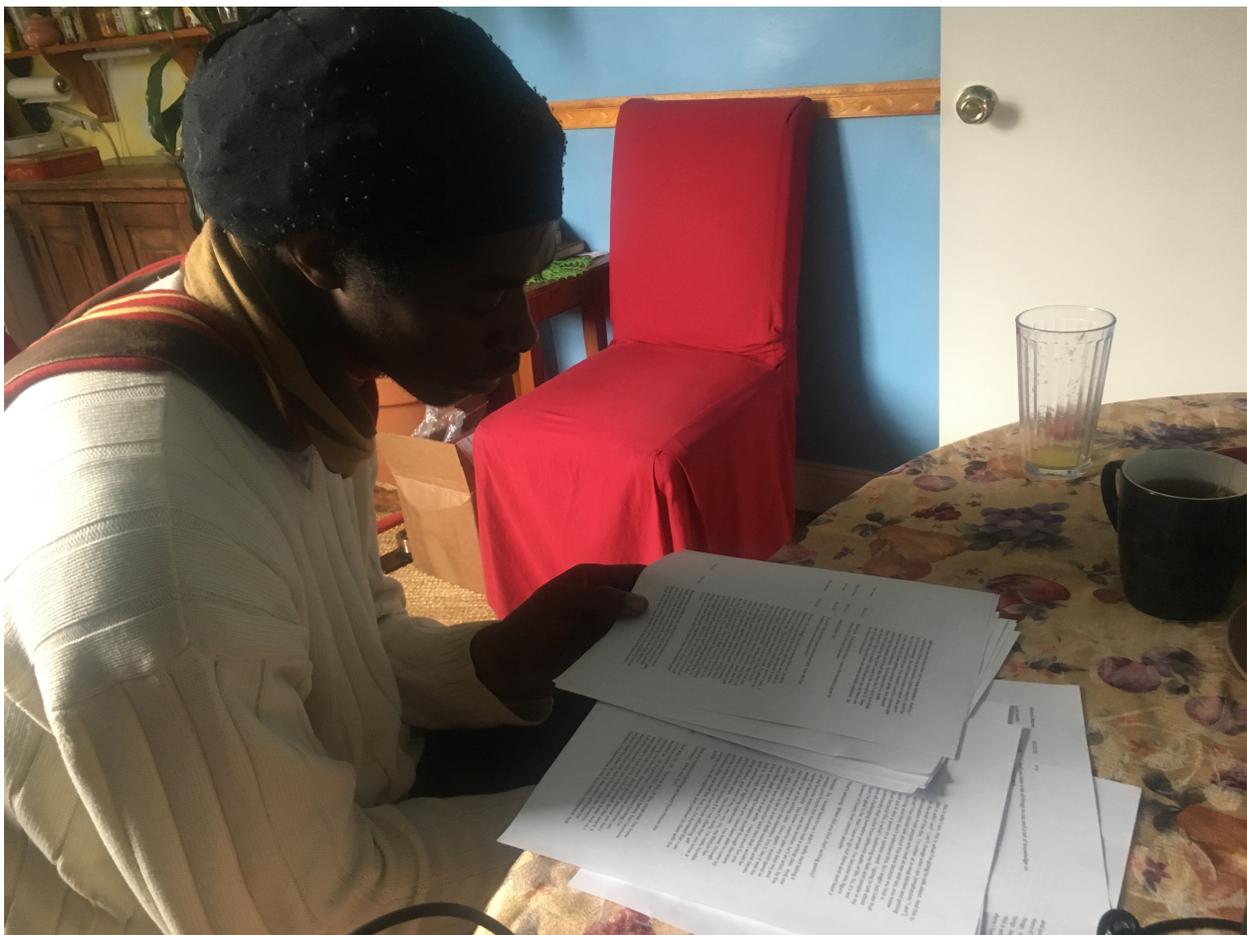


Figure 1: Marcus Moore reviewing the oral history transcript from his first interview

Source: Author's photograph. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. January 21, 2018.

The role of the Advisory Board in the oral history project is essential. As collaborators in the analysis of the interviews, Advisory Board members are able to reflect on their own experiences as PTH leaders while further deepening their insight into PTH’s organizing methodology. As leaders, and PTH board members in some cases, they occupy a position of power within the organization and are able to make suggestions about how this material can be made accessible and useful to PTH and other collective efforts to organize homeless and extremely marginalized people.



Figure 2: DeBoRah Dickerson, Rob Robinson, William Burnett, Tyletha Samuels, Rogers, PTH Oral History Project Advisory Board Meeting.

Source: Author's photograph. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. April 25, 2019.

The homeless narrators interviewed for this project are not representative of the general population or of all homeless New Yorkers. These social justice leaders are a unique group of homeless folks who have committed 10 or more years of their lives to this homeless rights organization.

Love and Collective Resistance

The love for community, the willingness to defend and fight for another homeless person's rights or one's own dignity, and the love that emerged from struggling together are described by the project's narrators. The committed engagement of PTH's homeless members counters the dominant paradigm, which figures "the homeless" as in need to be reintegrated into society by social workers and social service programs. This paradigm *pictures the homeless* as disaffiliated individuals existing outside of society. It has resulted in an expensive homeless service industry that has not stemmed the root causes of homelessness, which are primarily due to extreme poverty, even as the numbers of homeless families and individuals have increased dramatically.⁹ PTH's focus on solutions to homelessness emerges from homeless New Yorkers' lived experiences.¹⁰

⁹ The annual budget for the Department of Homeless Services in NYC alone exceeded one billion dollars in 2018, although homelessness continued to increase. Eliza Shapiro, "Homelessness in New York Public Schools Is at a Record High: 114,659 Students," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/nyregion/homeless-students-nyc-schools-record.html>.

¹⁰ Picture the Homeless had published several participatory action research projects documenting these trends. See Lynn Lewis, Sam J. Miller, and Adrian Paling, *Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation*

Charley Heck (2004 to present), DeBoRah Dickerson (2005 to present) and Marcus Moore (2008 to present) are among the many homeless narrators who described having engaged in individual acts of resistance prior to joining PTH. Their stories demonstrate their leadership, agency, and sense of justice. Charley Heck is a Vietnam veteran, now nearly 70 years old, and suffers debilitating health consequences from his exposure to Agent Orange while in Vietnam. Charley was street homeless for 27 years in Midtown Manhattan when he heard about PTH from other homeless folks and decided to see for himself what PTH was about. During his years street homeless, Charley successfully sued the NYPD, and was the founding Board Chair for a faith-based service organization called The Midnight Run, in which capacity he was instrumental in securing Christian burials for deceased street homeless New Yorkers who otherwise would have been buried in mass graves in Potters Field.¹¹ PTH's work on the harm inflicted upon homeless women and children by the homeless service system convinced him that PTH was worth his time:

Tyletha [a PTH shelter campaign organizer] was there working on women's issues because the way that women were getting treated by the city was inhumane. Some of the things that Picture the Homeless was getting involved in was bringing the city to task about the conditions in these places called the EAU [Emergency Assistance Unit] ... all the problems that a homeless woman would have living with children in New York in those women's shelters, and Picture the Homeless was doing something to erase all those problems.¹²

DeBoRah Dickerson is a retired home health aid and former union delegate. She is also a singer and an ordained community minister with extensive experience in grassroots political activism. Now in her 60s, she traced her organizing experience to her youth in Crown Heights, Brooklyn,

(New York: Picture the Homeless, 2012); and Jennifer Akchin, with the Picture the Homeless Research Committee, *The Business of Homelessness* (New York: Picture the Homeless, 2018).

¹¹ The Midnight Run is an interfaith charitable organization that delivers food, clothing, and personal items to street homeless New Yorkers.

¹² Charley Heck, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, December 16, 2018. The Emergency Assistance Unit was the central intake office for homeless families for all five boroughs.

which included working on the Honorable Shirley Chisholm's campaigns for Congress and for the US presidency. She graduated from PTH's Homeless Organizing Academy as an organizer trainee, and she is an active participant on the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project Advisory Board. Although DeBoRah was initially frightened by the conditions in the shelter system, where she spent several years even when she was working, her prior organizing experience informed her ability to resist shelter staff's abusive treatment of her and other homeless women:

You know being in the shelter it's always good to have a support. I say a group, to know that you're not in this by yourself. So I think that's very, very important because sometimes when you're with a group of people, especially if you're experiencing homelessness, it's always good to have somebody that you can really lock arms or heads up with, when those days of dealing with a system that is so corrupt and, and don't treat you like a human being... [voice trails off]¹³

Marcus Moore is in his 40s and was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he still has a large extended family with whom he maintains close relationships. Marcus became homeless as a low-wage worker. He found PTH through a flyer in the shelter where he was staying while working as a security guard. Similar to DeBoRah, even though he was working, he did not earn enough to pay rent. Marcus is a satirist and poet, performing under the name The Homeless Poet. He is a member of the Picture the Homeless Advisory Board as well as a board member of Picture the Homeless. Marcus has left the shelter system and for several years has converted vacant homes into housing through homesteading. Marcus describes his strategies for resisiting abusive shelter conditions at the large Wards Island complex run by Volunteers of America, where he lived prior to joining PTH:

I was just documenting stuff that was going on at the time when I was in the shelter, where the shelter was my residence for a little while. People will complain but I felt like I needed to do something; *that I had to do something*. So I didn't know Picture the

¹³ DeBoRah Dickerson, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, October 27, 2017.

Homeless like that, yet. But I knew that I had to document stuff that was going on where I was living.¹⁴

PTH offered homeless New Yorkers who were already resisting abusive shelter conditions a means to amplify the work that they were already doing and to build their skills as social justice leaders.

I heard about Picture the Homeless through a flyer that I had saw ... seeing these blue flyers and people just walking by and stepping on them and kicking them around. But, I like to read a lot.... So I picked it up and it said Picture the Homeless. I said, *Picture the Homeless?* I said, *yeah, I need housing.* But I knew right away that, based on the flyer, it wasn't a job, job, job, like you know you punch the clock, they'll give you your paycheck. I knew all that. You didn't have to explain it to me twice or three or four times that it wasn't a job like that. But when I saw on that flyer it said fight for housing and they had civil rights meetings, I knew [pauses] with my spirit, I knew I had to check this out!¹⁵

PTH offered a welcoming physical *and* political space, which in turn allowed for the formation of resistance relationships, encouragement of homeless political leadership, and a practice of supporting homeless self-representation. The following section explores how being welcoming, encouraging leadership, and supporting self-representation was essential to members' sustained participation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Marcus Moore, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, November 13, 2017.

¹⁵ Moore, interview.

¹⁶ Although this oral history project is still in progress, some overarching themes feature prominently in the majority of the interviews conducted, including organizing, representation, leadership, education, individual and collective resistance, education, justice, race, and interpersonal relationships.



Figure 3: Mrs. Arvernetta Henry with the PTH banner, civil rights campaign press conference.

Source: Archive. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. February 29, 2012.

Creating a Political Home for Homeless New Yorkers

There was a direct and intentional connection between establishing a welcoming office space and welcoming folks into PTH’s political work. The physical space and relationships among participants offered homeless New Yorkers a respite from the disrespect, the sleep deprivation, the targeting, and the lack of privacy common to the homeless experience. Creating a welcoming space was an act of collective resistance that allowed other forms of collective resistance to emerge. What did it mean to have a political home for someone who is home-less?

Rogers is a Trinidadian immigrant who prefers using only his last name. He is a devout Catholic who speaks at length in his interview about the necessity of aligning his political and religious views. Now in his 60s, he has an extensive professional work history, is a father of two,

and is a longtime anti-gentrification activist in Harlem. He was previously employed by PTH as a civic participation and voting rights organizer. He has been both street homeless and a resident in the shelter system more than once over the course of two decades. He is also an Advisory Board member for this project. During one of the project's listening sessions, as we discussed why some PTH members sustained their participation over several years, he mused, "When there is pain and there is love, we gravitate towards love."¹⁷ PTH practised love by being welcoming.¹⁸ ¹⁹ Anthony Williams (a PTH co-founder) is now in his early 50s and is the only narrator who has been homeless literally since birth, born to a homeless family and growing up in group homes and foster care in Baltimore before moving to New York as a young adult.

Anthony spent most of his adult life in and out of the shelter system, and has extensive experience squatting in vacant properties. Upon his return to Baltimore, Anthony joined a homeless-led organization there, Housing Our Neighbors (HON), and sits on the Residents Advisory Board for Section 8 and Public Housing in Baltimore. Anthony described the importance of a welcoming space for street homeless folks particularly:

This is trauma for them. They have to walk around all day with their bags in the freezing cold, waiting for a shelter bed.... Because of the difficulty, if they see a little bit of light, that's good. If they can just hear somebody say, "Well, we have a space for you to—here's a place where you can come and address this issue." And these are the people you talk to just like you did with me and Lou [Lewis Haggins, Jr.].²⁰

William Burnett (2004 to the present) is in his late 40s and is a devout Catholic. Similar to Rogers, he expressed the need to align his religious and his political beliefs and actions. William

¹⁷ Rogers, interview notes in possession of the author, December 13, 2018.

¹⁸ Ella Baker, bell hooks and Ai-Jen Poo all describe their practice as rooted in respect for community, which leads to organizing from a place of love. See Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); bell hooks, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 289-298; and Ai-Jen Poo, "Organizing with Love: Lessons from the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign," *Left Turn: Notes from the Global Intifada* (website), December 1, 2010, <http://www.leftturn.org/Organizing-with-Love>.

¹⁹ Anthony Williams, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, January 22, 2018.

²⁰ Williams, interview.

holds degrees in computer programming and philosophy. He is a veteran—having served as a medic in the Army—is queer, and is from politically conservative Indiana. He serves on the board of directors of Picture the Homeless and built the organization’s first website. He also works part time as the IT coordinator for two organizations: Interfaith Assembly on Housing and Homelessness and Hearts and Minds. He was previously employed as PTH’s faith community organizer. William has experienced homelessness more than once, including during periods of employment, and was moved by the sense of community practised by homeless folks at PTH: “You know where other folks talk about community I was watching people live it out. In a space, New York City, you didn’t expect people to have that community spirit. Here are the poorest of the poor, [pause] were exhibiting that community spirit as I was watching that unfold.”²¹

Sam J. Miller (2004 to the present) was PTH’s first housing organizer and later served as a lead organizer and communications organizer. Now in his late 30s, Sam was hired as the first staffer who hadn’t ever been homeless himself because PTH members felt that his experience as a queer man from a working-class family had familiarized him what it means to be oppressed. Sam has left PTH as a staffer and become a renowned science fiction author with several books published and in translation. When Sam mentioned the word love, I asked him to describe how love was created at PTH. He replied,

I mean that there’s a basic level on which it was always really important to who we were that we were a space where we were happy to see people, where we welcomed people [when] they walked in the door with their bags, or their stress from whatever they were going through, or any of the shit they were carrying, that had been heaped upon them by the cops, or the shelter, or the system, or the newspapers. That we were there, we were smiling, that we were welcoming them, that we were happy to see them and that if they needed to take 20 minutes in the bathroom that no one was pounding on the door for them to get the hell out. That if they wanted to just sit in a meeting and not say anything, that we were a space where people who didn’t get a lot of respect in other places got respect; that where people got treated like animals, or objects, or the enemy, were treated as people, as friends, as comrades.²²

²¹ William Burnett, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, November 16, 2018.

²² Sam J. Miller, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, November 30, 2017.

The PTH office was filled with artwork. Visuality communicated resistance. PTH was always precariously funded and “housed.” Our first office was in the basement of Judson Memorial Church—in what is now their elevator shaft. Our second location was in East Harlem, and from there we were in the Bronx for several years, in an old house with an upstairs porch. Finally, PTH moved back to East Harlem. In each space we created an open floor plan, with no metal detectors or security guards, which often define the physical environment of many social service agencies and shelters. In contrast, in the PTH office, music played on the radio. Members received mail and phone calls and made friends there. Members also slept, washed clothes in the sink, braided one another’s hair, soaked their feet, shared jokes, and had intense political discussions. This competed with the need to answer the phone, make phone calls, conduct research, have an organizing meeting, or plan one of PTH’s many direct actions. Striking a balance between all aspects of the organizing work was a collective effort. There was jostling over bathroom use, but resolving conflicts built empathy and solidarity. Rarely did tensions and even fights escalate into situations that could not be resolved. Members and staff often shared workspace and resources, creating opportunities to deepen relationships and political analysis.

Sam J. Miller described the special importance of listening as a function of being welcoming:

I think that when we’re at our best as organizers, as staff, at Picture the Homeless, we are really listening to people. We are really building the kind of deep relationships that will enable them to be fully honest with us and we’re pushing each other, right? We’re all sort of moving together outside of our comfort zones in ways that will help create change and really start to address power. So there’s a love. There’s a sort of mutual accountability that helps us do things that we’re not comfortable with.²³

²³ Miller, interview.

Welcoming homeless folks into the space is more than just a metaphor for welcoming them into the work. It is an essential function *of* the work. Arvernetta Henry (2009 to the present) is a retired schoolteacher, a mother and a grandmother, and in her mid 60s. She is a lifelong New Yorker, born in Harlem and raised in public housing in the Bronx. She is a lifelong member of Abyssinian Baptist Church and spent nearly 10 years in the shelter system. Arvernetta reached out to PTH, describing herself as frightened after having “had a bad experience in the shelter.”²⁴

Arvernetta recounted her first impressions of the PTH office during her interview:

I looked around, I saw there was a kitchen there [smiles], I saw furniture there, I felt like I was at home. Then one of the women came out and she said, “We fix community dinners, everybody takes turns cooking.” I think it was Linda at the time. I said, this is nice, I like this. I said, “Can you help me get housing?” She said, “Well, we don’t help you get housing, but we *fight* for you to get housing. We show you how to talk for yourself.” So, I said, “That’s nice. This is nice.” From that experience, that interview, I decided to do some time there.²⁵

Arvernetta’s description of being welcomed into PTH is in sharp contrast to how she was treated by the homeless shelter system during this same period: “I started coming to Picture the Homeless more regular because I was able to get some peace and quiet and get some sleep. I can go on the porch and do my work and I wasn’t far from the library. They made me feel so welcome, and so, when I finally stopped working, I would go there.”²⁶

DeBoRah Dickerson was a resident in a women’s shelter when she came upon the PTH office in East Harlem by accident:

I went in there and I saw this table. It had all kinds of brochures and stuff and I heard somebody say “Hi! How may I help you?” I said, “I see on your door it says Picture the Homeless. What you mean?!” [laughing] “What do you mean by Picture the Homeless?” So, it was Sam, so he says, “Are you new?” I said, “Yes, and I’d like for you to explain what you do.” So Sam came, and then Roosevelt came out, and Tyletha was in the other room and she was talking, and she said, “Hi!” and I said, “Hi!” So you know, people was like really hospitable.... So I waited around, you know they had different ones come in.

²⁴ Arvernetta Henry, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, September 28, 2017.

²⁵ Henry, interview.

²⁶ Henry, interview.

They had Jean, Jean Rice. They had John, Marco, Jean, Roosevelt, Leroy was there, Tyletha was there. People started to come in. They said, “Who’s here for the first time?” You know, “Stand up and give your name.” And it’s been from there, it’s just been, I just took it on from there because, I liked the way they greeted me, you know, and they got my nose up in the air, [smiling]. So I’m happy about that, you know.²⁷

Charley Heck now lives in the Bronx. He uses a wheelchair in his apartment. When I asked Charley in 2018 what had motivated him to stay involved with PTH, he wheeled himself over to a table stacked with papers, retrieving a clipboard with a letter dated September 22, 2004, a photo of himself and Jean Rice smiling during an action of the canners campaign, and some medical paperwork. The letter had been written a little over a month after we had been informed that our co-founder Lewis Haggins had died and was buried as a John Doe in a mass grave in Potters Field. This was the genesis of the Potters Field campaign. On September 22, 2004, shortly after he became involved in PTH and then sleeping on the street in Midtown Manhattan, Charley dictated and I typed the letter.. Typing that letter with Charley sitting next to me and telling me what to write was extremely moving. Here was a street homeless man directing me and PTH as a whole to take action over the inhumane burial of our co-founder. Learning that Charley had kept that letter for all those years brought back those feelings and summoned up others over the fact that he had saved that letter. I cried as I continued to interview him and asked him why he had kept the letter and photo for 14 years, much of which he had spent on the streets and in and out of hospitals. I asked him what his leadership in the Potters Field campaign meant to him. “I was not doing just simply nothing, like waiting for world to come to me, like the world owed me something, that I wasn’t out doing for myself, that I was out doing something.”²⁸ He paused, and continued:

²⁷ Dickerson, interview.

²⁸ Heck, interview.

For people who have never been forced to live on the street—*the uninitiated* [his emphasis]—they really don't have a conception of the life of a homeless person, for them to devise all these programs and charities is helpful to a degree but it doesn't satisfy the sense of accomplishment. It doesn't really give a person a sense of accomplishment of doing something. That's what I feel is vastly insufficient in helping people on the street.²⁹

The presence of homeless leaders in the PTH office, carrying out a range of personal and political tasks as well as explicit political analysis of homelessness, signalled to potential members that they would be heard and their perspectives valued. Identifying solutions to homelessness offered hope, and creating a physically and politically welcoming space that emphasized homeless leadership allowed PTH to incubate collective resistance through the formation of resistance relationships, both among the members and with the organization writ large.

Respect for Homeless Leadership

The rise of homeless political leadership in New York City was a direct result of structuring homeless leadership within PTH's office space and decision-making processes. Members, leaders, staff, and the board each had their own source of authority, but there was a shared authority that required intentional care in order to avoid replicating the systems of oppression that members dealt with on a daily basis.

Many narrators decided to join, or to deepen their commitment to, PTH as the result of two factors. One was the presence of an external crisis—such as police sweeps—combined with (often repeated) encouragement by other PTH participants. Jean Rice (2002 to present) was born in 1939, and is 80 years old and a great-grandfather. Originally from Anderson, South Carolina—a place that he describes as subject to American apartheid—his family was part of the

²⁹ Heck, interview.

Great Migration north. In the 1940s, when he was seven years old, he moved to Harlem with his mother. His long life story also includes time spent in Attica, nearly completing his BA at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and his role as a founding Poverty Scholar at Union Theological Seminary. He is a founding board member of Picture the Homeless. Jean spent nearly 30 years homeless, split between the streets, temporary respites with family members and friends, and short shelter stays. He earned his living picking up cans and bottles for the five-cent deposit and panhandling. Initially, Jean resisted his cousin Prince's attempts to convince him to attend a PTH meeting until his own livelihood as a canner was threatened.³⁰ Jean stated, "That got my attention because that was my pocket, that was my money!"³¹ The threat to Jean's income was a primary factor in his decision to first come to PTH, but it belies the deep sense of injustice that was also a part of Jean's world view:

Because I had had the opportunity to pursue higher education—again family motivated—and I had studied Public Administration as a major, Criminal Justice Administration as a strong minor, so I'd had some studying American constitutional law, etc.; because I knew about the 14th Amendment ... Lynn and Emily [pauses] and Anthony just drafted me! Like, you need me! I got drafted. [smiles] But I loved it because, seriously, it gave me the opportunity to use knowledge that I thought I would never be able to use in a positive way. I was able to use that knowledge to contribute to progressive social and equal justice and I'm still doing that.³²

Jean's leadership was sustained not only because his knowledge was valued but because of the relationships built through his work at PTH. Narrators frequently named one another in the telling of their stories. Just as Jean mentioned Anthony, Emily, and myself in his interview, Sam mentioned me, John Jones, and Jean in his:

I remember, also in 2004 in November, when we did the sleep out that night, the civil disobedience in Central Park, and when you and Jean and John are like, *we're going to do this. You want to do this?* And feeling like even though I was scared to put myself in an

³⁰ The term "canner" refers to someone who picks up bottles and cans to redeem them for their deposit. In New York City, each piece is worth five cents.

³¹ Jean Rice, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, October 6, 2017.

³² Rice, interview.

arrestable position I had thought about it a lot. In my work with Jews Against the Occupation, there was an occasional civil disobedience that I had never participated in a directly arrestable way because I was really scared. But that because I had love for you guys, and I had love for John who was dealing with this stuff like being arrested in the park all the time, I was like, *yeah sure, why not?*³³

I asked Sam how PTH created the conditions that produced the type of love that supported homeless leadership and collective resistance:

So we're really loving people, and encouraging them to love themselves, and sort of getting over a lot of the internalized anger and self-blame and rage that folks really understandably feel when they're in a situation like that. That is what has always enabled us to develop the kind of leaders who are going to feel like they can exert leadership, that they can do outreach and meet other homeless folks and bring them into the work. Or that they can march to the edge of a balcony and unfurl a banner over a protest, or any number of things that are sometimes things people don't feel super comfortable doing. That's sort of like the baseline. Even if we might not say it, even if we might not always feel it, that we love them back, like the love is there and that the respect and the celebration of each other is something that was essential to how Picture the Homeless was effective in organizing.³⁴

William described how relationships contributed to participants' capacity to engage in collective resistance and how, conversely, collective resistance through direct action strengthened those relationships:

It's like in the military they say that your strongest friends are the ones that you're in the foxhole with. I think that happened at Picture the Homeless too. When we're out in these actions, and we're spending the night, especially in the rain! [voice rises] and we're interacting with each other. We're not just protesting, we're talking to each other, sometimes there's the camp out part where we sit down and we pull out the canteen of cocoa and we're talking with each other and we're getting to know each other and there's some personal bonding going on. There's always that human interaction that I like to bring out. I think that it was one of the most important elements of Picture the Homeless organizing is that we did bond tightly.³⁵

³³ Miller, interview.

³⁴ Miller, interview.

³⁵ Burnett, interview, November 16, 2017.



Figure 4: PTH Housing Campaign Sleep-Out, Harlem.

Source: Archive. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. October 1, 2008.

William Burnett was already a housing campaign leader when he was welcomed into political leadership during the formation of the Potters Field campaign, which he initially resisted. How he was “shamed or guilt tripped into that one”³⁶ revealed the importance of deep listening and relationship building based on aspects of participants’ lives outside of their homeless status, such as their religious faith:

They knew I was a Catholic, and so they were bringing to me the emotional arguments to get involved, and they were bringing to me the religious arguments ... they all centered

³⁶ Burnett, interview, November 16, 2017.

around human dignity. I think Rogers was actually the most moving to me, because he wasn't only talking about the dignity of the deceased person, Lewis [Haggins, PTH co-founder], but he was talking about the dignity of the people who'd lost somebody.... Rogers is the one who framed it to me as, "Don't forget the dignity of the people who lost somebody." I guess Rogers was the more philosophical of the bunch. And so, in that process, they got me involved, and I don't know why, but somehow once I got involved, I got really involved.³⁷

Rogers and William are both members of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project Advisory Board. At a December 13, 2017, Advisory Board meeting, I told Rogers that William had credited him with "guilt-tripping" him into the Potters Field campaign. Rogers smiled, and I asked him how that happened. He shared that he and William had read the same books and that William had used language that another Catholic would respond to, and that they had many discussions in the office regarding their shared faith. This led to an extended conversation about the atmosphere in the PTH office that created the conditions for folks to get to know one another deeply enough to be able to welcome and even push one another into collective resistance.



Figure 5: Jean Rice and William Burnett, PTH Leadership Retreat.

Source: Archive. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. August 8, 2012.

³⁷ William Burnett, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, January 19, 2018.

William Burnett described the internal decision-making processes that engendered collective homeless leadership within campaign meetings, at one point stating that “there was no top-down policy analyst telling us what we need.”³⁸

Marcus Moore described being motivated to return to PTH after witnessing an example of that collective homeless leadership at his first meeting:

So two o’clock came and I got a chance to sit in on this meeting. I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forget it. This meeting was a bunch of homeless and formerly homeless people. A lot of them had pens, pads [he describes this with obvious relish]. They were taking notes! And these people, when they talk, I was like where did they learn all this from!? I saw white men. I saw black men. I saw all types of racial groups in that room. Men, women, and right away I took to it and I just, you know, it just made me want to fall back and take notes internally.³⁹

Through PTH, homeless political leadership has informed social movements well beyond New York City, affirming for PTH participants that their efforts made a difference in the world. PTH developed relationships with homeless and poor people’s movements through the support of visible homeless leadership. Our direct actions, reports, and media work elevated homeless visibility. Individuals and organizations would reach out to PTH, come to visit our office, or invite us to theirs. In the following passage from an interview with Arvernetta Henry, she describes what those relationships meant to her:

I have to say Picture the Homeless has done a lot for me. I have travelled across the world through having people from other countries come into our organization, speaking about the homeless plight and see how Picture the Homeless handled it. How they were able to get their government to listen to them. I’m talking about countries like South Africa, Germany, England. Different places coming to our country, coming to our organization and interviewing us and asking questions, and we are able to impart that wisdom and knowledge that we learned from the leaders at Picture the Homeless!⁴⁰

³⁸ Burnett, interview, November 16, 2017.

³⁹ Moore, interview.

⁴⁰ Henry, interview.

Representation Is Power

Each narrator cited PTH's practice of homeless leaders representing the organization in media interviews, as spokespeople, in coalition meetings and other public events as critical to their own leadership. Rob Robinson (2008 to the present) is Brooklyn born and was raised on Long Island, and is in his 50s. A college graduate and former corporate manager, Rob became street homeless in Miami for two and a half years after a loss of employment, before returning to New York City and staying in a drop-in centre for eight months, sleeping on a chair. Now an internationally known housing and human rights activist, and a Picture the Homeless Oral History Project Advisory Board member, Rob's reaction to hearing the PTH origin story and the story of the death of co-founder Lewis Haggins and his burial in Potters Field, reveals both the connection he has to PTH's co-founders and the political significance of homeless representation:

That was important to me. That's why I first said, "Okay, people can rise up and fight back but also be recognized for doing that," especially who it was—people of color, right? I've experienced growing up, discrimination, race discrimination, people being outcast, your problem being pushed to the side saying that "You're a problem" put on you. But here's somebody organizing people to say, "We have a voice together," and I've always believed in that togetherness. So, it was a message that resonated with me, and hearing this story, and hearing how he passed and where he was, that was moving. I'm like F that. That's not the way it's supposed to go down, so. You've got to stick with this.... So I made a decision like, I'm going to stick with this, and I'm going to change this shit just like they did.⁴¹

For members of stigmatized groups, and perhaps especially homeless folks, representation upends existing power dynamics and challenges systems of oppression.⁴²

It's important for them to see homeless people doing the work. Not relying on experts to do the work for them. Not relying on service providers. Not relying on the system, but them changing, working to change the system. They were actually doing what Lou was talking about; changing the system, right? How it operates, right?... It's very important for homeless people to see other homeless folks doing that same work. Although—and

⁴¹ Rob Robinson, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, May 7, 2018.

⁴² The results of a Google image search for "homeless" provide immediate insight into how homeless individuals are portrayed and perceived: pitiable, derelict, infirm, socially isolated, even dangerous.

even if they never did that work—maybe it would give us some more inspiration to keep up the work. I truly believe that.⁴³

When a PTH leader speaks to the media or attends meetings representing PTH in an official role, it is a political act. It asserts that homeless folks can and do lead. Yet representation often requires support for homeless folks to overcome internalized oppression. It requires respect and it requires love to overcome the internalized oppression that leads folks to doubt themselves. To this point, Sam J. Miller shares the following story:

I remember this woman Selina, who was one of my first housing campaign leaders, who was living at the shelter on Ward’s Island in the HELP USA shelter, and who was going to be the press spokesperson at our first action. And her being nervous about it, as so many folks are who are going to talk to the media. But I was working with her, and talking with her, and sort of pushing her to do something that she had never done before, or that she was nervous about, or that she maybe didn’t think that she was the best person for.⁴⁴

PTH maintained protocols around homeless representation to force staff and members to practise those resistance relationships.⁴⁵ This nurtured a deep bench of members who could represent a range of issues in public forums. Rob Robinson described the impact of representing PTH at a conference: “It was huge.... It was huge, right? You’re the direct line of communication. You’re the liaison for the organization. That was important to me. And it was an empowering position.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Williams, interview.

⁴⁴ Miller, interview.

⁴⁵ These protocols included prohibiting staff from speaking to the media, except when providing background information. This practice privileged the expertise of PTH’s homeless members, sometimes to the chagrin of journalists, who sometimes insisted on speaking with the Director or some other “authority.”

⁴⁶ Rob Robinson, interview with author, *The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project*, November 23, 2018.



Figure 6: Rogers, leading a walking tour of vacant buildings in East Harlem.

Source: Archive. The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project. 2009

Community organizing to build political power among homeless folks remains on the margins of social movement work.⁴⁷ This is partially attributable to, on the one hand, the belief that homelessness is the result of individual dysfunction and not intersecting systems of oppression and, on the other hand, specific challenges associated with organizing homeless folks. Narrators of the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project described PTH as being a physical and political space where their humanity was respected, where they could nourish their spirit, expand their skills, build deep friendships, and fight for justice. Their stories reveal an

⁴⁷ Notable exceptions include the member organizations of the Western Regional Advocacy Project (<https://wraphome.org/>) and Housing Our Neighbors in Baltimore as well as other formations of homeless folks that resist the indignities of policing, systemic racism, and structural inequality on a daily basis.

organizing practice that centred relationship building in support of homeless leadership, from which collective action emerged. PTH was an antidote to the toxicity of the system. From this physical and political space, a unique and groundbreaking organization took root and changed the New York City social justice landscape.