ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	"LEARN AS WE LEAD": LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN
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In the spring of 1968, over six thousand poor people—black, chicano, white, Puerto Rican, and Native American from rural areas to urban centers—converged on Washington, D.C. to call attention to poverty and inequality in the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. This six-week demonstration was part of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final and oft-forgotten Poor People's Campaign. Fifty years later, thousands of people in over forty states have taken part in reviving this movement as the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC 2018+), co-chaired by Bishop William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis. From low-wage workers' fight for $15/hour minimum wage in the South to the Apache struggle to protect sacred land from copper mining in Oak Flat, Arizona; from the battle to stop emergency managers from poisoning and privatizing water services in Michigan

to the urgent demands to abolish the criminalization of black, immigrant, and poor communities, “Learn as We Lead” investigates how local and national organizers are utilizing the vehicle of the campaign to build a broad-based movement across lines of identity, geography, and issue, while centering the leadership of the poor. Drawing on participant observation within the campaign, interviews with over forty grassroots leaders from twenty-seven states, and archival research, this dissertation uncovers how movement practitioners are reproducing and reformulating a long history of multiracial and multi-issue class politics—from the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the National Union of the Homeless of the 1980s and 1990s, from the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) of the early 2000s to the Moral Mondays and low-wage worker movements of recent years. In a time of deepening political, economic, environmental and health crisis, leaders with the PPC 2018+ offer critical insights on forging class consciousness and solidarity across difference.

“LEARN AS WE LEAD”: LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE POOR PEOPLE’S CAMPAIGN

by

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present that fight for freedom from exploitation, oppression, and unnecessary human misery in this country and around the world. I am therefore so thankful to the 41 leaders who I did formally interview for this project for sharing their diverse histories, organizing lessons, and work with the PPC (2018+). This dissertation is about the individual and collective knowledge that social movement practioners produce and reproduce. And in the best possible way, I was intellectually and emotionally overwhelmed by so many stories and so much hard-earned knowledge. Any brilliant insights are truly thanks to them.

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List of Abbreviations

ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
CHU	California Homeless Union
CIW	Coalition of Immokalee Workers
CLP	Communist Labor Party
DAWG	Direct Action Welfare Group
DRUM	Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
HKonJ	Historic Thousands on Jones Street
HON	Housing Our Neighbors
IVAW	Iraq Veterans Against the War
KFTC	Kentuckians for the Commonwealth
KWRU	Kensington Welfare Rights Union
LA CAN	Los Angeles Community Action Network
NAACP	The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NNU	National Nurses United
NUH	National Union of the Homeless
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
NWRU	National Welfare Rights Union
MAVIS	Mothers Against Violence in Selma
MIDI	Milton Inclusion and Diversity Initiative
MMP	Media Mobilizing Project
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
MWRO	Michigan Welfare Rights Organization

OFWV	Our Future West Virginia
PEP	Popular Education Project
PI	Poverty Initiative
PPC	The Poor People's Campaign (1968)
PPC (2018+)	The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival
PPEHRC	The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign
PPF! PA	Put People First! Pennsylvania
PSU	Philadelphia Student Union
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
UAW	United Auto Workers
UMW	United Mine Workers
UPoor	University of the Poor
UW	United Workers
VWC	Vermont Workers Center
YPO	Young Patriots Organization

Introduction: "A New and Unsettling Force"

On the morning of Monday, December 4, 2017, I drove down from Baltimore to Washington D.C. to attend a press conference at the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill, inevitably getting lost in the maze that is the nation's capital. I was late. Once I arrived, I quickly made my way inside the building. It was packed and the press conference had already commenced. I circulated the room, trying to find a place where I could see, giving nods, waves, hugs, and hushed hellos to friends and comrades. I was relieved to learn I had not missed much. Rev. Dr. William Barber II, who emceed the press conference, was flanked by his co-chair, Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, and a crowd of diverse grassroots and religious leaders. After almost four years of groundwork, it was happening, we were officially "reconsecrating" the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's final and oft-forgotten 1968 Poor People's Campaign under the banner of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (hereafter PPC [2018+]).[1]

Representatives from religious denominations, unions, and national partners, who endorsed the PPC (2018+), were eventually given a platform to speak, but grassroots leaders from the ranks of the poor and dispossessed went first. Terrance Wise (Fight for $15), Mashyla Buckmaster (Chaplains on the Harbor), Rev. Shawna Foster (About Face Against the War), Callie Greer (Mothers Against Violence in Selma), and Wendsler Nosie (Apache Stronghold) spoke forcefully about the urgent need for a new Poor People's Campaign fifty years later. Through their testimony, they connected their experiences as low-wage workers, homeless

[1] See Rev. Dr. William Barber's speech at "Martin Luther King Jr. Assassination 50th Anniversary Commemoration," *C-SPAN*, April 4, 2018, starting at 1:13:45 and ending at 1:21:49, https://www.c-span.org/video/?442986-1/martin-luther-king-jr-assassination-50th-anniversary-commemoration.

parents, grieving mothers, Native leaders, and veterans of the U.S. military to their struggles for living wages, work with dignity, housing, healthcare, protection of the earth and sacred indigenous sites, and an end to endless and unnecessary wars, death, and poverty. Individually and collectively, their fights and insights highlighted the inseparability of the PPC (2018+)'s challenge to the "evils" of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, ecological devastation, and the distorted moral narratives used to justify these conditions. While their particular stories were different in many ways, they talked of a need to link their struggles together, in order to build a mass movement of the poor and dispossessed to radically transform society. More than three years later, the PPC (2018+) has officially outlasted its antecedent by continuing to grow a nationally connected network of over forty-five state-based campaigns from California to Kentucky, Michigan to Mississippi, and Washington state to Washington, D.C.

Yet one of the critical assertions I make in this dissertation is that the PPC (2018+) is not merely a symbolic re-enactment of King's final campaign, but comes out of a long and largely unknown history of poor people's organizing in the U.S. Although the original PPC was short-lived, its vision lived on in the continued practice of antipoverty movements. From the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the National Union of the Homeless of the 1980s and 1990s, from the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) of the early 2000s to the Moral Mondays and Fight for $15 movements of recent years, the PPC (2018+) is building off this rich reservoir of knowledge forged through decades of movement organizing to practice what the PPC (2018+) calls "moral fusion politics." By acknowledging the continuation and evolution of these threads, I reframe the historiography of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s in order to complicate categorical separations between the civil rights, welfare rights, anti-homelessness, labor, feminist, and even environmental movements, and to challenge dominant

periodizations that obscure the continuity of movement activity up to the present. And by centering grassroots antipoverty organizers, I propose a way of understanding the convergence of prior periods of struggle within the study of contemporary movement practice.

Through participant observation, interviews with forty-one participants in twenty-seven states, and archival research, I look at how today's campaign participants are building on lessons of the past to organize a broad-based movement led by the poor and dispossessed across lines of race and identity, geography, and issue. I show how multiracial poor people's movements model a sophisticated and creative form of class politics that have emerged out of the many struggles to live in the United States. In this way, these movements have been a critical site of knowledge production, where organizers produce *analytical* insights about the systems and forces that produce the conditions under which we live, but also *strategic* insights about how we might counter and organize a transformation of these systems. By tracing the history of antipoverty activism through the lens of this present-day campaign, I examine how contemporary movement practitioners extend and reformulate a long legacy of multi-racial and multi-issue organizing in response to deepening conditions of inequality. While the PPC (2018+) does not explicitly use the language of class unity, I argue that the campaign is a vehicle for forging class consciousness and solidarity across difference.

Class matters, but not at the expense of an analysis of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other hierarchies. Race and racism are especially critical to any analysis of class formation and class struggle in the United States. While many scholars and activists have resisted liberal analyses that pit class against race and other forms of identity in reductive and unproductive ways, those who have brought these terms together have often emphasized models that weave a class critique within identity dedicated organizations and movements. I contend that there is a

way of thinking about and thus practicing a class centered politics that does not necessarily equate class with white working-class men, does not diminish the different histories of oppression faced by diverse working-class people in this country, or ignore the development of culturally and geographically unique forms of expression and resistance. While there are some well-rehearsed failures in this regard when it comes to the exclusionary history of the trade-union movement, I offer that multi-racial, multi-gender, and multi-generational poor people's movements provide an alternative model to these failures, as well as the limits of narrow identity-based models. The PPC (2018+) draws on a history of the poor organizing the poor across difference for its model of "fusion organizing." In making this argument, this dissertation enters into key scholarly and movement-based debates about the relationship between class and identity, economy and culture, and thus strategy and tactics.

As a heterogeneous group, poor people encounter all the social injustices of our society—systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, imperialism, xenophobia, etc. Therefore, organizing the poor and dispossessed is to combine all these issues as they overlap and contribute to the problems of capitalism and class. By centering poverty and the everyday material conditions of communities across this country, the PPC (2018+) is initiating a mass politics from below that connects and unites poor people across race, geography, and other lines of division. It does so by emphasizing that which we have in common, but also by asking participants to recognize how differences in issues are still intricately connected. And while the PPC (2018+) insists on a structural versus culturalist analysis of poverty and inequality, it does so by responding directly to the "distorted moral" narratives used to justify these injustices by promoting alternative narratives from the poor and dispossessed.[2]

[2] By "culturalist" analyses of poverty, I am referring to social scientific theories of poverty that root the problem of poverty in supposedly "cultural" maladaptations that are believed to prevent poor people from lifting themselves out

In addition to my primary source research, I draw on studies of poverty, neoliberal capitalism, race, gender, U.S. social movement history, and social movement theory to situate the PPC (2018+) within a period of profound global inequality and crisis. I look to Marxist political economy, African American history, labor history, and histories of race and gender in order to trace these radical shifts in the global capitalist economy since the 1960s, as well as to examine capitalism's entangled history with racial slavery, imperialism, and settler colonialism in the United States.[3] While the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the sheer level of economic precarity in this country, as well as devastating health disparities along lines of race, gender, citizenship, geography, and income, the PPC (2018+) draws on the analysis of welfare rights, antipoverty, labor, and human rights organizers who have been waging a war against poverty and inequality before and long after the federal government abandoned its promise to abolish "poverty in the midst of plenty."[4] Their struggles and insights help place the U.S. federal government's retreat from addressing poverty and its 'rediscovery' of poverty under the current

of poverty, as opposed to "structural" analyses that root poverty in political economy. I very intentionally use the word "culturalist" to describe these theories to distinguish them from cultural analyses that are genuinely interested in meaning-making via signs, symbols, and cultural practice. I will come back to these scholarly debates, but given the dominant narratives that consistently blame people for conditions that are beyond their control, it is important that the campaign is constantly reshifting the focus to the economic and political systems that are producing mass poverty and concentrated wealth in the U.S. and globally.

[3] Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, (New York: Free Press, 1998, originally published in 1935); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Culture Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1990); Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990); David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2011); Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 21, no. 2 (2009): 148–76.

[4] "Poverty in the midst of plenty" was the contradiction for which President Lyndon Johnson sought to address with his ambitious "War on Poverty" legislation. See, Public Law 88-452, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Rep. No. 1458 (August 20, 1964).

Biden administration in the context of radical transformations of the global capitalist economy over the last five or more decades.[5]

Whereas poverty in the late 1960s was seen as an aberration to the norm of middle-class prosperity, today poverty is experienced by a growing number of people in the United States. As the PPC (2018+) regularly cites, 140 million people or 43.3% of the population are poor or low-income, according to 2017 Census figures, suggesting that centering poverty is perhaps more urgent and strategic today than it was in 1968.[6] And these figures have only grown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] But this growth in poverty cannot be disconnected from the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, especially during the pandemic.[8] However even prior to the pandemic, there was already a deadly cost to such inequality with approximately 245,000 people dying each year due to poverty related causes.[9] One might say that today's Poor People's Campaign has been revived in a time more reminiscent of the Gilded

[5] Christopher Pulliam and Richard V. Reeves, "New Child Tax Credit Could Slash Poverty Now and Boost Social Mobility Later," *Brookings* (blog), March 11, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/03/11/new-child-tax-credit-could-slash-poverty-now-and-boost-social-mobility-later/.

[6] The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival has cited this figure based on the U.S. Census's 2017 Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), defining the population living between 100-199% of the poverty threshold as poor or "low-income." See Shailly Gupta Barnes, "Explaining the 140 Million: Breaking Down the Numbers Behind the Moral Budget," Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice, https://kairoscenter.org/explaining-the-140-million/#_ftn5.

[7] A Columbia University report found that "Due to the expiration of the CARES Act's stimulus checks and $600 per week supplement to unemployment benefits, the monthly poverty rate in September was higher than rates during April or May, and also higher than pre-crisis levels," see Zachary Parolin et al., "Monthly Poverty Rates in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic," POVERTY AND SOCIAL POLICY WORKING PAPER (New York: Center on Poverty & Social Policy, School of Social Work, Columbia University, October 15, 2020).

[8] In 2018, the combined wealth of the three richest men in the U.S—Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, and Bill Gates—was more than the total wealth of the poorest half of Americans. During the pandemic, however, "the combined wealth of all U.S. billionaires increased by $1.763 trillion (59.8 percent) between March 18, 2020 and July 9, 2021, from approximately $2.947 trillion to $4.711 trillion," according to the Institute for Policy Studies analysis of Forbes data. See "Facts: Wealth Inequality in the United States," *Inequality.org*, a project of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/.

[9] "How Many U.S. Deaths Are Caused by Poverty, Lack of Education, and Other Social Factors?," *Columbia: Mailman School of Public Health* (blog), July 5, 2011, http://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/how-many-us-deaths-are-caused-poverty-lack-education-and-other-social-factors.

Age of the late 19th century than the late 1960s.[10] Today's organizers recognize that the PPC (2018+) is being re-articulated in historically different times with unique challenges and possibilities for building a broad based movement of the poor and dispossessed across lines of difference. It is these insights to which this dissertation is dedicated to uplifting and engaging.

Brief overview of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

Undoubtedly, this dissertation is about the PPC (2018+), but in many ways it is about much more. It is about a continuous history of poor people's movements and what we can learn from its practitioners about organizing poor people across division and difference to demand transformative change. It is about how various movement networks connect and reconfigure over time and place. Campaigns in themselves can never fully encapsulate social movements, but as containers or vehicles, they draw on social movement networks, create new ones, and facilitate movement building. This is what I see the PPC (2018+) doing most effectively and therefore this is how the campaign figures within this dissertation. The PPC (2018+) is a lens or anchoring device for studying these broader movement networks, rather than it being the exclusive object of study. This approach is different from one which might focus on studying every action and event, the internal structure, funding, media coverage, policy platforms, sermons and speeches of the national co-chairs, etc. Although these do figure as primary sources in my research, I also venture outside the strict boundaries of the PPC (2018+) into a less delineated territory where social movement networks converge with the PPC (2018+). Since I spend less time on some of the more specific aspects of the campaign throughout the dissertation, some general background on the PPC (2018+) is in order.

[10] Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, "The Rise of Income and Wealth Inequality in America: Evidence from Distributional Macroeconomic Accounts," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 3–26.

Since the PPC (2018+)'s official launch in December of 2017, it has built a nation-wide "movement" of over forty-five state-based campaigns to "unite the bottom" to challenge the inseparable "pillars" or "evils" of systemic racism, systemic poverty, militarism and the war economy, ecological devastation, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism. These pillars—an extension of Dr. King's triplets of evil—are a key part of the campaign's analytical framework and organizing model. They help to draw the connections between often separated problems and build coalitions across diverse movements and people. Inspired by King's call for a "revolution of values," another key dimension of the PPC (2018+) is its explicit grounding in moral and religious "values" that are interfaith and non-faith as a basis for systemic critique. Lastly, the PPC (2018+) is committed to "moral fusion organizing" to build a politically independent movement that unites the 140 million poor and low-income people in this nation to challenge and transform the political and economic status quo.

The National Team led by the PPC (2018+)'s national co-chairs, Revs. Drs. Barber and Theoharis, provide much of the guiding framework for the state-based campaigns. This includes everything from the campaign's principles and organizing model to its policy analysis and platforms. "National," as many people in the states refer to the National Team, coordinate and connect the states through synchronized actions and national in-person and online gatherings. The first and most ambitious series of synchronized actions was the "40 Days of Action" in the Spring of 2018. From Mother's Day on May 13, 2018 to June 23, 2018, over forty states participated in nonviolent civil disobedience at state capitols every Monday for six weeks, ending with a mass march and rally in Washington, D.C. According to the PPC (2018+), it was the "most expansive wave of nonviolent civil disobedience in the 21st century United States."[11]

[11] "About," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/.

In the lead up to the "40 Days," the PPC (2018+) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) released the "Souls of Poor Folk," a report and "audit" of racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation in the U.S. since the original PPC.[12] The campaign also put forward a comprehensive set of demands addressing the five "interlocking evils" entitled the Poor People's Jubilee Platform.[13]

The next major event came the following June in 2019 with the Poor People's Moral Action Congress in Washington, D.C., a three-day summit attended by over 1,000 participants from across the states. In addition to several days of workshops, where campaign leaders got an opportunity to learn from each other, the campaign hosted a presidential candidates forum where Democratic Party and Republican Party nominees were invited to speak and field questions from the national co-chairs and PPC (2018+) leaders. Unsurprisingly President Donald Trump did not attend, but the leading Democratic nominees showed up promising to call for a debate on the problem of poverty and interlocking injustices suffered by almost half of Americans. Timed during this gathering, the PPC (2018+) also released the Poor People's Moral Budget with a hearing before the House Budget Committee to challenge the myth of scarcity and show how the campaign's Poor People's Jubilee Platform could be actualized.

The campaign then embarked on a nine-month We Must Do M.O.R.E. Tour (Mobilize, Organize, Register, and Educate) to more than twenty-five states leading up to another national gathering on June 20, 2020. This gathering was initially planned to be an in-person march and rally in Washington, D.C., but due to the COVID-19 pandemic was reconceptualized as a digital

[12] Sarah Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/Militarism and Our National Morality" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, April 2018).

[13] "A Moral Policy Agenda to Heal and Transform America: The Poor People's Jubilee Platform," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/jubilee-platform/.

gathering with 2.5 million people tuning into online and televised broadcasts.[14] In August of 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and presidential race, the PPC (2018+) released their second report "Unleashing the Power of Poor and Low-Income Americans: Changing the Political Landscape," which examines the potential voting power of poor and low-income Americans in order to argue that "organizing among the poor, around an agenda that represents the concerns of the poor, can fundamentally change the political map of this country and lead to policies that are just and representative for all Americans."[15]

Following the defeat of President Trump and the election of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, the PPC (2018+) put forward "14 Policy Priorities to Heal the Nation: A Moral and Economic Agenda for the First 100 Days" and initiated a series of "Moral Mondays" online and in-person gatherings, caravans, and marches to push forward these priorities around healthcare, living wages, and housing. On May 24, 2021, the PPC (2018+) released the "Third Reconstruction," an omnibus resolution in the House, submitted by Democratic U.S. Representatives Barbara Lee, Pramila Jayapal, and other Congressional backers, to "fully address poverty and low-wages from the bottom up."[16] The June 21, 2021 National Poor People's Assembly, a live streamed rally from Raleigh, North Carolina, marked the launch of "365 Days Fighting Forward" to the Moral March on Washington on June 18, 2022. This will be the campaign's first national mass protest since the "40 Days of Action" in the Spring of 2018.

As I said before, National coordinates and connects the forty-five state-based campaigns, but the states are the ones engaged in building out the campaign on the ground. Each state

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[14] "Mass Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington: A Digital Justice Gathering," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.june2020.org/.
[15] "Unleashing the Power of Poor and Low-Income Americans," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/power-of-poor-voters/.
[16] Jeffrey D. Sachs, "How a Third Reconstruction Could End American Poverty," *CNN*, May 24, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/25/opinions/third-reconstruction-end-poverty-sachs/index.html.

commits to carrying out the model, strategy, and principles of the PPC (2018+) and participating in nationally coordinated actions, but otherwise there is a lot of autonomy on the local level. And while there might be organizations involved who have paid staff, there are no paid organizers at the state level. Although every state must have a state-wide coordinating committee, there is variation in terms of structure. For example, some states have created regional sub-committees in order to ensure coverage across their states, while others simply ensure that they have geographic representation on the main coordinating committee. Most states have created subcommittees based on areas of work, like media or political education, or dedicated to specific pillars or constituencies, like labor and faith, but these vary by state. Some states are explicitly made up of organizations that help bridge the PPC (2018+)'s pillars of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation and/or connect the campaign to diverse bases of poor and working-class people, while others are made up of a mix of organizational representatives and individual activists, or mostly individuals.

Organizers on the National Team have a birds-eye perspective on what different states are doing, but they are not always directly challenged with building the campaign out on a local scale, unless they are one of several National organizers recruited from the state level. As an unpaid organizer with the MD PPC (2018+), I have knowledge of what we are doing and what National is doing, but I do not have that on-the-ground perspective in the rest of the states.[17] So I was particularly curious to hear from leaders in other states, to compare notes, and learn about what the campaign looked like in their states. In this way, this dissertation offers a comparative perspective, from the vantage point of a localized organizer. There is definitely unevenness across the country, but as an all-volunteer campaign (after all, the revolution will not be funded),

[17] I discuss how I came to be involved in the movement to end poverty and the PPC (2018+) in chapter 1.

I found it incredibly inspiring to hear how organizers in the twenty-seven states that I visited were creatively struggling with the ambitious task of building a "moral fusion" movement of poor and working-class people across their states and the country.[18]

Learn As We Lead: On Methodology and Sources

The title of my dissertation, "Learn as We Lead" references a longer slogan, "Learn As We Lead, Walk As We Talk, Teach As We Fight," developed by Willie Baptist and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis to emphasize the value of ongoing praxis within poor people's struggles.[19] I chose the slogan, "Learn As We Lead," as my title for several reasons. First, it is a nod to Willie and Liz, two key architects of the PPC (2018+) and dear mentors, who have modeled these words through their movement practice. While Rev. Dr. Theoharis is playing an important formal role as national co-chair of the PPC (2018+) helping to tirelessly direct the campaign alongside Rev. Barber, Baptist's role within the PPC (2018+) is less formal, but I would argue no less important. Over his forty years of movement organizing and educating in poor people's organizations and movements, from the NUH to the PPEHRC, Baptist has been a crucial torchbearer helping to connect, consolidate, and train leaders in the movement to end poverty. As co-coordinator of Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development at the Kairos Center, Baptist directed our study of the 1968 PPC and a continued history of the poor organizing the poor. One could argue that were it not for Baptist, the PPC (2018+) might not have been relaunched (at least in its current formation). Although Willie cares little for pedestals, this dissertation is about elevating

[18] INCITE!, ed., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, 2017th ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[19] Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis, "Teach As We Fight, Learn as We Lead: Lessons in Pedagogy and the Poverty Initiative Model," in *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty*, ed. Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

the contributions seen and unseen of so many leaders in this movement for which even he cannot be spared.

Another reason for choosing this slogan as my title is that it encapsulates my methodological approach, as well as one of this dissertation's key claims: that the PPC (2018+) is an outgrowth of a much longer history of multiracial antipoverty struggle, where knowledge and lessons have been produced and transmitted over generations. As a broad fusion campaign crisscrossing and connecting people, places, and issues, the PPC (2018+) offers exciting fertile grounds for the reproduction of knowledge new and old. "Learn As We Lead" is one of many brilliant slogans that have come out of this history of poor people's movement organizing. These slogans act as a kind of meme, a clear and condensed vehicle for communicating more complex ideas and concepts. They also highlight the collective nature of authorship and knowledge production within social movements. Even if a slogan can be traced to individual authors, like Willie and Liz, as opposed to being collectively workshopped, the ideas encapsulated by the slogan are often collectively generated in the sense that the author is drawing on a reservoir of knowledge that is collective. Furthermore, the work of co-creating and reproducing knowledge and capacity in other leaders is a valued demonstration of leadership within the movement to end poverty, as other slogans like, "each one, teach one" or "the more you know, the more you owe" make even clearer.[20] In this sense, the title articulates not only the subject and methodology of my study, but the purpose of my dissertation, which is to hopefully contribute to the movement by documenting, reproducing, and co-creating "movement-generated theory."

[20] Ron Casanova, *Each One Teach One: Memoirs of a Street Activist* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1996).

I borrow this term from movement scholar and practitioner Chris Dixon, who defines "movement-generated theory" as "the self-reflexive activity of people engaged in struggle."[21] It recognizes the intellectual engagement involved in social movement organizing and asserts that this engagement produces relevant questions and theories about systems of power and strategies for social change. In *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements*, Dixon identifies as an "activist-researcher" involved in movement relevant research that as he puts it, "take up shared aspirations, questions, and uncertainties as my own." He thus describes his methodology as "writing *with* movements," as opposed to writing *about* movements or even writing *for* movements. Although Dixon utilizes what might be described as ethnographic and oral history methods, he argues that these methods often still presume an insider/outsider distinction between movements and researchers. Whereas, he sees his research as more dialogical—a social movement practitioner and researcher in dialogue with other social movement practitioners about particular questions and challenges as they emerge within the organizing. In this sense, he is co-producing "movement-generated theory" through his conversations with other social movement practitioners, as well as consolidating and offering these collective insights back out for further dialogue and debate.

Within the broader arena of social scientific research, the power and position of the researcher as an outsider looking in, extracting information, and then leaving, has been the subject of much critique and critical re-imagining, particularly from indigenous and anti-colonial scholars.[22] This power differential between researcher and research "subject" has been especially problematic in the area of poverty studies, where anthropologists and sociologists studying

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[21] Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements*, 14.

[22] Vine Deloria, Jr., "Anthropologists And Other Friends," in *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, 1998th ed. (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1969)**;** Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2012th ed. (New York: Zed Books, 1999).

impoverished communities have produced a string of pathologizing theories of poverty from the "culture of poverty" and "tangle of pathology" theses to the notion of an "urban underclass."[23] The overlap between poverty studies, public policy, and popular sentiment, which lent credence to the myth of the black "welfare queen," has been the focus of much scholarly debate and critique, as well as pushback from poor black mothers and women themselves through the welfare rights movement.[24] And yet it is not that social science research, quantitative or qualitative, is inherently oppressive, but in whose hands such research lies and to what ends it serves. Which is why critical poverty scholars have emphasized an insider approach to poverty scholarship.[25]

I am somewhat wary of over-romanticizing "insider" positionalities, because of how they can summon certain reified notions of "community" and consequently position the "insider" as being representative of and thus speaking for "the community,"[26] Yet I do think there are ways in

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[23] Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959); *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (1966); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, March 1965), https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan; William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, 2012th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[24] Herbert J. Gans, *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Michael B. Katz, ed., *The "Underclass": Views for History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Eleanor Burke Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971); Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992); Premilla Nadasen, "From 'Widow' to 'Welfare Queen': Welfare and the Politics of Race," *Black Women, Gender + Families* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 52–77; Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in the Twentieth U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Carol Stack, *All Our Kin* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[25] Antonia Darder, "Problematizing the notion of Puerto Ricans as "underclass": A step toward a decolonizing study of poverty," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 14.1 (1992): 144–156; Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky, eds., *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics, and Impoverished People in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

[26] For an exploration of the problems with summoning the notion of "community," see Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

which people's relationships within a community not only offer deeper insights about a group of people, but a sense of accountability to that group, which can mitigate against extractive research practices. In "Undocumented Activist Theory and a Decolonial Methodology," Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Mirian A. Mijangos García, Lucia López Juárez, and Daniel M. Goldstein offer a case-study of decolonial methodology in practice. They show how immigrant activists turned ethnographers Lucy and Mirian not only produced better data concerning the issues constraining the lives of people in their community, but they used the ethnographic method of interviewing community members to organize and advocate for their community. This does not surprise me at all. In fact, I would be surprised if they were not doing some form of this already, since "one-on-one" conversations form the bedrock of most community and labor organizing. Still, Bejarano and all are making two critically important and related points. First, they are challenging the notion that having a level of social or critical distance from one's research subject is necessary to producing more "objective," read superior, knowledge. And they are thus refuting the related idea that having an explicit social justice agenda is somehow incommensurate with the aims of social scientific research.

Social movement historians have also had to confront the cudgel of objectivity. In *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*, Emilye Crosby responds to historian Charles Eagles's assertion that many civil rights historians, particularly those who rely on oral histories, have not been sufficiently detached from the movement, are too sympathetic, and therefore unable to offer critical and diverse perspectives. She counters, "It is essential that we recognize that *all* history, not just bottom-up movement history, is political. It is political in what we center and consider important, in the sources we use and prioritize, in the questions we ask and try to answer…To take seriously the stories of movement participants, to

engage in thoughtful discussion and exchange, does not require suspending the standards of scholarship." Crosby goes on to add, "it is not just that historical actors have important stories and details to share about their experiences, but they can often make insightful analytical contributions to framing the history they participated in."[27]

I could not agree with Crosby more. Especially in the case of poor people's movements, where so many of these histories are often absent within social movement literature, more recent scholarly attention to the welfare rights movement being an exception.[28] Yet, despite absences in the historiography, these histories and knowledge have been preserved through other means. It happens through workshops, meetings, and even courses where social movement practitioners share stories and analysis, to say nothing of all the informal conversations that happen when people are together. Additionally, there are various forms of intellectual and cultural production created by participants—books, pamphlets, essays, songs, drawings, slideshows, videos and documentaries. So the slogan "learn as we lead" is not an appeal to a pragmatic anti-intellectualism that posits "experiential learning" as superior to "book learning." This is an affront to all of those who recognize how social divisions of knowledge are designed to reinforce

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[27] Emilye Crosby, "The Politics of Writing and Teaching Movement History," in *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*, ed. Emilye Crosby (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 18. For a beautiful example of social movement history that centers oral history, see Michael K. Honey, *Sharecropper's Troubadour: John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the African American Song Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[28] I think this exception is a credit to the desires of intersectional feminist scholars and historians to decenter the middle class white women's movement of the 1960's and showcase an alternative women's movement led by women of color and impoverished women. Mimi Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Tamar W. Carroll, Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Mary Eleanor Triece, *Tell It Like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

social hierarchies, by denying literacy and certain kinds of knowledge to some, and by privileging sites of knowledge production like the university over others. In part due to these social divisions of knowledge, impoverished and grassroots leaders engaged in movements to abolish poverty have insights, questions, internal debates, and concerns that do not always correspond with those of left scholars or even other social justice movement actors. Nonetheless, these movement leaders do produce "movement-generated theory." Thus the slogan "learn as we lead" is a celebration of and call to knowledge production in the context of and for the purpose of a revolution of the systems and values that put profit before people and the planet.

Like Crosby, I value social movement practitioners as sources, while also acknowledging how my own involvement in this movement is a critical source of knowledge. Yes, my sources include many of the slogans, songs, chants, speeches, testimony, sermons, books, pamphlets, essays, reports, posters, graphics, photos, videos, and documentaries created by antipoverty activists over the last fifty years, but my analysis them cannot be separated from the context in which I encountered them over the last fifteen years. Movement songs are a wonderful illustration of this point. I could listen to the recording of a song and probably decipher much from the lyrics, voices, and melody about its message, but I would not know in what context such a song would be sung, why, and how it would *feel* to sing such a song with others in a particular space and time. I would not know what it feels or means to sing "Rich Man's House" at an organizing retreat, on the steps of a state capitol building, or at a mass meeting in a church. And without song leaders performing as repositories for movement history, I would not know who and how this song was developed.[29] I would not know this because it is information gathered over fifteen years of deep involvement, not simply participation observation. This is

[29] Charon Hribar, "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty: Structural Violence, Liberationist Ethics, and the Right to Not Be Poor" (Dissertation, New Jersey, Drew University, 2016), 196.

where Bejarano et al's "undocumented activist theory" and Dixon's "writing *with* movements" feel true to my experience and methodology, without having to present myself as an "insider" to all the communities, movements, and histories from which my fellow PPC (2018+) campaigners come from. I rely on historical and ethnographic methods, as well as secondary literature, but I also integrate my personal experiences and insights as both an organizer and working-class person into this dissertation.

My history with the movement and the campaign at multiple levels, from the national to the local, lent me knowledge about the inner workings of the campaign, as well as credibility and trust with other campaigners. So when I decided to conduct formal interviews with campaign participants around the country, I had support from the National Organizing Team, access to contact lists, already established relationships with organizers in other parts of the country, and an understanding of the campaign from the perspective of a local organizer. In October and November of 2018, I embarked on three separate road trips. In two months, I drove to twenty seven states and conducted forty one interviews. My first trip took me up the East Coast, from Baltimore all the way up to Vermont and back down. For my second trip, I did a loop through the Midwest and back down through Appalachia and the Mid-Atlantic. Lastly, I flew from Baltimore to Seattle and then again to San Francisco, where I rented a car and then drove down through California, the Southwest, and South, ending in my hometown of New Orleans.

Some of the people I interviewed were long-time comrades, some individuals I had connected with at national gatherings, and others were recommended to me as people I should talk to. For instance, Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies for the Kairos Center and Co-Director of Cultural Arts for the PPC (2018+), was particularly helpful in identifying leaders in all the states, particularly where I had no contacts. However, I also often asked these people if

there were others in their state that they recommended I talk to. There are tens of thousands of people who have participated in some way with the PPC (2018+)—attending a Mass Meeting, Poor People's Hearing, smaller meeting, art build, protest, even getting arrested. A different study might want to poll a wide range of experiences with the campaign, but my interests were with individuals who are somehow deeply involved, connected, or committed to the project of the PPC (2018+). For some, this meant being a tri-chair or member of a state-wide coordinating committee or taking on some other organizing role within the campaign structure. For others, it meant bringing their organization to the campaign, figuring out how to navigate the relationship between their local organizing and the national campaign. And others were focused on a particular area of work within the campaign—media and documentation, arts and culture, political education. While I did seek out people who were participating in the campaign in diverse ways, I was particularly keen to hear from people organizing in diverse impoverished communities outside of their work with the PPC (2018+).

There are hundreds of people who I did not interview or whose voices I would have liked to have included in my dissertation, most notably perhaps the PPC (2018+)'s national co-chairs Barber and Theoharis. Although I think their unique perspective is incredibly valuable, given their visibility at the national level, I was less worried about their voices and insights being documented for historical posterity. Although the PPC (2018+) always elevates the voices of impoverished and grassroots leaders through testimonials, this is a more public-facing form of protest and political education. I wanted to have deeper and more intimate conversations with leaders about strategy, tactics, and history to showcase the real genius of leaders in this movement and to learn from and with my comrades.[30]

[30] During 1968 PPC, there were some really incredible efforts to document people's stories through photographic essays, diaries, and oral history interviews, see Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope*

In deciding who to reach out to, I intentionally strove for a diverse cross-section of campaign participants in terms of geographical region, race, gender, age, and issue or organizing sector. While demographic diversity was an important consideration, particularly racial and ethnic, I should note that in the dissertation I do not as a pre-requisite offer this information for every person I introduce in the text. When I do offer demographic information, like a person's racial or sexual identity, it is not in a standard form. This was a deliberate decision, which for some might feel arbitrary, but was not. This decision was also not out of some race or gender blind fantasy whereby these categories are assumed to have no bearing on a person's experience and thus consciousness. However, given the complexities around how people choose to self-identify and when they feel this bears on what they are saying, I made a conscious decision to as much as possible allow readers to gather this information through the words of interviewees themselves or via context. But this was not a rule, sometimes I felt this information was very important to the subject at hand and was not otherwise readily or immediately available to the reader, in which I do explicitly state a person's race or ethnicity.

My interviews included movement veterans like Marian Kramer with the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU), Joyce Johnson and Reverend Nelson Johnson with the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina, and even Jimmy Collier, SCLC staffer and cultural organizer for the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. I also interviewed younger organizers like Anita Simha, who became involved in the Moral Mondays Movement in North Carolina when they were in high school, and Jacob Butterly, a leader with Put People First! PA and banjo player/movement vocalist. I interviewed people in their living rooms, at their organizational headquarters, church, community center, classroom, at coffee shops, diners, a library, and even

Remembered (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998); Hillard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train* (Xlibris LLC, 2014); Jill Freedman, *Resurrection City, 1968* (Italy: Grafiche Damiani, 2017).

in their cars. In the appendix, I include a list of my interviews with brief profiles on each person that explain how they are connected to the PPC (2018+) and how I came to interview them.

In almost every place I visited, people graciously put me up or fed me. The generosity that I received in terms of people's hospitality, time, and insights was humbling and inspiring, reminding me of one of the reasons I am a part of this movement—the people and the potential for social relations that are based on love, solidarity, and mutual respect. If I was ever unsure about this project or my ability to pull it off, the interview process reconfirmed my belief that the stories and insights of social movement practitioners are powerful and brilliant. Their trust, support, and confidence in me and the project have been the biggest motivator to attempt to do justice to their work and insights.

I could have interviewed people over the phone, I actually conducted two of my interviews this way, but I felt there was something important about traveling to the places where people live and are organizing. Not only did it give me a first-hand glimpse of their organizing context, a reference by which to better understand where people were literally and figuratively coming from, but physically traveling from one place to another gave me a sense of the scale of the campaign. I traveled alone for most of the trip, except from Seattle to Los Angeles, where I was joined by Anu Yadav, a dear comrade, theater practitioner, and cultural organizer, who has also been conducting interviews and collecting stories from campaign participants.[31] We and other cultural organizers have discussed how we might contribute our interviews to a larger

[31] Anu Yadav's project "Soul Tent Stories" collected short oral histories from Washington, D.C. residents and Poor People's Campaign participants who traveled to the capital during the "40 Days of Action." She was an artist-in-residence with the DC Public Library as part of a larger project they were doing on the 50th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign curated by my partner Nicholas Petr. See "Soul Tent Stories: Stories of a Movement. Stories of Everyday," https://www.soultentstories.org/.

campaign archive.[32] This same spirit of exchange and collaboration has also carried over to archival research being carried out by various scholars in the campaign.[33]

While I had a basic outline of questions, I adapted my questions based on the person and our conversation. I wanted to document people's stories, background, and involvement in the PPC (2018+), but I was also interested in their analysis of the campaign and larger organizing questions and challenges. The shortest interview was less than thirty minutes. The longest interview was about four hours and the average was at least an hour. I asked people how they came to be involved in the PPC (2018+) or what attracted them to the campaign. I asked who they considered poor and/or impacted and if they considered themselves among these ranks. I inquired how they would describe the unity they were building, was it class unity, or something else. How were they attempting to bring people together across lines of division and difference and how were they attempting to center and develop impoverished and impacted leaders? What were successes and challenges? I asked how they organized at and across local, state, and national levels and what were successes and challenges here. Finally, I asked what their hopes were for the campaign at the local and national level. Through these conversations, I gained even more appreciation for the practical and theoretical challenges we face in building this movement. But I also got a better sense of what personally compels so many of us to continue despite these challenges.

[32] Anu, Charon Hribar, co-coordinator of Theomusicology and Movement Arts for the PPC (2018+), Dara Kell, a filmmaker working on a documentary about the PPC (2018+) entitled "We Cry Power,"and I have created a shared spreadsheet of our interviews towards this end.

[33] In the spirit of cooperation rather than competition, former Kairos staffer, Colleen Wessel-McCoy, who wrote her dissertation on the 1968 PPC, and I have shared our archival research with each other. See ""'Freedom Church' of the Poor": Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Vision for a Poor People's Campaign and Its Lessons for Today" (New York, Union Theological Seminary, 2017).

I am arguing that the PPC (2018+) is a vehicle, and a potentially powerful one, for building class consciousness and solidarity across race and identity, geography, and issue, regardless of whether the PPC (2018+) officially uses the rhetoric of "class unity" or not. And my interviews serve as a major source for this assertion. But I want to be careful to make clear what I mean by this and more specifically what I do not mean. I do not mean to suggest that all PPC (2018+) participants would necessarily agree with me, that they themselves would use this language, or understand the PPC (2018+) in these terms, although a good many do. Consensus is not the grounds on which I am making this claim. This sort of ventriloquism would not only be completely disrespectful to those I interviewed, but it is also completely unnecessary in order for me to make this argument. This is because of how I understand the relationship between class, as referring to an objective reality, and class unity, as a political alliance based on a class consciousness that cannot be assumed but must be constructed through collaboration and struggle. Class unity is an ongoing process, not a fixed state.[34] What my interviewees offered was a glimpse into this complicated and often messy process, not some idealized version where there are no conflicts and we all agree on everything.

This argument does require some brief analytical clarity around how I am theorizing class and poverty. Using a Marxist analytical framework, simply put, I theorize class as defined by one's relation to means of production, whether one owns or controls the major economic institutions of our economy.[35] Rather than defining class by income or occupation, this definition foregrounds fundamental economic and political relations under capitalism that have become

[34] I draw on Stuart Hall's analysis of class unity as a "strategic alliance," see Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
[35] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

obscured and naturalized.[36] While there are many policies and circumstances that contribute to poverty today, it cannot be said to be due to a lack of productive capacity, ie. the ability to meet everyone's basic needs. The existence of poverty is a political choice. Abolishing poverty would require a complete restructuring of a global political and economic system based on dispossession and exploitation, to which those in the ruling class profit and benefit immensely. In this sense, poverty is a condition that is produced by capitalism. This fundamental uneven power relation makes those in the working class, waged and unwaged, vulnerable to poverty. At the same time, this vulnerability is unevenly distributed within the working class along various historic lines, including racial, gender, and national.[37] As I said before, I draw a broad canon of Marxist political economy to understand the historical and geographic development of capitalism in the U.S. and globally.

But as a study of the PPC (2018+) and its participants, I am interested in the analysis of poverty, racism, and social inequality that the campaign offers and interrogating what ideological and political work this framework is doing. As a campaign that focuses on the ways that the five interlocking injustices impact and connect the 140 million poor and low-income people across this country, poverty figures as simultaneously one of five pillars articulated by the campaign, including systemic racism, militarism, and ecological devastation, while also functioning as a basis of commonality and unity. I suggest this double function offers a framework for building a

[36] Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
[37] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*; Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*; Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*; McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*; Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition."

broad and diverse class alliance. My conversations with PPC (2018+) participants provided a window into what this framework is looking like in practice.

Class, Race, and Identity: Scholarly and Movement Debates

The ideology of race has served as a powerful vehicle through which exploitation and dispossession have been legitimized and carried out since European powers first colonized the New World, with racial difference becoming crystalized alongside the institution of slavery during the seventeenth century in colonial America.[38] Along with gender, race has offered an efficient marker of difference upon which uneven stratification and division of labor has been produced and reproduced.[39] This differentiation has been not only critical to the accumulation of surplus capital, but also for producing intraclass divisions that have been effectively exploited in order for ruling class powers to maintain social control.[40] It is for this reason that the PPC (2018+) emphasizes a deep historical analysis of "systemic racism" and "systemic poverty;" and why the PPC (2018+) emphasizes its model of multiracial antipoverty "fusion politics." As such the campaign offers a challenge to liberal understandings of poverty and inequality that often pit race and gender against class. But it also offers a vehicle for superseding some of the limitations of prevailing progressive organizing models, namely forms of trade union organizing, Saul

[38] On origins of race, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (June 1990): 95–118; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80; Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (New York: Verso, 2016).

[39] See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[40] See W.E.B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935); Theodore W. Allen and Jeffrey B. Perry, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso, 1994).

Alinksy style community organizing, left identity politics, and left sectarianism. By making such a perhaps bold claim, I come into long-standing and ongoing scholarly and activist debates about the relationship between class and identity, but race in particular, as well as debates about organizing strategy. I will begin by explaining how I am theorizing the relationship between class, race, and identity, and then move to how this informs my emphasis and understanding of class unity and solidarity vis a vis other models.

I situate my analysis of race and class within a broad Marxist tradition. In "Mapping Latino Studies: Critical Reflections on Class and Social Theory," Latinx Studies scholars Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres discuss the prospects of a Marxist class analysis within their field of Latinx Studies. To them, pitting race against class is all together analytical misplaced. They write:

> class and 'race' are concepts of a different sociological order. Class and 'race' do not occupy the same analytical space and, thus, cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to each other. Class is a material space, even within the mainstream definition that links the concept to occupation, income status, and educational attainment—of which, in turn, reflect the materiality of class, though not with any analytical specificity. Hence, the significance of class can be rigorously considered only through an approach that recognizes the social relations of production as germane to any social justice or emancipatory political project.

Here, Darder and Torres adopt a Marxist class analysis against other sociological definitions which tend to reduce class merely to social status markers like occupation or income. However, by arguing that class and race "are concepts of a different sociological order," they are refusing the very premise of class vs. race debates. But then how should we understand the concept of race? What is racism? And what is its relationship to class?

Save for the most ideologically rigid, it is not hard for most people to see that there is a relationship between race and class in the United States. But again how should we understand

this relationship? In "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," Stuart Hall offers an alternative to what he sees as two generalized tendencies—an "economic" approach on the one hand, and a "sociological" approach on the other. The "economic" approach includes several schools of economic thinking, but the general problem he sees is a vulgar economic reductionism, whereby "social divisions which assume a distinctively racial or ethnic character can be attributed or explained principally with reference to economic structures and processes."[41] His critique of the "sociological" tendency is that in its effort to correct against a simplistic economic determinism retreats into a kind of "pluralistic" causality that seeks "extra-economic" factors in its place. In the end, he sees the two tendencies as mirror images of each other, an inability to theorize a "complex unity" between modes of production, specific forms of political domination, and ideological legitimation.[42]

As with much of Hall's work on race and culture, he insists on a non-reductionist interpretation of Marxism that recognizes both the materialist and historical premise of its method. By way of Althusser, Laclau, and Gramsci, Hall elaborates on how to better understand this "complex unity" (which some have described as the economic base and superstructure, although Marx never used this language). He writes, "the economic relations of production must themselves be 'reproduced.' This reproduction is not simply economic, but social, technical and, above all, ideological."[43] It is here where Hall really draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony as the manner in which a ruling class alliance is secured through coercion surely, but also by legitimizing their authority to rule. Hall thinks this has major relevance for analyzing the role of race and racism as a means of legitimizing a society structured in dominance. But in his mind, if

[41] Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (UNESCO, 1980), 306.
[42] Ibid, 325.
[43] Idib, 334.

capitalism cannot be understood as evolving in the exact same way in every place, then neither can racism and race. How racism was articulated in Caribbean slave societies is not going to be the same as how it manifested in the Jim Crow South and this is because of the "concrete historical 'work' which racism accomplishes under specific historical conditions."[44] Thus, he calls for greater attention to these historical and geographic specificities and comparative analysis in order to determine whether there could even be said to be a general theory of race and racism.

Needless to say, there has been a lot more scholarship on the subject since Hall's 1980 essay. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's groundbreaking work *Racial Formation in the United States* took up this call to lend more theoretical and historical clarity to analyses of race and racism.[45] Their theory of racial formation offered a framework for understanding the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[46] They specifically observe how these processes are tied to historical "racial projects," like chattel slavery or even the civil rights movement, in which "human bodies and social structures are represented and organized."[47] Like Hall, they draw on Gramsci's concept of hegemony to theorize how racial projects directly connect to the ways in which society is ruled and governed. Their theoretical framework has contributed to a whole body of literature examining the evolving racial formation of different racialized populations throughout U.S. history, including the field of whiteness studies, as well as relational studies of racial

[44] Ibid, 338.
[45] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[46] Ibid, 55.
[47] Ibid, 56.

formation.[48] This literature has been enormously useful to my understanding of the geographical and historical processes by which certain groups were included and excluded into the American Project. Even in cases where class feels under-theorized, racial formation case-studies offer insights into the history of class formation in the United States, because so often these processes have everything to do with the appropriation and exploitation of land, labor, and resources, and the securing of ruling class hegemony. These histories still mark this nation and its people in common and different ways.

However, the under-theorizing of capitalism and class in Omi and Winant's work poses challenges for understanding the "complex unity" that Hall discusses. To what end and in whose interest do various racial projects serve? In "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism," Adolph Reed describes race and gender as "ideologies of ascriptive difference." He writes, "Race is a taxonomy of ascriptive difference, that is, an ideology that constructs populations as groups and sorts them into hierarchies of capacity, civic worth, and desert based on 'natural' or essential characteristics attributed to them." He goes on, "Ideologies of ascriptive difference help to stabilize a social order by legitimizing its hierarchies of wealth, power, and privilege, including its social division of labor, as the natural order of things." While ascriptive ideologies emerge from "self-interested common sense as folk knowledge," they become codified by law and custom when they "converge and reinforce the interests of powerful strata in the society."[49] As most scholars of race have shown these categories and ascriptive ideologies have shifted over time, in no small part, because people of color, women, people with disabilities, queer people

[48] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 2007th ed. (New York: Verso, 1991); Nataliya Molina, Daniel Martinez Hosang, and Ramón Gutiérrez, eds., *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).
[49] Adolph Reed Jr., "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism," *New Labor Forum* 22, no. 1 (2013): 49; Also see Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012).

have led important movements to challenge and reshape the hierarchies that have marked our society. Yet quoting Marxist theorist Harry Chang, Reed writes, "racial formation has always been an aspect of class formation, as a 'social condition of production.' Race has been a constitutive element in a capitalist social dynamic in which 'social types (instead of persons) figure as basic units of economic and political management.'"[50]

Although this dissertation looks mainly at poor people's fusion organizing across race and ethnicity, this should not be seen as a minimization of the role of gender in class formation. Marxist feminist scholars, have convincingly argued that the burden of unpaid or devalued reproductive labor historically assigned to "women" has been not only critical to capitalist accumulation, but has resulted in the disproportionate impoverishment of women not just in the United States, but around the world.[51] Furthermore, Black and women of color feminists have articulated how gender and race have historically intersected to subject women of color to particular forms of exploitation and marginalization.[52] As many feminist scholars have noted, poor Black women and mothers leading the multiracial welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s articulated an analysis of poverty that brought not only race and class together, but gender, at a time when intersectional analyses were not yet mainstream concepts.[53] Likewise, we

[50] Reed Jr., "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism," 51.

[51] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012).

[52] Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[53] Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Judith Shulevitz, "Forgotten Feminisms: Johnnie Tillmon's Battle Against 'The Man'," *New York Review*, June 26, 2018; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

can look at the ways that the policing of sexuality and construction of disability is enmeshed and complicit in the historical development of capitalism.[54]

Without a class analysis of capitalism, how do our egalitarian demands go beyond the confines of racial or multicultural liberalism, which has only expanded in the neoliberal era to absorb and limit our analysis and political demands? No doubt, this very question has been posed by other left scholars, who have also resisted liberal tendencies to counterpose class against race, gender, sexuality, thereby challenging single axis analyses and organizing models. Some of these scholars even make the explicit case for socialism. But still, many of these same scholars who bring these terms together often emphasize models that weave a class critique within identity dedicated organizations and movements. For instance, Lisa Duggan, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor have argued that rather than a disavowal of class, radical movements that center the identities and experiences of people of color, women, and queer people provide the greatest potential for effectively challenging capitalism.[55] Their arguments reflect insights made by other Black and women of color feminists who have argued that attention to the particular is again not a denial of the general, but rather an entry point from which to analyze both dialectically, and thus better understand the broader political economy and culture from various marginalized positionalities.[56] While I do not necessarily disagree with this, my concern

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[54] Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Lennard J. Davis, "The Rule of Normalcy: Politics and Disability in the U.S.A [United States of Disability]," in *Disability, Divers-Ability, and Legal Change*, ed. M. Jones and Lee Ann Marks (London: Kluwer, 1999); Jules Joanne Gleeson, Elle O'Rourke, and Jordy Rosenberg, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

[55] See Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2003); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

[56] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 1987); Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970); Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Barbara Smith, *Aint' Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me*

is that we do actually push people towards an understanding of the general as explicitly referring to capitalist class relations. This is not because I think that capitalism has developed uniformly across the globe as an ahistorical force, but because it is the dominant world system in which we live and its general tendencies towards dispossession, exploitation, and the commodification and destruction of nature are a threat to people everywhere. This recognition can encourage solidarity across difference with the potential of building a broad class constituency needed to more effectively challenge the dominant political and economic order.

Towards the end of "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," Hall makes the case for why class unity is critical for combatting racism and capitalism:

> Capital reproduces the class, including its internal contradictions, as a whole—structured by race. It dominates the divided class, in part, through those internal divisions which have racism as one of its effects. It contains and disables representative class institutions, by neutralizing them—confining them to strategies and struggles which are race-specific, which do not surmount its limits, its barriers. Through racism, it is able to defeat the attempts to construct alternative means of representation which could more adequately represent the class as a whole, or which are capable of effecting the unity of the class as a result: that is, those alternatives which would adequately represent the class as a whole—against capitalism, against racism.[57]

I think we could apply Hall's critique of the limits and barriers of "race-specific" strategies and struggles to other forms of left identity politics that have come to predominate activism since the 1960s. Hall is not saying that these race-specific strategies and struggles do not have a class character to them, but by being contained to that which is race-specific, they become politically neutralized from articulating a broader agenda and constituency that can change the material conditions impacting the lives of working-class people.

Around: Forty Years of Movement Building With Barbara Smith, ed. Alethia Jones, Virginia Eubanks, and Barbara Smith (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2014).

[57] Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," 341.

I am well aware that many might disagree with my appeal to center class in our analysis and movements. But Hall's description of the limitations of race-specific or gender-specific strategies also resonate with my personal experiences as a latinx/white woman, worker, and organizer. Let me offer a concrete example. As a long-time restaurant server (over twelve years), I have experienced my fair share of sexual harassment, mostly from customers, but at least one particularly gross occasion on a job interview by a restaurant owner. Unfortunately, this is a common experience shared by many women in the service industry, an industry which is especially gendered.[58] This issue matters to me, but the workplace issue that has the greatest impact on my everyday life is the institution of a sub-minimum wage for restaurant servers with the reliance on tips.[59] I could go on about the material and psychological stress of never knowing how much you will earn (the sub-minimum wage does not even cover our income taxes). But sexual harassment and the sub-minimum wage are in fact not separate issues. Rather, they are intricately linked.

It is the reliance on tips that makes me most vulnerable to such harassment in the first place, because my livelihood is dependent on the volume of business (with returning customers) and how customers rate my "service." And the restaurant where one works determines your income, which is why I felt coerced into accepting such harassment at that one interview (although I did not take the job). Sexual harassment is about power, not just about proper and improper behavior. This is why fighting sexual harassment in the industry necessitates challenging the sub-minimum wage. And challenging the sub-minimum wage would require organizing with all tipped workers regardless of their gender or experience of sexual harassment

[58] See Catrin Einhorn and Rachel Abrams, "The Tipping Equation," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/11/business/tipping-sexual-harassment.html.
[59] "Minimum Wages for Tipped Employees," *U.S. Department of Labor*, August 1, 2021, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/state/minimum-wage/tipped.

(since cis-gendered women like me are not the exclusive victims of such harassment) to abolish the sub-minimum wage. Changing the sub-minimum wage and ensuring living wages for all workers might not directly challenge the set of patriarchal ideologies that encourage sexual harassment, but it would certainly offer working-class women like me the economic security to push back against it.[60] And who knows, but a collective struggle to abolish the sub-minimum wage might engender greater worker-to-worker solidarity, whereby women workers would not be fighting this battle alone.

I offer this example, not to privilege workplace organizing or even struggles around wages, but merely to show the interplay between class exploitation and gender and racial oppression, as well as how addressing an issue that connects me with all tipped workers might more effectively address a more particularized issue like sexual harassment, because it hits at a key source of our general disempowerment.[61] This is one reason why I think there are limitations to organizing models that assume that we have more in common with people who share certain identities, particularly race, gender, and sexuality, than those who do not. Or the assumption that the most impactful issues in our lives are necessarily the ones that are not shared by someone occupying a different racial/gender identity and thus the most effective organizational forms are those based on our specific racial and/or gender identities. The experience of long-time antipoverty organizers support my claim that by centering the issues most material to poor

[60] Although the Maryland legislature passed a $15 minimum wage law (which has yet to take effect), it still exempts tipped workers.

[61] Although I am mostly discussing gender in this scenario, racism plays a historic role in the exclusion of tipped workers from the standard minimum wage dating back to the New Deal era Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Today, the vast majority of the six million tipped workers are women and disproportionately people of color. See Andre Manuel, "The Tipped Subminimum Wage Has Sexist and Racist Origins: It's Time to End It," *On Labor: Workers, Unions, Politics*, February 17, 2021, https://onlabor.org/the-tipped-subminimum-wage-has-sexist-and-racist-origins-its-time-to-end-it/; "Better Wages, Better Tips: Restaurants Flourish with One Fair Wage" (New York: Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, February 13, 2018), https://chapters.rocunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/OneFairWage_W.pdf.

people's lives, in all their diversity, they have been able to not only create multiracial, multi-gender, and multi-generational coalitions, where some of the most marginalized within the working class can lead—poor Black women and other poor women in the case of the welfare rights movement—but they have been able to address a totality of overlapping issues.

It is a form of class organizing that does not require one to relinquish one's identity (by equating class with the trope of the white working class) or necessarily prevent one from taking up issues that might disproportionately affect one community or group over another. However, even here, a disproportionate issue posed in such a way can be a bridge to building multiracial coalitions. Take an issue like police brutality, which disproportionately impacts working-class communities of color. This was the issue (along with urban renewal) that forged the original Rainbow Coalition between the Chicago Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots. They recognized that policing was not simply a racialized strategy of political repression and containment, but had a class character to it that was also tied to the city's plans for urban renewal that cut across their racially segregated neighborhoods.[62] Poor people's organizing is a form of class organizing that has gone largely unrecognized, because those who mostly practice this model, poor people, have the least social prestige, and because it has generally existed outside the dominant models of the trade-union movement which has its own conservative, concessionary, and exclusionary tendencies on the one hand, and identity-based movements that have been so subject to elite capture on the other.

It is not always that other left scholars and movement activists completely ignore class, but as Darder and Torrez suggest "even when class is mentioned, the emphasis is primarily on an

[62] Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (New York: Melville House, 2011); Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

undifferentiated plurality of identity politics or an 'intersection of oppressions,' which, unfortunately, ignores the overwhelming tendency of capitalism to homogenize rather than to diversify human experience." They recognize the particularizing tendencies within late capitalism that are having a "horrendous economic impact" on "racialized and other marginalized communities," without losing sight that "capitalism is the most totalizing system of social relations the world has ever known."[63] Since Darder and Torres's critique of "identity politics" and reducing class to an "intersection of oppressions" appears to reference the critical work of Black and women of color theorists, it is worth addressing further.

First, I believe it is possible to simultaneously credit the Combahee River Collective for coining the term "identity politics" without laying all the problems with "identity politics" at their feet. The term "identity politics" is such a minefield because it represents so many different things to different people. Even within Black feminist theorizing, there is no consensus of meaning. For instance, when Kimberlé Crenshaw speaks of "identity politics" in her essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," she is not referring to the identity politics as theorized by the Combahee River Collective, but to more conventional "single-axis" antiracist and feminist movements. No doubt, Black, women of color, Third World feminists, and queer theorists have attempted to push back against a tendency to focus on individual categories of difference and identity markers over a structural analysis, against a conflation of the personal with the individual, against a co-optation of the radical roots of these politics within the neoliberal university and beyond.[64]

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[63] Darder and Torres, "Mapping Latino Studies," 309.

[64] See Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 3 (n.d.): 437–65; Jasbir K. Puar, "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *PhiloSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (January 2012): 49–66; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of

In *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building With Barbara Smith,* Smith reflects on how identity politics has not only been derided by those on the Right, but misinterpreted and watered-down even by those on the Left in ways that sound something like:

> 'I'm an African American, working-class lesbian with a physical disability and those are the only things I'm concerned about. I'm not really interested in finding out about the struggles of Chicano farm workers to organize labor unions, because that doesn't have anything to do with me.' The narrow, watered-down dilution of the most expansive meaning of the term "identity politics" was used by people as a way of isolating themselves, and not working in coalition, and not being concerned about overarching systems of institutionalized oppression. That was narrow.

For Smith, identity politics was never meant to be a negation of coalitional politics, but a way of ensuring that progressive and socialist politics are anti-racist and anti-sexist, that they include the multitude of "interlocking oppressions" affecting black women and other oppressed and working-class people in all their heterogeneity.[65] I would add that the dominant tendency to imagine the working class as referring solely to white "blue-collar" men is in itself a cultural construction produced to erase the historical and contemporary diversity of this nation's working-class population.[66] These theoretical insights have been critically important and are clearly at work when the PPC (2018+) talks of the pillars of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation as "interlocking." However, I would argue that the narrow

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Minnesota Press, 2000); Barbara Smith, *Aint' Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building With Barbara Smith*, ed. Alethia Jones, Virginia Eubanks, and Barbara Smith (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2014); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[65] Smith regularly refers to this essay by Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 343–46; Also historian Erik S. McDuffie's *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* helps to situate early canonical texts like the Combahee River Collective Statement within an even longer history of black women's revolutionary and socialist politics, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[66] In "The Trump Era: The Politics of Race and Class," Nell Irvin Painter discusses how Trump era politics have helped to further cement this construction of the "working class" as white, *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, March 1, 2017, https://paw.princeton.edu/article/trump-era-politics-race-and-class.

version of identity politics that Smith describes is unfortunately commonplace within certain spheres of social justice activism.

One of the ways this "watered-down" version turns up is in certain "anti-oppression" and "antiracism" models of organizing. As a person who identifies as latinx and white, what I consider a "mixed" racial and ethnic heritage, I have always chafed at antiracist models that call for separate spaces for people of color and white people. Since a clear racial identity has never been readily available to me, I am suddenly forced to ask, 'Where do I go? Where do I belong? And why?' Trying to make that decision sends me down an exhaustive path, questioning my every motivation, and for what? Who does this benefit? Which is what attracted me to this fusion antipoverty movement in the first place. In the antipoverty movements that I have been a part of, what gets centered is the problem and the people who are most impacted by that problem—regardless of their identities. One's entry, membership, and leadership potential are predicated on one's experience, politics, and commitment, not one's particular identity. And likely also because I grew up in multiracial and multicultural environments, it is within multiracial movement spaces that I exist most comfortably. I do not need to authenticate my latinx identity in one space or deny it another. Ironically, it is the "anti-oppression" models that purport to be most sensitive to the ways that our identities shape our lives that run rough-shod over mine.

But more than this, it is the lack of a sustained and rigorous analysis of capitalism and class that I find most troubling in some social justice scholarship and activism. In "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy," Andrea Smith proposes an analytical framework that connects the intellectual projects of Native studies, African American studies, and Asian American studies towards the goal of strengthening solidarity among people of color. Smith writes, "people-of-color organizing must be premised on making strategic alliances with one

another, based on where we are situated within the larger political economy." Putting aside the contestation of whether or not Smith has claim to a "we," she proceeds to articulate a model that notably does not situate racialized groups within the "larger political economy."[67] Instead she centers white supremacy, which according to her schema is upheld by three "pillars" or "logics": "(1) slaveability/anti-Black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) genocide, which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war." By this schema, we are to understand that the "logics" of anti-black racism, genocide, and orientalism form the chain of white supremacy, but what is the logic of white supremacy? It hovers above like an uninterrogated ahistorical force, where capitalism figures only as a facilitator of white supremacy. But the purpose of Smith's framework is less about providing analytical clarity as to how racialized groups are situated within the larger political economy, but reinscribing who is harmed by the current system—people of color—and what she believes to be the central obstacle to people of color's liberation—white supremacy. Despite the differences in forms of oppression and thus challenges in building solidarity, people of color are natural allies in this fight.

For me, Smith's essay is a good illustration of a current of racial identity politics that Darder and Torres identify within ethnic politics more broadly. The assumption that the line is between what is now more commonly described as BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color) on one side and white people on the other, with poor and working-class white people as conspicuously absent, or maybe as allies or co-conspirators, not only renders class invisible, but is in itself an elitist proposition. That I, by virtue of being a woman of latinx heritage, have more authority to speak and lead in certain organizing circles than a poor formerly incarcerated white father working as a day laborer cleaning Camden Yards baseball stadium is absolutely absurd to

[67] Sarah Viren, "The Native Scholar Who Wasn't," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/magazine/cherokee-native-american-andrea-smith.html.

me. This kind of politics will certainly not make this poor white father more free, but it also will not make me more free either.

Although with my relative privilege afforded by a middle-income upbringing and educational status, I could lean into such politics to reinscribe or advance my social position. In "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," philosopher Olúfémi O. Táíwò looks critically at how certain social norms of epistemic deference regularly practiced in the academy and activist-oriented spaces based on intentions of centering the voices of the most marginalized, a worthy aim of standpoint epistemology, actually undermine such efforts. Táíwò does not take issue with the basic premise and aim of standpoint epistemology, which is that all knowledge is socially situated and that people occupying marginalized social locations have positional advantage in gaining some forms of knowledge, particularly regarding how society is unequally structured. Rather he calls into question dominant practices that assume experiential knowledge based on shared group identity, such as race, that make such practices susceptible to "elite capture." In a particularly pointed passage, he writes:

> Elites from marginalized groups can benefit from this arrangement in ways that are compatible with social progress. But treating group elites' interests as necessarily or even presumptively aligned with full group interests involves a political naiveté we cannot afford. Such treatment of elite interests functions as a racial Reaganomics: a strategy reliant on fantasies about the exchange rate between the attention economy and the material economy. Perhaps the lucky few who get jobs finding the most culturally authentic and cosmetically radical description of the continuing carnage are really winning one for the culture. Then, after we in the chattering class get the clout we deserve and secure the bag, its contents will eventually trickle down to the workers who clean up after our conferences, to slums of the Global South's megacities, to its countryside. But probably not.[68]

[68] Olúfémi O. Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," *The Philosopher*, What is We?, 108, no. 4 (October 2020), https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo.

While Táíwò does not specifically name "identity politics," speaking more about standpoint epistemology, it is clear that he is critical of an over reliance on individual markers of identity like race to effectively center those who are most marginalized to address the concrete and material ways that people are being oppressed and exploited.

But the problems with how we understand the relationship between class and identity and thus the social justice formations that predominate have a complex historical and material grounding beyond scholarly debates. This is why it is so important to put dominant social justice practices into a historical context of neoliberal reconfigurations since the 1960s. In *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, Cedric Johnson examines the evolution of post-segregation African American politics from the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s "toward the consolidation of a more conservative politics predicated on elite entreaty, racial self-help, and incremental social reforms."[69] This is partly because notions of Black Power already conformed in many ways to conventional ethnic group politics, but also how this would interact with the social management dynamics and "technologies of citizenship" that developed in the wake of the civil rights movement and urban riots of the 1960s. It privileged elite brokerage over popular democratic struggle. In the end, Johnson argues that this form of race-first politics "has run its course as an effective means to confront inequality."[70]

While Johnson is looking specifically at the shifts in African American politics, I think his analysis has parallels in other movements. In *The Twilight of Equality?*, Lisa Duggan looks at how national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have shifted towards what she refers to as

[69] Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota, 2007), xxiii.
[70] Ibid, xxxix

a "neoliberal brand of identity/equality politics" since the 1990s.[71] Rather than representing a broad-based progressive movement, these mainstream lesbian and gay organizations represent a narrow gay, moneyed elite that are pursuing a more conservative agenda of inclusion within the neoliberal social order. Although Duggan would likely disagree with Johnson that race-first or identity based politics have run their course, their attention to these more insidious forms of political containment and redirection in the neoliberal era are insightful. Duggan attributes a real weakness of the progressive Left to its inability to fully "integrate identity and cultural politics" and for continuing to engage in unproductive economy/culture debates that drive potential constituencies away.[72] While I sympathize with her frustrations and desires to bridge these fissures on the Left, I do not think uniting the Left is the same thing as uniting poor and working-class people. This has become particularly more true as the Left's popular base has narrowed considerably. Where these economy/culture debates are most consequential, in my mind, they can only be productively moved forward through organized struggle that centers the real concerns of poor and working-class people as a starting point. Therefore, it does not proceed that uniting what remains of the Left is a necessary prerequisite for organizing a broader class constituency.

That is because there is a more concrete basis for the Left's weakness that goes beyond "productive" or "unproductive" internal debates (it seems this determination is subjective). However compromised they were, the trade-union movement formed an important organized base of working-class power, in terms of people and resources, that had an organic relationship

[71] Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2003), 44.
[72] Ibid, xx-xxii.

to other progressive movements.[73] This mostly does not exist now. Unlike some on the Left, I do not think we are going back to the heyday of the industrial labor movement, but how are we, as Johnson suggests, building popular democratic movements that involve the participation of masses of working-class people? I do not mean just in terms of mass mobilizations, but sustained and active organizing. The NGO model of activism is definitely not up to the task, because corporate and elite funders are not particularly interested in addressing root causes of inequality or building an organized and diverse working-class base that might challenge their power and privilege.[74]

Although I am arguing that the PPC (2018+) is unique and distinct from other prevailing organizing models, I want to be careful not to place the PPC (2018+) in an antagonistic relationship to other progressive models of organizing or to assume that they themselves are mutually exclusive. Social movements and social movement practitioners are more complex and interwoven. For instance, rather than imagining the 1968 PPC as a complete departure from the civil rights movement, we could instead see it as an extension of a current within the civil rights movement that was committed to more democratic socialist and even revolutionary aims.[75] Currents that continue forward even if somewhat weakened. For instance, Rev. Barber himself came to the PPC (2108+) by way of his own roots in a more radical pro-labor antipoverty Southern civil rights movement. And following the 1968 PPC, the welfare rights movement carried on the strategic vision of multiracial and coalitional poor people's organizing. These multiple movement currents provide the model for today's fusion organizing of the poor.

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[73] Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed Jr., "The Crisis of Labour and the Left in the United States," *Socialist Register*, 2015, 353.
[74] See Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, "NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector," *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 93–131.
[75] See Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

But more than fifty years after King called out the triplets of evil, the problems of racism, poverty, militarism, and now ecological devastation appear to have only become more entrenched and violent. Under these conditions, where it is obvious that white supremacy is still so much a part of the DNA of our society, how can the PPC (2018+) seriously propose uniting poor people of color with poor whites, in particular? Very little in the news suggests this is a credible possibility. While the PPC (2018+)'s model of "fusion politics" is not posed in an antagonistic stance towards other left or progressive organizing models, it is distinct and unique. Part of this distinctiveness is that "fusion politics" is envisioned explicitly as a counter strategy to "plantation politics." The antagonistic formulation of "fusion politics" versus "plantation politics" draws its inspiration beyond the 1968 PPC to that of Reconstruction and the Southern U.S.

Given the South's long history of white racial violence, it might seem like an odd place to look for hope, but it is precisely here where Rev. Barber suggests we can find inspiration. Barber derives his formulation of "fusion politics" from North Carolina's Fusion Party, an interracial coalition of Republicans and Populists, that not only swept the state legislature, but won both U.S. Senate seats in the 1890s.[76] During Reconstruction, North Carolina's Fusion Party and similar coalitions across the South ushered in one of the most progressive, some might say revolutionary, eras in this nation's democracy. Although Reconstruction was defeated through "white Southern terrorism and Northern white indifference," Barber argues that these fusion coalitions provide a framework for how the "divisive rhetoric of white solidarity" can be challenged and the "common interests of most black and white Southerners" can be centered.[77]

[76] William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016), 56.
[77] Ibid, 56.

While Barber's fusion politics is a much broader coalition that includes all justice-seeking people, I am particularly interested in the fusion organizing of the poor that is emphasized by the Poor People's Campaign then and now. At a recent PPC (2018+) Moral Mondays live stream entitled "Building the Labor Movement from the South" focused on the union drive at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, Reverend Barber spoke with historian Robin D.G. Kelley about Alabama and the South's radical social movement history. Barber asked Kelley why he believed people are surprised to think of the South as a vibrant site of multiracial labor organizing and democratic movements. Kelley responded:

> Those who rule the South, the class that rules the South, they know that they don't live in a conservative region. We call it conservative. We call it backwards, but actually they're trying to do everything they can to suppress those very democratic movements...They are afraid that an interracial multiracial movement would threaten their power and that is why there is a constant war in the South around voting rights, labor rights, immigration rights, just the right for any basic civil rights.[78]

Kelley cited evidence of the South's radical democratic multiracial history from the Reconstruction era, to the Populist movement, the Knights of Labor, and finally the militant labor organizing of the 1930's and 1940's, which was particularly strong with the United Mine Workers (UMW) in Alabama. He credited communist organizers and New Deal labor protections with this "heyday of multiracial labor struggles" in the South. In Alabama, the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company tried to break the UMW union by any means possible, including racist divide and conquer, but they were unsuccessful. According to Kelley, it was not until anti-communism in the aftermath of WWII and the passage of the Taft Hartley Act that the ruling class was able to claw back these worker victories and secure Alabama as a "right to work" state in 1953.

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[78] "Moral Monday: Bessemer 6000 & Building the Labor Movement from the South," *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, March 29, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=458452658691371&ref=watch_permalink.

Despite this history of interracial class solidarity in the South (and elsewhere), the opposite is also true, in greater proportion. The overarching history of disunity and white racial terror, along with the silencing of these counter-hegemonic moments of class unity, conspire to make us believe that it is impossible, a hopelessly utopian venture. This was of course the criticism made about the PPC (1968).[79] But how should we understand these moments of the poor organizing the poor across racial lines? As a contradiction? An anomaly? How is it that interracial class solidarity can and does exist right alongside such blatant and virulent white supremacy? Rather than a contradiction or anomaly, this unity makes sense if one understands white supremacy as an ideology that serves to justify racial and class domination and pre-empt interracial class solidarity and revolt.

In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B Du Bois asks how it was that a small "planter class" (one might say the 1% of its time) was able to maintain domination when they were greatly outnumbered by five million poor whites and four million enslaved black people.[80] For Du Bois, the construction of racial difference and white supremacy accounts for why there was a lack of effective and sustained revolt in the southern United States, unlike the West Indies. According to him, poor whites consented to planter rule by way of being offered jobs policing the enslaved, but also because, "it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters. Slavery bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro toil of all sorts...To these Negroes he transferred all the dislike and hatred which he had for the whole slave system."[81] It only makes sense that in places of violent dispossession and exploitation across racial lines that racism would be key to maintaining such class and race domination. While *Black Reconstruction* is a history of Wall Street

[79] Gordon K. Mantler, "'The Press Did You in': The Poor People's Campaign and the Mass Media," *The Sixties* 3, no. 1 (n.d.): 33–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/17541321003771128.
[80] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* [1935] (New York: Free Press, 1998), 32.
[81] Ibid, 12.

successfully undermining a political project led by formerly enslaved people to revolutionize American democracy and society along more equitable lines, it can be read as a cautionary tale for activists of his time and ours to not be divided by racism, fear, and narrow self-interest. Du Bois was, after all, writing this during the 1930s in the shadow of Reconstruction's defeat and during a time of militant multiracial working-class struggle in the Jim Crow South.

Drawing on Du Bois's analysis of the planter class's use of racial divide and conquer between "the black worker" and "the white worker," those within the Poverty Scholars network often refer to this ruling class strategy as "plantation politics."[82] An illustration with the title "Plantation Politics" was created by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union's (KWRU) Education Committee in the 1990s to represent this dynamic and has long been used in Poverty Scholars' educational workshops. It shows two dogs fighting over a bone, across one it says "poor whites," and across the other it says "poor blacks (other non-whites)." In the corner off to the side is a third dog sitting in front of a giant pile of bones with the words "The Rich & Powerful" written above. The illustration helps to initiate discussion and debate about how groups are pitted against each other, while those who are enriching themselves, who are benefiting the most from these divisions draw attention away from themselves, recede from the picture. And while the illustration specifically speaks to racial division, it can generate discussion about the myriad ways people are divided and pitted against each other—"taxpayers" and "public sector workers" (also often racialized), "essential workers" and "unemployed workers," "dreamers" and other "illegal immigrants."

[82] This is not the same as Malcolm X's "field Negro" and "house Negro" articulation of 'plantation politics,' although his analysis does speak to intraracial class divisions, see Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots," Speech, the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan, December 10, 1963, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots/.

Rather than seeing *fusion politics* of the poor as an anomaly to the overarching force of *plantation politics*, I argue that the potential of fusion politics is plantation politics raison d'etre. They exist in a dialectical struggle. Plantation politics is designed to preempt fusion politics and fusion politics is a strategic counter to plantation politics. However, as Kelley discusses of communist organizing in Alabama during the 1930s, in *Hammer and Hoe,* because disrupting these color lines to forge class solidarity was such a threat to the elite white power structure, it was often met with incredible violence.[83] No doubt these backlashes have had their intended disciplinary effect, but that poor people have sometimes in spite of the violence and obfuscations been able to unite across race, out of antiracist principle and/or strategic necessity, is also true, even if it has not amassed the scale and force to ultimately transform the power relations of this nation.

Which makes it all the more important to learn from those who have practiced and continue to practice fusion organizing. What compels them to do this work and how do they do it in seemingly inhospitable environments? The veteran organizers (40-50 + years of experience) that I interviewed told me so many incredible, inspiring stories that just blew my mind, as well as tragic ones that confirmed the real-life risks and stakes of this work. Whole books could be (and should be) written on the stories they shared with me. For them it was not just stuff that happened in the past but experiences that deeply shaped their trajectory and strategic orientation, including their involvement in the PPC (2018+). The campaign is indebted to them for their continuation and evolution of a tradition of fusion organizing of the poor.

Chapter Outline

[83] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

In Chapter 1, "Re-Articulating a *New* Poor People's Campaign: Fifty Years of Grassroots Antipoverty Movement Organizing," I reframe the historiography of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign and social movements of the 1960s by charting a continued legacy of multi-racial and multi-issue antipoverty movement organizing that connects directly to the PPC (2018+). By drawing an alternative genealogy of antipoverty activism from the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) of the 1980s and 1990s, from the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) and poor people's labor organizing of the 2000s to the Moral Mondays and Fight For $15 movements of recent years, I simultaneously challenge two assumptions. One, that the 1968 PPC was a failed utopian experiment that, however well-intended, was doomed by among other things the futility of its very premise—poor people uniting across racial lines and leading a movement to abolish poverty. Second, rather than a deeper outcome of decades of continued antipoverty movement organizing, the 1968 PPC is merely an effective symbolic reference for today's effort. By centering the continued efforts of welfare rights, antipoverty, civil rights, anti-homelessness, and human rights activists from the War on Poverty through a longstanding war on the poor, I reveal how antipoverty movements have served as a critical and radical nexus for a range of social movements—civil rights, feminist, environmental, labor, anti-war, etc. And by narrating fifty years of antipoverty organizing, I challenge dominant movement periodizations that obscure these continuities of the poor organizing the poor.

In chapter 2, "Struggling with Poverty: Stigma, Strategy, and Building Class Consciousness," I look at how the PPC (2018+)'s attack on hegemonic definitions and narratives of poverty, a strategy carried over from earlier chapters in antipoverty organizing, is being reproduced on a broader scale. By calling out the dominant narratives and images of poverty

used to blame, shame, and isolate poor people, the campaign reclaims and recasts being "poor" as a position of knowledge and power. And by broadening the definition of poverty, the PPC (2018+) encourages individuals to interrogate their own material conditions to consider whether or not they, too, are poor. Whether individuals easily identify as poor or not, I argue that this process serves as a gateway to developing broader class consciousness and solidarity that eschews a charity or allyship approach to antipoverty organizing. Yet, I show how these are live processes, where participants are directly confronted with the myriad ways that stigmatizing narratives are brought to the surface through the campaign's organizing.

Chapter 3, "Fusion Politics of the Poor: Uniting Across Race, Geography, and Issue," looks at the ways that the contemporary PPC (2018+)'s model of "moral fusion politics" offers a mainstream analytical and political framework for knitting together the struggles of impoverished communities across lines of race, geography, and issue. Once again, the PPC (2018+) looks to the past to 1968, but also further back to the period of Reconstruction following Emancipation in the Southern United States for its inspiration and strategy of fusion as a way of simultaneously challenging white supremacy and "plantation politics," building multiracial coalitions of the poor and dispossessed. But this chapter is very much rooted in the present, hearing from organizers from the Midwest, Pacific Northwest, California, Southwest, South, Appalachia, and East Coast about what it means to practice multiracial fusion organizing in the particular political, economic, and cultural contexts of their states. I ask why organizers feel it is important to organize within and across the boundaries of race, place, and issue and what they have learned through doing this about the challenges and possibilities of building a nation-wide multiracial poor people's movement.

Chapter 4, "Led by the Poor?: Theory and Practice in the Poor People's Campaign," I examine the history and strategic thinking underlying the mandate to "lifting up and deepening the leadership of those most affected" and what this means and looks like to organizers in concrete practice.[84] I ask what does it mean to be most affected? And why do these experiences matter to this question of leadership? I observe how organizers identify a distinction and relationship between individual and collective notions of leadership of the poor. Here, I look at the critical role that base-building *organizations* of the poor play within a broader movement coalition. Finally, as many organizers explained, this vision of uplifting and centering the leadership of those most impacted cannot be achieved through rhetoric or deference alone but must be accompanied by intentional "leadership development" and political education.

Although not everyone I interviewed is quoted directly in my dissertation, I learned so much from my conversations with each and every person. Relistening to the interviews, I found myself crying, laughing, agitated, and inspired to the point of jumping out of my chair wanting to share what I just listened to with someone, anyone. There were so many insights, so much genius, so much incredible history, I could have written ten more dissertations on this set of interviews alone. Of course, I will not be doing this, but it really confirmed for me what I already knew, which is that the poor and dispossessed do have the knowledge and capacity to lead with clarity and vision. Certainly, one of the long-term audiences for this dissertation are those who are a part of the PPC (2018+), but I hope the lessons and insights from campaign leaders might resonate with other activists and organizers struggling with similar challenges in the fight for a more just world, free from unnecessary deprivation and destruction. I also hope that the analysis and practices of organizers in this campaign and this longer history of poor people's movements,

[84] "Our Principles," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival,* https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-principles/.

might offer new ways of thinking about the relationship between class and identity that open up the possibility of reconsidering and re-centering class, not as a term that obscures difference, but grounds it.

Here, I argue that multiracial poor people's movements have acted as a gateway to class consciousness and solidarity across difference and similarly served as a radical nexus of various movement currents, which in lies their revolutionary potential. The PPC (2018+) is an outcome of this longer history and a contemporary vehicle for reproducing this movement once again on a broader national scale. Although it is doing so on much different grounds than the 1968 PPC, these very differences offer new political possibilities, as well as risks. Thankfully, campaign leaders are drawing on diverse and deep reservoirs of knowledge to analyze the present political and economic conditions and to build a broad and diverse fusion movement led by the poor and dispossessed across race, issue, geography.

Chapter 1: Rearticulating a *New* Poor People's Campaign: Fifty Years of Grassroots Anti-Poverty Movement Organizing

In the spring of 2014, the Poverty Initiative (PI) celebrated its ten-year anniversary with a three-day strategic dialogue titled Getting Into Step at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, attended by some 150 anti-poverty and human rights organizers, faith leaders, and cultural producers from around the country and the world.[85] Getting Into Step's opening ceremony, held in Union's chapel, celebrated the history of PI and the broader movement to end poverty. I had arrived early to help craft and rehearse a *mística* procession with singing, music, and signs representing the eight caravans that had traveled from throughout the country to Washington, DC, to take part in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign.[86] The 2014 ceremony honored those who were instrumental in founding PI, as well as "fallen fighters" from the larger movement, some historic giants, and others, mostly unsung. It ended with a prayer and benediction by the activist Rev. William Barber, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) North Carolina state chapter and leader of the Moral Mondays movement. Each section of the program was carefully curated to highlight the theme of Dr. King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign (hereafter PPC). Although the PPC has been

[85] At this gathering, PI rebranded as the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. See "The Poverty Initiative Mission," *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice* (New York), https://kairoscenter.org/poverty-initiative; "Getting Into Step" was a reference to a 1968 *Chicago Sun-Times* political cartoon by Bill Mauldin about Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign that was widely used within PI educational material. The cartoon depicts four marchers with patches indicating the racial and ethnic identities they represent: American Indians, Puerto Ricans, poor whites, and blacks. A man in the background says to another, "What worries me, Senator, is that they're getting into step." The cartoon was reprinted by JustSeeds Artists' Cooperative ([1968] 2018), https://justseeds.org/graphic/getting-into-step-1968.

[86] *Mística* is the name given by Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) for the introduction of cultural forms of expression—music, theater, dance, visual art and installation—within movement organizing as a way of not only teaching certain concepts but also producing "the *feeling* of collective struggle" [my italics]. See Alessandro Mariano, Erivan Hilário, and Rebecca Tarlau, "Pedagogies of Struggle and Collective Organization: The Educational Practices of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement," *Interface* 8, no. 2 (2016): 236–37.

largely forgotten within mainstream historical memory, its symbolism was not lost on the attendees of this gathering. Not only were most of us familiar with its history, we also knew that it foreshadowed what was on the gathering's agenda: we were there to discuss a proposal to relaunch a new Poor People's Campaign to coincide with the original's fiftieth anniversary.

PI was founded in May 2004 by Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis (not yet then ordained), along with a group of Union Theological Seminary faculty, staff, and community leaders. Baptist's political organizing, which grew from his experience as a youth during the 1965 Watts Rebellion, spans roughly fifty years from the Black Student Movement of the 1960s to trade-union organizing with the United Steelworkers. As a formerly homeless father, he became a lead organizer with the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) in the early 90s, and then the education director for the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) and the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) in the late 90s and early 2000s. Theoharis had entered the movement to end poverty through Empty the Shelters, a nationwide student group that had worked alongside the NUH, and then continued as a dedicated organizer with the KWRU and the PPEHRC.[87] Baptist, Theoharis, and the other founders formed PI with the mission of "raising up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor."[88] However, in addition to training seminary students, PI created the Poverty Scholars Program in 2007 for leaders of a diverse range of organizations of the poor and dispossessed.

The Poverty Scholars Program became a space where organizers and leaders from the ranks of the poor could connect across different geographical locations, communities, and

[87] Liz Theoharis, "The Revival of the National Union of the Homeless," *The Nation*, March 20, 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/national-homeless-union.
[88] "The Poverty Initiative Mission," *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice.*

specific issue campaigns to learn from each other's struggles and grapple with the question of how to build a broad movement capable of ending poverty and exploitation. I became involved with the Poverty Scholars Program in 2007 as an organizer with the United Workers, a poor people's multiracial and bilingual human rights organization in Baltimore. It was through the program that I first learned about the PPC. Its educational gatherings and materials often used the PPC, among other examples, as a powerful case study of multiracial poor people's movement organizing.[89] Although some contemporary leaders could trace their organizing back to the 1960s and the original PPC, most younger activists like me envisioned ourselves carrying on the earlier campaign's model of multiracial anti-poverty organizing.

The Getting Into Step strategic dialogue moved the discussion of the PPC from historical model to a present-day possibility. From this gathering, the PI provided the infrastructure and network from which to begin building a national campaign. Unlike the original campaign, which was assembled in less than a year, we had four years to *get into step* for the fiftieth anniversary. This work involved a deepening collaboration with Barber and the Moral Mondays and Fight for $15 movement in the South. And in the spring of 2018, thousands of impoverished and grassroots organizers, clergy, and cultural producers from over forty states launched the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (hereafter PPC [2018+]), co-chaired by Reverend Barber, President of Repairers of the Breach, and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice in New York.

Like the opening mística ceremony, this chapter seeks to make visible a rich historical tradition of poor people's organizing across race, gender, geography, and issue. The PPC

[89] See The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary, *A New and Unsettling Force: Reigniting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign* (New York: Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice, 2009).

(2018+) is not simply resurrecting the spirit of Dr. King's campaign, but quite literally building on fifty years of continued grassroots organizing to abolish poverty. This rooted legacy is not only because there are people involved in the new campaign who were there in 1968—people like the welfare rights warrior Rev. Annie Chambers, who often tells the story of being pregnant while traveling with one of the caravans, giving birth along the way, and still making it to Washington, DC—but also because interracial, anti-poverty organizing has remained alive in the five-plus decades since 1968, adapting and responding to seismic shifts in the global capitalist economy and the restructuring of the social welfare state. Today's campaign is part of this continued history and practice.

In this chapter, I first weave together political and economic history to illuminate the terrain on which anti-poverty activists have fought. I begin with a brief history of the social, political, and economic conditions that gave birth to both the PPC and the welfare rights movement. From there, I examine how the welfare rights movement of the sixties and seventies evolved and overlapped in the Post-Fordist era with a movement led by the homeless in the eighties and nineties, and then how these networks combined with low-wage, worker-led organizations in the early 2000s. By following the ongoing practices of anti-poverty organizers, I reframe the historiography of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s in order to complicate categorical separations between movements—civil rights, welfare rights, anti-homelessness, labor, feminism, anti-war, and even environmentalism—as well as dominant periodizations that obscure the continuity of movement activity up to the present.

The network of anti-poverty and economic human rights organizations convened by the PI would eventually join forces with the Moral Mondays and Fight for $15 movements out of the South to launch the PPC (2018+). Today, the campaign has built an expansive infrastructure

across forty-five states that supports the independent political unity of the poor and dispossessed nationally. In the final section of this chapter, I recount the recent reorganization of the PPC (2018+) through my own involvement with the Poverty Scholars Program and continued participation in the campaign as a local organizer and scholar.[3] I detail the pre-launch phase of the campaign as these leading networks came together, and then offer observations based on my involvement and my interviews with campaign participants about how they carry on the work and build on lessons from earlier movements.

Why is this long history so important? For one, because so much of poor people's movement history, including the PPC, is largely forgotten or unknown. Even many of those who have joined the PPC (2018+) know very little about the history of anti-poverty organizing that this new campaign is built on. After fifteen years of involvement, I am still learning from my own research and from movement practitioners about what happened previously and how we got to where we are today. Surely, researchers can never fully capture the richness and complexities of real-life movements, but one thing I have found is that to properly contextualize the current campaign's model and strategy, I needed to offer a longer genealogy of anti-poverty organizing.[90]

Whereas some historians might object to applying lessons from the past to our present, this is exactly what PPC (2018+) campaign leaders have done. As an organizer, I experience history as a critical teacher; learning from other organizers' analyses of the past is invaluable to

[90] While historians Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang make a convincing argument against the "Long Movement" thesis of the civil rights movement in favor of recognizing the regional and temporal distinctiveness of the crm as a Southern movement against Jim Crow from 1975-1955, I appreciate how Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's "long civil rights movement" perspective as applied to U.S. based antipoverty struggles help to uncover continuities and unrecognized chapters or periods of struggle that are linked generationally by social movement actors. See Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265–88; Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Right Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63.

trying to figure out what to do today. The multiracial movements of the poor offer critical lessons for how we might build a society for the many and not just the few. In this chapter's conclusion, I examine some of the ways that the PPC (2018+) uses these lessons to build a broadly based movement across issues, identities, and geographies that centers and develops the leadership of the poor to abolish poverty.

From Reform to Revolution: Remembering the Poor People's Campaign

On April 4, 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, while supporting the sanitation workers' strike. The iconic images of African American sanitation workers wearing "I AM A MAN" signs and King's final and prophetic "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech are etched into a collective national psyche. King's support of the sanitation workers is often described as his last campaign and cited as a critical convergence of the fight for civil rights, economic justice, and workers' rights.[91] But it was the oft-forgotten PPC that was in fact King's final crusade. King saw the sanitation workers strike as highlighting the issues he sought to address through the PPC.

In the eight months leading up to his assassination, Dr. King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), were feverishly preparing for the PPC—a unique effort to bring a multiracial coalition of poor people to the nation's capital to dramatize the plight of poverty in the United States and to demand an Economic Bill of Rights. Still shocked and grief-stricken by King's assassination, SCLC and PPC coalition members decided to carry on with their planned actions. In May 1968, eight caravans from different regions of the

[91] Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

country set off for Washington. Over 5,000 people, black, chicano/a, white, Native American, and Puerto Rican, from rural areas and urban centers, camped out at "Resurrection City," a shanty town built on the National Mall. From May 2 to June 23, participants took part in daily protests, sit-ins, and civil disobedience, as well as other activities that built solidarity and community. For many who traveled, lived, protested, sang, and played music together, the PPC was a formative experience in multiracial class solidarity. The Washington campaign was intended to be the first phase of an escalating campaign for economic and racial justice. Unfortunately, it would not outlive the dismantling of Resurrection City and the ouster of its residents in late June.[92]

But to understand how and why Dr. King came to the PPC when he did, it is important to see civil rights within a broad constellation of movements that were making demands on the state and capital. The PPC was a convergence of social movements, emerging out of civil rights and intersecting with anti-poverty and welfare rights movements in cities and rural areas and on Native American reservations. It connected with the burgeoning Chicano/a rights movements and American Indian struggles for sovereignty, protection of land, fishing rights, and indigenous ways of life. It drew on the labor and civil rights networks from the Highlander Folk School in Appalachia, a rare place where poor whites and blacks came together for movement training and exchange. It pulled in the peace and student movements, the Black Power movement, the labor movement, and movements for community-based organizing in cities like Chicago. The PPC

[92] See Charles Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People's Washington Campaign* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969); Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Gordon K. Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition & the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998); Colleen Wessel-McCoy, ""'Freedom Church' of the Poor": Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Vision for a Poor People's Campaign and Its Lessons for Today" (New York, Union Theological Seminary, 2017). Many in the new campaign read PI staffer Colleen Wessel-McCoy's dissertation.

brought these strands together to create a multiracial movement that was radical, unique, and ambitious.[93] It also emerged at the moment when the Fordist Compromise was beginning to come apart, and it anticipated the retraction rather than expansion of the state's social welfare policies.

The postwar economic boom in Western nations relied on a particular arrangement between industrial capital, the state, and labor, which came to be known as Fordism or Fordist-Keynesianism.[94] In exchange for a less disruptive and more productive labor force, industry recognized unions and their demands for higher wages, benefits, and some improved conditions. With more disposable incomes, workers became not only producers but also consumers of a mass-produced society. The state played a moderating role between capital and labor, helping to secure, build, and regulate markets at home and abroad through Keynesian economic policies and imperialist ventures. Although the United States never went as far as other industrialized Western nations in instituting redistributive social welfare policies, the government was more willing to accommodate demands for an improved social safety net during the Fordist period in the interest of economic growth and production.[95]

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[93] Daniel M. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2008); Mantler, *Power to the Poor* (2013).

[94] In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes Fordism or Fordist-Keynesianism as a "regime of accumulation" that was accompanied by a particular "mode of regulation" that spanned roughly from 1945 to 1973. Although Fordism dates back to 1914 when automobile manufacturer Henry Ford introduced the five-dollar, eight-hour workday in conjunction with rationalized labor processes with the vision of workers becoming both producers and consumers of a mass production society, Harvey argues that it was the wartime mobilization and adoption of Keynesian economic policies by the United States and governments around the world that stabilized capitalism after the Great Depression and established Fordism as the dominant "regime of accumulation" and "mode of regulation" by the end of World War II in 1945. Keynesianism is named for the economist John Maynard Keynes, whose economic theories revolutionized the economic policies of governments in the Great Depression's wake. For Harvey, the 1973 economic recession marked the end of Fordism and its attendant social contract between the state, capitalist corporations, and labor and the transition to a new era of "flexible accumulation." See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Culture Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1990), 121–40.

[95] Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

Of course, this period should not be romanticized. Struggles over who would be included in or excluded from this growing economic pie and who would be guaranteed the full benefits of citizenship took new forms. New conditions—economic and technological developments, geographic and demographic shifts of the Great Migration, Cold War geopolitics, mass media, and industrial capital's move South to cheaper labor markets—offered a new terrain of struggle on which African American resistance against Jim Crow segregation crystallized into the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.[96] Civil rights activists pushed for and successfully secured major concessions and victories, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and culminating with the major legislative victories of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. While Cold War geopolitics might have provided some leverage for activists to exploit, the overarching effect was one of constraining a movement that had roots in more radical visions of economic and racial justice. As the Soviet Union and communism became cast as the preeminent threat to American democracy and the international order, McCarthyism narrowly delineated proper civil rights discourse and protest domestically. Those who critiqued colonialism or drew connections between race and class found themselves increasingly under fire.[97]

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[96] See Emilye Crosby, ed., *Civil Rights History From The Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2011); Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Right Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Marian Kramer, "Speaking for Ourselves: A Lifetime of Welfare Rights Organizing," in *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States*, ed. Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 355–66; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995); Adolph Reed, "Black Particularity Reconsidered," in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 39–66; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[97] Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Many activists recognized the limits of these major civil rights victories for the majority of African Americans, especially those who had migrated North only to encounter new forms of exploitation and discrimination. In response, the rise of the Black Power movement represented a growing militancy and radicalization during the late 1960s. Dr. King also underwent his own process of doubt and radicalization, increasingly at odds with the strategic orientation of both Black Power and the mainstream civil rights movement.[98] Despite the monumental victory of the Voting Rights Act, King would come to describe the movement activity from the late 1940s to 1967 as a reform movement. He called for a new era of revolution.[99] On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, Dr. King gave his famed anti-war speech "A Time to Break Silence" at Riverside Church in New York. He pulled no punches, calling the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and connecting the fight for freedom from racial and economic oppression at home to the war in Vietnam and US imperialism.[100] The speech was followed by an onslaught of criticism from mainstream liberal media outlets and prominent black leaders seeking to distance themselves from King, but he also gained credibility from student, peace, and more radical activists in the Black Power and Chicano/a movements.[101]

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[98] Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, 1986th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 555–633.

[99] During an SCLC staff retreat in May 1967, Dr. King gave a speech in which he said, "Now, when we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement…Then after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement." For more excerpts of this speech, see Colleen Wessel-McCoy, "When Jesus Says Love He Means It: Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 Frogmore Speech on Its 50th Anniversary," *Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice* (blog), n.d., https://kairoscenter.org/mlk-frogmore-staff-retreat-speech-anniversary.

[100] Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 233.

[101] McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 14-15; Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 61-64.

King spent much of the summer of 1967 engaged in anti-war activities, but urban uprisings in black neighborhoods in Newark and Detroit returned his attention to the domestic front and President Lyndon B. Johnson's retreat from the War on Poverty. It was Marian Wright (later Marian Wright Edelman), founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund and lawyer for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund in Mississippi, who proposed to King the idea of bringing a large group of poor people from Mississippi to stage sit-ins at the headquarters of the Health, Education, and Welfare Department and the Labor Department.[102] This initial seed blossomed into a multiracial coalition of poor people from all across the country engaged in nonviolent protest.

Johnson's Great Society legislation had included the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the War on Poverty's 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), the latter being one of the most ambitious expansions of social welfare in United States history. The PPC must be seen in part as a response to this legislation. Despite some of Fordism's economic gains, by the end of the 1950s, 22 percent of Americans—roughly forty million people—were still living below the poverty line.[103] The Johnson administration viewed "poverty in the midst of plenty" as an aberration to the norm of American prosperity, and as something to be eradicated through programs designed to offer "a hand up, not a hand out."[104] The EOA directed $947 million into job training, youth employment, adult education, rural economic development, services for migrant farm workers, legal services, and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)

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[102] In addition to crediting Wright with the initial idea, McKnight and Mantler also discuss how the idea of setting up "Resurrection City" was inspired by the Bonus Army's interracial encampment, when World War I veterans and their families came to Washington, DC, to demand their army bonuses during the Great Depression, see McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 20-21; Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 94.

[103] Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Touchstone, 1962); US Census Bureau, "The Extent of Poverty in the United States: 1959 to 1966," Series P-60, no. 54, (May 31, 1968), https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1968/demo/p60-54.html.

[104] Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), Public Law 88-452, 78 Stat. 508 (August 20, 1964).

program, which gave small stipends to individuals providing services to impoverished communities. These programs were coordinated by a newly established federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

The War on Poverty sought to offer a "hand up" rather than a "hand out" by enlisting poor people themselves in developing poverty programs in their communities. The OEO did this by funding thousands of Community Action Agencies (CAAs). One provision of the EOA was that federally funded CAAs demonstrate "the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and groups served."[105] This mandate of "maximum feasible participation" would have an incredible mobilizing effect on poor communities across the country, from urban centers to rural areas, which in turn led to it becoming one of the most controversial dimensions of the poverty program. As poor people got involved in assessing community needs, developing and carrying out projects of survival, and educating themselves about the welfare system and their rights, they became organizers, policy experts, and community leaders. Local politicians—even within Johnson's own Democratic Party—began complaining that the program was funding rather than quelling social unrest.[106]

It was under these conditions that the largest national organization of poor people in US history, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), and the broader welfare rights movement was born.[107] At the NWRO's peak, its dues-paying members were estimated at

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[105] Ibid.

[106] Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirijian, eds., *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2011); Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action During the American Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[107] Mimi Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Mary Eleanor Triece, *Tell It Like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013);

around 30,000, although participation was likely larger.[108] The expansion of resources, including social workers, community organizers, and administrative support, for the principle of "welfare as a right" through the War on Poverty, had a mobilizing effect with Welfare Rights Organizations (WROs) sprouting up across the country. On June 30, 1966, local WROs from across the country took part in coordinated demonstrations officially marking the launch of the NWRO and a more nationally coordinated movement; the demonstrations were timed to coincide with the March for Adequate Welfare, a 150-mile march from Cleveland to Columbus in Ohio that culminated in thousands protesting at the state's capital.[109] In New York City, 1,500 people—black, Puerto Rican, and white, from all over the city—gathered in front of City Hall to demand welfare rights.[110]

Although the NWRO was open to all welfare recipients, women and men, the organization and movement would be composed mainly of poor women and mothers, with African American women taking the lead. This demographic can be attributed partly to the untenable relationship to capital and care that black women have endured since slavery in the United States.[111] At the center of the welfare rights movement and debates around welfare was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. While white, middle-class feminists were demanding the right to work *outside* the home, poor black mothers and activists were demanding the right to welfare, the right to stay home and care for *their own* children. But the composition and leadership of the NWRO also reflected a history of black women's

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Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

[108] Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 18.

[109] Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, 3.

[110] Kornbluh, 14.

[111] Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

community organizing, including their experiences in the civil rights and black Power movements, which they brought to the NWRO. While black women played a leading role in the NWRO, its multiracial vision and composition was an important feature of this poor people's organization, with critical participation coming from chicana, Puerto Rican, Native American, and white women, especially in the Southwest, New York, and Appalachia.[112]

The NWRO and local WROs were known for their creative and assertive protest tactics that forced welfare authorities and politicians to confront the conditions of mothers receiving welfare. They held large marches, participated in pickets and sit-ins at welfare offices, stopped traffic on main streets, and undertook other daring acts of civil disobedience. They staged so-called buy-ins in which welfare recipients would go shopping for family needs and tell the cashier to "charge it to the welfare department."[113] When the governor cut benefits in Nevada, thousands descended on Las Vegas in a massive march. For weeks, protesters shut down the main strip and disrupted business and traffic, costing the casinos and hotels untold amounts of money.[114] These protests were successful in overturning the cuts. Welfare rights advocates also testified before the US Congress and State legislatures, spaces where decisions were made about their lives but that rarely included the voices of welfare recipients.[115]

But beyond its tactical inventiveness, the NWRO embodied a philosophy of organizing that asserted the agency and knowledge of poor people, specifically poor women, mothers, and women of color. In her famous 1972 essay "Welfare is a Women's Issue" published in *Ms. Magazine*, Johnnie Tillmon, the organization's first chair and then executive director, articulated

[112] Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, 16-20.
[113] Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*.
[114] Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*.
[115] Triece, *Tell It Like It Is*.

what today would be recognized as an intersectional analysis, writing, "I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle-aged woman. And I'm on welfare. In this country, if you're any one of those things you count less as a human being. If you're all those things, you don't count at all. Except as a statistic."[116] Speaking to the women's movement, Tillmon proceeded to argue why the welfare system is sexist and therefore should concern feminists.

But the NWRO's analysis was always more advanced and radical than the mainstream women's, civil rights, and labor movements. Welfare righters argued that caring for family and community members is work that not only has an inherent importance for human survival but also produces economic value for the capitalist system and should be justly compensated; they were not demanding charity, but their work's worth. Unlike these other movements, which often demanded jobs, they were asserting that they already had jobs. And they went further than simply demanding compensation for care work by demanding the right to a guaranteed annual income for all. They were not seeking merely a technocratic solution to a problem—their position reflected their critique of capitalism and the welfare system writ large; it also represented a broader class solidarity that crossed lines of race and gender as well as divides between waged and unwaged workers.[117]

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[116] Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare as a Women's Issue," *Ms. Magazine*, 1972, https://www.bitchmedia.org/sites/default/files/documents/tillmon_welfare.pdf.; Judith Shulevitz, "Forgotten Feminisms: Johnnie Tillmon's Battle Against 'The Man'," *New York Review*, June 26, 2018.

[117] Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, 71-94; Also see the NWRU's 2018 statement of support for the new Poor People's Campaign, where they revisit this long-standing demand: "But we have always pushed back. In 1965, Johnnie Tillmon said, 'If I were president I'd start paying women a living wage for doing the work that we're already doing, childcare, childraising, and housekeeping,"' "The National Welfare Rights Union Stands in Support of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival," *National Welfare Rights Union*, Baltimore, MD, April 7, 2018. https://wraphome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/NWRU-Baltimore-Statement.pdf.

So when Dr. King and the SCLC went to the NWRO about being part of the PPC, Johnnie Tillmon and other NWRO leaders wanted assurance that their expertise would be respected and incorporated into the campaign. As the longtime welfare rights organizer Marian Kramer later explained to me:

> Once Dr. King went to Welfare Rights and they kind of baptized him in the question of poverty . . . trying to teach him, "what are you talking about when you talk about poverty?" [And] He said, "I'm here to learn," they became an intricate part, a very important part of the Poor People's Campaign. They mobilized all throughout the country for people to go and to participate.[118]

In return for its full participation, the NWRO negotiated control over any demands and lobbying around welfare, and that they would plan and lead a Mother's Day March with Coretta Scott King by their side that would kick off the PPC.[119]

Although the PPC never secured an Economic Bill of Rights, NWRO leaders along with Marian Edelman succeeded in lobbying for some important concessions, including the establishment of a $100 million program for free and reduced-price lunches for poor children; immediate release of surplus commodities to 1,000 of the country's poorest counties; $25 million for OEO and Head Start programs in Alabama and Mississippi; hiring of more than 1,300 poor people by OEO agencies; expansion of the food stamp program; and some streamlining of federal welfare guidelines.[120] Even after the SCLC would put the PPC behind them, the NWRO would use the campaign as a springboard to build its base and carry on the torch of poor people's organizing.

For six more years, mothers and other NWRO activists helped to shape the national debate around welfare, responding directly to the racist, sexist, and classist trope of the "welfare

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[118] Marian Kramer, interview by author, Highland Park, MI, October 19, 2018.
[119] Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 104-5.
[120] McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 138-39.

queen" that had been in circulation since the 1950s.[121] In May 1970, Beulah Sanders and 150 other welfare activists staged a historic occupation of the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to protest proposed changes to the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which included the imposition of mandatory workfare on welfare mothers. This action was instrumental in defeating FAP, a major victory for the NWRO.[122] But increasingly, its members found themselves isolated and fighting against the ideological tide. The Johnson administration had all but abandoned the War on Poverty. The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 signaled a growing national conservatism among a majority voting bloc of white Americans. By the early 1970s, punitive workfare policies passed in a majority of states. The "discovery" of the problem of poverty in the 1960s was increasingly racialized and gendered as black and female, in ways that grafted onto long-standing distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor—those ostensibly worthy of sympathy and aid and those who were not.[123]

The hypervisibility of black poverty was a double-edged sword.[124] On the one hand, it brought attention to disproportionate black poverty, which activists and civic leaders could harness to make demands. But ultimately, the hypervisibility of black poverty fueled by white supremacy and anti-black racism accomplished two key objectives politically for

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[121] Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*, 7-11.

[122] Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*.

[123] Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

[124] In *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, Rebecca Wanzo writes, "Illegibility is not invisibility—the victims of Hurricane Katrina and state neglect were *hypervisible* on television. To be politically illegible as a sufferer is to have one's story visible but obscured by historical and cultural debris, thus the intended audience cannot read or interpret it in a way that leads to true comprehension of the cause of suffering" (2009, 32 [my italics]). I argue that instead of working to acknowledge the racial disproportionality of poverty, the racialization of poverty from the 1960s onward is about rendering impoverished African Americans thusly illegible, and thereby unworthy of sympathy and, more importantly, solidarity with its intended audience—white people. For impoverished whites, the invisibility of their suffering is the flip side of that coin, which simultaneously denies their exploitation and oppression and folds them into the bosom of whiteness. See Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009).

neoconservatives and economic elites seeking to transform the Keynesian welfare state. First, it served to isolate poverty as a black problem, stemming from the so-called culture of poverty supposedly reproduced by black mothers.[125] These culturalist explanations of poverty, which sidestepped the roles of political economy and structural racism, provided a basis on which to blame impoverished African Americans for conditions beyond their control. And second, framing poverty as a black problem made invisible the poverty of other Americans—particularly white Americans, who have always made up the largest proportion of poor people in the United States. I say particularly because, politically, this second outcome had the important (and I would argue intended) effect of mobilizing intraclass white racial solidarity over the potential for interracial class solidarity, thus garnering the political support for a backlash against the Keynesian welfare state and labor.

According to sociologist and NWRO supporter Guida West, internal conflicts among the NWRO leadership, staff, and supporters compounded this shifting political terrain, which resulted in difficulties mobilizing resources. The elected leadership was mostly poor black women, but the staff was mostly middle-class, white men, except for executive director George Wiley and a few others. The leadership was eventually able to secure control, but in the process lost economic and social support. Despite the centrality of the NWRO across multiple *movements* of the time, it received little if any support from other mainline *organizations*—including civil rights, feminist (including black women's organizations), or labor. Faced with little support, an economic downturn, and a growing political backlash, the NWRO closed its national headquarters in 1974, although many local WROs would continue their work.[126]

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[125] Herbert Gans, *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*.
[126] Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

The NWRO's folding represents the end of a chapter in the movement to end poverty. Yet it is important to understand the political backlash against welfare not solely as ideological, as a triumph of conservatism within American politics, but as entwined with broader shifts in global capitalism. To repeat, this was the peak and subsequent end of Fordism and the social contract that came with it. By the late 1960s, the rate of profit began to level and fall, sending off alarm bells for global capitalist elites. As Marxist geographers David Harvey and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have argued, this was a moment of economic and political crisis for capitalism.[127] Economic elites had been willing to accommodate the demands of labor and civil society groups when surplus profits appeared ever-expanding, but with economic stagnation, they were presented with two choices. The first choice was to continue to accommodate the demands of increasingly radical movements and begin eating into their profits with Keynesian policies, with the always-possible doomsday scenario of losing control of the means of production completely. The second was to wage a class war to discipline labor, regain control, and secure a greater share of surplus capital.

There is much evidence to suggest that they took the latter route. While it is not necessary to rehearse this history here, the global economy has undergone seismic changes in the last fifty years.[128] Some of these changes include a radical transformation of work and labor markets, facilitated by technological innovations and attacks on unions, leading to deindustrialization and "offshoring," greater labor automation, and the rise of the service sector economy; deregulation and the ascendancy of finance capital; the adoption of neoliberal policies and the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state; the growth of the carceral military state; and the increased

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[127] Wilson Gilmore Ruth, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[128] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

privatization and commodification of all life. The ramifications on the everyday lives of people in the United States and globally have been profound.

At the very moment that working-class communities in the United States were beginning to encounter the massive social dislocations of deindustrialization, the social safety nets that people could have benefited from were being systematically dismantled. In "Speaking for Ourselves: A Lifetime of Welfare Rights Organizing," Marian Kramer describes the implications of these economic shifts for welfare programs:

> In Detroit, it used to take months to retool the auto factories between models and the employers used to lay off the workforce during retooling. The factories needed General Relief to tide the labor force over and to keep them healthy so that they could work when the retooling was complete. . . . Robotization has replaced thousands of unionized workers. Corporations don't need us anymore, and they have to downsize to compete. We now have a permanent army of unemployed—a new class of folks who aren't needed in the workforce. Corporations don't need programs to regulate the people anymore.[129]

Welfare rights activists understood that attacks on welfare were not merely ideological but reflected changes in global production. They understood this not on some abstract level but intimately, because they came from working-class communities that depended on this work. Kramer was married to the late General Baker, an auto worker and leader with United Auto Workers (UAW) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. From Detroit to Baltimore to Los Angeles, deindustrialization was changing the political and economic landscape.

When I interviewed Kramer, she elaborated on the ramped-up political attacks on welfare recipients and the eventual passage of President Bill Clinton's welfare reform in 1996:[130]

> With welfare reform, a lot of us, in welfare rights . . . could see that his [President Clinton's] program was connected with labor. And what does that mean? We began to study and began to understand that as long as they had a question of a

[129] Marian Kramer, "Speaking for Ourselves: A Lifetime of Welfare Rights Organizing," 363.
[130] Jane L. Collins and Victoria Mayer, *Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom in the Low-Wage Labor Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

> reserve army of unemployed, they were gonna keep us divided from one another. And we tried our best to teach unions and others that look, all of us are in the same working class, be you disabled, whatever. We need to be fighting together, but the attack on welfare recipients was a way that they were able to keep the class divided.

But welfare reform did not stop the fight. As political and economic conditions change, the forms of contestation and arenas of struggle change as people respond to new challenges to their survival. In examining the trajectory of the welfare rights movement, most historians naturally frame the NWRO within the historiography of the War on Poverty. Certainly, this timeline reflects the rise of this particular poor people's organization and the backlash to it, which eventually paved the way for welfare reform. But this framing often misses how movements adapt, reproduce, and transform with new fronts of struggle. Welfare rights activists did not simply disappear when the NWRO dissolved or when welfare suffered defeats. Many leaders continued the work out of necessity and deep commitment.

Although some could argue that welfare rights activists have been fighting a lost cause, a hopelessly defensive battle to salvage an outmoded system, their politics and practices reveal a sophisticated analysis and revolutionary vision. By emphasizing and responding to people's most basic needs, they have been on the forefront of various struggles of the poor, all while anticipating worsening conditions for increasing sections of the working class. For instance, even before the crisis surrounding lead in the water in Flint, Michigan, Kramer and the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) had been battling nondemocratic emergency managers over water issues in Highland Park and Detroit. MWRO leaders are connected not only to the

fight in Flint, but also to other impoverished communities around the country and the world that recognize the increasing threat to people's human right to clean water.[131]

In the 1980s and 1990s, these continuing welfare rights networks would fuse with movements against the destruction of public housing and a growing movement led by homeless people.[132] Rather than a complete dissolution or a clean break from one era of movement activity to another, there are continuities and lessons that are carried on by social movement practitioners. When dramatic cuts to public housing and capital reinvestment in urban centers began to produce a growing phenomenon of structural homelessness in the 1980s, welfare rights and grassroots anti-poverty organizers were there to carry on the fight.

From the War on Poverty to the War on the Poor

President Jimmy Carter would begin to initiate cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during his tenure, but the Ronald Reagan years would be disastrous. According to the Western Regional Advocacy Project's 2018 HUD fact sheet, from 1978 to 1983, the "HUD budget authority shrank from $83 billion to a little more than $18 billion (in 2004 constant dollars)."[133] Today, unfortunately, homelessness is so common that it has become a normalized feature of city life, and increasingly rural life, but prior to the 1980s, homelessness affected a relatively small number of people. So when many cities saw homelessness suddenly

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[131] Bill Chappell, "Michigan OKs Nestlé Water Extraction, Despite 80K+ Public Comments Against It," *National Public Radio*, April 3, 2018; Drew Philip, "No Water for Poor People: The Nine Americans Who Risked Jail to Seek Justice," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2017.

[132] Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[133] See "2018 HUD Budget Fact Sheet," Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), June 27, 2017, https://wraphome.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2018-HUD-Fact-Sheet-sep-29-2017.pdf.

triple and quadruple, it was anything but normal. While government officials, policy experts, nonprofit service providers, and the media scrambled to respond to the new crisis (and perceived threat) with emergency shelters and temporary solutions, homeless people themselves responded by organizing.

Out of the devastating homelessness crisis, a vibrant national movement led by poor and homeless people emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Like historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's analogy of the "many-headed hydra," attempts to discipline the dispossessed in one arena simply led to the struggle rearing its head somewhere else, reborn or displaced in another form.[134] From 1986 to 1993, the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) would be instrumental in cohering this movement. The NUH grew out of grassroots organizing in the early 1980s in Philadelphia and then expanded nationally by the middle of the decade. At its peak, the NUH had over twenty local chapters and 15,000 members in cities like Los Angeles, New Orleans, Boston, Tucson, Albuquerque, Minneapolis, and Detroit, as well as affiliate organizations across the country.[135]

The NUH espoused what it called the "Johnnie Tillmon" model of organizing, named after the NWRO's first chairperson, and the NUH model drew several principles from the experience of the NWRO. The first was that poor people themselves had to be at the forefront of the movement to end homelessness and poverty. Not only were they experts on their condition and capable leaders, but they had the most to gain and the least to lose in abolishing poverty,

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[134] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

[135] See Ron Casanova, *Each One Teach One: Memoirs of a Street Activist* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1996); Emily McNeil, "The National Union of the Homeless: A Brief History" (Homeless Union HIstory Project of the Poverty Scholars Program, Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice, 2011); Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Pamela Yates and Peter Kinoy, *Takeover*, documentary (Skylight Pictures, 1991); This history of the NUH is also constructed from unpublished interviews I conducted with Willie Baptist, Kristin Colangelo, Savina Martin, and Anthony Prince.

particularly given that an entire apparatus of governmental and nonprofit "poverty pimps" had evolved to potentially ameliorate the conditions of homelessness and poverty, but not to end them.[136] Whole institutions and people's jobs materially depended on the perpetuation of the problem.

A second principle of the NUH model was that "you only get what you are organized to take."[137] This slogan encapsulated the theory that power comes from being organized, not merely disruptive, and the principle behind it reflected debates that took place between scholar activists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward and welfare rights leaders like Tillmon around the direction of the welfare rights movement. Piven and Cloward's *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* critiques the NWRO's prioritization of growing the organizational base over their own preferred strategy of disrupting the welfare system through mass enrollment.[138] Without getting into the particular weaknesses of Piven and Cloward's proposal, their focus on disruption rather than organization exposed the presence of oppositional theories of change in the welfare rights movement, as well as discordant assumptions about the political agency of poor people. With the "Johnnie Tillmon" model of organizing, the NUH emphasized building local bases of impoverished leaders tied to a national organization.

On a moral and strategic level, becoming organized meant a commitment to anti-racism and uniting poor people across all lines of difference. The NUH's founding mission stated, "We pledge to deepen our personal commitment to end all forms of exploitation, racism, sexism, and

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[136] The term "poverty pimp" is a colloquialism used by grassroots anti-poverty activists to refer to charitable or nonprofit organizations whose existence appears to be predicated on the management of the problem of poverty and homelessness, not the transformation of a system that produces poverty. In some cases, poverty pimps are threatened by the organization of the poor to advocate for themselves, as discussed by Willie Baptist and Phil Wider in "The Methods of Building Leadership and Organizing: Five Ingredients in the Poor Organizing the Poor" (1999).

[137] McNeil, "The National Union of the Homeless: A Brief History," 11.

[138] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

abuse."[139] On a tactical level, these principles guided the group's organizing activities, which centered around Black Panther Party–inspired "projects of survival" and assertive protest tactics like those of the NWRO. These activities were combined with a series of takeovers of vacant houses that served both to house people and to dramatize the problem of homelessness. In 1988, the NUH staged its first nationally coordinated "Take Off the Boards" campaign in seventy-three US cities.[140]

Meanwhile, Marian Kramer, Annie Smart, Arena Edwards, and other longtime welfare rights activists who continued to stay active and connected despite the NWRO's dissolution decided to reconfigure a new national organization—the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU). In June of 1987, they held a National Welfare Rights Conference at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where they officially launched the NWRU, discussed lessons from the movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and analyzed the current conditions. As they saw it, although things were not great in the 1960s, conditions were now much worse—growing unemployment, hunger, and homelessness, pervasive anti-welfare sentiment, and a lack of funding for their work.[141] However, their politics and their actual organizing experiences, only reinforced their conviction that organizing across divisions to build class solidarity was key. And as poverty grew, they saw the increased need and opportunity for building an even broader base among the poor.[142]

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[139] McNeil, 2.

[140] McNeil, 10.

[141] Marian Kramer, "Speaking for Ourselves: A Lifetime of Welfare Rights Organizing," 362.

[142] Marian Kramer et al., "Which Way Welfare Rights? (New Situation, New Strategy)" (the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and Voices from the Front, May 1993); This 1993 pamphlet consolidates some of the NWRU's thinking on strategic lessons and direction. Diane Bernard, then the president of Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, is quoted: "Don't tell me that a white mother who witnessed her three children burned up in a house fire is unfit to lead this struggle. She has a personal vendetta against the government. She'll fight harder than anybody who's out here just reading books and talking a bunch of bullcrap because it sounds good and feels good. She will fight because she has a personal stake, because they hurt her. Those are the kind of fighters we need and I'll follow her anywhere, anytime. We have to embrace those mothers. Take them under our wings and give them the

Forces combined in the summer of 1989 at a Survival Summit convened by the NUH, the NWRU, the National Anti-Hunger Coalition, and the United Electrical Workers, District One, which adopted the "Up and Out of Poverty, Now!" campaign and slogan. Albert Turner, a former lieutenant of Dr. King's and a caravan leader during the PPC, was one of roughly 450 leaders from thirty-three states who attended the summit.[143] Turner gave a rousing speech to those assembled, calling for interracial unity to get the "root" of the problem and "turn it over." The speech excited the crowd, which gave a standing ovation.[144] Although the SCLC had retreated from long-term plans for the PPC, Turner's presence and message suggested that the vision of the PPC did not die in 1968. Those embarking on the Up and Out of Poverty, Now! campaign were carrying on the torch.

On May 1, 1990, the NUH coordinated another multi-city campaign to take over vacant HUD properties that the group had been promised by Jack Kemp, then the HUD secretary.[145] The campaign resulted in several major wins for the NUH. In Oakland, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia, city governments were pressured to put up millions of dollars and land for housing and homeless-run housing programs. NUH chapters grew and membership swelled. But despite these successes, and in many ways because of them, the NUH began facing serious challenges, which led to its collapse in the early 1990s.

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ammo they need to fight. That is, proper education about who this enemy is and where this enemy is and how we go about destroying this enemy. And restructuring a society that could allow . . . children to burn up because you don't have money to pay for gas. And natural gas is so plentiful in this country that nobody should have to pay for it." Bernard, herself a black woman, was critiquing a version of racial identity politics that might have precluded black welfare rights activists from organizing with other non-black poor people, particularly whites. By addressing the material issues people are dealing with, organizing, and building trust together, and through political education, they shape people's class consciousness—who the ostensible enemy is and who it is not.

[143] In *The Last Crusade*, McKnight talks about Turner's critical role as a caravan leader in the 1968 PPC, 102-3.

[144] Albert Turner's speech was documented as a part of Pamela Yates and Peter Kinoy's documentary *Street Heat* (Skylight Pictures, 1989), but a clip of his speech can be seen online, see "Albert Turner, 'The Root Doctor,' 1936–2000," Kairos Center, YouTube, May 14, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oL3Vpo8Wfw.

[145] Yates and Kinoy, *Takeover*.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has demonstrated through her work on prisons, the state's solution to the political crises of growing militant movements and structural unemployment and impoverishment during this period was an expansion of "law and order" policies that criminalized poor, mostly black and brown communities and fed mass incarceration.[146] NUH leaders saw this devolution play out directly before their eyes, as crack cocaine flooded poor communities and the shelter system, overtaking movement leaders and destroying their organizations.[147] Contrary to the stereotype of drug addiction causing homelessness, they saw firsthand that homelessness came first.

NUH leaders also found that some of their gains were pyrrhic victories. Their hard-fought homeless-run housing programs provided housing to some, but they hardly scratched the surface of the growing need. The NUH also found itself with closer ties to city housing authorities, reorienting the group's energies toward administrating rather than organizing. Alongside the destabilization from drugs, these concessions tested the consciousness and commitment of some of the leadership and membership. Would those who had gained a home or a job administering these programs fight as hard for those who were still in the streets? Ultimately, the NUH would not survive this period.

But sometimes important lessons are learned through defeat. As NUH leader and longtime anti-poverty organizer Willie Baptist saw it, "the key lesson we learned from this was to focus on developing leaders so the movement doesn't have to be compromised by any

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[146] Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

[147] In my interview with NUH leader Savina Martin, she described it as "chemical warfare." Whether one is prepared to accept intentionality or merely a *convenient* result of state-sanctioned policies, it has been documented that the US government has played a role in proliferating drugs domestically, despite its outward "war on drugs," see William Blum, "The CIA, Contras, Gangs, and Crack" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1996); Savina Martin, interview by author, Boston, MA, October 14, 2018.

individual who gets compromised."[148] It was not enough that the NUH was led by poor and homeless people; the organization could not rely on the skill or charisma of a few leaders, poor or otherwise. The assassinations of so many leaders, from Dr. King to Fred Hampton, coupled with the infiltration and disruption of so many movements, had demonstrated time and again the importance of mass leadership development. The movement needed many leaders armed with strategic analysis and organizing skills to weather these storms. For Baptist, this meant that political education and training could not take a back seat to the *real* organizing—they had to be central to it.

While the NUH was beginning to dissolve in the early nineties, leaders who emerged from the Up and Out of Poverty, Now! campaign would spin off to form and join other organizations. Just as the NUH had its roots in Philadelphia, its offshoots would grow from there as well. Cherri Honkala, an organizer with the Minneapolis Up and Out of Poverty, Now! campaign who led that city's efforts in the 1990 takeover campaign, would move to Philadelphia.[149] Later that year, she and a group of welfare recipients and homeless families in Kensington, an impoverished, multiracial neighborhood in Philadelphia, formed the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU). Willie Baptist and several other NUH leaders joined this effort, with Baptist becoming the organization's education director. The KWRU drew many of the same survival programs from other welfare rights unions and the NUH, but it also began to explicitly adopt an economic human rights framework. Although it never completely abandoned the language of welfare rights, the KWRU was drawn to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR offered not only a list of concrete, internationally

[148] Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann, eds., "Interview with Willie Baptist (IV): Lessons from the National Union of the Homeless—A Debate on Organizing," Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 104.
[149] Yates and Kinoy, *Takeover*.

recognized demands but also a human rights framework around the values of respect and dignity, which appealed to the KWRU leadership as an alternative mode of engagement to the deep feelings of dehumanization and indignity that poverty produces.[150]

In June 1998, after eight years of organizing in Pennsylvania, the KWRU would embark on a month-long national bus tour titled "The New Freedom Bus—Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger, and Homelessness." Along the tour, the participants collected documentation from people living in poverty in urban and rural areas all over the country and linked up with grassroots organizations committed to the vision of abolishing poverty. The tour ended in New York with a march and tribunal where experts in human rights law, social welfare, and labor listened to its testimony. Out of these activities a new national campaign was born—the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC).

In October 1999, the PPEHRC organized the March of the Americas, in which hundreds of poor and homeless families from the United States, Latin America, and Canada marched from Washington, DC, to the United Nations in New York City.[151] Farmworker leaders from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a Florida-based group that had recently staged a monthlong hunger strike to call attention to poverty wages and human rights abuses in the fields, joined the 230-plus-mile march. At the UN headquarters, marchers filed the first legal petition in history charging the United States with violating the UDHR by failing to provide adequate public education, health care, affordable housing, and living wage jobs.[152]

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[150] Mary Bricker-Jenkins, Carrie Young, and Cheri Honkala, "Using Economic Human Rights in the Movement to End Poverty: The Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign," in *Challenges in Human Rights: A Social Work Perspective*, ed. Elizabeth Reichert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[151] Bricker-Jenkins et al., "Using Economic Human Rights in the Movement to End Poverty…"

[152] "The Poverty Initiative: Who We Are," *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice*, New York, NY. https://kairoscenter.org/who-we-are.

In the article "Building the New Freedom Church of the Poor," Baptist and Rev. Noelle Damico discuss the PPEHRC's work as a continuation of Dr. King's PPC: "Together, as poor people from every race and people from all walks of life, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign is taking up Dr. King's challenge to build the new freedom church of the poor in hope and with determination."[153] Baptist later explained to me how the inspiration for the PPEHRC came out of the KWRU education committee's study of the PPC. As the KWRU's education director, Baptist would push for the formation of the University of the Poor (UPoor) as the PPEHRC's educational arm. The UPoor facilitated leadership schools and strategic dialogue among the PPEHRC's national network. For almost a decade, the PPEHRC acted as a vehicle for national and international grassroots anti-poverty movement-building through marches, mass demonstrations, and national tours.[154]

It was through PPEHRC's activities that Baptist and Theoharis connected with faculty and staff at Union Theological Seminary. As they reached their final destination of New York City during the March of the Americas, Union Theological Seminary hosted the marchers at the end of their over 250 mile-long journey. When the PPEHRC eventually dissolved, as movement campaigns are apt to do, Baptist and Theoharis sought to create a more permanent home for training and leadership development. It was here that PI was born with the idea of being housed at Union Theological Seminary, an institution with a long history of progressive social justice activism. Founded in May 2004, PI would serve as a critical repository for movement knowledge and an incubator for today's continued anti-poverty movements.

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[153] Willie Baptist and Noelle Damico, "Building the New Freedom Church of the Poor." In "American Dreams: Class and Religion," *CrossCurrents* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 361.

[154] Pamela Yates and Peter Kinoy, *Living Broke in Boom Times: Lessons from the Movement to End Poverty*, documentary (Skylight Pictures, 2007).

Seeding the Ground for Revival: A New Poor People's Campaign

This is also the point at which I became involved, first as a participant in and then also as a scholar of the PI and the PPC (2018+). In 2006, I joined the United Workers (UW) in Baltimore, a multiracial human rights organization led by low-wage workers. At the time, the UW had been waging a then two-year campaign to demand living wages for the day laborers cleaning Camden Yards baseball stadium.[155] That Spring, I graduated from the Maryland Institute College Art and was becoming involved in some of the city's grassroots struggles around mass incarceration, education, real estate development, and labor through an arts activist collective called campbaltimore. But I was disillusioned by the superficial and often self-serving world of not simply "community arts," which has been subject to much critique, but also the supposedly more radical or avant-garde "interventionist" or "site-specific" practices in which relatively privileged and mobile artists have little long-term commitment to any community or struggle.[156] Earlier in the fall of 2005, my hometown of New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. As poor and mostly black residents were left to die and suffer needlessly for weeks, it tragically showcased the entanglements of the very pillars that the PPC (2018+) seeks to underscore today—systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation. The life and death

[155] The UW won the Living Wages Campaign at Camden Yards in 2007, a historic victory in day labor organizing. In an article from sports writer Dave Zirin, he writes, "The progress made on a living wage for day laborers in a hard-edged, damaged metropolis, which locals lovingly call Charm City, could open a new chapter in grassroots labor organizing not seen since the early days of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaigns, a model that puts the poor in charge of movements to fight poverty." Of course, it was not a coincidence that Zirin referenced the PPC, it had been an explicit part of our organizing and messaging, because of our connection to the PI network and this longer history. See Dave Zirin, "Cleaning Up After the Orioles," *The Nation*, September 4, 2007, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/cleaning-after-orioles/.

[156] For a history and critique of some of these modern art practices, see Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 85–110.

stakes of this work were made even more painfully clear and I was eager to learn how we "organize" to build power.

I was attracted to the UW because even as its worker leaders demanded work with dignity at Camden Yards, they were clear that the problems of poverty were not isolated to Camden Yards or even Baltimore (or New Orleans), but were systematic, demanding a mass movement to end poverty led by the poor across all lines of division and difference—race, gender, immigration status, language, etc. This vision and theory of change spoke to me. I worked as a "leadership organizer" with the United Workers from 2006 to 2012 organizing with low-wage workers at Camden Yards and the Inner Harbor, community allies, faith leaders, artists and media makers.

When PI created the Poverty Scholars Program in 2007, the UW was invited to participate. The UW and a network of other groups—low-wage labor organizers, welfare rights and anti-poverty advocates, veteran-led anti-war activists, movement media, and faith-based practitioners—regularly took part in PI's immersion trips, leadership schools, and strategic dialogues. The network was distinctive not only in terms of the breadth of organizations represented, but also because these were ongoing conversations. In this sense, PI facilitated the reproduction of a movement network, through which participants regularly collaborated and consulted outside of these gatherings.

It was here that I first learned about the much longer genealogy of anti-poverty organizing that provided the basis for the UW's organizing model. Whereas people would often mistake the UW for a labor union, we were actually modeled after the homeless and welfare rights unions, which strategically used the language of human rights to call attention to the contradictions of poverty in the wealthiest country in the world. The Poverty Scholars Program

network was anchored by the relationships that Baptist, Theoharis, and other PI leaders had developed through the PPEHRC, the KWRU, and the NUH, but this network would also expand. They brought in groups like the MWRO, the CIW, the Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG), Keepers of the Mountain, the UW, and a constellation of groups from Philadelphia, like the Philly Student Union (PSU) and the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP). The movement expanded to include low-wage worker organizations like Domestic Workers United and the Taxi Workers Alliance; veterans groups like Iraq Veterans Against the War (now About Face Against the War); the Vermont Workers Center, a working-class organization fighting for universal healthcare; and international groups like the Shackdwellers Movement in South Africa and the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil—and eventually Reverend Barber and the Moral Mondays movement. The range of organizations and the fact that we were not separated into the typical nonprofit issue silos allowed for a broader and more nuanced analysis of poverty and inequality in the United States and internationally.

When the 2007–2008 global financial crisis hit with a wave of foreclosures, evictions, and mass unemployment, the Poverty Scholars Program's political economy track provided critical analysis of the crisis. And when the right-wing Tea Party and left-wing Occupy movements took off, it was clear that masses of people were revolting against the status quo across the political spectrum. It also signaled that if the Left continued to ignore this broad discontent among poor and working-class whites in so-called red states, they would cede this territory to reactionary racist and nativist political currents. One could argue that the election of Donald Trump as president had its roots in the Tea Party movement and the Democratic party's embrace of neoliberalism.[157]

[157] Pew Research Center, "Trump's Staunch GOP Supporters Have Roots in the Tea Party," 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/05/16/trumps-staunch-gop-supporters-have-roots-in-the-tea-party;

But just as white supremacy is not an impermeable force, history is also not some inevitable unfolding of events. The financial crisis and its aftermath reconfirmed the PI's call for a movement that could knit together communities across race, ethnicity, gender, and other historic lines of division and difference to challenge systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation. The PI declared the need for a movement that could scale up efforts to the national and even international level but remain locally and state-based. It also identified the need for a movement that could identify, train, and connect diverse leaders from the ranks of the poor capable of leading such an effort.

So when the PI invited the 150 or so leaders together in the spring of 2014 to propose relaunching a new PPC with the upcoming fiftieth anniversary, it did so with a strong network and the time in which to expand and deepen relationships that would become the foundation for the PPC (2018+). The PI—newly renamed the Kairos Center—took the lead, helping to organize regional tours along the Gulf Coast, Appalachia, and the Midwest and gatherings that brought grassroots and movement leaders from various struggles and places together to learn about each other's experiences and discuss what a new PPC could be.

I traveled with a delegation along the Gulf Coast tour in November 2014 and then to Selma, Alabama, for the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday in March 2015. On these trips, we met with other local, grassroots leaders organizing around issues ranging from the lasting impacts of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill to the punitive poverty of rural Alabama where people were threatened with arrest for being unable to afford proper septic

Naomi Klein, "It Was the Democrats' Embrace of Neoliberalism That Won It for Trump," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/09/rise-of-the-davos-class-sealed-americas-fate.

systems.[158] Although Reverend Barber had not officially joined what was being called at the time a "New Poor People's Campaign for Today," in Selma, he would take part in a Community Hearing on Poverty in the South that the new PPC organized with local leaders.[159]

As president of the North Carolina NAACP, Reverend Barber had helped to build the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. In 2013, a broad coalition of progressive social justice organizations and interfaith leaders came together to challenge a conservative state legislature cutting unemployment benefits and mounting attacks on African American voting rights, LGBTQ rights, abortion, and Medicaid expansion.[160] The movement garnered national attention for its weekly acts of civil disobedience at the state capital and for its annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ) marches.[161] Drawing on the history of the Reconstruction era, Barber refers to the model of coalition organizing that the movement practiced as "fusion politics," the antidote to the divide-and-conquer politics of racism and fear that allows elites to maintain power.[162]

In 2015, while still president of the North Carolina NAACP, Reverend Barber founded Repairers of the Breach, an organization to connect and train diverse religious leaders across the country in the model of the Moral Mondays movement. In March 2017, Repairers of the Breach hosted a National MPOLIS gathering in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was attended by a

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[158] Charon Hribar, "Selma Is Now: Building a Poor People's Campaign for Today," *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice* (blog), 2015; Colleen Wessel-McCoy, "A Truth Commission Begins in Bayou La Batre, Alabama," *Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice* (blog), 2014.
[159] Alice Miranda Ollstein, "The Dark Side of Selma the Mainstream Media Ignored," *ThinkProgress*, March 10, 2015, https://archive.thinkprogress.org/the-dark-side-of-selma-the-mainstream-media-ignored-b7a47d7de749/.
[160] Abby Ohlheiser, "The Religious, Progressive 'Moral Mondays' in North Carolina," *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/07/North-carolina-moral-monday-protests/313301.
[161] Dahlia Lithwick, "The Left Fights Back: This Weekend's Massive Protest in North Carolina Shows That the GOP Doesn't Own Morality," *Slate*, February 10, 2014, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/02/moral-march-on-raleigh-how-the-moral-mondays-movement-is-redefining-the-left.html.
[162] William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016).

delegation of ten leaders from the Kairos Center and the new PPC. (MPOLIS stands for Moral Political Organizing Leadership Institutes and Summits). After this gathering came fourteen regional MPOLIS convenings in thirty-five states between August and December 2017. In April 2017, the group held a retreat at the Highlander Research and Education Center (formerly the Highlander Folk School) in New Market, Tennessee, where members hashed out a proposal for the next phase of the campaign among core leaders of the Kairos and Repairers of the Breach networks. This meeting would include leaders from a mostly southern contingent of Fight for $15/Raise Up and the Popular Education Project (PEP), both of which would play critical roles in the campaign, with Fight for $15 mobilizing members and resources and PEP helping to produce political education materials. In May 2017, Reverend Barber officially resigned as president of the North Carolina NAACP and announced that he would direct his full-time attention to the new PPC. As planned, the campaign's designated national co-chairs, Reverends Barber and Theoharis, traveled the country to help form state-wide coordinating committees for the now-christened Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC [2018+]).

I attended the very last MPOLIS meeting in Washington, D.C., on December 5, 2017, a day after the official launch of the PPC (2018+). From there, I joined the Maryland coordinating committee, one of forty-one new state-based committees. These committees were tasked with preparing for 40 Days of Action from May 13 to June 23, 2018—six weeks of nonviolent direct action, mass meetings, teach-ins, and cultural events starting on Mother's Day, the same day that the NWRO and Coretta Scott King led the march that kicked off the original PPC. However, instead of traveling to Washington, D.C., and camping out on the National Mall for six weeks, the campaign took a page out of the Moral Mondays playbook: each state staged coordinated civil disobedience at their respective state capitals every Monday for forty days, with over 5,000

people presenting themselves for arrest and tens of thousands of people witnessing.[163] Each week focused on a different set of themes to highlight the interconnections of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, ecological devastation, and the distorted moral narratives that underpin these "evils."[164] The 40 Days of Action culminated on June 23, with the Stand Against Poverty March, Rally, and Moral Revival in Washington, D.C.

Unlike the first PPC, the PPC (2018+) continues more than two years after the 40 Days of Action rollout. I attribute the campaign's resiliency to all the leaders who continued the work out of a deep committed to the campaign's vision. At a press conference releasing the campaign's report on poverty, Claudia de la Cruz, a PEP member and director of the People's Forum in New York, described the campaign as "organizing the hope of the poor, the hope that is often used and abused by politicians—whether they are Republicans or Democrats—the hope of a dignified life, our very right to exist."[165] This hope also builds on the long legacy of anti-poverty organizing I have detailed here.

The 40 Days action was designed not only to attract external media attention and push forward concrete legislation, but also to consolidate and embolden this history. During the campaign, activists attended a US congressional hearing with poor and impacted leaders from across the country testifying to the intertwined pillars of injustice—systemic racism, poverty,

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[163] William Barber II and Liz Theoharis, "Creating a Moral Movement for Our Time," *The Nation*, August 8, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/creating-moral-movement-time.
[164] "Our Demands," *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-demands.
[165] Sarah Anderson, "Poor People's Campaign Gears Up for Mother's Day Launch," *Truthout*, April 6, 2018, https://truthout.org/articles/poor-people-s-campaign-gears-up-for-mother-s-day-launch.

militarism, and ecological devastation.[166] Aaron Scott, an organizer with Chaplains on the Harbor in Grays Harbor, Washington, described what he witnessed that day:

> We didn't have a nice sit-down with Capitol Hill progressives. We staged a full-on narrative takeover . . . young black moms from Flint keeping them on the ropes. Generations of Appalachians eviscerating the myth that you can't organize for revolution in the coal fields. Apache Stronghold women grieving for their sacred sites buried under concrete. Undocumented moms with their children in their arms closing us out in deafening chants. What I saw yesterday made it very clear that we have what it takes to build a politically independent force.[167]

Through this action, these leaders showcased the agency of poor people, the capacity of uniting across historic lines of difference, and the fallacy of narratives that blame people for their own poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Even after decades of poor people's organizing has demonstrated the possibilities of this model, moments like this are critical reminders of its power and potential on a national scale.

Through my own participation and research, which included traveling to twenty-seven states and conducting forty-one interviews with a diverse range of participants, I am continually reminded that the past is ever-present both through its symbolic reference and through the continued organizing that shapes this new campaign. That this history is not widely known even to many in the campaign only serves to highlight the importance of fifty years of anti-poverty organizing—and its challenge to a historiography that obscures continuity and complexity through artificial periodizations and categorizations that frequently do not correlate with the practices and understandings of social movement organizers. Many people connected to the campaigns I have profiled here are doing the work to document and uncover these forgotten

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[166] Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, "Sens. Warren, Sanders Hear Directly from America's Poor at U.S. Capitol," *Huffington Post*, June 13, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/warren-sanders-cummings-poor-peoples-campaign_n_5b2048ece4b09d7a3d782673.

[167] "We Staged a Full-on Narrative Takeover," *Kairos Center for Rights, Religions, and Social Justice* (blog), n.d., https://kairoscenter.org/poor-peoples-campaign-capitol-hill.

histories. Willie Baptist, Kristin Colangelo, Savina Martin, and Anthony Prince are among those coordinating the Homeless Union History Project, a study-work project of the University of the Poor, to both recover the history and lessons of this incredible history of poor people's organization and to support a resurgence of homeless unions across the country. In this way, documenting organizing from the past can inspire organizing in the present.

The infrastructure and platform of the PPC (2018+) has provided an important vehicle through which homeless union leaders have been able to reestablish the NUH; in some places, local homeless unions are helping to lead their states' PPCs, while in others, the PPC (2018+) is helping to incubate homeless unions or to connect preexisting poor people's organizations as NUH affiliates. On the ground, this means that leaders with the California Union of the Homeless, who are mostly based out of tent encampments in Salinas and Marysville, have linked up with immigrant leaders from Union de Vecinos in Los Angeles to help direct the California PPC, along with a coalition of other groups. The Massachusetts PPC has created a homeless committee that is not only fostering homeless unions but also facilitating a coalition with the Boston chapter of the radical, grassroots LGBTQ and AIDS activist organization ACT UP around issues of housing, health, and opioid addiction. In Pennsylvania, Put People First!, a statewide poor people's organization fighting for universal healthcare and a key anchor organization of the PPC, has helped found a homeless union in Lancaster. And in June of 2019 at the PPC (2018+)'s Poor People's Moral Action Congress in Washington, DC, the NUH officially reconstituted itself, with groups like Housing Our Neighbors (HON)—a Baltimore-based group of unhoused and housed leaders fighting to empty the shelters and demanding the human right to housing—joining as an affiliated member organization.

There are regular reminders that the past informs the present. One poignant moment came for me as I was helping to prepare for the 40 Days in Maryland. I had been working with Rev. Annie Chambers, co-chair of the NWRU and a longtime welfare rights warrior based in Baltimore, to organize a mass meeting for the PPC (2018+) in conjunction with a four-day conference that the NWRU was holding in Baltimore. On April 7, 2018, a chilly Saturday morning, the NWRU held a press conference to officially declare its support for the PPC (2018+). Maureen Taylor, chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), read a statement from the NWRU on the steps of the First Unitarian Church. She was flanked by welfare rights and anti-poverty leaders from across the country who had traveled to Baltimore for the conference. I was there huddled among them listening intently to their words.

The statement was part history lesson, part political and economic analysis, and part manifesto. Taylor spoke about how Dr. King had come to welfare rights leaders for guidance when building the PPC and how organizers have continued to fight over the last fifty years against attacks on welfare and the deteriorating economic conditions. The statement recounted the particular exploitation and oppression experienced by poor mothers, women of color, and immigrant women as workers—waged and unwaged—within our political and economic system. Taylor ended the statement with this call:

> What is clear to us today is that we are one class with one cause. Workers waged and unwaged, documented and undocumented, who collectively have the need and the right to the basic means of survival. . . . Together we must broaden the fight for our basic needs by uniting and advancing the cause for our class. For all of those reasons, we stand today united with the new Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. We are multiracial, intergenerational, and we are united as the many against the dictatorship of the rich to defeat the four pillars of evil—racism, poverty, the war economy, and the destruction of Mother Earth. We

> stand for welfare with dignity and for the protection of our planet and all who live on it.[168]

Standing there on those steps, I was moved by a sense of history circling back, not as a closed loop but as an ongoing spiral. The collective knowledge articulated in the NWRU's statement has evolved and been reproduced over five decades of material struggle. The PPC (2018+) is not a re-enactment of the 1968 PPC, but a re-articulation of its vision in a new historical moment armed with the knowledge of generations of antipoverty and welfare warriors.

[168] NWRU, "NWRU Press Conference on NPPC," Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), Baltimore, MD. YouTube, April 7, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/MWROdetroit/videos/1675851009149529/?v=1675851009149529.

Chapter 2: Struggling with Poverty: Stigma, Strategy, and Building Class Consciousness

When I interviewed campaign leaders, my last question was always, 'do you have any final thoughts?'—a tried and true interview technique. After an hour, on average, of me asking question after question, people would often politely say something like, 'No, I am good. Did you get what you need?' But once in a while, they would share some insight that they felt was important to get across. This is what happened the night I interviewed Rev. Sarah Monroe and her wife Emily Nillson with my comrade Anu Yadav in their living room. Rev. Monroe is co-founder and priest with Chaplains on the Harbor, a radical antipoverty mission station of the Episcopal Church located in rural Grays Harbor County, Washington. She was clearly tired, but not just because it had been a long day for all of us, including an arts and cultural evening that Anu and I facilitated at Chaplains on the Harbor's base of operations in Aberdeen followed by an almost two-hour interview. Rev. Monroe breathed in deeply and then said, "Well, I've had a bad day," then proceeded to laugh as though "bad" was clearly an understatement. She continued:

> I feel like people outside poor communities really don't get how fucking bad it is. Or just assume that poverty in the United States doesn't look anything like the poverty they saw when they were vacationing in Southern Mexico or something. I've been to Southern Mexico and I've spent time on the border and I've spent time in poor communities around the United States. Acknowledging the extremity of what poverty looks like in the United States is something that I think is really important. Like we think of ourselves as a developed country, as we say in political parlance, and a country that has the greatest scientific advances and the best medical care. And then I have 24 year olds who die of pneumonia. I take people to the hospital and they're treated like shit because they've used drugs in their life. And so people just let them die. And then I get to bury them. And that sucks.[169]

[169] Rev. Sarah Monroe, in conversation with the author and Anu Yadav, Grays Harbor County, Washington, November 2, 2018.

There was sadness but also righteous anger in her voice as she continued to talk about the cruelty of a society that treats people as disposable. Rev. Monroe has a "memorial tattoo" on her arm with the names of all the people she has buried as a pastor in her community. Her arm is covered. For many pastors and religious leaders in the campaign having to bear witness to the unnecessary deaths and lives lost to poverty and the inseparable evils of systemic racism, militarism, and ecological devastation in their communities grounds their political organizing. As Rev. Barber says, "I bury people because of these politics."[170] But Rev. Monroe was also calling out the ideas about poverty and poor people that invisibilize and blame poor people, that obscure the root causes of these conditions. She said we need to ask ourselves, "Why is it easier to get drugs than it is to get treatment? Why is it easier to get incarcerated than it is to get a job?"

The *Poor* People's Campaign. The name of the campaign is effective in the sense that it clearly suggests what the campaign is about, who the campaign is for, and most importantly who is *leading* the campaign. And yet as Rev. Monroe was suggesting, there is nothing self-evident about poverty in the United States, arguably the wealthiest and most powerful nation in world history. The subject of poverty in the United States raises many questions. What does it mean to be poor? How is poverty measured? Who falls into this category of poor? And perhaps most consequential, why does poverty exist, especially amidst such abundance? These are analytical, political, and even moral questions to which the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC [2018+]) has set out to intervene in and shape. In fact, "shifting the narrative" around poverty is one of the campaign's three main goals (not demands).

One of the campaign's key interventions is to reveal the breadth, depth, and nuance of poverty in America. On the one hand, the PPC (2018+) has highlighted the growing problem of

[170] From a soon-to-be released documentary, see Dara Kell, *We Cried Power* (Brava Media, n.d.).

extreme deprivation and crisis in places like Aberdeeen, where Rev. Monroe lives, in order to dispel the exceptionalist myth that such conditions do not exist in the U.S.[171] On the other hand, the PPC (2018+) has broadened the definition of poor beyond the official poverty measure by proposing that it is more likely 140 million, or almost half of people in the United States, who are poor.[172] While politicians across party lines have continued for decades to speak of 'fighting for the middle class' (still a majority of people in the U.S. *identify* as "middle class"),[173] the PPC (2018+) has pointed to a range of empirical evidence and personal narratives in order to reveal a more general insecurity that has engulfed a majority of people in the U.S. The campaign has not simply avoided the language of "middle class," but has directly called out politicians for using "middle class," while refusing to utter the words "poverty" and "poor."[174]

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[171] It is partly a myth of American exceptionalism that extreme poverty only exists in less "developed" nations (for which the U.S. of course plays no part). This narrative of U.S. exceptionalism suggests that whatever problems we have here, relatively speaking, they are nowhere near how bad they could be. Therefore people should really be grateful that they live in the greatest country in the world. But it is also a myth about the U.S.'s exaggerated power vis a vis global capitalism. That we are in fact, not just dictators of the world economy, but the U.S. has always existed in a multi-polar global capitalist world, where the center has shifted. We are experiencing U.S. hegemony in decline and the role it played in stabilizing the global capitalist world order.

[172] Once again, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival derives this figure of 140 million based on the U.S. Census's 2017 Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), the population living between 100-199% of the poverty threshold are defined as poor or "low-income." See Shailly Gupta Barnes, "Explaining the 140 Million: Breaking Down the Numbers Behind the Moral Budget," Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice, https://kairoscenter.org/explaining-the-140-million/#_ftn5.

[173] Robert Bird and Frank Newport, "What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?,"*Gallup*, February 27, 2017, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/204497/determines-americans-perceive-social-class.asp.

[174] In June 2019, the PPC (2018+) hosted a presidential candidates forum in Washington, D.C., where Barber and Theoharis challenged candidates to speak to the 140 million poor people in this country and stop using the language of "middle class" as a way of obscuring the dire state of the economy for almost half of people living in the U.S. Rhetorically, and to some degree in terms of policy, poverty does seem to be on the agenda for now. At a PPC (2018+) voter registration training in September 2020, then candidate Joe Biden said, "If I am president, ending poverty will not just be an aspiration, it will be a theory of change." There seemed to be some promise with President Biden's American Rescue Plan (ARP), which included many key provisions that poor people's organizations have been demanding for decades, like the expansion of child tax credits independent of employment. While the media has been quick to make comparisons to the ambitious New Deal policies of the 1930s, the ARP will need to not only be made permanent, but will need to be greatly expanded. See H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn J. Edin, "A Simple Approach to Ending Extreme Poverty," *The Atlantic*, June 2021 issue., https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/how-to-end-extreme-child-poverty/618720/; Liz Theoharis, "Statement from Kairos on the American Rescue Plan," *Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice* (blog), March 11, 2021, https://kairoscenter.org/statement-on-the-american-rescue-plan/.

But there is a reason that most Americans identify as "middle class." "Poverty" and "poor" carry a lot of baggage. Efforts to shift the narrative are up against deeply entrenched, complex, and pervasive ideas about poverty and poor people. While well-meaning advocates and policy-makers might want to substitute the scurrilous word "poor" with other labels that promise to evade the stigma of poverty and offer more dignity, the power of these narratives goes deeper than one's choice of words. The stereotypes, assumptions, and "common sense" understandings of poverty are deeply embedded and internalized ideological weapons against the poor.[175] They blame, shame, and divide the poor. The function of these dominant poverty narratives is to mystify and justify the very social relations that produce poverty in order to preempt the organization and unity of the poor to contest these social relations.

In this chapter, I explore poverty as a terrain of struggle against both the concrete conditions of exploitation and deprivation and against the cultural narratives that legitimize these conditions. I examine how the strategy of centering not only poverty, but *the poor* intentionally summons the very representations of poverty and poor people that the campaign seeks to disrupt. Because the campaign calls on participants to identify as poor or at least with poor people, the shame, stigma, and stereotypes surrounding poverty are intimately brought to the surface. This process creates a terrain upon which organizers struggle within themselves and with others around the myriad of questions this campaign raises about poverty. Although this process is no doubt challenging, I argue it is productive, in the sense of helping to construct a loosely shared framework and class consciousness which informs collective action.

As I argue throughout this dissertation, much of the campaign's strategic insights, including challenging these dominant cultural narratives, are not new to the PPC (2018+), but

[175] See Gramsci's distinction between "common sense" and "good sense," Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

come from a longer history of poor people's movements. However, as a national campaign with broad participation in over forty states, it offers a unique vehicle for shifting the narrative through shaping the consciousness of thousands of participants across the country. While one might imagine the task of "shifting the narrative" as oriented towards some external other—media outlets and political leaders—I argue that the primary targets or rather beneficiaries of this ideological work are in fact those of us who are involved. If consciousness is a continuous dialectic between the objective conditions and experiences of our lives and the cultural frameworks that make meaning of these conditions and experiences, then the PPC (2018+) functions as a vehicle and framework for not only shaping our consciousness, but creating the conditions for our collective action to change these conditions.

But I am making a further claim in this chapter. While the PPC (2018+) does not explicitly talk about class, a tricky venture in the United States, I argue that talking about poverty in the broad and complex ways in which the PPC (2018+) does is a gateway towards developing a class consciousness and a critique of capitalism. Given the ideological obfuscation around poverty in the United States, the limited and superficial discussions about class, and its relationship to race, gender, and other modes of oppression, class consciousness is complicated, no doubt. It is no less so within the PPC (2018+), but the campaign creates a particular forum and framework in which diverse participants connect their experiences with others, while taking on these dominant conceptions of poverty as they arise within the organizing.

The campaign forces participants to ask questions. How do "we" define poverty? Who is poor? Am I poor? Are you poor? Does my poverty have to look like your poverty? Why are we poor? Are we poor for the same reasons? And if I am not poor or you are not poor, what is my/your relationship to a campaign that explicitly calls for centering the leadership of the poor

and dispossessed? These sorts of internal questions are class-consciousness raising questions in the most basic sense. Which is not to say the question inevitably leads to a single answer. I am not arguing that this sort of internal grappling inevitably leads towards a particular or single form of class consciousness, but it calls the questions and orients participants towards a broad form of solidarity, which for me and many others is class solidarity.

In this sense, the campaign is a container for participants to grapple with what these categories mean in order to construct a shared language and analytical framework. Because without some sort of shared language, it is hard to communicate, coordinate, and build alliances around shared goals. Constructing a shared language and analytical framework is both part of the struggle and never complete. It is a struggle because of the dominant narratives and frameworks that mystify and redirect, but also because of the political stakes involved. Who is included (or excluded) and centered (or de-centered) in the analytical framework reflects who is included (and excluded) and centered (or de-centered) within the political coalition that the PPC is trying to build.

Although the PPC (2018+) does not explicitly name the "capitalistic economy" as King did, it continues in this same tradition of raising questions about "a larger system that has concentrated economic and political power into fewer and fewer hands, driving a deepening and dangerous inequality that is impacting the majority of people in this country,"[176] and "the complex relationships between and across systemic racism, persistent poverty, the war economy and its inevitable militarism, and the ecological devastation from which none can escape."[177]

[176] Sarah Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/Militarism and Our National Morality" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, April 2018), 13.
[177] Shailly Gupta Barnes, James Forbes, and Tim Tyson, "Foreword" in "The Souls of Poor Folk" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, April 2018), 2.

Against the dominant tendency to invisibilize or exceptionalize poverty, the PPC (2018+) is showing the breadth, depth, and nuances of poverty in this land by connecting diverse impoverished communities. This work is developing and sharpening participants' collective analysis and consciousness of the "underlying structures that perpetuated misery in their midst."[178]

The *Poor* People's Campaign?

When I met with Brittany De Barros in the New York offices of About Face Against the War (formerly Iraq Veterans Against the War), she admitted that the name initially turned her off. A veteran from the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Brittany became involved through the New York campaign and was hired on as one of the national organizers before eventually taking a position with About Face. As she put it, her first reaction was, "'Ooh, like POOR?' when I first encountered it, it struck me. The word grated on me, like a bad word almost." But she signed up anyway, because although she did not love the name, she liked everything else about the campaign and the name at least made more sense to her when she realized it was in reference to Dr. King's last campaign.

I was not surprised to hear this was Brittany's first reaction. In the fifteen years that I have been involved in antipoverty organizing, I have heard it too. Even in the early days as we were laying the groundwork for the PPC (2018+), some questioned the strategy of re-appropriating the name of Dr. King's last campaign, 'Maybe it would be more effective to use another word? People do not like to be called poor.' Sometimes they would acknowledge that, 'Maybe this has worked for you where you are from, but that would not go over well here,' as if

[178] Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk," 6.

the shame, stigma, and dehumanization associated with poverty is somehow unique or more acute for some. Even if this were true, or could be known, the fact that the word strikes a nerve is part of the strategy. So when we officially launched the PPC (2018+), I was curious to see how this strategy would play out when scaled up as part of a national big tent campaign.

Since the name is after all people's first introduction to the campaign, people's uneasiness with the word poor usually comes up pretty quickly. But as Brittany mentioned, because of the three other pillars—systemic racism, militarism, and ecological devastation—the campaign draws people who do not necessarily fall into a more narrowly prescribed "antipoverty" camp. So when I interviewed people, I asked them about the name of the campaign, how they responded to it themselves and how they responded to those who are troubled by the word poor. This question became a nice entry point into a much deeper discussion around what poverty is, who are the poor, class consciousness, and organizing strategy. It offered insights into where participants were coming from either in terms of their personal experiences of poverty and their organizing backgrounds.

Although that was Brittany's initial reaction, she described how her thinking about poverty and the word poor changed as she got more involved, "It was a blind spot for me, because I had grown up with this very bootstrappy understanding of America and how economics works here and what's possible." Even though she considered herself to be someone with a developed intersectional racial analysis, "I still never thought about the stigma around literally just the word poor, let alone how much of a problem it is that people understand poverty in a very caricaturish way in the United States." For her, the very reason she initially felt "poor" was a shameful word was the very reason it needed to be used so it could spark a conversation

about a "set of narratives that needs to be undone in this country in order for people to really understand themselves as in the same fight."

This idea that using the word poor helped generate a conversation that forced people to examine the source of their discomfort and class positionality more closely was common. Many said they responded to such questions and discomforts around the word "poor" with their own questions. Sheilah Garland-Olaniran, a Chicago-based organizer and former co-chair of the Illinois PPC, explained her approach:

> I just ask a question. I say, 'well, are we rich? We're going to call ourselves the Rich People's Campaign?' I mean, 'What are we? You got everything you need all the time, every day? Do you ever worry about your future? Do your lights get turned on? Do you sometimes worry about whether you have enough gas or money to get on that bus? That makes us poor. How else would you describe us?'

Long-time MWRO organizer and co-chair of the NWRU Marian Kramer has dealt with this a lot over the years. When people have a problem with the name, she said, "I tell them that's too bad. I say, because you one paycheck away from being poor yourself. A lot of them." She has heard the same "advice" about not saying welfare, "'Why you call it welfare rights, Marian?' And I said, 'because that's the base of our organization. Most people are on welfare.' 'Well maybe if you change it.' I said, 'Well, I'm not changing it. I am keeping it where it is.'" But again, for her it is an educational process to move people:

> You just have to ask questions. Just like you do with me. Do you have the same job that you had at one time? Can you take your children out on a vacation like you used to? What about your insurance? And a lot of times that get them. The whole family is without insurance. And that's like killing you slowly. So, you know, you have to take it slow and some people you might not be able to talk to.

And according to her, the fact that you are not going to get everybody is fine, that is why MWRO "don't cap. We throw the net out there."

In Sheilah's experience, these hesitations around "poor" came up early on. She explained, "there were folks that initially came around, and are still around, who maybe found no pride in saying, 'yeah, I am poor,'" but after being a part of the campaign will now say, "'you know, I am impacted. I am poor and I am proud to speak out.., because this is my life.'" When I spoke with Tayna Fogle, organizer with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) and leader with the Kentucky PPC, she described a similar initial but not impermeable reaction, "When we first began, the issue was the word poor, because folks are prideful and it was a sell to people that's poor to be called poor. To say, 'What? Oh no, we don't want your charity around here.'" For her, the audit and the political education materials around poverty, particularly when it came to race, was key, "the myth was everybody in prison is black. Everybody in prison is Democrat. Poor people are black people. And when that audit came out and it actually started showing that the majority of poor people in Kentucky are white, then Mitch McConnell couldn't sell his cookies no more." Of course these sorts of shifts are not automatic, "Now mind you, we still have folks that think that the coal industry is coming back to Kentucky. They have not woke up yet. And hopefully as we keep chiseling away, they will finally realize Mitch McConnell has sold them a mirage. And so people are trickling over."

But the shame and stigma attached to the word "poor" is potent and not everyone is prepared to identify with it. Many of the PPC organizers I spoke with could relate and empathize with these strong adverse responses. Dr. Savina Martin, tri-chair for the Massachusetts PPC and leader with the NUH, sees it all the time:

> My Facebook page is full of folks from my community—African American, Latina. I can't even get them out to a rally, because they can't relate to the Poor People's Campaign, because they don't want to be poor. They don't want to look at it. It's too difficult to look at as long as they've got a beautiful pocketbook. And I'm not being, trust me, I'm not stigmatizing. I am talking about what my experience is in our community. You always have to present yourself so that people will not know that you're poor or you

> will be stigmatized. So it comes from generations of trying to balance being really financially poor and not looking like you're poor.

Savina even told the story of an "Asian sister" who approached her at a press conference and was insistent that they change the name of the campaign, suggesting that these discomforts transcended her racial and ethnic "community." For Savina it was "triggering" and she ended up "phasing out," while the woman was speaking. Finally, she looked at the woman and said, "'Ma'am, I get what you're saying. Could you just take a breath and let me explain to you?'" She then told the woman, "'I understand the word poor in my soul, because that word poor has been a shameful word, beaten in us for being poor all through the years. And no one, even if they're living paycheck to paycheck, wants to realize that they're poor…'" Although Savina was not able to completely persuade the woman otherwise, they were able to talk. As she explained, "I know that reaction comes from a deep place...I knew that Asian woman had a history also." She recognized and understood the desire to craft "believable lies" about our lives, to not think "more critically in terms of where that pain was coming from," and "erase it."

Like others, Savina emphasized the importance of political education, "if we continue to educate about who the poor are and why we are poor, people will begin to open up about the word poor." But unlike some organizers who are adamant about using the word poor, she expressed some personal ambivalence about the word:

> You know, it could be a time to tear that down too...I'm open to talking about perhaps putting another word in front of the word poor, or substituting the word poor to something else, but I don't know what that something else is. Here, we've gone through years and centuries of that word...I don't want to use that word poor...I'm sick of the word poor, but I know that I will continue to fight against the injustice of poverty. You know? I'm open. I have no real concrete answers for it, but I could tell you, I hate that word poor.

Amy Jo expressed a similar ambivalence around the word as well. At the time of our interview, she was a tri-chair of the West Viriginia PPC and Northeast Organizer with Our Children, Our Future (now Our Future West Virginia [OFWV]). On the one hand, she recognized the power and utility of proudly reclaiming the word, but also felt the weight of the negative connotations. It was a tricky tension to work with. And being from West Virginia, she spoke about the slew of negative caricatures about poor white people from Appalachia that she referred to as "poverty porn."

Even as an antipoverty movement organizer, she told me, "I get scared every time I have to stand in front of a new group of people and say I'm poor because I know what that conjures up. That's one of the hardest things that I have to battle...it's still a struggle to find that as a point of strength, you know?" It is for this reason that OFWV has tried to find substitutions for the word poor, because as Amy Jo explained:

> If you keep telling somebody they're stupid, they're going to become stupid, all that defeating talk. So we've made a real effort with my organization to stop that. Low-income is what we used to say all the time and now it's impacted people...You don't want to be the person saying the P word and you don't want to be the P word. So we just sidestepped that all together.

But she also questioned the reasons for wanting to "sidestep" the "P word," "It's bougie-er.," she said, referring to "impacted." "We do that a lot in the nonprofit world. We dress all these simple words up just so it makes it easier to be with, to sit with." Which is why despite her struggle with the stigma attached to the word poor, she appreciated the directness and assertiveness of using the word, "what is more empowering than a group of poor people saying 'I'm poor,' but not from a victim mentality. But from a position of power and where they're speaking to their own power. 'I'm poor and I'm in power.' It can't get any better than that. It's a campaign of the people, so let's talk like the people."

While some people struggled to always find strength in the word poor, others were adamant about this being precisely why we needed to continue to say it. Nijmie Dzurinko, a leader with Put People First! Pennsylvania (PPF! PA) and that state's PPC tri-chair, described it as not "colluding" with the narratives we are trying to disrupt. As we sat in her car, she explained:

> There's a reason we have this reaction of 'Why would you call it that? No one wants to identify as poor.' And that's part of the problem. We're actually highlighting the fact that the reason that no one wants to identify as poor is because it's been used to blame people for their own situations. That their poverty is their fault, because they're lazy or they're stupid or they made bad decisions. It's shameful, right? That's actually part of what needs to shift for us to understand poverty is something that is produced by the system. Individual choices don't create poverty.

While the desire to "sidestep" the "P word" might be understandable, Nijmie argued that this move only gives those narratives strength, because it cedes ideological ground to these dominant narratives, rather than struggle over their meaning.

Oppressed groups commonly reclaim the very words used to denigrate them—Black, queer, crip—just to name a few. Several people I interviewed drew similar connections to explain the efficacy of using the word poor. When I met with Katrina Battle with the Vermont PPC and Black Lives Matter of Greater Burlington in the Milton public library, she saw it operating on multiple levels. She talked about how not identifying as poor works to "invisiblize the struggles of the poor" and to "otherize them, because they're a 'them' and not an 'us.'" Not saying poor is a step towards not talking about the realities of poverty, whereas using the word can reclaim it from these negative associations:

> The problem isn't the name. The problem is that we actually are poor and what it means to be poor and how we view the poor. The problem isn't that people are called disabled. The problem is that when we hear the word disabled, we associate it with somebody as less than. The problem isn't that these differences exist. The problem isn't that I want to call myself black. It's that when I say black, you think less than, dirty, and trash. Right?

> So the problem isn't that I'm calling myself poor, that I'm recognizing that need. It's that when you think poor, you think dirty and trash. So reclaiming the name, because it's the reality, that's all of our truth.

However, when I spoke with Trini Rodriguez with Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural, a bookstore and cultural center located in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, she saw it a little differently based on her experience with the Chicano/a movement of the 1960s and 1970s. She supported the idea of the PPC then and has been involved in the network that helped to relaunch it, so she was not seriously arguing that the name change, but she wondered about the work it was actually doing. As a writer and political activist, she is very attuned to narratives and ideology. She said, "When we called ourselves Chicanos, for instance, it was a response. 'No, we're going to define ourselves. You're not going to define us. We're going to define ourselves.' And it was the offensive." Whereas she saw poor as "a deficit based way of looking at it, as opposed to an asset based way of looking at it." She understood the gesture to history, but she explained, "At the same time, just like the idea of being a victim, we wouldn't call ourselves the victim people's campaign, because we're all victims of a system, right? But we wouldn't assign ourselves that." For her, she saw poor as strengthening narratives and myths of scarcity. "Again," she said, "we're looking at the part that is not abundant. We're looking at the part where there's a lack. And the scarcity thing is what we've been told. We're not enough. Somebody else has power. Somebody else can decide. You don't know."

I thought it was interesting that Trini and Amy Jo brought up the word *victim*, as something we would not want to assign ourselves, because in some of the older welfare rights pamphlets I read, they did just that, referring to themselves as "victims of poverty."[179] But I

[179] See Marian Kramer et al., "Which Way Welfare Rights? (New Situation, New Strategy)" (the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and Voices from the Front, May 1993).

understood the conundrum and contradictions they were raising. How to point to the uneven power relations that impose poverty, in order to dispel ideas that poverty is our fault, without taking away our sense of agency and power? While Katrina drew parallels to other movement strategies of self-identification, Trini saw differences. I think there are a number of reasons for this, which is why I found myself agreeing and disagreeing with different aspects of what they were saying. For instance, I agreed with Trini's assessment that they were not analogous strategies, but because of the point that Katrina made when she said, "the problem is that we actually are poor."[180] Antipoverty organizers are not simply attempting to eradicate the stigma or narratives associated with being poor. We are fighting to not be poor, albeit through a radical shift in social relations. This is of course not to say that these other movements are not also fighting for a radical transformation of social relations, but one's identity as black, disabled, or chicano/a would not necessarily be lost as a result of ultimately succeeding.

Mrs. Johnson and Rev. Johnson of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina have also been politically active since the 1960s, coming out of the civil rights and Black Power movements but always with a strong emphasis on antipoverty and economic justice. Rev. Johnson helped form an organization called the Association of Poor People in 1966 with Elsie Mobley and a group of other women who lived in public housing in Greensboro. This was before Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign. In talking about this history, he offered, "The issue of why you would call yourself the Poor People's Organization in 1966, we answered it in a very simple way, because we're poor and we're people. And the people qualify us to have dignity and worth and meaning. Poor is simply the social location that the systems, the powers, and principalities had put us in." He added, "To run around pretending that we're not and being

[180] These examples are also themselves not analogous, each has their own particular tensions and histories.

embarrassed because we are, is not logical. I actually think back on being impressed that we were able to articulate that in the sixties." For them, calling themselves poor people was not a deficit way of assigning themselves, just a matter of fact. And Mrs. Johnson offered something I believe further spoke to Trini's concerns when she said, "to comment on the earlier question about why the poor, why poverty. First of all, poverty is all around us. There's more poverty than we acknowledge in this country and certainly abroad and it doesn't have to be so. But I grew up poor, quite poor, but I also have a rich appreciation for the teachings, the philosophy, the training, the culture of growing up that way." For Mrs. Johnson, they were poor in material fact, but that did not mean they were lacking in knowledge and culture. Moreover, she saw the experience of growing up in a poor community as having offered her valuable lessons. Self-identifying as poor did not erase this but directly challenged these assumptions otherwise.

In this sense, reclaiming the word poor is about speaking truth and claiming power but not necessarily pride in the way that many identity-based movements might challenge denigrating cultural narratives through affirmative slogans like "gay pride" or "black is beautiful." Rev. Annie Chambers spoke directly to this point of poverty and pride at a Maryland PPC Virtual Town Hall in May 2020:

> When the last time you heard a politician talk about 'poor,' use the word 'poor'? See, I make them use it all the time. They be, 'low-income,' I say, 'no, I ain't low-income, I'm poor...Use the word!' See those are the things that we gotta get people to be able to say. Now, if you want to say, 'do I wear a badge of poverty?' No, I am not saying, 'I am so happy I am poor.' No, I am not, because I feel I should have the basic things in life...I am not ashamed of poverty. I am not proud of poverty. I want to fight poverty.[181]

[181] Maryland Poor People's Campaign, "Maryland PPC Virtual Town Hall – COVID-19 Impact & Response – May 21, 2020 #WWAD," YouTube, May 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xj3PBK7-4o.

Developing a sense of dignity and agency is a critical part of reclaiming the word poor, but ultimately we are fighting for the right to not be poor. Claiming poverty as a condition produced by the current social relations, rather than as a moral failure or deficiency is an assertion of one's full humanity or personhood, but as Nijmie explained, "it's not about seeing 'poor' as an identity category. It's seeing it as a fundamental relationship to the structure that we live in."[182]

However, as others explained to me, the name was not necessarily a turn-off, just something to slowly get people comfortable with. It certainly got people's attention, but it often messaged very well with poor people. Avery Book, a member of the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC) and the PPC (2018+) National Steering Committee, described the name as a "reverse dog whistle."

> ...most of the people that I've heard object to the name are in the more stable sections of the working class. The whole concept of the middle class in this country, mostly I think refers to the more stable sections of the working class. People who have a middle income and they still are working for a wage and do not own things, except for maybe their car and some percentage of their house depending on how far they are with their mortgage, but it isn't owning a business with the means of production. So it's mostly been more middle income people like, 'Why the Poor People's Campaign? You know, people don't like to be called poor. It evokes charity.' But then for people who are at the most acutely hurting section of the class, they go, 'Yeah! They're talking about me! That's me. I'm a poor person.' People see the t-shirt, like a homeless person, and they're like, 'Oh yeah, I'm poor. That's cool. What's this about? Tell me.'

He went on to talk about how the PPC (2018+) has actually been very successful particularly in a part of the state called the Northeast Kingdom, which unlike the name *Kingdom* suggests is not a

[182] Cathy Cohen's theorizing on the radical potential of those deemed "deviant" within black communities has some parallels here, since she argues that the strategies employed by those most marginalized in black communities—poor mothers and welfare recipients, young people, gay and trans people—to carve out autonomy against oppressive regimes offer what she believes to be the greatest "possibility of radical change, not only in the distribution of resources, but also definitional power, redefining the rules of normality that limit the dreams, emotions, and acts of most people." I think the self-definitional strategies of welfare rights leaders like Annie Chambers are the kind of challenge to the respectability politics that Cohen sees as counter-productive for Black politics in the twenty-first century. See Cathy J. Cohen, "DEVIANCE AS RESISTANCE: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

place of wealth, quite the opposite. It is the poorest and most rural part of the state.[183] It was here, not the state capital of Montpelier (or Burlington), where the Vermont Workers Center organized their Medicaid March in connection with the PPC's 40 Days of Action.

Then again, another VWC member David Przepioski, who served on the Vermont PPC Coordinating Committee, told me the story of when he was in Washington D.C. during the 40 Days of Action. The DC PPC, accustomed to the steady stream of protesters from outside of the city never engaging with local residents, led a group door knocking in a neighborhood with lots of vacant boarded up homes (he was told the neighborhood was being razed). David, who is white, said he knocked on the door of a woman, "a person of color, in her mid sixties or thereabouts," who took offense to the suggestion that she might be poor. She explained she was not poor, that she helped poor people, particularly homeless vets. David, who just happens to be a formerly homeless vet, said that offering that helped to shift the conversation, but it underscored for him how the word could be off putting even or especially to people he would most certainly identify as poor.

The lesson for him was not that we should not use the word, but that we should not be surprised either when people did not leap at it, because these narratives are pervasive and relentless. David understood it well, "the narrative we're always given is that it's all our fault that we're living in poverty. We're not working hard enough, we're not working enough hours. We're not getting the education or we don't know the right people or and on and on and on about, you know, the reason why we're living in poverty and it's our fault directly. I've heard that narrative from just absolutely everyone in my whole entire life–family, friends, and

[183] The Northeast Kingdom, also referred to as "The Kingdom," is the northeast corner of the state comprising Essex, Caledonia, and Orleans counties. These counties rank last in per capita income, see "List of Vermont locations by per capita income," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Vermont_locations_by_per_capita_income.

coworkers and everyone." So he understood why someone might want to reject identifying as poor as a way of rejecting these narratives, which are damaging. This was one of the reasons he found a political home with VWC, because they explicitly rejected these narratives, without asking him to deny his reality.

Of course, as I said before, another concern about the name is more pragmatic. If we are trying to attract as many people as possible to the campaign, would not having a name that is not a potential liability would be wiser? Once people are in the door, then we can work on people's internalization of these narratives around being poor and poverty or maybe simply bypass this third rail altogether. In this vein, a progressive nonprofit conducted a "cognitive linguistic analysis" based on 14 "listening sessions" in 7 states and Washington D.C. to determine what language resonated best with people. Lo and behold, their analysis advised progressive political and social justice campaigns against using the words "poor," "working poor," and "low-income," among others, because they found it was not a "winning" message.[184] But we cannot treat the efficacy of using the word poor as some marketing or branding puzzle.

First, poor people are not a monolith and there are innumerable variables to consider: who is delivering the message, who is receiving the message, how, and when. For instance, maybe the D.C. woman on who's door David knocked would have reacted differently if the canvasser was black, or at least not a white man. Maybe not. But more importantly, the process of organizing takes people and the conditions as they are, but does not accept these as static since we are trying to affect change. That change is not only an external process, but an internal process as well. Organizing is a process that shifts people's consciousness. And lastly, as many

[184] See Anat Shenker-Osorio et al, "Persuading the Public on Poverty: Economic Justice Messaging Research," *Center for Community Change*, June 2014. A group of artists, media makers, and organizers critically unpacked this study as part of a Poverty Scholars working group studying popular and religious narratives of poverty.

have noted, the fact that the word is agitational is not its weakness but its strength. If people are "hailed" by the word, great.[185] If people are agitated by the word, that is an opening to explore, even amplify these feelings and redirect them. But of course, that is if one is actually going to organize, not just deliver a message and move on.

Picture the Homeless, Picture the Poor

I was first introduced to the New York-based homeless-led organization Picture the Homeless through the Poverty Scholars network in 2006. I have always thought the name of their organization, Picture the Homeless, was brilliant, because it asks two things simultaneously. First, not to ignore and invisibilize people experiencing homelessness, as those of us who are housed are inclined to do so out of a complex mixture of feelings (guilt, sense of powerlessness, fear, contempt), but also to critically interrogate the image that gets conjured when we *picture* the homeless. Many PPC (2018+) organizers I spoke with talked about having to contend with

[185] In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," Louis Althusser elaborates on Marx's concept of interpellation. According to him, "*all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*." This process and function of ideology is interpellation. But it is a process that is possible only because we take part in our own subject making by the very act of recognizing when we are being "hailed" by ideology. In "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall describes a process wherein ideology or meaning is "encoded," in this case mass media, and then "decoded" by the viewer. However, Hall suggests a more complex process of "decoding" wherein the viewer, or one may say the subject, has some level of agency in their interpretation of the encoded message. He articulates three possible modes of decoding: a) dominant-hegemonic position; b) negotiated position; or c) oppositional position. Lastly, in *Disidentifcations: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz, theorizes how queers and people of color interpellate dominant representations of homosexuality and queerness in ways that "rehabilitate" these images from their abjection. Muñoz refers to this oppositional decoding, to use Hall's language, as "disidentification." He writes, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship." In similar ways, representations of poverty produce varied responses or strategies by poor people. Although none can escape these dominant representations, which also intersect with racist and homophobic narratives, there are multiple ways that people respond to being hailed. I would argue that the ideological work of antipoverty organizing is to cultivate oppositional positions or strategies of disidentification in order to resist such dominant narratives and create alternative representatives and narratives. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al., 2005th ed. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1980); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, vol. 2, Cultural Studies of the Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

two related problems that are a result of these dominant narratives and stereotypes of poverty. One being a narrow definition of poverty that encompasses only the most extreme expressions of poverty, usually homelessness. And secondly, the unstated assumption that you can somehow tell a poor or homeless person just by looking at them.

As I said, asking people about the name of the campaign was merely an entry point into a discussion about who are the poor, what does it mean to be poor, and whether they themselves identify as poor. When I asked campaign participants these questions directly their answers reflected (for the most part) a more expansive, less tightly delineated definition of poverty that emphasized a spectrum and diversity of experiences, as well as an understanding of poor people as a heterogeneous group affected by intertwined forces of systemic racism, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, militarism, and imperialism. Many people quoted the 140 million figure, but they were not prescriptive about it, it was not the line that marked off the poor from the non-poor.

For instance, when I posed the question to Khalil Saddiq, a tri-chair with the MA PPC and Marine veteran, his response was particularly broad, "Who are the poor? Fundamentally, the poor are those individuals who do not have enough financial resources to have a quality of life where people are healthy and happy. That's to me, who the poor is. So if you don't have adequate resources to maintain a healthy and happy life, you're poor." Given the health and happiness measures of people in this country, a lot of people are poor under this definition.[186] He

[186] Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton's research into sharply rising mortality and morbidity rates in the U.S., particularly among white middle-aged people without a college degree, brought attention to what they refer to as "deaths of despair." The increased death rates among whites are largely from drug and alcohol poisonings, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis. These mortality rates mimic similar declines among black people in urban centers in the 1970s and 1980s. While the mortality rates among black people still exceed those of whites, the u-turn in mortality among middle-aged white people without a college degree is significant. They attribute the rising mortality and morbidity to deteriorating economic conditions under late capitalism. See Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century," *PNAS* 112, no. 49 (December 8, 2015); Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of*

explained how the campaign uses the figure of 140 million to broaden people's understanding of poverty, "And so that stretches much further beyond the person that we see sitting on the park bench sleeping. It could be a person who looks like everything's together, but in reality, everything's not together. They're still struggling." Khalil's experience is a case in point. Like a true Marine, he is clean cut and poised, does not fit the stereotype of the poor or homeless veteran, but when I asked him if he identifies as poor, he said:

> Yeah. I do. Yeah. I have been homeless twice. Right now I'm living on a voucher, which is, you know, quote unquote, a section eight voucher, but it is from the military and it's based on income. Right now, I have no income. I'm unemployed and I'm searching for jobs, part time jobs. I'm an entrepreneur at the end of the day. And so I want to have my own business, but I'm certainly poor. But I do have housing, which is a good thing. I'm able to eat. I have snap benefits and then I just have my passion that goes with the campaign, but yeah, I'm certainly one of the poor.

Many people I spoke with talked about confronting this dominant tendency to envision the poor as only the homeless person "on the park bench sleeping." It is not hard to see why people only associate poverty with its most extreme manifestations. Just a web image search of the word "poverty" produces what we might expect—people living in extreme poverty in the global south scavenging in trash heaps, people living on the street with signs asking for money, and also the kinds of "poverty porn" images that Amy Jo spoke of—poor white rural families with dirty faces and shirts looking blankly at the camera.

This theme of not looking the part was raised by several people I interviewed. Like Savina talked about with her Facebook friends, Katrina talked about how poor people, particularly in reference to black people, actively hide their poverty to avoid stigmatization. She

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Capitalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Suicide rates alone paint a dismal picture of despair in the U.S. From 1999 through 2018, the age-adjusted suicide rate increased 35%. See Holly Hegegaard, Sally C. Curtin, and Margaret Warner, "Increase in Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1999–2018," NCHS Data Brief (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2020).

explained, “Because when we go out into society, we are judged so much by what we look like. So I can be real presentable. I have been the cute poor my whole life. I’ve been homeless since January of this year. And people don’t know it. As long as you don’t look what they think poor looks like.” Since people would not assume she was poor, let alone homeless, it was particularly important for her to identify as poor in organizing spaces to disrupt these assumptions.

Others spoke to me about the weird ways this belief that poor people had to look a certain way, or that poverty only referred to the most extreme poverty, played out in organizing spaces. As Brittany put it:

> We have an understanding of poor that is like a person in rags sitting homeless on the street. And sure, of course, that person is poor, but the number of times my fellow organizers even in New York have been, for example, like a young woman of color struggling to get by, standing in the front of the room, while older, what we would describe as, middle class white people are like, ‘we need to get the poor people in here to lead!’ and just watching the absurdity of people’s misunderstanding of what poverty looks like in the United States just drives home every time why this is important. Because every time someone says that, it creates an opportunity to say, ‘why do you think that there aren’t poor people leading right now in this room?’

For me, this story, which is all too common, reveals so much. But one of the most pernicious underlying narratives is that poor people cannot lead. The very performance of this young woman of color’s capacity to lead marked her as non-poor to these middle class white people. It was even trumped by a racialization of poverty that often marks people of color, regardless of their economic status, as poor. So while the impetus to have poor people lead is a noble gesture, if one’s understanding of what poverty is and who the poor are relies on a trope of extreme poverty, then it undermines the project, because one cannot even recognize the impoverished leader standing right in front of them.

When I interviewed Yexenia Vanegas in the Detroit public school classroom trailer where she teaches, she also spoke about having to contend with these ideas about poverty and

how they often come up around this question of leadership, even on the coordinating committee level. Yexenia, who led the cultural organizing for the Michigan PPC during the 40 Days, told me about one particularly frustrating moment when she and her partner Carlos Santacruz, a PPC (2018+) National organizer, held a meeting with local artists and musicians they were trying to recruit. Someone who was on the coordinating committee attended the meeting and felt compelled to say, as Yexenia put it, "'well, I'm just wondering, like we're not really being led by poor people or people of color. You know, I think that's one of the problems in the campaign.'"

She and Carlos were livid, because not only did it potentially poison the water with these new people that she had worked to get into the room (incredibly disrespectful to her time and effort) but, as she put it, "me and Carlos were leading the discussion and we're both people of color and he's actually brown. And also he's a poor working-class person, all his life. So I was like, first of all, what the fuck are you talking about, here you go." She knew this was something that others in New York had experienced, too, as she and Carlos are originally from New York. She wondered, "I think one thing is being from New York, we just have nice style. So people assume I guess that because you're poor you can't look nice? I don't know." She was not sure and it frustrated her, but she understood some of the questioning:

> Those tensions come up often with new folks, who are coming in, just questioning the validity. And I get it, because it's happened so often, there's movements and spaces that are organizing where the leadership isn't reflective of who the organizing is for. So it becomes more like a savior kind of complex, so I get the questioning, but it's interesting to see what people think about poor people or how poor people should be, or act, or even live like.

She could at least understand when the questioning or concern came from poor people or people of color, who were concerned about being instrumentalized and not having real leadership, but the flip side of this was a charity mindset where middle income white people want to "help." Her

response to this, “I’m like, I don’t want your help. I want you to see yourself as who we are and come in like, ‘I’m doing this for myself and for you. So we can build together.’ That pisses me off. That’s them white liberal shit.” While the “white liberal” charity or ally model might at first blush seem an appropriate gesture of deference to those who are assumed to have experiential knowledge, it is a trap.[187] As Yexenia suggested, it is a trap, because it does not produce the orientation and politics that can match the scale and scope of the problem. It does not lead to a deeper solidarity and commitment whereby someone recognizes that they too have a stake in transforming the political and economic system, that they are part of the same class.

Of course not everyone I interviewed had quite the same expansive definition of poverty. For some there were clearer demarcations between the poor and non-poor, which offered clearer roles for poor people and “allies” in the movement. For Amy Jo someone might be “broke but not poor.” She described herself as having “gone from deep poverty to working poor poverty back to middle poverty. And now I am operating from a little bit of privilege. I still live paycheck to paycheck. And if I had a flat tire, it would cripple me, you know.” But these distinctions mattered to her, having experienced “deep poverty” mattered to her ability to really understand and know poverty. As she put it, “I think it’s just something that the people who aren’t poor don’t understand.”

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[187]In “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference,” Olúfémi O. Táíwò begins the article by telling a story about a white journalist that offers him a story that she has been working on, because as a white person, she feels that she does not have the appropriate epistemic knowledge that he as a black person has to write about environmental racism in a red-lined working-class black neighborhood. He writes, “It was an innocent and properly motivated offer…,” However, he writes, “I suspected that Helen’s offer was a trap. She was not the one who set it, but it threatened to ensnare us both all the same.” As a tenure-track professor and the child of professional Nigerian-American parents, he did not have the epistemic knowledge to which she assumed. But the problem is not isolated to Helen, but rather a set of “properly motivated” practices and norms that undermine the stated goals of such deference. What I appreciate about this article is that Táíwò offers a scathing critique of these practices and the kinds of politics they produce without doubling down on improper motive as the cause. To me, Helen’s behavior sounds a lot like “them white liberal shit” and yet to assume bad faith on her part does not explain how Helen has been conditioned, or more importantly, how to get out of the trap. *The Philosopher*, What is We?, 108, no. 4 (October 2020), https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo.

As someone who has been a part of antipoverty movement organizing since graduating college and now being in my late thirties, I have thought a lot about how this has shaped my analysis of poverty broadly and my own material conditions specifically. For most of my adult working life, I have lived paycheck to paycheck with increasingly accruing student loan and credit card debt. Over the years, I have received SNAP benefits, Medicaid (or largely been without health insurance hoping I do not get sick or injured), and currently unemployment, but I have not experienced the "deep poverty" Amy Jo is talking about. Perhaps I might be what she calls "broke but not poor." And maybe I do not or cannot *understand* deep poverty, no matter how many stories I hear and home visits I do as an organizer with people living in some of the worst housing situations in Baltimore. I can certainly accept these important qualitative distinctions, but for me, my experience does not have to be equivalent to someone else's experience of poverty to understand that they are produced by the same political and economic system, and therefore my liberation is tied to those of others who are more up against it than me.

Furthermore, being in this movement has allowed me to contextualize and understand my experience, not as a failure or a result of poor decision-making, but a result of my economic position within a much larger system that I have very little, to no, control over. Ironically, it is my very "middle class" background that provides another level of self-blame. For instance, maybe, it was my "privilege" that made me stupid enough to think that going to a private art college was a good decision and now I must pay the price for not choosing a better career path. I squandered my leg-up on pipe dreams and deserve what I got. In the United States of America, there might not be enough good paying jobs, but there is plenty of shame to go around. That the PPC (2018+) has created a container for these differences in experiences and perspective on

poverty to come together, to even clash, and conflict with each other is in itself productive in a society that affords little space for real honest discussion about our economic conditions.

Since the PPC relies heavily on the tactic of testimonials, and people on the state coordinating committees are coming to the campaign with diverse ideas about who is poor and impacted, it is often around deciding on speakers for a given event that people's operating concepts around poverty get brought to the surface. Carolyn Baker, a member of PEP and the Michigan PPC coordinating committee, spoke to this problem:

> I know in the campaign we say impacted people. And we usually only talk about those severely impacted, which I think can be an issue...when we try to find the poorest person to put in front of the camera, when actually it's people who don't necessarily always look the part...There's someone who goes to work everyday, who has a house, has two cars. And has kids in the nice school, who can't afford to not work, because if they do, they're one paycheck, two paychecks away from being on the street themselves. I think those people are impacted people as well. And so I think we have to be careful, going forward with the campaign, when we say having the most impacted people speak, we are not indeed ourselves buying into the narrative that we are so much trying to change. And so when I think of the Poor People's Campaign, I think of anyone who doesn't own the means of production. So that's a whole lot of people.

Carolyn comes from a family of formidable antipoverty and labor leaders. Her mother is Marian Kramer and her father was the late General Baker, a rank-and-file organizer with the UAW and leader with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), among many other organizations. So I doubted her point was to decenter or replace the campaign's spokespersons who are experiencing "deep poverty" with those who might be more middle income but merely asking if we might be able to better hold both.

Carolyn elaborated on how we might hold both, without suggesting the spectrum of experiences are equivalent:

> I'm not saying that, we need to get people who are not directly impacted to speak on behalf of them...I'm saying these people, these middle class people, who don't identify as poor and identify as privileged they can come speak, but speak from the perspective of

> themselves and realizing too that they are poor themselves...that could be a way of speaking your truth, that gets you out of speaking somebody else's.

However, Carolyn was not making this argument for the sake of some generic inclusivity, but because of a class analysis that emphasizes the need for class consciousness. As she explained:

> It gets you to understand where you fit in this whole system. And getting people to understand where they fit can only help them with organizing. It can only help. And just challenging these narratives, getting people to understand that we are on the same side, we might not agree with everything, but we can agree that we are on the same side. That *they* don't care about any of us. And so, yes, the sooner we can get people to understand that, the better it will be.

The "they" Carolyn is referring to are the ruling class. This is the other side of developing a class consciousness. Class consciousness is not merely becoming conscious that one is part of the "working class," but becoming conscious of the existence of a class that owns, not just their homes or small business, but owns and controls the means of production and circulation, a class that is part of a political elite that determines policy at a national and transnational level. Class consciousness is becoming aware of who (in all their heterogeneity and internal divisions as well), controls our economic and political structures. They are not all family and friends, although many of them are, but are part of a class. They do not have a hive mind, but they have broadly similar interests because of their social position, even if they are individually forced to compete with each other. The composition of this class is not static, people fall out of this class and people do enter this class. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady and dramatic upward redistribution of wealth to this ownership class that accounts for the broadening of poverty in the United States (and elsewhere).[188]

[188] Doug Henwood, "Take Me to Your Leader: The Rot of the American Ruling Class," *Jacobin*, April 27, 2021. As Henwood remarks in his article, there is surprisingly a dearth of Marxist scholarship analyzing the ruling class. The

The broadening of poverty is not to dismiss the reality of extreme poverty. Extreme poverty or "deep poverty," which is defined as having an income half below the OPM, has risen from from 3.7 percent in 1975 to 5.8 percent in 2016.[189] By this measure, almost half of those who fall below the OPM are living in "deep poverty." And the majority of this population are children under 18, with black and latinx families disproportionately impacted.[190] So extreme poverty is a real and growing problem in the United States, not just something people "saw when they were vacationing in Southern Mexico," as Rev. Monroe put it. But by broadening the definition of poverty, the PPC (2018+) is attempting to prevent "deep poverty" from being ghettoized, figuratively, analytically, and politically.

And this call to connect these experiences of extreme poverty to a growing experience of precarity is not simply being made by the downwardly mobile to simply say, 'Hey, look at us! We are suffering too!,' but by those who have experienced these extremes. I have often heard Willie Baptist, a formerly homeless father and long-time antipoverty organizer, make the point that the notion of "the homeless" as some special category of poor person was produced by the corporate media. Surely, the condition of structural homelessness was produced by a confluence of economic and political factors, but his point is that the reifying of this experience as a new and more debased category of poor person has troubling political implications. His critique goes deeper than a call to replace "homeless" with "houseless," or to not use either. But to recognize

political economy? Yes. Working-class struggle? Yes. But very little on the ruling class itself. When he asked Marxist political scientist Bertell Ollman, why he thought this was. Ollman responded, "They think it's obvious." I have often thought that maybe a better contribution to the movement would have been researching the ruling class, and specifically their influence and shaping power on social movements through charities and foundations. Perhaps, my next project.

[189] Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk" 42.

[190] "What Is 'Deep Poverty'?," Center for Poverty & Inequality Research, University of California, Davis, January 16, 2018, https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-deep-poverty#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Census%20Bureau,percent%20of%20those%20in%20poverty.

how the categorization creates its own set of confusion about the causes of homelessness and stereotypes about who the homeless are, which then isolates those people who are experiencing homelessness, for whatever specific reasons brought them there. The low-wage worker might be organized into a union, but the homeless person will be given charity, when they might in fact be the same person. It creates strange divisions even within housing justice work, where you have tenant rights groups on one side and homeless organizations on another, when the homeless person was once a tenant or soon to be a tenant. It simultaneously mimics both identity-based and trade-union organizing models, where someone who once experienced homelessness, but is not currently homeless, cannot authentically speak as a homeless person because they are no longer part of the "bargaining unit" so to speak.

It is not surprising then that the National Union of the Homeless rejected these tendencies then and now, because as poor people, NUH leaders understood intimately the experience of homelessness could not be treated as an issue separate from the problems of affordable housing, living wage jobs, healthcare, environmental crisis, etc. Homelessness is a class issue. It is the extreme outcome of capitalism, where our basic needs are commodities, and our only means of accessing such goods is through selling our labor. We have no guarantees to our basic needs, not even a guarantee to a job, just shame and blame if we do not have a job or it does not pay us enough to meet these needs. NUH's slogan, "you're only a paycheck away from homelessness" sought to elevate this point, which has been updated to include "you're only a healthcare crisis…" or "environmental catastrophe away from homelessness." The latter is one the California Union of the Homeless brought to the fore with the devastating forest fires on the West coast.

And like poverty generally, homelessness is often not a permanent condition for people. In any given person's lifetime, one might experience homelessness on the street, in a shelter, in their car, "couch surfing," or living in their parents' basement. Of course, here too, there are the categories of the "chronic homeless" to separate the *real* homeless from the *sort of* homeless. Like a Russian doll, there are endless categorizations of poor people that require their own specialized treatment and programs from an ever expanding, or dwindling, or re-organized non-profit charity apparatus that relies on limited state funds, corporate and wealthy philanthropists, and small donations (would you like to round up to the next dollar to support needy families?). The flip side of this charity is the increased criminalization and incarceration of poor people, disproportionately poor people of color.[191]

NUH leaders assert that organizing the homeless is about organizing those who have the least to lose and the most to gain but also that the very heterogeneity of homeless people's experience underscore the class dimension of the problem. I bet that if you go to any homeless shelter or encampment in the United States and talk to people, hear their stories about why they are homeless, you will find similarities, but also differences in people's stories that beg the question, why? What connects each of these people's stories that have seemingly different and complex sets of circumstances? If they are all coincidence and happenstance, then why the growing problem for so many? Our society certainly affords no measure of "error" for poor people, but you will find people who did everything "right" and they still ended up homeless. Their crime? Getting sick or injured. Their crime? Getting laid off as a result of the 2008

[191] Although I am not sure it is exactly the flip-side considering the deep connections between the social welfare state, non-profit social service sector, and the carceral state. People in Baltimore often remark how the new facilities for Healthcare for the Homeless, the largest non-profit homeless service provider in Baltimore, were built and relocated right next to the Baltimore City Detention Center. For a critical study of the homeless service industry and its political, economic, and social function within neoliberal capitalism, see Craig Willse, *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

economic crisis. Their crime? Having no family to lean on in hard times. Their crime? Yes, sometimes taking drugs. Taking drugs to numb the pain, or to experience pleasure (God forbid), and getting addicted to highly addictive substances, which formal and informal markets have made widely available, and for which some have profited immensely.[192]

So while, as I stated before, the PPC (2018+)'s messaging rarely uses the language of "class," or directly points to "capitalism," I argue that the work of expanding the definition of poverty and assembling a broad poor people's coalition produces conditions for deeper and nuanced conversations about who is poor and why are we poor, which operates as a gateway for talking about capitalism and class. When I posed the 'who are the poor' question directly to NUH leaders, they articulated what some might identify as an explicitly Marxist class analysis. The same was also true for many other welfare rights, labor, and antipoverty organizers I interviewed. When I asked Savina, who experienced homelessness as a young mother, she said the poor were:

> The 140 million people, who are the workers of the world, who cannot make a decent livable wage. The school students who are going hungry and can't afford a lunch. So the poor can be white, black, disabled, young, old, who are affected by capitalism. Who are the poor? The 99% of this country. If you have to work every single day, for 40 plus hours, and hold down three and four jobs, and leave your children with babysitters all through the week, and make sure someone feeds them and feeds the dog, you're poor. If you're one paycheck away or one sickness away, you're poor. If you can't make ends meet, you're poor.

One might ask, is it the 140 million or the 99%? It is both, that is her point. It is not a line, it is a relationship. It is the "workers of the world" who are "affected by capitalism." When I posed the question to Kristin Colangelo, whose mother was part of the original NUH, she said pointedly

[192] For a movement perspective on the opioid crisis, read Caitlin MacLaren, Savina Martin, and Aaron Scott, "Drugs, Divide-and-Conquer and Dissent: Perspectives on the Opioid Crisis," *University of the Poor* (blog), July 3, 2020, https://universityofthepoor.org/drugs-divide-and-conquer-and-dissent-perspectives-on-the-opioid-crisis/.

with a laugh, "We all poor! I don't own shit. How about you?" referring not to owning a home or car, but owning the means of production. She then explained further:

> The reason why we organize the homeless is identifying them as part of the class. A manifestation. For instance, the gentrification that's happening is pushing more people farther down the spectrum towards homelessness. And it's showing the effects of a wage based society where you have to have this job that doesn't exist anymore to acquire what you need to live. Liz [Rev. Liz Theoharis] put out these statistics about how there's nowhere in the country where a minimum wage job can get you a two bedroom apartment anymore. Like it's not working for people. That's the dispossessed piece is that we are no longer able to survive.

The "dispossessed piece" that Kristin refers to are the ways people have been and are continually dispossessed of land and the means of production and reproduction so that all they have to sell is their labor in order to acquire money to buy the commodities they need to live.[193] It is a historical and continuous process of which has become normalized and naturalized. For many of us, it is a completely unexamined reality. Of course, we must go out into the marketplace and get a job in order to live. What else would we do? For others, like peasant and indigenous farmers in Mexico

[193] In *Capital Volume I*, Karl Marx theorizes the production of surplus value by way of the exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist. However, it is at the end of *Capital* that he ventures into how such social relations were created in the first place, whereby the waged worker is forced to sell their labor to the capitalist. In "Part Eight: So-Called Primitive Accumulation," he describes a historical process in England where peasants were expropriated from the land thereby becoming the industrial proletariat. Without access to the means of production in the form of land for agricultural production, peasants were forced to urban areas to work in factories. Of course, this was not a simple or quick transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism, but a rather long and violent process. Without owning the means of production, workers were also alienated from their labor, as in, they did not own the products of their labor. Instead, they were given a wage with which they would go out into the marketplace to buy the commodities they needed to live. These basic relations have come to predominate. It is also in this last section where he also outlines a "Modern Theory of Colonization" and the dynamics that drove European colonization of the Americas. Although, he writes, "We have seen that the expropriation of the mass of people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production," he appears completely ignorant of the particular form and scale of settler colonialism based on Indian removal and genocide in the North American territorities. On the other hand, his analysis of slavery in the process of colonization and global capitalist development is insightful, suggesting that these processes of proletarianization once again did not and do not happen in neat and clearly delineated stages. Although Marx clearly sees the proletariat as the revolutionary social force, his analysis of labor includes slave and "free," and thus he argues for a broader class solidarity. He writes, "In the United States, every independent workers' movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin." Anyway, the "dispossessed piece" refers to this historical and continued process globally. See Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 1976th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 873, 934, 414.

forced to leave their land due to the devastating economic effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), becoming dispossessed is a live and violent process. And to go back to categorizing the poor, if they come to the United States to find work as a farmworker picking tomatoes, they are now a migrant farm worker, but so much gets lost materially and figuratively with this rebranding.

I recognize the "dispossessed piece," because it is part of the political education that I have been a part of through the Poverty Scholars program and the University of the Poor. One of the key quotes used in these educationals is that of Dr. King speaking on the Poor People's Campaign. It begins with the line, "The *dispossessed* of this nation - the poor, both white and Negro - live in a cruelly unjust society…[my italics]"[194] Thus, those in this network often speak of poor and *dispossessed* rather than poor and *impacted* or *low-wealth*, other terms widely used in the PPC (2018+). Whether used in an explicitly Marxist sense or not, "dispossessed" is agitational, because it further cements that one is not simply poor, one is made poor. When I spoke with Nijmie, she referred to this "dispossessed piece" as critical to their organizing with Put People First! PA:

> I think it's really important to agitate and politicize people around what being dispossessed means...It's really important that people be politicized around that we have no rights to our basic needs and no one has the rights to their basic needs. Even if they have a car and a house, they don't have the right to health care and they don't have the right to work, to a job, to an income.

In this way, it is not even completely accurate to refer to poverty as a static condition, but rather a violent, if not hidden, process. PPF! PA's emphasis on the denial of "rights to our basic needs" is a way of uniting people across the working class, as well as challenging bourgeois notions of

[194] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Social Change" (Massey Lectures, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), reprinted in *Jacobin*, April 4, 2018, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/martin-luther-king-jr-nonviolence-direct-action.

property rights, a strategy that has a long history among poor and oppressed peoples.[195] As one of the many fallen heroes in the movement to end poverty Ron Casanova said in reference to NUH's housing takeovers, "Forget about it being against the law. I don't care. I am dying in the streets. I think that should be against the law."[196]

It is no surprise of course that those campaign participants that come from the Poverty Scholars network and this longer history of antipoverty organizing share a similar analysis and organizing model. But the PPC (2018+)'s political education processes, as well as adjacent processes, have expanded the framework and network. For instance, organizers from the Kairos Center and PEP took the lead on developing the political education packets during the campaign's roll-out towards the "40 Days" of action. The campaign continues to produce analysis and educational materials. Additionally, there is a lot of cross-organizational studies that are organized by the University of the Poor, PEP, the People's Forum, the General Baker Institute, and other organizations that take place outside of the campaign, but are composed of a large percentage of people who are involved in the campaign. This cross-fertilization has forged not only relationships across geography, which has strengthened the campaign (and local

[195] In contrast to the PPC (2018+) which emphasizes constitutional rights, a strategy born out of the Moral Mondays model in NC, welfare rights and antipoverty activists appealed to the notion of welfare rights, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, and then explicitly adopted an economic human rights framework in the 1990s. Antipoverty organizers were in no way unaware of how the language of human rights, much like that of "democracy" and "freedom," has been used by the U.S. as an ideological weapon against other countries who do not submit to free market liberalism. Of course for this reason, they found it to be an effective framework re-appropriated and re-interpreted in their hands. This strategic use of human rights was pioneered by black civil rights leaders following WWII. See Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Furthermore, we might look back to the Hatian Revolution and the ways that the former slaves of Saint Domingue radicalized European Enlightenment ideas about natural rights, see Carolyn E. Fick, "The Haitian Revolution and the Limits of Freedom: Defining Citizenship in the Revolutionary Era," *Social History* 32, no. 4 (November 2007): 394–414**;** Also see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
[196] Pamela Yates and Peter Kinoy, *Takeover*, documentary (Skylight Pictures, 1991).

organizing as people share lessons) but created some broadly shared analytical framework among campaign participants.

So even though I interviewed a broad spectrum of campaign participants, not simply people I knew through the Poverty Scholars network but people who had come to the campaign through other points of entry, I recognized signs of the collective intellectual labor that happens not only through "organizing" together but learning and studying together too, something which the PPC (2018+) emphasizes. The signs could be a story or a point I noticed repeated, like the "dispossessed piece." It was not in a sectarian sense of everyone towing some line but an organic process within and across individuals and organizations. A sign of deep cross-fertilization. This is in itself a critical contribution of the PPC (2018+) in a country where there is a long history of repression against systemic critiques of capitalism, and a long history of class struggle being unproductively pitted against struggles for racial and gender equality (or, rather, productively for the ruling class).

In order to challenge the dominant stereotypes and narratives around poverty and the poor, they must be demystified and exposed for what they are—false narratives used to blame and shame poor people, to obscure the structures and social relations that produce poverty so we have no one to blame but ourselves or "others." There are many ways that the PPC (2018+) aids in this demystification process—pushing back against definitions of poverty that attempt to hide the growing economic insecurity in this country, that reduce poverty to its most extreme expressions or solely to "economic" indicators like income. As many indicated, challenging narratives of poverty was a bridge towards people developing class consciousness and solidarity.

There is no singular experience of poverty. There is no singular cause of poverty. And there is no singular solution to poverty. Bottom line, poverty is complicated, just as is the

political and economic system that produces it. No doubt, we all come to the PPC (2018+) with our own experiences and ideas. But through the PPC (2018+), participants begin to see each other, to hear each other, to unlearn the things we have been told about ourselves, others, and why things are the way they are. The campaigners I spoke with illuminated how unlearning these dominant narratives and relearning and recreating new ones is an ongoing, challenging, and sometimes contradictory collective process. But it is a really crucial part of the work, because in order for the conditions to change, so too must our consciousness. As Willie and Rev. Liz wrote much more eloquently, "We have to first end poverty in our minds before we end poverty with our hands. We see the main playing field or battleground for a movement to end poverty as our minds."[197]

[197] Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis, "Teach As We Fight, Learn as We Lead: Lessons in Pedagogy and the Poverty Initiative Model," in *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty*, ed. Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 163.

Chapter 3: Fusion Politics of the Poor: Uniting Across Race, Geography, and Issue

> One unfortunate thing about Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan "Power for Poor People" would be much more appropriate than the slogan "Black Power."[198]

In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community?*, Dr. King dedicates a chapter on the rise of "Black Power," his public debates with SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael along the Freedom March through Mississippi, and what he sees as the limitations of the slogan and its strategic direction. While King critiques what he viewed as an implicit, sometimes explicit, racial separatism embodied in Black Power, the above quote raises some intriguing questions. For instance, what is it about automation that has made the "economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike"? And what are these "other forces"? Although King does not offer further clarification, it stands out in its clear reference to the alternative project King was undertaking with the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) and his perhaps controversial provocation that giving priority to race did not offer a complete explanation of, or a political vehicle to address, the growing economic inequality of the times.

Does this mean King was trading in race for class? Was King dismissing the violence of white supremacy, the realities of racial inequality, and the role that racism plays in class formation? Of course not. As many other scholars have argued, King's evolving political

[198] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967) in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1986), 586.

analysis was part of a black radical tradition that understood race and class to be inextricably linked.[199] But what does it mean in our own precise historical and political context—a time of persistent racial violence and inequality, as well as deepening economic crisis and polarization—to once again call for the "Power of Poor People"? What does this look like in practice today for the poor and dispossessed to unite across the lines of race, geography, and issue? How is this unity constructed in ways that do not assume uniformity and equivalency within and across these lines, but builds solidarity nonetheless?

The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC [2018+]) endeavors to unite the "140 million" plus "poor and low-wealth" people across this land into a "moral fusion movement." As I discussed in the previous chapter, it does so by showing the breadth, depth, and nuances of poverty, rather than a narrow and exclusive articulation of poverty that has so often been used to isolate, blame, and shame poor people. Additionally, the PPC (2018+)'s messaging and framework around King's evils (plus one)—systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation—helps to draw the deep connections between often separated issues and systems. As I traveled the country, from the mid-Atlantic to the Northeast, the Midwest to Appalachia, and the Northwest to the Southwest and South, to talk with a range of organizers involved with the PPC (2018+), I wanted to hear their account of the economic and political conditions they faced in their area, their reasoning for uniting across difference, and what this meant theoretically and practically for them.

[199] Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

Since one of the PPC (2018+)'s core organizing principles is a commitment to multiracial "fusion" organizing, I could assume to some degree that this was a self-selecting group, i.e. if they were opposed to this principle, they likely would not join and stay. But this does not answer the why and how question. While participants hold varying political ideologies, some explicitly Marxist, for instance, others not, there are two inseparable threads that I found to be undergirding the 'why unite?' question. The first was an analytical and strategic response. The other was a principled and moral one. But these were so often a tightly braided dialectic in the sense that they could not be easily teased apart, because they supported each other.

By analytical and strategic, I am referring to the ways people understand the problems they are dealing with to be systemic or produced by uneven social relations that negatively impact many people in similar and different ways. This analysis informs a strategic orientation towards uniting with those people who have a common interest in challenging the prevailing system. However, for those I spoke with it was more than a calculation of power, but also a moral and ethical valuing of life, human and non-human. People expressed care and love for their communities and others, care for the earth, which informed more principled commitments to antipoverty and antiracism (and other forms of oppression), in addition to challenging the other pillars of militarism and ecological devastation. But these moral values and principles also fed an inclination to draw connections beyond surface categorizations, thus reinforcing a broader analytical perspective and strategic orientation towards fusion organizing across difference.

The concrete ways PPC (2018+) organizers practice building this fusion coalition of the poor have a lot to do with how people have been historically divided, race being of course central, but also geography and issue. This chapter focuses specifically on race, geography, and issue, not merely as separate points of division, but as relational or mutually reinforcing. For

instance, given the history and continued patterns of racial segregation and migration, uniting across race often necessitates uniting across geography at different scales. Similarly, transcending the local level to unite and build power across the state and national level necessitates uniting across race. But how to do this when different communities, racially and/or geographically bounded, have different pressing issues? This is partly why the PPC (2018+) is not a single-issue campaign. But how does any community, or individual for that matter, choose between, say, housing or freedom from criminalization, water or healthcare, living wages or childcare? As so many PPC (2018+) participants articulated, even those who do work on specific issue campaigns, these issues cannot be separated. They are all connected. Here race, geography, and issue were not always points of division to transcend, but rather the vehicle through which fusion organizing happens.

Each geographical region has its own particular histories of exploitation and dispossession, racial and class formation, experience of global economic restructuring, as well as histories of resistance that have shaped these territories. But these are not separate histories. While organizers painted a picture of the particular dynamics and hardships that come with being in a center of global capital like Chicago or Los Angeles, a site of colonial expropriation and potential extraction like Oak Flat, Arizona, or a discarded byproduct of them like Aberdeen, they often spoke of how these realities and thus their fates were materially and politically intertwined. And the collective picture they painted suggest that the "economic question" and "the impact of automation and other forces" have only become more acute and pressing for a growing multiracial majority, people of color certainly, but also poor whites. The practice of building a multiracial fusion movement across geography and issue is not only a strategy for building power, but enhances our analysis and estimate of the forces we are up against. This chapter

explores how practitioners' theory and practice of multiracial poor people's organizing is informed by race, place, and the struggles to live in the United States of America.

I begin with former Illinois PPC tri-chair and National Nurses United (NNU) organizer Sheilah Garland-Olaniran speaking from the once booming centers of auto-production in Chicago and Flint, where the celebrated American industrial "middle class" was created and then destroyed. She discusses how working-class communities left in the wake of deindustrialization are facing new fronts of struggle for basic human rights to water and clean air. I then travel to the gold coast of California where the contradictions of incredible wealth and productive capacity are set against glaring and growing gentrification, homelessness, and poverty. I hear from California PPC coordinators Kenia Alcocer with Union de Vecinos and Anthony Prince with the California Homeless Union (CHU) about their efforts to connect organizing in major cities like Los Angeles and smaller towns across this massive and diverse state. I then shift to hear from several organizers with Chaplains on the Harbor located in Grays Harbor, Washington, a poor, rural, and largely white county, about how the multiracial fusion organizing of the PPC (2018+) has helped them break their isolation and challenge the divide-and-conquer stranglehold of white supremacy. From there, I go to Appalachia to hear from Amy Jo Hutchinson, a West Virginia PPC tri-chair and antipoverty organizer, and Tayna Fogle, a leader with the Kentucky PPC and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), to learn about the challenges and break-throughs uniting poor people across historic divisions of race to challenge some of the most regressive state legislatures in the country. Finally, I end with Vanessa Nosie with Apache Stronghold who explains how their struggle to protect Oak Flat, a sacred indigenous land, is tied to the "first chapter" of settler colonialism, and how acknowledging the "first chapter" offers insights into

what we are up against and for unifying our struggles to protect and care for the earth and everyone on it.

Deindustrializing America's Heartland

Being involved in the PPC (2018+) and traveling around the country has helped me make not only personal connections, but analytical ones between seemingly disconnected issues, places, and people. This is what happened when I went to Selma, Alabama for the 50th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday" in 2015, as part of an early PPC (2018+) delegation prior to the campaign's official launch. As a community labor organizer in Baltimore, I was well aware of the history of deindustrialization and factories moving South to cheaper labor markets. However, I assumed that the U.S. South was a temporary lay-over to eventually moving production to the global South altogether. I had not realized that Alabama and the U.S. South were still such an enticing place to set up shop, that even Japanese and German auto manufacturers were now coming to Alabama. I learned this from Kim King, an auto worker in Selma suffering respiratory health problems as a result of failed worker safety protections, and Fernando Hernandez, an organizer with the United Auto Workers (UAW). While we were there, our PPC delegation participated in an action with them and I later interviewed them for the Kairos Center (in retrospect my first PPC interview). But the other thing that struck me was when Fernando explained that he was a former auto worker himself from Chicago. When the plant where he worked closed, he became a union organizer and followed the jobs South to organize workers there. Kim and Fernando's stories illustrated their linked fates produced by the movement of capital across geography. The histories of these regions might appear on the surface different, but they are in fact connected.

This subsection follows the trail back up to these once prosperous hubs of auto manufacturing in the Midwest to ask what does it mean to organize in the shadow of deindustrialization?

Sheilah Garland-Olaniran was part of the earliest efforts to establish the PPC in Chicago and Illinois going back to a PPC Midwest tour in the Spring of 2016. She built upon on relationships she had developed over her fifteen years as a political organizer with NNU. During the launch phase and 40 Days of Action, she served as a tri-chair for the Illinois PPC. When I spoke with her in Chicago in October 2018, she had stepped back from this role, but was still involved and committed to the campaign's vision and efforts. I began by asking her about what brought her to the PPC (2018+) and she started by talking about being from Flint, Michigan, where her father was an auto worker:

> I grew up at a time when auto work was booming, but I also was old enough, when technology was introduced into production to see the impact of essentially jobless recoveries. You know, the auto industry continues to boom, but it's not reflected in the number of auto workers that once worked at these huge auto factories. I mean, Buick City, which was one of the largest concentrations of auto workers in the country, no longer exists. It's been raised to the ground. And the communities that were built up around that, around those complexes are all destroyed. So that's seared into my mind.[200]

The life and death connection to work and industry, and the contradictions between exploitation and abandonment, were painfully clear to her. Contrary to a simplistic narrative of manufacturing decline in the U.S., Sheilah's experience reveals a more complex reality. While there has been a long decline in the share of total employment attributable to manufacturing since the 1970s, the growth of real output in the U.S. manufacturing sector has actually equaled or exceeded that of total GDP.[201] In other words, workers in these industries have lost out, even if manufacturing output remains steady. There has been much debate about whether the

[200] Sheilah Garland-Olaniran, interview with the author, Chicago, Illinois, October 22, 2018.
[201] See Martin Neil Baily and Barry P. Bosworth, "US Manufacturing: Understanding Its Past and Its Potential Future," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 3-4.

"decline" in manufacturing is a result of "trade deficits," i.e. industry moving to or growing in cheaper labor markets, or increased labor automation, but it is clear that the results have been devastating.[202] Sheilah went on to describe how unstable and insecure the lives of the children and grandchildren of these former autoworkers have become, even for those with college degrees. Flint, a city that was once home to nearly 200,000 people, has seen their population dramatically plummet by half since the plant closures in the 1980s.[203] 54% of those who remain are African American, 39% percent white, with a median household income of $28,834.[204]

However, for her, it was not simply about bringing back jobs or even just raising the quality of life (although she said this is important). Even as a political organizer with NNU, Sheilah was under no illusion that good paying union jobs were the only solution to working-class people's problems. As she put it, "unions serve a very finite political space in society and in politics," which is why she was attracted to the PPC (2018+). She saw the moral framework as allowing us to go deeper to raise critical questions about what kind of society we want:[205]

> ...because the alternative is if you go to Flint, Michigan today, or Detroit, or Benton Harbor, or any of those cities that were the centers of auto production. It's horrible. So is that the alternative? I see the alternative and it's not the alternative that I think any of us

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[202] This debate reached a mainstream audience as Democratic presidential candidates Senator Elizabeth Warren and Andrew Yang squared off, but new research from MIT economist Daron Acemoglu suggests that automation has had a greater impact on the labor market than previous research has shown, suggesting that King was right to emphasize the "impact of automation and other forces," see Lauren Aratani, "Robots on the Rise as Americans Experience Record Job Losses amid Pandemic," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/nov/27/robots-replacing-jobs-automation-unemployment-us.

[203] Brittany Greeson, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know," *National Resources Defense Council*, November 8, 2018.

[204] U.S. Census Bureau, "Population Estimates, July 1, 2019 (V2019) -- Flint city, MI," *Quick Facts*, accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/flintcitymichigan.

[205] In his successful 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump popularized the slogan "Make America Great Again," which was seen as a nostalgic appeal for the 1950s, a period of prosperity for white working-class Americans. While manufacturing jobs have steadily declined since the 1970s, there was a significant drop from 2000 to 2010, largely a result of the 2008 Great Recession. See Baily and Bosworth, "US Manufacturing: Understanding Its Past and Its Potential Future," 4; The failure of Democrats to address these long-standing, but intensified economic conditions following the economic recession when they were in office, is sometimes cited as a reason that traditional manufacturing and union dense "blue states" like Michigan went for Trump. See Naomi Klein, "It Was the Democrats' Embrace of Neoliberalism That Won It for Trump," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016.

> want. We don't want to see people being poisoned by the water they drink, being poisoned by the air we breathe. We've got people on the Southeast side of Chicago breathing in manganese.

In a reversal of the infamous slogan "There is no alternative" used by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, one of the early proponents of neoliberalism who, like President Ronald Reagan, ushered in an era of market deregulation and austerity, Sheilah cast the status quo as a catastrophic alternative to a revolutionary different model.[206] As if to say, we've seen what this system has to offer, what it produces, where the world is headed, what choice do we have, but to take up a broader fight?

As Sheilah discussed the ways deteriorating conditions were tied to histories of economic production and development, it was clear the stakes were not reducible to a loss of income, as indicated by the environmental impacts that she recounted in Michigan and Southeast Chicago. But was the water contamination in Flint caused directly by industry? Not in the sense that it was General Motors (GM) who made the fateful decision to switch the city's water supply to the contaminated and corrosive Flint River, causing lead to leach from the city's aging pipes. Although it was the city's industries who were responsible for the river's contamination in the first place, the decision was made by a non-democratic emergency manager appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder.[207] But Sheilah was offering a longer and connected view of the economics and politics of capitalism, which cannot be disentangled, and which threatens the notion of a society that would collectively provide and care for people.

Throughout Michigan, once booming centers of auto production like Flint, Benton Harbor, Highland Park, and Detroit were seized by non-democratic emergency managers,

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[206] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).
[207] "Key Moments in Flint, Michigan's Lead-Tainted Water Crisis," *The Associated Press*, January 12, 2021; Greeson, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know."

because as manufacturing jobs hemorrhaged it led to a declining tax base, which then led to fiscal budgetary crises.[208] The people and places, no longer critical to capital accumulation, were deemed unworthy of investment, even unworthy of a fundamental human right to clean water. While many have highlighted Flint as a case of environmental racism, for instance every majority black city in the state of Michigan has been under the control of emergency managers, such short-hands offer a sense of who is disproportionately impacted, and the means by which such communities are rendered disposable, but not why.[209] Meanwhile, Michigan, which sits on one of the world's largest freshwater ecosystems, the Great Lakes, continues to approve a deal with Nestlé, a multinational corporation, wherein they pay $200 *a year* to pump 576,000 gallons of water *each day* from an underground aquifer for resale as bottled water.[210] These vivid contradictions lay bare the underlying power relations and value system of our political and economic system. As Claire McClinton from the Flint Democracy Defense League is quoted as saying in the PPC audit, "They could not take our water away without taking our democracy first."[211] Here King's question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" has taken a frightening turn as a once abundant resource has become an increasingly scarce (due in part to pollution) and thus valuable commodity.[212] Struggles around water were a recurring theme for so many that I spoke with in the campaign.

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[208] Chris Savage, "The Scandal of Michigan's Emergency Managers," *The Nation*, February 15, 2012.

[209] Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk," 28.

[210] Bill Chappell, "Michigan OKs Nestlé Water Extraction, Despite 80K+ Public Comments Against It," *National Public Radio*, April 3, 2018; Jessica Glenza, "Nestlé Pays $200 a Year to Bottle Water near Flint – Where Water Is Undrinkable," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2017.

[211] Anderson et al., "The Souls of Poor Folk," 97.

[212] King, *11th Annual Presidential Address: "Where Do We Go From Here?,"* August 16, 1967, Atlanta, Georgia, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/where-do-we-go-here-address-delivered-eleventh-annual-sclc-convention.

Chicago, on the other hand, where Sheilah now lives, reflects a different side of the coin for poor and working-class people. Rather than being a place of capital flight, it is a place of intense capital investment. She explained how the financiers and developers own the politicians and determine how the city is developed, where the money goes. She said, "They determine how the city is going to look and they don't care if they push people out. They don't care if they destabilize entire communities, because they need that gleaming epicenter, so that the global rich can come and have some place to play and do business." If you are poor and you live in a neighborhood of interest to the ruling class, you're out. If you are poor and you live in a neighborhood that is not (yet) of interest to the ruling class, your neighborhood is systemically disinvested. For instance, Sheilah described the West side of Chicago, where a group called Blocks Together organized the very first PPC (2018+) event in the city:

> If you drive through the West side of Chicago, it looks like it's been bombed out. It looks like a war zone. There's very little infrastructure in terms of businesses. Communities and neighborhoods are fractured because of, I call it urban removal, they call it urban renewal. But also just because of vacant buildings and homes and the tax structure and how people are taxed here. All of those things that represent destabilization of neighborhoods. So there's the Near West Side and there's the West Side. So the Near West side is of interest to the ruling class of the city. So they're doing certain things to revitalize and keep it together, but if you go further, where we were there's very limited interest. So folks are very impacted. So that's where we held our first tent revival.

Hyper gentrification and abandonment exist side by side in Chicago and yet it is a city with a rich history of militant struggles for economic and racial justice. Labor union struggles, civil rights struggles, the Chicago Black Panther Party and the Rainbow Coalition, and even Saul Alinsky and the birth of "community organizing" have shaped the political landscape.

The legacy and dynamics of all this organizing is complicated to say the least. Sheilah has lived in Chicago for a long time and worked with NNU connecting with different communities and organizations around environmental justice and healthcare issues. She was able

to bring a lot of the relationships she has built over the years to the PPC (2018+), but getting groups to work together is always challenging because, as she put it, "we live in such a, I think, duplicitous political environment. People tend not to trust each other." And in Chicago, it is particularly complicated, as she said, "if you're working in a place like Chicago, I don't know, this statistic was just shocking to me. There are some 600 organizers that work in Chicago, paid organizers that work in Chicago. We are probably the epicenter of the non-profit industrial complex."[213] Rather than all this organizing capacity building the power of poor and working-class people, she has seen how discontent over conditions are captured and diverted, often with the best intentions.[214] Issues and communities are isolated from each other; demands are compromised in order to deliver wins. "So from my perspective, it's been extraordinarily destructive for the development of any kind of independent politics in Chicago."

But the PPC (2018+) model and structure intentionally organizes at the statewide level, in an attempt to bridge urban, suburban, and rural divides and to target state legislatures, where many of the most critical policy decisions that affect localities are made. When I asked Sheilah about attempting to reach beyond Chicago and build a statewide campaign, she outlined the interrelated ways people are pitted against each other politically, geographically, and racially. For instance, she described how the positioning of Illinois's capital in Springfield, in a "buffer" farm territory, created "interesting political dynamic of everything outside of Chicago, being pitted against Chicago politically, and Chicago politically being pitted against everything else around the state." From her positioning working with people in Chicago, she says, "there's all these myths and ideas about what happens outside of Chicago from people who are beginning to

[213] INCITE!, ed., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, 2017th ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
[214] Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, "NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector," *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 93–131.

organize." Which is why, getting out there, meeting, and connecting with people is so important to getting past these assumptions, prejudices, and fears, to see how the economic crisis is affecting people in similar and different ways. "If you look at the statistics, it would show that poverty in these collar counties and downstate is probably percentage wise, it's greater than what we experience on the Southwest side of Chicago. It's incredible. And it comes from a different perspective."

Organizing statewide is a mandate of the campaign that goes against prevailing progressive organizing models that are often very much focused on large and population dense formerly industrial urban areas, where there are also greater concentrations of people of color. Partly a result of migration patterns and the leading role that communities of color have played in labor and racial justice movements, and partly a result of the political geography carved out by the Republican and Democratic parties, these racial, partisan, and geographic lines get continually reinscribed. Convincing people there is sense in transgressing these lines is not always easy. For instance, Sheilah talked about getting pushback from some black members about the participation of poor whites in the campaign. It was a debate about racial composition, but also leadership and strategy.

> There was a struggle politically around this whole idea of black liberation. Don't get me started. Like, what does that even mean within this context? How can you have black liberation without liberation of everybody? I mean, it's just impossible to do and you can't shut people out, because you're not going to have a movement if it's only black people. It's going to get killed. It's open for question. Why wouldn't you want to be united and be a part of this broader movement? There's protection for everybody to grow and to develop and to fight, versus I'm going to separate myself off and do this little thing calling for black liberation, or gay liberation...Where's your protection? Where's the unity? How do we protect ourselves to get strong enough in order to have something to really fight for liberation of black people or gay rights or whatever it is that we're talking about. We've never been able to gain them and achieve them and sustain them. How do we do it independent from each other? Or that people have to be silent, because they're white. So we had that fight.

Sheilah's point about protection in numbers was echoed by Aaron Scott, an organizer with Chaplains on the Harbor. When he was reflecting on what initially brought him to this movement, he spoke about working with Queers for Economic Justice, a group that was "organizing poor queer and trans people in New York City around welfare rights, police violence, incarceration, immigration, and all the issues that you don't hear about as gay issues." Although the work was so important, he said, "sometimes it just felt so small. I just felt the need for being connected to a very big social movement in order to defend those smaller groups."

But even within interracial coalitions, racial affiliations are at work in ways that are not only beneficial, but probably unavoidable in a racialized society. For instance, I imagine that as a black woman Sheilah was able to have "that fight" with fellow black PPC members around these strategic questions of unity in ways that I, as a Latina/white woman, might navigate differently. Likewise, I might be able to have a greater facility having a direct conversation with others, who share some sort of perceived racial/ethnic or other identity with me. However, Sheilah really emphasized the importance of everyone being "political equals" and the imperative of collectively struggling through these conversations and debates. For her, it is a process that requires developing trust and relationships over time. And she has seen people shift in all sorts of ways to where they now recognize the need to work across a myriad of differences in terms of race, issue, and geography. "It's still messy. It's not like straightforward," trying to figure out how to practically unite in all these different ways, but people are beginning to really appreciate how the framework connects all these normally siloed issues and communities. I heard this a lot from people in the campaign about the need to struggle through these conversations about race and difference in order to reach a greater level of strategic unity. These conversations and debates often arose in defense of the campaign's expansive and less "straightforward"

framework, against more "pragmatic" approaches to community, labor, and progressive organizing.

Growing up in Flint, living in Chicago, Sheilah has seen the many sides of deindustrialization in 'America's heartland,' from mass layoffs to deteriorating infrastructure, from environmental health catastrophes to gentrification and displacement. While the age of mass production is certainly not to be romanticized, the economic and political shifts that have taken place since the 1970s have rendered many communities increasingly superfluous to capital. These conditions have shifted the front of struggle from the factory floor to community struggles for some of the most basic of human needs, including the right to clean water. From the South side of Chicago to the collar counties in Southern Illinois, the PPC (2018+) is providing a framework that leaders with the Illinois PPC hope will allow them to overcome some of the limitations and barriers of conventional forms of organizing that have kept communities and issues segregated along lines of race, geography, and political party.

Poverty Amidst Plenty: Demystifying the "California Miracle"

When I sat down with Kenia Alcocer, an organizer with Union de Vecinos, a community based organization in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, we talked a lot about how she got involved in organizing, what made her want connect with the PPC (2018+), and the on-the-ground work of building it out in California. As an undocumented young person, she was involved in an organizing effort in 2009 across seven cities to push for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), a legislative proposal to grant temporary conditional residency to undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. as minors. But she had a lot of misgivings about its limits and exclusions. One of the lessons she took from this

experience was that "a lot of the organizations, and a lot of the foundations, and a lot of the things that are funding and pushing for social change, are really not doing their job. What they're doing is negotiating before we even start the fight."[215] Her aunt was involved with Union de Vecinos and she became attracted to their model and "seeing that there was power in organizing beyond this notion of being a citizen." In her community, she explained, "We had citizens, permanent residents, and undocumented folks that were living under the same condition. So it didn't really seem like citizenship was really giving you any benefits. Or that there was any benefit except for voting, but even then, sometimes you're taken out of that equation when they start criminalizing you." For Union, citizenship is not presumed to be the most important or strategic issue for residents of Boyle Heights, which is a largely poor and working-class latinx and immigrant community. They work on the issues that are most pressing to their members, from fixing potholes to fighting gentrification.

To be clear, Kenia has testified for the PPC (2018+) about her fears of being deported and separated from her children. Her critique of the DREAM Act fight is not about diminishing the need for more just immigration policies, but based on a strategic analysis that comes from internal lessons generated by movements based in working-class immigrant communities. Many young activists saw or came to see the DREAM Act as a way of fracturing a growing immigrant rights movement in this country, particularly following the massive nation-wide immigrant rights mobilizations in the Spring of 2006, by focusing on those "deserving" and "innocent" immigrants versus their "undeserving" parents who knowingly broke the law. For Kenia, it is not just that this compromise would only benefit a small segment of undocumented immigrants, but that it undercut their base of political power. Politics are not pure. Compromise is a reality, but a

[215] Kenia Alcocer, interview with author, Los Angeles, California, November 9, 2018.

compromise that weakens rather than strengthens the ideological and material grounds upon which you fight the next battle is ill-conceived. Once DREAMers have fought and won on the grounds of being "deserving" how are they supposed to then turn around and argue for the rest of their community? As Kenia and many of her fellow DREAMers saw these decisions being directed by large foundations and advocacy NGO's rather than their communities, they grew disillusioned.

It is why Kenia believes in the necessity of base-building organizing at the local level, but this was not in contradiction to building power at multiple scales. She saw them as complementary and necessary. She described how organizing in an immigrant latinx community, where members are often coming with previous experiences of militant struggle from their home countries, has influenced her global perspective of not only what we are up against, but has offered insights on organizing models that are different from the ones that dominate in the United States. One of the things that frustrates her about prevailing U.S. models is that they are often short-sighted and short-term, unable to think big or long-term. Whereas with Union de Vecinos, she said, "we don't just have a year plan. We have a 20 year plan. We have a 10 year plan."

The scale, scope, and insistence of organizing for the long haul are what attracted her to the PPC (2018+), even though "that's been one of the biggest push backs from organizations, from the media, and from other folks against the campaign, it's like, 'Oh, well, no, you're asking for everything and everything's not going to happen. Why don't you just focus on one thing?'" It reminded me of Sheilah's discussion of Chicago's organizing culture. From unions to non-profits, the emphasis is always on concrete and deliverable "wins" without asking what it is that we are actually winning. Kenia's response to this?

> The reality of things is that we can't focus on one thing. I mean, I can't separate the fact that I am a woman of color from the fact that I'm undocumented, that I am low-income, that I am a tenant. Like those things can't be separated from our lives. And that's why we need to push for everything. We need to push for tenant rights. We need to push for access to healthcare. We need to push for equal pay. I mean, all of these things need to pass in order for us to have a livable life. And the reality of things is that if we don't push for everything right now, and we just keep segmenting things, then we're not going to have the lives that we deserve.

Of course, Kenia is not saying that everyone needs to work on every issue and be everywhere all the time, but rather, through the vehicle of the campaign, she can be organizing in Boyle Heights with Union de Vecinos, while they are also connecting up with this larger movement in California and across the country. She mentioned several times just the power in hearing testimony from people across the state and country, not just for her personally, but for Union members as well. She described it as a political education moment. "That's one of the most beautiful things about the Poor People's Campaign is the fact that since we're statewide, you can actually interact with people from different counties, different cities in California, and start realizing that the struggles in one community are very similar to the struggles in another."

California is a big and diverse state. Both Kenia and Anthony Prince expressed optimism about the campaign, but also a realization that there is a lot of work to do. Kenia with her long-term perspective saw the campaign in its "baby stages," she said, "we just need to feed it and make it grow." Part of this feeding and growing is continuing to build relationships and extend the campaign's reach across this vast territory. Anthony, General Counsel for the California Homeless Union/Statewide Organizing Council and co-chair of the California PPC, described the work that they have cut out for themselves:

> We're doing the identification of communities across the state of California, where it's a very diverse, huge state, 33 million people. Geopolitical divisions are there. They're real. Rural, urban. Farm, industry. Young, old. You know, it's a different world when you get

> up to the Oregon border and you get down to El Centro, eight miles from the Mexican border. The diversity is a reality, but the universality is also the reality.[216]

Part of this universality is the perhaps surprising reality that sunny liberal California boasts the highest rate of poverty of any state in the country, higher than Mississippi or Arkansas.[217] It also tops the list in the number of billionaires.[218] I learned these facts from talking with Anthony. But as he explained these facts are not accidental, rather they are two sides of the same coin.

With record levels of poverty comes record levels of homelessness. Anthony said, "homelessness is just the most visible expression of poverty." And it was definitely visible everywhere I went. From Oakland, San Francisco, and Berkeley to Los Angeles, there were tents pitched on the street, in parks, sometimes just one or two, other times whole encampments. The California Homeless Union (CHU) grew out of this homelessness crisis across the state and is part of a national effort to revive the National Union of the Homeless (NUH). Anthony was part of the Chicago/Gary Union of the Homeless in the 1990's, during the time of the original NUH, helping to unite homeless people, public housing residents, and unemployed steelworkers to do takeovers of abandoned public housing. It is a much longer story, but after being laid off from the steel mill, working different jobs, he eventually moved back to his home state of California and went back to school to become a lawyer. He is now counsel for the CHU, practicing what he calls "revolutionary jurisprudence."

The CHU initiated in 2015 in Salinas, a town about 120 miles South of San Francisco, out of a struggle to stop the city from destroying a large homeless encampment that had existed for years in the old Chinatown section of the city. The CHU has now expanded with official

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[216] Anthony Prince, interview with author, Berkeley, California, November 6, 2018.
[217] Dan Walters, "California Still No. 1 in Poverty," *CalMatters*, September 15, 2019.
[218] Krisztian Sandor, "The States With The Most Billionaires 2021," *Forbes*, April 6, 2021.

homeless union locals in Marysville and Oakland, as well "as contact with these smaller groupings up and down the state of California as far North as Eureka County, as far South as Imperial County." CHU is reaching out, but people are also contacting them as they hear about their work. And the PPC (2018+) is a vehicle for extending their reach and contact with homeless communities across the state. Anthony said, "We're looking for those leaders. We're looking for the men and women who are coming out of the shelters and coming out of the encampments, who have already distinguished themselves as spokespersons, as organizers, as genuine representatives of those communities."

Although Anthony brings his history and the lessons from the original NUH, he is very clear that political and economic conditions are different than they were in the 90s. He told me, "Today you have a completely different situation. There is no "Comic Relief" for homeless people," referring to the nationally televised charitable benefits for homelessness in the late 80s and early 90s that featured big-name comedians of the times—Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal. He continued:

> There is no massive charitable enterprise. There is no public sympathy. There is in fact, a vilification, there's a war against homeless people, a physical war, a cultural war, an ideological war, and a legal war. And California has 500 laws on the books, essentially criminalizing homeless people. Homeless people are being dehumanized to the point where the level of violence and physical attacks against homeless encampments is becoming acceptable.

According to Dr. Savina Martin with the NUH and Massachusetts PPC, these conditions are causing the NUH to rise from the dead like Lazarus.[219] However Anthony and other former NUH

[219] Savina Martin's beautiful words are worth quoting at length, "The National Union of the Homeless is resurrecting itself. It's getting up and walking, which reminds me of that biblical passage of when Lazarus was called out of the grave site. He hadn't died…And I think when Jesus finally got there, sandals dirty, feet dirty, tired, I suppose, he gets there and with his smooth and cool way and says, 'Lazarus come out of there.' I believe that today that there has been a breath of fresh air, a revival in the discourse in this country that is calling all the Lazarus's out of the grave. And we're seeing emerging in this country 'a new and unsettling force in our complacent lives' that's just coming about now. And people we're saying, 'no more, no more. I'm not going to lay down and die. I'm going

leaders are clear that drawing on the lessons of this prior phase of organizing means not just repeating what they did before. “What we want to do this time around. We’re very mindful that in every city where we see now the possibility of growing a new union, that education is stressed. Education is absolutely critical. It’s the most important thing.” Here too, they realize the prevailing organizing tendency is to pit political education against the need for addressing the immediate and real needs of people facing homelessness. ‘Poor people do not have time for such things.’ They reject this dichotomy.

One of the other differences they are recognizing is the geographic and political realities of homelessness today. No longer an “urban problem,” homelessness is growing in rural areas, smaller cities, and towns across the U.S.[220] This is a reflection of both the declining economic bases of suburban and rural areas, but also the gentrification that has pushed poor and working-class people out of cities.[221] Hence, struggles like those in Salinas and Marysville are becoming more commonplace, but also organizers with the NUH see possibilities for growing an organization of the poor independent from the strangle-hold of the non-profit industrial complex in major cities. NUH is not wholesale abandoning the city, but attempting to bridge these divides. But the PPC (2018+) also provides a mechanism for connecting these struggles, as the fights in places like Boyle Heights against gentrification and rising rents are part of the larger forces that are producing homelessness and economic instability.

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to be Lazarus.’ You know, ‘I may be thirsty, but I’m hungry enough to come out and fight and find my own water.’ And that’s what we’re seeing happening across the country.”

[220] Mary Meehan, “Unsheltered And Uncounted: Rural America’s Hidden Homeless,” *Morning Edition*, July 4, 2019, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/07/04/736240349/in-rural-areas-homeless-people-are-harder-to-find-and-to-help.

[221] Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, “One Nation, Divisible: Rural America Is the New ‘Inner City,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008; Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, “The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008,” Metropolitan Opportunity Series (Brookings, January 2010).

As Kenia mentioned Union de Vecinos has a long-term plan and the biggest threat to their neighborhood is gentrification. Union de Vecinos got their start in 1996 when things were very different in Boyle Heights. The problem was not an influx of capital, but rather the opposite. The organization was formed out of a struggle led by 36 families from the Pico-Aliso housing projects to resist eviction and the destruction of their homes. Although they were unsuccessful in preventing the destruction of Pico-Aliso, Union de Vecinos exists to this day and has expanded to the entire community of Boyle Heights. Through their history, they have taken on issues from stopping police brutality to trying to broker peace treaties between gangs. Kenia explained for instance how the gang violence and "criminal" activity in the 90s was not only produced by the economic conditions, but how this violence was intentionally seeded by police working on behalf of those seeking to justify the demolition of the projects. While people now talk about gentrification, she told me that within Union de Vecinos, they understand that "gentrification started 22 years ago with demolition of the projects, because it was the first attempt of getting rid of poor communities." Still, neighborhood residents have worked hard to take control and improve life in Boyle Heights, but now they are confronting not a criminalization of their neighborhood, but a rebranding of it as the new arts and entertainment district.

But a shared experience does not necessarily produce solidarity. Kenia knows this. Just because someone has experienced the destruction of their home and displacement as a public housing resident does not mean that they will automatically relate to a person who has experienced the destruction of their tent encampment and displacement as a homeless person. As an organizer, her work is to help people make these connections through political education, discussion, and bringing different communities together to hear each other's stories. For

instance, she talked about Union de Vecinos working in solidarity with the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and their members living on skid row, which is just across the river from Boyle Heights. Initially some Union members held some stereotypical assumptions about *those* poor people, but "it wasn't real solidarity until our members started really interacting with members from LA CAN that live in Skid Row" and heard their stories.[222] She went on, "That's why I think that the Poor People's Campaign has been able to break some of those barriers and start having some of those conversations. Especially when people start giving their testimony, their life experience of how they're impacted and affected by all the things." And for her this is not just about poor people sharing their plights with each other, but sharing their fights and their insights as well.

Because of the diversity and energy already represented in the California PPC, they have been able to accomplish a lot since the start of the campaign. When I interviewed people in the fall of 2018, the "40 Days of Action" from that previous Spring was fresh in their minds as one of the campaign's first big series of actions. While organizers are often trained to question what the concrete objective of any action is, Anthony recognized its historic significance. He mentioned, "We were told by the Capitol historian in Sacramento, that our very first gathering was the largest single gathering to protest poverty in the history of the state of California. And then we quadrupled that in week five. So we made history two times in the state Capitol of California." But it was not just the numbers that were significant to him, but the unity across race and other lines of difference and division that were unprecedented to him, as he explained:

> Because I'll tell you something, in the past in California, you look at some of these struggles of the working class, they were struggles to advance one section at the expense of another. It was to say, well, we're going to advance these poor people over here, but

[222] For a series of scholarly and activist essays on LA CAN and other housing organizing in L.A., see Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, eds., *Freedom Now! Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in L.A. and Beyond* (Los Angeles: Freedom Now Books, 2012).

> kick these Chinese out. We need to advance, but only if we get rid of these, you know, Mexicans, or only if we do this, only if we do that. I'm telling you, history is riddled with times where people were able to frame things in such ways that we'll advance, but only at the expense of this group. But what we did in the 40 days was to prove, articulate, and show with human bodies, that none of us moves forward unless all of us move forward.

For him, this was the significance of the "40 Days," demonstrating to the public, but also ourselves, that there is an alternative to plantation politics. And a critical first step to building a fusion movement of the poor is to "prove" that it is even possible.

Both Kenia and Anthony expressed the importance of centering the leadership of poor people and uniting people across race on the basis of what they have in common. But like Sheilah, they discussed how making the case for this strategic principle requires internal debate and discussion, because it is often not the prevailing wisdom. For instance, Kenia told me that some of the criticism that she has heard from people of color in California and elsewhere is that the PPC (2018+) is "too white." She joked that she tells them, "Well, yeah, but it's very white, because you're not there." But she continued that it is also about "breaking down the notions that only people of color suffer in this country. I think that's important too. It is important for everybody to be faced with reality, that in order to change anything in this country, we're going to need everybody who is poor and dispossessed, that is suffering." When I asked her how she defined poverty and who was poor, she explained that she saw the poor as the working class, but that developing this type of class consciousness was difficult "because we're in a country that really plays on identity politics a lot."

She elaborated on how she sees identity politics playing out and how one's understanding of class is often framed or informed by race and geography in particular ways. For instance, she explained that organizing in a city where the majority of poor people are people of color informs the city's racial and class politics:

> One of the things that we are taught in Los Angeles is that poor black or brown communities always need to be at the forefront. And they're the ones that should be listened to the most, because they're poor and they're brown. I think that that's true. I think to some degree, yes, we have to center those folks that are the most marginalized in the communities. But at the same time, we cannot forget that there are others that aren't necessarily brown or black that are still poor too. I think there needs to be a balance of both realities. I think that separating those realities from each other only hurts the movement.

This balance is precisely the line that the campaign is trying to walk, highlighting systemic racism and the disproportionality of poverty and other problems for communities of color, while also recognizing that white people make up the largest population of poor people in this country. This fact alone means that a Poor People's Campaign in the United States will compositionally be very white if it is representative of those who are poor. Herein lies both the analytical and strategic, as well as moral and ethical considerations. The power and "protection" on the one hand, and the recognition of and identification with another person's pain who might not look like you, whose pain might not look like yours, and knowing that these might not always be one in the same.

Kenia recognized that this balance was challenging, which is why, "The only way that we can continue to do this work, and be meaningful, and really understand who we're centering and why we're centering those folks, is through political education" and internal discussion and debate. When it comes specifically to talking about race and racism in the world and even internal to the movement, she knew that some organizers are hesitant and afraid of conflict, but for her, she believes, "no, let the conflict start, let the debate start, let that conversation flourish in order for it to move to another level of understanding." She gave the example of being in Washington, D.C. with the PPC (2018+) and listening to a white Fight for $15 fast food worker talking about coming to see how racism affected him through conversations with fellow workers in the union. She thought, "not all white people realize why they're racist. And racism, even

though it does sometimes manifest itself from an individual perspective, [racism] is a systemic thing that affects us all."

Of course, the fear is that the fusion will become unfused and fall apart, which is an understandable fear, but then perhaps the bond was shallow to begin with. And do you want to go into battle with our opponents without knowing if you can trust those you are working with to have your back or stick together? Probably not. And so people I talked to spoke about this sort of debate and open conversation being necessary to building a resilient and deeply united coalition, wherein together we are able to "move to another level of understanding." Anthony said to me, "leaders have to be people who are willing to be frank with each other, and to bump heads a little bit, and to be open to critique, and open to constant self-evaluation. This is important work."

The sheer geographic scale and diversity of California make it a microcosm of the many challenges involved in building the PPC (2018+) nationally. However, already the CA PPC's successes in being able to bring poor and working-class people together across historic divisions to hear each other's stories, see beyond the obvious differences to find commonalities and common cause, has already proved transformative for those involved. Kenia and Anthony are keenly aware through their organizing experience and history that solidarity is never to be assumed, but they also know through their experience that given the circumstances poor people have the capacity to identify what is material to them and to struggle and learn together across lines of division. And yet because the geographic, ideological, and political terrain works against this kind of solidarity every day, it must be constructed, even fought for, every step of the way.

Grays Harbor, Washington: Organizing in the "apocalypse"

I definitely share Kenia's faith in the capacity of poor people to unite and lead, but as she noted, she is living and organizing in a community that is predominantly of color and a state that is racially and ethnically diverse. I was curious to hear from organizers, both of color and white, organizing in communities or states that are predominantly white. What does it mean and look like to practice multiracial fusion organizing in areas that are predominantly white? Are their particular challenges, dynamics, or insights that come from this experience? One of the groups that I knew would have a lot to say on this subject was Chaplains on the Harbor, a uniquely radical Episcopalian ministry in Grays Harbor County, Washington.

Chaplains has been a part of the PPC (2018+) since its earliest days with one of their key leaders Mashyla Buckmaster even speaking at the press conference that officially launched the campaign. At this event, Mashyla made explicit reference to her whiteness when she said:

> Some of you might be suspicious of a Grays Harbor County person getting up in front of this crowd, thinking aren't they all a bunch of rednecks out there. Hell yes, we're rednecks. We're radical rednecks. We're hillbillies for the liberation of all people. 'We're the living reminder that when they threw out their white trash, they didn't burn it.' We're here to stand shoulder to shoulder with anyone taking up this campaign. And trust me we're the kind of scrap you want on your side in a fight.[223]

This brilliant line "We're the living reminder that when they threw out their white trash, they didn't burn it" were the words of William "Preacherman" Fesperman from the Young Patriots Organization (YPO), a slight nod to another poor people's campaign, the original Rainbow Coalition.[224] While the mention of Grays Harbor County alone might not mean anything if you

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[223] Mashyla Buckmaster, Testimony, "Poor, Disenfranchised, Clergy to Launch New Movement For Moral Revival of America: Leaders to Announce Historic Wave of Direct Action, Non-Violent Civil Disobedience," *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, December 4, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/873203482775828/videos/1535191456577024.

[224] Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (New York: Melville House, 2011)**;** Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

are not from Washington state, the suggestion was clear from her speech. They are thought of as "white trash."

I had known one of their co-founders Aaron Scott from the Poverty Scholars network and had been hearing about their work for years, so I was excited to finally be able to pay them a visit. I was accompanied on this trip by Anu Yadav, a theater practitioner and cultural organizer involved in the Poverty Scholars network. I asked Aaron to describe Grays Harbor and the town of Aberdeen, where one of their bases of operations is located (Their other base is in Westport, which I did not get a chance to visit). He painted a pretty dystopian picture:

> Aberdeen, Grays Harbor County, in general, is a really isolated place. Like a lot of rural de-industrialized communities, there's this really intense depth of crisis that is also super invisible because it's not a major population hub. It's a place of capital flight. A hundred years ago, Aberdeen was the timber capital of the entire world, not just the state, or the country. More timber flowed out of that port than anywhere else in the country and none of it came back. Then the industry shut down and the only replacement has been to build a prison and expand all the local jails and in tandem with that the heroin economy.[225]

Homelessness, incarceration, police brutality, drug addiction, and death, particularly among millenials, who have few job opportunities since the loss of the timber industry, are just some of the daily issues that people face in a county that is almost 90% white.[226] Several of the "dismal" statistics that both Aaron and fellow co-founder Rev. Monroe cited were that Grays Harbor has the highest rate of opioid addiction in the state, and the highest rate of incarceration of juveniles

[225] Aaron Scott, interview with author and Anu Yadav, Seattle, Washington, November 3, 2018.

[226] The next largest demographic group is "Hispanic or Latino" at 10.3% and then "American Indian, Alaskan Native" at 5.6%. The official site of the Quinalt Indian Nation is located just north of Gray's Harbor County, where Aberdeen is located. Aaron explained that many Quinalt tribal members dealing with opioid addiction find themselves living in a large homeless tent encampment in Aberdeen. For demographic figures, see U.S. Census Bureau, "Population estimates, July 1, 2019, (V2019) -- Grays Harbor County, WA," *Quick Facts*, accessed March 31, 2021, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/graysharborcountywashington/PST045219.

for non-violent offenses in the country.[227] As Aaron put it, "the apocalypse is already there" in Aberdeen.

This feeling of isolation and invisibility was something that I heard a lot in talking with Aaron and Rev. Monroe. Rev. Monroe grew up there and decided to return after seminary and form Chaplains with Aaron. This was a big part of what attracted them to the PPC (2018+), an opportunity to break their isolation and connect with other impoverished communities across the country and across race. As Aaron had mentioned with his experience with Queers for Economic Justice in New York City in the early 2000s, there was protection in being "seen" and being part of something bigger. He continued, "Just the death and the chaos that all of that brings on top of the geographic isolation makes it so hard to get the word out about what's happening," but by connecting with the PPC (2018+) on both a statewide and national level allows them to "share some of the threat." And by threat, he means actual death threats. There is a lot of political repression and backlash for their work ministering, organizing, and running projects of survival, out of their church, on the streets, in tent encampments, and in jail. It only adds fuel to the fire that they are both queer and that as Rev. Monroe put it, they support "the leadership of people who are queer and female identified which is a rare thing in a rural white community."[228]

The "apocalypse" in Grays Harbor exists in relation to the state's political, economic, and cultural center of gravity—Seattle—where Mashyla astutely pointed out, "the CEOs of Microsoft and Amazon have made themselves the richest individuals on the planet," while she was

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[227] Melissa Santos, "Washington No.1 for Jailing Noncriminal Kids, Spurred by Law Named for Tacoma Runaway," *The News Tribune*, July 13, 2015; Wilma Weber and Kristina Alnajjar, "Opioid Needs Assessment and Response Plan" (Grays Harbor County Public Health and Social Services Department, February 2018), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53ee83dee4b027cf34f1b520/t/5a99e51dc830255b24067ebb/1520035105024/Opioid+Needs+Assessment+and+Response+Plan.pdf.

[228] Rev. Sarah Monroe, interview with author and Anu Yadav, Grays Harbor County, Washington, November 2, 2018.

homeless and pregnant in the dead of winter.[229] For Chaplains, these differences between Seattle, Grays Harbor, and the rest of the state have played out in sometimes frustrating ways as they participate in the Washington PPC. As I mentioned, Chaplains had been connected to the pre-PPC network and the national co-chairs, Rev. Barber and Rev. Theoharis, for many years, Mayshyla had even spoken at the launch, but when they initially joined the Washington state coordinating committee, they had to work through, what Rev. Monroe referred to as, "a tremendous amount of classism disguised as anti-racism." This was exacerbated by the fact that Grays Harbor County, which had historically been a blue-collar Democratic stronghold, went for Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Rev. Monroe explained the dynamic:

> There's this inherent classism in white organizing circles that I come up against a lot. And it's the flip, it's the liberal version of the white savior, right? We're gonna help rescue poor black and brown people. And poor white people are the enemy. They're racists. They're kind of the scapegoat of racism, so we don't have to talk about our own racism.

Although this aspect has been frustrating, the opportunities for genuine multiracial fusion organizing at the state and national level has been very important for them. Rev. Monroe described it as probably the biggest "benefit and blessing" of the PPC (2018+).

One of the stories that Rev. Monroe and her wife Emily Nilson, who ran another local soup kitchen, shared with me was connecting with the Seattle Black Panther Party. Through their connection to the PPC (2018+), Chaplains on the Harbor was invited to speak at the 50th Anniversary celebration of the Seattle Black Panther Party. Emily had me cracking up the whole time telling this story, joking that the Rainbow Coalition was not a gay thing, and the Young

[229] Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, "Poor, Disenfranchised, Clergy to Launch New Movement For Moral Revival of A…," Facebook, December 4, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/873203482775828/videos/1535191456577024.

Patriots were not in fact young. A group of them attended and according to Emily they stood out and not just because they were all white, especially this "particular kid":

> God, I love him. But if you looked up redneck in the dictionary, the kid is like six five, just this giant white dude, big old arms, tatted, and of course, on purpose, he came in like Carhartts and suspenders, but in his shirt that's this Poor People's Campaign shirt that said, 'fight poverty, not the poor.' And he had a red t-shirt hanging out his back pocket, because he wanted people to know what colors he was repping.[230]

But they were so well received and it was such a powerful experience for their group of young people to connect and learn from these former Panthers and for them to be seriously interested in their work in Grays Harbor. While they were at the event, they learned about a current struggle to stop another youth jail from being built in Seattle and because just about every single one of them had been incarcerated, Emily said they were like, "'no, that's messed up.' And so from that, it was like, 'okay, well that's our fight too.' No new youth jail in Seattle."

These opportunities for interracial exchange in Washington state and across the country are critical to developing the critical consciousness of their members, but as Rev. Monroe discussed, their antiracism work happens at the local level as well. For one, Aberdeen and Grays Harbor is not all white. Grays Harbor is located just South of the Quinalt Indian Nation, so "we have our own history of colonization" and "a lot of folks from the Quinault nation end up homeless in Aberdeen." The level of police brutality and discrimination is worse for Native people living there. But also, within all white spaces, race is there and as Rev. Monroe put it, "white power is just part of the narrative on the street, and not for everyone, but it's still very much there." Therefore, "internally having those conversations and confronting our own racism is also deeply important work."

[230] Emily Nilsson, interview with author and Anu Yadav, Grays Harbor County, Washington, November 2, 2018.

But the way this looks is very different from "academic anti-racist models," which according to Rev. Monroe are primarily centered around language. She went to Evergreen College as an undergraduate and then the Episcopal Divinity School in Boston, so she is familiar with these approaches. She said, "Academics and middle class white people are obsessed with language and obsessed with saying things right...Like doing workshops on anti-racism is not a thing that particularly moves working-class communities." But they have direct conversations about race, where "people say what they mean and mean what they say, which is probably not always a good thing, but it also opens up the possibility of just having straight up honest conversations about racism and about how people feel about race." However a big part of being able to have these conversations and even calling people out on racist ideas is having developed relationships of trust and care with people. One of the distinctions that Rev. Monroe made several times between their model of poor people's organizing and a lot of left progressive organizing is around relationship building. As she put it, "there's a lot of commitment to issues [in most organizing circles] and less commitment to people."

The other dimension to their approach to challenging white supremacy within their impoverished white community is "giving people first the ability to confront their own oppression and recognize it as oppression. And then move on to the next step of recognizing ways that they oppress other people," or just developing nuance about how their oppression might be different from the oppression faced by people of color. For instance, she said, "we also experience a great deal of police violence, but we experience it also as white people." So while the issues of criminalization, police brutality, and incarceration are ones they share with heavily policed communities of color, as they build solidarity across race, they try to push their people beyond a simple equivalency of experience.

A lot of these conversations happen for Rev. Monroe through jail ministry and what Chaplains refers to as "counter-recruitment" from white supremacist gangs. As she explained, the name is a bit of a misnomer in the sense that they are not trying to recruit people from one gang into another gang, but also they are also not trying to necessarily pressure people to drop out of white supremacist gangs either. She realizes that this is complicated and potentially dangerous for people. Aaron gave some context:

> In Grays Harbor County, we have a lot of folks coming out of prison or circling in and out of prison. Prisons are by design ground zero for the racial divide and conquer of the poor in this country. It's not even like people join a prison gang on the basis of race, because of ideology. It's a survival thing. People join those gangs for protection and for identity, a sense of identity and belonging. They're cut off from all their family, but also to get some form of income, like when they're on the outside. Because the Harbor is like 95% white, a lot of people are involved in white power gangs. That's directly tied to the prison industrial complex and people getting out of it. And again, for our class strata, that's survival. Some people are really ideological about it, but mostly people are just involved for survival reasons. So on the street you have like skinheads interacting with members of native gangs all the time. That's just the street economy. People are actually trading all the time and relationships exist across those lines.

For example, Aaron talked about a funeral that Rev. Monroe did for a white woman, a mother, whose four sons, white power gang members, were incarcertated at the time of her death. Rev. Monroe was able to get them out in order to attend the funeral, although shackled with guards next to them. One of the native gangs came to formally pay their respects. Aaron explained, "that just happens" even though for those outside this community, the existence of white supremacist violence, ideological or physical, next to interracial cooperation might seem completely confounding. Interestingly Rev. Monroe mentioned that while most of the white gang members in her millenial generation are affilitated with white power gangs, mostly skinheads, a lot of the younger generation of white kids are joining latinx gangs.

For Rev. Monroe, the practice of counter-recruitment is more about trying to "create a vision that's different than the one that people have been given," whether that is narratives

around poverty or white power. Since they understand the reasons that people are attracted to gangs is about both ideology and economics, they are attempting to create an alternative on both fronts. On the economic front by working collectively to figure out alternative ways of meeting material needs through projects of survival and cooperative economic models. On the ideological front, "asking people to seriously consider if poor people actually united across race, what change could be created in this country? So it's moral, right? Questions of race and racism are moral, but they're also practical. It's also in poor white people's best interest to organize across race." Like so many other poor people's organizations in the PPC (2018+), internal political education is key to Chaplains, but the opportunities for exchange with impoverished communities across the state and country reinforce and validate this vision of an alternative.

As the experience of Chaplains suggests, multiracial fusion organizing is about principle and politics, not a particular racial and ethnic composition. Even, and especially, in impoverished white communities there is a need *and* potential for practicing antiracist poor people's organizing that develops people's understanding of white supremacy. But developing a deeper understanding of white supremacy necessitates not simply seeing it as a force that dehumanizes people of color, which on its own is worth dismantling, but as an ideology that is designed to also control white people. White supremacy is a powerful tool of ruling class hegemony that has a long history in the United States. This is not to diminish the agency and culpability of white working-class people in adopting and reproducing white supremacist ideologies, which have had deadly consequences for communities of color, but to understand the historical, material, and cultural context in which people's consciousness is shaped, and thus how it can potentially be reshaped. The PPC (2018+) cannot take the place of the on-the-ground organizing that Chaplains is doing, but in connecting them with communities across the state and country, it can help them

offer a "vision that's different than the one that people have been given." On the flip side, if the lessons and model that Chaplains has developed by way of their organizing in a poor rural white community can find replication through the PPC (2018+) in other parts of the country, I think we would have a powerful movement on our hands.

Canaries in the Coal Mine: West Virginia and Kentucky

When one thinks about "white poverty," one probably thinks about Appalachia. The iconic images of Appalachian white poverty were after all the ones used by President Lyndon Johnson to sell Americans on the need for a War on Poverty.[231] In West Virginia, a state that is over 90% white, Amy Jo Hutchinson has seen a lot of "white poverty," she has lived it, too, as a poor white woman herself. As an organizer with the statewide organization Our Future West Virginia (OFWV), Amy Jo travels around the state, but is mostly based in the Northern panhandle. When I met her for breakfast at a dinner in Wheeling, I asked her to tell me about the area. She described a familiar story of what happens when industry leaves and local leaders try to find alternative sources of revenue and jobs.

> Now we have gambling. That's a huge tourist attraction. They claim it brought a boost to the economy. But one of the things that I find is we have a higher rate of poverty here in the Northern panhandle than anyone talks about. Someone told me the other day that 69% of kids in this County's schools were eligible for free or reduced breakfast and lunch...Our downtown, they're trying to rebuild it, but the fact of the matter is, there just aren't jobs. We have food deserts. Yeah, two grocery stores for the whole county. I'm not including Walmart. Walmart would be a third, but these are huge obstacles. Our transportation doesn't run at all on Sundays. It only runs until five or six, not sure which, during the week, you know. So if you have to travel by bus to get a job and most of the jobs...We have a huge new development called the Highlands of on the Hill, off of the

[231]Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirijian, eds., *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 3; Martin Gilens, "How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media," in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 101–03.

> interstate. But most of those are restaurant or retail jobs. In fact all of them are restaurant and retail jobs.[232]

Much has been said about the rise of the service sector economy, but a 2019 Brookings analysis revealed that "53 million Americans between the ages of 18 to 64—accounting for 44% of all workers—qualify as 'low-wage.' Their median hourly wages are $10.22, and median annual earnings are about $18,000."[233] Contrary to the arguments against raising the minimum wage made by corporate interests, these are not summer jobs for high school students wanting some extra spending money. The vast majority of these workers are in their "prime working years" and this is their main source of income. Of course, the follow-up to this rebuttal is 'well, then get another job.' But as their analysis and others have demonstrated time and time again, there just are not enough "good jobs" for every person seeking one.

Although perhaps waning as the healthcare industry, Walmart, and other retailers surpass coal as the state's leading private employers, the coal industry still wields an incredible amount of power in West Virginia and the broader Appalachian region. While the labor conditions and environmental impacts of coal mining are extreme and widely known in Appalachia, challenging "King coal" has not been easy, as Amy Jo explained to me:[234]

> We have purposely been put in these situations where standing up for ourselves divides us, especially here in West Virginia. How do you fight the coal company that has employed every man in your family for generations, but you can't drink the freakin' water? You take a drink of tea made from water out of the spigot and your hair falls out. That's not okay. Yet that's who your money's coming from. That's where your bread and butter is. And so we're just stuck all the time here in this weird...It's just a weird space to

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[232] Amy Jo Hutchinson, interview with author, Wheeling, West Virginia, October 18, 2018.

[233] Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman, "Low-Wage Work Is More Pervasive than You Think, and There Aren't Enough 'Good Jobs' to Go Around," *Brookings*, November 21, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/11/21/low-wage-work-is-more-pervasive-than-you-think-and-there-arent-enough-good-jobs-to-go-around/.

[234] "King Coal" was the title of a novel by Upton Sinclair about the terrible working conditions in the coal mines during the 1910's.

> be in. How do you stand up for yourself and then you cut your nose off your face at the same time?

It is not as though people in these areas do not understand the problem, do not care, or have not and do not continue to fight back. There has been a long history of militant struggle in Appalachia, but the dependency on these jobs for one's livelihood is precisely how the ruling class coerces consent.[235] Amy Jo travels around West Virginia for her work and talks with people in coal towns, like Minden, where the coal company has stopped bringing in fresh water after making it undrinkable. And what do you do when that happens? She explained the terrible *decisions* people are forced to make, "We have to drink that water, because we have a baby that needs a formula bottle and we don't have a choice. We can't afford to go out and keep buying bottled water and bring it here. So we have to, we have to poison our babies because we need the freaking water. I think there's definitely something wrong with the moral narrative."

In her position with OFWV, she mainly focuses on safety net programs. For instance, when we spoke, the West Virginia state legislature had recently passed a bill placing work or educational requirements on "able-bodied adults without dependents" receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a particularly draconian law.[236] So the WV PPC was organizing a Hunger Town Hall to begin laying the groundwork for taking up this fight again in the next legislative session. But at OFWV, she also has leeway in supporting different local struggles in her counties, which is why for instance she was asked by a group of black mothers for support in addressing racism in their kid's school. Amy Jo got her start organizing as a

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[235] Rebecca J. Bailey, *Matewan Before the Massacre: Politics, Coal, and the Roots of Conflict in a West Virginia Mining Community* (West Virginia University Press, 2008)**;** John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (University of Illinois Press, 1980).

[236] Campbell Robertson, "What Happened When a State Made Food Stamps Harder to Get," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/us/food-stamps-work-west-virginia.html.

concerned parent in her daughter's school. As a white person, she understood her role as a "white ally" in this particular case, but as an organizer generally she sees her job as offering training and mentorship so as to develop more organizers. This is partly because she believes in supporting the leadership of poor people, particularly poor women and mothers, but also she sees it as practical and strategic. She has a lot of ground to cover in the state and knows that creating a mass movement of poor people to effectively confront the kind of legislation that was just passed is going to require a lot of leaders. This is why she created the Impacted Organizers Fellowship to train new and emerging organizers who are directly impacted by a safety net issue.

When I asked her if she thought class was the basis of the multiracial unity that the PPC (2018+) was building, she answered the question by telling me a story about this newly established Impacted Organizers Fellowship. As part of their training, fellows learn to have organizing conversations with people in their community around a safety net issue and then organize a meeting or "house party," where they invite people to come. Amy Jo went to attend one of the house parties, which she described as "out in the middle of nowhere" with no cell reception. She pulled up to the house and saw two black women walking up. When she got inside, she said almost half of the people were people of color. She was struck by this. One, because she just did not expect this in such a white state. She said, "I'm thinking there are probably pockets of people of color here in the state that we're not even aware of." But as she told me, "I was blown away, like to the point where I almost. My head was swimming so much with that and everything that that meant to me and everything I saw. I almost kind of lost my focus for a little bit about why we were meeting in the first place." And then she said, "But back to your question, I think it is class. I think it's very *possible* to build a strong movement of impacted people." For her class was that commonality around the safety net issue that brought all

of those people together. And I interpreted her experience of being "blown away" by this multiracial meeting of poor people as demonstrating for her the very real possibility of constructing multiracial class unity even in a state like West Virginia.

But I was also curious to hear from organizers of color about poor people's fusion organizing in predominantly white places, since I imagine the experience of being a racial minority produces its own insights and experiences. Like Amy Jo, Tayna Fogle works with a statewide membership organization, but in Kentucky called Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC). I met with her at KFTC's Lexington office to talk about their work and the KY PPC. Tayna told me a little bit about KFTC's thirty-seven year history, which "streamed out of Eastern Kentucky, people stealing land, the coal owners, the coal industry are taking people's lands, they're removing mountains," to now being statewide taking on a whole range of issues from housing to voting rights in different communities.[237] As she put it, "we're probably the busiest nosiest organization that I know because we go looking for issues." One of the issues KFTC found while they were out doing voter registration in a low-income black neighborhood was felony disenfranchisement. She said they found that one out of every three doors they knocked on people told them that they would like to vote, but they were unable to because they were formerly incarcerated, sometimes 15-20 years ago. She said, "evidently some members of KFTC didn't really understand what they were saying," but they went back and researched Kentucky law and learned that "section 145 of the Kentucky constitution, it states that once you have been in prison, you lose your right to vote." Part of why KFTC was just discovering this problem was because given the racial demographics of the state and the organization's history, it was not an

[237] Tayna Fogle, interview with author, Lexington, Kentucky, October 23, 2018.

issue that impacted white communities as much and "we have probably the most damaging racial discriminatory laws in Kentucky." This is how Tayna got involved with KFTC.

As an ex-felon herself, Tayna has been working for decades on restoring voting rights for formerly incarcerated people. But for her, the issue went even deeper and farther back. Being a poor black woman in the Appalachian South, where her family has gone back generations, she talked about tracing an evolving yet continuous thread of systemic racism and white supremacy from mass incarceration back to Jim Crow, and before that slavery. She spoke of these shifts through her mother and grandmother's experiences, then her experiences as a mother, and now watching the context in which her grandchildren are growing up. For example, she told me about a gang bill that had recently passed that is "definitely targeted at low-income people of color. Only three or more people can stand together in a particular place outside their home or at a park. And if they're dressed alike, then they're subject to being stopped and searched and questioned." And when I learned about the police killing of Breonna Taylor in her own home in Louisville, KY, I thought of Tayna telling me about fearing for her grandchildren and giving them instructions for how to interact with the police:

> But to make sure that they know that if they're approached to please lay down on the ground, spread your fingers, do an angel like you used to do in the snow. And don't move. Just say, 'Call my granny. Can you call my granny?' or just holler it out real loud, let somebody here and scream out the number, 'Call my granny. This is her number,' you know, so I can get there. You shouldn't have to. We shouldn't have to live our life like that. And here lately, it don't even matter if you do that, they'll shoot you anyway.

They'll shoot you anyway. You could do everything your granny told you to do and *they'll shoot you anyway*. This is the devastating reality that Tayna and other black people, particularly from poor and working-class communities that are criminalized and overpoliced have to deal with. So Tayna is very aware of the racial disparities and differences between her experiences and those

of other poor and working-class whites in Kentucky. And yet I was curious what compelled her to want to build this multiracial fusion movement of the poor.

Tayna explained that as much as her organization has put in work building the PPC in Kentucky, they and the broader movement have benefited from it, because it has brought groups together:

> With the Poor People's Campaign. There's more people of color. There's the same issues, but it's actually coming from a different fork in the road, still with the same values, and lifting up poor people. But now we get to mash together. We've got people down in Eastern and Western Kentucky that probably has not had a first touch with a person of color, whether it be black, hispanic, or what, but somehow this Poor People's Campaign has been able, and KFTC has struggled to pull those people.

I thought this was interesting because it was almost the reverse of what Kenia spoke about. Instead of the PPC (2018+) being too white, for Tayna it was the opposite, she saw it as a counterbalance in the other direction, helping to bring in more people of color in order to better forge a true poor people's fusion movement. In her work with KFTC and the KY PPC, she has traveled around the state and witnessed the different conditions that poor people are dealing with. So I was interested in how she spoke about the differences and commonalities in conditions across geography and race and what it meant to unite as poor people.

As Tayna explained, trying to take on this ambitious project of building a multiracial fusion movement of the poor on the state level and nationally is not all "peaches and cream," it is a lot of hours and a lot of work. But she discussed how she approaches these initial organizing conversations with other poor white people across the state.

> It is a big sell in some parts of Kentucky. And I'm pretty sure across the nation to walk in, one being a black woman, walking in Harlan, Kentucky. They love me down there though. But that first experience wasn't the experience that I am having now...yeah, it's a tough sell, but you know, when I identify, 'I'm poor,' if people could see the transparency in you and that you're not riding in on a white horse to save them or these poor pitiful people and you disclose you're poor too. I am poor too, then that makes for better conversation. And I think it just makes it easier to do the work and not to, like I

> said, go with a poor pitiful you, look at you, but to go with a lot of love and empathy in your heart.

And she described "the devastation" she has seen in other parts of states and the struggles that KFTC came out of:

> I remember when I saw the kids for the first time trying to get to school in all that sludge. I was down to see this girl, her name is Terry Bland. She used to work for the Canary Project for Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. And I went to her house and she showed me the sludge and all that filthy devastation. I can't imagine Martin County not having water, but I should start to imagine it, because Lexington, Kentucky is getting like Barton, Kentucky, like Flint, Michigan. We're headed there. The devastation is coming.

Her response to seeing the water crisis in Barton and Flint was not to exceptionalize their situation, and demarcate it from hers, but to see them as "canaries in the coal mine," as the expression goes.

When Tayna spoke about why it was worth the time and effort given the amount of work, she spoke in terms of strategy and her faith in God. She saw the PPC (2018+) as the antidote to the "ugly, dangerous, climate" at the federal level and within Kentucky's state legislature:

> With what's going down in Frankfurt and the misuse and abuse of just people in general. And it doesn't matter what color you are, if your baby goes to bed hungry and my baby goes to bed hungry, our babies are going to bed hungry. Doesn't matter what color you are. They're going to be hungry and that should not happen.

That material reality provides not only the possibility of unity, but is key to undermining the control of those in power. As she put it, "The buy-in is we need each other, just like white and black people need each other and hispanics, and we all need each other." But it is also as she sees it, "what God meant for it to be anyway." Reciting her favorite scripture, she said, "'If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways. Then I will hear from the heaven. I will forgive them of their sins and I will heal their land.' The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival will march toward getting the land healed, because we will all work for the same cause without an ulterior motive

other than, if you fall, I fall, if you rise, I rise and we do it together." Her interpretation of "turn from their wicked ways" is not about all the things that the religious Right would have us believe, but "wicked" is for instance their Governor 'snatching' vision and dental away from Medicaid recipients.

The state-wide multiracial fusion organizing that Amy Jo and Tayna are doing in West Virginia and Kentucky are not just critical to the politics of their state, but to the nation, as evidenced by the obstructionist power that West Virginia's Democratic Senator Joe Manchin and Kentucky's Republican Senator Mitch McConnell have on Congress. As a national campaign of state-based committees, the PPC (2018+) is creating an infrastructure in which to coordinate a shared poor people's agenda into targeted actions at statewide and national scales.[238] The national campaign has the potential to lend much needed attention and capacity to the state level struggle, but national politics will not advance without the on-the-ground organizing that unsung heroes like Amy Jo and Tayna are doing everyday to build the power and capacity of poor people in their states. Poor people's fusion organizing across race, geography, and issue is critical to building the power needed to transform the policies of this nation.

Remembering the "first chapter": Oak Flat

The moral framework of the PPC (2018+) and the Christian language of its co-chairs clearly resonated with Tayna's beliefs, but given the ways that Christianity has been wielded as a tool of settler colonialism, I was keen to hear from Vanessa Nosie, a leader in a tribal,

[238] The PPC (2018+) has had numerous "Moral Mondays" actions targeting both Senators McConnel and Manchin, including the "Moral Monday March on Manchin" in Charleston, West Virginia on June 14, 2021. See Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, "WATCH: #MoralMonday March on Manchin in Charleston, West Virginia! #PoorPeoplesCampaign," YouTube, June 14, 2021.

generational, and coalitional struggle to protect Oak Flat, Arizona, or Chích'il Bił Dagoteel, a place that is sacred to the Apache people as well as other indigenous tribes. Her father, Chairman Wendsler Nosie founded the organization Apache Stronghold to aid in this effort and they have been involved in the PPC (2018+) since its launch. Other participants I spoke with in California and New Mexico shared with me that the strong Christian messaging, and the language around Constitutional rights, were not necessarily irreconcilable, but were understandable barriers when reaching out to some indigenous communities. So I was interested to hear from Vanessa what it was that attracted Apache Stronghold to the PPC (2018+), whether these were barriers for them as well, and if so what compelled them to want to unite anyway.

But with every other person I interviewed, I wanted to first learn about the conditions and context from which their struggle was grounded. Although Oak Flat is federally *protected* land, located in the Tonto National Forest, it has been under threat by the largest proposed copper mine in U.S. history, Resolution Copper, owned by the multinational corporations, Rio Tinto and BHP.[239] If Resolution Copper is allowed to move forward with their proposal, it would not only completely raze this sacred and mountainous landscape into a massive crater of rubble, about 1

[239] Although there were previous attempts by Resolution Copper to petition a land swap with the federal government, they were unsuccessful. It was not until December 2014 when the late Arizona Senator John McCain and Senator Jeff Flake attached a last minute land-exchange rider to the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act Bill, which President Barack Obama signed into law. This provided the necessary land-swap for mining on federal land, but the Tonto National Forest was required to do a full survey of the environmental impact. The environmental impact surveys grossly underestimated the impacts. Needless to say, the U.S. Forest Service under the Trump Administration was not a champion of environmental and indigenous rights. Thankfully, there has been more recent promising news as of March 2021. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is the parent agency of the Forest Service, is forcing the Forest Service to rescind the final environmental impact statement (FEIS) and draft record of decision (ROD) for Resolution Copper. However because of the land-swap signed into law by the National Defense Authorization bill, an act of Congress will be required to provide long-term protection. The case of Oak Flat and the use of the bi-partisan support for the military budget really highlights the interplay between the PPC (2018+) pillars. See "US Forest Service to Withdraw Environmental Report for Resolution Copper Project," *Mining Technology*, March 2, 2021, https://www.mining-technology.com/news/us-forest-service-feis-resolution-copper/; "Diverse Coalition Criticizes Resolution Copper Mine Draft Environmental Impact Statement," Sierra Club Grand Canyon, *Media Release* (blog), November 8, 2019, https://www.sierraclub.org/arizona/blog/2019/11/diversecoalition-criticizes-resolution-copper-mine-draft-environmental-impact; "About Us," *Apache Stronghold*, http://apache-stronghold.com/about-us.html.

½ miles long and 850 feet deep, but it would lead to a range of far-reaching environmental problems that extend beyond the site of the block cave mine. There is the incredible use of water in an area where water is scarce and then the storage of nearly 1.5 billion tons of toxic waste, or mine tailings, in the nearby Dripping Springs Valley that will require a twenty-mile pipeline to get there. And as Vanessa explained, the impacts extend even further:

> When we talk about climate change, that's not just right there, that spreads when the earth plates shift. And we talked about those heat pockets and the rise of heat. That doesn't just affect Oak Flat, or Superior, Globe, and those border towns, it affects the whole earth when it shifts. With our water, we're in a very crucial time right now to preserve and protect water. Not just on an indigenous aspect, but as a human being, how are we going to survive if there's no water?[240]

No surprise, Resolution Copper denies these concerns are real, referring to them as "myths," but offers little in the way of "facts."[241] What is clear from their website is the enormous profit they see as one of the world's largest "undeveloped" copper deposits.[242] Resolution Copper's promised benefits are textbook. At the top of their "local economic impact" infographic is "creating new jobs." They claim the mine will support 3,700 local jobs—1,500 in "direct employees" and 2,200 in "indirect" and "induced" jobs. They also highlight their $2.2 million investment in local initiatives including the Superior Unified School District and they project that the venture will add $1 billion a year to the Arizona economy during operation, implying that this will naturally trickle down to residents of an economically depressed area.[243]

One could see how these promises of jobs and investment might be effective. On my way to the San Carlos reservation from Phoenix, I drove through part of Oak Flat in the Tonto

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[240] Vanessa Nosie, interview with author, San Carlos, Arizona, November 12, 2018.
[241] "Myths and Facts," *Resolution Copper*, https://www.resolutioncopper.com/myths.html
[242] "Project Overview," *Resolution Copper*, https://www.resolutioncopper.com/project-overview.html
[243] "Local Economic Impact," *Resolution Copper*, https://www.resolutioncopper.com/files/media-releases/Resolution%20Copper%20Local%20Eco%20Impact%20Nov%202020.pdf

National Forest. The landscape was so otherworldly to me originally being from the swampy South. The unexpected lushness of the vegetation and rock formations of this desert landscape were mesmerizing. I experienced this many times in my travels, seeing the visible contradiction of natural abundance and beauty alongside human made poverty and misery. One of the first places I saw as I exited the boundaries of the Tonto National Forest was Globe City, one of the "border towns" Vanessa mentioned. It had the look of a deserted mining town, but more post-industrial than the Hollywood stereotype featured in Westerns. Currently, Globe City has a median household income of $49,954, or a per capita income of $25,321, with only 20.1% with a bachelor's degree or higher.[244] It has an official poverty rate of 15.8 percent. The racial composition is 50% white and 40% latinx. Superior is only slightly better economically. And although I was not able to get county or municipal unemployment figures, I imagine jobs are welcome.

Of course, like many other indigenous communities, the official poverty rate in San Carlos is roughly four times that of Globe City at 60.3% according to DataUSA, a disparity which is just one legacy of settler colonialism.[245] And the struggle to save Oak Flat is a direct and unbroken continuation of this history of genocide and removal, or what Vanessa referred to as the "first chapter," not just for the Apache people, but indigenous people more broadly. Vanessa was clear, San Carlos is not their home, it is an open-air prison that her ancestors and many other Apache bands were placed on, after being forcibly removed from their homelands. It was the barren and inhospitable land the U.S. government did not care to hold on to. Oak Flat is their homeland and a place they return to regularly for ceremony and to maintain a spiritual

[244] U.S. Census Bureau, "Population estimates, July 1, 2019, (V2019) -- Globe city, Arizona," *Quick Facts*, accessed April 7, 2021, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/globecityarizona#.
[245] https://datausa.io/profile/geo/san-carlos-az

connection to the land that sustained her people. So when she goes to these meetings about Resolution Copper mining Oak Flat, she says:

> They talk about, 'Resolution Copper is here. It's a done deal. It's gone.' I come out of those meetings, hurt or angry. I'm right here, standing in front of you. How can it be gone? How come my way of life isn't as important as your way of life? Would you want a copper mine to remove your church? Would you let it be destroyed? Would you allow toxic tailing in your backyard? No. Are you going to tell me you'd buy a house anywhere from a hundred miles or less from where the toxic tailing is going to be? But it's okay for you to do that to me, my people, and then those that are in the surrounding areas? Don't you see something's wrong with that? If you can't live there, why should anybody else? And if you won't allow your way of life, your religion, even if it's not a religion, but something that's important to you to be destroyed, why is it okay for you to make that decision to destroy my way of life, my land, my people, and the people that we're trying to protect?

The only true answer Resolution Copper could give to Vanessa's question would not be an easily justifiable one. The capitalistic system of rights that global multinational corporations like Rio Tinto and BHP operate under, entitle them, even demand they continually seek profit through dispossession and exploitation. Unfortunately, as Marx said, "Between equal rights, force decides."[246] However in this battle of force, these moral questions have become a critical strategy employed by those who are a part of the PPC (2018+) for exposing a twisted value system that is an existential threat to humanity on this planet.

Vanessa explained that for her it was "the way Reverend William Barber talked," the moral and spiritual framing of the PPC (2018+) that aligned with how Apache Stronghold understands and carries out the struggle to protect Oak Flat. Religion and spirituality frame their struggle, while prayer and action is their methodology. In the case of the PPC (2018+), religion and prayer is a point of unity, not because there is a shared religion or method of praying but because there is an essential message that is shared. Caring for Mother Earth and everybody on it

[246] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 1867, 1976th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 344.

is a moral imperative. However, she also saw Apache Stronghold offering insights to the PPC (2018+) on the nature and root of the problems that we all share. For her it was not just about *including* the injustices done to indigenous people, although that was important too, but seeing how the "first chapter" of the United States offers understanding of a system that is affecting all people in this country:

> Not taking away from all of us that are here and on this earth right now, that are here in the United States, but how can we go on and make real moral decisions and fix the injustice that's happening to all people? How did we get here to begin with? It's what happened to the indigenous people. The divide and conquer, the greed, because that's what they did to indigenous people. They divided and conquered. They tried to wipe us out. Then more and more people came and it just continued. If they weren't in a position of high status of money, or being able to have influential leadership in their point of view things, they were shunned, they weren't treated equal. So with the Poor People's Campaign, I just continue to encourage them. Like, if you want to make a real change for all people, then you need to make sure you include that first chapter. Because how we're going to help all the other minorities and all those is looking at what happened to the indigenous people first.

Vanessa's larger point is that the "first chapter," or what some refer to as settler colonialism, is absolutely necessary to understanding the historical and contemporary processes that produce and maintain inequality in the United States and globally. And yet this fact about the origins and continued reality of the United States as a settler colonial society are sometimes obscured by frameworks of social justice that attempt to reconcile the sins of the "past" within an American progress narrative towards greater equality and freedom.

In *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz makes this point when she examines how periods of contestation in the United States are recuperated into a narrative of progress that can only make sense if genocide is erased.

> The 1960s social revolutions, ignited by the African American liberation movement, complicated the origin narrative, but its structure and periodization have been left intact. After the 1960s, historians incorporated women, African Americans, and immigrants as contributors to the commonwealth. Indeed, the revised narrative produced the "nation of immigrants" framework, which obscures the US practice of colonization, merging settler

> colonialism with immigration to metropolitan centers during and after the industrial revolution. Native peoples, to the extent that they were included at all, were renamed "First Americans" and thus themselves cast as distant immigrants.[247]

So it makes sense that Vanessa would "continue to encourage" the PPC (2018+) to not fall victim to this same trap of forgetting about "what happened to the indigenous people first." She went on to draw parallels to the way that territory is "monopolized" and geographic boundaries are created in urban areas, "you have your high income class people, you have your poor class, you have your mid class. It's just like a reservation. They all categorized us." And indeed scholars of gentrification have drawn similar parallels to the violent process of expansion along the Western frontier to these more urban processes.[248]

Although I think PPC (2018+) messaging could possibly be critiqued for recuperating such progress narratives, by for example talking about "saving the soul of the nation" or constitutional values, the campaign's focus on militarism and the war economy does provide the opening for two important recognitions. First, that the massive expenditures on the U.S. military and endless and deadly wars "abroad" are merely a continuation of a genocidal form of colonialism that was, as Ortiz argues, "modern from the beginning" and designed with the aim of expropriating land and resources.[249] I am encouraged by the ways that I see the campaign helping to make these historical links between militarism and settler colonialism, as well as between militarism and the police and carceral system. For instance, I attended a convening organized by the Kairos Center specifically dedicated to militarism, where this was the subject of much discussion among attendees, most of whom were PPC (2018+) participants. Second, for all the talk about the lack of bi-partisan cooperation in Congress, the U.S. military is one area of sacred

[247] Roxanne Dunar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 12-13.
[248] Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
[249] Dunar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, 6.

and seemingly untouchable consensus. This is reflected in a lack of sustained critique of U.S. militarism and imperialism within "domestic" social justice movements. The PPC (2018+) is a unique effort in contemporary social justice politics to reconnect critiques of settler colonialism, militarism, and imperialism with demands for economic and racial justice.[250]

But like so many others that I interviewed, Vanessa's analytical and strategic insights were tied to her religious and moral insights, which undergirded Apache Stronghold's work uniting across tribal, religious, geographic, and racial lines. When it came to aligning with the PPC (2018+), she said:

> Indigenous people talk about seven generations ahead. They prophesize about the future of seven generations and in these prophecies, they talk about unifying. So is this that time? Is this the time that our truth of our story is going to be heard? How can we help one another? Because I'm going to need them to stand with me as I fight for Oak Flat, just as much as they gonna need us. Because they can't do it without us as indigenous people. They need us, but we need everybody also too.

In their work to protect Oak Flat, they do a lot of outreach to other tribes and non-Natives. For instance, they have had 467 indigenous tribes pass resolutions calling for the protection of Oak Flat. They also work with other organizations and non-Natives in the surrounding communities concerned about the environmental and health impacts of Resolution Copper.

As part of the PPC (2018+)'s "40 Days of Action," rather than participating in the protests in Phoenix, Arizona, Apache Stronghold organized a caravan, more akin to the 1968 PPC. They began in Northern California in Pomo Indian territory, where they are dealing with

[250] Anti-war and anti-colonial critique was of course an important part of the original 1968 PPC. Daniel Cobb's *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* is a fascinating examination of how Native organizing took shape during the War on Poverty and how this came to overlap with the PPC. See Daniel M. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2008).

toxic pollution of their water and land due to nearby mercury and sulfur mining. Vanessa explained:

> We started there and we did ceremony, because our journey to the Poor People's Campaign rally was going to be a spiritual journey. And it was to unify tribes, touch these holy places, because it's going to take not only action but prayer. And sometimes I think people forget how powerful prayer can be. Miracles happen every day. But we also wanted to touch these tribes and other people throughout our route of their story and bring their prayers and leave our prayers with them.

They traveled down through California, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, and elsewhere en route to Washington, D.C. for the "Stand Against Poverty March & Rally" on June 23rd, 2018. For Vanessa, the whole caravan was incredibly powerful and then for it to culminate at the rally with thousands of people, where they performed their song and dance on stage made her proud and hopeful, particularly to see her nephew singing. She said, "That was amazing and my nephew, he is only 17, so we're not gone yet. We're going to still continue to live. We're going to strive. He made that stand. He sang his heart out for all people, not for just Indian people, for everybody."

However, while they were on the caravan, Vanessa took a stand, too. She was asked to testify at the first PPC (2018+) Congressional hearing on June 12, 2018, during the "40 Days." She explained that her father and her daughter Naelyn Pike are powerful speakers, but "I remember when I got the word, when they asked me to testify, that was a big moment for me, because I was like, 'why me? I'm not an activist. I'm only doing what's right as an Apache woman.' And that was scary." It was scary and humbling to feel like she was representing not just Apache people, but all indigenous people. As the PPC (2018+) intentionally sought to represent the fusion diversity of the campaign and highlight the intersections of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation from across the country, Vanessa was the single indigenous voice on a line-up that included Amy Jo Hutchinson (WV), Pamela Sue Rush (AL),

Christopher Olive (WA), Nick Smith (VA), Kenia Alcocer (CA), Stanley Sturgill (KY), Callie Greer (AL), Ariana Hawk (MI), and Margie Storch (NC).[251]

Each person testified to their particular and personal plight—losing a daughter and brother for denial of healthcare, getting black lung from working in the coal mine, having a son poisoned with lead contaminated water, not having enough money to afford a proper septic system, coming home from war with a medical condition that led to addiction and homelessness, being afraid of their child being ripped from their arms because they are undocumented—but together their stories stood as a collective condemnation of the far too common reality of poverty, inequality, and injustice in the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Against efforts to invisibilize, exceptionalize, and disconnect these sorts of realities from each other, these testifiers spoke to the potential consciousness and capacity of poor people to unite and lead with an alternative vision that cares for people and the planet. Describing the experience of testifying, Vanessa said:

> To me, when I leave this earth, I can say, I sat there with a group of people and we did unify, because everything did matter to us. It's not always black and white. It's not always, you know, of separation. There is hope. And I have seen it. I was a part of it, because I know that no one's going to leave and go back to their ancestral homelands. We have to find a way to work together. And I think that world will be a better place if we knew the truth of how we were founded, and be able to understand and respect our differences, and that what we have left we have to protect and preserve.

In this sense, the Poor People's Campaign is not just about *poor* people, but the liberation and salvation of all people because, as Vanessa stated, "when all natural resources are gone, how are we going to survive as human beings? Whether you're rich or poor, how are you going to survive when it's all gone? Because your money won't be able to buy anything if there's nothing left."

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[251] "Poor People's Congressional Hearing," (June 12, 2018) *Repairers of the Breach*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi9YRwWDI5s

When I spoke with Trini Rodriguez, founder of Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural located in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, she echoed Vanessa by tying PPC (2018+)'s fusion organizing back to Dr. King and the original PPC. Trini and her husband Luis Rodriguez have since embraced and incorporated an indigenous cosmology and philosophy into their political and artistic practice, but in 1968, they were part of the burgeoning Chicano movement in Los Angeles. She remembers:

> He was pulling people together and he recognized that it was going to take everybody...he was seeing that the limitations were self-imposed, because of a lack of communication with each other, and because of a lack of seeing the fights as interlinked, and this whole thing of fusion politics. It was a very advanced idea really, because it didn't require you to have a left language in order to be revolutionary. It required you to be advanced in your thinking, not in your categorization of things.[252]

As both a scholar and antipoverty organizer, I really appreciated the distinction Trini was making between advanced thinking and categorical language. It allows the possibility that people, particularly poor people, could be advanced in their thinking and politics even though they might not use the terms that mark one as politically savvy or educated. On the flip side, it suggests that having a proficiency in a certain kind of language does not actually mean one is politically advanced. I have seen this too. I am less concerned that people are using the correct, or most radical, or left language, but that people are practicing fusion organizing and by doing this, beginning to see and feel on a much deeper level "the fights as interlinked." If experiencing is understanding and seeing is believing, then practicing multiracial fusion organizing of the poor is creating the conditions for our power and potential to be seen by us as a necessary first step.

So to go back to Vanessa's earlier question, "is this that time?" That "time of unification"? I sure hope so. Thankfully, PPC (2018+) participants are drawing from deep and

[252] Trini Rodriguez, interview with author and Anu Yadav, San Fernando, California, November 8, 2018.

diverse reservoirs of knowledge from varied histories of struggle among the poor and dispossessed across this land and even internationally. There is a way of conceiving of class unity across race, geography, and issue not as an erasure of difference or lack of analytical nuance, but quite the opposite: one that requires an exercising of analytical, philosophical, and strategic sophistication. Solidarity is ongoing work that transforms our individual and collective consciousness. As a strategic alliance, class unity across difference provides the necessary basis of our collective power, but hopefully also a more complete vision of what "Power for Poor People" will mean for a true "revolution of values."[253]

[253] See Colleen Wessel-McCoy, "When Jesus Says Love He Means It: Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 Frogmore Speech on Its 50th Anniversary," *Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice* (blog), n.d., https://kairoscenter.org/mlk-frogmore-staff-retreat-speech-anniversary.

Chapter 4: Led by the Poor?: Theory and Practice in the Poor People's Campaign

The very first destination along my interview tour was a Holiday Inn in Morgantown, Pennsylvania where I attended Put People First! Pennsylvania's (PPF! PA) weekend-long Annual Membership Assembly. Founded in 2012, PPF! PA is a statewide grassroots membership-based organization of poor and working-class people building power through their Healthcare is a Human Right campaign. Several of PPF! PA's founding members were part of the Poverty Scholars network and had come out of various Philadelphia based organizations, including Empty the Shelters, Media Mobilizing Project (MMP), and the Philly Student Union (PSU). Although one of the younger organizations in the network, PPF! PA has become an inspiring model for how to build a state-wide poor people's organization. Building off lessons and approaches from prior antipoverty organizing, they are constantly adapting and developing their model and leadership in the movement. As a leading partner organization in Pennsylvania's PPC (2018+), it felt like a fitting place to begin my trip to learn and hear from organizers in the campaign.

The PPC (2018+) is not simply a campaign about poverty, but a campaign made up of poor people, and led by poor people. This is certainly implied in the name of the campaign, but it is also underscored by the explicit model of the campaign. For instance, the second of the PPC (2018+)'s twelve "fundamental principles" states, "We are committed to lifting up and deepening the *leadership of those most affected* by systemic racism, poverty, the war economy,

and ecological devastation and to building unity across lines of division" [my italics].[254] The campaign's Phase II Organizing Guide outlines the three goals of the campaign: 1) Shift the narrative; 2) Build power; and 3) Impact elections and policies. Elaborating on goal number one, it reads, "Shifting the narrative is not just about being in the media or simply talking and changing the words we use. Instead we put the *plight, fight and insight of those most impacted by injustice into the center* of national discourse and politics and make our political and economic system have to address these life and death issues" [my italics]. In regards to 'building power,' it says, "Power means unity and organization. *This is only a Poor People's Campaign if we actually unite and organize large segments of poor people* across racial and geographic lines in the United States" [my italics].

This mandate to center the leadership of the "poor," the "dispossessed," the "most impacted," and now the "low-wealth," is clearly important, but how exactly to do this is not always clear. As I discussed in chapter 2, who "poor" people refers to is not always agreed upon, and complexities and contradictions abound. As Nijmie Dzurinko, a founding member of PPF! PA and tri-chair of the Pennsylvania PPC, explained:

> I think this question can get really confusing for people, because people are so used to thinking of these categories as identities, right? So when it's like, 'this needs to be led by the poor,' people get in that head space. They start wanting to quantify what that means, because there's such a lack of understanding of our fundamental relationship to the economy...It's not like we need people in this income bracket only to be leading this campaign. That's really silly.

I understood her to be rejecting a dominant and narrow conception of poverty in favor of one rooted in political economy, but I wanted to understand more how she conceptualized a broad coalition that is inclusive of everyone and yet ensures that poor people, across a broad spectrum

[254] "Our Principles," *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-principles/.

and across a multitude of differences, are substantively *leading* the campaign. Being there at PPF! PA's Membership Assembly, I got to see their model in practice. As an organization, they are a sort of microcosm of the fusion organizing of the poor that the PPC 2018+ calls for, in terms of their membership composition but also in terms of their demonstration of what it means to be member-led. At the time, this state-wide organization had two part-time paid organizers, and they were deliberately moving to a non-staff model, and yet the level of organization, attention to detail, and care that was put into each aspect of the assembly was impressive. From the logistics, to the content of the sessions themselves, to the community care team and childcare, it was organized and led by members from across the state.

When I interviewed Nijmie following the assembly, I wanted to hear more how she thought about the question that seemed to challenge so many in the PPC (2018+): How do we center the leadership of poor and impacted people in a broad and inclusive campaign that includes people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds? She referred back to a "Leadership Across Difference" workshop they did at the Assembly (a key concept in their organization):

> This is about the whole working class and it's also about bringing people that are marginalized in the class into the center. So when we did the workshop on 'leadership across difference' yesterday, it was Ben who talked about how we conceive of our base. Which is the working class broadly, but with a really specific focus on poor people, and people of color, and immigrants, and LGBTQ people, and disabled people. So not leaving out, or having a narrow conception of who the working class is, because that focus is important. It is really important that we put specific attention on marginalized people in the working class. I think that's the foundation. And that has to be really clear so that we keep that focus there and also are open to everyone.

This conceptualization of a "working class" base that centers the leadership of the most impoverished and marginalized within the organization was clearly in practice at the Membership Assembly. It was constantly spoken to, but it was also again reflected in their

leadership composition. And although the PPC (2018+) itself rarely speaks directly about capitalism or class, PPF! PA was notably not elusive in their language.[255]

In the chapter 2, I explored how, by interrogating and challenging dominant definitions and narratives of poverty and the poor, the PPC (2018+) serves as a vehicle for developing class consciousness and solidarity. In this chapter, I move from definitional questions to questions of power, organization, and leadership. For starters, why center the leadership of the poor and "those most affected by systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation"? Is this a moral or philosophical directive, a practical political directive (a mathematical equation of power), or both? Where does this come from? What are some of the challenges different organizers are identifying in their states as they attempt to build a campaign that is led by the poor? Are they conceptual challenges, as in what does leadership mean, what does it look like? And how much are the efforts of organizers to carry out this mandate in their states informed by histories of prior struggle and the level and forms of existing organization? What lessons and models are organizers drawing on and what new insights are being developed?

I organize these questions into three sections below. First, I explore how PPC (2018+) organizers spoke about why those who are most impacted must lead this campaign. Through these conversations, I reveal how a "theory of change" articulated in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the Poor People's Campaign has been reproduced through generations of antipoverty struggle in ways that still inform the strategic orientation of today's PPC (2018+) leaders. Second, I examine how insights about individual versus collective notions of leadership

[255] The PPC (2018+) is more likely to speak of class through the lens of poverty and poor people or low-wage workers. Occasionally, Rev. Barber might talk about how he responds to people when they ask him, 'is it race or class?' To which he just replies, 'yes,' as a way of refusing the dichotomous framing all together. More recently, I have heard "ruling class" uttered, which is interesting to me that the PPC (2018+) is becoming somewhat stronger in its reference to class. It is a delicate dance of wanting to speak in terms that are clear and popular, as in not sectarian, and yet not be immediately red-baited.

suggest the critical role that organizations of the poor play within the broader coalition that makes up the PPC (2018+). Here, I examine the unique form of the PPC (2018+), as "organism," rather than an "organization," as both a source of its greatest potential and yet part of what makes it challenging to not only build out, but to ensure its leadership is firmly grounded in "the base." Lastly, I focus on why and how organizers emphasize the role of "leadership development" and political education processes within their organizing. For them, these processes strengthen the dialectic between individual and collective forms of leadership, i.e. between identifying and developing *individual* leaders from the ranks of the poor and building the unity and *organization* of the poor as a leading social force.

A New and Unsettling Force: A Theory of Change

In the opening session of PPF! PA's Annual Membership Assembly that I attended, we were all handed a diagram, almost a flow chart, that articulated the organization's "theory of change." Through simple graphics and text, it leads the viewer through a series of questions, whose answers lead to the next question: 1) What is the fundamental problem of our time?; 2) Who can change it?; 3) How do we build such leaders? We were split into small groups and then asked to develop a short mística to convey one of the specific concepts or theories laid out in this document.[256] As a beginning exercise for the assembly, the activity functioned as part ice-breaker, part lesson, and part framing, as they would continually refer to their "theory of change" throughout the weekend. Although the document itself was new to me, the theory was not. I

[256] I define mística in a footnote in chapter 1, but it is worth noting the explicit repetition of this form at different organizational events. These sorts of shared practices across organizations are evidence of the existence of a grassroots antipoverty movement network in the U.S. It could be argued that shared practices like mística are also what help to constitute this network. As I mentioned before, mística was adopted from the MST in Brazil, an indication of these networks and exchanges are also transnational. The MST holds international schools where they bring social movement actors together from around the world for strategic dialogue, study, and to promote their model. Even when I was in Colombia for the ALBA movimientos continental gathering, we performed daily místicas. It appeared to me that most people were familiar with the form.

recognized it as an incredibly effective tool for consolidating and reproducing many of the theories and lessons learned from this larger antipoverty movement network and history. In this section, I explore what this "theory of change" is, how it was reflected in Dr. King's vision for the 1968 PPC, and how it has evolved over generations of antipoverty struggle to inform the PPC (2018+). Since a key strategic principle of this "theory of change" relies on the leadership of the poor, I ask why is the leadership of the poor key? And where and how does the PPC (2018+) play into this strategic vision?

Rather than claim their "theory of change" to be original, PPF! PA leaders are the first to acknowledge its roots in a longer history and network of the poor organizing the poor. Under the first question, it even includes the "four horsemen of the apocalypse," an earlier articulation of the PPC (2018+)'s "pillars" or "evils" of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological destruction. So what exactly is a "theory of change"? Interestingly, the language "theory of change" has some not so radical origins in the "evaluation field" developed to help companies, non-profit, philanthropic, and government sectors evaluate the efficacy and outcomes of programs. According to the Center for Theory of Change's website, the term and methodology was popularized within the nonprofit sector through the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change.[257] There is a lot of jargon like this in the nonprofit world and an entire cottage industry built up with theorists, consultants, and "practitioners" designing "innovative" theories, models, and methodologies for running better nonprofits. I got a real glimpse into this during my very brief enrollment in the University of Maryland's Nonprofit Management certificate program.[258]

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[257] "TOC Origins," *Center for Theory of Change: Setting Standards for Theory of Change*, https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/toc-background/toc-origins/.

[258] Although I dropped out of the program, because my tuition remission did not cover it (a revenue generating scheme for the University's Do Good Institute, I am sure), I was completely fascinated by the curriculum and the

Given the almost unavoidable crossovers between the nonprofit sector and grassroots movements, it would not surprise me if leaders in PPF! PA had not encountered the "theory of change" framework at some point. While the "evaluation field" has material interest in standardizing their methods and approaches in order to protect against appropriations that risk diluting their branded methods, it is probably safe to say that PPF! PA's interpretation of "theory of change" is a deviation. For PPF! PA, their "theory of change" document is a way of very clearly articulating their organization's goals and overarching strategy so that it is constantly foregrounded. For me, the contents of this "theory of change" matter and it is here that I chart its genealogy not in the field of nonprofit evaluation, but in this longer genealogy of antipoverty organizing. Hence, my use of the term will reflect the sense in which it has come to be used and meant within this movement network.

How does this relate to the PPC (2018+) besides the inclusion of the four pillars? One of the central premises of PPF! PA's "theory of change" is the centering of "a united social movement of the poor and dispossessed of every background, gender, ability, age, and religion" as the agent of change. This is also a key principle of the PPC (2018+)'s theory of change and the subject of this chapter. In chapter 2, I mentioned a frequently referred to quote with the Poverty Scholars network where Dr. King that talks about "the dispossessed of this nation - the poor, both white and Negro." In this same quote, he goes on to say:

> They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. *The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose*. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to

uncritical nature in which they prepared us to accept the nonprofit world and thus excel within its rules. It was here that I felt more like an ethnographer than a student. In the fundraising class, we matter of factly learned how to adapt to the increasing reality in philanthropic fundraising that wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. 'Yeah, I know it's terrible right, but let's figure out how to get your organization money to help those poor children in Africa.'

> lose. If they can be helped to take action together, *they will* do so with a freedom and a power that will be a *new and unsettling force* in our complacent national life.[259] [my italics]

This quote has been used within the Poverty Scholars network and now within the PPC (2018+) because it articulates the theory of change at the heart of King's vision for the 1968 PPC. The underlying theory might be simply summarized by saying that the power needed to realize a revolution to "lift the load of poverty" will come from the unity and organization of the bottom. I argue that this basic and yet not self-evident premise is the PPC (2018+)'s broader theory of change. Even the phrase "a new and unsettling force" has been made into a song "We are a new unsettling force," a slogan, and a poster that is part of the campaign's repertoire. Of course, King did not pull these ideas out of nowhere, these radical ideas had their roots most directly in the labor and freedom movements of the Southern United States that preceded the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but were also inspired by international anticolonial struggles.[260]

The PPC (2018+)'s theory of change is supported by both moral and ethical claims, as well as a strategic power analysis of economic relations. It suggests an inseparable dialectic between principle and strategy. From talking with campaign leaders in the states, it was clear that the question of 'why center the poor?' could not be answered on merely objective grounds. Even

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[259] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Social Change" (Massey Lectures, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/martin-luther-king-jr-nonviolence-direct-action.

[260] For Southern civil rights and labor movements, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008)**;** Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)**;** Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010). For transnational connections, see Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

those with more socialist politics spoke about capitalism as a value system that was antithetical to a vision of society that 'puts people first.' The campaign's explicitly moral framework is in itself simultaneously strategic and authentic, as in people are guided by moral ethical beliefs whether or not they are understood or expressed religiously. But for many, religious beliefs were explicitly at the core of their politics, even their socialist politics. For instance, when I was talking with Rev. Tonny Allgood in Mississippi about his history in the civil rights movement and labor movement, where he eventually joined the Communist Labor Party (CLP) in 1976, he said, "the kind of society they were talking about building was the same society I saw in my view of religion should be built."

In social justice activism, there is of course much talk about centering those who are most impacted. For this reason, it is important to draw distinctions. The poor and marginalized are not be centered because *they* have it the worst, which others (with privilege) should recognize this and thus give deference to poor people in organizing spaces, but because, as co-president of the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU) Marian Kramer said to me, "the Poor People's Campaign can be all our interest, because that's the base of the class. If you bring the base up, you got to bring everybody else up." According to this theory of change, it is only "the base of the class" that will know when their hurt is gone. Unlike other sections of the working class that might be afraid to lose the little they do have, "the base" has the least to lose and most to gain in revolutionizing the system. This observation is intended to guide the overarching strategy of the organizing, not an ethical code for how those with relative privilege, be it economic, racial, gender, are to interact with those with less privilege.

This later approach, which is to be found in a lot of "antiracist," "anti-oppression," and "diversity" literature and training, tends to reduce structural political and economic problems to

the behavior and thoughts of white people or others with privilege.[261] A lot of "anti-oppression" and "antiracism" work centers around getting white people or men to recognize their unacknowledged privilege, and hence ways they oppress others, consciously or unconsciously, and then use this self-awareness to lessen "unearned advantage and conferred dominance."[262] In feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh's well-circulated essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," she takes aim at the myth of meritocracy. But her critique is ultimately liberal. She does not challenge the very capitalist system that would deny people their rights to dignity and basic needs, but that it is not actually a meritocracy, because some people have unfair advantage of accessing such goods and "privileges" over others. This sort of literature might use the language of systems and structures, but the analysis is for the most part not focused on transformation at the level of the economy or public policy (or any insight at what drives these), but at the level of interaction between people in workplaces and organizations. The implicit suggestion is that individual thoughts and behaviors, which inform organizational structure and culture, are the basic building blocks of the *structure* of society. Taking this analogy to its logical conclusion, if these building blocks are re-organized and transformed, so will the structure of society.

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[261] While there are parallels elsewhere, a lot of anti-oppression frameworks for organizations seem to come out of the field of social work. Ironically, I think the very critiques that welfare rights activists have made against the welfare system and the racist and demeaning treatment by white social service workers have made those in the field much more self-consciousness of the ways that social work is complicit in carrying out the will of the state in surveilling and disciplining poor people. Some welfare rights activists even entered the field of social work to try and work within, or because it offered a job and they knew the system well and felt they would be more sympathetic to people receiving benefits. However, I think this sort of anti-oppression framework probably belies the concerns and preoccupations of mostly white "middle class" social workers with being one of the "good" ones, rather than working with poor people to challenge the system. But I am not completely unsympathetic, we all need to work and better to train people not to be jerks, right? For an example of this approach see Carolyn Campbell, "ANTI-OPPRESSIVE THEORY AND PRACTICE AS THE ORGANIZING THEME FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: The Case in Favour," *Canadian Social Work Review* 20, no. 1 (2003): 121–25. But this framework can also be seen more popularly in books like Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Sophie Williams, *Anti-Racist Ally: An Introduction to Activism and Action* (New York: Amistad/HarpersCollins, 2021).

[262] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom*, August 1989, .

Although I disagree with the liberal premise of these models and their "theories of change," this is not to say that I do not think there is any value in having people interrogate the ways that ascriptive ideologies like race, gender, sexuality, disability shape cultural narratives and thus our own consciousness. This is all very important, but a misdiagnosis of the problem results in misguided efforts that might have some positive effects, but do nothing to address the real conditions that bring us to this work. And rather ironically, my experience is that in practice these "antiracism" and "anti oppression" models can actually have the effect of re-centering attention on those with more relative advantage than on those who are most impacted. For this reason, in "antiracism" models, there is often a call for separate spaces for white people and people of color, so people of color do not need to be bogged down with the extra burden of teaching white people about their white privilege.[263] White people, usually more middle income white people, are then tasked with organizing other white people, which as I discussed in chapter 3, can be done in incredibly patronizing ways to poor white people.

But I want to return to Marian. When she said "the base of the class," she was referring to the most economically disadvantaged sections of the working class, whereas Nijmie spoke of "the base" as being the entire working class, the broader base that needs to be organized. Although they were using "the base" in slightly different ways, they agreed that the most impoverished sections of the working class should lead. The poor should lead, because it makes strategic sense. Of course, there is a long history of international and domestic discussion and debate within radical and socialist movements in the modern era regarding this question of who

[263] I am making a lot of generalizations for the purpose of making a larger point. I think a really good example of this approach is the organization Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). I think they are way more sophisticated than my criticism suggests, and are doing some interesting organizing in places, but overall I do not see their model truly being capable or interested in working towards class solidarity.

is the vanguard or leading social force of the revolution.[264] The New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s began rethinking orthodoxies of Marxism regarding class struggle, organizational forms, and the revolutionary potential of the American mass worker, particularly as the civil rights movement, student movements, the women's movement, and anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America suggested the political significance of colonized peoples, peasants, racial minorities, and others outside of the narrowly defined industrial proletariat. Black Power intellectuals like Harold Cruse analogized the circumstances of African Americans to that of an internal colony, whereby "the Negro is the leading revolutionary force, independent and ahead of the Marxists in the development of a movement towards social change."[265] Whereas black America got recast in the role of the revolutionary vanguard for Cruse and other Black Power leaders, welfare rights leaders, many of whom had roots in the civil rights and Black Power movements, drew other conclusions. By centering poverty and welfare recipients, they built a multiracial movement led by poor people, mostly women and mothers. Although the welfare rights movement has faced their fair share of defeats, their politics has not been so susceptible to elite brokerage.

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[264] Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1998th ed. (New York: Verso, 1848); V.I. Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?," in *Essential Works of Lenin: "What Is to Be Done?" And Other Writings*, ed. Henry M. Christman, 1987th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1929); Mao Tse-tung, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, 1926, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_1.htm; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 2004th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1963);Toni Cade Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles*," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970).

[265] In *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, Cedric Johnson dedicates a chapter to Harold Cruse and his influence on New Left debates and the Black Power movement. Johnson quotes from Cruse's book *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota, 2007), 14; Also see, Harold Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," in *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 75.

The claim that the multiracial poor are the leading social force comes out of this longer history of antipoverty activism of which Kramer and others were a part of.[266] But even here moral and religious claims are often seamlessly embedded. In a 1993 pamphlet entitled "Which Way Welfare Rights? (New Situation, New Strategy)," Arenia Edwards, Treasurer of the NWRU, writes in the preface:

> We, the victims of poverty, must go back to the basics: hit the streets and organize by the thousands. *We are over 60 million strong. We have the necessary knowledge of our needs*: food, clothing, and shelter. We must organize to show the so-called representatives, that don't represent our interests, that they can not represent us...We, as senior abolitionists, have a duty to keep this struggle on course. *We will be successful, because God is on our side, and therefore, we have all the time in the world.* We will not sit by and wait for a leader, because we are all leaders. Join our fight, because it is a *fight for the future of this world*. A world where there will be no homelessness, or hunger, but a world where we will all enjoy the fruits of *our societal labor*. [my italics]

The notion that God is on the side of the poor is a claim firmly rooted in the Christian bible, but interpreted here not as God saving the poor, but calling on the poor to "fight for the future of this world," for them to save this world and make it right. Although the national co-chairs Reverends Barber and Theoharis likewise carry on this tradition of Christian liberation theology directly citing biblical scripture in order to make their case, the call for a "moral revival" is intentionally and explicitly interfaith and "non-faith." It is not just a matter of inclusivity but in itself a claim that, for better or for worse, there are no purely secular politics. This seems to be especially true in the United States. All politics are an expression of morals, whether acknowledged or not. For this reason, it does not surprise me to read Arenia Edwards speak about God in one sentence and in the next talk about enjoying "the fruit of our societal labor" in another.

But once again, the theory directing organizers to center the poor is also simultaneously an objective and historical claim, as Anthony Prince with the California Homeless Union (CHU)

[266] See Marian Kramer et al., "Which Way Welfare Rights? (New Situation, New Strategy)" (the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and Voices from the Front, May 1993).

explained to me. He said, “I think that as we talk about a poor people’s movement, it has gotta be led by poor people, because they’re the ones in the position to best gauge whether this movement is on course or not, whether this movement is actually addressing the burning issues.” He added, “And that’s just not something because we want it this way, or someone likes it or doesn’t like it, that’s the motion of history.” But since it is not a foregone conclusion that a poor people’s movement will just emerge, Anthony stressed, “it’s very important that everyone in the campaign recognize, hold up, and appreciate the necessity for leadership in this campaign being in the hands of those who are in the best position to understand where it’s going. Whose life experience is such that they are objectively occupying that position.”

But this directive is up against assumptions and narratives about “poor people” that Joyce Brody, a coordinating committee member with the Illinois PPC, explained sound something like, “‘Well, poor people, they don’t have time to organize this stuff. They’re not capable of organizing. They’re just struggling day to day. They can’t do that.’” I have heard these truisms about poor people not only from well-meaning “middle-class” people, but also sometimes from poor people themselves. But these assumptions just do not stand up to the test of history, as Anthony suggested, or bear out in the experiences of many of the organizers I spoke with. Savina Martin with the NUH and the Massachusetts PPC told me, “The homeless committee, to me, out of all the committees, is the most organized. And I believe because they’ve got the least to lose, right? They ain’t got nothing to lose, but their chains. They are hungry and they’re organizing. So the bottom is there.”

And one of the recurring things I heard from organizers was that from their experience poor people often just get it quicker—the conditions, the stakes, the analysis, and the theory of change. So centering poor people is truly not about *helping* poor people, but because they are

best positioned to lead with strategic clarity. Aaron Scott with Chaplains on the Harbor spoke about needing to, "shift that mindset of 'let's help these people because it's so extra hard out there' to 'Oh shit, these people are experts because they're already living through the hell that's coming down on everybody else.'" When it came to understanding PPF's "theory of change" and conceptualization of their base, Nijmie said, "Usually folks who are the most impacted, get it pretty quickly. And then I think there are certainly other people who have experienced the downward mobility of the realities that we're living in that also really get it. And then I think for others it's been a long, pretty long process." This does not mean that the middle does not matter. On the contrary, they are necessary to any fundamental change taking place in this country, but according to Nijmie, "The other folks [the middle] can't be brought along without that [the organization of the poor]. Which speaks to this broader theory of change around uniting the bottom to win the middle."

Again, while these pesky truisms about poor people not having the time or capacity to be involved in political organizing persist, I heard otherwise from many impoverished organizers, who spoke about organizing before they even knew that was what they were doing. Khalil Saddiq, tri-chair of the Massachusetts PPC, said to me, "As I look back, I've always been a community activist because of the work that I've done within the community." For instance, he now regards the work he did trying to educate people about Islam in response to Islamophobia following the 9/11 terrorist attacks through interfaith dialogues, visiting different places of worship, and even having a CCTV talk show, as "community activism." Amy Jo said, "I was told I was an organizer for a long time and just didn't know that's what I was doing," when she was getting fellow parents at her daughter's school together to stop the school pool from shutting down.

Poor people's organizing might not follow trade-union or Saul Alinksy community organizing style models of organizing, but as Anthony saw it, "poor people are organizing every single day in this country." Even though these struggles are not publicized, "There are struggles every single day in these camps, in these shelters, on these street corners, in these apartment buildings, in the courtrooms, every single day, there are battles underway." So for him the PPC (2018+) is not about building something wholesale from scratch, but highlighting, supporting, and connecting these struggles. And even when people are not involved in these forms of explicit contestation, there are lots of transferable skills that people bring from other experiences of collective organization whether in their families, church, school, music practice, etc. When I asked Katrina Battle with the Vermont PPC and Black Lives Matter of Greater Burlington how she got involved in organizing, she made this very point. "My organizing chops, as I say, were built in ministry. When I was in Philadelphia, I was a part of a group, who helped actually build a church from scratch. From living room, to meeting rooms, to hotel offices, to the point of having our own edifice." The skills and experience she acquired through ministry transferred over when she began organizing in response to several incidences of racism and blatant discrimination in the Milton public school system in Vermont, where she worked. It was at a school board meeting, where she says, "I stood up that day and never sat down."

As Katrina's story reveals, there is a critical interplay between political organizing and other forms of social organization.[267] Where one ends and the other begins, is when there is an explicit challenge to the power structure.[268] In Katrina's case, it was when she stood up in that

[267] See Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 75–112; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

[268] In "DEVIANCE AS RESISTANCE: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," Cathy Cohen calls for analytical distinction to be made between deviant actions, defiant actions, and political resistance. Although she sees deviance as the seeds of potential resistance, intent is important. *Du Bois Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

meeting and spoke her mind, but also further when she decided to form the Milton Inclusion and Diversity Initiative (MIDI) to organize a series of community dialogues on racism led by students. So although there is an interplay between seemingly non-political arenas and political arenas, I define political organizing as a collective practice that directly seeks to challenge and transform the status quo. Political organizing might engage with electoral politics and policy making, but it is certainly not limited to these activities. Either way, political organizing involves theory and practice, which is often learned and passed on via multiple arenas.

Because analysis and lessons are developed through the practice of political organizing, we can see how this process of knowledge reproduction is discouraged in the United States in clearly intentional ways, as well as more diffuse ways. For one, the very structure of our lives and the ideological terrain ('every man for himself') does work against our organization in real ways. And yes, working multiple jobs (or just one) does pose time constraints. Childcare or transportation is another constraint. Just the chaos and hardship that poverty creates in one's daily life disorganizes us, to say nothing of structural processes like mass incarceration, immigration, and gentrification, or even the management of information via the media (or barrage of disinformation).

If that were not enough, we have also seen clearly intentional efforts by the State (and its ruling class interests) to dismantle, disorganize, and co-opt resistance from poor and oppressed people, especially when they begin coming together. The FBI's infamous COINTELPRO program was one such effort to sabotage any form of organization from below that might challenge U.S. capitalist hegemony. Although there is increasing attention to the ways that COINTELPRO targeted the Black Panther Party, it might come as a surprise to people that Dr.

King was a key target.[269] Already the most surveilled American in U.S. history, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was especially concerned about the Poor People's Campaign and King's radical talk of uniting the poor across racial lines.[270] Even after King's assassination in the month leading up to the Poor People's Campaign's launch, there were deliberate efforts by the FBI, in coordination with the military and local police forces, to infiltrate, spread disinformation, and discredit the campaign.[271] When Fred Hampton, chairman of the Chicago Black Panther Party, presented himself as another potential "black messiah" by working in coalition with other groups, including encouraging the formation of the multiracial Rainbow Coalition, he was eliminated.[272]

There is no doubt in my mind that the targeting, elimination, and incapacitation of political leaders has had an effect on the reproduction of social movement knowledge and pacification of social movement struggle. In the center of U.S. Empire, this process has been (and continues to be) pretty ruthless and sophisticated.[273] So it is less an indication of poor people's incapacity to lead, but more that we are up against formidable opponents that have attempted, albeit never completely, to stamp out any infrastructure and process of social

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[269] See Shaka King, *Judas and the Black Messiah* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021).

[270] See Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).

[271] McKnight talks about how the FBI fed information to President Johnson, Congressional leaders, and the media, but Mantler's analysis of the media coverage of the Poor People's Campaign is another indication if the ways that the Poor People's Campaign was undermined not simply directly by state intervention, but via more subtle measures, see Gordon K. Mantler, "'The Press Did You in': The Poor People's Campaign and the Mass Media," *The Sixties* 3, no. 1 (n.d.): 33–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/17541321003771128.

[272] Aaron J. Leonard and Conor A. Gallagher, "We Obtained New FBI Documents on How and Why Fred Hampton Was Murdered," *Jacobin*, March 31, 2021, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/03/fred-hampton-black-panther-party-fbi-documents; Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

[273] There are a lot of "softer" sorts of social management strategies than COINTELPRO. This is part of the story that Cedric Johnson is telling in *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*. In addition, I would add the blossoming of the NGO or Third Sector. See Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, "NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector," *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 93–131.

movement reproduction. And yet, despite the targeting of social movement leaders, the reproduction of the very conditions of exploitation and oppression ensure that new generations of people will continually resist.

But to return to Nijmie's comment about the importance of 'winning the middle.' For her, this hinges on the unity and organization of the poor and dispossessed first. There are stages to the "theory of change." This is where the PPC (2018+) presents an opportunity to carry out this "theory of change" and yet presents challenges to it. The "60 million" poor people that Arenia Edwards spoke about in 1993 have now become the "140 million" in 2018. This is not merely a rhetorical shift but reflects a growing polarity and concentration of wealth at the top alongside deepening conditions of precarity for more people. It reveals the ways class composition, rather than being a static category, is in fact fluid, albeit not arbitrarily so. With increasing wealth at the top comes increasing power, and yet the reality of a growing base of impoverished and precarious people presents a political problem for economic elites. Of course, for those on the bottom, a growing majoritarian rather than minoritarian base presents political opportunity to realize demands for guaranteeing basic needs and more. For the PPC (2018+) today it means a potentially larger and more powerful "new and unsettling force" than in King's time.

At the same time, the PPC (2018+) is a big tent campaign that draws and includes people from every economic and income strata. Whether all these people are considered part of "the base" or not, within the "theory of change" there is an acknowledgment that other "moral agents" have a role to play in social transformation. Anthony explained it to me this way. While the PPC (2018+) "seeks to support the self-organization of poor people and move them into the leadership, we have got to develop and bring the campaign into the ranks of the professionals, in particular, and into the broader society. We cannot have a situation now where we let our

adversaries dominate the intellectual discussion in this country, where they dominate the total national narrative." The PPC (2018+) has done a particularly good job of calling on faith leaders, but he says, "We need to call out the ministers, the scientists, the doctors, the lawyers, and say, 'What side are you on here?'" And as a lawyer himself, he certainly believes in the potential for "professionals," or one might say the more stable section of the working class, to genuinely contribute to a movement led by the poor to end poverty. Especially since Anthony observed that even some of these "professionals" are finding themselves slipping economically, "the line between the professionals and those who have the means and those who have nothing, is starting to narrow quite a bit."

However, there is still reason to be "vigilant," as Anthony put it, because "Any movement you analyze, those segments of society who have the resources and means are going to tend to dominate." So, is the PPC (2018+) a unique opportunity for carrying out this theory of change to link up, augment, and inspire these struggles of the poor and dispossessed? Or as a broadly inclusive campaign, is it skipping a step and attempting to 'win the middle' before this unity and organization of the poor has been established? Or is it both colliding at once, because social transformation is more dialectical than sequential? Or because the transitions from one phase to another are more seamless and overlapping? Of course, no one really has the answer, which is why so many organizers I spoke with were hopeful (and anxious) that through the collective efforts of many, we could keep the PPC (2018+) grounded in the theory of centering the leadership of the most impacted, and yet be vigilant of internal and external forces, some intentional and others unintentional, that could lead it astray.

Up until now, I have explored the PPC (2018+)'s "theory of change," a strategic vision that calls for the unity and organization of the poor and dispossessed as the leading social force

of transformative change. This "theory of change" was reflected in King's vision for the Poor People's Campaign and has been reproduced through decades of antipoverty struggle. In this next section, I explore the observations, challenges, and insights that organizers are making as they put this theory into practice through the PPC (2018+).

Putting theory into practice

When I sat down with Afghanistan veteran and PPC (2018+) organizer Brittany DeBarros in October of 2018, she described a conversation the New York PPC was currently having around what it means to center the leadership of the poor within their state coordinating committee and campaign. Brittany laid out a problem they had identified:

> There's a disconnect between the people who are living the lived experience now and capacity. So there's this idea of impacted people lead and yet a lot of people end up carrying a lot of the work, not because they don't want impacted people to lead, but because they have the time so they do the work and then they're like, 'I'm like holding a lot of this work now and my intention was for other people to lead and now I've lost how to make that happen given the capacity limitations of people who are struggling in a really rough way.'

These questions and conversations regarding being led by the poor were something I was familiar with being on the Maryland PPC coordinating committee, so as I traveled the country I was curious to hear from other leaders in different states. What were their experiences centering the leadership of poor and impacted people? What did this mean to them? And how were they assessing their organizing on this front? In this section, we hear from organizers across the country about not only what this means in practice to be led by poor and impacted people, but how they understand and see the PPC (2018+) to be facilitating this broader "theory of change." One of the key insights I derived from these conversations was around the importance of

"organizations of the poor" and yet the challenge and contradictions of building a poor people's movement with so few organizations to draw on.

I met Beth Foster with the Tennessee PPC at the Harriet Tubman House, an intentional community in Nashville, where she and other "activists and former insiders" doing prison abolition work live. When I asked Beth whether she would describe the people leading the TN PPC as poor, she said:

> In Tennessee, those of us who are in leadership are all poor, but we are certainly not among the poorest. And we've talked a lot about that. And I think I've found that to be a difficulty in organizing people who are experiencing dire poverty. How do people organize when they don't know how they're going to eat? When their phone numbers and their living conditions are constantly changing? And I don't know. But that is definitely...I don't see us doing that in reality in Tennessee. We may be able to get some of those folks to show up to speak occasionally, to testify, but they are not...The very, very poor, the ones who are feeling the greatest effects of this are not the people leading. And it's just so hard, because when everything you have is going to survival, how do you take on this? And I don't have an answer to that. Do you all have, is that the experience?

She sort of trailed off, like 'crap, tell me, we're not the only ones.' I assured her that lots of people were struggling with this very same question of how to involve and develop the leadership of those who are experiencing deep poverty. Since as she saw it, everyone on their coordinating committee was poor, she did not necessarily see it as a contradiction, but she said, "I think always, we want to try to lift those voices and those people up into those leadership positions as much as possible."

Beth, who had done some organizing in public housing projects, was identifying some pretty concrete and typical challenges organizing poor people. How do you keep in touch with people when their addresses and phone numbers change regularly? It is an issue. Since barriers like this are again just part of the challenge, organizers are often keen to learn from each other. But how one solves a problem is also dependent on how one thinks about the problem. Does it

require a small adjustment in practice, a tactical solution? Or does it require a rethinking of methodology? For the NY PPC, they were taking what Brittany described as a "structural" approach,

> I think in the culture we have, it's easy to make it an individual or interpersonal issue...I'm really proud of the work that the New York coordinating committee has done in terms of saying, 'okay, we have some grassroots leaders, we have some grassroots organizations, but we're not where we want to be'...Sometimes in other spaces I've been in, including national, it feels like, 'Oh, let's find a new practice.' Where I'm like, 'I'm not sure that the way we're structured is conducive to what we're trying to accomplish.'

And she admitted, "There are really good models that have probably been developed in *poor organizing the poor* movements that have existed, but also a person like me, I have very little organizing education about what those lessons learned are, so I feel like a lot of us are trying to figure out those models as we're trying to do the work" [my italics]. By "poor organizing the poor movements" she was likely referring to the movements that I described in Chapter 1, since this particular phrasing is also the name of a class developed by the Homeless Union History Project called "The Poor Organizing the Poor." She at least knew models existed, but the fact that she and many others felt as though they were starting from scratch is a testament to the lack of movement organization that exists, even with the incredible history that precedes this campaign.

Although Brittany and Beth shared these challenges in New York and Tennessee, they also described what from my perspective sounded like really fervent and creative organizing happening on the state level. For example, during the 40 Days when people were engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience at state capitals, the Maryland PPC did jail support for those who had been arrested. But in Nashville, the TN PPC has continued doing weekly jail support as part of their organizing. Beth described it as a combination of "ministry, direct action, and organizing

all in one." She told me they were getting ready to launch it in Memphis and hopefully Chattanooga. So I was impressed with the various ways people were developing their organizing practice. If being led by the poor was easy, there would in fact be no need for a Poor People's Campaign. And yet I think it would be fair to say that there is unevenness across the state campaigns in this regard.

I suspected one key component distinguishing the states that were the most organized and most "led by the poor" were those states that were anchored by at least one, but often a coalition, of grassroots base-building organizations of poor and working-class people. This might seem an obvious observation, but the PPC (2018+) has attracted a lot of what I might call "unaffiliated" individuals. In some cases, these unaffiliated individuals actually work for organizations or unions or pastor at a church, but they are coming to the campaign solo, ie. not bringing their organization's membership base with them. My suspicions about the key role of organizations was confirmed through my travels and conversations.

I knew this piece about anchoring organizations of the poor leading the state campaigns was key, particularly since a large percentage of the unaffiliated individuals who are coming to the campaign are what I might describe as middle-income liberals and progressives, not all white, but largely older, often retirees, attracted to the campaign by Rev. Barber. Many of them have a lot of passion, but not necessarily organizing experience. Where there are organizations of the poor anchoring the state campaign, they act as a kind of compass helping to direct strategy and priorities. Although, unlike some, usually younger activists, my reaction is not to either push these unaffiliated people away or be turned away myself, since they do have much to contribute and some are real gems. Time and time again, the PPC (2018+) has revealed for me that you cannot tell a revolutionary by looking at them. One, because some of these people are in fact

poor and impacted themselves, but also because people have demonstrated real commitment to the vision of the campaign. But ultimately, the problem is not that certain people are attracted to the PPC (2018+), but is rather an organizing problem of how we bring poor people into the campaign. The assumption that "poor people" might flock to the campaign if "those people" were not involved, is not an organizing strategy. It is an abdication.

This is all complicated by the unique structure of the PPC (2018+). Rev. Barber often describes the PPC 2018+ as an "organism" rather than an organization, as a way of encouraging state coordinating committees to not go the way of trying to make the campaign into an organization. The reasoning is that the campaign does not want to compete with or replicate those organizations that exist but serve as a vehicle for those organizations to come together. But the distinction between a campaign and an organization gets confusing within the PPC (2018+) because it attracts so many unaffiliated individuals, who have roles within the structure of the state coordinating committee. So it can feel like an organization, particularly for those who are not already part of an organization. And it is not like a traditional campaign coalition, which is usually made up of organizational representatives that come together to develop strategy, with usually one organization taking the lead.

The strength of this is that the campaign is clearly engaging and mobilizing new people who are not already organized. Organizing the unorganized! The fact that the campaign has inspired a lot of people who want to be connected to something is very positive, but it creates a problem of how to organize those people into something more sustaining, when the campaign itself is not an organization. And it is a challenge when there is an imbalance on the state coordinating committees between unaffiliated individuals with little organizing experience and experienced leaders from organizations, particularly organizations of the poor.

In some ways, the problem of how to absorb lots of people who want to be involved in movement organizing is a good one to have, but it can be tricky.[274] Kate Kanelstein, executive director of the Vermont Workers Center, described this organizing problem within the Vermont PPC:

> When you bring up the question of attracting a pretty broad range people, it's an area where for us at the worker center, thinking about how our organization relates to the campaign doesn't feel that hard of a question to me, because if we see the campaign as the work of organizing poor people in our state, then that's what we're trying to do anyway. And it only helps us to be part of a bigger movement that's trying to do that. But I think for people who are coming to it or intrigued by it that are not already part of an organization, I think that's where people are struggling to figure out what their role is. And the question of the form that the campaign is taking on the local level I think is a place where a lot of people are still trying to figure out what that looks like and what different roles people can play.

So while anchor organizations like the Vermont Workers Center play a critical role guiding their state's campaign and embodying the goals of the PPC 2018+ through their very own organization, the exact form and thus distinctive role of a campaign versus an organization can still be a little messy. Building something new with no exact roadmap is challenging even for the most experienced organizers, it is even more so for those who are new to organizing.

The national campaign does offer guidelines on state coordinating committee structure and composition, but there is still a lot of autonomy in terms of state level plans and priorities. The pre-existing relationships, experience, and capacity of the initial coordinating committees,

[274] I would probably say that most social justice organizations have to work to attract people to their organizations and to keep people continually involved. But occasionally because of the political and economic circumstances, groups find themselves with masses of people coming to them. In these situations it can be the opposite problem. How does the organization effectively absorb all these people without being overwhelmed? Willie Baptist talks about this with the National Union of the Homeless. But when I interviewed former Baltimore Black Panther and political prisoner Eddie Conway (not for this project), he talked about how this was a huge problem they encountered. The survival projects were one way of absorbing people, but effectively vetting and training masses of people to be members of the Black Panther Party was a challenge, particularly given the infiltration by the FBI. See Marshall "Eddie" Conway and Dominique Stevenson, *Marshall Law: The Life & Times of a Baltimore Black Panther* (Baltimore: AK Press, 2011).

alongside the particularities of each state's political landscape have created variations in structure, composition, and level of organization. And the problem of a campaign structure made up of lots of unaffiliated individuals versus individuals accountable to a base of poor and impacted people adds additional confusion to this question of being led by the poor. Again, it sometimes leads to a tendency to treat poverty as an identity category that then becomes easily tokenized, where well-intentioned coordinating committee members find themselves looking for a "poor person" to fill the "impacted" slot.

Experiencing poverty certainly gives one intimate knowledge about what it means to be poor, but it does not necessarily mean one understands why they are poor or how to direct and lead a campaign to change it. But again in a culture that centers the individual and eschews collectivity, this is often the only way that leadership is understood. Nijmie spoke to me about how people often misinterpret "led by the poor" as solely referring to an individual poor person in a leadership role, rather than as "organizations that are base building, that are actually about building the forces of poor and dispossessed people." And an individual poor person is likely to have much more power and influence within a committee structure if they are not simply representing some abstract notion of poor people, but an actual base of real poor people. So for her, the only way for the PPC (2018+) to be led by the poor is for it to be led by organizations of the poor. And she added "organizing state-wide" and "being politically independent" as important to this project as well. One of the biggest challenges she saw with the PPC (2018+) was not having organizations of the poor in every state leading the campaign, "We don't have that right now, but that's definitely what we need."

I definitely agreed with her, but why don't we have organizations of the poor leading in every state? Is it something about the campaign itself or a reflection of the state of working-class

organization generally? When I sat down with Rev. West McNeil who has been helping to lead the PPC effort in New York as executive director of the Labor Religion Coalition of New York, they described the landscape in their state:

> When you get outside of New York City and especially outside of the Lower Hudson Valley, there's very little organization of the poor at all. And the groups that are doing some of that, are very stretched resource wise. And there were a couple other groups that it was also kind of hard to convince, like why should we redirect limited time and resources to be part of this thing that isn't endorsing particular campaigns. But I think that the bigger issue of state is really that there just aren't these organizations that are really base-building with some exceptions...There is a group that's really organizing the poor in Buffalo that did come out once or twice, like mobilized a group to come out and have been engaged in the Buffalo committee of the work, but there's just very little organization elsewhere.

Other than New York City and Buffalo, the second largest city in New York, there is not much in the way of base-building poor and working-class organizations. I heard similar descriptions from campaign leaders in other states about the lack of organizations that exist outside of larger metropolitan centers. As I discussed in chapter 3, organizing across geographical scales is a challenge, but it is also an issue for the campaign that there exists little political organizing of the poor to begin with. But there were also dynamics and challenges with the organizations that do exist.

Having worked with the United Workers, I was sensitive to what some of the barriers to participating in a national campaign or even a more local coalition might be for a grassroots poor people's organization. I saw many national campaign efforts and coalitions come and go. Some left bad impressions or just seemed to go nowhere. With so few resources, not wanting to be instrumentalized for your staff, membership, and legitimacy is a real concern, especially when you are accountable to a base with few material resources already. But it is also a question of both politics and relationships. With the United Workers, we gladly extended ourselves to other

organizations that shared our values and politics. For instance, when the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) had big marches in Miami or Chicago, we mobilized our forces and traveled across the country to participate. We saw this sort of solidarity as benefiting us as well, but not in a transactional way. Our orientation was towards building a broader movement, not just building our own little organization. We understood that in order to create the sort of change we wanted to see, we could not do it alone, because it was not just about us. And we also saw the benefits we got from getting out of Baltimore, seeing other parts of the country, engaging with other grassroots leaders, seeing their organizing in action. We learned from these experiences. But again, we had established a relationship with the CIW through the antipoverty movement networks I have previously discussed.

On the other hand, we were wary of other efforts. We would still often engage in coalitions, but the vision was small, the relationships felt transactional. Unions are infamous for their "community labor" partnerships that usually end when their workers get their contract or their bill passes. Since this is how groups have been set up to relate to one another, I could see where some groups with either different politics or no relationships might ask 'what's in it for us?,' especially when the PPC (2018+) refuses to endorse any candidates, political parties, or legislation that calls for less than what the national demands are. For more pragmatic organizations that only see the end goal as getting this person elected, this bill passed, this contract for their members, what good is the PPC (2018+) to them?

Then there are the turf wars, if this union is relating to the campaign, then this other union will not. This is actually why some union organizers are relating to the campaign as individuals, but unable to bring their union to the table. That and the fact that unions require buy-in at the very top to sign-off on such collaborations. Another problem is the competition and

compromise that the non-profit industrial complex fosters. Usually, the influence of foundations works more subtly, but I know of one organization that supports the PPC (2018+), but would not publicly endorse it, because they feared losing one of their biggest grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). CCHD is against the PPC (2018+) for its support of LGTBQIA2S+ and abortion rights.

However even when the politics and relationships are there, organizations of the poor do have to carefully consider how to relate to the campaign in ways that build rather than extract from their organizing. Joyce and Lenny Brody with the Illinois PPC told me about an organization called Blocks Together, one of the "genuine community organizations of poor people" that really helped to launch the campaign in Illinois. Lenny explained:

> They organized the first big meeting for Barber and Liz and it almost destroyed their organization and they pulled back completely. They were very into it. The head of the organization was really into it and they knew some of the people involved nationally. And so they got us this historic church on the West side, which is a poor neighborhood, where King spoke when he came to Chicago, one of the only two churches allowed him to speak. And we had six, seven hundred people there. It was very successful in terms of our stuff. And they really used all their resources to get that...They really were not able to participate after that. They had to reconstruct and everything.

For Lenny, it was really revealing as to the relative weakness of so many poor people's organizations (particularly vis a vis the bigger unions that could pay for things like charter buses from Chicago to Springfield during the 40 Days), that just trying to execute one of the many events that national asks state coordinating committees to organize was completely destabilizing to their organization. I hate hearing stories like this, because I am sure everyone including Blocks Together was well-intentioned, but it is clearly a failure when the campaign weakens rather than strengthens those organizations that participate. It is counter-productive to the entire project.

Again, even when there is alignment, it is not always evident how to marry the two. Amy Jo with the West Virginia PPC said to me, "I organize poor people. So I'm like, this should be seamless, right? To me, it's a natural kind of partnership." But she has struggled to figure out how to incorporate the PPC (2018+) with her organization, Our Future West Virginia (OFWV):

> Sometimes I forget, because I'm already organized. You know, we're coming up on our legislative session, our state election. There is so much riding on our state election. We're kind of full steam ahead right now as an organization. And sometimes I'm like halfway home in the car, 'Oh, I should've mentioned the Poor People's Campaign!'

I was really curious to understand this more, because I could see how this could be an especially "natural kind of partnership" for OFWV and the PPC (2018+) considering that a lot of what OFWV does is focused at the state legislative level. But Amy Jo, a state tri-chair, seemed genuinely unsure how much "leeway" they had to make the PPC (2018+) relevant to the issues they were working on. She asked:

> Ms. Loretta, one of our other tri-chairs, she's working right now to establish a Hunger Town Hall in her community. Because our governor put all these work requirements on our people, on SNAP recipients last year, for able-bodied without dependents. We fought, we fought, we fought, but we lost that. Basically he's already adopted the Trump administration's Farm Bill. Like it's already in effect here. So Ms. Loretta is like, 'We're fighting that. We're going right back at him this year'...But one of my questions is, as the Poor People's Campaign, what can we do? What do they want us to do? Are they going to be mad when we start going in there and sitting in the chambers, because we know house bill 4001 is back on the floor?

For me, this is completely aligned with the spirit and demands of the PPC (2018+) and certainly something that a campaign that encourages nonviolent civil disobedience would readily endorse. I felt frustrated, not by her, but by the situation. How could it be that a tri-chair who was proposing something so relevant to the crisis in West Virginia be unsure if they could do this as part of the WV PPC? I suspected there might be confusion around not endorsing candidates and bills that are less than the National demands, but fighting against cuts to SNAP should not be an

issue. She admitted that communication works both ways and she was not always able to make the meetings (and there are a lot of meetings), which could be why she was unsure, but again it spoke to the challenge of figuring out that working alignment between organizations and the campaign. It also reinforced for me the importance of time to build relationships, trust, and strategic alignment among leaders, as well as just having a collective of leaders to think through strategy, plans, processes, and tactics on the state level. It is not easy or self-evident.

As I have said, I already know how easy it is, even with the PPC (2018+), for this relationship between organizations (particularly organizations of the poor) and campaigns to be transactional or uneven, so I was especially interested in hearing from those grassroots base-building groups (statewide or more local) why they decided to be involved and how they practically did this in a way that also built their organizing. I was curious, were there challenges? And if so, how did they work through or around these challenges?

When I met with Tayna, I was really interested to hear her talk about why she and her organization Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) joined the PPC (2018+). It was evident to me why the PPC (2018+) would want to connect with KFTC. They are a statewide membership-based organization that works on a variety of issues from environmental pollution in the coal fields to restoring voting rights for ex-felons, but what did KFTC and Tayna see as the value of the PPC (2018+)? Was it merely transactional or was it deeper than that?

Tayna told me that she actually did not want to work with the PPC (2018+) at first. She had been a member of KFTC for a while but had just started on as an "organizing apprentice" and felt as though she had enough on her plate already gearing up to fight against a tax bill and pension bill that their governor was pushing. Their executive director, who was connected with Rev. Barber, thought Tayna would be perfect as the KFTC representative for the KT PPC, but

after attending one meeting, Tayna was not impressed. She told me she begged her supervisor not to make her do this. Her supervisor asked her if she knew who Rev. Barber was. Tayna told her she did not. She told Tayna to just take thirty minutes and watch some videos of him speaking. If after that, she was still unimpressed then she would not have to work on it. She said it only took thirty seconds. She ran back in to tell her supervisor she was on board. When I asked her what it was that Rev. Barber said in thirty seconds that could have swayed her, she replied:

> I think it was the voter suppression part within 30 seconds. He said something to the fact, if I can quote it right, that there was all these hearings. And then all of those hearings, not one time did they mention voter suppression or systemic racism and how in 23 States, they closed down all these polls. See, I didn't know none of that. And that's what got me in 30 seconds, because I'm a convicted felon and it had lost my right to vote. So I don't know why I clicked on that particular message. I believe that God sent me to that YouTube [video]. Cause he's got a whole bunch of them.

Whether God, chance, or an instance of algorithms actually working in our favor, I am thankful too that this video is the one that first appeared, because Tayna is a serious and forceful leader to have at the helm of the KT PPC.

But I still wanted to understand what value the PPC (2018+) brought to KFTC since Tayna did not strike me as someone that does this for fun. She answered very directly:

> KFTC has been predominantly white for 36 years, streamed out of Eastern Kentucky, people stealing land, the coal owners, the coal industry are taking people's lands, they're removing mountains. And so KFTC trickled that way. With the Poor People's Campaign. There's more people of color. There's the same issues, but it's actually coming from a different fork in the road, still with the same values, and lifting up poor people. But now we get to mash together. We've got people down in Eastern and Western Kentucky that probably has not had a first touch with a person of color, whether it be black, hispanic, or what, but somehow this Poor People's Campaign has been able, and KFTC has struggled to pull those people.

She was under no misconceptions KFTC was putting in a lot of work to get the KT PPC up and running, but it was worth it for a higher purpose that went beyond KFTC or the PPC (2018+). She attributed it to her faith being able to recognize "the buy-in is we need each other, just like

white and black people need each other and Hispanics, and we all need each other. So I think the buy-in was so that we could get culturally attuned and to believe that we are all one body, we just have different members." She went on to describe how different parts of the body have different functions, but work together as a whole. I appreciated this metaphor of the body for describing the form of the campaign.

Of course, it is no surprise that for the most part the organizations that seemed to have most successfully integrated the PPC (2018+) into their organizations were those that had longer and/or deeper relationships to the Kairos Center and Repairers of the Breach networks. This is true for groups like NC Raise Up, who have had a long relationship with Rev. Barber and Repairers of the Breach through the Moral Mondays Movement. As well as the Vermont Workers Center (VWC), who had been connected to the Kairos Center for years. In the case of VWC, they were present at Kairos's 10th Anniversary celebration, where Kairos first introduced the proposal to relaunch the PPC, but as an organization they still had to be intentional and thoughtful about how they would participate. Kate explained to me how they had to approach relating to the PPC (2018+):

> We thought a lot about this when the campaign was launching, because we sort of had our game plan for the year already and then the 40 Days of Action came into play. And so we did have a lot of conversations with our members about how do we see both throwing down for this, but also how it fits in with our work that we're already doing. What ended up being a focus for us was we held a March for Medicaid in a region of the state where we were trying to go.

If VWC had not already been connected to the Poverty Scholars network, they likely would not have had the orientation or willingness to consider how to "thrown down." But again, it was not immediately clear how to practically relate and they knew they had to do so in a way that

enhanced their organizing. Avery with the VWC explained how they connected the PPC 2018+ with their long running Healthcare is a Human Right Campaign.

> We're constantly doing the work of trying to make it more and more grounded in the most dispossessed section of the class. And there's ways the Poor People's Campaign has helped with that, particularly the sharpening around focusing on people who are on Medicaid and having that be the leading edge of "the spear." I don't know if I actually like that metaphor for organizing [laughs]. In terms of who we're focusing on, like let's start with the threats to Medicaid as the beginning of the conversation towards the whole solution to this whole problem is just Medicaid for everyone, universal health care. And that's been really powerful in terms of focusing in on the ones who have the least to lose sections of the class.

It was not a reverse of the Blocks Together situation, where in this case the VWC siphoned the resources and momentum of the PPC (2018+) to push their agenda, but an organic relationship of mutual solidarity. Both growing and supporting the other.

VWC did turn out people for the Monday actions at the state capitol, but again the way they mainly decided to contribute to the "40 Days" was through their March for Medicaid in the Northeast Kingdom, not Montpelier. Kate with VWC saw it as a contribution to the "40 Days" by modeling in their state what it means and looks like to be led by the poor. For grassroots groups whose work was not specifically targeting their state legislatures, the tactic of six weeks of nonviolent civil disobedience at the state capitol could be practically challenging to incorporate into their organizing, or justify as a resource expenditure. Six weeks is a lift for any organization, which is why even if the state legislature did make sense as a target, organizations often focused on one week out of the six to really mobilize for. This is how PPF! PA approached the "40 Days" and they ended up mobilizing the largest single day of all the states. When I attended PPF! PA's Annual Membership, they created a timeline on the wall marking the activities and events of the past year. It was clear that their mobilization during the "40 Days" was a major highlight and agitational experience for PPF! PA leaders, who recounted their

memories of this action. For some it was their first time participating in an action of that scale and learning how to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience.

Chaplains on the Harbor in Washington state went the same route as VWC. The WA PPC held that week's Monday action in Olympia, their state capitol, but then on Friday, everyone went to Aberdeen to protest an anti-homeless ordinance that had just passed banning sitting and lying down in the downtown area during all daylight hours. For Chaplains, this was their very first public protest in Aberdeen. They did a walking tour of downtown led by formerly homeless and incarcerated "apprentices" in Chaplain. Then they went down to the river, where there is a large homeless encampment. Native drummers from the Quinalt Nation (who had family members in the encampment, some who had even died that winter) then led a procession of about a hundred people to the steps of City Hall, where the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry (who did the Royal wedding) gave a "spontaneous" and "charismatic" sermon. According to Chaplain organizer Aaron, Rev. Barber had put in a call to Curry. Aaron described the scene:

> People were just crying, clapping, and cheering on the steps of Aberdeen City Hall...And then we did a direct action where people pitched tents on the sidewalk in front of City Hall and stayed overnight in defiance of the ordinance. It was Poor People's Campaign folks from all over the state, including one homeless woman from Spokane, who took the bus out to Aberdeen. Homeless folks in Aberdeen were coming by and checking on people all night long, making sure they were safe. The police just drove by and literally turned their heads because they didn't want to deal with the PR nightmare that would have been enforcing a sweep of that direct action.

It was inspiring to hear these stories of how organizations of the poor had incorporated the 40 Days into their organizing, but I was still interested in understanding what Aaron thought the value was for them:

> The value is that we get seen...the geographic isolation makes it so hard to get the word out about what's happening. Being part of a larger statewide campaign physically brings

> folks, like black clergy from South King County and Tacoma to our place and then brings our folks out to meet them at the state Capitol...It's a major source of security for us to be visible. There's so much violence, there's so much political repression on the ground that keeping our folks in the consciousness of people around the state and around the country is really big.

This visibility has also given them legal connections which have helped them take on the city in a way they have not been able to do before.

The coordination and synchronicity of over forty states simultaneously engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience at their state capitols every Monday for the six weeks was very important to the national campaign. While it was definitely a lift for us to pull off in Maryland, I recognized its underlying efficacy afterwards. The 40 Days helped to create a nationalized state-wide infrastructure that we saw could be effectively operationalized. This did not exist prior. The "40 Days" built this. It also knitted us together in the active telling of a shared story, from California to Arkansas, from Texas to Massashusetts. And when all the states came together in September 2018 for our first Annual Poor People's Convening in Baltimore County, there was a deeper sense of solidarity and camaraderie. We had all survived the trial by fire that was the "40 Days" and we were excited to compare notes and talk about next steps.

Of course, during the "40 Days," the hope was that the strategic and tactical principle of being "one band, one sound," an expression Rev. Barber uses a lot, would help us garner wide-spread national and local news attention.[275] It did, but not as much as we had hoped. While I would say that overall the strategy of being "one band, one sound" (six weeks of nonviolent civil

[275] To me, it is just really fascinating that there can be a few coordinated right-wing rallies at state capitols with a few hundred people protesting the pandemic shut-down and it is an enormous national story, but over 40 states in the PPC (2018+) do it for 6 weeks mobilizing thousands and it gets no where near the attention. As we saw with the Capitol riot, these movements are certainly troubling (and resourced), but I also think the media often overemphasizes the level of "organization" and exaggerates the mass character of right-wing movements on one hand, and the "spontaneous" nature of left movements and protests on the other. I have not sought out or conducted any media analysis regarding this observation, but given Gordon Mantler's thorough media analysis of the 1968 PPC, it does intrigue me, see "'The Press Did You in': The Poor People's Campaign and the Mass Media," *The Sixties* 3, no. 1 (n.d.): 33–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/17541321003771128.

disobedience at state capitals in over forty states) was successful in building out the infrastructure of the campaign and forging relationships and commitment, I did see instances of unproductive and frankly completely avoidable conflicts arise from inexperienced and stressed national organizers trying to get states to comply, in combination with inexperienced state coordinating committee leaders lacking confidence and imagination to be able to figure out reasonable work-arounds in order to support grassroots organizations of the poor. For those who had prior relationships and deeper ties to the networks with which Rev. Theoharis and Rev. Barber came from, they were able to navigate these conflicts.

For instance in the case of Chaplains, Aaron said of these sorts of conflicts, "because I'm on the National Steering Committee and the State Committee, I just bypass State Committee people and say, 'this is what we're doing.'" But I could easily see how not everyone has the relationships and history to be empowered or inclined to make the effort. I imagine some busy organizers are just like, 'I don't have time for this nonsense.' In these cases, I would not blame them. I would not either. Since it can be harder to build back these relationships, it resonated with me when Kenia Alcocer with Union de Vecinos and the California PPC talked about the long-term work of getting groups on board, "It's patience on our part and it's also consistency. So doing what we're saying we're out to do, and making sure that we're being consistent, and that the message is loud and clear, and that we abide by the principles. That is what's going to get folks to really join the Poor People's Campaign with time." Of course, inconsistencies and mistakes are bound to happen, the hope is always that people learn from them.

However, in some cases, key organizations and leaders do not necessarily relate to the PPC (2018+) through a state coordinating committee structure. For instance, rather than participate in the 40 Days of Action in Arizona, where Oak Flat and the San Carlos Apache

reservation are located, Chairman Wendsler Nosie and Apache Stronghold organized a caravan starting from the Pomo Indian territory in Northern California and ending in Washington, D.C. for the final march and rally. Along the way, they made stops at different Indian reservations, sacred sites, and places impacted by environmental catastrophes. I imagine this not only served to better highlight their struggle to save Oak Flat (which is more of a federal issue than a state issue) as well as broader issues of environmental devastation on indigenous lands, but it probably was also a more effective way of including different indigenous tribes across the country into the narrative of the "40 Days" than the state actions could have done.

Organizations of the poor and dispossessed, not just individual poor and impacted leaders, are key to the PPC (2018+). On a state and national level, they have the potential to build the PPC (2018+), but also keep the campaign on track in ways that individuals, poor or otherwise, struggle to do. By on track, I mean true to the vision of uniting the poor and dispossessed across all lines of division and difference to fundamentally challenge and transform the politics and economics of this nation (a center of global capital) to ensure everyone's civil and economic human rights are met. While tensions between "national" and state coordinating committees might arise, the struggle to keep the campaign on track is not between the more localized expressions of the campaign and the national apparatus. At every scale there are prevailing forces that run interference with the campaign. From the dominant cultural narratives that shape our collective mental terrain to the institutional forces that absorb, manage, and direct discontent at all levels—the family, church, municipal and state governments, etc.

For some organizers, a key institution of concern was the Democratic Party. The campaign's "political, non-partisan" stance is strategic, but a challenging line to walk given the

progressive politics of the PPC (2018+). Avery Book with the VWC explained why the PPC (2018+)'s political independence was key, but also not necessarily a foregone conclusion:

> Building real organization of the poor and dispossessed is the only way that in the long run we'll be able to maintain political independence. Because without that, there's just a really high risk of co-optation by the Democratic Party, because that's just what they've always done. And there's very powerful institutions that are already instruments of the Democratic Party, including large sections of organized labor.

The PPC (2018+) is creating this large tent coalition, but because the base of the working class are "the least organized part of the constituencies being brought into the Poor People's Campaign. We're going to have to do explicit organization of that section," argued Avery. Surely many agreed that the organization of the poor as a social force is essential to leading this broad-based campaign coalition, but what is the campaign to do about the reality that outside of some organizations mostly in the larger cities, few mass organizations of the poor exist in most states?

Following the 40 Days, I thought the answer to this dilemma was that the state campaigns should engage in base-building organizing in poor communities and serve as an organization for those people brought in through this outreach. If these kinds of organizations do not exist in certain areas, let the state campaigns be that organization that essentially fills the void. But the conversations I had with fellow PPC (2018+) leaders challenged me to think differently. My instincts and intentions were good, but I was losing the distinction between a campaign and an organization and how they serve different, but important functions. If I attempted to fashion the MD PPC into an organization of the poor, I would lose what was beneficial about the PPC (2018+) and might not actually be very effective in creating an organization of the poor.

My conversations helped me to see that the PPC (2018+) could be a movement vehicle, but not an organizational container. The campaign could help coalesce forces, identify gaps, even

help to support organizing, but basically not be its container for membership. Maintaining a distinction and autonomy between organization and campaign, allowed for an organic relationship that was more effective, precisely because of its flexibility. In a defensive way, if the campaign fizzled out or got co-opted, for instance, the organization could prevail. But perhaps more importantly, if the campaign became an organization then it would no longer effectively be an umbrella in which many different types of organizations, most critically different organizations of the poor could join together in coordinated action. Since the PPC (2018+) does not look like other single-issue campaigns and it has a state structure, it is easy to confuse these distinctions. Former Illinois PPC tri-chair, Sheilah Garland-Olaniran's description of the PPC (2018+)'s form and function made clear that the PPC could not and should not be so rigidly reified:

> I see the Poor People's Campaign just as I saw it in 1968 as sort of a gathering—gathering a certain level of consciousness, gathering a certain level of willingness to do something, gathering people to look beyond like my own personal issues and understanding that they're united with other folks in that pain. We have a lot more in common than we have not.

There is of course great need and urgency to affect concrete change, but there are no short-cuts to organizing. This "gathering" was where I saw so much of its potential power. To lose this, was to lose the campaign and a chance at real transformative change, not just some policy wins.

In this section, I examined how understanding leadership on a collective level, rather than simply an individual level, reveals the critical importance of organizations of the poor to the PPC (2018+)'s theory of centering poor and impacted people. However, I also explored the challenge of building a PPC (2018+) when the building blocks of the campaign—organizations of the poor—are few and far between. This is not because poor people are incapable of organizing, but because of a variety of forces that have historically worked to disorganize and preempt the unity

and organization of the poor. So where do we go from here? As many organizers suggest, it will require long-term vision, consistency, and flexibility to see how this "gathering" can inspire us to build these necessary building blocks of our movement.

The struggle is a school

As I argued in the previous section, mass organizations or base-building organizations of the poor are critical building blocks of the PPC (2018+). As the name suggests, base-building organizations of the poor build "bases." A "base" is another way of saying a sustained community of people with shared interests, values, and politics. It is in this way that base-building organizations of the poor contribute towards the leadership of the poor as a collective social force. But one of the additional strengths of an organization of the poor, versus a campaign, is that an organization *can* provide a more structured and reliable leadership development pathway for individual leaders from the ranks of the poor. In this section, I examine what "leadership development" means to organizers, why it is so important, and why political education is a particularly important dimension of leadership development.

When I spoke to Nijmie with PPF! PA, she emphasized how important base-building organizations were to building a campaign and movement that is led by the poor, but she also stressed that it was deeper than this. The politics of an organization mattered and for her an organization's politics were reflected in the degree to which they emphasized leadership development of their members:

> The challenge that we're running into, which could be a positive thing, is how can the campaign be used to build organizations of the poor, where either none exist, or where the ones that do exist are sort of too compromised to really be in the lead of this, or else aren't really organizations of the poor. They may have some poor members, but they're not really organizations of the poor, because they're not actually really building leadership. They're not politically independent. They're not really building among multiple segments of the class, et cetera. So it's not a weakness of the campaign in that, it's really just a weakness of where we are right now in the country, that we don't have a

> deep base of organizations...We see a lot more organizations that are in big cities that don't invest a lot in leadership development, that have more traditional structures, that do more transactional organizing, that do a lot more mobilizing than organizing, that aren't gonna see real value for themselves in the Poor People's Campaign.

This intentionality around political education and training was what distinguished those organizations that "may have some poor members" from organizations that are actually building the leadership of the poor on an individual and collective level. The notion of leadership development of poor people might rub some activists who are predisposed towards "leaderless" or "horizontal" models as normative or even paternalistic.[276] But these leaderless models, which

[276] According to anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, "leaderless movements" like Occupy Wall Street have roots in anarchist or anti-authoritarian political philosophy. He defines anarchism as a political philosophy that "envisions a society based on equality and solidarity, which could exist solely on the free consent of participants." He contrasts this to Marxism, which shares similar goals, but believes that state power must be seized in order to realize radical social transformation. Because they have a very different theory of change from Marxists, anarchists emphasize "prefigurative politics" whereby they refuse to "create an internal hierarchy" and instead "operate not only by direct democracy, without leaders, but by consensus." It should be noted that there is a diversity of thought within anarchism. For instance Simon Western argues instead for embracing "autonomist leadership" models rather than "leaderless" models, which he sees as a "fantasy" that creates dissonance and internal tensions that are barriers to the agency of anarchist movements. Nonetheless, I have fundamental disagreements with anarchist conceptions of power as inherently coercive and corrupt, which lead to a refusal to assume the power needed to challenge and transform the very social structures and institutions that produce mass exploitation and suffering. Although I hate to paint any movement with a broad brush, my experience is that anarchist organizational forms tend to fetishize tactics and internal democratic processes, which can seem ancillary and even alienating to people who are most impacted by and concerned with changing the political and economic system. While Chris Dixon showcases a more racially, ethnically, and gender diverse anarchist or anti-authoritarian current in *Another Politics*, which suggests the broad influence and appeal of such principles within grassroots movements in the United States, it did not surprise me that #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Cullors would reject the label "leaderless" to describe the Black Lives Matter movement, instead referring to the movement as "leader-full." In "Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement," movement historian and activist Barbara Ransby offers an alternative narrative of BLM's leadership philosophy that is rooted in the lessons of civil rights activists like Ella Baker, not anarchist philosophy. Ransby writes about Baker, "Although she objected to the top-down, predominately male leadership structures that were typical of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the NAACP in the 1950s and '60s, she realized the necessity for grounded, community-based leader-organizers such as sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer and Cleveland, Mississippi-based local organizer Amzie Moore. Baker was not against leadership. She was opposed to hierarchical leadership that disempowered the masses and further privileged the already privileged." As Ransby notes, critiques of "leaderless" models have emerged within the very movements that espoused such models. Here, she references Jo Freeman's highly influential 1970 essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" on the second wave feminist movement. For similar reasons, anarchist models of leadership and organization have not held much sway within poor people's movements. See David Graeber, "Occupy Wall Street's Anarchist Roots," *Aljazeera*, November 30, 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/11/30/occupy-wall-streets-anarchist-roots/; Simon Western, "Autonomist Leadership in Leaderless Movements: Anarchists Leading the Way," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 14, no. 4 (2014): 673–98; Barbara Ransby, "Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement," *Colorlines*, June 12, 2015, https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement; Jo Freeman, "The

purport to elevate the collective, are just the flip side of the myth of rugged individualism that eschew the role of society in shaping all of us along uneven lines. All leadership is developed and cultivated. While people might have inherent talents, the myth of *natural* leadership is just that, a myth. Those who currently rule and govern, not just at the highest levels of public office, but economic elites have been positioned and cultivated to lead. To pretend otherwise only benefits the status quo.

The emphasis on leadership development and political education is a hard-earned lesson that comes from decades of the poor organizing the poor. Many of the slogans that come from this longer history reflect this lesson—from Willie and Rev. Liz's "learn as we lead, walk as we talk, teach as we fight," to one of NUH leader Ron Casanova's favorites "each one, teach one," from "the more you know, the more you owe" to "the struggle is a school" or "the campaign is a classroom." But this type of leadership development is more than simply learning by doing or "nuts and bolts" training. In *Pedagogy of the Poor*, Willie Baptist and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis write:

> If we are serious about the work of ending poverty, we don't have to merely do more actions; we have to do smarter actions. We don't just have to be more active; we have to be more effective. We live in a very pragmatic society, and many of us think that if we just start one more program or effect one more policy change it will bring an end to poverty. But our experience has shown that poverty is more complex than that and it is going to take clarity, competence, and commitment to achieve real social change in this country. To outfight the forces arrayed against us, we must outsmart them.[277]

As national co-chair, Theoharis brings this insight to the PPC (2018+), along with a network of leaders who share and practice this approach to antipoverty organizing. But as Nijmie pointed

Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1970), https://millcreekurbanfarm.org/sites/default/files/tyranny%20of%20Structurelessness.pdf.

[277] Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis, "Teach As We Fight, Learn as We Lead: Lessons in Pedagogy and the Poverty Initiative Model," in *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty*, ed. Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 161.

out, this is not necessarily the prevailing organizing approach even among organizations with poor and working-class members.

Avery offered an example of such an organization when he spoke about his experience organizing with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a national and even international network of community-based organizations made up of low and moderate income members that was targeted by right-wing operatives eventually leading to their dissolution. He explained ACORN's conception of leadership development.

> There was a kind of skills-oriented leadership development at ACORN, but there wasn't a whole lot of time spent on theoretical and ideological development...I remember an ACORN colleague...she was talking about some other mentor who had been like, 'Well, you know, the best political education is people showing up for that rally.' And this idea that all you need is the experience of organizing to develop your orientation.

Seeing ACORN, one of the most expansive and powerful community-based organizations, effectively taken down was a formative lesson for Avery. When he moved back to his home state of Vermont to work with VWC, and eventually continue on as a member, he was struck by the difference in their organizing models and approach to leadership development.

> What was really striking with the Worker Center and then some of the other organizations that are part of this network that was connected to the Poverty Initiative, but not solely, that you're able to do both. You're able to actually organize poor working-class folks around a unifying vision, and how that's part of that study and political education and development towards a real vision and critique of capitalism and towards a different world centered around people instead of profit.

VWC has suffered setbacks as well, especially after their momentous victory passing a universal healthcare bill at the state level, only to have Governor Gavin Newson who signed the bill later kill it over the funding mechanism.[278] This sort of victory followed by setback resulted in an array of internal challenges, but because of their deep bench of leaders committed to the

[278] Adam Gafney, "Lessons from Vermont," *Jacobin*, January 8, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/vermont-single-payer.

organization and the larger movement they were able to weather this period. For instance, Avery is no longer a paid staff organizer, but now a key member leader.

It is so often this experience of defeat and study of other movement successes and setbacks that has led so many leaders connected to the PPC (2018+) to adopt and further develop an organizing model that does not simply mobilize bodies, but builds "permanently organized communities" made up of leaders with "clarity, competence, and commitment."[279] Again, Savina offered a very sobering lesson from her experience with the U.S. military and NUH:

> We're up against a sophisticated enemy. I can really attest to that from my role as a United States veteran woman. The military complex is organized to the bone...So we better be prepared because they're prepared. They taught me how to lock and load a weapon and clean it in 3 or 4 seconds. So we've gotta be just as clear in terms of how to identify something that is coming towards us that may decimate the entire body. I mean, if we get one wound on our leg, then the whole body can suffer from the pain. And that's what happened with the National Union of the Homeless. Cadre was hurt. When one went down, we all went down, and what we did not do was replicate the leaders. So when one leader went down, we hardly knew what to do, because we were so dependent on that leader. And if we don't replicate that process today, we're not going to win.

For some, her words might seem extreme. But I have found for veterans, of both the U.S. military and antipoverty movements, the veil of innocence around the capacity and willingness of the U.S. state to exercise violence to maintain the status-quo is non-existent. Savina is not talking about matching that violence with violence, she is suggesting something quite different. While many activists now talk about being "leaderfull" rather than "leaderless," she is not talking about simply designing a structure that shares power and responsibilities, but having an intentional and systematic training process by which we are developing "leaderfull" organizations and movements that can match the sophistication of our enemy.

[279] The phrase "permanently organized communities" comes from Put People First! PA's document, "The People's Recipe" which lays out the "10 core strategies" of their organizing model.

As a "gathering," as Sheilah put it, the PPC (2018+) has encouraged leadership development and political education of the poor in several key ways. As I discussed in chapter 2, the PPC 2018+'s framing and messaging is part of its goal to challenge and shift the dominant narratives of poverty. However narratives are not something that are just out there, they are changed through shaping the consciousness of masses of people, that sort of cultural shift happens first through shifting and shaping our consciousness of movement participants themselves.[280] So many of the people I have encountered in the PPC (2018+) talk about how the campaign has changed and expanded their thinking on poverty, in terms of who are the poor, but also what poverty is. Our consciousness and leadership is further developed through our interaction and exchange with this growing network of leaders on a state and national level.

The campaign's national gatherings are a particularly ripe space for exchange both within the formal program as well as the informal conversations that happen on the side. Here, leaders discuss and share strategy, tactics, organizing models, and internal leadership development processes, as well as build camaraderie and relationships. This is an arena where the strongest states, often made up of organizations of the poor, are highlighted as models. National often calls on them to share in the spirit of "the more you know, the more you owe." Lastly, the campaign's infrastructure has allowed leaders to connect across the country in ways that relate to the PPC (2018+), but are autonomous to it. As I discussed in chapter 1, the NUH officially re-constituted itself at the June 2019 Poor People's Moral Action Congress, where unhoused and antipoverty organizers working specifically around homelessness across the country were able to connect up.

[280] In *The Art of Protest*, T.V. Reed examines "social movements as forces of cultural change," not just political or economic change. Part of his investigation looks at how social movement participants reshape dominant culture through their protest activities, including specific forms of cultural production, but also how social movement practitioners are themselves transformed by their participation. See T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Similarly, through the campaign, organizers from across the country or regionally have been able to connect up in order to engage in further study and strategic dialogue through the University of the Poor, PEP, the People's Forum, the General Baker Institute, and Oak Hill Center.

These are some of the ways that I see the PPC (2018+) fostering leadership development and political education and yet this cannot substitute for the ways that organizations of the poor are more readily equipped to do this in more structured and reliable ways. For instance, it was actually Amy Jo's frustrations with wondering how the PPC (2018+) could practically build a mass movement led by the poor, with no paid statewide organizers and little operational infrastructure, that pushed her to want to create the GrassRoots Impacted Organizers Fellowship, a paid organizer training program within her organization specifically for poor people impacted by a safety net issue. It was one of the things she was most excited about and hopeful for when we sat down to talk. As she understood it, if poor people are going to lead this movement, not just be there to tell their sad story, they need to have base-building organizing skills and these are developed and learned.

She knew this from experience, "That's what my boss did to me. Nobody in the world would have ever believed in me the way he did. He just knew I could do this. So I'm in the opportunity now, because of my job, the privilege to be able to pay this forward." For her organization OFWV, she is responsible for twenty out of 55 counties in West Virginia, which is an impossible territory for one person to cover. But by having this ongoing fellowship program, she saw them as being able to build their capacity to reach every corner of the state, "We're building our army, but on the other hand, what we're really hoping to do is as you're out doing this work, we want you to start picking," as in picking or identifying the next round of potential impacted organizer fellows. This was a new program for OFWV, so she said she was learning a

lot and already thinking about ways they might improve it, but she said, “I think it’s going to be little programs like these that are going to make a difference.”

From my experience with the United Workers and talking with leaders with other organizations of the poor—Chaplains on the Harbor, VWC, PPF! PA, NUH, MWRU, and others—having robust internal leadership development processes and programs make an incredible difference towards building a movement led by the poor. Each of these groups have similar and different programs towards this end. So even if Amy Jo’s impetus for creating the fellowship program came out of what she saw as shortcomings of the campaign, I see it as a success, because her alignment with the theory of change propelled her to advance the work by creating an intentional process by which poor people can develop political organizing skills. PPF! PA has a similar program called the Mother Jones Leadership Program, but political education and leadership development is woven throughout their organizing, infused in every meeting. Their organization has a document that articulates their “leadership development pathway” that makes transparent the levels of leadership within the organization and how someone advances not simply in terms of the organization’s governance structure, but in terms of one’s commitment, knowledge, and training.

Many organizers talked about how they saw the PPC (2018+) as helping to accentuate their organization’s internal leadership development and political education processes, not a substitute for it. Aaron talked about how powerful the exchanges afforded by the PPC (2018+) have been for Chaplains leaders, “Being able to do exchange between our young base members, like the Seattle Black Panthers invited us to come speak at their 50th anniversary party because of our connections to folks in the campaign. Then to bring that back to our folks and be like, ‘here’s some history that’s very relevant for us,’ is huge. It agitates and excites our people a lot

to have that exchange." These experiences enhance the education and leadership development of leaders, particularly since as Aaron explained their members have had terrible experiences with formal educational systems that are tied to the carceral system.

But it is also important to acknowledge and articulate levels, if we are to develop leaders that have the sort of sophistication that Savina referenced. PEP and Michigan PPC member Carolyn Baker explained how they emphasize this at the General Baker Institute, a movement school in Detroit that she helps run in honor of her father. According to her, they always start every class with "the evolution of a revolutionary, looking at the evolution of General Baker and how he didn't just become a revolutionary overnight." It is a way of demystifying this notion of leadership as inherent and static. Again, Willie and Liz make this point in *Pedagogy of the Poor*:

> Popular education forms have been very useful especially for orientation and introductory education for those just getting involved in organizing and advocacy work. However, our experience is that they must be applied with the view of advancing especially the prospective leaders to intermediate and more advanced educational forms. Paulo Freire exposed himself to higher levels of education, which he then used to creatively formulate and apply popular education approaches. The sophisticated leadership development of the cadre of the powers-that-be requires in our leadership development process more than simply popular education–level graduates. It requires nothing less than the training of many more Paulo Freires, which translates into higher levels of education development methods.[281]

So we definitely need these onramp programs like the GrassRoots Impacted Organizers Fellowship, but as many others, particularly veteran organizers made clear, we cannot stop there. Which is why Joyce from Chicago is also a part of the University of the Poor in addition to being heavily involved in her ward's independent political organization (IPO), United Neighbors of the 35th Ward, and the PPC 2018+:

> Getting that political education and that political training is necessary for all of us. Because if not, it's too easy to get sidelined. It's too easy to get disoriented and that's

[281] Baptist and Theoharis, "Teach As We Fight, Learn as We Lead: Lessons in Pedagogy and the Poverty Initiative Model," 169.

> what we can't afford. And so part of our job is to constantly be looking towards these folks [PPC participants] and engaging them in the University of the Poor. Letting them know there's this other organization that is separate, but is all about power and all about understanding, who has it? How do you get it? Why is there systemic poverty? Why is there systemic racism? How do we see the resolution of that? So they're both necessary...We see that as a very complementary relationship and essential.

The University of the Poor pre-existed the PPC (2018+) and similarly came out of the Kairos Center's Poverty Scholars program, but as a concept it goes back to the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), where Willie Baptist and others conceived of it as the educational arm of that earlier national campaign. No longer officially attached to any campaign, it has grown alongside the PPC (2018+) with more than ninety grassroots leaders and organizers from across the country, many involved in the PPC (2018+), participating in their most recent Cadre School. The University of the Poor is just one of the cross-organizational educational spaces that have developed a "complementary relationship" to the PPC (2018+).

The question of how to build a mass movement led by the poor and dispossessed united across lines of division and difference to radically transform society is no doubt complex. It is not only an exercise in theory, but in a long practice of successes and failures. In NWRU's statement in support of the PPC 2018+, Maureen Taylor stated, "Today, despite fifty years of struggle, the plight of the poor and the dispossessed, 70% women and children, is undiminished and indeed more desperate. Surely this is not due to the failure of care, commitment, energy, or analysis on our part, rather we see fundamental changes in the landscape of the nation and beyond." No, surely it is not due to "the failure of care, commitment, energy, or analysis" on their part. We are up against complex and powerful forces. Rather we are indebted to their analysis and leadership over the last five plus decades. It will take the replication of many many more leaders from the ranks of the poor and otherwise with their level of sophistication and long-term commitment.

It can be overwhelming to simultaneously deepen one's analysis of the complex political, economic, and cultural forces that produce and perpetuate poverty and inequality, while being engaged with the concrete problems small and large of organizing to transform them. It sometimes feels like death by a thousand cuts, while a tsunami is taking you down. This is why leaders and leadership matter so much. None of us can do it alone. It is going to take a very large movement of sophisticated, creative, and committed leaders, not just a mass of bodies. This will require organizations committed to the identification and development of leaders from the ranks of the poor, committed to bringing leaders together into collective bases of power. While mass movements depend on the independent action of countless organizations and people, campaigns are important vehicles for bringing organizations together into strategic alignment and coordinated action. Depending on the goals, campaigns can be short-lived or long-term. But my belief is that the success of a campaign should not be judged by whether it achieves some concessions, but whether it builds the power and capacity of the broader movement. And by this, I mean the capacity of leaders, because campaigns, even organizations, come and go, but leaders are the reproducers of other leaders and thus the seeds of future movements.

This is all of course easier said than done. But if the PPC (2018+) is to be judged on these terms then I think it is at least headed in the right direction. After talking about many of the challenges involved in undertaking such an ambitious campaign, Brittany said at the end of our interview:

> Ultimately, what keeps me here, even though the struggles and the places where I think we're falling short and criticisms and all of that, is when I look around, I'm like, who else would I be organizing with? Like these are the most amazing, powerful, diverse leaders in a space I've ever worked with, who have brilliant analysis that they're bringing to the table, both in their differences and in their similarities. And this is the right group of people. So I kind of feel like we're all we got, where else are we going to go to work with this group of organizers? And if there comes a day when those are no longer the people

> organizing the campaign, then that's when I'm going to get real worried. I think the best thing about this campaign are all the amazing leaders in the States.

I could not have said it better myself. The people in this campaign have inspired me and confirmed that we, the poor, impacted, dispossessed, and low-wealth, can lead. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, if being led by the poor were easy, we would not need a Poor People's Campaign. It is a practice that goes up against a very world that is objectively not led by the poor. The struggle to end poverty is the struggle to be led by the poor. Both are hard and yet perfectly possible.

Conclusion: "A Little Bit of Hope"

> I am not hopeless because there's a Poor People's Campaign. Have you heard? And I am part of it and so are thousands of other people from every walk of life. And we don't necessarily pray alike, or sing alike, and we definitely don't look alike. We don't live in the same neighborhood. We don't live in the same states. We don't do any of this stuff alike. The only thing we have in common is that we're human and we're poor people. In some way, we are poor.[282]

In an interview featured in a forthcoming documentary on the PPC (2018+), Callie Greer says the words above as she sits at her kitchen table. Ms. Greer is a leader in the PPC (2018+), who has testified many times about losing her daughter Venus to breast cancer and watching her die an unnecessary and miserable death, because she was unable to afford health insurance. The state of Alabama refused to expand Medicaid and Venus did not qualify otherwise. She is also the founder of an organization called Mothers Against Violence in Selma (MAVIS) for mothers who have lost children and loved ones to violence, often gun violence. I did not have the honor of interviewing Ms. Greer, but when I interviewed Mashyla Buckmaster with Chaplains on the Harbor, she without prompting spoke about Ms. Greer, "Like the very first time I met her, her story really, out of everybody's, really hit me. She's an amazing woman." It was clear that one of the things that Mashyla valued about the campaign was having formed a relationship with Ms. Greer. Mashyla expressed admiration and respect for the courage in which she shared her story, but also how she has used her pain as a bridge to connect with the pain of others. For instance, Mashyla told me about Ms. Greer, "Somebody killed her son and she went to that man's trial to tell the judge not to put them in jail, so his mother didn't hurt the way she had to. Like, that's

[282] Quote from Callie Greer taken from an in-progress documentary on the PPC (2018+), *We Cried Power*, directed by Dara Kell (New York: Brava Media), accessed via private vimeo link.

crazy to me, that's an amazing woman to me." Both Ms. Greer and Mashyla have attended and testified at several PPC (2018+) events together, the latter being something that Mashyla dreads doing. So when Mashyla spoke at the Stand Against Poverty March & Rally on June 23, 2018 about her experience being a young homeless mother with a baby in the dead of winter, she got a text from Ms. Greer afterwards that said, "'I love you. Thank you for not wasting your pain.'" Mashyla said, "it was nice," but it was evident that it was more than nice. It meant a lot to receive this encouragement from Ms. Greer.

I share this small story, because the sort of movement mothering that Ms. Greer extended to Mashyla is just plain tender. And it underscores how important forging relationships and friendships across difference can be. Ms. Greer is an older black woman from Selma, Alabama. Mashyla is a young white mother from Westport, Washington. Ms. Greer and Mashyla do not look the same. They do not live in the same state, let alone the same neighborhood. I am not sure how they sing or pray (if Mashyla prays), but it is probably not the same either. But they are human and they are poor. The recognition of this commonality is class solidarity in the most basic sense. And through the PPC (2018+), Ms. Greer and Mashyla have become connected, not just on an organizational level, but bonded by feelings of love and solidarity. Class solidarity is not just an abstract concept, but a lived practice between real people developing real relationships. The PPC (2018+) is facilitating this kind of class solidarity through its model of moral fusion organizing of the poor across lines of race, issue, and geography.

I also start with this quote, because Ms. Greer talks about hope, specifically not being *hopeless*. Hope comes up a lot in this work because it is hard to be *hopeful*. There is the daily grind of poverty, deprivation, and oppression; the negligence and cruelty of what Rev. Barber calls "policy violence"; and the seemingly impermeable obstacles of racism, fear, and political

division. The PPC (2018+) does have concrete demands aimed at addressing these conditions, but for me the campaign is not merely a vehicle for advancing a policy platform. Rather, as I quoted Claudia De La Cruz in chapter 1 as saying, the PPC (2018+) is "*organizing the hope* of the poor, the hope that is often used and abused by politicians—whether they are Republicans or Democrats—the hope of a dignified life, our very right to exist." Claudia did not say the PPC (2018+) was *giving hope*, she said it was "organizing the hope." There is a difference. To talk about organizing a collective feeling is to at once recognize the work feelings do in motivating us to act in certain ways, but also to emphasize the process of organizing generally. Without organization, there is no power, and there is no hope. But sometimes, it has to start with a little hope.

Unlike the hope that is "often used and abused by politicians," "organizing the hope of the poor" is especially critical in a time when we have just experienced a government that is hardly mobilized even by the potential for mass death. In Baltimore, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Housing Our Neighbors (HON), a grassroots housing and anti-homelessness group, lead the Empty the Shelters campaign to pressure the city to move all individuals living in potentially deadly congregant living shelters to hotels and eventually permanently affordable housing. At their March for Housing on November 21, 2020, Alexis Garnett, a HON leader who was relocated to a hotel, spoke about the terrible shelter conditions and the need for more than temporary fixes to the housing crisis. She ended her speech by chanting "homeless, not *hopeless*."[283] I recognized it as a creative play on NUH's original slogan

[283] Housing Our Neighbors, "Hotel #HousingIsAHumanRight,"*Facebook*, livestream on November 21, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/115194731985809/videos/801896680660885; Louis Krauss, "Young must do more for the housing insecure, marchers say," *Baltimore Brew*, November 22, 2020, https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2020/11/22/young-must-do-more-for-the-housing-insecure-marchers-say/.

from the 90s, "homeless, not *helpless*." Whether intentional or not, the switch seemed appropriate. She and her fellow HON compatriots were not about to let their deaths go unseen and unheard. In the face of a system that treats so many people's lives as disposable, it was an act of defiance to say she would not let that crush her spirit and will to fight. Alexis would not be made hopeless. Her appropriation and adaptation of the NUH slogan reflected the reproduction of movement ideas and networks.

Mashyla also brought up *hopelessness* and *hopefulness* when Anu Yadav and I interviewed her in the hallway at Chaplains on the Harbor's offices in Aberdeen. Like most days, they were dealing with various simultaneous crises that come with organizing in a community living on the brink. When Anu asked Mashyla what keeps her going, Mashyla spoke about her work running their soup kitchen and day shelter in Westport—feeding people and watching stand-up on Netflix with people, helping them laugh, and sometimes saving people's lives. She told us the story of how a woman came in one day completely distraught, feeling bad about her drinking, talking about how she was going to kill herself. Mashyla told her, "You can do whatever you want to do. Just don't do THAT." Several weeks later, the woman returned and told Mashyla, "You saved my life. I wrote on my window that night 'you can do anything, just don't do that.'" That kind of stuff kept her coming back, "Cause it's really hard to keep coming. I'm actually kind of down right now. *Hopeless*."

When Anu asked if it was anything in particular that had her down, she spoke about the battle they are having with the city council around the anti-vagrancy laws that had been passed in Aberdeen. "I get really hopeless because logically I think of how long it's going to take to get the city council's head out of their asses, or new city council members in there, or anything" Mashyla continued, "It just feels very daunting and like it's never going to happen." When we

later interviewed Rev. Monroe, she told us how someone at the city council hearing actually stood up and said they hoped that the homeless would die so they could build a better town without them. It sounded like a tough hearing to attend. So it felt like an awkward note to have to end the interview with Mashyla, but I knew she was being called into a meeting, so I just asked her if she had any final thoughts. She replied, "So it gets really daunting, but maybe what keeps me going is a *little bit of hope* for the Poor People's Campaign. It's been like 10 years? How long has it been going? I don't know. So I know it's going to take forever, but y'all been going for how long already? So I know you guys aren't going to quit. So that's *hopeful*." To which Anu responded, "And you aren't either?" "Yeah, no," Mashyla retorted, then jokingly offered, "Maybe. I don't know." We all laughed.

Technically, the PPC (2018+) did not officially launch until December of 2017, less than a year before we spoke with Mashyla in October 2018, but she was including the groundwork phase for the PPC (2018+) that had begun long before. But her question of when exactly to mark the beginning of the PPC (2018+) is hard to answer. Was it 10 years? 15 years? 20 years? It is hard to say where the seed began. Was it at the Poverty Initiative/Kairos Center's "Getting Into Step" 10-year anniversary celebration in Spring of 2014 when they shared a proposal to relaunch the PPC with the 50th anniversary? Or was it before that, since clearly the proposal came from somewhere? Was the proposal generated through the Poverty Scholars Program strategic dialogues where the PPC figured as a recurring historic model? Or must we trace it back further to the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) that made explicit reference to Dr. King's PPC? However, if we do that, do we need to look years prior to the KWRU's political education committee's study of Dr. King's PPC as the seed that inspired PPEHRC? How far do we go back to find the end of the thread?

In chapter 1, I follow these threads back to the original PPC to show how the welfare rights movement of the 1960s intersected with the 1968 PPC and then carried on the torch of multi-racial and multi-issue movement organizing to abolish poverty in the midst of plenty. The welfare rights movement and its leaders would continue to adapt to changing and deteriorating conditions, eventually connecting with a burgeoning movement led by those rendered homeless by the implementation of neoliberal austerity in the face of global economic restructuring in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even after the dissolution of the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) as an organization, leaders who emerged from this struggle would go on to found the KWRU and eventually help lead the PPEHRC in the early 2000s. Through PPHERC's broader economic human rights framework, national tours, and actions, a network of grassroots antipoverty organizations and poor people's unions around the country and the world would be created. This network would find an ongoing home for cross-organizational dialogue and political education through the PI's Poverty Scholars Program from 2007 to 2014. During this time, a broad based movement coalition was being built in North Carolina. When the NC state legislature began simultaneously attacking African American voting rights, LGBTQ rights, worker rights, and preventing the expansion of Medicaid, the Moral Mondays Movement burst into action with weekly acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in 2013. These actions along with the annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ) marches demonstrated once again the possibility of building a mass fusion movement in the South. Through Rev. Dr. William Barber III, the Moral Mondays network and NC Raise Up would join the Kairos network and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis in relaunching the PPC (2018+) with the original's 50th anniversary setting the stage for a new phase of grassroots antipoverty movement organizing.

But were we coming back full circle to the initial seed—the 1968 PPC? Not quite. Even the 1968 PPC was itself partially inspired by a prior antecedent, the 1932 Bonus Army, a multiracial group of WWI veterans and their families from across the country that came to Washington, D.C. during the height of the Great Depression to demand their military bonuses from the U.S. government. But we were also not coming back full circle, because just as 1968 was a much different time than 1932, 2018 was a much different time than 1968. And unlike the 1968 PPC, the PPC (2018+) has continued. This is where the historical and ethnographic approach of this dissertation combine to examine how the past informs the present, but also what it means and looks like in practice to be building a PPC in today's unique political, economic, and cultural context.

Returning to the quote from Ms. Greer, she said, "The only thing we have in common is that we're human and we're poor people. *In some way, we are poor*." This last part suggests a more expansive definition of poverty. It also suggests that being poor is not a self-evident category, which begs the question—what does it mean to be poor? In chapter 2, "Struggling with Poverty: Stigma, Strategy, and Building Class Consciousness," I ask who are the *poor* in the PPC (2018+)? What ideological and political work does the PPC (2018+)'s expanded definition of poverty do? And where does this strategic intervention come from? Through my conversations with a range of PPC (2018+) leaders, from long-time welfare rights warriors to younger and more recently involved activists, I reveal how explicitly identifying as poor has long been a critical strategy for countering stigmatizing narratives that blame poor people for their poverty and for forcing the issue of poverty into the center of political debate. It is here where struggles over meaning can take place and thus shape the grounds upon which broader class alliances and organizing takes place. And yet, because these dominant narratives of poverty are so relentless,

and the stakes of such definitions feel contradictory at times, organizers discuss how these struggles are brought to the surface by the PPC (2018+). However, in the end, I argue that these struggles are crucial to our ideological development. The PPC (2018+)'s expanded definition of poverty is a gateway to developing class consciousness and class unity.

Chapter 3, "Fusion Politics of the Poor: Uniting Across Race, Geography, and Issue," offers a comparative localized perspective of the PPC (2018+) through my conversations with campaign leaders in the South, Midwest, California, Pacific Northwest, Appalachia, and Southwest. I asked them to describe the local political and economic landscape, what attracted them to the PPC (2018+)'s model of poor people's fusion organizing, and how they see it being practiced in their state. I specifically inquire how the model is forging class unity and solidarity across lines of race, issue, and geography. PPC (2018+) leaders talked openly about the myriad of obstacles they face in their organizing—from white supremacist ideology to mutual fear and mistrust among poor people; from geopolitical divisions to prevailing responses to poverty and inequality; from organizing in spaces of capital flight to organizing in spaces of intense capital reinvestment. Although not without its own challenges, the PPC (2018+) has provided a mechanism for connecting their more localized struggles to struggles across the state and country. By doing this, the campaign has not only united people across various lines of historic division—race, ethnicity, political party, religion, etc.—but also encouraged a nuanced analysis of how a myriad of issues people are facing are interconnected. Rather than this model of class solidarity forging unity on the presumption of equivalency, it is doing so on the basis of shared (although not uniform) grievances, strategic analysis, and moral and ethical values.

The political stakes of this work hinge on this question of leadership. As the name of the campaign suggests, but PPC (2018+) rhetoric makes explicit, "This is only a Poor People's

Campaign if we actually unite and organize large segments of poor people across racial and geographic lines in the United States" and "We are committed to lifting up and deepening the leadership of those most affected." In the final chapter, "Led by the Poor?: Theory and Practice in the Poor People's Campaign," I argue that this commitment to not only *centering* poor people, but being *led by* the poor is the PPC (2018+)'s "theory of change," as it was for Dr. King's PPC. And yet it is a strategy that seems easier said than done. This is most certainly not because of a lack of capacity on the part of poor people, but because of relentless social forces, small and large, that are arrayed against poor people's organization and leadership. So I was keen to hear from organizers across the country about how they are putting this theory into practice. In our conversations, we discuss the challenges they see in building out a statewide and national campaign that is led by the poor and dispossessed, as well as the successes in grounding the campaign in impoverished and working-class communities. One of the insights that emerges is the need for more base-building organizations of the poor that have robust internal leadership development and political education processes. These organizations are a critical building block of the PPC (2018+) and to this broader theory of change.

However, whether the PPC (2018+) can help mitigate against the obstacles to poor people's leadership and inspire mass organization of poor and working-class communities across the country is still to be determined. In more ideal circumstances, there would be mass organizations of the poor already in every community, in every state. These organizations would form the base of the PPC (2018+). Surely, this would still be challenging to get these organizations to come together in coordinated action, but nearly a century of working-class demobilization has conspired to create different conditions for today's campaign. As Nijmie Dzurinko with Put People First! PA explained, "it's not a weakness of the campaign in that, it's

really just a weakness of where we are right now in the country, that we don't have a deep base of organizations." Those ideal circumstances are not the grounds upon which the PPC (2018+) is attempting to build a nation-wide movement to unite the 140 million poor people in this country.

So what can be done in this context? Do we just accept defeat? Or do we retreat into our local organizing and reject the efficacy of nationalized campaigns until we have sufficiently built the breadth and depth of organizations at local and state scales? The former to me is not an option. If we think it could not get worse, it could. The only thing stopping that is some level or threat of resistance. The latter also seems unwise. Local organizing is absolutely critical for the reasons that Joyce Brody with the Illinois PPC laid out, "it's a local thing that allows you to connect with people, with where they're at, and really find out what are the issues. You have to be connected to where people are at or how are you going to know what their moral narrative is? How are you going to answer the questions they really have? And how are you going to overcome these divisions if you don't know and don't have a way of relating to people?" But she also offered, "it's extremely important to have a global vision, to have an internationalist vision, but be rooted locally." We are compelled to organize locally, because that is the space where most of us live, but we must have an analysis that understands the problems we face and the powers we are up against are not simply locally produced, not even just nationally produced, but quite literally global. This reality also compels us to organize and connect across geographic scales if we want to get at the roots of a system that is producing misery and violence, albeit uneven, from the routine to the extraordinary. This means connecting on an international level as well.

It should be said that PPC (2018+) leaders do have many international connections to help support a more global perspective, even if the PPC (2018+) itself is a national campaign.

For instance, Sylvia Orduño with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) and I traveled as part of an early PPC (2018+) delegation to Colombia, South America for ALBA Movimientos, a continental assembly of social movement leaders in December 2016. There are many other such transnational exchanges. However, I think the national focus of the PPC (2018+) is strategic in an internationalist sense. For example, some U.S. based activists engage in a model of Latin American solidarity work that aims to bring visibility to the atrocities of the U.S. government and/or U.S. and international corporations in Latin America. While I think this is very important work, I hardly see a change in the U.S. government's imperial stance towards the rest of the world without a change in U.S. governance. A transformative change in U.S. governance will require a mass movement of people in this country. The motivation for such a movement will not come solely from a desire to help others elsewhere, but will likely come from a desire to change one's conditions here, albeit hopefully understanding how they are interconnected. That kind of solidarity is principled, but also strategic. Caring about other people in the rest of the world means doing the work here. Particularly since social movements in Latin America, and elsewhere, are often much stronger. If social movements in the U.S. matched the level of organization and political independence seen elsewhere, the political possibilities of our comrades elsewhere would be greatly expanded.

This is not U.S. exceptionalist self-aggrandizement, just an acknowledgment of the uneven power dynamics. Even as the U.S. government is losing its prestige and economic power on the international stage, it is still by far the greatest military power the world has ever known. The upside for our friends elsewhere, who face the brunt of this military force, is that many many people in the U.S. have serious cause to want something different too. These people include first and foremost the 140 million poor and low-income people who are struggling to

survive in the richest and most powerful country in the world. This was King's assessment as well in 1967 as he referred to the U.S. government as the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[284] King's antiwar and anti-imperial position was not lost when he then called for the PPC, but it was embedded in how he understood revolutionary social change taking place in the U.S. In this dissertation, I have several times referenced this quote from his 1967 speech "Nonviolence and Social Change," where he says, "*The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose*. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, *they will* do so with a freedom and a power that will be a *new and unsettling force* in our complacent national life."[285] This potential is even more true today than it was in 1968.

But as King is suggesting, in order for the poor and dispossessed to be a "new and unsettling force," we must be organized to take action together. For instance, I do not believe that the PPC (2018+) can achieve its ambitious Poor People's Jubilee Platform without a massive organized movement made up of organizations of the poor helping to lead the way. In "Where Do We Go From Here?," King lays out his analysis of how policy demands get implemented, "When people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance when they have accumulated the power to enforce change. When they have amassed such strength, the writing of a program becomes almost an administrative detail." He goes on to write, "The deeper truth is that the call to prepare programs distracts us excessively from our basic and primary tasks...We are, in fact, being counseled to put the cart before the horse. We have to put the horse (power) before the cart

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[284] Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 555–633.
[285] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Social Change" (Massey Lectures, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), reprinted in *Jacobin*, April 4, 2018, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/martin-luther-king-jr-nonviolence-direct-action.

(programs)." Unfortunately, a lot of social justice "advocacy" falls into this camp of fixating on the cart and paying very little attention to the horse. King continues, "Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands."[286]

Is King saying that movements do not need demands or "programs" just a rallying cry like the Occupy Movement? No, he is clear that "general programs for the movement" are important, but "not for use as supplicants." Instead, he writes, "We require programs to hold up to our followers which mirror their aspirations. In this fashion our goals are dramatized and our supporters are inspired to action and deeper moral commitment." Now, I might rephrase this slightly, as "followers" and "supporters" reflect King's leadership approach, not mine. But I agree with his analysis that programs or policy platforms should be used as an articulation of our aspirations that motivate us to organize and build power. In this sense, rather than understanding "general programs" as fundamentally externally focused, ie. something we bring to our opponents or political targets as demands or "supplicants," their greater strategic purpose is internal. We are the targets of such "general programs" and as such, they should be worth the blood, sweat, and tears that social movements require.

A good example of this distinction can be seen in organizing around universal healthcare. There are those who have been pushing for a single-payer healthcare system for decades. Year after year, they unsuccessfully lobby Congress or their state legislatures to push for single-payer legislation. If politics were a debate about which system was most efficient, cost-effective, and best at actually providing care, single-payer would have won against our private healthcare

[286] Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, 1986th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 598.

system a long time ago. But it is not. This is particularly striking given how unpopular our private for-profit healthcare system is and its abysmal record of actually providing healthcare to people in this country, whether they are insured or not.[287] People die for lack of healthcare. People become bankrupt and homeless due to healthcare costs. In contrast, the approach of groups like Vermont Workers Center and Put People First! PA is to organize statewide around people's problems with our healthcare system and around the goal of healthcare as a human right. Do they want a single-payer system? Yes, but their focus is not on pouring over the details of single-payer legislation, getting swept into debates over the differences between Senator Bernie Sanders's Medicare for All plan versus other single-payer legislation—when we lack the power to implement either one. They are organizing to make it so we are demanding from a position of "strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us."[288]

And one of the biggest breakthroughs in this regard came as a result of years of organizing and pressure by the Vermont Workers Center (VWC). In May 2011, then Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin signed "Green Mountain Healthcare," a state-level single-payer plan into law, a first in the country.[289] Three years later, Governor Shumlin would abandon Green

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[287] Robert H. Shmerling, "Is our healthcare system broken?," *Harvard Health Publishing: Harvard Medical School*, July 13, 2021, https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-our-healthcare-system-broken-202107132542; Justin McCarthy, "Seven in 10 Maintain Negative View of U.S. Healthcare System," *Gallup*, January 14, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/245873/seven-maintain-negative-view-healthcare-system.aspx; Bradley Jones, "Increasing share of Americans favor a single government program to provide health care coverage," *Pew Research Center*, September 29, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/29/increasing-share-of-americans-favor-a-single-government-program-to-provide-health-care-coverage/.

[288] Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, 1986th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 598.

[289] The article in *the Atlantic* credits enlightened progressive politicians with the passage of Green Mountain Healthcare, whereas *The Truthout* and *In These Times* articles, the latter written by VWC's former executive director, reveal the organizing that went behind getting Shumlin to sign the bill into law. See Sean McElwee, "Can Vermont's Single-Payer System Fix What Ails American Healthcare?," *The Atlantic*, December 27, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/12/can-vermonts-single-payer-system-fix-what-ails-american-healthcare/282626/; James Haslan, "*Lessons From The Single-Payer State*," *In These Times*, October 27, 2011,

Mountain Healthcare citing his inability to support the funding plan.[290] For this reason, some single-payer advocates might say, 'Well see, statewide legislation does not make sense, it really needs to be a national system for it to really work." This might be true, but if VWC's model was replicated across the country, we might actually be in a better position to fight for it on the national level. There is a technocratic analysis of the Vermont case and then there is a power analysis of the Vermont case. The latter more accurately explains how this breakthrough came about and how it was undermined.

However, the differences in approach go deeper. PPF! PA and VWC are not healthcare organizations. This is an important strategic difference between them and other single-payer advocacy organizations. Their "healthcare is a human right" campaigns are vehicles to build a base of poor and working-class people across their state. It could be something else, but they have assessed that healthcare is a strategic issue. Although healthcare is their focus, as an organization of people impacted by the healthcare system, they are acutely aware of how healthcare is connected to all the other issues that poor and working-class people face. This is what attracts them to being a part of the PPC (2018+), because they are able to connect their campaigns for healthcare to a larger campaign for a broader poor people's agenda from voting rights to environmental justice. But again, it is not simply that the Poor People's Jubilee

https://inthesetimes.com/article/help-wanted-lessons-from-the-single-payer-state; Michael Arria, "How Vermont Got a Single-Payer Health Care Bill: A Non-Electoral History," *Truthout*, June 29, 2014, https://truthout.org/articles/how-vermont-got-a-single-payer-health-care-bill-a-non-electoral-history/.

[290] Basically when Act 48 "Green Mountain Healthcare" was passed in 2011, it did not establish a funding mechanism. There are several objective obstacles to funding state-wide single-payer, which are too complicated to explain here, but Adam Gafney explains in "Lessons from Vermont." Anyway, this provided an opening and time to wage a counter-attack by the very health insurance industries that were taken by surprise by the passage of Act 48. Gafney writes, "There seemed to be more at work than simply changed revenue estimates, however. In the wake of Shumlin's decision, Richter criticized "vested interests," including "institutions with a commercial interest in health care, out-of-state PAC money and large businesses too miserly to provide decent health care to their employees…" See Adam Gafney, "Lessons from Vermont," *Jacobin*, January 8, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/vermont-single-payer.

Platform, as a "program," is perfect, that includes every issue, but that the PPC (2018+) is a potential vehicle for centering and leading with the horse (power) that will pull the cart (demands).

But to return to my initial inquiry, given, as Nijmie Dzrunink, PPF! PA leader, put it, "the weakness of where we are right now in the country," can the PPC (2018+) "organize the hope of the poor" and inspire mass organizing in poor and working-class communities? And if so, how can a campaign (not an organization) do this? I believe the answers to this are suggested in the analogies people use to describe the form of the PPC (2018+). In this dissertation, I spoke of some of these descriptions. Rev. Barber continually emphasizes that the PPC (2018+) should not be seen as a movement *organization*, but rather a movement *organism*. When I spoke with Tayna Fogle with the Kentucky PPC, she used the analogy of a body with different parts and organs with different functions and roles, but working together. Kenia Alcocer with the California PPC referred to the campaign as a baby that must be collectively cared for and fed so it can grow over many many years. Finally, Sheilah Garland-Olaniran, a leader with the Illinois PPC, called the PPC then and now a "gathering."

I appreciate all these descriptions for how they articulate the organic—structured and yet not rigid—nature of social movements generally and social movement projects like the PPC (2018+) specifically. Each of these analogies emphasize a different dimension of this organic quality. Tayna's analogy of the body emphasizes how differences can coexist within a whole, a unity that includes differences whether they be racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, etc. But her analogy also has a strategic or operational dimension to it. We do not need to be, and really should not be, working on the same exact thing, in the exact same place, however we should find ways of connecting our efforts and at times working in synchronicity towards shared goals. Trini

Rodriguez with Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural in Los Angeles echoed these themes using the analogy of an ecosystem, "you have to have differences that feed the ecosystem so that it can all be healthy. Because if it was just one thing, it's not going to be healthy." On the other hand, Kenia's analogy of the growing baby reflects the idea of growth stages in social movements, which require not only patience, but also active caring for the growth to happen, not assuming the baby will raise itself. Lastly, what I enjoyed about Sheilah's analogy of the PPC as a "gathering" was that she used it in a double-sense, a gathering as a noun and an action. She said, "I see the Poor People's Campaign just as I saw it in 1968 as sort of a gathering—gathering a certain level of consciousness, gathering a certain level of willingness to do something, gathering people to look beyond like my own personal issues and understanding that they're united with other folks in that pain. We have a lot more in common than we have not." Gathering is a process with a purpose to develop our consciousness and commitment to action.

This amorphousness or organic quality is what makes the PPC (2018+), and social movements more broadly, beautiful and I would argue potentially powerful, and yet also challenging and sometimes deeply frustrating. The work is intellectually and emotionally challenging because the form and the process are not always clearly defined or prescriptive. There is no exact roadmap to follow and we cannot assume we all have the same destination in mind. This gathering process is critical to assembling our people power, but it is also critical to developing a "certain level of consciousness," including some shared vision of what our goals are and how we get there. Because if people try to force the baby to drive a car, we might just all go off a cliff. So there are stages, but there is also orientation. It is not just the velocity of the movement that matters, but its orientation.[291]

[291] I borrow this insight about velocity and orientation from Willie Baptist.

As a big-tent "gathering," the PPC (2018+) is drawing and connecting lots of different people, who are not all ideologically or strategically on the same page. You have welfare rights activists that have been fighting a five-plus decades long battle to end poverty and then you have the person who was motivated to come to a voter registration canvassing day, because they wanted to get Trump out of office. The PPC (2018+) holds these diverse perspectives and experiences together, which can create an unwieldy coalition at times. However, I argue that the campaign's analytical framework and organizing model do provide critical orientation for those who are involved. The five "interlocking pillars," the "140 million," and the moral fusion organizing orient people in the direction of a systemic critique of capitalism, systemic racism, and imperialism, in the direction of class consciousness and solidarity. It does not guarantee people get there, but it points in the direction.

Furthermore, the structure of the campaign, a national campaign made up of 45 state-based campaigns, is concretely helping to link up leaders from across the country and within their states. Some of those leaders are already engaged in critical struggles in their local communities, some are looking for some way to be involved in movement organizing. In either case, it is putting leaders and potential leaders in relation to one another, facilitating a broader movement network, where leaders can see each other and learn from one another. This network certainly works in favor of the PPC (2018+), but it exceeds it and has consequences outside the form and function of the PPC (2018+). In this way, the PPC (2018+) is a vehicle for social movement reproduction, perhaps never achieving its broadly ambitious policy platform (although we will fight for it) but reproducing ideas and leaders on a larger scale. My big hope for the PPC (2018+) is that it can inspire the kind of mass base-building organizing (not just mobilizing) in every state that needs to happen, by identifying, connecting, and training leaders

who are prepared to do this work for the long-haul. My "little bit of hope" for the PPC (2018+) is that it will expand and deepen this network of leaders beyond what existed prior, which if it does nothing else, will widely cast the seeds of the movement to end poverty led by the poor. Seeds which will flourish in ways we cannot predict.

As an individual organizer-researcher involved in the PPC (2018+), I am part of this collective organism, body, and gathering; I have taken my share of responsibility for caring for this beautiful and sometimes fussy baby. I share the aspirations, challenges, and workload with those in the PPC (2018+), as well as this much broader movement to end poverty. I see this dissertation as part of that broader work, but I cannot claim to be speaking *for* this campaign or movement, only *with* it. I hope this dissertation will initiate further strategic conversation among those who are a part of this movement, but also with other justice seeking scholars, activists, and students.

As I write this in the summer of 2021, we are not yet in the clear of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the government and the public's desires to 'return to normal.' We continue to face devastating conditions of economic hardship and premature death exacerbated by this global pandemic. President Trump's negligence in the face of the pandemic was compounded by a fractured for-profit healthcare system, decades of neoliberal privatization, and a gridlocked Congress that undercut the U.S. state's capacity to appropriately respond to the crisis. As of July 20, 2021, 608,811 people have lost their lives to this pandemic in the U.S.[292] The U.S.'s abysmal

[292] "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," *The New York Times*, accessed on July 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html; However, one of the things that the PPC (2018+) often highlights is that even prior to the pandemic, approximately 245,000 deaths in the U.S. were a result of poverty related causes. See "How Many U.S. Deaths Are Caused by Poverty, Lack of Education, and Other Social Factors?," *Columbia: Mailman School of Public Health* (blog), July 5, 2011, http://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/how-many-us-deaths-are-caused-poverty-lack-education-and-other-social-factors.

death rate vis a vis other wealthy nations became one more indication of a declining Empire.[293] As we have seen, the impacts of this public health crisis have been unevenly felt along the preexisting fault lines of our society with black, brown, and poor communities suffering the worst.[294] Already precarious economic conditions were intensified by levels of unemployment not seen since the Great Depression and the looming threat of mass evictions and foreclosures.[295]

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[293] See Jason Beaubien, "Americans Are Dying In The Pandemic At Rates Far Higher Than In Other Countries," *National Public Radio*, October 13, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/10/13/923253681/americans-are-dying-in-the-pandemic-at-rates-far-higher-than-in-other-countries; German Lopez, "How the US's Covid-19 death toll compares to that of other wealthy countries," *Vox*, January 11, 2021, https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2021/1/11/22220827/covid-19-pandemic-coronavirus-usa-europe-canada-trump.

[294] There have been many reports looking at the demographic disparities in rates of COVID-19 infection and deaths by race, ethnicity, and poverty. For instance, according to the COVID Tracking Project, black people have died at 1.4 times the rate of white people, followed by indigenous, then latinx people. See "The COVID Racial Data Tracker," *The COVID Tracking Project at the Atlantic*, March 7, 2021, https://covidtracking.com/race; A cross-sectional study examining race/ethnicity and poverty in 10 cities, revealed the combined impact of race and income. They write, "While the excess burden of both infections and deaths was experienced by poorer and more diverse areas, racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 infections and deaths existed beyond those explained by differences in income." Suggesting that while income is a major factor, "systemic racism" is also at work in "less-poverty counties." See Samrachana Adhikari, et al., "Assessment of Community-Level Disparities in Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Infections and Deaths in Large US Metropolitan Areas," *JAMA Network Open*, July 28, 2020, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2768723?resultClick=1; However as Roberto R. Aspholm argues, it is critical that such racial disparities be placed within a structural and historical framework so as to illuminate the reasons for such disparities, rather than add fuel to biological racism or culturalist explanations that reduce disparities to behaviors. Here, a class analysis is crucial. "To Talk About Racial Disparity and COVID-19, We Need to Talk About Class," *Jacobin*, August 15, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/08/racial-disparity-covid-19-coronavirus; Of course, there are devastating global disparities as well. The refusal of pharmaceutical companies to waive patent rights for COVID-19 vaccines and the hoarding of vaccines by wealthy nations has left poorer nations, particularly in Africa, desperately trying to contain growing outbreaks. See Abdi Latif Dahir, and Holder, Josh, "Africa's Covid Crisis Deepens, but Vaccines Are Still Far Off," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/07/16/world/africa/africa-vaccination-rollout.html; In the end, as outgoing UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Philip Alston argues, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the cruelty and failures of our global political and economic system, see "Covid-19 has revealed a pre-existing pandemic of poverty that benefits the rich," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/11/covid-19-has-revealed-a-pre-existing-pandemic-of-poverty-that-benefits-the-rich.

[295] See Rakesh Kochhar, "Unemployment rose higher in three months of COVID-19 than it did in two years of the Great Recession," *Pew Research Center*, June 11, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/; As far as the eviction and foreclosure crisis, the final eviction moratorium from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will expire on July 31. While the moratorium has put a halt on evictions, renters are still responsible for paying back rent, fees, and interest accrued. And in order to be eligible for protection, renters had to have completed and returned a declaration form to their landlord. Needless to say, evictions have still been taking place despite the moratorium. But the government has known that the moratorium was only a temporary stop-gap measure forestalling a looming eviction crisis as so many renters and homeowners are desperately behind on rent and mortgages. Despite Congress allocating tens of billions of dollars in rental aid, much of this money has not reached people who need it. Now with the moratorium expiring, state and local governments are scrambling. At a

But this heightened moment of crisis also sparked mass resistance and demands for racial and economic justice. The summer of 2020 saw the largest wave of protests in US history, as an estimated 15 to 26 million people took to the streets in unprecedented numbers in the wake of the brutal murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.[296] Of course, this political, economic, and public health crisis has also mobilized right-wing reactionary forces. On January 6, 2021, following the electoral defeat of Donald Trump, thousands of his supporters gathered in Washington, D.C. to protest and attempt to prevent the certification of the election results based on Trump's false claim that the election was stolen from him. After a rally where Trump spoke, the crowd violently stormed the Capitol complex as Congress was in the midst of a joint-session to count electoral votes and formalize Joe Biden's victory.[297] Although the insurrection was unsuccessful in overturning the election results, it highlighted the dangers of white supremacist and anti-democratic currents in American politics. These are no doubt explosive and uncertain times, but with critical opportunities for showcasing the need for something radically new.

White Housing meeting in June 2021 with representatives from 50 cities to discuss plans for preventing this eviction crisis, Susan Rice, director of the White House's Domestic Policy Council said, "It's fundamentally the responsibility of state and local governments to get relief in the hands of renters and landlords." The federal government seems to have wiped their hands of the problem. But once again, this reveals an underlying state (as in government) capacity issue in that we lack the infrastructure in which to effectively disburse such funds. This is also coming at a time when pandemic unemployment insurance is being cut and/or work search requirements are being re-instated, if people were even eligible or able to get it in the first place. See Rachel Siegel, "FAQ: The CDC's final eviction moratorium expires July 31. Here's what Biden is doing to avert a crisis," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/30/housing-eviction-moratorium-white-house-summit/; Emily Benfer, et al., "The COVID-19 Eviction Crisis: an Estimated 30-40 Million People in America Are at Risk," *The Aspen Institute*, August 7, 2020, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/the-covid-19-eviction-crisis-an-estimated-30-40-million-people-in-america-are-at-risk/.

[296]Larry Buchannan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html.

[297]Lauren Leatherby et al., "How a Presidential Rally Turned Into a Capitol Rampage," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/12/us/capitol-mob-timeline.html.

As I have attempted to show, multiracial poor people's movements are and have been a critical site of sophisticated and practical politics, where organizers produce *analytical* insights about the systems and forces that produce the conditions under which we live, but also *strategic* insights about how we might counter and organize a transformation of these systems. The PPC (2018+) is building off this rich reservoir of knowledge, forged through decades of poor people's movements, of how to practice fusion politics across difference—a class politics that is needed now more than ever. As a container for this process on a mass scale, the PPC (2018+) creates substantial opportunities for large-scale movement exchange, leadership development, and coalitional as well as base-building organization. Again, the title of my dissertation references a longer slogan developed by Willie Baptist and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, "Learn as We Lead, Walk as We Talk, Teach as We Fight." As thousands of people endeavor to take up this "nettlesome task," invaluable lessons will develop in the process.[298] As we eventually reflect back on the PPC (2018+), I hope that we will ask ourselves not simply what did we do, but what we did we learn. I also hope we will be one step closer to abolishing poverty for everyone, everywhere.

[298] Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, 1986th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1967), 598.

Appendix: List of Interviews

Natasha Agrama, November 9, 2018, Los Angeles, California
A talented musician and singer, Natasha coordinated and led the "theomusicology" during the 40 Days of Action (Spring 2018) in California. I first met her at a national gathering the First Annual Poor People's Convening held in Baltimore County in September 2018. The purpose of this gathering was to collectively reflect on the 40 Days and discuss next steps. Although I was already thinking that my dissertation might shift from its initial focus on the role of arts and culture in the campaign, I still wanted to hear from cultural organizers in the campaign. In our interview, Natasha speaks thoughtfully about learning to lead through singing and the critical and complicated role of cultural expression, religion, and spirituality.

Kenia Alcocer, November 9, 2018, Los Angeles, California
Kenia is an organizer with Union de Vecinos, a grassroots community-based organization in the latinx and working-class immigrant neighborhood of Boyle Heights Los Angeles. She is also a part of the Popular Education Project (PEP), a collective of organizers and popular educators from diverse grassroots movements in the U.S. She has played a leading role in the PPC (2018+) at the state level, serving on the CA PPC coordinating committee, and national level, speaking at many events including being one of several testifiers at the PPC (2018+)'s first Congressional hearing on June 12, 2018. I was particularly interested in talking with her after she spoke at the First Annual Poor People's Convening (September 2018) about Union de Vecinos's popular education model, giving an example of how they use las Posadas, a celebration and re-enactment of the Nativity story in the bible, to initiate political discussion around conditions in the community.

Tonny Algood, November 20, 2018, Mobile, Alabama
Reverend Tonny is the director of the United Methodist Inner City Mission in Mobile, Alabama and part of the coordinating committee of the Alabama PPC. Raised on a subsistence farm his family owned in Mississippi, Rev. Tonny got involved in the civil rights movement a sophomore at Millsaps College in the 1960s. As a white Southerner, Tonny would go on to organize interracial unions of pulpwood haulers in Jones County, Mississippi, and then as a shipyard machinist in Mobile. Eventually, after going back to law school and working in legal services, Rev. Tonny was called to ministry in the early 1990s. I first met Rev. Tonny as part of an early PPC delegation that attended the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama in March of 2015.

Carolyn Baker, October 19, 2018, Detroit, Michigan
Carolyn works with PEP and the General Baker Institute, a social movement "incubator" in Detroit dedicated to political education and preserving the legacy of her late father, General Baker, an auto worker and a legendary organizer with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, United Auto Workers (UAW), and Retirees for Single Payer. Carolyn served on the coordinating committee of the Michigan PPC, as well as helping to develop the political education curriculum for the national campaign as part of PEP. Carolyn's mother, who I also interviewed, is Marian Kramer, National Chair for the Welfare Rights Union.

Katrina Battle, October 11, 2018, Milton, Vermont

Katrina got involved with the Vermont PPC during the 40 Days of Action (Spring 2018) and eventually joined the state coordinating committee through her organizing with Black Lives Matter (BLM) of Greater Burlington. She was instrumental in coordinating the bus from Vermont to Washington, D.C. for the culminating week of action and the Stand Against Poverty March & Rally on June 23, 2018. She was recruited onto the PPC choir helping to lead the singing during the last week in Washington D.C. In addition to being a part of BLM of Greater Burlington, Katrina founded Milton Inclusion & Diversity Initiative (MIDI) supporting high school students to lead community dialogues around addressing racism and fostering inclusion in the local public school system. When we sat down and talked at the Milton Public Library, Katrina spoke about her experiences growing up black/biracial and poor first in Gary, Indiana (a predominantly black community) and then to Milton, Vermont (a predominantly white community) and how this experience along with her background in ministry has shaped her organizing.

Munroe Bey, October 17, 2018, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Munroe is a member of Put People First! PA (PPF! PA) and videographer/photographer. She attended the Theomusicology and Movement Cultural Arts Convening in Raleigh, NC in February 2018 as the digital media delegate for the PA PPC. This is where we initially met, but we reconnected at PPF! PA's Annual Membership Assembly during my interview tour. We met up while I was in Pittsburg later that month, where she spoke about her involvement in the PPC (2018+) through her organization PPF! PA.

Danielle Blocker, October 6, 2018, Morgantown, Pennsylvania
Danielle served as one of the original tri-chairs of the MD PPC during the first year of its launch. Originally from Montgomery County, Maryland, Danielle threw herself into campus labor and racial justice organizing while an undergrad Washington University in St. Louis. Her student activism coincided with the Ferguson Uprising following the police murder of Michael Brown. At the time of the PPC launch, Danielle was a union organizer with SEIU 1199, but soon quit to dedicate her organizing energies to the MD PPC and incubating an organization for youth activism. Together, we attended PPF! PA's Annual Membership Assembly, where I interviewed her. She is now President of Young People for Progress (YPP), an organization of youth and young adults that have been leading efforts in Montgomery County against police brutality and for police accountability.

Avery Book, October 11, 2018, Burlington, Vermont
Professional singer and base-building organizer, Avery is a long-time leader with the Vermont Workers Center (VWC). He also serves on the National Steering Committee for the PPC (2018+). We first met through the Poverty Scholars gatherings organized by the Poverty Initiative (now Kairos Center) and have served together on various iterations of arts and media working groups prior to and anticipation of the PPC (2018+). Avery has had many organizing jobs, from ACORN to unions, to nonprofit think tanks, but his political home is the Vermont Workers Center. Although he began as a paid organizer, he has continued as a volunteer organizer and member. As someone who was already closely tied to the Poverty Scholars network through a base-building organization of the poor and dispossessed, I was curious to hear his perspective of the PPC (2018+) from initial proposal to reality and how their statewide organization (VWC) has related to this national campaign.

Jacob Butterly, October 7, 2018, Horsham, Pennsylvania
Jacob is a member and Montgomery County Healthcare Rights Committee co-coordinator of Put People First! PA (PPF! PA). As a singer and banjo player, they attended the Theomusicology and Movement Cultural Arts Convening in Raleigh, NC in February 2018 for the PA PPC. Jacob helped lead singing during the 40 Days of Action in Harrisburg and Washington, D.C. This is where we first connected. After a long weekend gathering for PPF! PA's Annual Membership Assembly, Jacob was gracious enough to meet up that last day at Lancer's Diner in Horsham, PA to talk about how PPF! PA's efforts to organize the poor and dispossessed around healthcare connects with the PPC (2018+).

Brittany DeBarros, October 9, 2018, New York, New York
Brittany, a veteran of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, got involved with the NY PPC in early 2018, quickly joined the state coordinating committee, and then was soon asked to serve on the National Organizing Team for the 40 Days Action to support multiple states. I was introduced to her at the First Annual Poor People's Convening in September 2018. When I interviewed her in October 2018 at the offices of About Face Against the War (formerly Iraq Veterans Against the War), she had just started there as an organizer. She is now their Outgoing Organizing Director.

Joyce and Lenny Brody, October 20, 2018, Chicago, Illinois
Joyce and Lenny Brody, who were a part of early conversations around relaunching the PPC (2018+), serve on the Illinois PPC's state coordinating committee. It was at a national PPC gathering in Baltimore in August 2016, where we first met. Joyce, a retired Workers United staffer, and Lenny, a retired printing press operator, have been involved in social justice and radical movements since the 1960s from the civil rights movement to the Communist Labor Party (CLP). As a young white person, Lenny was called South to work with SNCC during the Freedom Summers of 1965 and 1966. However by 1968, Lenny joked with me that he was too "militant" for Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign. As Joyce explained about King, "his evolution as a radical was not clear…it was a missed opportunity." Joyce and Lenny are also heavily involved with their ward's independent political organization (IPO) United Neighbors of the 35th Ward and the University of the Poor.

Mashyla Buckmaster, November 2, 2018, Aberdeen, Washington
As a formerly homeless mother and leader with Chaplains on the Harbor in Grays Harbor County, Washington, Mashyla Buckmaster was one of several key leaders to provide powerful testimony at the launch press conference for the PPC (2018+) on December 4, 2017. Chaplains on the Harbor has been deeply connected to the Kairos Center and the PPC (2018+) prior to and since the launch, so they were a group of leaders that I was excited to learn from. Although our interview was abbreviated, Mashyla spoke about her work running their soup kitchen in Westport as a project of survival and what it has meant for her to participate in the PPC (2018+) and connect with other impoverished leaders across race and geography.

Kristin Colangelo, October 8, 2018, Collingswood, New Jersey
Kristin Colangelo is a formerly homeless mother of three and has organized poor and homeless families for the past 20 years. She is the Membership Director, Organization Secretary, and a National organizer of the National Union of the Homeless. She is the coordinator of the

University of the Poor's Homeless Union History Project and a Root Coordinator of Put People First – PA. She is on the Executive Board of National Welfare Rights Union and a member of the New Jersey Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. I first met her at the December 4th launch of the PPC (2018+) and was intrigued because she was part of a generation before me, getting involved through the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU), and yet our paths had never crossed through the Poverty Scholars network. When I later interviewed her, she would explain this break in involvement. This was actually a common theme I heard from a lot of other long-time movement practitioners I interviewed, that while people remained committed, circumstances, often child rearing years, or in some cases political repression, forced breaks or less intense engagement. It seemed to me that these experiences rather than being "lost years" offered an opportunity for deeper reflection and clarity when people "returned." Since our interview, Kristin has become a real teacher to me.

Jimmy Collier, November 7, 2018, Fresno, California
Jimmy Collier was a folk singer-songwriter and civil rights activist who traveled with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. performing. In 1968, he and Rev. Frederick Douglass "Kirk" Kirkpatrick released a collection of original songs "Everybody's Got a Right to Live" in the lead up to the Poor People's Campaign's six-week encampment of the National Mall. When Anu Yadav and I interviewed him in his home in Fresno, we asked Collier about his work with Kirk coordinating the musical and cultural program at Resurrection City. He opened his home to a couple of traveling strangers and generously performed a couple songs, shared his story, and offered fascinating insights. For instance, he said that after the occupation of the National Mall, the plan had been to go to Wall Street next—truly a campaign ahead of its time. It was an incredible honor to have this time with him before his death. May he rest in power.

Nijmie Dzurinko, October 8, 2018, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Nijmie is an organizer, healer, and movement strategist originally from Monessen, a de-industrializing steel town in western Pennsylvania. She is also a founding member of Put People First! PA and co-chair of the PA PPC. She identifies as black, indigenous (Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation), queer, and working-class. During her tenure as Executive Director of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU), she became involved with the Poverty Initiative's Poverty Scholars Program. They also helped co-found Media Mobilizing Project (now the Movement Alliance Project), another organization that participated in the Poverty Scholars network.

Tayna Fogle, October 23, 2018, Lexington, Kentucky
Tayna is a mother, grandmother, and grassroots organizer. As a former felon, Tayna has been on the frontlines fighting to restore voting rights to former felons in Kentucky. At the time of our interview, she was an Organizing Apprentice with Kentuckians with the Commonwealth, a statewide membership organization, and a member of the Kentucky PPC's coordinating committee. She first caught my attention the First Annual Poor People's Convening (September 2018) as a passionate and determined leader and has continued to stand out as a key leader at the state and national level.

Bethney Foster, October 24, 2018, Old Hickory, Tennessee
Bethney is a prison abolitionist, antipoverty organizer, and faith leader on the Tennessee PPC's coordinating committee. She became connected to the PPC (2018+) five years prior to the launch

when she was working with the Mercy Junction Peace and Justice Center in Chattanooga, TN. As part of their outreach efforts touring different regions of the country, the Kairos Center reached out to Mercy Junction about meeting to talk about the Poor People's Campaign. I later met Beth when she attended a pre-launch national gathering held in Baltimore in August of 2016. I did not run into her again until the First Annual Poor People's Convening (September 2018). When I came through Tennessee, we sat down and talked at the Harriet Tubman House, an intentional community of activists and former insiders, where she lives.

Sheilah Garland-Olaniran, October 22, 2018, Chicago, Illinois
Although recently retired, at the time of our interview, Sheilah was working with National Nurses United (NNU), who she had been with for fifteen years helping to connect their union efforts around organizing nurses to broader issues of community health in Chicago and Illinois, including environmental pollution, mass incarceration, gentrification, and economic justice. Along with Joyce and Lenny Brody, she was part of early efforts to establish the Illinois Poor People's Campaign and served as an original tri-chair of their coordinating committee during the 40 Days of Action. Unlike most others I interviewed, I had never met or encountered Sheilah even from afar before we sat down to talk. Rather she was someone who had been recommended to me by Joyce Brody or Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies for the Kairos Center and Co-Director of Cultural Arts for the PPC (2018+). Our interview almost did not happen, because she was recovering from a cold, but the last day, she was feeling better and we were able to do it. As evident by her prominent role in chapter 3, Sheilah's insights and analysis made a real impression on me.

Irasema Hernandez, November 16, 2018, Houston, Texas
Sema initially got involved with the Texas PPC as one of the main "theomusicologists" helping to lead songs and chants during the 40 Days of Action. But her enthusiasm quickly led her to take on other roles, including as a legal liaison and then as tri-chair for the coordinating committee. She was one of the people recommended to me by Charon Hribar as a leader and song leader in the Texas campaign. When we spoke, I discovered that Sema's story offered an interesting case-study in the complex navigation between electoral politics and the PPC (2018+)'s political non-partisan stance. Since the PPC (2018+) does not endorse elected officials or candidates and they are not able to serve on the coordinating committee, Sema kept her distance from the campaign, while she was running against Beto O'Rourke for the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate. At the time of our interview, she was struggling with which path to choose, running for office again, or continuing with the TX PPC.

Amy Jo Hutchinson, October 18, 2018, Wheeling, West Virginia
Amy Jo was an original tri-chair with the WV PPC and one of several key testifiers the PPC (2018+)'s first Congressional hearing on June 12, 2018. At the time of our interview, she was the Northern Regional Organizer for Our Children, Our Future (now called Our Future West Virginia [OFWV]), a statewide membership-based organization focused on civic engagement and a broad range of social justice issues—voting rights, child poverty, safety net programs. Anu Yadav had done a short interview with Amy Jo during the 40 Days in Washington, D.C. for her Soul Tent Stories series and recommended her. I had the honor of sitting down and talking with Amy Jo for breakfast at a diner in Wheeling, WV. She spoke about how her experiences a poor

single-mother led her to organizing and how she now works to identify and develop other leaders from the ranks of the poor, particularly poor women.

Joyce and Nelson Johnson, October 26, 2018, Greensboro, North Carolina
Mrs. Joyce Johnson and Rev. Nelson Johnson are founders of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina with deep roots in movements for racial and economic justice going back to the 1960s. Rev. Johnson serves on the National Steering Committee for the PPC (2018+) and Mrs. Johnson is on the NC PPC coordinating committee. They are unique in the PPC (2018+) in that they were independently connected to both the Kairos Center at Union Theological Seminary (Rev. Nelson studied at Union) and Rev. Barber through their organizing in North Carolina. The Johnsons spoke to me about how the Beloved Community Center and its organizing framework is a direct outgrowth of lessons from their fifty years of movement organizing, including the Greensboro Massacre of 1979, where members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party shot and killed five of their comrades (four were members of the Communist Workers Party [CWP]) marching in support of a textile workers unionization drive. Their commitment to a revolutionary transformation of our value systems through nonviolent struggle and multiracial fusion organizing led by those most impacted as the ultimate antidote to racial and other violence was compelling to say the least. It was a deep honor to learn from them and record their story.

Kate Kanelstein, October 11, 2018, Burlington, Vermont
Kate is the Executive Director of the Vermont Workers Center (VWC), a statewide organization of working-class people fighting for economic justice and human dignity. She also served as a member of the Vermont PPC Coordinating Committee during the 40 Days of Action. VWC was part of the Poverty Scholars Network, which is how I initially met Kate. As an organizational leader of a base-building organization with strong ties to the network, I was interested to hear how they were negotiating the balance between their organizing priorities and the demands of the PPC (2018+). When were they one in the same, when did it require trade-offs, and how did they make these decisions?

Marian Kramer, October 19, 2018, Highland Park, Michigan
Based in Detroit, Michigan, Marian is a veteran civil rights, welfare rights, antipoverty, and community-labor organizer. She is Chair of the National Welfare Rights Union and … She also serves on the *** of the PPC (2018+). Originally from Louisiana, she organized with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) doing voter registration in the South in the early 1960s, before moving to Detroit. As part of her community organizing against urban renewal, Marian attended The Poor People's War Council on Poverty in Syracuse, New York in 1996, where she got introduced to Beulah Sanders and George Wiley with the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). When she returned to Detroit, she got involved in welfare rights organizations locally helping to build a chapter there. She along with her sisters in the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) have been on the front lines of struggles for welfare, human dignity, and freedom from poverty for over fifty years. Currently, MWRO is helping to lead the fight against emergency managers and for the human right to clean water.

West McNeil, October 10, 2018, Latham, New York

Rev. West McNeil is the Director of the Labor Religion Coalition of New York state and tri-chair of the NY PPC. They attended Union Theological Seminary, where they got connected to the Poverty Initiative (now Kairos). I first met West while they were part of a PI Immersion trip designed to introduce seminary students to some of the grassroots organizations in the Poverty Scholars network. One of their stops was in Baltimore to meet with the United Workers, where I was working at the time. Trained in the PI model, Rev. West has dedicated their organization to building out the NY PPC, reaching out to local organizations across the state, helping to support regional committees and working groups. When we met, we discussed the issues of internal structure and capacity building, alongside the political terrain and dynamics of their state.

Savina Martin, October 14, 2018, Boston, Massachusetts
Minister Savina is a lifelong activist and organizer from Massachusetts. She is an Army Veteran, and over the past few decades has mobilized and organized with homeless men, women and veterans throughout Boston and San Diego, CA. She has played a leadership role in the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) and is an active member on the National Advisory Council of the Homeless Union today. She is currently a member of the University of the Poor's Homeless Union History Project and a Tri-Chair of the Massachusetts Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Like Kristin Colangelo, I had not actually met Savina before the PPC (2018+), although I was familiar with the history of the NUH and recognized her from the documentary film *Takeover*. For me talking with Savina was not only an incredible opportunity to learn more about this history of prior struggle, but to get to know a key organizer, faith leader, and scholar in this movement.

James Montoya, November 13, 2018, Albuquerque, New Mexico
James is a visual artist, activist, and member of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), a multiracial membership organization that works primarily in low-income communities of color to gain community control of our land and resources. James has been involved in the PPC (2018+) as an artist at the state and national level. He was a part of the Arizona PPC Coordinating Committee leading the art-making in preparation for the 40 Days of Action. We first met at the Theomusicology and Movement Cultural Arts Convening in Raleigh, NC in February 2018 and were both part of the visual arts track.

Sarah Monroe and Emily Nilsson, Grays Harbor County, Washington
Born and raised in Grays Harbor County, Rev. Sarah Monroe co-founded Chaplains on the Harbor, a "freedom church of the poor" that combines pastoring, projects of survival, and organizing for human dignity and freedom from poverty. Chaplains on the Harbor has been connected to the Kairos Center and the PPC (2018+) since before the launch and have been a leading organization at the state and national level. When Anu Yadav and I sat down to interview Rev. Monroe, her wife Emily Nilsson joined the conversation. I learned that Emily, who also grew up there, ran another soup kitchen in the area similarly compelled by the growing poverty among those of her millennial generation.

Vanessa Nosie, November 12, 2018, San Carlos Apache reservation, Arizona
Chiricahua Apache mother and activist Vanessa Nosie and her family have been fighting to protect Oak Flat, their ancestral and sacred land, from copper mining by Resolution Copper. Her father Wendsler Nosie, former Chairman of the San Carlos Apache tribe, founded Apache Stronghold, an organization dedicated to this struggle. Apache Stronghold has a partner of the

PPC (2018+) since its launch in December 2017. Vanessa testified during the 40 Days of Action at the PPC (2018+)'s first Congressional hearing on June 12, 2018. When I met with Vanessa on the San Carlos Apache reservation, she told me that where we were was not their home, but an open-air prison where her ancestors were forced to live after being removed from their land by the U.S. Army. Today, Oak Flat located in Arizona's Tonto National Forest, 66 miles West of San Carlos, is at risk of being destroyed by copper mining, because Arizona Senators, John McCain and Jeff Flake attached a land-exchange rider to the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act Bill in December 2014. This opened the door for Resolution Copper to put in a bid to lease the land for mining. After years of organizing, Apache Stronghold's case was finally held before the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals on October 22, 2021. The court will hand down its ruling by the end of the year or early 2022.

Anthony Prince, November 6, 2018, Berkeley, California
Anthony Prince is the General Counsel for the California Homeless Union/Statewide Organizing Council, an attorney in the state of California, and the Co-Chair of the California PPC. He was a founding and leading member of the National Union of the Homeless and its Chicago/Gary Indiana local chapter in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The revival of the NUH and the revival of the PPC (2018+) are parallel and yet overlapping processes. However, from my perspective, it appears that the groundwork outreach phase and launch of the PPC (2018+) helped to reconnect older movement networks like water released from a damn enlivening and reconnecting dried river beds and tributaries. Through the PPC (2018+), I was suddenly meeting all these leaders from prior periods of movement struggle, including Anthony. I first heard his name, but I did not actually meet him until the First Annual Poor People's Convening (September 2018). In our workshops, I was impressed by how he spoke about the work of the CHU and the next phase of the PPC (2018+).

David Przepioski, October 11, 2018, Burlington, Vermont
David is a formerly homeless veteran, artist, and member of Vermont Workers Center (VWC). He served on the coordinating committee of the Vermont PPC during the 40 Days of Action and was part of the Vermont delegation that traveled to Washington, D.C. David was recommended to me by Avery as one of the most involved VWC members in the PPC (2018+) during the launch phase. He spoke about VWC's study of Dr. King's 1968 PPC in advance of the re-launch and what it meant to be carrying on this history today. He also talked about how his artistic practice intersects with his activism.

Trini and Luis Rodriguez, November 8, 2018, San Fernando, California
Trini and Luis are co-founders of Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore in Northeast San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County, the second largest Mexican American community in the U.S. after East L.A. Born and raised in nearby Pacoima, Trini is a healer, educator, and writer with roots in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. She served as Tía Chucha's Executive Director until February 2018. Luis is a poet, writer, and political activist, best known for his book *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* about growing up in East L.A. in the 1960s and 1970s. He has been teaching writing workshops in prison for over forty years. I first met them at Oak Hill Center in Baltimore, where they attended a national PPC gathering in August 2016. In the Spring of 2018, Luis spoke at the CA PPC Mass Meeting in Los Angeles. Although they do not have a formal organizing role in the PPC (2018+), like many artists and

movement veterans I see them playing an important educative role in the campaign, as well as broader movement spaces.

Khalil Saddiq, October 13, 2018, Boston, Massachusetts
Khalil is an entrepreneur and formerly homeless Marine veteran that got connected to the Massachusetts PPC through tri-chair and NUH organizer Savina Martin. He initially served as the legal and police liaison during the 40 Days of Action and then was eventually brought on as tri-chair. When I came through Boston, Savina invited me to one of their MA PPC meetings where I met Khalil, who was facilitating the meeting. Khalil's was one of the few spontaneous interviews along my trip. Thankfully, he was open to talking with me after their meeting about what got him involved and their efforts in Massachusetts.

Carlos Santacruz, December 11, 2018, by zoom
Carlos served on the National Organizing Team for the PPC (2018+) during the 40 Days. Originally from New York City, he and his partner Yexenia Vanegas were already connected with PEP members and other NY activists involved with efforts to relaunch the PPC (2018+). When they moved to Detroit in 2017, they attended PEP's Summer School of Resistance, where they met Rev. Erica Williams with Repairers of the Breach. She later invited them to attend a regional MPOLIS where the initial MI state coordinating committee for the PPC (2018+) was formed. As Carlos began outreach and organizing to build the MI PPC, he went from coordinating committee member to tri-chair to National Organizing Team. Several other energetic and effective state-based organizers were tapped to join the national team during the 40 Days—Brittany (NY) and Rev. Janelle Bruce (MD). When I interviewed Carlos over zoom in December 2018, he had just returned from three months in Brazil at the MST's (Landless Workers Movement) international school.

Aaron Scott, November 3, 2018, Seattle, Washington
Originally from Mechanicville, New York, Aaron Scott is a co-founder of Chaplains on the Harbor, a radical antipoverty mission station of the Episcopal Church located in rural Grays Harbor County, Washington. He attended Union Theological Seminary, where he got involved with the Poverty Initiative (Kairos Center). Rev. Monroe and he connected during their ordination process for the Episcopal Church. Aaron eventually moved to Washington to help Rev. Monroe start Chaplains. He is a member of the National Steering Committee of the PPC (2018+) and the Washington PPC coordinating committee. Aaron is also a member and coordinator of the Freedom Church of the Poor, a religious program of the Kairos Center committed to the liberative theology of the poor and dispossessed. They hold weekly online service, bible study, and produce resources for movements.

Anita Simha, October 26, 2018, Carrboro, North Carolina
Anita is an ecology student and environmental activist who got involved in the North Carolina Moral Mondays Movement when they were in high school. When they heard Rev. Barber was launching the PPC (2018+), they joined the NC PPC helping to lead the nonviolent direct action training during the 40 Days of Action as an undergraduate college student at the University of North Carolina (UNC). Following the 40 Days, they took on roles as social media coordinator and co-chair of the environmental justice committee. In September 2018, they helped organize

an ecological justice tour in North Carolina attended by Al Gore to highlight the problem of coal ash pollution of the water supply in Belews Creek, NC.

Robin Tanner, December 13, 2018, by zoom
Rev. Robin Tanner is Minister of Worship and Outreach at Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Summit, NJ and former National Faith Organizer of the PPC (2018+). She got connected to Rev. Barber and the Moral Mondays Movement when she was living in Charlotte, North Carolina as a minister for a Unitarian Universalist Congregation. She got activated in 2010 around the NC state legislatures attacks on same gender marriage and then joined the wave of Moral Mondays civil disobedience at the state capitol in 2013 to challenge a broad range of regressive policies around LGBTQ rights, voting rights, Medicaid, and more. I first met Rev. Tanner at the First Annual Poor People's Convening (September 2018) and was interested in her history with the Moral Mondays Movement and national faith outreach.

Yexenia Vanegas, October 19, 2018, Detroit, Michigan
Yexenia served on the Michigan PPC's coordinating committee as the movement arts coordinator helping to lead songs during the 40 Days of Action and outreach to singers, musicians, and artists. Originally from New York, she attended City College where she got involved in student activism. Not soon after she and her partner Carlos Santacruz moved to Detroit, they were invited to join the MI PPC through their connections to PEP. I had never met Yexenia before the interview; she was recommended by Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies for the Kairos Center and Co-Director of Cultural Arts for the PPC (2018+). We met in the classroom trailer at the Detroit Public School where Yexenia taught. She spoke about the importance and real challenges of cultural organizing in a campaign that seeks to unite across racial, economic, and generational lines.

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