

HOMELESS SHELTERS: Reproducing Ethno-racial Divisions Among Black and Brown Women

Odilka Santiago

Abstract: Today's homeless crisis is the largest since the Great Depression. It is increasingly a problem for Black and Brown families as they are the fastest-growing population going into shelters. Between 2017 and 2020, over 60,000 people slept in New York City municipal shelters per night. African Americans and Hispanics/Latina/o/x make up ninety percent of the sheltered-homeless population, and two-thirds are families. New York City is legally mandated to house anyone found legitimately homeless. Drawing from an ethnographic study, this paper will analyze the current and historical experiences of working-poor women within the framework of welfare racism. Historical and ethnographic research findings show that shelters (as part of the welfare system) reproduce ethno-racialized and gendered subordination at the structural and interpersonal levels. As a site of potential help, the shelter system reifies ethno-racial hierarchies among marginalized women through 1) procedures that shuffle people through spaces, appointments and meetings without the guarantee of permanent housing; 2) policing sexual activity; and 3) reproducing colorism and humiliating stereotypes that justify punitive treatment from welfare services. These processes distract homeless women from coalition-building for permanent housing conditions and, instead, pit them against each other in competition for resources.

Keywords: *Black, Brown, homeless, Latina/o/x, New York City, shelter, welfare*

Homelessness in the U.S. is the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The number of individuals residing in New York City municipal shelters increased by twenty percent in 2021 over the last ten years (Coalition for the Homeless 2021). Of those, fifty-seven percent are Black, thirty-two percent are Hispanic/Latina/o/x, seven percent are white, four percent are unknown and less than one percent are Asian or Native American

(ibid). From 2001 to 2013, homeless families with children increased by seventy-three percent in New York City shelters (Coalition For The Homeless 2013). Stereotypes about those experiencing homelessness blame individuals for their adverse circumstances, but research shows the number one research is the lack of real affordable housing. New York City must shelter anyone who can *prove* they have no other resources, but this intervention does not solve the issue of affordable housing, but instead this traumatizes and fractures relationships between those experiencing homelessness. More specifically, New York City municipal shelters' current welfare and shelter services reproduce racial hierarchies. They individualize shame in historical stereotypes of African American, Caribbean and Latina women, which prevents coalition-building between working poor women of color.

Since 1981, New York City has been one of three places in the United States with the *Right to Shelter* mandate. Through the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), applicants must provide documentation of their living situation from the past one to two years. People travel to New York City from all over the U.S., including Puerto Rico, to be placed “quickly” into affordable or low-income housing. Nevertheless, the average length of time spent in shelters was eighteen months for families with children and twenty-nine months for adult families in 2021 (NYC Department of Homeless Services 2021). From 2015 to 2020, over 60,000 individuals slept in shelters each night, with the total number of families averaging 44,000 persons (Coalition for the Homeless 2021). The number of sheltered-homeless individuals declined to 48,000 people per night by August 2021 after coronavirus peaked in New York City in 2020 (ibid). DHS spends the most money sheltering families through temporary housing, emergency shelters and operations/services. They pay private landlords \$2,500 to \$5,000 per month for a room, and \$7,7000 per month to house one family in commercial hotels (PTH 2018).

This paper will illustrate how current conditions in New York City municipal shelters reproduce ethno-racial hierarchies that pit impoverished women of color against one another for permanent housing. My core argument is that the current welfare and shelter services from New York City municipal shelters reproduce racial hierarchies and individualize shame found in historical stereotypes of African American, Caribbean, and Latina women, which prevents coalition-building between working poor women of color. To lay out this argument, I will review the literature on women of color and homelessness, noting the lack of research on women of color experiencing homelessness. Then I will overview the methodology used to collect the data informing this project. The final sections outline the three main findings of this work, namely that although a site of potential help, the shelter system reifies ethno-racial hierarchies among marginalized women through 1) procedures that shuffle people through spaces, appointments and meetings without the guarantee of permanent housing; 2) policing sexual activity; and 3) reproducing colorism and racist stereotypes that justify punitive treatment from welfare services.

Literature on Homelessness

Of the studies and scholarship on homelessness, seldom is there analysis on the unique and specific experiences of homeless women of color. According to Housing and Urban Development (HUD), homelessness can be defined in four categories. The first category of homelessness is literally homeless: anyone living in a place not meant for habitation (including emergency shelters or transitional housing). The second category is the imminent risk for homelessness: anyone losing primary nighttime residence within 14 days and unable to maintain housing. The third category labels homeless under federal statutes, which includes families with children or unhoused unaccompanied youth (up to age twenty-four) for the last sixty or more days. Lastly,

homelessness is defined as anyone fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence. This can be anyone fleeing dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, dangerous or life-threatening conditions with no other housing options (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012). Homelessness is generally discussed as an all-encompassing category that is often analyzed racially, but not with gender in mind.

While there has been a significant growth of African American, Latina and Caribbean women and their families entering homeless shelters, few studies address their particular experiences (Santiago 2021). The experiences of Black and Brown women experiencing homelessness are thus generally left out of this scholarship. Qualitative studies of homelessness provide experiences of homeless men and women living on the street (Duneier 1999; Liebow 1993). Within Latina/o/x studies, many scholars have focused on gentrification and displacement (Betancur 2005; Muniz 1988; Pérez 2002; Rúa and Garcia 2017) but with little mention of homelessness. The scholarship that does attend to Latina/o/x homelessness concentrates mainly on homelessness due to migration, barriers in language, employment and community (Baker 1996; Chinchilla and Gabrielian 2019; Conroy and Heer 2003). The lack of scholarship on those in shelters could be due to Latinas/os/xs avoiding homeless shelters out of fear of deportation, past experiences of discrimination, or lack of Spanish translators (Chinchilla and Gabrielian 2019).

An important contributor to the scholarship on homelessness is cultural studies scholar Craig Willse (2015), who argues that homelessness and housing insecurity are technologies of state racism. Willse argues that when homelessness is situated as a problem, it obscures conditions that produce housing deprivation and techniques of insecurities. In addition, anthropologist Aimee Cox (2015) explores how Black teenage girls resist

stereotypes by using “choreography” as a method to challenge popular discourses that marginalize them. Cox provides a vital contribution in the scholarship on homelessness that challenges tropes of Black poverty and instead showcases multiple ways individuals experiencing homeless exercise agency. There is hardly a distinction within scholarship on homelessness between individuals experiencing homelessness on the street instead of those living in shelters. This paper will focus on the latter.

This research is part of a larger project exploring if and how New York City’s shelter system helps individuals experiencing homelessness achieve permanent housing and self-sufficiency. This inquiry regarding effectiveness has primarily been focused on policy assessment by nonprofit organizations like Coalition for the Homeless and Picture The Homeless. Other stakeholders, like New York’s Department of Housing Services (DHS) may provide a way to achieve permanent housing, but my study of women of color navigating this institution indicates that this can be at the cost of compromised mental health and trauma faced by those who must navigate the shelter system’s mandatory procedures. As part of a racist welfare system, New York City’s municipal shelter divides and fractures potential relationships between African American, Latina and Caribbean women by forcing individuals to compete for limited resources.

Methodology

Based on ethnographic research from 2017-2020, my analysis primarily comes from interviews with those who have spent at least one year in a public, private or hotel shelter in New York City. I conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with sheltered-homeless women, six staff who worked at shelter sites and safe havens, and countless informal discussions with individuals living on the streets. The majority of women I spoke to were women of color, except

for five women. For the in-depth interviews with sheltered-homeless women, I spent anywhere from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours together, often sharing a meal while I recorded our structured interviews. I later transcribed them manually. I talked to staff in person or over the phone. In 2020, I began to use the app *Tape a Call* to record phone conversations with various participants. Additionally, I talked to sheltered residents via informal discussions quickly and in non-structured ways. I often met interviewees outside of their shelter buildings because DHS forbids guests from entering these facilities, posting a security guard at the entrance of every shelter to make sure no guests and contraband come in. I mostly talked to people while they walked to their next appointment, to the store or on their way to do laundry while I hastily wrote fieldnotes in my notebook or on my phone. I tried to respect everyone's time and recognize that they had important insight and information. I also explicitly acknowledged the limits of my research, in that while I was unable to provide immediate assistance in finding them housing, my goal has been to elevate their voices.

My initial strategy for getting interviews via snowballing as an individual researcher was difficult. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was met with rightful hostility by a young Black woman talking to two other women outside their shelter building on the Upper Westside of Manhattan. On July 9, 2017, I walked up to these women and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. With a look of surprise and skepticism, one woman asked me, "Can you help us get our own place?" After responding that I could not, she replied, "If you want to know conditions inside a shelter, then you could live in one yourself!"

Later that summer in August 2017, I connected to people through participatory observation and outreach with Picture The Homeless (PTH)¹, a homeless-led grassroots organization in East Harlem. Working with PTH not only

allowed me to connect and learn from other scholar-activists and organizations throughout the U.S., but the experience, relationships and insight I gained greatly informed my interview protocol and analytical lens. Additionally, my experience organizing with civil rights campaigns and my training as a historical sociologist—which helped me learn the distinction between legal rights and system practices by state assistance/relief programs—together shaped the analytical framework I used for analyzing my interview transcriptions and field notes. What emerged was the realization that not only did those navigating the shelter system have limited time, but they were constantly responding to humiliating stereotypes. Individuals experiencing homelessness confront ascriptions characterizing them as incapable of managing themselves and their time productively and, as a result, are blamed for needing assistance. Similar to the welfare system, I found contemporary shelters reproduce racial hierarchies and individualize shame rooted in historical stereotypes of African American, Caribbean and Latina women. These ethno-racial hierarchies and stereotypes can prevent coalition-building between poor homeless women of color. The elements of the shelter system bureaucracy and their underlying discourses that contribute to these limiting conditions are discussed in the following three sections. They include 1) busywork that shuffles sheltered-homeless individuals around in pseudo-productivity; 2) the undue policing of sexual activity of women living in shelters; and 3) the manifestation of discourses rooted in stereotypes that justify punitive treatment.

Shuffling through the Shelter System and Reproducing Ethno-Racial Divides

On July 10, 2018, I met with Charmel² at a small rustic café one block north of Central Park in Manhattan. Charmel told me about her experience living in New York City homeless shelters for six years. Charmel, a fifty-one-year-old, Black cis-gendered woman, wore her salt and pepper-colored hair shaved short in an afro mohawk. Wearing small gold hoop earrings, dark magenta tint

lipstick, a white blouse and blue jeans, Charmel looked radiant and carried herself with poise. Like most people living in a shelter, she carried a backpack daily. During our meal, Charmel shared her background and difficulties finding affordable housing. Charmel was born in East Harlem and is a mother of five. Prior to being displaced by Hurricane Sandy³, she worked for the Board of Education for four-and-a-half years. Immediately after the storm, she and her partner were displaced from their Brooklyn apartment when their landlord decided not to return after their apartment flooded.

From 2012 to 2021, Charmel and her partner have stayed in several shelters and have moved around almost annually in what she called the “shelter shuffle.” Shelter shuffle describes the constant moving of individuals to different temporary spaces (instead of permanent housing) without notification and at the discretion of shelter directors. Like most sheltered-homeless individuals, Charmel stayed in shelter spaces that have varied from commercial hotel rooms, repurposed public buildings like a former school classroom, and apartment units in privately owned “cluster” buildings in New York City.

At lunch, Charmel seemed surprisingly calm and in a cheerful mood despite being recently transferred out of her shelter unit to the Challenger Hotel shelter without warning a week prior to our meeting. When describing that day, Charmel was surprised upon entering her shelter unit at the Holiday Inn in Manhattan to find all of her things collected, stuffed into a large black plastic bag and deposited with the security guard at the entrance. When seeking an explanation, shelter administration told Charmel that she was being reassigned for “safety reasons.” However, Charmel believed that the real reason she was being relocated was “because I was on the news.” Previously, Charmel had been interviewed by several news organizations such as *New York 1 News*, *New York Post*, *WNYC Public Radio*, *Los Angeles*

Times, *Democracy Now*, and more. In one interview describing the conditions of the shelter condition, she complained that “people are having a ton of anxiety up in here [shelters],” and “why would you [the city] spend \$7,000 someplace somebody can’t even have a decent meal?” (Gross 2018). When she had the opportunity to vocalize these inequities, she was not hesitant. Charmel was cognizant of disparities between investment funding shelters and the lag in services provided for the rights those sheltered in public housing should have. She believes she was transferred from the Challenger Hotel shelter as a form of retaliation for speaking out.

During her time in the shelter system, Charmel was an active member and organizer with Picture The Homeless (PTH). I met Charmel while volunteering at PTH. It is a grassroots organization that has fought and advocated for the civil rights and housing of individuals experiencing homelessness since 1999. The organization is primarily led by those who have been previously or are still homeless with the assistance of a few paid staff, volunteers and college interns. Volunteering with PTH, Charmel organized Hurricane Sandy survivors to fight for their right to shelter, “Housing Not Warehousing” campaign, and weekly outreach at shelters and soup kitchens.

Like their homeless clients, shelter staff find fault with the current DHS system, noting it can be harsh and discouraging to those seeking housing through municipal shelters. For women of color, especially those identifying as African American, Caribbean and Latina, the historical stigma of the lazy, sexually promiscuous, or fraudulent welfare queen or matriarch is an added layer that often negatively impacts their experience living in homeless shelters. While the welfare queen was a strategically constructed political propaganda that justified the dismantling of public funds and services since 1976, this stereotype is an additional burden poor homeless women of color navigate when trying to find livable shelter.

In a July 2017 interview with Monique⁴, an African American female in her mid-fifties who served as the director of several shelters in New York City, and has overseen several shelter sites over three decades, stated:

The system can be very punitive, you know, there are a lot of rules, regulations and curfew, someone telling me when to come and when to go. And the frustration is about wanting to be independent and not wanting to follow all of these rules and regulations but having to do it in order to survive. I think it's pretty consistent. Years ago, we didn't have such rigid rules and regulations. We didn't really function from a punitive place and now it kind of feels like the system is a bit punitive and probably to discourage people from entering the system or to not make it so comfortable is the thought so that people won't stay. (2017)

The “rigid rules and regulations” become apparent immediately. Once accepted into New York City shelters following a ten-day investigation at intake centers, homeless individuals are required to keep up with frequent meetings, appointments and paperwork from various offices. For example, clients must meet with their case manager bi-weekly for at least an hour and attend job work programs for at least twenty-five hours a week. These job work programs either have clients work on their resumes or job search online independently. There are mandatory meetings with case managers, housing specialists, job training programs, long lines at welfare offices, curfews, and more. Whether they are working or not, this time must be documented and reported to case managers to prove these individuals are worthy of remaining in a DHS shelter. Most of the women interviewed complained the cumbersome job training took up time better spent looking for employment in person. They confessed that at some point, they just sat in the room of

these trainings waiting for their required time to be over. Those employed had to provide documentation with their hours signed off by their supervisor to DHS staff. Moreover, they must do these tasks all while seeking permanent housing alone. Despite the staff's benevolent intentions, shuffling clients to appointments and providing paperwork to various welfare offices create more barriers than opportunities. These punitive rules and requirements keep individuals busy with endless tasks and often humiliating staff interactions. In return, women in shelters are treated (and treat others) as if their situations are individual problems instead of structural ones developed by a legacy of racial capitalism⁵ and colonialism. Shelter and welfare staff present affordable housing as a limited resource only achievable through individual tasks. The effect of this rhetoric can stifle coalition-building among African American, Latina and Caribbean women. This busy work keeps them occupied rather than immediately providing them with housing first.⁶

Sheltered-homeless clients must sit for long hours and provide the same information to different offices without the guarantee that these tasks will provide permanent housing. The constant changes and verbal commands, office protocols, and bureaucratic red tape reinforce that the state and state personnel are the ones in control. Shuffling individuals around means that they cannot establish a routine or plan anything, which keeps them in anticipation and in survival mode. Shuffling also keeps them in suspense and waiting to obtain information and instructions, putting them in anxiety and tension with others. The shelter system's complex web of requirements and lack of routine makes it clear that their clients are at the state's mercy for sustenance. Keeping these sheltered-homeless women of color occupied promotes the idea that being idle or unproductive leads to housing insecurity. The notion that homelessness is the result of idleness especially targets African American, Caribbean and Latina women, who also face deep-seated tropes of being sexually deviant.

Constructing Sexual Deviants of Impoverished Black and Brown Women

While standing outside of a shelter in the Bronx in August 2017, I met Tiffany⁷. Tiffany was furious as she walked from across the street with her right hand wound tightly in a fist facing the ground and her shoulders inched up towards her ears. Tiffany, petite, tan-skinned, and with long curly dark brown hair worn in a high ponytail, was a half-Puerto Rican and half-Dominican woman in her mid-twenties. She approached her new friend Nicole, an African American woman also in her twenties, throwing her arms up in the air and bellowing that she was just approached by a man in a car, who offered her \$10 for a *blow job*. She yelled, “Are you kidding me? Do I look like a prostitute?” Visibly upset, she pulled a cigarette out of her bag and, while pacing back and forth, said in a slightly louder voice, “I’m not like these women. Just because I’m in this shelter doesn’t mean I will do *that!*,” gesturing to the crowd of women and a few men barbecuing in front of the women’s shelter. Her comment—that she is not like *those* people pushes back against the stereotype that women who enter homeless shelters are deviant and immoral and signals the historic conflation of poverty with sexual deviancy.

The stereotype that poor and primarily Black and Brown women are sexually deviant is rooted in colonialism. Since the sixteenth century, prostitution, sexual promiscuity and loose morals have been conflated with impoverished women. The stereotypes of sexual deviancy have especially plagued dark-skinned African American, Caribbean and Latina women regardless of socioeconomic class. These stereotypes stem from how women’s bodies were doubly exploited as unpaid laborers and breeders during chattel slavery in the Americas (Davis 1983).

Black and Brown women’s sexuality has been reproduced thereon as moral and economic concerns (Roberts 1993; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Collins

2000). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) uses the concept of “controlling images” to explain the power of stereotypes in controlling, regulating and restricting the mobility of Black women. Images ranging from breeder, mammie, matriarch, jezebel and welfare queen have essentialized Black and Brown women’s characters as unidimensional—either deviant or obedient.

Historically, women’s sexuality and motherhood have functioned as political tools that subordinated women into unpaid labor childrearing (Roberts 1993). For white women, their motherhood was constructed as naturally nurturing. In contrast, enslaved Black women were only as valuable to their masters so much as they could reproduce more enslaved people (Roberts 1993; Davis 1983). During chattel slavery, the control of Black women was an economic decision, but, at the same time, Black motherhood was not wholly discouraged. While Black bodies were used as breeders, white women’s labor was relegated to the household, separated from public spheres, and reproduced as housewives (Federici 2004; Roberts 2017). The labels “savage” and “civilized” differentiate between African and European white women (Mies 1986, 95). Furthermore, like all Afro-descendent women who are racialized as Black and Brown, Puerto Rican women are sexualized due to a colonial project.

Families of color with children are the largest population in New York City municipal shelters. In 2021, 107,510 adults and children slept in (DHS) shelters, including 31,947 homeless children (Coalition for the Homeless 2021). Approximately fifty-seven percent of all heads of households are Black and thirty-two percent are Latina/o/x (ibid). Today’s shelter system discourages Black and Brown motherhood through sexual deviancy and unfit parenting tropes. Rooted in early twentieth century social policy, sterilization for incarcerated, poor, insane, or mentally ill people has been used as a government-funded means of contraception (Perry 2016) and to mitigate

rising poverty rates. This barbaric policy also extended to U.S. territories. Between 1932 and 1968, one-third of women in Puerto Rico were sterilized without their consent. After the legalization of contraceptives in 1937, the eugenics board targeted Puerto Rican women in rural areas and promoted contraception as family planning to allow women to work in factories. Supported by a grant from USAID⁸, family clinics emerged and tested Puerto Rican women with modern-day birth control. Additionally, the class-action lawsuit *Madrigal v Quilligan* in 1975 revealed that an estimated 20,000 Spanish-speaking Mexican or Mexican-American women were sterilized without their consent between 1909 to 1979 in the Los Angeles County hospital when they were asked in English while in labor if they wanted their tubes tied (Stern 2005). This conflux of sexist and racist social policy is further exemplified by Stanford University's William Shockley who advocated that "we" should sterilize welfare recipients and provide a "Bonus Sterilization Plan" of cash incentives for low-I.Q. welfare recipients in the 1970s and the 1980s (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001, 156).

The sexual behavior of women living in homeless shelters continues to be a concern for law enforcement. According to the Department of Investigation (DOI), more oversight is needed in shelter sites for illegal activities like prostitution. DOI Commissioner Mark Peters has "found homeless families with children sharing the same facilities as prostitution enterprises and uncovered troubling observations...included a proposition to work as a prostitute to supplement income (Peters 2018)." Between January 2017 to August 2017, there were fifty-nine prostitution-related arrests in thirty-four out of fifty-seven commercial hotels throughout New York City, triggering increased security in emergency shelter hotels. The concern for prostitution and the proposal for more oversight in shelter hotels begs the question: If the DOI acknowledges that "propositions to work as a prostitute to supplement

income (ibid)” exist, then why not focus greater attention on providing resources so that women have more options to provide for their families? Prostitution may imply that women in homeless shelters need more financial support than welfare services allocate, rather than greater police surveillance.

There is an important difference between sex work and survival sex work (Kaba and Schulte 2017). Those already going through the shelter system illustrate their dependency on state funding. Hence, sex work is not constitutive of immortality but rather of survival. This police data prompt increased monitoring of the spaces Black and Brown working-poor women navigate, marking them as potentially criminal—if not for prostitution, then for drug use, even though mandatory drug testing is already required of welfare recipients. “The early feminists also saw clearly that women’s economic survival was integrally linked to their sexuality... thus the construction of feminine gender roles, the feminist argues, was intimately linked with both women’s economic dependence and sexuality” (Findlay 1999, 69). Misogyny, patriarchy and respectability politics work in tandem to delimit impoverished women’s options for livelihood and support.

Colorism and Racial Stereotypes Reproducing Welfare Racism

At ninety percent, Black and Latina/o/x individuals overwhelmingly make up New York City’s sheltered-homeless population. Despite being the majority, the logics of colorism prevent women from forming bonds of solidarity across phenotypical lines. On a sweltering hot and humid August day in 2017, I met Ana⁹ while doing outreach with Charmel outside of a women’s shelter located in the Bronx. A shelter resident, Ana was a short, petite, dark-skinned woman in her late thirties, with dark brown hair tied back in a tight bun, wearing a white spaghetti-strapped shirt and black stretch pants. She was sitting outside the shelter in the shade on concrete stairs, eating an order of chicken and broccoli

with white rice from a Chinese restaurant around the corner. Often, she bought her meals from outside the shelter because she, like other sheltered-homeless individuals, complained that food served at the shelter gave them diarrhea.

Ana was visibly frustrated. She had just returned from a scheduled apartment viewing, where she waited for eight hours and was ultimately not given a tour of the apartment by the landlord. Ana complained that she was blackballed because the landlord favored and preferred light-skinned Puerto Rican women. “I had my voucher and appointment, but he only paid attention to the light-skinned *Spanish* women,” she complained, “but I am actually *Spanish*. I am Guatemalan, just dark-skinned.” “Spanish” is the word most working-class and working-poor native New Yorkers use to identify those of Hispanic or Latino heritage. Dark-skinned Afro-Latinos are thus generally pressured to choose between being “Spanish” or “Black.” For Ana, her experience with the landlord reflected ideologies of colorism or anti-indigeneity, where lighter-skinned Latinas/os/xs with more explicit Spanish colonial ethnic ties are privileged. While officially, landlords and DHS staff cannot legally discriminate on the basis of ethnicity or race, there has been other informal discussions I have encountered during outreach on the streets that suggests Black or darker-skinned women report more unfair treatment by housing officials than lighter-skinned women of color.

Racialized categories of Black, white and “Spanish” are part of a colonial legacy, which has justified the unequal distribution of resources and construct divisions among the working poor. Instead of acknowledging their similar conditions, the construction of race and ethnicity has been internalized to create a false sense of hierarchy among this marginalized group. This stratification encourages the working-poor to compete with each other rather than organize together to overthrow exploitative conditions. Housing

insecurity and deprivation result from state racism and a differential vulnerability to premature death (Willse 2015). Ana may continue to face discrimination while apartment hunting, because she is part of a system that forces the unhoused to compete individually, rather than fostering conditions that would allow for alliance-building, which could secure permanent housing.

A city with limited subsidized housing inevitably leads to people competing with each other. Consequently, those institutionalized within the welfare system see their circumstances as individual problems. And competition for the declining low-income housing units can be (re)positioned as competition on the color line (Du Bois 1968[1903]) or between those read as “Spanish” versus those read as Black African American. The obstacle becomes other individuals struggling for housing and not the state’s structural and ethno-racialized inequalities constitutive of racial capitalism that produce these conditions.

Melissa,¹⁰ an African American and Puerto Rican female, and her toddler son, lived in municipal shelters for three years off and on after being evicted in 2013 and 2015. After getting sick while nine months pregnant, Melissa decided to take leave from her job in retail. Three months after having her son, her position was no longer available. For the first time, at the age of thirty-five, Melissa applied for welfare and joined the Family Eviction Prevention Supplement (FEPS) voucher program to stay in her apartment. FEPS paid a portion of her rent as long as she attended mandatory meetings. The program mandated that she take a Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and attend a Back-To-Work program weekly. She described her experience:

In order for you to receive cash assistance or food stamps, you’re supposed to give public assistance up to thirty-five hours a week...

like a job. So, if you don't take on a job you will sit in a room or work on your resume. It's very insulting to people who had a job or have been to school ... they send you to your little workshop for your resume and after that you sit in a room every day, almost every day. It's nothing in the room, it's an empty room, just a table and chairs. And you don't do anything in the room except sit there It's like a junior high school lunchroom ... so if you don't want to sit in those offices, you can go to a counselor and ask them what [jobs] are available and if there was something you were interested in instead of sitting in a room, you can take a job.

Melissa pursued a job placement—one that paid \$10 per hour at a hardware store. As a result, she was removed from her FEPS voucher program and was expected to pay full rent on this meager salary, leaving her and her son to once again face eviction. She continued:

I only took a job because I was used to working and I'd rather take a job anywhere instead of sitting in a room with a bunch of people for eight hours doing nothing, and so I was like yeah, I would take a job as long as I keep the [FEPS] program. I found out later on that the job workers... every time someone takes a job from them [Back-To-Work] they get a commission. Their incentive is that they get a bonus, so that's one less person that would be in the system. It doesn't help the person because the person ... end[s] up right back in the same place ... because I won't be able to pay rent .. with that crappy job that I got. Why not help them go to school? Why not help them still even after they get the crappy job and help them with budgeting their income? I felt like I was tricked into [taking that job placement]. If I had never taken that job, then I would have never

lost that place. But at the same time, who wants to sit in a room not doing anything?

If one earns income just barely above the government-sanctioned benchmark of poverty, they no longer qualify for rent assistance vouchers. If you remain without work and at or under the poverty line, you can receive assistance, but in exchange for your time. Melissa described feeling stuck between choosing between remaining poor enough to qualify for housing assistance or taking on a job that would provide her with more dignity, but at the risk of no longer being poor enough to be eligible for assistance. By remaining on welfare and dependent on the voucher program, she felt patronized and pushed into conditions that would force her into any work conditions. Melissa felt insulted by the “crappy” jobs offered, and ultimately relegated her to a cycle that reinforces a long-standing stereotype that women on assistance do not want to work, so they must be punished or coerced by unfavorable conditions to be pushed into the labor force.

The contemporary treatment of homeless individuals in New York City shelters should be contextualized within the historical development of the U.S. welfare state. Historically, the welfare state would not have been possible without colonialism and racial hierarchies. The ability of the U.S. to subsidize and invest in their national population’s health and general well-being was possible because of wealth accumulated from conquest, plunder and exploitation of non-Anglo Americans (Willse 2015; Valverde 2007; Simon 2000). Those recognized as national citizens [Anglo-Americans], whose health and well-being was seen as a state concern, received investments from the state (Willse 2015). Welfare distribution is not simply based on needs (Piven and Cloward 1971; Hall 1979; Katz 1996). For example, in 1931, ninety-six percent of families that received aid in the U.S. were white despite the fact that African

American unemployment was thirty to sixty percent higher than whites during the Great Depression (Roberts 2017; Abramovitz 1988).

Most welfare recipients are white women, but Black and Latina women are overrepresented as ‘welfare queens’ due to fear-mongering tropes and case studies beginning as early as the 1940s. For example, Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland was framed as a social work and public agency problem in 1947 (Briggs 2002). *The New York Times* contributed to the mass hysteria of lazy Black and Brown families after misreporting that fifty-four percent of welfare recipients were Puerto Rican when they were only four percent (Briggs 2002). From the 1940s to 1950s, Columbia University, the New York Board of Education and Welfare and Health Council of New York City, and the Ford and Rockefeller foundations commissioned studies on Puerto Ricans. The data about Puerto Ricans and migration was essential for reforming welfare policies that were predicated along this erroneous data point.

In the 1960s, with the help of social scientists and behavioral research like that of Elizabeth Herzog (1963), Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) and Oscar Lewis (1965), the problem of poverty was projected as a racial problem. In particular, Oscar Lewis authored the widely received ethnography *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (1966) that greatly impacted perceptions of Puerto Rican poverty. According to Lewis, the intention was to show Puerto Ricans with the “desired result... to reveal the local, cultural expressions of the contradictions of capitalism and the results of exploitation” (Briggs 2002, 78). Conversely, what emerged in this study, and others like it at the time, was the “culture of poverty” narrative. The “culture of poverty” portrays Puerto Rican, Mexican and African American families as poor because of their inherent everyday-life practices. Accordingly, lousy mothering, absentee fathers and their depraved sexuality

are responsible for reproducing poverty. Accordingly, these habits passed on from generation to generation keep families of color in poverty.

The “culture of poverty” discourse underlies the U.S. government’s imposition on Puerto Rico, with the sterilization, experimentation of birth control, and industrialization from the 1930s to 1960s. Industrialization across the island, also known as Operation Bootstrap¹¹, occurred alongside population control. At this time, “in the symbolic economy of nationhood, the woman was the mother of the nation; women’s sexual deviance was about the failure of nationhood” (Briggs 2002, 77). The problem was not capitalism, colonialism, and structural inequality but rather the disorganized family, machismo, hypersexual mothers having too many babies developed and passed on from their “steamy tropical childhoods” (Briggs 2002, 79). This study by Oscar Lewis was accepted by the public as widely representative of all Puerto Ricans despite Lewis sharing the stories of only nineteen out of the fifty families interviewed (not by himself directly). Lewis’ focused only on those Puerto Rican mothers’ sexual actions instead of their jobs and how they paid bills. This narrow focus on sexual activity led the public to believe that Puerto Rican customs are solely responsible for poverty.

Similarly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report: “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”¹² (1965) was drawn from case studies of Black families which introduced the idea of the dominant Black matriarch. These studies informed government policies that restricted welfare distribution and prompted greater monitoring of African American and Latina/o/x welfare recipients, especially Black and Latina women. This is evident in that Black and Brown women are disproportionately kicked off the roll for “socially unacceptable reasons,” like having children out of wedlock or the father of their children being in prison (Piven and Cloward 1971; Roberts 1997). The myth of the Black and Brown welfare queen that emerged from this flawed

report was again utilized two decades later in 1976 by Ronald Regan during a presidential campaign that ran on eliminating welfare fraud.

Prior to the prison boom in the 1970s, the welfare state established and policed acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Roberts 2017). The federal aid dedicated to American Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) increased by seventy-two percent between 1960 and 1969 based on demand due to the economic crisis and outsourcing of factories outside the U.S. The distribution of public relief to economically disenfranchised populations served to pacify populations into accepting high levels of unemployment (Piven and Cloward 1971; Hall 1979; Katz 1996). After the economic crisis in 1972, media propaganda about the dangerous Black and Brown poor in the inner cities became necessary for justifying reductions and restrictions to state aid. The history of welfare rights, which resulted from multiple protests and struggles from the civil rights era, was refashioned in the 1970s as the charity from the government that poor Black, Caribbean and Latina mothers abused.

The seemingly sexually deviant and pathological culture instilled in Black and Brown women serves to justify the punitive treatment of Black and Brown mothers in homeless shelters and welfare offices today. The state's intervention vis-à-vis harsher treatment in the shelter system is seen as necessary to unlearn the so-called "culture of poverty" they inherited from their parents. The process by which racism and racial oppression get exercised and experienced through gender identity, specifically in welfare policies, is part of a long legacy of welfare racism (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

Conclusion

The current welfare and shelter services from New York City municipal shelters reproduce racial hierarchies. They individualize shame found in stereotypes

of African American, Caribbean and Latina women, which prevents coalition-building between working poor women of color. Those living in New York City municipal shelters for long durations are also likely to experience punitive (prison-like) rules, humiliating interactions with staff and residents and penal monitoring. The trauma of being shuffled around, competing for housing and being approached and assumed sexually deviant by law enforcement and strangers alongside stereotypes and tropes specific to African American, Caribbean and Latina women can leave them humiliated, alienated, and distrustful of both staff and residents. My ethnographic and historical research shows that as [potential] mothers and head of households, Black and Brown women seeking housing assistance are vulnerable to harmful internal stereotypes. Some accept individual blame for their circumstances, while others, like Charmel, resist. Charmel's continual resistance to punitive shelter and welfare services can largely be attributed to her organizing history with Picture The Homeless. Organizations like PTH have been essential spaces to elevate and empower those marginalized voices and promote collaborative organizing efforts to address structural poverty through research, outreach, and political campaigns.

Punitive experiences in municipal shelters symbolically reinforce that state services are not a given right but a charitable handout for the deserving, ethical and obedient poor. In other words, to receive financial and housing assistance, one receiving aid must prove their worthiness and must do so through a series of obstacles that pit themselves against others. Given the historical development of welfare, African American, Caribbean and Latina women must constantly confront stereotypes and tropes that they are lazy, fraudulent and sexually deviant for needing help.

Welfare racism experienced in shelters reproduces the necessary conditions of modern capitalism, which requires a class division and racial hierarchy.

Modern capitalism requires that a portion of the population be unpaid, superfluous and unemployed to put pressure and exploit waged workers. Welfare distribution is not based on need but aims to pacify those unemployed temporarily while reproducing class divisions and inequality without protest and resistance from the working-poor populations (Piven and Cloward 1971; Hall 1979; Katz 1996). Ideas about ethno-racial divisions keep those impoverished with the same material conditions divided by beliefs in inherent natural differences. Stereotypes of the Black welfare queen or the baby-making Latina ensure that working-poor women compete instead of challenge the state. By accepting the welfare system's resources, Black and Brown women also risk becoming complicit to the conditions of systemic racism and structural inequalities—which can prevent collective organization. Before joining PTH, Charmel initially felt isolated but now approaches anyone experiencing homelessness and finds a way to advocate for their rights to decent living conditions.

Before municipal shelters in 1979, people in New York City organized for safer and permanent housing conditions. New York City has a rich history of coalition building, collaborations, and squatting movements organized by working-poor Black and Brown people during the 1960s (Vasudevan 2017). The best depiction of community organizing for safe housing is illustrated in the documentary *Break and Enter/Rompiendo Puertas* (1970). In response to the death of Jimmy Santos, a fifteen-year-old who died from carbon monoxide in his apartment on West 106th Street in Manhattan, community members took to the streets to demand better housing conditions (Muzio 2009). Community members consisted of Puerto Rican, African American, Dominican women, and their families. Instead of waiting for the city to act—by creating safer conditions—community members helped the Santos family and several other dozen families move into safer unoccupied buildings.

Amidst urban renewal, gentrification and displacement, Black and Brown women and children squatted in buildings on the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights scheduled to be demolished. This later became known as “Operation Move-In.” On the night of July 25, 1970, over two hundred families broke into and squatted in locked buildings on the Upper West Side (ibid). These buildings were in perfect conditions but were in the process of being reconstructed into hotels and luxury apartments that would charge higher rents.

Operation Move-in resulted from collaborations between Black and Brown mothers, families, students, church members, merging into the leftist organization El Comite. Together they took control of vacant housing, recruited families living in substandard housing, provided childcare services and food to those in the neighborhood. Squatting was not easy or convenient. Many were forcibly removed by police and faced arrest charges. This movement was short-lived, with some receiving low-income housing while others left altogether.

The political power realized was even more significant and long-lasting from Operation Move-in through collective action. For example, after squatting in a building on 90th Street and Columbus Avenue, the real estate company Mitchell-Lama development agreed to make thirty percent of their units low-income and rent-stabilized (Muzio 2009). And while Mitchell-Lama eventually reneged on this agreement, only providing twenty percent of low-income units in 1980, one thing that came from this was recognizing the effects of a unified voice from Black and Brown women leaders in the movement. Black and Brown women successfully reclaimed their spaces and eventually achieved permanent housing through community alliances. This history provides a blueprint for ongoing resistance, especially significant today. As said by a Spanish-speaking woman in the documentary:

You're stronger because if something happens to you. It's not just two or three fighting the city, it's a whole group of people fighting together ... Because we're in an organization, we're stronger. (*Break and Enter/ Rompiendo Puertas*, 28:56-29:30)

Much like the advocacy work of Charmel with Picture The Homeless, women who squatted on the upper west side of Manhattan in the 1960s who eventually were permanently housed, know the significance of collective action. While this documentary is not widely popular, the squatting movement serves as a reminder of a more empowering way to achieve real affordable housing and end homelessness. My interviews with sheltered-homeless women of color show the violence of relying solely on state assistance, primarily when welfare is rooted in a racist and sexist colonial development. The state's welfare distribution to Black and Brown women shows the trauma of receiving assistance. The current welfare and shelter system humiliates and shames African American, Caribbean and Latina women using historical stereotypes. If assistance is continuously accepted individually, then we risk possibilities for coalition-building between working-poor women of color. By remembering the struggles of Black and Brown women, we can rethink new possibilities.

Notes

¹ Picture The Homeless (PTH) is a nonprofit grassroots organization located in East Harlem, NYC. I volunteered doing participatory observation, advocacy and outreach between 2017-2020. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Nikita Price, a lead organizer for the Civil Rights group of PTH, where he worked for over twelve years before his untimely death on May 21, 2020. For more information on his methods, see Goldfischer and Santiago (2020).

² Charmel, New York City shelter resident and PTH member, interview with author on July 10, 2017.

³ Hurricane Sandy hit New York City October 29, 2012. Sandy was a category 1 hurricane that killed forty-four people, destroyed 300 homes, damaged 69,000 residential units and left thousands of New Yorkers without power and temporarily displaced. For more information, see: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cdbgdtr/about/About%20Hurricane%20Sandy.page>

⁴ Monique, NYC shelter director, interview with author on July 26, 2017.

⁵ Racial capitalism refers to the idea that race and racial differences are fundamental to the reproduction of class hierarchies. Race is principle in organizing structures of power, commerce and the economy. This concept was developed by Cedric Robinson in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983).

⁶ Housing first model has been proposed to provide permanent housing immediately and unconditionally to unhoused people without requirements like sobriety. This is viewed as a radical approach to housing those experiencing homelessness without barriers.

⁷ Tiffany, New York City shelter resident, interview with author on August 8, 2017.

⁸ A U.S.-based agency that offers development and disaster assistance during international humanitarian crises.

⁹ Ana, New York City shelter resident, interview by author on August 8, 2017.

¹⁰ Melissa, New York City shelter resident, interview by author on July 6, 2017.

¹¹ Operation Bootstrap was the name of a development policy and series of projects by the U.S. government to individualize Puerto Rico post World War II. This included tax exemptions for corporations in order to appeal to factories building on the island.

¹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan was Secretary of Labor when he assembled a team to study and write a report about African American families in 1964. They produced *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as *The Moynihan Report* in 1965. This report was considered one of the most controversial texts of the twentieth century because accordingly, “the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling,” and “Measures that have worked in the past, or would work for most groups in the present, will not work here. A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure” (<https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan>). This report directed the public’s attention to role of the single-headed Black mothers as responsible for reproducing poverty.

References

- Abramovitz, Mimi. 1988. *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Routledge.
- Betancur, John. 2005. “Gentrification Before Gentrification: The Plight of Pilsen in Chicago.” Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, Voorhees Center White Paper.
- Break and Enter/ Rompiendo Puertas (aka Squatters)*. 1970. Third World Newsreel.
- Briggs, Laura. 2002. “*La Vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels: Migration, Social Science, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Welfare Queen.” *Centro Journal*, XIV(1): 101.

- Chinchilla, Melissa, and Sonya Gabrielian. 2019. "Stemming the Rise of Latino Homelessness: Lessons from Los Angeles County." *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 29(2): 71-75.
- Coalition For The Homeless. 2013. "Briefing Paper: Homeless Again." <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/new-briefing-paper-homeless-again/>.
- Coalition For The Homeless. 2021. "Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City." <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Conroy, Stephen J., and David Heer. 2003. "Hidden Hispanic Homelessness in Los Angeles: The 'Latino Paradox' Revisited." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Science*. 25(4): 530-38.
- Cox, Aimee M. 2015. *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Davis, Angela. 1983. *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. 1968 [1903]. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Findlay, Eileen J. Suárez. 1999. *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Goldfischer, Eric and Odilka Santiago. 2020. "Homeless Theory and Research Collaboration: A Tribute to Nikita Price." *MetroPolitics*. June 9. <https://metropolitcs.org/IMG/pdf/met-goldfischer-santiago.pdf>.
- Gross, Courtney. 2018. "How much progress is NYC making to open 90 new homeless shelters?" *New York 1 News*. March 28. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/allboroughs/politics/2018/03/28/new-york-city-plan-open-90-new-homeless-shelters> update.
- Hall, Stuart. 1979. *Drifting Towards a Law and Order Society*. London: Sage.
- Herzog, Elizabeth. 1963. "Some Assumptions About the Poor." *Social Service Review*, 37(4): 389-402.
- Kaba, Mariame and Brit Shulte. 2017. "Not a Cardboard Cut Out: Cyntoia Brown and the Framing of a Victim." In *The Appeal*. Dec 06, 2017. <https://theappeal.org/not-a-cardboard-cut-out-cyntoia-brown-and-the-framing-of-a-victim-aa61f80f9cbb/>.
- Katz, Michael B. 1996. *A Social History of Welfare in America*. New York: Basic Books.

- Liebow, Eliot. 1993. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Free Press.
- Mies, Maria. 1986. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. London: Zed Books.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. March 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan>.
- Muniz, Vicky. 1988. *Resisting Gentrification and Displacement: Voices of Puerto Rican Women of the Barrio*. New York: Routledge.
- Muzio, Rose. 2009. "The Struggle Against Urban Renewal in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Emergence of El Comite." *Centro Journal*, XXI(2): 109-141.
- National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2012. "Changes in HUD Definition of Homeless." January 18. <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/changes-in-the-hud-definition-ofhomeless/>.
- Neubeck, Kenneth J. and Noel A. Cazenave. 2001. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge.
- New York City Department of Homeless Services. 2021. "DHS Local Law 37 report for the Month of October 2021." https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/temporary_housing_report.pdf.
- Pérez, Gina M. 2002. "The Other 'Real World': Gentrification and the Social Construction of Place in Chicago." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 31(1): 37-68.
- Perry, David. 2016. "Our Long and Troubling History of Sterilizing the Incarcerated," *The Marshall Project*. July 26. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/07/26/our-longtroubling-history-of-sterilizing-the-incarcerated>.
- Peters, Mark. 2018. "DOI Investigation Finds City Department of Homeless Services Does Not Screen for Criminality Before Placing Homeless Families." The City of New York Department of Investigation. Jan. 4. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doi/reports/pdf/2018/Jan/01CommercialHotels010418wrpt_UL.pdf.
- Picture The Homeless. 2018. "The Business of Homelessness." http://picturethehomeless.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/PtH_White_paper5.pdf.
- Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. 1971. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 1997. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: First Vintage Books.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 1993. "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood." *American University Journal of Gender & Law*, 1(1): 1-38.
- Roberts, Adrienne. 2017. *Gendered States of Punishment and Welfare: Feminist Political Economy, Primitive Accumulation and the Law*. New York: Routledge.

- Robinson, Cedric J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rúa, Mérida and Ivis García. 2017. "Our Interests Matter?: Puerto Rican Older Adults in the Age of Gentrification." *Urban Studies*, 55(14): 3168-84.
- Santiago, Odilka. 2021. "Regulating Time and Space: The Disciplining of Latina and Black Sheltered-Homeless Women in NYC." In *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies*, edited by Mérida Rúa and Ana Ramos-Zayas, 379-391. New York: NYU Press.
- Stern, Alexandra Minna. 2005. "Sterilized in the Name of Public Health: Race, Immigration, and Reproductive Control in Modern California." In *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(7): 1128-1138.
- Simon, Jonathan 2000. "'Entitlement to Cruelty': The End of Welfare and the Punitive Mentality in the United States." In *Crime, Risk, and Justice: The Politics of Crime Control in Liberal Democracies*, edited by Kevin Stenson and Robert P. Sullivan, 125-143. London: Willan Publishing
- Vasudevan, Alexander. 2017. *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting*. New York: Verso.
- Valverde, Mariana. 2007. "Genealogies of European States: Foucauldian Reflections." *Economy and Society*, 36(1): 159-178.
- Willse, Craig. 2015. *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.