EXAMINING STRUCTURAL POVERTY IN COOPERATION WITH THE POOR
PEOPLE’S ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN: A PARTICIPATORY
ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Examining Structural Poverty in Cooperation With The Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign: A Participatory Action Research Project

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Myths of meritocracy and upward mobility, not to mention myths that “blame the victim” (among many others), help maintain the American capitalist economic system and obscure the existence of the tremendous structural barriers that work to prevent the majority of working class and poor families from successfully escaping poverty. Indeed, the American capitalist economic system is only able to operate given the structural barriers caused by interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression including, but not limited to, classism, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, ageism, ableism and more, along with the myriad myths, ideologies, and forms of violence that both emanate from and sustain them.

Despite the operation and strength of these systems and ideologies, which seem to make the eradication of homelessness and poverty impossible, innumerable economic justice and human rights organizations aim to do just that, and in the long run, bring about a more just world for all. One such organization is the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), which is the largest multiracial, cross-generational, national movement led by poor people themselves in the United States. PPEHRC works to abolish the structural violence of poverty and homelessness using a diverse array of strategies aimed for instance, at abolishing poverty and other interrelated
forms of structural violence as well as the interconnected myths, ideologies, and systems of power, privilege and oppression that create and sustain them. At the same time, PPEHRC works to guarantee that everyone’s basic human rights are observed and respected within the policy and practice of the U.S. State. These fundamental human rights, as enshrined in International Laws such as the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, include, but are not limited to, ease of access to adequate health care, decent housing, living wage jobs, and quality primary, secondary, and higher education.

In this thesis, I use the lens of Intersectional Feminism, engage in Participatory Action Research and conduct in-depth interviews to illuminate and critically examine the work of PPEHRC. I pay particular attention to the analysis of poverty developed by members of PPEHRC themselves, and both examine and personally engage in several of the strategies of activism developed and utilized by members of PPEHRC. Furthermore, I closely examine how poverty expresses itself differently in rural, urban, and suburban areas, the significance and possible causes of these differences, as well as they particular ways in which PPEHRC responds to poverty in all three contexts.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, Poverty, Intersectional Feminism, Social Movements, Social Justice, Horizontal Research, Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign
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INTRODUCTION

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, is without a doubt one of the most culturally significant individuals in U.S. history and an icon of nonviolent resistance throughout the world. While Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership in the struggle to achieve civil rights for African Americans is well known, his commitment to eliminating poverty is much less recognized. On December 4, 1967, just four months before he was brutally assassinated, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) launched the Poor People’s Campaign to highlight the tremendous poverty in the United States and call for an “economic bill of rights.” Nearly 43 years later, the United States remains without an economic bill of rights and millions of Americans experience the structural violence of poverty alongside rampant homelessness, every single day.

However, common understandings of poverty among the general public as well as the dominant discourse\(^1\) of poverty held by systemically privileged members of dominant U.S. social institutions including the State, Academia, Corporate/Mainstream Media and more. Dominant discourse on poverty and homelessness not only denies the pervasiveness of poverty, but consistently and institutionally perpetuates the “common

\(^1\) Like Urban (2008:6) I define discourse as “. . . an ordering of terms, meanings, and practices that form the background presuppositions and taken-for-granted understandings that enable people’s actions and interpretations” (Milliken 1999, 92). Discourse, then, is more than the simple, objective presentation of ideas; it is the “matrix of social practices that give meaning to the way that people understand themselves and their behavior” (George 1994, 29). Discourse generates “the categories of meaning by which reality can be understood and explained [and] makes ‘real’ that which it prescribes as meaningful” (George 1994, 30; emphasis in original). Discourse involves a relationship between knowledge production and power, including the power to define or represent the “reality” of a situation or issue in a particular way” (Urban, 2008:6).
wisdom” notion that poverty doesn’t truly exist within the United States and/or is solely relegated to countries in the so-called Third World. The myths of upward mobility and meritocracy, along with dominant constructions of the so-called American Dream, are largely accepted as “Truths” or conventional wisdom by a majority of Americans, which helps sustain hegemonic power relations under capitalism. For example, alongside ideological wedge strategies that blame the poor for their poverty (claims that, for instance, target the working class and working poor as simply lazy and who create scarcity for “the rest of us” by unfairly draining social and economic resources), these myths and many others strategically obscure the pervasiveness and real, material, daily realities of poverty for millions by simply diverting attention away from its structural causes. Wedge strategies not only divert attention away from these causes, but use classist, racist, sexist myths that pit groups against each other and make building social justice coalitions across lines of difference much more difficult. Although these beliefs are continually perpetuated by dominant social institutions in the U.S., it is vitally important to acknowledge and honor the tremendous amount of daily resistance to dominant U.S. discourse on poverty poor people across the country and their allies.

The Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) has taken up the mantle of Dr. Martin Luther King, mobilizing a grassroots movement to end the structural violence of poverty and homelessness. Although officially formed in 1998, many of the groups’ core organizers have been involved in the movement to end poverty for over 25 years. PPEHRC is the largest multiracial movement of poor people in the United States working to abolish poverty through the guarantee of basic human rights to
health care, housing, living wage jobs, and access to quality primary, secondary, and higher education. Perhaps the most central tenant to the approach taken by PPEHRC is the commitment to developing a movement that is led by and for the poor. Unlike many other nonprofit organizations that do work on behalf of the poor, PPEHRC has developed a broad leadership of poor and homeless individuals who guide the process of mobilization.

I had the opportunity to meet Cheri Honkala and become involved with PPEHRC in April of 2009 as I, in coalition with a number of other groups and individuals worked collaboratively to organize the week-long series of events associated with Take Back the Night (TBTN). TBTN is an international movement aimed at engendering awareness of sexualized violence, supporting survivors, their loved ones, and the loved ones of those lost to sexualized and other forms of violence, and in the long-run, eradicating sexualized and all forms of violence on HSU campus, in our community and around the world.

TBTN at Humboldt State University (HSU) is organized annually by members HSU’s Womyn’s Resource Center, who work in coalition with innumerable group and individuals including (but not limited to) North Coast Rape Crisis Team, faculty staff and students from what is now the Department of Critical Race, Gender and Sexuality Studies (CRGS) not to mention innumerable students, staff administrators and faculty from across campus plus many, many community members, groups and businesses. In planning TBTN events, organizers came to consensus on having Cheri Honkala, national organizer for PPEHRC, serve as the keynote speaker for TBTN. It is important to note that despite some obstacles, his organizing process itself exemplifies coalitional
participatory organizing strategies, which was of course, no accident. Cheri is a formerly homeless mother who gained national attention when she began taking over abandoned buildings in order to house herself and her young son along with many other homeless families. She has been intimately and actively involved in direct action struggles to fight poverty ever since and has been arrested over eighty times for her commitment to the movement. In her keynote address she explored the interlocking relationship between poverty and sexualized violence. After bearing witness to her incredible keynote address for Take Back the Night 2009 and having many other personal conversations about PPEHRC over the period of time Cheri was visiting Humboldt, I approached her about the possibility of collaborating on a research project in direct cooperation with PPEHRC, and she agreed. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with TBTN and therefore have the opportunity to meet Cheri and work with PPEHRC.

Consistent self-reflexive analysis (which continues to this day) is a vital element of this project given my commitment to Intersectional Feminist analysis and activism, Participatory Research and Horizontal Knowledge production. This means (as a start) acknowledging and consistently negotiating the significance of my social location and its impact on the research process. This includes the ways in which I am simultaneously and systemically oppressed (as a woman in a patriarchal system) and privileged (as white in a white supremacist/racist system, plus the systemic privilege I have on the basis of class, nation, able-bodiedness, and age as examples). The privilege and power dynamics that come with my role as an academic especially those related to conducting research are of particular concern. In order to truly conduct a collaborative research project, it is
important for me to consistently engage with my positionality, constantly interrogate my assumptions, behaviors, choices and their origins as I attempt to challenge the traditional barriers between researcher participant. Traditional research models have sought to extract knowledge from groups of individuals and interpret them through an academic lens without consistent consultation with the analysis or importance to the participants being “studied.” Intersectional feminists contend that without critical engagement and conscious confrontation with how power operates within the research context, academic knowledge production reinforces systems of power, privilege, and oppression while simultaneously dismissing the importance of valuing the analysis of the participant (Fals Borda 2001). Self-reflexive analysis challenges the expectation that academic research must be an extractive process and is a critical component to the intersectional feminist work towards dismantling interlocking systems of power.

Therefore, after having become involved with PPEHRC, every avenue of research has been determined in consultation with the needs of PPEHRC’s members, and the organization has been deeply involved in the process of developing everything from potential research questions to grounded theoretical production. Another important dimension of the research that challenges traditional notions of the objective researcher is my direct engagement with the work of PPEHRC. Throughout the production of this thesis, I helped to organize and participate in various forms of direct action, community outreach, and structural planning in the organization as part of -- and as a result of -- the research I am conducting. I will expand on the issues of knowledge production, self-
reflexivity and participatory action research later in the Methodology/Epistemology chapter of this thesis.

In this thesis, I describe my engagement in research practices grounded in a commitment to horizontal research and knowledge co-production. I do so not only as an additional method of challenging dominant research methods and methodologies in the U.S., but also as a strategy for challenging dominant depictions of the poor as ignorant or uneducated, and wholly unable to recognize or analyze complex social phenomena, much less resist injustices. This is intimately connected to my use of in-depth interviews and my goal of foregrounding the analyses, strategies, and voices of those directly impacted by poverty and multiple, interwoven systems of power, privilege and oppression, also known as the Matrix of Domination and Privilege. Anderson and Hill-Collins refer to this as “shifting the center,” which I discuss in greater depth in my discussion of Intersectional Feminism.

Using Intersectional Feminist theory, I also critically examine the dominant discourse of poverty in the U.S., as well as myths of upward mobility and social constructions\(^2\) of “the American Dream” to demonstrate how these formations work to obscure the experience of poverty in America today, not to mention its causes. At the same time, I discuss some of the alternative analyses provided by Intersectional Feminists,\(^2\) Intersectional feminists argue that interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression are socially constructed in relationship to one another; that is they are assigned social meanings through various institutions including but not limited to governments, education, religion, family, the media, etc. Social construction is a process that does not necessarily directly descend from the material reality, but a reality that is created through repetition of meanings over time (Johnson 2001, Hill-Collins 1990).
particularly in relation to the systemic, ideological, and institutional forces, as well as the operation of systemic privilege and oppression that create and sustain the structural violence of poverty and homelessness. Likewise, I discuss some of the ways in which attention is deflected away from these very forces, including strategies such as “blaming the victim.” Moreover, although I continually discuss and examine diverse array of resistance strategies, alongside their analysis of the roots of poverty, not to mention the tremendous resilience evident in the daily struggles of the poor throughout this thesis, I also utilize specific examples of each to challenge hegemonic characterizations of poor people as helpless, compliant, inert, and as mentioned, ignorant and therefore unable engage in social justice activism to abolish poverty. Finally, using the framework and tools previously mentioned, I critically examine how poverty is expressed differently in rural, urban, and suburban areas and the specific tactics that PPEHRC employs to address the dynamics central to each context.
Despite the growing discrepancy in wealth distribution in the United States, the neoliberal capitalist system is widely accepted by most Americans as the best and most successful economic system, and really, the only option that exists. The prevalence of powerful myths perpetuated throughout dominant U.S. Social Institutions obfuscates powerful critiques of, and daily acts of resistance to the global capitalist economic system, particularly by those most directly impacted by poverty and Intersectional Feminist scholars (not mutually exclusive categories). Intersectional Feminism contends that interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression (i.e. racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, etc.) operate simultaneously and in relationship to one another to create material and discursive constructions of identity and positionality within society (Crenshaw 1991). This theoretical framework will be explored at length later in this paper.

The first and perhaps most prevalent myth is that of the American Dream. This myth has been institutionally perpetuated through many different discourses that continuously construct the United States as being the land of opportunity for all. Many within the boundaries of the nation and throughout the world believe that America is a truly “developed” nation, in which all its citizens live free from the burdens of the immense poverty of the Third World. While some of the poor in America have better access to certain consumer goods than their counterparts in poorer nations around the world, this is not the case when it comes to health. According to a study examining
infant mortality rates in the US from 1969 to the present, “In 2003, black infants and infants born to women with less than a high school education experienced more than twice the mortality rate of white infants and infants born to women with a college degree, respectively” (Kogan and Singh 2007, 929). While infant mortality rate is not the single indicator of the state of poverty in a nation, I cannot help but wonder why the richest nation in the world falls behind so many others in relationship to health issues. This information also demonstrates a clear relationship between access to quality health care in the United States, education level, class, and race, further drawing attention to the inaccuracy of the notion that all Americans have the opportunity to thrive.

Utilizing an intersectional feminist lens to examine poverty is particularly useful in order to analyze and interpret the interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression that perpetuate the experience of poverty disproportionately in different identity locations. It is true that in the United States, as in many other nations around the world, that if “you are black and female…you are much more likely to be poor or

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3 Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey contend that our identities are both multiple and fluid, and are defined by both others’ perceptions as well as our own self-identification with certain categories within systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2005, 9). Because people occupy more than one identity location based on these systems, intersectional feminists note that individuals can be both in positions of privilege and disadvantage simultaneously (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2005, Johnson 2001, Hill-Collins 1990). Moreover, Kirk and Okazawa-Rey use the term “social location” to express “…the core of a person’s existence in the social and political world. It places us in particular relationships to others, to the dominant culture of the United States, and to the rest of the world. It determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise, as well as situations in which we have less power and privilege…social location is where all the aspects of one’s identity meet…” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey 2007, 71 emphasis added).
working class than you would be as a white male” (Mantsios 2007, 194). For example, while only 1 in 10 families that consist of a white man and women as heads of household will live in poverty in America, the number raises to 1 in 5 for a Hispanic heterosexual couple, and 1 in 4 for black heterosexual couples. This number jumps even further when looking at households that are comprised of single women householders, 1 in 3 for both Hispanic and black women (Mantsios 2007, 194). This illustrates that in order to effectively address poverty, that the racial and gendered dimensions must be fully and completely integral to the approach.

Another prevailing myth is that of upward mobility. Americans are taught that as long as they work hard within the capitalist system, obey the law, and save whatever money they can, they will have access to plenty of wealth to provide for themselves and their families. Often referred to as the “bootstraps myth,” this narrative is taught, repeated, and reinforced through by the State, academia, and mainstream media in the U.S. and is one of the central reasons why a large portion of Americans accept capitalism as the best and most successful economic system. However, studies have consistently demonstrated that the reality of mobility in the United States today is much more downward than upward. “Most children of poor families remain so all their lives, and very few of those who start out in the lowest economic strata wind up at the top. Wealthy dynasties endure forever, while children born to middle-class parents rarely advance much beyond the bounds of that class any time during their lives” (Delgado 2007, 879-80). In light of the recent housing and economic crisis and the destruction of the social safety net, a great number of people once identified as middle class in America have
fallen from their position of supposed security that was once promised to them.

According to the Center for Responsible lending, 1,888,716 homes are projected to enter foreclosure in the state of California alone between the years of 2009 and 2012 (Center for Responsible Lending 2010). The growing number of people facing poverty only points further to the failure of capitalism to provide the conditions that meet the basic needs of all Americans.

Part of the reason a large percentage of the general population of the United States, and practically all of the rest of the world, do not truly recognize the reality of downward mobility in the U.S. is due to the tremendous wealth that is held within the country. Stories of economic prosperity and lavish lifestyles penetrate the global understanding of the United States, obscuring the reality of the tremendous amount of poverty and gross inequity in the distribution of wealth that exists in the United States. “The income gap between rich and poor in the United States (measured as the percentage of total income held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population versus the poorest 20 percent) is approximately 12 to 1, one of the highest ratios in the industrialized world. The ratio in Japan and Germany, by contrast, is 4 to 1” (Mantsios 2007, 185). It is because of the high concentration of wealth that people throughout the world largely have no idea that according to the 2000 census, over 650,000 people living in the U.S. live in homes that lack complete plumbing (Glackmeyer 2002).

The value placed upon rugged individualism is one of the most closely held ideologies that supports the American institution. Americans are taught that America is a level playing field, economically and otherwise. Not only is America a level playing field,
but Western philosophy as well political liberalism and neo-liberal economic theory surmise that it is the *individual* that is the most important focus of analysis and understanding. Taken together then, every *individual* has equal opportunity and access to success, provided that one works hard *on one’s own* to achieve prosperity. The continual dismantling of the community and social safety nets reflects this emphasis on individual responsibility. The flipside of this position suggests that when people are unable to “prosper,” it is their own faculty as individuals, or rather, *individual failures*. Put differently, the typical reaction to poverty in the U.S. (institutionally and among the American public) is to place blame upon the working class, working poor and anyone experiencing poverty and/or homelessness for creating their own poverty and/or homelessness. As mentioned, this obfuscates the role of systems of power, privilege and oppression and the role of US foreign and domestic policy in creating poverty, keeps many from questioning the institutional structures that produce the conditions for injustice, and even works as a wedge strategy to not only divert attention away from the real causes of poverty and homelessness, but also to keep people blaming one another rather than uniting in solidarity to create a more just world. The existence of the group of individuals that make up the working poor directly confront this paradigm of blame, because even while they are following the expectations of capitalism, they are still unable to make ends meet. In sum, the acceptance of American individualism as common wisdom by a large portion of the population leads most Americans to the assumption that people in America are poor and/or homeless simply because they are lazy and/or ignorant, and as such, the suffering that comes with each is rationalized as “deserved.”
William Ryan calls this process of constructing those most greatly affected by injustice as responsible for their own oppression “blaming the victim.” (Ryan 2007). The process of blaming the victim happens in several steps according to Ryan. “First, identify a social problem. Second, study those affected by the problem and discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice. Third, define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself. Finally, of course, assign a government bureaucrat to invent a humanitarian action-program to correct the differences” (Ryan 2007, 691). Ryan argues that the process of victim blaming is ideal for those who benefit from systems of power, privilege, and oppression to evade truly engaging with the institutionalized causes of injustice. The final step of blaming the victim also exhibits the continuation of the savior paradigm often pushed by many politicians and NGOs that invisiblizes the agency of those in less privileged positions while simultaneously refusing to address total systemic transformation.

The rhetoric of victim blaming also reinforces the position of those in the top the social strata by accepting that they must have achieved this position deservingly through hard work and dedication. While this may be the case for some of the few who have gained positions of power throughout society, the vast majority of these individuals have been systemically afforded privilege since birth, whether they are aware of, or even want this privilege or not (Johnson 2001). Victim blaming carries forward the tradition of social Darwinism that many intersectional feminists have critiqued for its parallel to biological essentialism. Under this paradigm, the poor are “patently unfit – a label based solely on their position in society. According to the law of natural selection, they should
be in [this perspective], eliminated” (Ryan 2007, 693). These perspectives have had extremely violent consequences in the lives of the poor, including everything from the brutalization of the homeless to the social acceptance of hunger in America to the forced sterilization of poor women of color.

The broad acceptance of myths that blame the poor for their own struggles with poverty has also had a strong impact on American policymaking, just as they are simultaneously produced by US policies and policymakers. For example, the National Welfare Reform Bill signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996, represents a clear acceptance of the ideology of the bootstraps myth. Under this bill, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a government entitlement program that was in place for over 60 years (Pfeifer 2002, 21). The TANF program was structured as a work-based program with a maximum time limit of five years for services. Under TANF, welfare recipients are required to work low-wage jobs in order to receive assistance. Policymakers argued that TANF would allow welfare recipients the opportunity to pull themselves out of poverty by working a steady job and reducing the number of long-term welfare recipients.

However, the TANF program has had devastating effects, particularly women and children of color living in poor communities (Pfeifer 2002, 22). Providing incentives to county welfare agencies to reduce caseloads was a central facet in the implementation of the program. Therefore, many participants were dropped from welfare regardless of their quality of life after participating in the program. In fact, a study conducted in Wisconsin by the Hudson Institute reported that 71 percent of former welfare recipients under the
state’s W-2 program remained in poverty after leaving the program (Pfeifer 2002, 23). In order to keep numbers down, new applicants under the TANF program were also regularly forced to undergo a 60-day job search prior to receiving services and asked to seek help from family, friends and neighbors by private agencies administering the W-2 program.

The implementation of Welfare Reform in the mid-90’s represents a clear cultural shift towards a broader acceptance of rugged individualism and the myth of upward mobility. By systematically dismantling the social safety net and replacing it with TANF, policymakers created a pool of cheap wage labor to serve the needs of the US capitalist system. Although Welfare Reform was constructed as an opportunity for the poor to be able to escape poverty through hard work, the failure of the TANF program demonstrates that upward mobility for the majority of poor Americans is unattainable. The failure of Welfare Reform to address the issue of poverty in America also validates the need for social services programs and policymakers to engage with the operation of systems of power, privilege, and oppression to truly deal with the existence of poverty.

Another aspect of the experience of poverty that becomes invisible under characterization of the poor as lazy and inert is the daily resistance and resilience that is employed not only in order to survive, but also consciously enacted in an attempt to transform systems of power, privilege, and oppression. While it is important to recognize the survival strategies of the poor within a framework of resistance, many researchers ignore the deliberate and thoughtful decisions of poor and working people to subvert the dominant hierarchy. The ability to survive under the direst of circumstances and
consistent institutional oppression also demonstrates the resilience and ingenuity of the poor.

Because the poor are continuously and systematically confronted by laws and regulations that determine what access to social services they will have, many people have become experts at navigating and strategically challenging the system. While many of those experiencing poverty in America receive welfare from the government for a period of time, most still struggle daily in order to get by. Many have, as a result, developed a deep understanding of how to push open the cracks in the flawed welfare system in order to better provide for themselves and their families. A study by Austin Sarat on the relationship between legal services and welfare recipients showed that while most recipients understand the two departments to be working together in the common interest of denying the poor full access to support for basic human needs, many recipients are still willing to go through legal proceedings to demand that their voices be heard. According to Sarat, the poor refuse to see the law as “autonomous, apolitical, objective, neutral, and disinterested” and consistently challenge these constructions through their engagement with the welfare bureaucracy (Sarat 1990, 346).

While these individual moments of struggle are critical to understanding the scope of resistance of the poor, it is important to recognize the long and rich history of poor people’s collective resistance. Because the experience of poverty in America differs drastically when it is examined spatially, community-level collective organizing has been a regular part of the legacy of resistance. Oftentimes these community actions take shape around one particular galvanizing issue that disproportionately affects the poor in a given
region. In some cases, these issues have had very real racialized components. In her article, “The Hollow and the Ghetto: Space, Race, and the Politics of Poverty,” Julie Anne White explores how some of the collective struggle in Appalachia (one of the poorest parts of the country) has been largely accepting of white privilege while simultaneously engaging in the class struggle (White 2007, 278). This differs greatly from the experience of poor black Americans in urban ghettos who are consistently recognizing their experience with poverty as intimately linked to race. Later, I will explore the approach taken by PPEHRC to work intersectionally in the movement to eliminate poverty, challenging assumptions about how poor and working people organize in struggle.
METHODOLOGY/EPISTEMOLOGY – HORIZONTAL RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION WITH PPEHRC

The history of mainstream or hegemonic academic research across disciplines on groups that are subjugated by systems of power, privilege, and oppression is wrought with problematic assumptions about the research “subjects” (who are more often treated as objects without subjectivity at all) and power-over dynamics. Much of this research has been rooted in positivist assertions that the researcher can and should come from a position of objectivity in relationship to the subjects of the research. Numerous feminist and postmodern scholars reject the concept of the objective researcher (and pure objectivity itself) and argue instead that all research is grounded in a subjective reality based on systems of power, privilege, and oppression, and explain that the social location of the researcher is deeply situated within these systems, making pure objectivity impossible (Lakoff 1980, Fals Borda, 2001).

My research is grounded in a rejection of traditional positivist claims of an objective reality that exists outside of the constructions of the social world. George Lakoff states that the notion of truth is based upon particular understandings that are attached to symbols created through social institutions (Lakoff 1980, 160). From this perspective, it is important to recognize that all knowledge is situated within its particular context. The creation of knowledge through research as a process is affected along the way by the particular understandings of truth that both the researcher and the participants hold. Acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher presents the opportunity for the disruption of power relations as position of infallible “expert” as well as the concept of
“expertise” (which can only be held by a very few privileged individuals) is challenged. I therefore consider it absolutely essential that participants be empowered to determine and define their own realities during this research process (hooks 1989, 42).

It is necessary for me to state that the participants in this research project have consistently and actively engaged to disrupt the devotion to academic expertise as the only source for knowledge throughout their work. While I came to this research project as an academic with a desire to work cooperatively and challenge positivist claims about knowledge-creation, members of PPEHRC already employ this methodological framework every day in their organization. PPEHRC places the highest value on the knowledge and expertise of those most directly impacted by poverty to guide the movement. That is not to say that academics and other typically perceived “experts” are not involved in the process as well. However, PPEHRC emphasizes the wisdom and creativity of people who encounter the daily struggles related to poverty by placing these individuals in leadership roles. This core principle carries through in all of PPEHRC’s work and is important to highlight as it points to the fact that the movement is already doing methodology that challenges positivist claims. My use of this research orientation only hopes to continue the process that the movement has been engaged in for decades.

I have approached this project with the understanding that I will use my academic research skills to facilitate the articulation of the expert knowledge held by members of PPEHRC in their work to eliminate poverty. The utilization of the framework set by bell hooks in her discussion of standpoint theory is critical in my orientation towards the development of this research project. Standpoint theory contends that those who
subjugated most by systems of power, privilege and oppression are in a more objective position to evaluate and analyze these systems. Because members of structurally marginalized social groups are consistently navigating spaces and experiencing systemic inequity, their perspective is much clearer than those who have the privilege to ignore it (hooks 1989, 42). Allan Johnson describes this phenomenon as the “luxury of obliviousness” (Johnson 2001). Johnson contends that individuals in positions of privilege are not consistently confronted with certain institutional barriers nor are they dismissed from a feeling legitimacy, therefore have the ability to ignore systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Johnson 2001). Similar to the Gramscian concept of the “organic intellectual,” and the foundational assumptions and arguments of intersectional feminism, the framework set forth by hooks when employed requires the researcher to foreground the voices of those most systematically disenfranchised.

When examining the impacts of systems of power, privilege, and oppression, it is critical to understand that these systems are interlocking and mutually reinforce one another. Intersectional feminist scholars and activists argue that in order to address and eradicate a system like classism, one must simultaneously address and seek to eradicate racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, and all other systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw 1994, hooks 1981, Hill-Collins 1990; Johnson, 2001). According to Patricia Hill-Collins, each of these systems works together to create a “matrix of domination” (Hill-Collins 1990), aka Matrix of domination and privilege (Urban 2008). Every individual under these interlocking systems holds multiple identity locations concurrently and each holds a set of meanings and material consequences in the
world. Under the matrix of domination and privilege people are afforded certain privileges based on a particular aspect of their identity, for example being male in a patriarchal society, but can experience oppression simultaneously based upon another aspect of their identity, for instance a man who is also working class, poor and/or homeless. Because our identities cannot be understood in fragments, it is important to address the multiplicity and intersectionality of identity alongside all interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression. I employ an intersectional feminist analysis to examine how PPEHRC challenges these interlocking systems throughout their organizing efforts.

It is important for me to be clear at this juncture that PPEHRC does not necessarily claim this particular theoretical framework in their approach to eliminating poverty. The word “feminism” is a difficult identifier for many members to claim due to a long history of many privileged white liberal feminist organizations that have directly and indirectly undermined and sabotaged the work of PPEHRC throughout its history of organizing. These hesitations are understandable, especially when they are expressed by group that places their emphasis on development of a movement that is directly led by the poor while many of the liberal feminist organizations that work out of a traditional philanthropic model. Because PPEHRC is attempting to unite a broad base for social transformative action, they consistently foreground their work with a strong emphasis on classism. Members of PPEHRC might argue that the impacts of poverty are often so severe that daily survival is consistently at risk; therefore it is both strategic and valuable to unite individuals under the banner of economic justice. PPEHRC members also argue
that divisions in the poor community along race lines have been historically particularly
difficult to bridge, especially in relationship to the typical intersectional feminist rhetoric
of “privilege.”

For example, it might present a difficulty to unite poor white individuals living in a rural location without access to running water and electricity with poor people of color if the initial discussion includes a critique of white privilege. When material resources are so incredibly scarce for this type of poor family, the existence of white privilege might not seem like a reality. However, the approach of PPEHRC consistently challenges all interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression both discursively and materially. The organization purposefully unites people across race, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation to build a broad base for a movement to eliminate poverty. For this reason I employ the tradition of intersectional feminist analysis in my approach to constructing this research project.

During our construction of this thesis, PPEHRC and I have sought to develop techniques to encourage horizontal research processes. The history of colonialist knowledge creation in academic research can be disrupted by multiple employments of participatory techniques. Leela Fernandes describes the act of “witnessing” as a

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4 Intersectional feminist and postcolonial scholars argue that positivist research frameworks have supported colonial ambitions through processes of “othering” the participant and using the research process to extract information for negative use against the participants. Ranajit Guha’s study of archival research and the representations of resistance movements demonstrates how the positionality of the researcher can actually create counter-insurgent narratives and the importance of highlighting the voices of the subaltern in order to produce transformative research (Guha 1987).
transformative process that has both spiritual and ethical dimensions for the researcher to create knowledge in cooperation with the participants (Fernandes 2003, 83). The witness is fundamentally different from the objective observer because they actively acknowledge and challenge power relationships throughout the research process and take a care-sensitive approach to the dynamics of representation. By consciously engaging with these power dynamics and encouraging the participants to share knowledge creation strategies, this research project with PPEHRC is both contextual and cooperative.

The methods of inquiry for this research project were also partly formulated in cooperation with the needs of the community of PPEHRC members. Oftentimes, it is important for the community to develop research methods, especially when the researcher is coming from a different cultural background. While this orientation towards research is most salient in the context of cross-cultural inquiry, it is important to recognize my own positionality and the power dynamics that are enacted through every process of conducting research. Continually assessing these dynamics as well as the methods of collection throughout the development of the research is a key aspect to Kathy Charmaz’s description of grounded theory. Charmaz envisions research as a process that must be continuously evolve to address issues of social justice while remaining anchored in the empirical world (Charmaz 2003, 508). Through this consistent evaluation and self-reflexivity, this research has the capacity to assess both the theoretical understandings and material aspects of participants’ lives.

While there have been several research projects that have featured the work of PPEHRC as shining examples of resistance, much of this research has been completed
without any consultation to the members of the organization. Through many conversations that I have had with some of the organization’s leadership base, there has been a regular occurrence of academics who have become interested in the work of PPEHRC, written about them, and haven’t even told the members that they would be the subjects of a study. This is not to say that the members of PPEHRC are not happy with the fact that researchers might take interest in their work. But, they have expressed some bitterness from their lack of participation in the research process. This history makes it all the more critical that this research be conducted with the needs of PPEHRC in mind, and that the final culmination be of use to the organization in some way.

In order to further challenge the power dynamics that are at play in the conduction of research, particularly with an organization of the poor, I have chosen to emphasize the voices and analysis of those within PPEHRC while simultaneously engaging in autoethnographic representation of the work that I have done as a participant of the organization myself. By writing autoethnographically and self-reflexively I hope to challenge some of the troubling politics of representation that can be apparent in this type of research. I follow in the tradition of Anne Brodsky in her research with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). In the book, *With All Our Strength*, Brodsky (2004) begins by directly stating her own positionality and how she became involved with RAWA as both researcher and participant. She continues through the book to highlight the tremendous resistance and organizational expertise of the members of RAWA while continuously engaging with how she as the researcher is politically positioned to relay their testimony. Drawing inspiration from these texts, I
move forward to provide an alternative vision of horizontal research and knowledge co-production.
METHODS – DEVELOPING OUR RESEARCH TOGETHER

The process of building this research project began in July of 2009 at PPEHRC’s National Conference in Louisville, KY. During the conference, the over 300 people in attendance held workshops, teach-ins, film screenings, and planning sessions to move forward in building the movement to end poverty. I met here with several members of PPEHRC to determine the research questions that this project would explore. These questions were formed in casual conversations with people involved in activist work with PPEHRC from across the country. These conversations continued through email and telephone with several members in leadership positions with PPEHRC, and it was determined that we would begin research together in October 2009.

A mixed-methods qualitative approach was taken in the conduction of this research in order to approach a more holistic understanding of the work that PPEHRC does. Participant observation was conducted in Minneapolis, MN, Philadelphia, PA, and Glendora, MS. These locations were determined with PPEHRC to highlight the variety of struggles that poor people are facing throughout the country and in different geographic regions. During this time, I helped to organize events and actions alongside PPEHRC in each of the cities. PPEHRC members also invited me to share in their planning meetings as well as their participation in local government meetings they attended. While actively participating in the work of PPEHRC, I took extensive notes and kept a journal in which I could engage self-reflexively about my own positionality throughout the process. I also consistently took notes during conversations with
PPEHRC members and asked them to look over what I wrote down in order to ensure that their words were represented accurately. I also invited PPEHRC members to continue to ask questions during our interviews and provide feedback about the process as we worked together. I also found it essential to the research process to directly engage in work and action with PPEHRC as we developed our research together.

I think that it is critical in the process of conducting research that seeks to develop counter-hegemonic discourse to employ the use of interviewing techniques. Conducting interviews with participants was the best-suited method for this research project because of the depth of rich description that they have the propensity to elicit. The ability of qualitative research to produce “thick description” of the meanings that individuals attach to the social world is particularly beneficial to this research (Denzin & Lincoln 2008, 4). As many authors have noted, the task of interviewing is a sophisticated art and technique that takes much consideration and preparation. However, it was important for me to ensure the casual and comfortable nature of the interviewing process so that participants felt empowered to ask their own questions as well as sharing their own experiences and expertise throughout our conversations.

When contacting participants to schedule interviews, it was important for me to explain the objectives of my research as transparently as possible, and ask if there were any important points of dialogue that the participants felt should be included. Interview questions were also co-authored with the leadership of PPEHRC in order to ensure the needs of the organization were being met. Each interview lasted about an hour in local coffee shops, PPEHRC’s National Headquarters, and some of the participants’ homes.
Interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission, and themes were later reviewed with other members of the organization to continue the grounded research process. Approximately 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted as well as multiple casual conversations with PPEHRC members throughout the research process. It is critical to this research project that I highlight the testimonies of those engaged in struggle with PPEHRC through these first-person accounts. Why? Add a sentence or two explaining why, esp in context of subverting dominant discourse of poverty and homelessness in US

As themes and testimonies were collected, members of PPEHRC and I reflected about the direction of the research project. As I continued to work alongside PPEHRC in various local and national campaign plans, we developed a clear outline for the components of this paper and how they might be useful to future PPEHRC projects. Once I produced a draft of the paper, I circulated it between members of PPEHRC for reflection and edits in order to ensure that the participants’ goals were being met through the production of this research.
PPEHRC AND THE MOVEMENT TO ELIMINATE POVERTY AS RESISTANCE TO DOMINANT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE POOR

PPEHRC situates the current movement to eliminate poverty as a culmination of centuries of struggle in America against all forms of oppression that has carried over through time including the resistance of slaves and indentured servants in the 1700s, the struggles of labor activists and factory workers of the 1930s, and the Freedom Rides of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s to name a few. Throughout each of these movements there is a strong history of the involvement of the poor as the base of leadership. PPEHRC has strategically and symbolically linked these struggles through purposefully continuing projects similar to those taken on in the civil rights movement such as Freedom Bus rides and the March to Fulfill the Dream in which PPEHRC is marching from New Orleans to Detroit for the US Social Forum and visiting some of the poorest areas of the country to fulfill the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s March.

The organization is dedicated to creating the largest multi-racial movement of poor people from all parts of the country. Why? It presents an interesting challenge for the organization to encourage participation while simultaneously having such a broad and diverse leadership base with differing immediate agendas. However, I contend that the unique and highly intersectional methodology (even though PPEHRC doesn’t use this specific phrase) of the organization builds their base with strength in diversity. Also, it has been my experience through personal and casual conversations with many PPEHRC members from diverse backgrounds that the majority of participants position themselves
as open and receiving to learning from one another’s experiences. An enormous strength of the organization is to recognize that all its members are at different points in the development of their analysis but each has knowledge to share that should be valued and represented in the actions that are taken.

At this juncture, I must discuss the particular analysis of poverty that PPEHRC employs in their organization. In contrast to conventional wisdom and dominant discourse of poverty and homelessness in the U.S., which casts each as the result of personal misfortune, laziness, or negative circumstances (but not structural forces), PPEHRC presents an analysis that locates the cause of poverty and homelessness in interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression as well as institutional policies and practices that depend upon, maintain and necessitate the existence of poverty under global capitalism. Depending on their personal background and experience, members of PPEHRC choose to express this analysis differently. While some might directly critique the global capitalism which systematically and systemically concentrates the world’s resources into the hands of a few individuals and multi-national corporations, others express similar perspectives, but in a less explicit ways. In their testimonials, many members facing foreclosure regularly point to the injustices associated with the 2008 bank bailout, which brought many lending institutions millions of dollars even as families continued to lose their homes. Although expressed differently, taken together, each of the testimonies I heard create a broader narrative, or counter-hegemonic discourse that not only challenges dominant representations of the poor as “Other” who have brought poverty upon themselves, but the very causes of poverty and homelessness
itself. Contrary to dominant discourse on poverty then, the working class and working poor are very much involved in producing theory and knowledge about – not to mention resisting – the structural violence of poverty and homelessness in the US.

The next important aspect to recognize of both the PPEHRC network as a whole, as well as the individuals that make up the base of the organization is their tremendous resilience. As previously stated, many of the participants in the movement have spent the majority of their lives in poverty or homeless, yet they are still able to give an immense amount of time and dedication to organizing. Even while the organization is terribly under resourced and under funded, somehow PPEHRC is able to pull off massive demonstrations, meetings that require travel, and provide food and clothing for large portions of the community. For example, while working at the Philadelphia headquarters of PPEHRC in the fall of 2009, it became apparent to Cheri that it would be useful to have me participate in an upcoming planning meeting in Mississippi. However, neither the organization nor I had adequate funds to for the travel of basically any of the people that would be travelling from all ends of the country to be at this critical meeting. However, due to Cheri’s incredible dedication and skillful ability to tirelessly uncover every prospect available to her that might produce cash, frequent flyer miles, or other resources towards travel arrangements, the meeting was able to happen successfully.

How is it that this organization is able to achieve such seemingly impossible feats while the majority of its members are consistently experiencing moments of crisis due to poverty? This is a direct testament to the resilience, ingenuity, and creativity of PPEHRC. Explain significance a bit more – see Brodsky intro for help
PPEHRC frequently engages to disrupt the myth of the American Dream through many means. Many of the members of the organization frequently speak about the importance of exposing to the rest of the world how the American Dream has turned into an American Nightmare for the millions of poor folks in this nation. This discursive construction is employed often during public addresses at the beginning of large rallies and marches organized by PPEHRC and can be seen on many of signs held by march participants (fig. 2).

Another way that PPEHRC has attempted to challenge the myth of the American Dream that highlights the organization’s incredibly thoughtful and creative ingenuity was through a direct action demonstration in front of the Liberty Bell in 1999. Cheri Honkala, along with several other homeless families living in Philadelphia and thousands of supporters organized a peaceful protest in which they set up an entire living room scenario in front of the Liberty Bell including couches, tables, and lamps. They argued that if the United States government was committed to freedom and liberty, and if they were not going to provide adequate housing for these citizens (as mandated by international human rights law), that they would “set up house” on the public lawn in front of the Liberty Bell. This direct action sends a clear message to the American people, who hold the Liberty Bell as a symbol of the American Revolution for freedom that these ideals are not being afforded to all. Consequently, the Philadelphia police sent in the riot squad on mounted horseback to disperse the peaceful demonstration arrested Cheri and charged her with the crime of obstructing the view of the Liberty Bell. Shockingly, this citation carried with it one of the heaviest penalties that Cheri has faced in her over 200
arrests, including being permanently banned from the Philadelphia Independence
National Park and even the sidewalks that surround it. In response, PPEHRC acquired a
flatbed truck for their next demonstration and had Cheri leading the rally from a
megaphone on the back along with several musicians performing songs of resistance.

PPEHRC members also consistently confront and attest to the reality of
downward mobility. Many members have lived in poverty for most of their lives and
struggle on a daily basis to provide adequate food and housing for themselves and their
children. One tactic that PPEHRC has employed to challenge dominant perceptions of
poverty is what they call “reality tours.” Any time leading organizers of PPEHRC are
asked to host student groups or take on new members and volunteers, these individuals
are taken out into the community to bear witness to the daily reality of poverty that
people experience throughout the United States. This is a critical moment of both
popular education and compassionate community building that helps individuals who are
new to the movement gain a deeper understanding of the experience of poverty. Reality
tours are a crucial aspect of the movement’s development, even for individuals who are
living in poverty or homeless themselves. For poor and homeless individuals, reality
tours allow the opportunity for the realization that the conditions of poverty are systemic
in nature, rather than a reflection of personal failure. They also provide poor people the
possibility to place their own personal experience in the broader context and understand
poverty.

As such, reality tours serve two vitally important functions. For one, as a
community-centered popular education strategy, they provide another powerful way of
challenging dominant discourse on poverty and homelessness in the U.S. The understanding that poverty is experienced both systemically and inter-generationally are two dominant themes that reoccurred in the testimonies I personally heard during numerous reality tours in a variety of locations, including Philadelphia, Louisville, Minneapolis, and Glendora. PPEHRC’s reality tours directly confront and mobilize the public against the hegemonic discourse on poverty and homelessness in the U.S.

Likewise, reality tours provide crucial opportunities for consciousness raising and personal empowerment (which bolsters resilience), in challenging what Intersectional Feminists call the internalization of oppression, or rather, the process by which people come to believe the myths and ideologies supporting interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression, or in this case the myths (including those that blame the victim) central to hegemonic U.S. discourse on poverty and homelessness. Put more explicitly, those experiencing poverty and/or homelessness come to believe that they themselves -- as “deviant” or “deficient” individuals -- are to blame for the poverty and/or homelessness they experience, because they as individuals have failed to work hard enough, are ignorant and so forth. Like wedge strategies, the internalization of oppression diverts attention away from the real, structural causes of poverty and homelessness, a process that PPEHRC seeks to disrupt through campaigns like reality tours.

PPEHRC works on many levels to challenge the rhetoric of blaming the victim that has been internalized by many Americans, including the poor themselves. Another crucially important strategy for disrupting this is PPEHRC’s emphasis on the sharing
personal narratives about peoples of the experiences with poverty. PPEHRC attempts to disrupt the victim blaming process by producing numerous videos that feature individuals within the organization sharing how they became homeless or how they have experienced poverty throughout their lifetime. Testimonials are also an integral part of every organized rally, community gathering, and truth commission held by PPEHRC. Typically these testimonials speak to issues such as bankruptcy due to illness and lack of health insurance, foreclosure due to capitalistic predatory lending schemes, and lack of access to the necessities guaranteed by the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights such as food, adequate housing, and living wage jobs. These personal testimonies interrupt the hegemonic discourse on poverty in the U.S. and give witnesses little choice but to recognize the systemic and institutional components of the structural violence that is poverty and homelessness in the U.S.

As mentioned, because myths of poverty and victim blaming are so commonplace in the U.S. it is not unusual for members within PPEHRC to internalize each and express guilt and/or frustration that they somehow must have played a part in causing their poverty. It is in these times that other members of the group come together in support to help them place their struggle in the larger context of the scope of poverty within the United States and throughout the world. For example, many of the participants in PPEHRC who have lost or are losing their homes due to foreclosure experience moments of tremendous despair seeing their livelihoods being taken away from them. Many of these people have faced unexpected health crises, were coerced into refinancing without complete consent, or lost their income due to the economic recession. The
general public often holds that those who have been victimized by predatory lending should have read their lending agreements more closely, or that they “knew what they were getting into.” To combat this thinking, PPEHRC has developed several community advocacy/support groups of people losing their homes to foreclosure who engage in direct action against the lending institutions who hold their mortgages. These groups prevent participants from feeling as if their experience is an isolated incident and directly call attention to the institutional forces that pushed them towards foreclosure.
PPEHRC leadership suggested that I begin our research together in Minneapolis, MN in order to begin to understand the ongoing struggles against the foreclosure crisis that had begun prior to my arrival. According to the Minnesota Home Ownership Center, 14,459 homes were placed into foreclosure in 2009 in the Twin Cities Metro area alone, up 89% since 2005 (HousingLink 2010). The impact of the housing bubble meltdown was felt throughout the country, with millions of families losing their homes to foreclosure, while banking institutions reported record profits and received massive taxpayer bailouts. PPEHRC saw this as a moment and seized the opportunity to bridge the perceived gap between the so-called “middle class” and the working class and poor, as many “hard working families” (i.e. those who did not fit dominant stereotypes of poverty as individual failure) began to face the reality of losing their homes for the first time in their lives. It is for this reason that I explore the issue of foreclosure as another expression of poverty, one that transcends the boundaries of the geographic characteristics that typically define rural, urban, or suburban settings.

The pervasiveness of foreclosures throughout the country calls for an examination of this newer expression of poverty, which PPEHRC and I began exploring in Minneapolis together. During this time, PPEHRD was rallying around five women known as the “Minnesota 5,” each of whom were in various stages of foreclosure. All were in agreement that they would fight to stay in their homes with the help of PPEHRC.
During my time in Minneapolis, I hoped to connect with each of these women and learn more about what they were doing to prevent the banks from taking their homes.

After months of going back and forth with her bank to try and work out a deal to save her home, Rosemary Williams, along with dozens of other PPEHRC activists forcibly occupied her home for 35 days after the sheriff initially locked the doors in order to keep Rosemary and her family in their home. Rosemary is a 55 year resident of her block who has led neighborhood revitalization projects, block parties, and is a vital member of a community where foreclosures have run rampant. At the time of her foreclosure, eight homes on her block alone continued to sit empty as a result of foreclosures. Rosemary got behind in her mortgage payments when she took out an adjustable rate mortgage (ARM) in order to buy out another family member’s share of her mother’s estate in order to keep their family home. Shortly after taking out the ARM, she lost her job and when her mortgage payments skyrocketed from $1200 to $2200 per month, it became impossible to make ends meet. Soon she was served with a foreclosure notice and decided that she would remain in her home. Rosemary became an internationally recognized activist for her strong critique of the capitalist system that afforded the banks massive profits while families throughout the country continued to lose their homes.

During a foreclosure defense, PPEHRC employs multiple tactics to encourage community participation and involvement. The activities involved in Rosemary’s foreclosure defense occupation included interfaith community prayer sessions, candlelight vigils, potlucks, sit-ins at the offices of the bank holding her mortgage, and a
community bike ride demonstration. These activities were all created in cooperation with several local organizations including the Minnesota Coalition for a People’s Bailout. People that were involved in the defense went door knocking throughout the neighborhood, collecting signatures on a petition to demonstrate the support for keeping Rosemary in her home. In an incredibly creative maneuver, PPEHRC and other supporters of Rosemary filed a court injunction against GMAC Mortgage LLC, claiming that the eviction would create a public nuisance by leaving another home empty and available for drug use and prostitution. Many of these tactics deflected the foreclosure process and brought Rosemary more time and attention to the struggle. However, on September 11, 2009, just weeks before I was to arrive in Minneapolis, police entered Rosemary’s home and forcibly removed and arrested seven individuals engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience. The police placed military-grade steel panels over all of the doors and windows to prevent re-entry. Rosemary emerged from the home waving a bouquet of flowers as protestors chanted, “It’s not over yet!” and “Whose House? Rosemary’s House!” The action gained so much international attention that Rosemary was flown to Sweden to give speaking engagements to highlight her experience in the foreclosure struggle in the United States.

The expansiveness of the foreclosure crisis in the United States points towards the creation of a new class of the poor not before seen until now. Because the majority of Americans are only a paycheck or a health care crisis away from being homeless, PPEHRC has worked to dispel the belief in the security of the middle class. According to a study published in 2008, almost half of all foreclosures in America are caused in part by
medical issues (Robertson et al. 2008, 68). The dismantling of the social safety net and decline in stability of the middle class directly challenges the myth of the American Dream. It is a widely held belief by the majority of Americans that as long as you work hard, it is easy to live a moderate lifestyle that includes homeownership in the United States. However, the reality that many hard working middle-class families are losing their homes to foreclosure while the top 1% of Americans hold the vast majority of the global wealth, indicates that the line separating the middle class and the poor is becoming blurred. It is for these reasons that PPEHRC consistently emphasizes and finds strength in uniting the shrinking middle class with the working class. The systematic funneling of the world’s wealth into the hands of a small number of extremely rich individuals and corporations impacts both groups significantly.

After following Rosemary’s journey through the foreclosure defense process, I was excited to meet the members of the Minnesota chapter of PPEHRC and learn about what projects they had in mind for the next month that I would be joining them in their work. We met in the home of Ann Patterson, another member of the “Minnesota 5,” who happens to also be Cheri Honkala’s sister, for a planning meeting and report back from a recent action that the chapter had participated in Washington, DC. The atmosphere was familiar and welcoming, and the members of PPEHRC started by going around the room and introducing themselves. Throughout the evening, Ann’s two young daughters interacted with each of the members, playing and roaming around the room. The sense of community and an intimate bond between the organizers was definitely apparent. Building a strong network of support, both emotional and material is an important
priority for accomplishing long-term, sustainable activism, so that participants do not burn out from consistent pressure and stress. This is particularly vital in poor activist networks, as many of the participants are continually working to meet their own survival needs while also organizing for the broader movement.

Ann has been a nurse at a local Minneapolis hospital for nineteen years and her husband was regularly employed as a cook. When he lost his job during the economic recession, they spent ten months racking up credit card debt just to be able to put food on the table to survive. Eventually they were forced to refinance their home mortgage and were given an ARM. When President Obama put into place a plan to assist families with the loan modification process, Ann told me that she was hopeful because her family met all of the requirements necessary to qualify. She began months of calling her lending institution (Wells Fargo), the Obama administration’s loan modification hotline, and the Urban League, attempting to get her finances settled before the ARM would go into affect, raising her payment from $1200 to $2000 per month. Because she was not receiving any help, she and other PPEHRC members organized a sit-in at the office of Wells Fargo, and after 6 hours finally spoke to the Vice President. The bank promised to process her loan modification paperwork, and after weeks of waiting for an answer, Ann was told that her income was too high to qualify for a modification. Ann responded, “In regards to my income, there is nothing in the Obama plan that states that there is an income cutoff. It’s important for people to understand this because it’s not just people out there sleeping under bridges who are hurting. It’s people like me. I don’t know what to do, I just know that me and my kids are not going to lose this house.”
Ann knows what is at stake for the majority of seemingly middle-class Americans who are facing losing their homes. Having grown up poor, Ann knows that there is a set of survival skills that many newly poor people are not equipped with. “Most of the people I work with have never been poor. They’ve been able to go on camping trips and they have cabins, and now they have nothing.” Her hospital has been laying off 300 people every six months, and many of these people are in the age bracket of retirement and have worked there for up to 45 years. “We’re talking about a whole new class of poor people who are not going to know how to hustle to get toothpaste, or diapers, or clothes. We need to recognize that this struggle is going to change and is changing from here on out.”

A few days after our initial meeting I was invited once again to Ann’s house to participate in a community outreach supply distribution. Even though it was below freezing temperatures outside, PPEHRC members gathered to pass out bags of hygiene products, diaper bags, household items, and children’s clothing. Ann collects these products from local businesses that are willing to donate overstock merchandise for PPEHRC members to distribute to families in need throughout the neighborhood. Some of the items being given away came from Rosemary Williams’ house after it was seized from her foreclosure. Even in the wake of such a personally devastating event, that Rosemary still found it in the goodness of her heart to share these items with the community, attests to her valuable role and commitment to being a positive influence in her neighborhood. It was evident throughout my time working alongside PPEHRC that most members shared a strong dedication to sharing for the good of the movement and
their communities, even if they did not have much materially to give. Signs were made to inform passersby what items were available and others that explained some of the broader political issues PPEHRC addresses like, “Stop Foreclosures and Evictions!” (fig. 1)

While most of the people that organize with PPEHRC face their own personal challenges related to economic stability, the organization places a strong emphasis on regular food and supply distributions, knowing that there are many families struggling in the community who have not yet connected with the movement. Distributions allow PPEHRC the opportunity to connect with new allies in the neighborhood and inform other poor and working class folks of the work that they do. This is a particularly useful tactic in urban and suburban settings, where much of the population is segmented and live largely isolated lives from one another. As people came to collect items and began conversations with us, Ann shared that her house was already in foreclosure and the difficulty she was having in getting the bank to work with her to resolve the mortgage. By this time, Ann had already gone through several attempts by phone and fax to complete all necessary documentation to get a modification from Wells Fargo, but each time she called it seemed that she was given different directions about how to proceed forward and that no one could give her a solid answer. This seems to be a reoccurring theme expressed by most of the people facing foreclosure I have encountered through my work with PPEHRC. While the banks have claimed that they are willing to work with people to modify their mortgages, bureaucracy and structural barriers often prevent people from getting the assistance that they require. Ann’s courage and willingness to
speak out about her experience with her neighbors seemed to bring a lot of solidarity with most of the people taking part in the distribution. Several people took informational materials and seemed to be genuinely interested in engaging in future projects and demonstrations with PPEHRC, especially any actions related to supporting their neighbor Ann in fighting her foreclosure.

Once all the supplies were passed out, Lynette Malles (a leading organizer for MN PPEHRC) and I headed over to the home of Leslie Parks, another one of the “Minnesota 5” women who were engaged in the struggle to save their homes from foreclosure. I met Leslie earlier in the week and was excited to find out what she had in mind for the coming weeks of work in the struggle to save her home. Leslie grew up in a single-parent household, with her mother Tecora working full time as a hospital worker to make ends meet. “I think that’s where a lot of my strength came from, my mom. My mom is also my best friend, so whenever I had struggles I could always talk to her and she would get me through whatever I was going through.” Leslie is a logistics assistant and customer service professional for a roofing shingles manufacturing company in the Minneapolis area.

Tecora decided to refinance her fixed-rate mortgage on the property that Leslie now resides in order to pay for some renovations required by the city to maintain the property as a rental. During her meeting with the loan agent, Leslie’s mother said that she wanted the same kind of mortgage that she had always had and was told that her refinance would keep her payments the same through the entirety of the loan. She was dissuaded from reading the entirety of the paperwork and rushed through the process by
the aggressive loan agent who told her that there were lots of other appointments that he needed to keep waiting behind her. Even though Tecora had perfect credit that would’ve qualified her for a fixed rate mortgage, it turned out that the papers Tecora signed contained an ARM that quickly skyrocketed her monthly payments from $700 per month to $2300 per month and threw the Parks family into foreclosure. Leslie told me that she was never much involved with anything political for most of her life. “My plan was to live just a quiet life, under the radar. I wasn’t into anything political. Nothing. Until they tried to steal my mom’s house. That was when I started to become extremely political and started waking up.”

Leslie has gone through every outlet at her disposal to save her house, including going to the attorney general to attempt to bring charges against Indymac. She decided that she wanted to turn her home into a standing activist demonstration against the foreclosure crisis. She had come up with a variety of exciting proposals for raising awareness and gaining momentum in the neighborhood for her upcoming foreclosure resistance. The first task was to cover all the windows in the home with statistics about the rise in foreclosures throughout the country, including a ticker that would display the running national total of foreclosures since the housing bubble burst in 2007. One sign that Leslie wanted to put up stated, “Capitalism Did This” in a direct and deliberate statement of confrontation with injustice due to the operations of systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Leslie has moved the majority of her belongings out of her home in order to prepare for the day when the sheriff comes to forcibly evict her, so we sat on lawn chairs and used a space heater to keep warm. The consistent confrontation
with impending crisis is a factor of life disproportionately experienced by poor and working class individuals and the movement to eliminate poverty as a whole. For Leslie, the stress of dealing with her lending institution and worrying about when and if she will be evicted while simultaneously working a full time job has had serious health consequences that she struggles to deal with on a daily basis. Later, I will explore how issues related the seemingly endless need to manage crises and under-resourcing impact the entirety of PPEHRC’s functionality.

A few days later, PPEHRC members gathered at the home of Barbara Byrd, another member of the “Minnesota 5.” Barbara has an upcoming court date on Wednesday to file a lawsuit against her mortgage company for the fraudulent practices that were used when authorizing her foreclosure. Her home is situated in a much more suburban part of Minneapolis in comparison to the other women I had met so far, however, PPEHRC members were willing to travel the distance to show support and plan a strategy for how to proceed with Barbara’s foreclosure defense. We gathered in her living room and begun chatting casually. Lynette, who is clearly a woman of great leadership capabilities and a strong ally to each of these women, brought with her a scarf to place on the table along with some candles and incense to burn. She wanted to create the space where we could give a spiritual blessing to the house as well as offer our support to Barbara in her upcoming endeavor. This activity provided another moment for building support on a more intimate level between each of the women facing foreclosure. By creating bonds of solidarity and opening a space where each of the women can focus on a critique that falls on the institutions that created the housing crisis, PPEHRC
challenges the rhetoric of victim blaming that causes shame in many homeowners in default. Oftentimes, the shame becomes so great that homeowners will simply move out of their homes in the middle of the night in fear of being judged by their neighbors for being a “delinquent” rather than fighting to remain in their homes. It is critical that PPEHRC builds networks of support to encourage its members to maintain the analysis on dominant institutions that have operated through interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression and caused millions of families to lose their homes to foreclosure.

Perhaps the most interesting and exciting event that took place during my stay in Minneapolis occurred a few days later at the home of Leslie Parks. Leslie decided that she wanted to continue making her home into a visible and long-term statement in the ongoing foreclosure struggle. In a study published by the National Coalition for the Homeless of 186 social service agency workers, respondents estimated that 19% of the homeless individuals receiving services from their agencies became homeless as a result of foreclosure (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Drawing the link between foreclosure and homelessness became an important emphasis for Leslie, who had decided to set up a tent city on her front lawn (fig. 3). This also provided another opportunity for the organization to continue the conversation about uniting the middle class with the poor and working classes as each of these populations are being subjected to an unjust economic system. While PPEHRC regularly organizes tent city setups for both political and survival purposes, this action was the first to take place on the property of a foreclosed home. PPEHRC excels at exercising creativity in all their activist pursuits,
insisting that all demonstrations contain visual elements that will attract attention from the public. It was clear from only a few minutes after the tents were set up that neighbors and passersby were curious as to what PPEHRC doing.

We continued to pass out hygiene kits to neighbors and literature regarding the work PPPEHRC does in relationship to the foreclosure crisis. We were hoping that if there were members of the homeless population that needed a place to stay for the night that we could connect with them and offer them a spot in one of our tents. We realized soon enough that we would probably need to connect with some of the local shelters so that they could direct individuals who they had to turn away to our encampment. Lynette and I slept in the tents alone that night, so that we could be sure to hold signs about the demonstration to catch the eyes of the people on their morning commute to work.

It was also important to spend that day working on a plan to get the local media and politicians to attend a press conference to be held at Leslie’s home announcing the demonstration a few days later. Lynette and I spent the day in the front yard making phone calls and emailing contacts in between our interactions with people in the neighborhood. Press conferences are an integral part of the process of building successful campaigns and demonstrations for PPEHRC. While many national news organizations pay little attention to activist organizing, PPEHRC has built a network of independent media, documentarians, and bloggers who publicize the work of the organization through the Internet. Oftentimes PPEHRC is also successful in gaining the attention of the local news organizations with their penchant for visual creativity and focus on sharing of testimony in all of the press conferences they hold.
Leslie announced at the press conference that she was refusing to leave her home and would engage in nonviolent civil disobedience if the sheriff forcibly evicted her. She and Lynette explained the important link between foreclosure and homelessness that the tent city was attempting to shed light on. They also announced that if anyone was in need of a safe place to sleep, they were welcome to come to Leslie’s house to take part in the demonstration. Several local media outlets, Minnesota Indymedia, and a local woman running for city council were all in attendance and support of Leslie’s struggle. PPEHRC members gathered at Leslie’s house after the press conference and were surprised when a neighbor offered to buy everyone pizza because they had heard about the demonstration on the news. Garnering this type of support from neighbors and the local community is critical to the success of building a foreclosure defense project. Because most people do not want to see another home sit empty in their neighborhood as an invitation for crime and drug use, PPEHRC purposefully works to unite neighborhoods around foreclosure defense through door-knocking, petitions, and organized community meetings. PPEHRC displays incredible skills in developing community outreach during these types of demonstrations. Leslie even decided that she wanted to have one night a week for community coffee night at her home where neighbors could come to chat and listen to local music as a way to involve her neighbors in her foreclosure defense.

A few days later, we gathered at the courthouse to attend Barbara’s hearing. In a further demonstration of support and solidarity, PPEHRC members that were unable to attend called Barbara to wish her luck and check in with her. As we sat outside the courtroom and the scheduled time came and went, we began to wonder if the hearing had
been cancelled. Barbara then called her lawyer who informed her that the hearing had in fact been cancelled and he was still at his home. Apparently no one thought it was important enough to let the plaintiff in the case know that she didn’t need to come all the way down to the courthouse. Most surprising though was the fact that this was the second cancellation that Barbara has had to deal with.

Cancellations like these occur on a regular basis and have a disproportionate impact in the lives of poor and working class people. For working class people, issues of transportation, child care, and time off work can literally make the difference about whether or not they can continue to fight to stay in their homes. People in positions of power often don’t fully comprehend the consequences in the lives of those affected by their frivolousness due to the operation of systemic privilege. In Barbara’s case, she had been working the night shift and running on no sleep when she arrived at the courthouse, a ball of nervous energy awaiting the decision that would determine whether or not she would be allowed to remain in her home. We later discovered when I telephoned the Judge’s court clerk that the Judge had in fact postponed the hearing until the next morning because “something came up” and “there were only two hearings scheduled for that day so she decided to send the court reporter home.” The level of carelessness on the part of the judicial system for the gravity of Barbara’s situation stunned and disgusted me. Especially as Barbara is a working woman, who clearly has made significant sacrifices on multiple occasions to attend her hearings.

The following day, when the court hearing finally took place, Lynette took notes feverishly. She said that a lot of the time in these hearings the language they use is
impossible to understand and she wanted to still be able to report back to all the people in the PPEHRC network about Barbara’s case. This is another reason why most people interacting with the court system, particularly people disproportionately impacted by interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, don’t have the tools and resources to defend themselves in a courtroom. The utilization of academic and legal jargon without consistent and thorough explanations of what life-altering decisions are being made really calls into question whether or not someone who does not have access to that language can truly have a just court hearing. However, PPEHRC attempts to challenge this barrier by documenting to the best of their ability each court hearing and developing a network of pro bono lawyers that are interested in issues related to social and economic justice.

When the hearing began, it was clear early on that it was going to be quite a circus. The young lawyer for EMC mortgage had a binder that was clearly organized and prepared for the hearing. He began explaining how Barbara had gone into foreclosure and because of all the lawsuits she had brought against the company, she was able to stay in her home for “free” for 2 years. Lynette feverishly took notes on the proceedings as the lawyers on both sides were speaking in legalese for most of the hearing and making it very difficult to understand what was taking place. Lynette told me that oftentimes there are life-changing decisions made in these types of hearings that are made without the full understanding of the person who will be impacted the most.

Barbara’s lawyer had submitted an amendment to his complaint only about 10 minutes before the hearing began. The judge immediately snapped at him and told him
he was ridiculous if he thought that she would have been able to read an amendment with only 10 minutes prior to a hearing. At that point, Barbara’s lawyer was completely thrown off and couldn’t recover. He began to fumble his papers and was searching for words that wouldn’t come. The judge decided that she wasn’t even interested in hearing the arguments that Barbara’s lawyer was to present and having read the court documents, dismissed the hearing with prejudice. She then addressed Barbara with a tone of admonishment, speaking to her about not taking on responsibilities she couldn’t handle and that she would have to leave her home.

It happened so fast that Lynette and I were stunned. We didn’t really even understand that it was time to leave until the judge walked out of the room. When we met Barbara in the hall she looked stunned, upset, and angry. Almost instantly tears began falling down her face. Lynette and I said nothing, just placed our hands on her back in support. She was devastated. Each of us couldn’t believe that the judge wouldn’t even let Barbara present her case and that she would still have to leave her home no matter what. Her lawyer said that he would speak to EMC’s lawyer and try to convince him to give her 90 days before she had to leave.

That night, I interviewed Linda Norenberg, the last of the “Minnesota 5” women at her family home that her father built when she was a child. Linda worked many years as a bus driver while putting herself through school and always dreamed of owning a home. When her father passed away, she used her part of the inheritance to put a down payment on their home so that it could remain in the family. When she lost her bus-driving job, she took a position working at a supermarket, which cut her pay in half. She
soon got behind on her mortgage payments and went into foreclosure. “I worry about what is going to happen to the house after I’m forced to leave. I don’t want it to sit vacant. This is the house that my father built for his family, lovingly. He built it to be kept in the family.” Linda told me that while she is out walking her dog in the neighborhood she sees new houses that are being put up for sale or sitting abandoned due to foreclosure every day. After reading about Rosemary’s housing struggle in the newspaper, Linda decided that she was going to fight to stay in her home.

“Most people in our society think that people are living in poverty because they’re lazy or that all their money is going to drugs and alcohol. But the reality is that we’re not getting paid enough for the jobs that need to be done!” Linda never saw herself as the kind of person who wanted to work an office job, she was always much more interested in driving bus. After getting connected with PPEHRC, Linda has found a network of other people who have encouraged her to share her testimony of her experience, and work toward lifting the stigmatism off of people experience foreclosure. “The best experience about working with PPEHRC has been that everybody is so generous and kind and loving and understanding. They’re not condemning or making any judgments. It’s been hard when people think that I must’ve been irresponsible or squandered my money, but PPEHRC has helped me to speak out.”

I argue that the foreclosure crisis illuminates the structural inequalities in the economic system due to the disproportionate impact it has had on working class families and people of color. Using an Intersectional Feminist lens to examine the experiences of the “Minnesota 5,” I contend that the barriers to successful loan modification and legal
assistance are directly correlated to systems of power, privilege, and oppression. It is not simply a coincidence that Tecora Parks was pushed into an adjustable rate mortgage when she actually qualified for a fixed rate loan. A mixed-methods study analyzing econometric models of subprime mortgage lending in the larger Baltimore area revealed “persistent racial targeting and disparate impact, even after controlling for applicant income and underwriters’ evaluation of borrower risks” (Wyly et al. 2006, 126). It is clear that the African-American market as well as the working class market is becoming synonymous with a specialization in sub-prime mortgages to large-scale mortgage companies (Wyly et. al 2006, 126). People of color have been purposefully and systematically targeted for less preferable loans by the mortgage industry, regardless of their credit standing, as a way to make a tremendous amount of money in a short period of time. This in part occurs due to what Allan Johnson refers to as “agenda-setting power” (Johnson 2001). People in positions of privilege have the ability to define the discourse and be taken seriously simply based on their social location. In the case of the subprime mortgage crisis, thousands of underwriters targeted poor families and people of color for ARMs that were likely to fail without any objection from the US government or Federal Reserve. These actions were able to take place due to the tremendous privilege afforded to the financial sector and the desire to expand global capital in the US, regardless of who would receive the negative effects of irresponsible lending. An Intersectional Feminist lens makes clear that this phenomenon is another demonstration of the operation of systems of power, privilege, and oppression that disproportionately impact poor and working people as well as people of color.
However it is also important to recognize how the individuals involved in MN PPEHRC also respond to these issues utilizing an Intersectional Framework, even though this is not a phrase they use themselves, as mentioned. MN PPEHRC displays an obvious and compelling ability to build support networks, to directly involve the community in their demonstrations, and provide people with resources for foreclosure defense throughout Minneapolis. Each of these tactics illustrates the organization’s ability to operate within an Intersectional Feminist framework of coalition building. Furthermore, members consistently and successfully challenge the rhetoric of victim blaming that persists in dominant State and mainstream/corporate media discourse surrounding the foreclosure crisis, and in so doing, purposefully disrupt hegemonic U.S. discourse on poverty and homelessness, including its unquestioning acceptance of the capitalist system as a level playing field upon which an individual need only “pull oneself up by their bootstraps” to succeed and prosper. PPEHRC has developed and employs specific strategies to disrupt these discourses and the myths that comprise them in both urban and suburban areas of Minneapolis. Likewise, MN PPEHRC addresses the foreclosure crisis at multiple levels and engages with multiple systems of power, privilege, and oppression throughout their work. I argue that the methodology and tools used by PPEHRC to develop a sustainable movement and keep families in their homes post-foreclosure could be used in other urban or suburban centers.
URBAN POVERTY IN KENSINGTON, PHILADELPHIA: THE IMPACTS OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCING DEFICITS ON PPEHRC

After our month together in Minneapolis, I headed for the PPEHRC National Organizing and Education Center in Philadelphia, PA. A large portion of national-level coordination in the PPEHRC network occurs out of this location, which also hosts educational workshops as well as arts and culture events. PPEHRC’s National Organizing and Education Center and a large portion of the Philadelphia-based PPEHRC organizers live in a part of Philadelphia known as Kensington. Once a booming factory town with an emphasis in carpet, glass, and shipbuilding, Kensington faced an economic downturn in industrial production that by the mid-1950s had closed the majority of factories in the area, driving the neighborhood into desperate poverty (Remer, 2002). Now, upon visiting Kensington, one will see that the majority of factories sit empty and abandoned, with no signs of future economic investment on the horizon. This economic collapse caused the neighborhood to become overrun with gang activity, violence, and drugs. With a violent crime rate that is nearly four times the national average, Philadelphia is one of the most dangerous cities in the country, and Kensington is perhaps the most impacted of Philadelphia’s districts. According to the 2000 US Census, the median household income for the neighborhood of Kensington was $30,505, nearly $12,000 less than the national average (US Bureau of the Census, 2000).

The expression of poverty in Kensington is drastically different from the earlier discussion of the foreclosure crisis in Minnesota. Kensington is a densely populated urban area that could easily be compared to a war zone. The majority of buildings in the
neighborhood are older brick row houses that are in poor condition and are likely to be in violation of safety or health standards. There is so much violence in the neighborhood that it is not uncommon to hear gunshots at any time during the day or night, and the majority of people do not even come to a complete stop at the stop signs when they are driving. Drug sales and usage takes place everywhere in Kensington and during my stay I regularly came across people on the sidewalk who had passed out with a needle in their arm from shooting up heroin.

There are many environmental health concerns disproportionally impacting the poor community of Kensington that members of PPEHRC are genuinely concerned about. The first and perhaps most visible issue facing the neighborhood of Kensington is the lack of access to healthy foods. There are a multitude of convenience stores carrying highly processed foods yet there is a complete lack of grocery stores carrying fresh fruits and vegetables. When viewing Kensington’s retail stores on a map, within a five-mile radius there are hundreds of convenience stores but only one grocery store. This distance becomes even more difficult considering that many of the people living in Kensington do not have access to reliable transportation in order to get to the grocery store.

Many environmental and food justice groups have documented this phenomenon throughout the country. “Food deserts” occur as supermarket chains invest in car-accessible, 24 hour megastores on the edges of town, leaving lower income neighborhoods for more affluent suburbs (Mamen et. al, 2004, 61). Due to this lack of accessible grocery stores, Kensington families are forced to turn to fast food restaurants and convenience stores, placing them at greater risk for health problems like diabetes and
heart disease. The legacy of redlining poor communities and communities of color into undesirable neighborhoods has carried over into the redlining of the food system, presenting a legitimate environmental health concern for the families of Kensington.

Furthermore, Kensington is seeing an increasing environmental health issue as its community recreation centers and pools are being systematically shut down. As poverty and crime continues to immensely impact the neighborhood, the city has closed virtually all locations where youth can participate in active sports. These centers used to be places for children to socialize and exercise in a constructive and safe setting after school, especially when many families cannot afford costly extra-curricular activities. The American Heart Association states that physical inactivity in children contributes to coronary artery disease, stroke, and childhood obesity (American Heart Association, 2010). The city government of Philadelphia has a history of extremely complicated economic issues related to corruption and mismanagement of resources. Kensington’s community recreation centers have been a significant casualty of these governmental problems.

It is not only Kensington’s recreation centers that have become unavailable to the children of the neighborhood. While Kensington has many parks and playgrounds, these areas have become unsafe for children due to crime and drug use. The persistence of gang and drug-related violence has made it virtually impossible for families to exercise and play in the community playgrounds without fear that they might be caught up in the crossfire of shootings that have become a regular occurrence in the neighborhood. The state of gang violence and drug usage in Kensington is a direct result of the economic
oppression that has been institutionally perpetuated in the area. The lack of government investment in the betterment of the Kensington community along with the removal of economic opportunity has made the neighborhood environmentally unsafe in many ways.

Finally, residents of Kensington have also been redlined out of access to adequate health care. For many years the neighborhood of Kensington had its own hospital, which has now been turned into a methadone clinic and no longer provides general or emergency care. Residents of Kensington must now travel twenty minutes by car to the nearest medical facility if they are in need of services. This lack of access to health services is only exacerbated by the denial of affordable health care options to the majority of Americans currently living in poverty. All of these environmental health concerns create a very dire situation for the residents of Kensington and represent a clear inequity in distribution of environmental impacts.

Kensington is significant in the historical development of PPEHRC as it is the birthplace of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU). KWRU was formed in 1991 by a group of individuals that included Cheri Honkala, who began to organize the poor, welfare recipients, and homeless individuals living in Kensington to demand human rights. The organization led some of the first housing takeovers of properties owned by Housing and Urban Development in the Philadelphia region and has gained national recognition for its large-scale tent cities and political demonstrations. KWRU helped to birth the national network that is PPEHRC today and is still active in the Philadelphia area connecting families with the resources they need to survive, organizing teach-ins, and participating in the global movement to eliminate poverty.
PPEHRC has had great success in taking over abandoned properties and placing homeless families with them in Kensington. This activity has helped to gain a lot of attention for PPEHRC, as the organization has held properties for upwards of three years and housed hundreds of people over the history of the organization. Housing takeovers are a central method that PPEHRC uses to place pressure on governmental institutions to provide adequate and affordable housing to poor and working families. The organization cites the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights to claim the human right to adequate housing and “reclaim” properties that have been abandoned by Housing and Urban Development. The process of building a housing takeover action has been refined by members of PPEHRC to include a very clear outline of steps that are taken before, during, and after a housing unit is occupied. This tactic taken by PPEHRC is perhaps the most direct form of confrontation with the institutional systems of power, privilege, and oppression that the organization employs.

I was to spend the next two weeks shadowing Cheri Honkala, national organizer for PPEHRC, and working alongside other Philadelphia-based PPEHRC organizers on several upcoming projects. Cheri invited me to stay with her in her small Kensington apartment where she lives with her 8-year-old son Guillermo. Having been a participant and key mobilizer in the movement to eliminate poverty for over 25 years, Cheri’s dedication to her work with PPEHRC is truly unbelievable. A typical day for Cheri consists of waking up at 6:30am to take her son to school, taking several conference calls on her way in to the PPEHRC national office, working all day long on planning projects and responding to emails, picking Guillermo up from school and returning home for an
hour or so before she heads out to work a night job that helps her make ends meet and fund the movement. Her phone rings with calls from around the world regarding strategizing, coalition building, and even crisis management *all day long*. It is not an exaggeration to say that Cheri does not get a single moment to herself on a typical day.

While this lifestyle is wildly unsustainable and places tremendous amounts of stress on Cheri, she and other members of this movement have had to operate this way in order keep PPEHRC going. Poor and working class families are regularly faced with a disproportionate number of crises in their daily lives: the electricity is about to be shut off, our landlord is about to evict us, my child has a cavity and we don’t have dental insurance. These types of crises occur consistently and unexpectedly, so poor and working people frequently are forced to engage in projects of survival and demonstrate a tremendous resourcefulness to ensure that basic needs are met. Because the majority of PPEHRC members are faced with these crises in their family and personal lives, it is not surprising that the organization as a whole is recurrently forced to focus on crisis management. The organizing body of PPEHRC spends a tremendous amount of time trying to determine how the office rent will be paid and how they will make important actions and meetings take place with virtually no money.

Upon witnessing these general struggles to stay afloat, my immediate reaction was to wonder why the organization is not receiving regular grants and funding opportunities from large-scale endowments that are given out around the world to fight poverty. I’ve seen commercials on television and been to several conferences where non-profit organizations are able to feed starving children or provide medical assistance for
poor people in developing nations. Why hasn’t the largest network of poor people in the United States received a large amount of financial support from these types of organizations? PPEHRC is clearly able to feed and house large numbers of people, as evidenced by their efficient large-scale food distributions and housing takeovers making an impact on the lives of thousands of people across the country. This is not to say that PPEHRC has not ever received grants or funding from outside sources. Executive Director Larry Bresler and other coordinating council members have written many grants over the history of the organization and received some significant amounts of funding that have helped to support the work of PPEHRC. However, the organization does not regularly receive the amount of funding that many other non-profits receive and is required to sustain activist organization.

There are several reasons why PPEHRC has not received many long-term, large-scale resourcing opportunities. The myth of the American Dream and upward mobility are so pervasive, that even the fact that poverty exists in the United States is regularly obscured. Most large-scale grants localized in the US are afforded to projects that address the impacts of poverty in “third-world” nations; claiming that somehow the poverty “over there” is different and more severe then how poverty is expressed within the boundaries of the United States. The operation of the “savior mentality” in philanthropic work does little to challenge existing power relations and objectifies the receivers of aid. This type of activist work deepens the conceptualization of American exceptionalism and rarely is directed by the needs and analysis of those most directly impacted by poverty. The perceived elevation and freedom afforded to poor people in
the United States when compared to the poor in developing nations often presents an obstacle to PPEHRC receiving funding from these types of philanthropic organizations. Many philanthropic organizations have yet to even acknowledge the existence of poverty in the United States, therefore PPEHRC’s work seems less appealing and/or fundable, particularly when paired with a conceptualization of poverty in developing nations as much more desperate.

Because many institutions work out of a traditional philanthropic model that focuses more on charity work than systematic transformation, PPEHRC is not as attractive of an organization to fund. The work that PPEHRC engages in consistently challenges interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, many of which large-scale philanthropic organizations benefit from. This lack of steady resourcing opportunities for PPEHRC places the organization in a habitual state of crisis management that is totally unsustainable for the structural stability of the organization. However, the fact that the PPERHC has been able to organize massive events over a span of several decades and continue to engage in the global movement to eliminate poverty without consistent financial support is a testament to the creativity and resilience of the organization’s members and coordinating council.

While in Philadelphia, I met Liz Ortiz and Tara Colon, two residents of Kensington who have been involved in organizing with KWRU PPEHRC for close to twenty years. Both formerly homeless mothers, each spends much of their time working on projects and are a driving force in the day to day operation of the National Organizing and Education Center. Each of these women has had to overcome great obstacles in their
lives. Liz completed the 11th grade in the Philadelphia school system and dropped out when she realized that she was going to graduate high school without having learned to read. She has faced serious health complications including several heart bypasses and circulation problems that prevent her from working a typical job. Tara became a homeless mother at 19 and raised her first two children living in tent cities alongside members of KWRU and PPEHRC. Now, each of these women propels the movement to eliminate poverty through their work with PPEHRC.

Tara has encouraged her daughters to participate actively in the movement and regularly helps to organize youth-led projects through PPEHRC. PPEHRC places a great emphasis on including a youth involvement component with each action that the movement organizes. It is a central tenet of PPEHRC’s methodology that children and young adults participate in every aspect of the movement possible. The organization incorporates popular education models for children, youth teach-ins, performance spaces, and marches led by poor youth. While in Philadelphia, Tara was working with her daughters to begin the process of planning a film festival featuring movies directed and produced by children in the movement. Tara also works tirelessly to organize food and clothing distributions throughout the neighborhood, attempting to counter the impacts of the Kensington food desert.

Community outreach is a central and ongoing project that each chapter of PPEHRC continually engages in. Liz often leads these charges, door-knocking and talking to residents of Kensington about PPEHRC’s work. During my stay in Kensington, she and I created flyers explaining that PPEHRC could help families resist foreclosure,
connect to resources, and stop the electric company from shutting off their lights. We looked up the list of recent sheriff sales in the Kensington area and visited the homes of people facing foreclosure to make sure they had the contact information of PPEHRC.

Liz takes on these types of projects each day as she works in the PPEHRC National Organizing and Education Center. While these actions do not necessarily have as much visibility as the larger press conferences and marches typically attract, the consistent outreach to building community support is vital to the success of the organization in mobilizing a large base of poor and working families.

While PPEHRC engages in a large number of community-level projects, the organization frequently takes on the task of working at the national and international level as well. During my stay in Philadelphia, PPEHRC was invited to be part of a presentation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing who was taking testimonials from people living in the United States on the current state of housing conditions. PPEHRC arranged for chapter members from across the country to attend the day-long summit in Washington DC to ensure that the voices of the poor would be heard. Each testimonial was to last about five minutes and was to be included in a report that would be circulated to the international community describing whether or not the US is in compliance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights. However, it became clear early on in the program that the first hour and a half of testimonials would be taken by lawyers speaking on behalf of the poor rather than testimonials from those most directly impacted. Many of these people went over their allotted time, and by the time PPEHRC members were able to speak, the time-keeper was cutting testimonials short. The movement was
not going to let this trespass go unnoticed. Cheri started off her testimonial stating, “Now that we’ve heard all that is happening in the lives of poor people in this country, how about we hear from some of the poor people!”

Cheri told me that this is a common experience in the movement to eliminate poverty when interacting with national and international governmental institutions. PPEHRC works tirelessly to place the voices of the poor and working people that are most directly impacted by economic injustice in the center of discussion at every function that they attend. While the experience at the UN Special Rapporteur event was frustrating and seemed to place less value on these voices, PPEHRC members took the opportunity to network and connect with other poor people that were in attendance and engaged in struggle. Although these kinds of events often highlight the depth of the division between those working in institutionalized governmental roles and those most directly impacted by systems of power, privilege, and oppression, PPEHRC continues to work at all levels to challenge these barriers and place a strong emphasis on valuing the experience and analysis of poor and working individuals.

PPEHRC’s experience at the UN Special Rapporteur illustrates the Intersectional Feminist argument that people in positions of power are much more likely to be taken seriously while the experience and knowledge of those most directly impacted by systems of power, privilege, and oppression are consistently ignored or dismissed (Johnson 2001). Experiences of dismissal within multiple venues, especially sites of power and policy making are a regular occurrences for members of PPEHRC. As American government representation continues to become more and more contingent upon the financial
lobbying ability of a given interest group, and without consistent and stable funding
opportunities for organizations like PPEHRC, poor and working people are pushed
further towards the margins of the political power spectrum. Intersectional feminists
argue that the systematic delegitimizing of the analysis of poor and working people exists
to perpetuate and reify hegemonic capitalism.

However, PPEHRC continuously resists this process of delegitimization and
engages in direct confrontation with normalized conceptualizations of authority.
Intersectional Feminist scholar-activists have called this process of challenging
hegemonic notions of expert authority, “shifting the center” (Crenshaw 1994, hooks 1981,
Hill-Collins 1990). PPEHRC exemplifies this Intersectional Feminist strategy for both
knowledge/theory production and activism, by consciously foregrounding the voices,
analysis, experiences and needs of members of the working class and working poor, and
by supporting their leadership roles within PPEHRC. These strategies paired with non-
vviolent direct action, including but not limited to housing takeovers in Philadelphia puts
PPEHRC in a unique position of being able to simultaneously address the needs of poor
and working class families while dealing with the challenges of surviving in an urban
center disproportionately impacted by poverty and crime. Using an Intersectional
Feminist framework, I argue that the National Organizing Center of PPEHRC in
Philadelphia offers a clear, creative, and effective model for challenging interlocking
systems (and supporting ideologies) of power, privilege and oppression – as well as
resulting institutional analysis, policy and practice in the context of poverty and
homelessness – at local, national, and international levels.
RURAL POVERTY IN GLENDORA, MISSISSIPPI: PPEHRC’S RESPONSE TO CONTINUING LEGACIES OF SLAVERY

Having never travelled through the region of the rural south of the United States, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect from a trip to Glendora, Mississippi with PPEHRC. Glendora is a small town, about two hours south of the nearest airport in Memphis, TN with a population of just under 300 people. According to the 2000 Census, 92% of Glendora residents identified themselves as Black or African-American. The average family income was $11,875. While this income level is already staggeringly low, residents of Glendora explained to me that the majority of families actually earned less than this. The mayor of Glendora explained to me that there is one family residing in Glendora that actually has an income of six figures, which has caused the median income census data to be much higher than the true income most working Glendora families earn.

Driving into Glendora, one sees stretching cotton fields that seem to continue on infinitely. Clumps of cotton gather by the roadside creating tiny bunnies that have escaped their fate of being pressed through the gin, which uses its sharp teeth to remove the seeds for processing which will most likely occur in a developing country and will be returned for US consumption. While in Glendora, I learned that the cotton gin was used for other purposes as well. It was in Glendora that a 13-year-old boy named Emmitt Till was spending the summer vacation with his Aunt and Uncle when he allegedly whistled at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant as he was leaving the general store. Later that evening, he was kidnapped by Carolyn Bryant’s husband and his half-brother, brutally beaten, and left to drown in the Tallahatchie River with a 70 pound fan from a cotton gin.
tied around his neck. When Emmitt’s body was returned to Chicago, his mother Mamie Carthan decided to hold an open casket funeral to draw attention to the incredible brutality of the practice of lynching that continued throughout the country, particularly in the South. This event is well known as being one of the most significant moments that helped to spark the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

PPEHRC decided to hold one of the largest strategic planning meetings of the year in Glendora because of its role in the civil rights movement. PPEHRC members and allies were to gather in Glendora for a long weekend of working together to plan a three month long march and caravan from the Mississippi Gulf to Detroit, MI for the 2010 US Social Forum. The purpose of the march was to both grow the number of PPEHRC member groups, while simultaneously uniting a broad base of the poor who would attend the Social Forum and have their voices heard surrounding the issues related to poverty.

During the weekend, PPEHRC members involved in the labor movement, media justice, academia, and the movement to eliminate poverty set out to develop a detailed calendar, budget, and strategic plan for how to accomplish this incredible undertaking.

By choosing Glendora as the meeting point for this meeting, PPEHRC’s methodological ingenuity and creativity is demonstrated twofold. First, the historical significance of place reaffirms PPEHRC’s commitment to situating the movement to eliminate poverty along the continuum of centuries of struggle from slave liberation, to the labor movement, to the fight for civil rights. During the meeting it was also decided that the march would begin in New Orleans and continue up, arriving in Marks, MS on the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The march was
decidedly titled “The March to Fulfill the Dream” and was an attempt to follow in the footsteps of Dr. King’s 1967 Poor People’s March on Washington. The continued focus on carrying out a historical legacy that calls for recognition of human rights and dignity for all clearly demonstrates the persistent and thoughtful agency of PPHERC members while disrupting dominant conceptualizations of the poor as incompetent, unable to resist, or consenting of their own oppression.

Secondly, the purposeful selection of Glendora allowed the organization the opportunity to build networks with organizations and individuals in the rural south. Building relationships with people in the rural south has consistently been a priority task for PPEHRC. While the organization has developed a coalition of member groups that stretch to all parts of the country, strengthening power in the south has been an important component to social justice movement building throughout US history. Because the march would begin in the south, PPEHRC set out to build alliances with organizations in some of the poorest parts of the regions. It was decided in Glendora that PPEHRC would send out “forward teams” along the march route, or groups of individuals that would travel to the scheduled locations in the months leading up to the march, helping PPEHRC to build alliances prior to the march arrival, so that actions and events relating to local issues could be planned in each town. Using this technique, PPEHRC works creatively to link the local issues related to poverty that people living in the south experience to the broader context of systemic oppression of the poor throughout the United States and the rest of the world.
Exploring the town of Glendora doesn’t take very long; it is no more than a ten minute walk from one end of town to the other. The first thing that I noticed as I walked down one of the main Glendora streets was the firehouse. Its roof was caved in, seemingly for years, and the insides of the building were visibly burnt out (fig. 8). After speaking to the mayor who was hosting PPEHRC in his home, I soon learned that Glendora has no fire department, police station, grocery store, or hospital within 30 miles. Residents of Glendora, many of whom don’t even have access to a vehicle, are forced to travel that distance in order to meet their basic needs. It was soon decided that as a part of the weekend’s activities, local residents of Glendora would lead us on a “reality tour.”

PPEHRC’s method of incorporating reality tours in all locales stems from the consistent desire to understand and engage with how poverty expresses itself differently depending on local and regional issues. It also provides PPEHRC members the opportunity to meet potential allies and connect people who are experiencing poverty with the broader movement. Because the experience of poverty can be extremely isolating and shame producing, many individuals feel that they are alone and do not have access to build unity with a larger group of the poor engaged in radical politics.

It is important at this juncture to express that the level of destitution that the majority of Glendora residents currently live in is absolutely impossible to comprehend or explain with the vocabulary that is available in the English language. As discussed previously, it is common for large-scale philanthropic organizations to fund anti-poverty projects in the so-called “third world” under the assumption that the level of poverty that exists “over there” is somehow different and more severe than what is experienced in the
United States. However, a quick look around Glendora and the surrounding towns leads me to draw very different conclusions. The interlocking relationship between racism and classism that has driven this predominantly black town into a dramatic and inescapable level of poverty leads me to question: Has slavery truly ended in the south? At the same time, the descriptive language that I employ in order to convey the severity of destitution in Glendora is not meant to invoke pity or suggest that the people of Glendora feel or embody helplessness. While facing tremendous obstacles related to poverty, residents here demonstrate tremendous resourcefulness, resiliency, and agency in their consistent ability to survive in the most desperate of situations.

While on our reality tour and in conversations with the local community in Glendora, we learned that the majority of people living there go without adequate housing, food, and water on a daily basis. A group of young people struck up a conversation with us as we were touring the affordable housing units in Glendora, many of which were in a sordid state of disrepair with roofs caving in or boards on the windows. Most Glendora residents have not graduated from high school, and the availability of jobs within a 30-mile radius is slim to none. One of the young men explained to us that most children living in Glendora are able to eat breakfast and lunch at school, however, in the summer months when school is not in session, most of the children go hungry. “A lot of the time we have water for lunch, and then we share with our neighbors to make it through dinner.” Without access to living wage jobs, families in Glendora have to work together just to be able to feed their children.
Another young Glendora man told me that in order to make ends meet and provide for his infant daughter, he regularly works picking cotton when it is in season. On one occasion, he was in the field picking cotton for over 10 hours while the temperature reached scorching levels without access to drinking water. When he finally got up the courage to approach the white landowner for some ice to cool down with, he noticed that in the bed of the truck next to him lay a double barrel shotgun. This level of fear and intimidation helps to maintain the power structure that built the North Atlantic Slave Trade centuries ago. Because residents of Glendora have very little access to jobs that would potentially lead to class mobility due to interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, a job in which one faces abuse in order to survive and provide for one’s family must be taken.

Later, we arrived at a remote location near the cotton fields where a landowner had converted five sharecropper’s shacks into rental properties. These shacks had corrugated tin roofs, no running water or electricity, and consisted of one small room for the entire family to occupy. Antionette Harrell has been working for over 15 years throughout Louisiana and Mississippi to document the persistence of peonage through oral histories and genealogy projects. Here Antionette introduced us to two young mothers, each with three children who were living in one of the sharecropper’s shacks struggling to survive. Originally one of the women was living in the unit next door, however, when she was unable to make the $100 per month rent, she was evicted and forced to move in with her neighbor. Images of slave houses swirled through my mind as the cotton blew in the wind behind the shacks. It was in this moment that I was
bombarded with a deep realization of the level of privilege I have been afforded simply because of the body and social location I was born into. How is it possible for a woman with three children living in the rural south who is unable to afford $100 per month “pull herself up by the bootstraps?” The depth of poverty in the south transcends any rational understanding and deeply calls into question the existence of the American Dream of liberty and justice for all.

Throughout the reality tour, community members were invited by PPEHRC to attend the planning meetings that were being held in Glendora and participate in the development of the march. Because PPEHRC specifically works to unite the poor both across race and generation, an impromptu youth development workshop was planned for the following day. Rosemary Williams invited each of the children and teenagers throughout the community to come to the mayor’s house to discuss the issues that they felt were the most pressing to Glendora residents. By involving the community’s youth, PPEHRC set out to build a network of energetic organizers with developing leadership skills that could carry on to future projects building power in the south. Through the process of getting to know the youth community in Glendora, a variety of ideas came about regarding how to continue to grow the connections with PPEHRC that began over the planning weekend. Exchanges with PPEHRC-affiliated youth in Philadelphia and the potential to build a popular political education summer school in Glendora were suggested as a way to remain connected. The methodological orientation of PPEHRC to youth leadership development further demonstrates the organization’s persistent creativity and skills in movement building.
On the final day of our stay in Glendora, Rosemary cooked a large-scale spaghetti dinner to share with the community and youth that PPEHRC interacted with during the planning weekend. That night, because PPEHRC continuously places an emphasis on incorporating arts and culture into each of its events, some of the youth were asked to share their various musical and dance talents in an informal performance at the mayor’s house. The human connection that is achieved through the means of expression through arts and culture adds a complexity to activist organizing that PPEHRC values tremendously throughout all of the organization’s work. The incorporation of arts and culture into each of PPEHRC’s exploits is a central tenet of the organization’s methodological orientation and allows the organization the opportunity to extend its work into the creative realm. Glendora’s drill team, a singing group, and several young rap artists performed for us and other community members in attendance. In this moment I reflected upon the incredible talents and spirit of the people in Glendora, who in spite of (or perhaps as a result of) the tremendous amount of daily struggles they faced, were willing to share and celebrate so much with a group of strangers that entered their lives only a few days prior.

The task of building power in the south and connecting those communities with the struggles occurring throughout the country is a clear strength of PPEHRC. A critical component to the methodological approach taken by PPEHRC is that the organization purposefully situates the movement to eliminate poverty along a continuum of resistance throughout history, particularly the rich history of slave liberation and civil rights resistance throughout the rural south. PPEHRC recognizes that successful activist
organizing must be done with consistent self-reflexivity, taking into account lessons learned from past movements seeking social justice as well as immediate reflection on how the movement continues to develop throughout the process. This approach is central to the work characterized by Intersectional Feminist scholar-activists and encourages both personal growth as well as growth within the entirety of the organization. PPEHRC’s methodology embodies this intersectional feminist orientation as evidenced in the development and each of the components that were involved in the Glendora meeting.

The constant incorporation of youth leadership as well as arts and culture elements to PPEHRC organizing practices demonstrates the organization’s creativity, its ability to grow and adapt, and overall, it’s unique approach to activist organizing and consciousness raising. These strategies draw people into the work of PPEHRC and speaking in particular of those who may not typically find themselves involved in an activist movement, both encourage participation and empowers people to participate. Moreover, PPEHRC strategically uses myriad forms of art and culture to share their mission, goals and analysis in ways that are as accessible and transparent as possible to as many people as possible. This, I argue, serves as further evidence of the organization’s ability to create and sustain a coalitional, activist movement, not to mention one that is multi-faceted, diverse, and led by the very people most impacted by poverty and homelessness. Finally, the lens of Intersectional Feminism highlights PPEHRC’s ability to develop solid linkages across geographic locations, including less-accessible portions of rural south. The importance of uniting the struggles of the working poor in urban centers and the rural south is one of the biggest strengths of PPEHRC due to the large
number of communities in the rural south who experience poverty at the level of
destitution and may not have access to large-scale mobilization to have their analysis
represented. PPEHRC emphasizes the need to encourage poor people from all parts of
the country to participate in a unified front, providing a venue for people living in rural
areas to feel connected to a broader movement to eliminate poverty.
CONCLUSION

Myths of upward mobility, meritocracy, and a level playing field, along with social constructions of the “American Dream” and strategies that “blame the victim” for the poverty and homelessness they experience serve as some of the key components of hegemonic U.S. discourse on poverty and homelessness, which have come to be regarded as conventional wisdom among members of systemically privileged social groups within U.S. social institutions and the general public. By contrast, PPEHRC offers a counter-hegemonic discourse that simultaneously exposes the operation of, and seeks to eradicate interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression, including the myths and ideologies that support these systems, not to mention the institutional policies and practices that disproportionately impact peoples of color, the working class and the working poor.

Through our work together on this thesis, PPEHRC and I have sought to highlight the alternative analyses, modes of activism and visions of a more just world evident in PPEHRC’s work, including especially PPEHRC’s demand for a more just economic system; one that enables everyone basic human rights including but not limited to access to quality health care, adequate housing, food, and employment with a living wage and safe, decent working conditions. Together, we examined how poverty expresses itself differently within the foreclosure crisis in Minnesota, urban life in Philadelphia, and rural poverty in Mississippi. Finally, I worked with PPEHRC to explore and highlight the myriad projects of survival, resistance, resilience and political action aimed at meeting
the survival needs of people living in each of these regions while simultaneously challenging the larger power structure.

According to an article published in *The New York Times* in September 2011, 46.2 million people are currently living below the poverty line (Tavernise 2011, 1). This figure represents the highest number of people living in poverty ever recorded by the Census Bureau in the 52 years they have been collecting data on it (Tavernise 2011, 1). This statistic provides only a glimpse into the growing body of activist-scholarship that continues to reveal the enormous impacts of the failing US economy. I further contend that this still unfolding crisis shines critical light on the very foundations—and fundamental assumptions and myths—upholding the global capitalist system. It also shines critical light on the interlocking systems and supporting ideologies of power, privilege and oppression (including but not limited to classism, racism, sexism and ageism) that enable the global capitalist system to function in the first place (at least for systemically privileged social groups within this system). PPEHRC’s work, theoretical framework, and methodology present a unique set of tools for other individuals or activist groups to gain knowledge from. Their particular modes of organizing for social justice provide a model for other groups interested in mobilization of a national movement as well as a working model of meeting the immediate and long term needs of the poor community.

In developing this research project in coalition with PPEHRC, it became apparent early on that the organization was only cautiously enthusiastic about the prospect of academic research being done to document their work. Because of PPEHRC’s past
experiences with academics who chose to operate within the framework of positivist separation between researcher and researched, the organization has not had research outcomes that would be useful for them. This points to the very real consequences of research processes that relate to the participants of research as objects to be studied. A lack of consistent collaboration during previous research projects left PPEHRC feeling much less accurately represented and their analysis was not as successfully foregrounded. While this research project has been able to examine a portion of the work PPEHRC does in the larger movement to eliminate poverty, there is still a clear need for further research. Continuing the process of participatory action research throughout the movement to eliminate poverty could potentially bring a stronger understanding of the continuing existence of desperate poverty in the US as well as the most effective strategies to challenge and eradicate it along with the interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression behind it.

One of the biggest barriers to sustainable organization within PPEHRC that became illuminated through this research process is the lack of consistent funding sources. Further research examining the system of philanthropy and which organizations or individuals are chosen to receive funding through an intersectional framework could provide a deeper insight to the structural barriers in place that continue to suppress large-scale mobilization to eliminate poverty. Also, as more research and visibility is given to the pervasiveness and destitute conditions of poverty that exist within the US, it is possible that much more funding sources would become interested in projects and organizations that are focused on eliminating poverty. At this juncture, simply arguing
that poverty exists in the US and equating it with conceptualizations of so-called “third-world” poverty represents a shift that could have broader impacts for successful mobilization.

In order to truly comprehend the organizational work that PPEHRC has been able to accomplish thus far, one must examine how the movement has responded to dominant paradigms. PPEHRC’s intersectional approach and the ability of the organization to critically examine and challenge the social constructions that have risen to hegemonic understandings of poor people makes it a powerful force of resistance. Members of PPEHRC both discursively and materially contest the institutions contribute to the persistence of poverty in America. The organization’s commitment to developing a movement in which the leadership base consists of those most directly impacted by poverty looks to fulfill the legacy set forth by popular movements towards a more just world that have come before, and represents a deliberate shift in the conceptualization of expertise. By highlighting the tremendous resistance and resilience of PPEHRC through this thesis, I hope to be a part of the process of growing the movement to eliminate poverty both in America and globally.
LITERATURE CITED


PHOTOS OF PPEHRC

Figure 1: Leslie Parks speaking at a community meeting to address the foreclosure crisis in Minneapolis, MN.

Figures 2 and 3: Tent City demonstration on the front lawn of Leslie Park’s home.
Figure 4: Cheri Honkala presenting testimony to the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing

Figure 5: Kensington, PA row housing.

Figure 6: Cheri Honkala and Liz Ortiz during a meeting at the PPEHRC National Organizing and Education Center.
Figure 7: PPEHRC members taking a reality tour of Glendora, MS. Stopping at the place on the Tallahatchie River where the body of Emmitt Till was discovered.

Figure 8: Glendora, MS Fire Department roof caved in and abandoned.

Figure 9: Only grocery store in Glendora, MS went out of business.