

FIGHT TO WIN

Inside Poor People's Organizing

A.J. WITHERS

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ABBREVIATIONS

BI	basic income	ODSP	Ontario Disability Support Program
BIA	business improvement area	OOTC	Out of the Cold
BLC	Better Living Centre	OPS	overdose prevention site
CAB	community advisory board	OTF	Ontario Trillium Foundation
CAP	Canada Assistance Plan	OW	Ontario Works
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	PA	parks ambassador
CDRC	Community Development and Recreation Committee	PAE	political activist ethnography
CHPI	Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative	PAR	participatory action research
COVID-19	coronavirus disease	PCLS	Parkdale Community Legal Centre
CP	community partner	PHR	prescriptive harm reduction
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees	RWHP	Rapid Winter Housing Project
CUPW	Canadian Union of Postal Workers	S2H	Streets to Homes
CST	Canada Social Transfer	SALCO	South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario
CSUMB	Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit	SAMS	Social Assistance Management System
DRC	Decision Review Committee	SHJN	Shelter and Housing Justice Network
DSC	daily shelter census	SSHA	Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
EDCC	Economic and Community Development Committee	TAEH	Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness
EDC	Economic Development and Culture	TCHC	Toronto Community Housing Corporation
ESN	Encampment Support Network	TESS	Toronto Employment and Social Services
GTA	Greater Toronto Area	TOPS	Toronto Overdose Prevention Society
HF	Housing First	TPL	Toronto Public Library
HSF	Housing Stabilization Fund	TPS	Toronto Police Service
IE	institutional ethnography	VI-SPDAT	Vulnerability Index Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool
ISAC	Income Security Advocacy Centre	WITB	Working Income Tax Benefit
MOU	memorandum of understanding		
NGO	non-governmental organization		
OCAP	Ontario Coalition Against Poverty		

FIGHTING TO WIN

Power and Poor People's Organizing

There are thousands and thousands of people in the city who have been influenced by OCAP and have some sense that collective action can win things. That might not have existed before.

—*John Clarke, OCAP Organizer*

“Tracy” is thirty-five weeks pregnant. She and her partner, “Bill,” sleep on a mattress on the floor of the (ironically named) Better Living Centre (BLC) respite site.¹ The two of them stay in a large room that has the lights on twenty-four hours a day and up to two hundred people in it at any given time. Toronto’s Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) workers tell Tracy they will find her a shelter bed at twenty-four weeks, but the length of time keeps climbing and now is “thirty-seven weeks with a hospital stay.” Tracy tells me the Children’s Aid Society “is up our arse” because she is pregnant and living in a respite centre. I meet her and Bill around 9 am in the café in City Hall, shortly before we begin a protest demanding that at least one thousand shelter beds be opened that year. Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) organizer Gaétan Héroux met the couple during one of his trips to the Better Living Centre. He brought them to the action so we can fight for a better place for them to stay.

After disrupting the city council meeting, the protesters who can stay occupy the space outside of the mayor’s office. Earlier that morning, the receptionist told me everyone was busy and the earliest anyone could get to the matter would be Friday. It is Monday. No one comes to meet us, so we decided to go with “plan B” and attend the not-far-away Metro Hall, where SSHA is headquartered. About ten of us make our way to Metro Hall. After getting in the building, we inform security that we will not

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leave until we have a meeting and Tracy and Bill have somewhere safe and quiet to go. We wait. Tracy, Bill, Yogi (an OCAP Organizer) and I go upstairs to meet with two Streets to Homes workers. Eventually, as a result of all this, Tracy and Bill are on their way to Family Residence, a family shelter, and we are assured they will move to a motel soon. A relatively small group of people, when they work collectively and use disruptive tactics, can be very effective.

With homelessness at levels unseen in decades and in the midst of a housing crisis, OCAP organized to improve the living conditions of homeless people in the short term as well as the social relations that produce homelessness in the long-term. This book tells part of the story of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, through both direct action casework and its political fight to protect public space and for more and decent shelter for homeless people.

The events told here happened primarily between winter 2016 and spring 2018, with Chapter 7 set in the first fourteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot has happened between now and when this book begins — both globally and on the streets of Toronto. The global COVID-19 pandemic superimposed another crisis on the already existing housing and shelter and overdose crises in Toronto. A similar scene played out in many cities across North America: a rise in both homelessness and its visibility, with many people forced to take to encampments in public space. The struggle in Toronto intensified. These life-and-death issues became more acute as a deadly pandemic interlocked with peoples' disproportionately high comorbidities and shortened life expectancies.² However, based on my own experiences of organizing and what I have seen in the world at large, this massive COVID-19 rupture has not fundamentally changed ruling relations. Indeed, in spite of some important gains — like around police accountability (which I hope is more than simply a discursive change) — existing power relations have become further entrenched. There are some easy examples, like how the US Republican Party was able to install a new Supreme Court justice who will likely sit for decades.³ Amazon founder Jeff Bezos profited from COVID-19, becoming the first trillionaire in the world, yet workers at Amazon were fired for agitating for protective equipment.⁴ But it is also largely the same people (politicians and bureaucrats) who are enacting the same government policy today as before the pandemic and it is largely the same policies that are being implemented. While there are emergency measures that have been put

in place during the pandemic, it is the park bylaws and ongoing issues around inadequate income and housing that continue to be at the fore.

About OCAP

Founded in 1990, OCAP is a direct-action, anti-poverty organization based in Toronto. The group is anti-capitalist and anti-colonial/decolonial and understands itself to be “in solidarity with similar movements across the country and around the world.”⁵ OCAP does not support a specific political doctrine (e.g., anarchism or socialism), nor does it support specific political parties. It works to bring poor people and their allies together in a united struggle rather than get stuck on points of political doctrine.

OCAP works on a variety of issues. During the time period that I write about, the largest campaign was a municipal fight for more homeless shelter beds. Shelter beds are an emergency measure but an inadequate solution; people need housing and money. We were simultaneously fighting provincially to raise social assistance rates and nationally for housing. I view these campaigns as complementary to and interlocked with but separate from the shelter campaign. OCAP was a part of the Raise the Rates Campaign, a group working to raise social assistance payments and the minimum wage in Ontario. We organized together, including protests in October 2017, calling on the province for a raise and “an end to the punitive system of surveillance and degradation.”⁶ We were also working with a loose network of groups, initiated by OCAP, to fight for social housing nationally. A day of action was called by OCAP, the Front d’action populaire en réaménagement urbain (Popular Action Front in Urban Development) in Québec and the Carnegie Community Action Project in Vancouver. Actions took place in multiple cities condemning the inadequacy of the federal Liberal government’s National Housing Strategy.

Unfortunately, to focus on homelessness organizing in as much detail as I wanted to, I was unable to capture the ongoing organizational labour that makes campaigns possible. Some of these things include bookkeeping, mentorship, booking meeting space, new member intakes, cleaning the office, emotional labour,⁷ getting food for meetings, casework, website work, answering the phone, email, propaganda design and distribution, fundraising, social media, handling requests from researchers/media, printing and photocopying. There is a lot of largely invisible labour that goes into keeping an organization running and that remains invisible in this book.

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The OCAP Organizing Model

Since its early days, OCAP has maintained two distinct arms: mass mobilizing and casework. The problem of fighting for systemic change around poverty issues is that we are calling on people to take on a long-term fight when they are in very real, immediate crises. Poor people, especially homeless people, generally struggle to meet their most basic needs. Campaigns that we know may take years to win do not address these immediate crises. However, exclusively working to help resolve the immediate needs of individual poor people would provide an individualistic band-aid solution (if that) and do nothing to change the deep, systemic injustices that poor people face daily. Together, casework and mass mobilizing combine to ensure that we can collectively organize to win immediate needs and use those victories to build larger struggles for fundamental changes in social relations (i.e., the elimination of capitalist, colonial, white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal⁸ and disablist relations), so that each of us has what we need not just to survive but to thrive.

OCAP casework diverges from typical social work casework, as social work tends to view individual casework as distinct from community work.⁹ OCAP works with the community to win individual cases, conceptualizing individual casework as key for both meeting immediate needs and for movement building. The success of direct-action casework relies on the strategy of disruption. Poor people's organizing has limitations because poor people have so few resources and so little individual power. Stef Gude, a former OCAP caseworker, asserts: "Bureaucracy relies on the fact that things will always go in a particular way."¹⁰ When poor people insist on functioning in ways that bureaucrats do not expect, it opens new possibilities. Direct-action casework bypasses formal legal appeal mechanisms. We refuse to work through the (often incredibly slow) official channels that are designed to keep poor people in line. This is different, of course, than engaging in the legal application process. For example, with respect to social assistance, people have to make applications for benefits but, if denied, we do not follow the established legal pathways. Instead, we use collective disruption to force those in power to capitulate to us quickly. What seem like rigid and unmovable bureaucratic relations to individual poor people can become flexible and accommodating when groups of them collectively demand it.

Like strands of DNA, the two aspects of OCAP's work are connected. As former OCAP caseworker Stefan writes:

Casework gives OCAP a clear picture of the abuses people face daily. OCAP is effective as an anti-poverty Coalition because casework allows us to face the abuse that social agencies and organizations dish out, confront that abuse in particular cases, and launch campaigns against it in the broader political context of a capitalist society.

The weapons against (poor) people are demoralization, isolation, abandonment, hate, prejudice and further impoverishment. When OCAP does casework it tells something to people. It gives the people we work with strength and hope, and lets them continue with their lives. It also sends a clear message to our enemies: we are not going to lay down and take it.¹¹

Casework also works as a form of what Stefan calls “front line research.”¹² Through the calls that come into the office, OCAP caseworkers can spot trends and identify problematic policy changes or other issues that need a collective response. If OCAP didn’t have that regular contact and just analyzed policy the way that left-wing think tanks do, OCAP would be identifying theoretical issues rather than responding to those that are tangibly impacting people. This work also helps OCAP build evidence against the government, which often says it is working to benefit poor people while the reality on the ground is very different.

OCAP’s casework program builds on a long history of using group protest tactics to help meet individual needs. In the 1930s, for instance, in both Canada and the United States, poor people came together to fight for welfare benefits for individuals and their families.¹³ OCAP did not invent direct-action casework. Nonetheless, what OCAP’s model offers is a disciplined and experienced approach that has been successfully applied to the contemporary political and economic context. As such, the OCAP model of organizing has been globally influential, with groups directly replicating all or part of it in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.¹⁴

A central component of OCAP’s program is not simply the slogan but also the ethos: “fight to win,” which OCAP adopted in the early 2000s. This framing makes it clear that OCAP doesn’t understand itself as having a moral calling to register its objection to how things are; rather, it has a responsibility to resist with the goal of changing things. Over the years, OCAP has shown that it fights back, it fights hard and it fights to win.

It is also important to note that no matter how good an organizing

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model OCAP or any anti-poverty organization has, this model will not be a panacea. Many authors have documented the difficulties in organizing poor communities. John Clarke says, “oppression never fails to leave its mark on its victims.”¹⁵ This has implications for organizing. Poor people, especially homeless people, are also often in crisis. They may face hunger or eviction. There is a high level of transience among poor people — especially homeless people — that also makes organizing difficult because of a lack of consistency. It can also be hard to reach people, in my experience, as many people don’t have phones or the money on their pay-as-you-go accounts runs out. The difficulties of organizing poor people are intensified with homeless groups because of the desperateness of their circumstances — one of the most tragic of these being the high numbers of homeless people who die, which impacts the people who are close to the deceased and, often, the broader community. Also, many poor people lack class solidarity (beyond, perhaps, their immediate social circles) and blame themselves for their poverty.¹⁶ Organizing can be difficult with any group of people, but with poor people, there are particular disadvantages and obstacles that intensify the difficulties.

About Me

I got involved in OCAP in 2000. I had been involved in what we now call the global justice movement and grown critical of “summit hopping” and the lack of commitment to local organizing that was endemic at the time. I was a twenty-year-old overconfident young organizer and quickly came to appreciate the intergenerational organizing in OCAP. Folks in OCAP just weren’t making the same mistakes we had while doing, what we called at the time, antiglobalization work (which isn’t to say that no mistakes were being made in OCAP).

I spent all that time living in poverty until I entered a PhD program in social work at York University in 2013. Much of that time I received welfare and then disability social assistance. I also had relatively brief experiences with homelessness as a youth. My anti-poverty work is grounded in my experiences as a poor person. At the same time, I am a white settler living on the traditional territories of many nations, including the Anishinabek, the Haundenosaunee Confederacy, and the Wendat. The Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation are the current treaty holders of the territory that I am grateful to call home. I benefit from settler colonial and white supremacist relations, which infuse my experiences of poverty and class

relations. All of these things deeply inform my worldview as well as my understandings of poverty and of OCAP.

I want to be clear on my use of “we” because I do not want to speak for OCAP but I am also writing about things I was directly involved in. I use “we” to refer to OCAP, including myself, only in reference to specific things in which I was involved (e.g., “we went to the mayor’s office”). I also use “we” to refer to OCAP’s longstanding campaign demands and political positions that arise during but also predate the period I write about (e.g., “we demand housing for all”).

I went to grad school because it was a job I knew I could do. Grad school offered flexibility and the opportunity to work primarily from home — things I needed in a job because of my disability but didn’t seem to exist. I got into grad school, having not completed my undergrad, because I had written the book *Disability Politics and Theory*. I wrote that book because I was deeply frustrated by the lack of radical texts that dealt with disability and wanted to make something available to activists and people who wanted to be allies.

This book is a political intervention of sorts, too. As someone who has been organizing for over twenty years, I felt like I was not being engaged by a lot of the texts that are produced by people who are a part of movements. There is a contradiction between what we think we need to produce in order to build movements — which is often smoothed over and partial — and what people who are in movements can benefit from — which is much more analytical and raw. I wanted my work to respond to Bevington and Dixon’s call for “movement-generated” and “movement-relevant” theory.¹⁷

OCAP is the longest-standing and most prominent anti-poverty organization in Canada. It has been a longstanding frustration of mine that the groups that mirror OCAP aren’t, for the most part, being influenced by many of the parts of OCAP that I think are integral to who we are, some of which I have captured in this book. I know this is the case because these are the lessons we have learned through reflecting on our work. They pertain to how we relate and respond to the communities we are rooted in — but they aren’t recorded in media articles and one cannot simply replicate these things in a cookie-cutter fashion. I was also motivated by the desire to be able to think through how to be more effective — how to win more and more effectively and to better understand how the government works. How power works.

Some Ethical Concerns

There were multiple ways that OCAP could benefit from this book, but the group also took a risk in participating. I could do a “hatchet job” on the organization and/or make it vulnerable to political attack. I worked with a committee of five OCAP members to help me navigate any issues that arose, to support me through my return to working as an OCAP Organizer and to attend to any ethical concerns that the organization had. We agreed that I would not report on general membership or executive committee meetings to ensure that members felt they could speak freely. OCAP’s existing policy regarding members speaking and publishing about OCAP was also adopted in my case. There are a number of texts, both scholarly and non, that claim to be written by OCAP members but are written by people who in fact haven’t been a part of OCAP for years or never really were an active part of the organization. Those texts carry an undeserved authority by using our name. Consequently, if one intends to speak on behalf of OCAP, it has to be approved (the act, not the content) and if one wants to publish about OCAP as a member of OCAP, they have to run the text by the organization. In my case, the Research Steering Committee took on this role and it was agreed that text approval would be limited to a “no harm” provision. I also agreed that I would work to make all of my talks open to OCAP members and any published text available to OCAP for free.

The issue of control is important for research on social movement organizations, as academic research has a history of being exploitative and appropriative of activist and movement knowledge.¹⁸ OCAP has experienced this kind of exploitation and appropriation. Indeed, I personally have felt manipulated by researchers who then appropriated my knowledge about the organization. I wanted to be extra cautious not to subject to this form of epistemological injustice the people that I work with for social justice — I did not want to commit knowledge theft.¹⁹

Consequently, in ensuring that OCAP could maintain control over the research for this book and that it could take the risk in participating, I proposed that I would not present anything in writing that caused harm to OCAP (as opposed to critique). As a longstanding and committed member of the organization, I undertook the research to understand more about how power works and how to make our work more effective. I also wanted to show the minutia of our work so that others could learn from it, not just the “flash in the pan” big actions. I certainly didn’t want to do damage to OCAP.

I decided in advance it was important, for the sake of the integrity of this project, to say how many times and in what context I removed or changed content because members of the OCAP Research Steering Committee thought it was harmful. The committee did not express concerns as a group that my work harmed OCAP in relation to the content in this book.²⁰ Two members raised concerns about my historical and current description of OCAP and my current description of my own position in the Conclusion. I then worked with these members to ensure this section was accurate, fitting with the project and that my intention was properly conveyed. In practice, I found that framing the issue around “no harm to OCAP” was overly simplistic in the context of organizing with allies who could also be impacted by this book. It was, nevertheless, the framework that the Research Steering Committee and I worked within.

Chapter 7 takes place outside of my initial examination period of late 2016 to spring 2018. I originally intended for this chapter to be a brief afterword about the pandemic but as the crisis (d)evolved, I found myself incapable of capturing what had taken place in a few pages. In this chapter, I use autoethnographic and political activist ethnographic methods to explicate ruling relations. Nobody I was working with, myself included, was aware that I would be writing about encampment organizing during the 2020/2021 pandemic. Consequently, I rely heavily on publicly available documents for this chapter and never rely on documents that were internal to social movement organizations or campaigns. My personal recollections do not provide information from personal conversations and no one is named based on my autoethnographic method without their consent.

My Framework and Approach

At the beginning of the self-guided tour of the Creationism Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, my friends and I enter a large room that has been made to look like the Grand Canyon. The museum, designed to try to debunk evolution, is run by evangelical Christians. Upon our setting foot in the Grand Canyon room, a video plays featuring two scientists. They are both archeologists. The white Christian fundamentalist archeologist smiles and explains to the viewer that he and his colleague, a man of colour who is bent over and doesn't make direct eye contact, have different views of evolution. As a Christian, he knows that the Earth is 6,000 years old: the archeological evidence he has found proves this. His colleague, however, has a “different starting point” that has led him to “different conclusions.”

The epistemological position and theoretical framework of the different researchers — their “starting points” — can lead to profoundly different conclusions. The age of soil, the meaning of flood damage, the placement of rocks — concrete material reality — can be understood very differently depending on one’s assumptions, what questions are asked or seen as worthy of trying to answer, and the theoretical lens through which the material is approached. The Christian archeologist’s epistemological starting point — creationism — shaped his analysis.

Ruling Relations

The theoretical approach of this book is largely rooted in the epistemology (the study of how we come to know) and ontology (the study of being — of how the social comes into existence) of institutional and political activist ethnography that holds that knowledge is produced reflexively and collectively.²¹ This means “we learn from doing, from social practice and from inter-acting with others.”²² Knowledge isn’t produced by individuals in ivory towers thinking hard; rather, it is produced through our actions, practices and relations, which are never done in isolation.

Hence, the knowledge in this book is collectively produced with and by OCAP members and, to a lesser extent, our allies. This is not to say, however, that there is agreement in OCAP about my analysis of events. This text is my own and I am not speaking *for* OCAP; rather, I am “*writing with*” OCAP.²³ All errors are my own.

Theoretically I begin with social relations and ruling relations. Ruling relations are a part of and dominate social relations. Social relations are people’s “interdependent actions that shape” our daily lives and practices.²⁴ Even when alone, each of us is participating in social relations because we use things that are part of the web of social relations — like computers and toilets.

Ruling relations “coordinate people’s activities across and beyond local sites of everyday experience”²⁵ and “connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives — the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complex of relations that interconnect them.”²⁶ It is through these institutions that “we are ruled and through which we ... participate in ruling.”²⁷ Ruling relations are the “web of relations” that coordinate us rather than a dichotomy in which one is on one side or the other.²⁸ Divisions between “inside and outside” of ruling relations tend to negate

the reality that we are all complicit with and “inside” of ruling relations in some way.²⁹ One of the key tools of coordination across time and space is text — including computer files, videos, and printed policy documents. For example, the same welfare policies are used by welfare bureaucrats to coordinate the activities of people across the province, from looking for work to reporting income to taking certain (covered) medications over other (uncovered) medications.

Ruling relations include what we talk about when we talk about “systems” or “structures”; what we are actually talking about when we use this language is the interactions between people. “Systems/structures” like oppression, capitalism and colonialism are not giant monsters that we must fight but cannot necessarily locate — they are the result of human interactions, involve people actually doing things and, crucially, they are under human control. When I use terms like “the state,” “the city” and “oppression,” I am not writing about these as *things* but as sets of relations. For example, “the state” means a group of “social relations and a claim to legitimation” and includes texts like law and policy and the people who make and carry those policies out: bureaucrats, police, military, elected officials, social workers and so on.³⁰

Ruling regimes are a part of ruling relations. Ruling regimes, like “states,” are not things; they give us a starting place for further investigation “to include multiple sites of administration following a distinctive mode of regulation.” They are typically characterized by having “two interrelated pieces of organization: a political apparatus and a bureaucracy.”³¹ I use the term “ruling regime” interchangeably throughout this book with “the City of Toronto” because it is my primary focus.³²

Political activist ethnography (PAE) is a theory and methodology that enables an analysis of ruling relations.³³ PAE is conducted to help social justice movements enact social change by figuring out how ruling relations work and how to use that to make organizing more effective.³⁴

Instead of examining OCAP, this book aims to understand how power works — how ruling relations work — from OCAP’s perspective or standpoint.³⁵ It is a starting place; here, standpoint “begin[s] from the local and the immediate ... in order to explore the larger social organization.”³⁶ The idea that there is some neutral observer position outside of social relations is a myth.³⁷ However, most scholarly social movement theory claims to be neutral. This book and the research it is based on are rooted in the values of social justice and the idea that social research can be mobilized for social change.

Gary Kinsman has developed the practice of “mapping the social relations of struggle,” which is “a relational sketch of the conflicts between ruling relations and social movements.”³⁸ A lot can be learned about how ruling relations work by more fully understanding the relationship between a movement and a ruling regime. Also, a map is “useful in terms of figuring out where you’re at and also where you might be going.”³⁹ Mapping the social relations of struggle opens opportunities to explicate movement strengths and weaknesses, identify capacities and allies.

I want this project to be useful to OCAP. As a longtime OCAP member, I have seen researchers come, take up OCAP’s time, get their degrees, and OCAP isn’t any better off — sometimes it is worse off. So, I began with the assumption that the finished product would be useless and asked how the process could be useful. I worked as an unpaid Organizer with OCAP so the group would benefit from my labour.⁴⁰ In addition to the “field research” of being an Organizer, I conducted thirty-seven interviews between December 2017 and April 2018, primarily with OCAP members as well as members of the media, a member of Parliament and Toronto city councillors and their staff. Everything that I quote from these interviews is attributed to who said it, except in the instances in which people wanted to remain anonymous. Additionally, I carried out a series of *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* requests, totalling over five thousand pages. I analyzed these as well as publicly available city and OCAP documents and, for Chapter 7, used autoethnographic methodology and drew heavily on public documents. All this helped me map the social relations of struggle and come to some conclusions about homelessness social policy that will help make homelessness organizing, and social justice organizing in general, more effective.

Homelessness, Homeless People, Poverty and the Moral Economy

Government policymakers and scholars have written exhaustively on typologies of homelessness. The Canadian government has adopted a definition that lays homelessness out in a spectrum, from “at-risk” through to “chronically homeless.”⁴¹ This classification system has been operationalized to determine who should receive services and which services they should receive. OCAP, on the other hand, rejects these classifications and organizes around homeless issues and homeless people — those without homes — including those considered to be the “hidden homeless” (people

who are not in the shelter system or sleeping outside). For OCAP, homelessness is a social rather than a statistical question.

“Homelessness is a complex issue” is something that is often said in the literature. However, the actual human complexity is rarely captured. Official definitions flatten the diversity within homelessness and erase the uniqueness of what is going on for someone like Comrade George De Guzman. “Comrade” is not a term we particularly use in OCAP — except for George. Comrade George is a Pilipino immigrant who developed mental health issues after he came to Canada. George is a security guard and he trades his labour to a McDonald’s in exchange for hamburgers and being allowed to sleep there. He also stays in respites or shelters. Comrade George needs the social interaction of shelters or McDonald’s. If he is on his own, he has mental health struggles. He has an apartment with his mom, where he occasionally returns to sleep for an hour or two if he is very exhausted. He pays rent there, but because he doesn’t use his room, he has moved two homeless people in. Comrade George’s name is on a lease, but he is homeless, and two people are homeless because he is homeless.

It is also essential to understand that homelessness does not impact all groups of people the same way. Already oppressed people are much more likely to experience homelessness, and different oppressed groups are likely to have somewhat different experiences of homelessness. For instance, disabled people⁴² are much more likely to be homeless than non-disabled people.⁴³ Experiences of homelessness and how one is treated as a homeless person can also be deeply informed by the type(s) of disability. Additionally, some groups, especially women, are more likely to experience/practise “hidden homelessness” — to “double up” by staying with people they know, possibly trading sex for a place to stay, and/or squatting — rather than accessing emergency shelters or sleeping outside.

Homeless women⁴⁴ and trans and non-binary people are at high risk of violence and other harm. Women’s homelessness is often hidden.⁴⁵ According to the Homes for Women campaign, “the reduced visibility of their homelessness [is] due to the struggle for safety and to prevent their children from being taken into care by child protection authorities.”⁴⁶ Many women become homeless because they are fleeing violence, yet they then face violence when homeless. Violence is also a significant factor for trans people, also resulting in high levels of hidden homelessness.⁴⁷ Further, trans people are sometimes refused access to both men’s and women’s shelters or are at risk of violence in shelters.⁴⁸ Homeless women

and trans people are also likely disproportionately Indigenous people, Black people and people of colour. This is the logical conclusion based on the data, but race and gender data are often treated as wholly distinct. Thus, they are less likely to be visibly homeless and therefore less likely to be identified as homeless in official statistics or offered homeless services.

Historic and ongoing practices of settler colonialism in Canada result in disproportionately high rates of homelessness among Indigenous people. Métis-Cree scholar Jesse Thistle says the “thorough, complex and intentional unravelling of traditional social and cultural systems, known as cultural genocide, has created and prolonged, and continues to perpetuate, Indigenous homelessness in Canada.”⁴⁹ In Toronto, Indigenous people make up 2.5 percent of the general population but comprise 16 percent of the homeless population. Indigenous people are also much more likely to sleep outside (38 percent) and are homeless longer than non-Indigenous people. In Canadian urban centres, a staggering 1 in 15 Indigenous people in Canada are homeless, compared to 1 in 128 non-Indigenous people.⁵⁰ Additionally, Indigenous families are also far more likely to experience homelessness than non-Indigenous families.⁵¹

Settler regimes must recognize how “Indigenous Peoples imagine and experience homelessness on their own terms.” Thistle, author of “Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada,” says:

Indigenous homelessness is . . . best understood as the outcome of historically constructed and ongoing settler colonization and racism that have displaced and dispossessed First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples from their traditional governance systems and laws, territories, histories, worldviews, ancestors and stories.⁵²

While this definition includes not having a place to live, it is far more expansive than the definition of homelessness I use. From a policy perspective, this definition is useful as it could identify and allow for early Indigenous interventions into the harms associated with settler colonialism and prevent dispossession.

Racialized people and migrants are also disproportionately likely to be homeless. Racialized people, like LGBTQ and disabled people, have disproportionately high rates of core housing need.⁵³ This is often or can easily become hidden homelessness.⁵⁴ In Toronto, two out of three homeless people are people of colour; the largest racial group is Black people (31 percent).⁵⁵ Migrants, the majority of whom are people of colour, are

at increased risk of homelessness because they experience high rates of poverty and housing precarity; they may also live in situations of overcrowding as a result.⁵⁶ Further, 10 percent of homeless youth were born outside of Canada.⁵⁷ Rather than intervene in the relations that create the conditions that make these groups (at risk of) homeless(ness), the mayor, city council and city staff scapegoated homeless migrants for the terrible circumstances that they were in.

This group was scapegoat-able, however, because of its low standing in the moral economy. The “moral economy” is an idea that describes the value that is imposed on people by others. Thobani, in *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*, uses the moral economy as a way to analyze the differentiation in human worth attributed to Indigenous people and racialized immigrants. Homeless people (who are disproportionately Indigenous and racialized people) are denigrated within the moral economy, which is detrimental to them.

Thobani argues:

The worthiness that exaltation endows onto national subjects does not function at an abstract level. In order to reproduce social relations with some measure of success, such exaltations are concretized and harnessed within a moral economy as very particular qualities and characteristics, recognizably human and self-evidently positively weighted. In this, the technique of power naturalizes itself and appears as guileless, unexceptionally and ordinarily reflecting an ethical polity.⁵⁸

It is through the moral economy that human differentiation of value is attributed to different groups, naturalizing and normalizing them. In *A Violent History of Benevolence*, Chris Chapman and I build upon Thobani’s conceptualization of moral economy and apply it to a wide array of social relations. How poor and homeless people are constructed within the moral economy depends on ruling relations. Poverty is already understood as relative to others in a society,⁵⁹ meaning there is no fixed construction of poor and homeless people within the moral economy.

The moral denigration of poor and homeless people brings their humanness into question and is used to facilitate injustices to benefit and perpetuate ruling relations. Bre, a former homeless person who has attended OCAP protests, challenges the construction of homeless people within the moral economy:

We are essentialized as thugs and criminals, and simultaneously as victims who suffer in silence. At the same time, essentialist discourses accuse me of being driven by bodily urges, of being incapable of refusing my desires. I am poor because, in addition to being lazy or immature, I cannot delay gratifying my immediate desires for sex, booze, or a leisurely life. Poor-bashing, as a form of dehumanization, doesn't necessarily ask about the basis of humanity or ask what is the essence of being human. It simply denies us a place in the category "human" itself.⁶⁰

This dehumanization, Bre argues, legitimizes the unjust treatment of homeless people.

The denigration of poor and homeless people isn't homogenous. Poor people experience denigration unevenly as it interlocks with gender, race, disability, sexual orientation and other marginalities. Poor and homeless people are also divided into the subgroups of the so-called "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. These constructs divide those who are deemed incapable of competing in the capitalist labour market from those who are deemed able to do so.⁶¹ The deserving poor are constructed as "entitled to the economic, social, and political redistribution of resources that would bring them out of poverty and into [the] mainstream" while the undeserving must first become or demonstrate that they are deserving before obtaining these entitlements.⁶²

In Ontario, one of the clearest divides between these constructed categories are the differences in social assistance policy. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP, or disability) and Ontario Works (OW, or welfare) clearly delineate between the deserving and undeserving poor. Single people who receive OW only get 63 percent of what people on ODSP get.⁶³ Certain disabled people, those deemed to qualify for ODSP, receive more funds and additional benefits, such as general dental coverage, than non-deserving disabled people and other poor people. So-called non-deserving poor people are constructed as lazy and drains on the system.⁶⁴

Similarly, the (neo)Liberal provincial government removed children from social assistance cheques, creating a false separation between undeserving poor parents and their deserving poor children.⁶⁵ Children are cast as innocent victims while their parents on welfare continue to be constructed as undeserving.

Constructions of poor and homeless people are far from new. The English Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601 legislated the distinctions between

those who were considered the deserving and undeserving poor.⁶⁶ This division individualizes social problems and, for example, depicts homeless people as homeless “not because they were without work, wages, and the material foundations of human welfare (of which housing was foundational) but, rather, because they had other problems that afflicted them as individuals.”⁶⁷ These individual problems, often identified as pathologies, then require only individual solutions.

Poverty and homelessness are not discrete categories in the moral economy; rather, people can shift how they understand poor people based on their membership in denigrated groups. For example, McDonald delineates between the “good citizen” and the “undeserving immigrant”⁶⁸ — someone who would be considered to be a member of the deserving poor could become reinterpreted as undeserving depending on their immigration status. Similarly, a white disabled body may be categorized as the deserving poor but Stuart says that racialized disabled people are “assumed to ‘suffer’ from alien cultural practices” that are used to explain their disabilities.⁶⁹ A white person may be viewed as a part of the deserving poor while a Black person with the same disability might be further denigrated as undeserving poor in relation to and because of racism.

Neoliberalism and Governmental Practices of Assemblage

The moral economy functions within the general social relations of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is both a political/economic philosophy and set of capitalist political and economic policies, espousing individual responsibility, privatization and free-markets.⁷⁰ As neoliberalism became increasingly dominant, neoliberal logics were used more and more within the moral economy. Poverty has been increasingly individualized and blame is downsized onto poor individuals.⁷¹

Neoliberalism is often said to promote, even lead to, “a hollowing out of the state ... or a bypassing of the state by corporate power.” Albo reminds us that this is far from the case. Neoliberalism benefits corporate power and is supported and extended by the state. Albo continues:

Neoliberalism has operated through the institutions of the nation-state. The state increasingly concentrates the exercise of political power relative to democratic actors, from parties to unions to NGOs, within civil society. It routinely invokes authoritarian measures in policing, administering social policy.⁷²

Rather than becoming a hollow shell, the state often becomes stronger, especially in relation to other actors. This is evidenced by trends of increased budgetary spending for policing and border security while social spending has been met with austerity.⁷³

The Canadian welfare state has been significantly eroded as a result of neoliberal practices and policies. For example, employment insurance (formerly unemployment insurance),⁷⁴ social assistance⁷⁵ and social housing⁷⁶ have all been eroded. As a consequence, wealth is far more concentrated in the hands of the rich in Canada today than ever before, such that the richest half a percent of families hold a fifth of all the wealth.⁷⁷

Toronto, where much of the nation's wealth resides, is a neoliberal city. In a neoliberal city, individual worth is measured by one's consumption and productivity. For Neil Smith, the neoliberal city has shifted towards capitalist production, displacing social reproduction (the making and maintenance of life and social relations, including health, education and culture). This process is interlocked with gentrification.⁷⁸

Neoliberalism is an "assemblage of knowledge and practices."⁷⁹ "It is the *interactions* between human and nonhuman components that form the assemblage." It is, therefore, more "than just parts that are related — and these interactions cannot be reduced to individual properties alone."⁸⁰ Assemblages are not stable, though — people have to engage in making them, holding them together and remaking them.⁸¹ The practices of assemblage provide a framework to understand the work of ruling. Government interventions and policies are assemblages that take human labour to bring together and keep together.⁸² Practices of assemblage help to describe how ruling relations actually work.

Li describes six governmental practices of assemblage. The first, "forging alignments," is "linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage," the objectives of both the rulers and the ruled.⁸³

The second practice of assemblage, "anti-politics," is "the re-pos[ing] of political questions as matters of technique."⁸⁴ This is done by "closing down debate" and "limiting the agenda."⁸⁵ Here too, political issues are depoliticized. Using Ontario's *Income Security: A Roadmap for Change* (hereafter *Roadmap*) as an example, the report boldly states: "social and economic inclusion cannot be fully achieved until the root causes of systemic racism are addressed."⁸⁶ This statement is made literally boldly — it is in large, blue font so it stands out. But the root causes of neither poverty nor systemic racism are addressed in the recommendations of the report.

Capitalism is not discussed in the *Roadmap* whatsoever, even though it is capitalist relations that cause poverty. Capitalist relations interlock with colonial relations, historic and contemporary, to ensure the continued impoverishment and oppression of Indigenous people in the Canadian settler state. Except for the “Message from the Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security Reform,” colonialism is depicted solely as a historic occurrence rather than the ongoing reality that it is. It is through these same logics of human value, capitalism and colonialism, that Black people were brought to Canada enslaved — a reality erased not only from Canadian history until recently but also from this report. Canada is also actively involved in global imperialism/neocolonialism through diplomatic, economic and military projects.⁸⁷ The world has more displaced people today than ever before;⁸⁸ many of them are fleeing the consequences of Canadian imperialism. These migrants, if allowed into Canada at all, face profound levels of discrimination.⁸⁹ Yet the *Roadmap* sanitizes these political realities, calling them newcomers and adding them to a list of groups for which there should be data collection and for which the federal government should “allow for the evaluation and assessment of additional supports people may need.”⁹⁰ Poverty is also gendered — worse for Black, Indigenous, racialized, migrant and disabled women.⁹¹ And trans people are disproportionately poor.⁹² While the report makes broad reference to systemic issues, the terms of reference ensure that the recommendations cannot address these. This is the operationalization of anti-politics.

The third of these practices is “rendering technical,” which is similar to anti-politics. Rendering technical depoliticizes an issue by constructing what has been rendered problematic “as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result.”⁹³ One example is the approach to poverty in the *Roadmap*. The report identifies the problem as poverty rather than capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and so on. One of the interventions, then, is to get people on social assistance into paid employment by recommending the government “enhance the effectiveness” of the Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB), a benefit for low-income workers. The WITB is designed to induce people off of social assistance and “strengthen [poor people’s] participation in the labour market.”⁹⁴ Here, the *Roadmap* identifies poverty + incentivized employment through the WITB = less poverty (because working for wages is generally more lucrative than social assistance but also because magic).

Li observes: “experts tasked with improvement exclude the structure of political-economic relations from their diagnoses and prescriptions. They focus more on the capacities of the poor than on the practices through which one social group impoverishes another.”⁹⁵ Through rendering technical, the authors of the *Roadmap* create a set of specific, technical policy recommendations for experts to implement — erasing the analysis of and necessity for political intervention.

Managing failure is the practice of “presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies,”⁹⁶ the fourth practice of assemblage. The *Roadmap* as a whole manages failure as it works at “smoothing out contradictions so that they seem superficial rather than fundamental” while demonstrating openness for community and expert input and direction.⁹⁷

The fifth practice of assemblage is authorizing knowledge. This practice isn’t done by the government itself but by its “friendly critics” — the experts who push for change that is aligned with, or tries to align with, the government’s policy agenda. Authorizing knowledge entails “specifying the requisite body of knowledge” as well as who is considered a legitimate knower (whose knowledge counts) and the boundaries of desired and required knowledge. Again, using the *Roadmap* as an example, one of the officially recognized experts who authored the report asked OCAP after the *Roadmap* was written not to publicly criticize it. However, they did not ask OCAP what should be in the *Roadmap* when it was being crafted. The experts decided what counted as knowledge. Containing critique is also an important part of authorizing knowledge. Here, people like those in the working groups, “fine tune, adjust and improve on the model, but they seldom propose a radically different approach.”⁹⁸ The *Roadmap* proposed “urgent and yet modest increases” to social assistance that would leave people on disability social assistance 45 percent below the (low-income measure) poverty line rather than 53 percent and people on welfare 52 percent below the poverty line rather than 60 percent.⁹⁹ The members of the Income Security Reform Working Group did not all agree on the number that was put forward and “choose a number that we expect government can implement.”¹⁰⁰ Of course, the government can implement a massive increase for social assistance — it chooses not to. I learned from a member of the working group that government bureaucrats were present at the meetings with the working group and indicated what the government would and would not agree to — what would be asking for too much. Consequently, some of the working group contained

their critique about the rise in the rates in order to try to get the government to accept a much lower (and wholly insufficient) recommendation. The report acknowledged that the experts “could not agree on a ‘right number’ to raise social assistance rates; however, none of the members publicly criticized the *Roadmap*. Part of why experts contain critique is because “they are wary of supplying ammunition — arguments, data or the justification to use live bullets” that could be used by those who are fully opposed to poverty reduction projects.

The final practice of assemblage is reassembly. New or refurbished elements can be brought into the assemblage by “deploying existing discourses to new ends [and] transposing the meanings of key terms.”¹⁰¹ Reassembly may involve changing the use of terms because they emerge “in forms so different that they can no longer plausibly travel under the old name.”¹⁰² For example, “welfare” was reassembled as “Ontario Works” by the Harris Progressive Conservative government. The new policy paid people less and was branded as a scheme that got people into work.¹⁰³

Li was examining governing practices from the outside when she explicated these practices of assemblage. I observed the ruling regime from the outside, but I also had access to what was going on internally — through both interviews with city councillors and their staff as well as documents I acquired through freedom-of-information requests. In the process, I discerned two further practices of assemblage by ruling relations: (in) validating knowledge and tightening the ranks. (In)validating knowledge is the practice of the authentication and recognition of a body of knowledge and its producers. Returning to the *Roadmap* as an example, it was the province that decided who counted as the “experts” that would be a part of drafting the report and those experts all agreed to the province’s terms to participate. This practice involves excluding critique — shutting out or shutting down critique; it is containing critique turned outward. It also includes institutional gaslighting, which is when institutions that are part of ruling relations work to get a knower to disregard/reject their own knowledge and accept the knowledge being put forward by the institution. The primary aim of this practice is, at times, invalidating the knowledge of those working for social justice; I therefore call the practice invalidating knowledge in those sections. Tightening the ranks is an internal practice of constructing a unified message to ensure there is a singular account of the truth that is shared by those working for the ruling regime. Together,

these practices of assemblage are used in doing the work of governing; they are tactics of ruling and management.

Homelessness and Disrupting Ruling Relations

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty has impacted many individuals' lives, won significant social policy and material gains, and built up and defended communities over the years. It has also been a spark that has inspired other organizing around the world. This book captures a small fraction of OCAP's work, focusing on three homelessness campaigns between late 2016 and spring 2018 and one during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. The first campaign was, on its face, to get a private security guard hired by neighbourhood businesses to police homeless people out of a public park. More broadly, this was a struggle over who gets to access public space, the pushing of homeless people out of the urban core and the collusion of city government with private business to push people out. The second campaign was for access to and the improvement of an emergency housing benefit. The city was denying people the fund, imposing what seemed like arbitrary rules and discriminating against disabled people and families. Beginning with direct-action casework and moving into a larger campaign, OCAP was able to win major gains. The third campaign was for more beds and better conditions in the shelter system. The system was dangerously overcrowded and people were being refused access. OCAP fought for and won more and better space. The final campaign defended homeless encampments in public space. All of this work has taken place under the shadow of and in resistance to Housing First, a homeless policy scheme adopted as a panacea by all three levels of government. This policy is not only neoliberal, it is both actively harmful to many homeless people and a failed experiment in Toronto. *Fight to Win: Inside Poor People's Organizing* provides a perspective on the organization that has not yet been offered and offers new insights into organizing, ruling relations and the iterative relationship between the two. Ultimately, it demonstrates that when poor people come together, use disruption — both through direct-action casework and mass mobilizing — and fight to win, they can and do win important gains.