



Homeless Theory and Research Collaboration: A Tribute to Nikita Price

Eric Goldfischer and Odilka Santiago

At a time when too many people are dying, Eric Goldfischer and Odilka Santiago remember Nikita Price of Picture the Homeless, and the participatory action-research he encouraged and produced.

“Homeless people have bestowed their knowledge upon academics, upon movements, and it’s starting to come to fruition now” — Nikita Price, March 2018.

Collaborations between academics, activists and organizers lie at the core of many powerful community-based projects. Sometimes such partnerships serve as a means to an end for actors on both ends of the equation: community organizers may need to add academic research to their project, while scholars work with community activists to complete a research project, which requires the voices and experiences of those on the ground. But sometimes these collaborations become more than their intended outcomes: the collaboration takes on a life of its own. It becomes a true partnership, creating an ethos of solidarity that moves well beyond any discrete project or action. To steward such collaborations (while successfully winning campaigns and mobilizing the community) requires patience, vision, and bravery. Nikita Price, the longtime Civil Rights Organizer at Picture the Homeless (PTH) who passed away suddenly on May 21, 2020, had all of those qualities in droves. Nikita worked with homeless folks, students, politicians and organizers alike to transform the model through which researchers and homeless organizers traditionally work together. Each of us worked closely with Nikita during our time in graduate school, and his impact on our lives, work, and approach to seeking justice through participatory action-research cannot be overstated. By reflecting on his impact here, we hope to honor his legacy as an intellectual while showcasing his unique approach to participatory action-research.

When academics first visited Picture the Homeless, either as students or as faculty, Nikita welcomed them with his characteristic greeting: “What’s up, family?” This radical welcoming always changed the terms of the conversation. Nikita never accepted the idea that there were “insides” or “outsides” to movements for justice or the intellectual work that accompanies boots-on-the-ground action. And because PTH functioned as a member-led organization, Nikita took active steps to ensure that researchers understood that the knowledge and theories emanating from PTH—of which there were many—were clearly understood as “homeless knowledge.” In the framing that Nikita taught us, “homeless knowledge” was not confined to the realm of experience, such as the knowledge derived from the material experience of sleeping on the street or living in the shelters. Instead, Nikita knew that to transform paternalistic systems that looked down on homeless people—systems that extended well beyond policing and housing and into the walls of the academy itself—we needed to understand PTH members’ ideas as theorists in their own right. Eric remembers this framework hitting him in a meeting that he and Nikita facilitated where members explicitly addressed the question of *why* police targeted people for “looking homeless.” After a long co-facilitated conversation, during which Eric remembers taking about 30 pages of notes, Nikita turned to him and, with his characteristic sly smile, said, “So, Eric, when you write your book, remember: homeless people thought of this!” This was more than a credit-where-credit-is-due

formulation; it was also a reflection of Nikita's unique understanding of the role of movement scholars. He didn't believe that our job was to theorize what other people said, nor did he think that academics should provide data and get out of the way. For Nikita, the relationship between scholarship and activism was a fully two-way street, filled with opportunities for learning together and amplifying ideas that altered power relations and structural inequalities.

Although not himself an academic, Nikita was plenty familiar with some of the more troubling tendencies of research and developed his own ways of reframing them into a more generative approach. Odilka remembers how Nikita taught her to speak to homeless people on their own terms and not enforce the academic way of categorizing people, which uses demographic information such as race or formal education level. When she began interviewing people in shelters for her dissertation, Nikita insisted that instead of asking, "what is your highest completed educational level?", she should ask, "what are your previous work experience and skills?". By replacing the category of "education level" with "skills and work experience," we can redirect the focus from what homeless people lack, to what they have and can contribute, a significant point of emphasis for Nikita in all of his work. Nikita consistently worked with us (and countless others) to reorient typical ethnographic research questions that highlighted the desperation and depravity of homelessness. Instead, Nikita transformed these questions to emphasize the resistance and humanity of homeless New Yorkers. Nikita taught us the (still radical) idea that homeless people's ways of knowing must remain at the forefront of social theory and policy. This was how Nikita practiced participatory action-research. But, crucially, this knowledge took root through conversation, emerging from collective ideas that came up in meetings, presentations, outreach, and everyday dialogue with homeless New Yorkers.

Importantly, the knowledge that Nikita helped to shape from both PTH members and researchers who worked alongside him did not abide by traditional boundaries. Nikita would continuously remind us that we needed to resist the academic tendency to compartmentalize knowledge into "book" versus "street" knowledge. He instead saw the best work as a blend of "book" knowledge and the ideas of currently and formerly homeless PTH members. By fusing the two, he worked with academic researchers to construct new knowledge production that challenged traditional boundaries. He practiced this pedagogy with his uncanny ability to cross the divide between spaces of policy, academics, and community organizing. Nikita had a true gift: the ability to communicate empathetically with people from all walks of life without losing himself in the process. We witnessed this gift play out in academic spaces, New York City streets, and at City Hall hundreds of times over the years. Nikita tirelessly spoke in our classrooms, participated in co-writing processes, and gave talks at conferences on his own, with PTH members, or with us as co-presenters. On these occasions, Nikita shone brightly. When PTH members traveled to a conference at Yale to speak about homelessness as an environmental-justice issue, Nikita directly challenged students and urban designers to think differently and imagine parks and urban green space from a homeless perspective. Watching this unfold, Eric found it hard to tell whether his words got through to the audience. An hour later, at the reception, Nikita and PTH members were swarmed with participants eager to talk about how the presentation had affected them. Nikita's talk contributed not only to specific PTH campaigns or actions. At the Power at the Margins conference in Minneapolis, which Eric organized to spotlight scholar-activist work for housing justice, Nikita shared the opening plenary stage with several nationally known scholars and activists. His powerful contribution to that space exemplified his own analysis of the role of scholarship in activist work:

"In order to peel away at these layers, you have to look at everything that contributes to what a certain population is going through. People who are homeless know that it's not only not being housed, it's being systematically targeted by specific groups: law enforcement, bureaucracy, neighbors, you name it. We're fending off a lot. All of these things are compounded to make you try to go away. And what we do is we say no, you don't have to go away" — Nikita Price, "Power at the Margins: Mobilizing Across Housing Injustice", University of Minnesota, 2018.

It is tremendously hard for both of us to come to grips with the reality that we'll never be able to work directly with Nikita again. In many cases, we know that deep partnerships between scholars and activists often hinge on individual relationships, and can disappear when one of the parties leaves town for another job, part of a deep structural problem within academia. Future faculty too often become treated as floating, thinking and talking heads who can do their work anywhere, rather than committed thinkers rooted in a specific place and embedded within community relationships. Both of us discussed with Nikita how this could happen to us, to which he would often say, "Don't think you'll get away so easily!" We never once imagined the departure would take place on the other side, nor that it would be so permanent. And Nikita's passing in the midst of hypervisible police violence against homeless New Yorkers—first through the MTA's nightly closures and cleanings, now through a curfew that disproportionately affects those living on the street—feels like the cruelest form of irony. But just as Nikita noted, the purpose of this work is to say "no, we won't go away." And so we will work to honor him through our ongoing collaborations with homeless activists, and our commitment to apply his ideas and approach to the partnership of knowledge and action throughout our work and our lives. He will always be in our heads, our hearts, and our research praxis, wherever we go.

Eric Goldfischer received his PhD candidate from the Department of Geography, Environment and Society (<https://cla.umn.edu/geography>) at the University of Minnesota. His work focuses on the relationship between the visibility of homelessness and urban green development, and has been published in *Environment and Planning D*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, and *Housing Studies*. He lives and works in New York City, where he collaborates closely with Picture the Homeless (<http://picturethehomeless.org>). He can be contacted at goldf056@umn.edu, and you can see more about his work at <https://ericgoldfischer.com>.

Odilka Santiago recently completed her PhD in Sociology from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton and is an incoming assistant professor at the University of San Diego. Her research interests include urban sociology, critical criminology, housing justice, and world historical sociology. She co-published the "Central Park Five Syllabus: Towards Understanding the Historical and Contemporary Criminalization of Working-Class Youth of Color" in *Abolition Journal*.

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