



Marronage and Philadelphia's Housing Justice Fight

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Abstract

This update focuses on the ongoing work of Philadelphia Housing Action and how the group has maintained a politics of marronage in their organizing with homeless residents and in encampments during the Covid-19 pandemic. The group is comprised of a group of Black, white, Indigenous, Asian, Queer, Cis and Trans, poor, undocumented, working class, drug users, sex workers, formerly incarcerated, chronically ill, and disabled and deformed people who came together to make their place in Philadelphia's Center City through protests, housing reclamation, and relationship building.

Keywords

Encampment, social movements, housing struggle, Philadelphia, squatting.

‘Yes, this is an encampment. Yes, this is a protest. But what this really is, is a civil war between Black and poor people and the City of Philadelphia!’ Organizer, Jen Bennetch, yelled into the microphone at a July 13th rally, making it clear that the encampment would not move in the face of its first eviction notice. Jen Bennetch, our beloved friend, passed away earlier this year.

This morning felt like ‘Church,’ an electric feeling, as person after person took the mic and talked about why the city must make room for people like ‘us’, connecting this fight to others such as #BlackLivesMatter and #HousingNow protests. We screamed, ‘Fuck the Police!’ as the local station was only a block away. We did this knowing that the police were willing to use tear gas and rubber bullets and other types of coercion to stop our protests, an unusual amount of force for our context (Goodin-Smith & Roebuck, 2020). We did it anyway as an expression of resistance to state power and a practice of marronage – place-making



outside of state control. This was the first of three eviction threats that the encampments would survive.

Figure 1
Unhappy campers.
Source: Philadelphia
Inquirer



Our group, Philadelphia Housing Action, had initiated an encampment protest of around 200 homeless individuals with express intent to force the city to transfer vacant properties for us to administer as a community land trust. We started another smaller encampment as well as conducted 15 housing takeovers with low-income homeless mothers to prove the concept that we could sustain and manage properties.

We were a mix of organizers: Black, White, Indigenous, Asian, Queer, Cis and Trans, poor, undocumented, working class, drug users, sex workers, formerly incarcerated, chronically ill, and disabled and deformed people came together to make our place in Philadelphia's Center City. Jen Bennetch, had led an encampment protest the year before, protesting the Philadelphia Housing Authority's policies that led to the selling off of thousands of publicly owned properties to private developers. While I and others had been involved with fighting homeless encampment sweeps for several years prior (Reyes 2019).

We center marronage as liberatory practice in our work. It is a constant practice of breaking one's shackles and re-negotiating your relationship to a powerful and ever-present settler colonial state. Concurrently, to be entangled in the state, is to ensure your death, fast or slow, through the mechanisms of state power. At any moment, police may deem you arrest-worthy or a drug user or a mad person to be placed in a mental hospital. Only recently has social science literature imagined marronage as a unified framework as well as

interpreting it as a legitimate strategy for Black placemaking and epistemology (Bledsoe, 2017; Wright, 2020; Winston 2021).



Figure 2

Camp entrance with banners stating 'Housing Now' and 'Black Lives Matter.'
Source: Philadelphia Tribune

Even before the George Floyd Protests, our group had started a Housing Takeover campaign to support homeless families when the city would not provide housing. As the third largest metro area on the U.S. east coast with about 6 million inhabitants, it has become a preferred location for those moving from New York City, increasing rental prices, and creating new hipster enclaves. City policy had been tailored to encourage white middle class people to return, since at least the early 1990s. However, Philadelphia has a history of housing takeovers and occupations, similar to other cities. Overall, direct action has been the most effective way to force the production of low-income housing.

On the first day of the COVID shutdown, the City of Philadelphia went forward with a homeless encampment sweep in the Central Business District. Our city abandoned its poor residents again as it decided to brutalize homeless individuals coercing them into shelters. One person, that we know of, would ultimately die due to this decision (Lubrano, 2020). Mothers knew that they were at-risk of having their children taken away if the state saw that they did not have enough space in their homes or that they were living in their vehicles. This is standard practice, since all school, healthcare and social service employees must report all behavior they perceive to be 'child abuse' (Roberts, 1999). Thus, once again it becomes imperative to make space outside of state surveillance if one is to survive. We were able to forcibly open fifteen homes and house mostly Black and Latinx mothers, with some regaining custody in their new residences, poverty being a clear factor in the state's analysis of parenthood.

We refused intervention not only from the police, but also from 'helping' institutions like our mental health system, the homeless regulation system, and child protective services.

We refused their paternalism. The state had brought people ‘inside’ only to expose them to Covid-19 and premature death in congregate shelter. These were services in which almost all of us had either been abandoned or trapped. Either way, we knew offers of ‘help’ always came with strings attached. Volunteers handled sanitation, food and medical needs and we connected to the city's electricity and water. By refusing the ‘care’ provided by the state, the homeless regulation system accused us of being ‘mentally ill.’ These narratives mirror those used 150 years ago, which called escaped slaves mentally ill for running away from their masters. One provider was forced to formally and publicly apologize for her remarks.¹

What was different about our protest in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests, was that our values centered in the practice of marronage - of taking unused land and making a place. We were a multi-racial organizing group of outlaws who came together out of necessity with much support from Philadelphia's activist community. The camp's original name was Camp ‘Maroon’ after Russell ‘Maroon’ Shoatz.² It was then Lakay Nou, or ‘Our Home’ in Haitian Creole, as the camp sat under the Haitian flag and to honor Haiti as a beacon of light for all the Black diaspora. Then we settled upon the name James Talib-Dean (JTD) Camp, named after my cousin, the camp's founder who transitioned during the first weeks of the encampment.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have had to organize and care for each other. We only engaged homeless services on our terms and forced them to open another hotel that was safer for people to stay compared to the shelters. We also conducted Covid-19 testing with a trusted partner, finding only one positive case during the months of the camp. Individuals self-organized and provided community defense from outsiders like white supremacist vigilantes. We offered help to those fleeing interpersonal violence, including queer and trans people. It was no utopia, but it was an experiment in self-governance and freedom-making. Signs said, ‘Respect our space,’ as we refused to be a spectacle for people and confronted those who tried to take pictures of the space and public figures who attempted to conduct photo ops.

We made a place for the ‘other.’ As people that had been rejected, once we asserted this statement, the state attempted to bring us in, so that it could hurt us. Staking a claim outside the state and being in constant negotiation and renegotiation was how we found safety. We engaged in a mediated politics of refusal, tactics that are especially important for people engaged with the criminal legal system, people fleeing domestic violence, or people fleeing unjust sex offender laws, and maybe the only way to survive. We understood the camp as a place for ‘outlaws.’ Harm did occur and we attempted to hold those people accountable outside of the carceral system (Kaba, 2021). Our community showed care for each other

¹ One can find the apology on the Homeless Advocacy Project's website here:

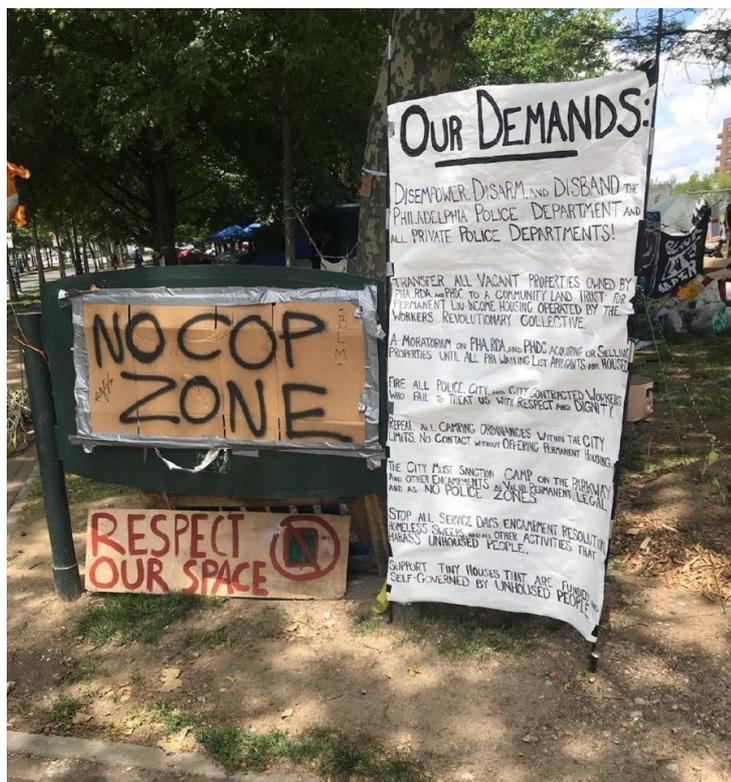
<https://www.haplegal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Marsha-Cohen-Letter-6-22-20-Final-1.pdf>

² Russell ‘Maroon’ Shoatz was a Philadelphian, political activist, member of the Black Panther party and the Black Liberation Army. In 1970, he had been imprisoned for the murder of the Frank Von Colln, but has continued his writing and activism. At the time, his family and activists around the world were fighting for his compassionate release as he had stage 4 cancer. He would be released on October 26, 2021 and would transition on December 17, 2021.

when the city was ready to offer our bodies in exchange for the maintenance of the US capitalist state.

Figure 3

Source: WHYY



Ultimately, the protest encampments lasted from June 10th until October 26th, when an agreement was made to de-camp in exchange for small concessions: ensuring the safety of the fifteen families in the takeover houses, nine rehabbed houses, 50 other vacant properties, access to union labor jobs, access to hotel slots, and 50 emergency housing vouchers, among other promises. At the time, it was important to work with homeless organizers and show them that we could take on the state and win. The first houses were transferred to the land trust in December 2021 (Moselle, 2021). We hope for its success, but we know that there are many other battles to be fought in the city.

What lessons have we learned? We need to apply the wisdom of the first enslaved African peoples that arrived in the Americas from Jamaica and Haiti to Virginia and North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp. We are the carriers of that spirit. In marronage, it is not only about freeing oneself from enslavement. It is also about freeing oneself from one's own limitations of what is considered possible in a settler society and making something new. We believed in the expansiveness and abundance that would exist on the other side. In truth, not everyone survived, and some organizers have transitioned. But they are still with us. In marronage, there are no failures, just surviving to fight another day.

Our lead organizer, Jennifer Bennetch, transitioned on February 17, 2022 leaving behind three children, 18, 9 and 7, who were all a part of our encampment protests. We appreciate any and all prayers of support.

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