We Keep Us Safe: Abolitionist Literacies in the Work of Lu Lu Livingston, At Your Service

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KEYWORDS

Abolitionist literacies; Homelessness; Self-determination; Liberatory care; Interdependence

ABSTRACT

This article discusses three abolitionist literacy practices—interdependent safety, self-determination, and liberatory care—that Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service relied on in her work as an organizer with the Kansas City Homeless Union (KCHU). Livingston's use of these literacy practices is representative of the ways in which abolitionist activists teach their fellow activists as well as broader publics how to read the world differently. These alternative readings of the world not only resist the continuation of carceral logics—in this case, as present in discourse around homelessness in Kansas City, Missouri—but also open pathways to non-carceral, abolitionist futures.

Content Warning: detailed discussion of gun violence

> "You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there."
> —Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, private interview, July 11, 2022

Sometime in the winter of 2020, Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service—a white woman in her 40s "with mental illness and determination," as she asked me to introduce her[1]—arrived in Kansas City, Missouri, in her truck, which she was living in by then. Her truck and identity were stolen from her shortly after she arrived, causing her to take on her current name: Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, a combination of her home city of St. Louis (Lu Lu), her adoptive grandmother's last name (Livingston), and "at your service" because "I've been out there in the streets . . . you learned that you're gonna have to work real hard if you're going to survive," as she explained to me once in an interview. Later, that part of her name would also be called an expression of her commitment to serving the homeless community (Plake).

With nowhere to go during a record-breaking cold winter, Livingston found herself at the Bartle Hall Warming Center in Kansas City, an emergency center set up by activists and volunteers after Sixx, a Black homeless man, was found frozen to death on New Year's Day, 2021,[2] just days after his camp had been destroyed ("swept") by city officials. At first, Livingston said she was excited by the warming center's program for homeless residents volunteers to help run the space—only for her to be told a few days into volunteering that the city had formally taken over the center and was cancelling volunteers.

Livingston told me she left the warming center and started wandering up the street, upset that the staff had gone back on their word to include homeless people in running the shelter. It didn't feel right or real to her, to not let homeless people participate in running a space for themselves; she said she'd "rather freeze and starve"[3] than participate in a system that no longer felt right or real.

Then Livingston came to City Hall's front lawn, just a few blocks from the warming center, and saw a small group of tents. She approached a member of the camp, asking if she could borrow a tent and stay there that night. He said she'd have to talk to Qadhafi—and so she did.

Qadhafi is a formerly incarcerated, Black, homeless man who spent many of those incarcerated years writing out his plans for a homeless union in pieces he published through organizations like the Anarchist Black Cross. Livingston said he told her, "That wasn't a homeless camp; it was a protest, and we were occupying. We were trying to affect policy and change, and that was really important." Then, he offered an analysis of why it mattered to camp. Livingston described this meeting to me in one of our interviews:

> Shelters are actually a business. If there were no homeless people, there wouldn't need to be shelters, so they have a vested interest in keeping homeless people homeless, and so it was a revolving door. And it sounded so obvious once he said it, once you thought about it . . . and that was honest, and that was truth, and that was reality. (Livingston, July 7)

She stayed in the camp and quickly became Qadhafi's right-hand organizer, because the thing you have to know about Livingston is that when she says something is real, and honest, and true, she'll stake everything on living out that belief.

I first met Livingston on March 23, 2021, a cold, rainy day, while I was livestreaming for Independent Media Association (IMA), a citizen journalism project I normally edited and wrote for. IMA Founder Andrei Stoica had gone out of town, and when the organization received news that the camp was under "sweep threat," I gave my best attempt at filming instead. Stoica's style of citizen journalism, which documented participant voices through livestreams, had built trust between IMA and Qadhafi, who often mistrusted other media outlets' tendency to chop his story into soundbytes rather than representing unhoused voices in their entirety. The city was insisting these sweeps weren't happening, and we hoped IMA's recordings would expose their lies ("Kansas City Homeless Union Sweep. 11th and Harrison. Kansas City, Missouri"; Stoica, "Protest against Houseless Camp Sweeps in KCMO").

As Livingston and many other homeless people would tell me, sweeps—when Parks and Recreation, backed up by the police department, goes in and bulldozes a homeless camp—are horribly traumatizing and often leave people who can't get into shelters displaced once again. This is one symptom of what Grace Kyungwon Hong identifies as the logic of neoliberalism itself, "an epistemological structure of disavowal . . . *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life . . . *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death" (7). In this case, sweeps—which, as we saw with Sixx, certainly exacerbate death—are frequently justified by saying that homeless people have the chance to get to shelters, or get a job, or otherwise live a "respectable" (with all the racialized and gendered connotations of that word) life. Livingston, in our very first interview together (see Fig. 1), pushed back:



FIGURE 1. A screen capture from Livingston's interview with IMA, quoted here or available at https://youtu.be/wU7_af9QsVY.

> How you doing? Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service. I'm here, I represent leadership of the Kansas City Homeless Union. I'm out here 414 12th

> Street. I just wanted to let you know, we're out here in this weather, it's cold, it's rainy. And it's representative of some of the weather that really negatively impacts the homeless population. We can't get out of this. We have nowhere to go. We have no one to turn to. We don't have a roof over our heads.
>
> This kind of weather is exactly what devastates us . . . our clothing gets wet. We don't have dryers that we can throw in. We don't have, you know, somewhere that we can turn to that we can just protect ourselves. So we have to get rid of those clothing, we have nothing, you know? We can't carry wet clothes around with us. So we just shed those items. We have to wait until the rain is over. We have to stand here, freeze and shiver. You know, if we had homes, that would really be, you know, something that would help protect us to really help us out—not just a shelter, but a home, you know? And that's the first demand of the Kansas City Homeless Union. That's why we're here. If you want to come around here, I can show you some of the tents and things like that. Over here, this is why we're here. This is why we do this.
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> So our first demand is homes, you know, and if we had those homes, we can also give our people jobs fixing up those homes if we could get those homes from the land bank that Kansas City has. So homes and jobs. Those are our first two demands.
>
> Now access to water is our third demand so that we could be able to wash up, so we could be able to wash those clothes, so we could be able to use the bathroom. COVID-19 really devastated us. So that's homes, jobs, and water.
>
> Now the last demand that we have is a seat at the table. We really need to be able to talk to people, talk to the city council, talk to representatives. We need to be at that table so that we could really impact how they see us, how are our issues are dealt with. They need to know because the dividing line is so vast. You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there. It's not just a weekend camping; the people that do all want to understand and come out and you know, camp for homelessness and things like that. They still get to go home after that weekend. We don't. There's no way out of this. You know what I'm saying? So [if] we could just get a seat at the table, that would really impact us and make everything a lot better.
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> So that's our four demands. That's all we're asking for: homes, jobs, water, a seat at the table, and that would make all the difference in the world. Lu Lu Livingston, out. (Fitzsimmons, "Update Kansas City Homeless Union")

That final demand—for not just homes, jobs, and water, but also a "seat at the table," might at first seem to be asking for inclusion in the very system that was actively harming her. However, Livingston's broader argument, here and elsewhere, would require that the table change completely—something she would recognize more explicitly later on in her work. In this video, she treats lived experience as a kind of literacy—implicitly

asserting that a lived, in-the-body kind of understanding of the day-to-day experience of homelessness is a prerequisite for epistemic authority in public discourse related to homelessness. What does it mean, she asks here, for the public to become literate in experiences of homelessness? What norms do they have to pick up? What sources should they consider authoritative?

"We Keep Us Safe": Some Academic and Activist Context

> "We don't commit crimes; we commit acts of survival."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

As both an activist and a scholar of abolitionist rhetoric and community literacy practices, I return often to the ways in which Livingston's work addressed the root causes of homelessness and worked to create new, life-affirming conditions that helped people help each other reimagine *safety* as something we create for and with each other —not something that requires police, or prisons, or the hoarding of resources. In many abolitionist spaces, "we keep us safe" is an often-repeated refrain, meant to reassert that policing doesn't keep the vast majority of "us" safe—we do that for each other. This is the kind of work Livingston did—building power among homeless people rather than waiting for the state to stop criminalizing them and meeting needs along the way. She did it through literacy, yes—through the speeches she gave, the stories she told, and the pages upon pages of writing she used to try to imagine our way to a better world—but she also put action to those words. As I'll argue below, the undoing of carceral systems and the building of life-affirming futures became how she *read the world itself.*

For example, after Livingston finally got housing, I showed up to her new apartment on Christmas Eve with dinner for her and "a few people" she'd said were staying with her. There were eight, plus their pets, in her tiny apartment, not counting those who came by briefly for laundry or a bathroom or to say hello. I lost track of their stories as she told them, all the reasons they struggled to find housing or couldn't go to a shelter, the different needs they had. There was no question, for Livingston, that keeping people safe from the weather was as much her responsibility as the city's—maybe especially because the city wasn't doing a very good job of housing people at all.

There's a longer history behind such abolitionist action, of course. *We keep us safe* is one of those logics that enact Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "life-affirming institutions" (qtd. in brown 1) that nurture rather than constrain and incarcerate life. If Stefano Harney and Fred Moten were correct in arguing that abolition isn't about just tearing down prisons, police departments, or the other myriad reinventions of chattel slavery, "but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society" (Harney and Moten 42), then *we keep us safe* is one small, discursive move towards that kind of shift. If we keep us safe—if we really *do* that, collectively, effectively, with accountability—then for what do we ever need the police?

But there's more than literacy work that goes into keeping people safe. Safety requires material moves towards interdependence, care, and prioritization of people's self-determination. However, all of these components *also* represent a kind of literacy —which is to say a way of reading not a text but the *world* (Pritchard 20)—and perhaps even simultaneously reading the world we have and the worlds that could be, which other abolitionist scholars have called "prefigurative politics" (Lin, Pykett, Flanagan, and Chávez). At the risk of being too broad, I'm assuming here that literacy is an umbrella term encompassing all of the communicative and analytical skills involved in processing and participating in various communicative situations. We build these skills based on our presuppositions about the world—our "terministic screens," to use the rhetorical term (Burke). Because we filter communication through socially constructed and influenced lenses/screens, literacy is also inherently political (Licona and Gonzales; Brandt; Paris and Alim), and so it would make sense that radical movements with radically different foundational logics will have literacy practices built on those differing foundations. A part of what Audre Lorde was talking about when she argued that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99) was that the *rhetorics*, the *ideologies*, and perhaps even the *literacy skills* we borrow from a patriarchal, racist, linguistically-supremacist state-educational complex will not dismantle that complex. Our critique of said complex won't dismantle it, either, as critic la paperson has compellingly argued; but, as they also argue, we might turn the tools of the system against itself (paperson). Perhaps more so than any organizer I know, Livingston knew that critique itself gets us nowhere—but that strategic misuse of existing systems can be crucial for liberation.

We keep us safe is too often just something people say and then neglect once ICE is at their door asking about their neighbors or police are in the street in riot gear. However, there are many abolitionists who live and die by that logic, whose every communicative moment throughout their work demonstrates how radically different we all might conceive of the ways we write, speak, story, use our bodies to communicate, or otherwise move through the world. Livingston was one of those.

Thus, this article focuses on how abolitionist literacy practices as exemplified by Livingston's work make good on the claim that "we keep us safe," and how this shift not only transforms the kinds of literacy skills we deploy around care within movements, but also makes possible futures that affirm rather than cage *life*—not one life, not only human life, but life broadly and with all its contradictions (Johnson). My overarching argument is this: Livingston deployed a set of not just abolitionist but *life-affirming literacy practices* that countered the hegemonic cultural narratives that harm Kansas City's homeless communities—and this includes narratives of criminalization but also well-meaning narratives from housed advocates. For example, in many activist and academic spaces, the preferred term for Livingston's community is "houseless," meant to draw a distinction between not having a *house* and not having a *home*, which might well be a vehicle or a tent. However, Livingston and other homeless participants in my study were always adamant that this term softened the harsh reality of being homeless. "Homeless" was the term they used to describe themselves, and thus is the term I generally use in this piece—because, as I discuss, self-determination is one of the three

literacy skills for reading the world that is crucial within Livingston's organizing and abolitionist organizing more broadly:

- **Self-determination:** Self-determination for abolitionists like Livingston means something radically different than the pass/fail test of self-determination cast in, for example, healthcare settings or in policy used against those with disabilities. Articulations of self-determination like Livingston's reframe the concept not as an earned right, but as an *inherent* right to self-define (including defining the terms used to name you). This framework provides a concrete starting point from which to imagine and discuss the balance of personal autonomy and interdependence.
- **Interdependent safety:** Unlike state models for "public safety," which are predicated on surveillance, punishment, and policing as the methods by which (certain) people gain access to "safety," Livingston's rhetorical model treated safety as an interdependent project—one we all contribute to, enact for each other, and define both individually and for ourselves. *Safety* for Livingston had an invitational, almost familial quality to it, grounded in her work around harm reduction.
- **Liberatory care:** As many critics of the prison-industrial complex have pointed out, sites of "care" often function as extensions of incarceration (Ben-Moshe; Schenwar and Law). These—along with the ways in which "care" for the homeless also tends to function paternalistically at best and carcerally at worst—necessitate a kind of critical literacy around care that helps us differentiate between liberatory care and carcerality disguised as care. Abolitionist conceptions of interdependent safety and self-determination lead us here: to an understanding and deployment of *care* in precise, critical, and non-coercive ways, both in material and discursive contexts.

While there are clear ties between abolitionist thought and movements and Livingston's commitment to non-carceral forms of community safety, the ties between homeless activism and abolition go deeper still. Homelessness *is an abolitionist issue.* As Livingston once told me in an interview, "we don't commit crimes; we commit acts of survival" (July 7). Clarifying this distinction was front of mind for Livingston throughout her work, and her framing highlights the foundational link between abolition's longstanding critique of crime as a social construct (Davis). From bills criminalizing homelessness (Bates) to the disproportionate number of homeless people who are formerly incarcerated, homelessness is just as much a part of the prison-industrial complex as are educational systems (Annamma; Price), psychiatric systems (Ben-Moshe), and other institutions that extend the reach of state incarceration further into our lives.

It feels like an understatement to say that homelessness is a pipeline to prison—perhaps a closed loop is a better image. The National Alliance to End Homelessness and Federal Bureau of Prisons report that 40% of homeless people are Black—compared, at the time of writing, to 38% of incarcerated people (and only 13% of the overall population)—and this number is notably *not improving* ("Racial Inequalities"; "BOP Statistics"). In Kansas City, the 2024 numbers were similar—35% of homeless people were Black, despite Black people being 26% of the city's population ("Point in Time"; "Kansas City, MO"). Livingston herself is white and has not been incarcerated, to my knowledge, but many of her fellow organizers are Black, and many (regardless of race) were formerly incarcerated. Experiences of incarceration often bar people from

shelters and other housing services, which means they end up sleeping on the street. Especially given recent anti-homeless executive orders that I will not dignify with a citation, sleeping on the street means risking further criminalization for "illegal camping" ("What the Recent Executive Order"). State policy around homelessness is not a pipeline to prison; it's a circle—one that frankly resembles its own prison bars the longer you look at it.

Homelessness as a state of being maintained by state policy functions not only as an excuse to criminalize predominantly Black and brown people for *existing in public*, but also as a manufacturer of what Jasbir K. Puar has called "debility" (13), or the debilitation of people's bodies via capitalist and state-sanctioned violence. Prisons, too, function as instruments of debility—propping up whole private prison industries while destroying the bodies/minds of those locked inside. Homelessness, similarly, props up the interests of landlords and developers who, instead of *housing people* in the hundreds of vacant homes in places like Kansas City, purchase properties to leave vacant, tear down, flip, or otherwise keep out of the grasp of those who need those places to *live*. This system, like incarceration, disproportionately impacts Black and brown people—leading to high rates of mental and physical illness or debility. Livingston once told me in an interview, for example, "If you don't have mental illness before you get on the streets and you end up on the streets, I guarantee you by the time you get off the streets, you will have some sort of exacerbated form of anything you already had, and you definitely have PTSD" (July 7). This was true for her, as well—she identified as having mental illnesses, including borderline personality disorder and PTSD, both of which were exacerbated by homelessness. As Livingston's situation exemplifies, of course, these kinds of systemically racist systems ultimately harm *everyone*, regardless of racial identity—although certainly not in the same or even proportionate ways. As Ruha Benjamin puts it, "inequality makes us *all* sick" (16), which is why, for example, disability justice activists and scholars have long placed movements for disability justice within the broader context of movements against white supremacy, imperialism, and settler-colonialism (Piepzna-Samarasinha; Jaffee).

Whether discussed in this broader context of abolition or not, homeless (self-)advocacy has been a longstanding part of literacy studies, specifically community literacies. Paula Mathieu and Diana George, for example, have written about homeless-led independent newspapers, sometimes called "street papers," as preeminent examples of public writing (Mathieu and George). Nedra Reynolds considers homeless communities in defining streetwork as a way of helping students "expose some geographies of exclusion and how they operate" (133). Melanie Loehwing writes about how the concept of "home" is itself rhetorically constructed—and how having a home is often equated with being a citizen—perpetuating a rhetorical kind of harm alongside the physical harm of not having shelter (4). Of course, it is not just having a home that is connected to citizenship; rather, literacy itself is connected to normative expressions of citizenship (Wan; Pritchard). Particularly, it's been all too easy in our field to treat literacy as a kind of "savior" that will transform "bad" citizens into "good" or "productive" citizens—rhetoric we see in discussions of prison writing programs (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad) but also in homeless advocacy, which Korey Tillman calls out for patterns of "coercive benevolent policing"

(635). In fact, given that there is a well-understood pipeline from being incarcerated to being homeless (Wooten), and given that being homeless is often, as Loehwing argues, equated with being a bad citizen (or not a citizen at all), the criminalization of homelessness reveals how these rhetorics are just a reinvention of the rhetorics of criminality that lead us to police and prisons.

Livingston's ways of reading the world in her activism is representative of the work other abolitionist activists do more broadly: her rhetoric was complex enough to hold and care for many different lived experiences; it prioritized people's autonomy and self-determination as a center-point of, not a determent to, collective movements; and it redefined safety as something we all build together, with each other and not at the expense of each other. When she narrated her experiences, her community's experiences, and her visions for movement, her stories took these—self-determination, interdependent safety, liberatory care—as givens, and I'd like to argue, in telling a part of her story here, that those *givens* prove to be a truly transformative way of reading the world.

Background, Framework, and Methodology

> "The difference between my camps and other camps was . . . my camps were the cleanest. My camps, we had minimal violence. We had minimal problems. We worked together. We had a huge sense of community. And we fostered that. We built on that. And I did that on purpose. I did it by making people feel involved and mak[ing] them feel important. I made them feel like they did it themselves. I gave them a sense of hope, a sense of pride."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 11, 2022

When I started this article, I was primarily focused on the citizen journalism project, Independent Media Association (IMA), which I worked with as an activist and then as a scholar while living in Kansas City from 2020–2023, before moving to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where I now work. I planned to talk about community media as a kind of counterstory (Martinez) that challenges the narratives that media and the state craft about abolitionist movements, why those literacy practices matter, and how they tie to broader movements for media justice. I was writing the section where I explained what this project is—a kind of "patchwork, participatory-critical rhetorical ethnography" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe; Middleton, Hess, Enders, and Senda-Cook) born out of working with IMA from 2020–2022 before I ever started research, built from fragmented journals, active participation, after-the-fact interviews, and short fieldwork trips.[4] In addition to interviews, I thematically coded hours of recorded video of activist events, looking for how we talk about people's bodies, health, and well-being within abolitionist movements. I came away with a clear sense of the ways abolitionists are redefining the foundational terms of public debate—beyond all the other work these movements seek to accomplish. So many movements that the media jumped to labelling as "failures" were anything but; they've remade what public debate about safety and well-being in Kansas City *means*, and there are fewer clearer examples of this

than the Kansas City Homeless Union as storied by citizen journalists (see Fitzsimmons, "Storying Access").

And then, one afternoon in January, I left a meeting on my new campus, 700 miles from Kansas City where I'm now working as an assistant professor, and opened a text from a fellow activist telling me that our friend (and one of my research participants), Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, had been shot in the head in her home by a man who'd only recently been released from prison and was, like many formerly incarcerated people, facing homelessness (Plake). She'd taken him in; by his own report, he was lacking access to mental healthcare he sorely needed. It turned out to be easier for him to access a gun. It's hard, as a student of abolitionist movements, to read the news account of what happened and *not* note that he didn't escalate to using that gun until police were standing outside the door, yelling to be let in, and that their presence once again did the opposite of deescalating *anything*. "Who do you serve? Who do you protect?"[5] indeed.

On January 29, 2025, Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service died from the wound to her head after weeks of fighting. I went back to my data looking for her voice, because I couldn't think about anything else. In the end, I pulled out the two interviews I'd done with her, every livestream I could find that she'd spoken on, and the work of KCHU more broadly; I'd known, academically, that I needed to narrow the scope of this project, and grief, as it turns out, sometimes focuses your mind into tunnel-vision. I went back through just her data, looking for emergent themes, looking for the story arc, the literacy skills. I had already coded all of this in my broader study, and so those themes—around embodiment and health and access and safety—certainly tinted my analytical glasses, but I was also looking for *her*, for my friend, for what she believed and what abolitionist literacy practices might've meant to her. I coded thematically, looking for literacy practices in their broadest definitions, and then looking and coding for how they were abolitionist, which is to say "a keyword that assembles a range of practices, insurgencies, movements, languages, and vocabularies across ecological, political, social, and aesthetic formations" (521), as Omedi Ochieng and Amber Kelsie have defined abolitionist rhetorical studies. Reading for these practices and "taking literate action" (Flower 44) in the world *through* them, as I will argue Livingston did, is the core of abolitionist literacy studies.

I found myself captivated by how frequently Livingston talked about care and safety along with self-determination. These emergent themes fit what I'd always heard her say about herself and what others said about her: she was a mother to that camp. She cared and kept people safe and fought fiercely for their dignity—and it is around these themes from the data—from her public speeches and the two extended one-on-one interviews I did with her in 2022—that I've organized this story of her. I've woven her voice throughout—from the livestream interviews she did with citizen journalist volunteers (which included me at the time) with Independent Media Association, from the two interviews she and I did together in 2022, and from her own publicly available social media—to showcase these quiet, radical reframings of core concepts within and beyond rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies. In this way, my framework is less an application of our field's concepts to analyze Livingston's work and more the reverse case: using her work to comment on, expand, and reimagine what it might mean to

become literate in livable, abolitionist futures—for the homeless, and for the rest of us. Ersula Ore called recently for abolitionist rhetorical studies to "*move away from* a disciplinary fondness for incrementalism and fugacious reform, and to instead *move with* an ethic and ethos anchored in a radical understanding of the rich transformative potential of the field's alignment with abolitionist movement theory and rhetoric" (v), and I would argue that a part of doing this is to allow activists' frameworks to guide, reshape, and make our theories, understandings of literacy, and ways of doing literacy in the world. My methods and the framework I ultimately offer aim to do just that.

All the way through writing, I wished I knew exactly what she would say about the end of this story—the one where her work doesn't keep going at the end. I wish I could text her and ask, like I normally would've, if she'd read this draft, or parts of it, to make sure I didn't misrepresent her, or to ask her a clarifying question the way I did when I worked on earlier pieces of this broader Kansas City project. But having had the privilege of knowing her, I have a guess about what she'd say about how her story ended. I know she wouldn't have regretted taking him in. I know, too, that she'd point to the systemic issues here—asking why the city didn't offer him services, why we continue to incarcerate people and cause harm to their mental health by doing so, why we don't house and treat people instead of incarcerating them and then rearresting them for being homeless, why it was easier for him to get a gun than care, why "care" would've come at the expense of his autonomy even if jail hadn't been how he accessed it. We'd talked many times about how she wanted housing-first, non-carceral approaches to homelessness, how those efforts should be overseen by people with lived experience of homelessness, and how they shouldn't strip people of their autonomy as a condition for getting housing or demand that people perform sobriety or sanity or a particular religion in order to earn said autonomy. In other words, she wanted solutions that were *life-affirming* before red tape, before rules, and before questions of who "deserves" what.

Once, I asked Livingston whom she imagined as the audience for her work as an activist. I've asked many activists this question—part of my standard interview protocol about activist composing and literacy practices. Many of my participants have articulated multiple audiences for their work—sometimes speaking to their communities, sometimes to state leaders, sometimes to the broader public. Livingston was somewhat unique in her answer, articulating, instead, a specific person.

One day, Livingston told me, she'd been flying a sign on a street corner when a man slowed down, rolled down his window, and yelled at her to get a job—an all-too-common refrain that homeless people hear when in similar positions. Her truck had just been stolen, with all her possessions and paperwork, and she told me how what she'd wanted to say was that she wanted to get a job, but she had no identity documents anymore, and without an address, she couldn't apply for new ones. It left her caught in a vicious cycle—one where homeless people lose or have their documents stolen, cannot apply for new ones without an address, cannot get an address without a job, and cannot get a job without identity documents and an address, creating a closed loop of bureaucracy created by state policies that are quite literally leaving people out in the cold.

Livingston couldn't explain that situation to the man in the span of such a brief interaction, but she's been explaining ever since. "That's the kind of audience that I think of—the non-believer, the person that . . . doesn't understand the stigma, that full-on doesn't know, you know, never experienced it, they're looking at it from the outside in" (July 7), she told me. Her work bears this out—that she spoke with the "non-believer" but refused to capitulate to stigmatizing rhetorics to do so, that she maintained her commitment to care, to interdependence as a means of survival, and to self-determination as the starting point for her public and private work.

In so doing, her work began to undo some of the rhetorical harm created by the stigmatizing rhetorics around homelessness (Loehwing 4)—not just for housed people to understand, but for members of her own community. She should be here to tell you this story herself, but she's not, because the world she fought for remains far out of reach for many of us—for now.

Self-Determination

> "That's a person. It's a human being. He's got a story, got a life, and he probably doesn't want to be on the streets, either. If he does want to be on the streets, then he should have the right to self-determination too. He should be able to choose that."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

In disability movements, the slogan "nothing about us without us" has long been a rallying cry—meant to encapsulate an insistence on disabled people's right to make decisions about their own lives. Broadly, the Kansas City Homeless Union made the same basic argument; they argued for city discourse around homelessness to shift away from a public conversation defined by the perspectives of professional advocates and other housed people (people without the lived experience of homelessness) and towards discourse that prioritizes lived experience. Of primary importance in this reshaping was this concept of self-determination—that homeless people should have the right to self-define what, for example, health or well-being meant for them, rather than having service providers do that work. This was an issue Livingston discussed in two qualitative interviews she did with me in the summer of 2022. There, she talked about the ways in which many "outreach" programs and advocates are focused on

> not necessarily what they're doing *for* the homeless, more what they're doing *to* the homeless . . . neither one of which involves allowing the homeless to decide, you know, anything about their lives. 'Well, you're gonna stay in the shelter tonight. You're gonna get up at 6 am. You're gonna get out there. You're gonna do this stuff . . . [but] we're not pets. We're people. (Livingston, July 7)

In these one-on-one interviews, Livingston said her response to such rhetoric was to try to represent stories—whether her own or others'—that challenged stereotypes around homelessness, asking them instead to read homeless narratives through the lens of this inherent right to self-determination: "I try to make it so that I'm not the typical

homeless person they see. And I try to make it so that they can listen to my words and use them to build in their head a different idea of who they're talking about" (July 7). She told me she wanted people to see a homeless person on a sidewalk and realize, "that's a person. It's a human being. He's got a story, got a life, and he probably doesn't want to be on the streets, either. If he does want to be on the streets, then he should have the right to self-determination too. He should be able to choose that" (July 7). Livingston used her body, her speech, her engagement with media even when she did not want to,[6] in order to make the argument that people should have the resources to decide what they need—whether that's housing or not—and be able to act on it without fear of there being strings attached to those resources. Instead, she argued that services, policies, and nonprofit housing organizations should resource homeless people's ability to make decisions about their own lives and to live as safely and happily as possible while doing so, and without conditions; this insistence on self-determination was the rhetorical starting point for all her conversations throughout her work, and she expected it to become housed people's starting point when trying to understand her community.

While Livingston talked about presenting herself via normalized literacy skills to city officials—sitting up straight in meetings, "using my big words," (July 7) and the like—these performances of normative literacy skills were, for her, a means to an end. She used these kinds of skills to frame the resourcing of self-determination as interdependent—which is to say, the idea that we depend on each other to live full, safe lives that we have autonomy over (Kittay; Mladenov). This approach stands in contrast to the hyperindependent model of self-determination, which frames the ability to make decisions about one's own life as a right that must be earned through particular behaviors, particularly related to participation in capitalist economies (holding a job, paying rent without assistance, etc.)—an ableist model which has been thoroughly critiqued in disability studies (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole). Nirmala Erevelles, for example, has argued that essentializing rhetorics around disability "locates persons with cognitive/severe disabilities outside the margins of 'active' citizenship" (148) because the rhetorics around those who will need substantial, lifelong supports often imply (or outright state) that this need for support equates to a lack of *competence*. "It is in this oppressive context," Erevelles writes, "that persons with cognitive/severe disabilities are perceived as (ir)rational and (non) autonomous—qualities that are then equated with noncompetence, nonstatus, and ultimately noncitizenship" (149).

Livingston's model, however, is different. As perhaps most clearly exemplified in the quotation that opens this section, Livingston argued for support and self-determination even for those who don't perform those kinds of "rationality" (e.g., sleeping indoors) or autonomy (e.g., ability to be financially "independent"). She argued for homeless people to have full participation in the decisions that affect their lives *without strings attached*. For example, in Livingston's first interview with IMA, she appealed to the Kansas City public like this:

> I just wanted to let you know, we're out here in this weather, it's cold, it's rainy. And it's representative of some of the weather that really negatively impacts the homeless population. We can't get out of this. We have nowhere to go. . . . This kind of weather is exactly what devastates us. . . . You know, if we had homes, that would really be, you know, something

> that would help protect us to really help us out—not just a shelter, but a home. (Fitzsimmons, "Update Kansas City Homeless Union")

Here, Livingston uses terms and starting points that housed audiences would be familiar with, even appealing for "help." However, she's specifically not arguing for "help" as a prerequisite for homeless people gaining autonomy over their lives; "a seat at the table" is, after all, the union's fourth demand. Instead, she explains: "We need to be at that table so that we could really impact how they see us, how are our issues are dealt with . . . You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there." That is, she argues that the lived experience of the homeless community, when making public decisions that primarily affect them, is not even "just as good" as city leaders' or nonprofit directors' perspectives, but rather is epistemically authoritative in ways that these other sources will not and cannot be.

This kind of assertion of one's lived experience over and against dominant narratives not only highlights an alternative interpretation to the stigmatizing narrative that "homeless people leave their clothes by the wayside because they're lazy," but also invites the broader Kansas City public to read homeless people's stories through this same lens—and to take action accordingly. This narrative pattern, I would argue, represents a practice of life-affirming discourse towards abolition's life-affirming institutions; it steps outside of civic debates and institutions that gatekeep who has access to survival resources and instead asks us to focus on how we are all implicated in helping to cultivate the "streams of resources" ("Resist Policing") that support our lives —as we define them, rather than as they are defined and circumscribed by the state.

Interdependent Safety

> "I'm helping people out, but I'm also creating structures. It's not necessarily, you know . . . it's not necessarily about like control or anything like that. I was just thinking at the time [that] if we work together, we can make this work, try to keep the camp picked up, so people aren't having an excuse to call the cops, and having people come in and all this stuff. . . ."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

Livingston also deployed literacy skills by 1) reading discussions of "safety" and recognizing them as carceral when that's what they were, and 2) practicing a resistant, interdependent reading of safety, which she in turn taught others through the "structures" she references above. As discussed in the previous section, interdependence stands in direct contrast to the hyper-independent model of self-determination so frequently critiqued in disability studies (and still promoted by the medical-industrial complex). Disability Justice group Sins Invalid describes interdependence thus: "We meet each others' needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives" ("10 Principles"). As implied here, interdependence is particularly important for discussions of safety, which are tied up with self-determination in the sense that "safety" is often mobilized to mean "a state of being free from harm or fear of harm," which, of course, becomes fraught when "fear

of harm" is attached to certain bodies, whose "safety" or protectability never seems to matter once they have been labelled criminal or otherwise expendable (see Rowland; Agamben). In this way, safety rhetoric operates carcerally via two basic rhetorical moves: the equating of "safety" with policing, and the function of policing as the removal of particular bodies to whom "criminality" or lack of safety has been attached. The equating of "public safety" with police is a common rhetorical move reflected in foundational state documents, including the annual budget, where "public safety" is often (as in Kansas City) simply "police" and "the fire department" (Lucas and Platt 9), despite the hundreds of people that the Kansas City Police Department has killed and brutalized just in the last few decades.

Once police are rhetorically equated with "safety," it becomes easier to invoke "safety" as tied to the absence (enforced by police) of particular bodies that have criminality attached to them. In the context of housing discourse, we see this invocation of safety rhetorics when affluent neighborhoods engage in "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) rhetoric, arguing that homeless shelters and transitional housing cannot be built in their communities (Gent). Instead, these communities push for homeless people, whom they perceive as criminals, to be removed—directly or indirectly—by police. "Homeless people are allowed to exist," the rhetoric often goes, "just not in my backyard." In other words, police enforce safety by ensuring that propertied classes are free from having to see a homeless person. Whitney Gent cites examples in which housed residents in New York decried the increasing number of homeless men as a safety issue (140). As Gent points out, NIMBY rhetoric mobilizes democratic processes to claim that housed residents are being excluded based on the fact that they are not being allowed to exclude—and, more precisely, to use police to exclude—homeless Others from their communities (141). These kinds of invocations of "democracy" emphasize not justice, but rather a kind of hyperindependence in which it becomes *unjust* for someone's existence to inconvenience another.

In Kansas City, the homeless union faced even more insidious "safety" rhetorics. After the initial encampment on City Hall's front lawn, Qadhafi and Mayor Quinton Lucas negotiated a deal to move everyone in the camp into hotels temporarily, with the promise that everyone—some 463 people at the largest count, Livingston told me—would be housed (see Fig. 2). However, the hotel program was ultimately cancelled—and many people remained homeless. Now dealing with summer's blistering heat rather than winter's bitter cold, the remnants of the union returned to city property, this time camping in the park behind City Hall. Livingston explained (full interview below; "I was feeling myself that day," she told me later, about this interview):

> At the end of the hotel stay, we had nowhere to go. I am among those people that just . . . don't have anywhere else to go. I have no family, I have nowhere to turn. So what happened was we left out on our own and we had intended to begin other things, like we were going to begin an occupation of City Hall [front lawn] again. However, they fenced off the city hall [front lawn].
>
> Now they claim that it's because they needed to have some safety issues covered due to the parking garage being in failing shape. Underneath, which, I mean, that's logical and reasonable, except why wouldn't you

> close the whole building? You know, if everybody's, you know, trying to be safe here. But so they blocked off the . . . lawn so that we didn't get there. There was a small section of lawn on the side we tried to utilize just to get something fired up, didn't work out so well. They ran us off within three hours. (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Update from Ilus")



FIGURE 2. Qadhafi (left), leader of the Kansas City Homeless Union, meets with Mayor Quinton Lucas (right) on April 5, 2021. Photo by Andrei Stoica, Independent Media Association. Used with permission.

In the situation Livingston describes here, we see carceral safety showing its true colors: it's not and never was about homeless people's safety, but the safety of city property. Instead of rehearsing all the ways in which the use of police to enforce the protection of property at the cost of people's humanity reflects its legacy as a modern iteration of chattel slavery, I'll just note that the city treated abolitionist movements this way throughout the entirety of the George Floyd uprisings. Leaders of Friday Night Protest were confronted by ex-police counterprotesters over tying a Black Lives Matter flag to a police memorial with twine (Laurel). Anti-police occupiers at city hall found that Kansas City's mayor was more inclined to call to check on an allegedly-defaced memorial than to check on a victim of police brutality (Stoica, "KCMO City Hall").

The city didn't treat KCHU any better, and the union worked from the outset to forward their own definition of safety. For Livingston in particular, harm reduction was a key part of how she kept her community safe (in fact, her last social media post shows that she was out doing this work shortly before she died; see Fig. 3). However, as with other forms of safety, her use of harm reduction insisted on people's self-determination and a resistance to state control over what harm reduction means. This approach places

Livingston's work within what Micah Hobbes Frazier, as quoted by harm reductionist Shira Hassan, defines as Liberatory Harm Reduction:

> In Liberatory Harm Reduction we say let's get underneath and get to the root cause of things, because if we don't get to the root of things, then we're going to be constantly responding instead of creating new ways of being in new conditions, really setting ways for people to be their best selves, be safe, be well. Instead of continuing to respond to crisis, to trauma, to violence, to harm, Liberatory Harm Reduction can pull out those roots and then plant something different. Is it white supremacy? Is it patriarchy? Is it someone's trauma? Like what allowed and supported this risk to happen in the first place? That's our work. (qtd. in Hassan 27–28)

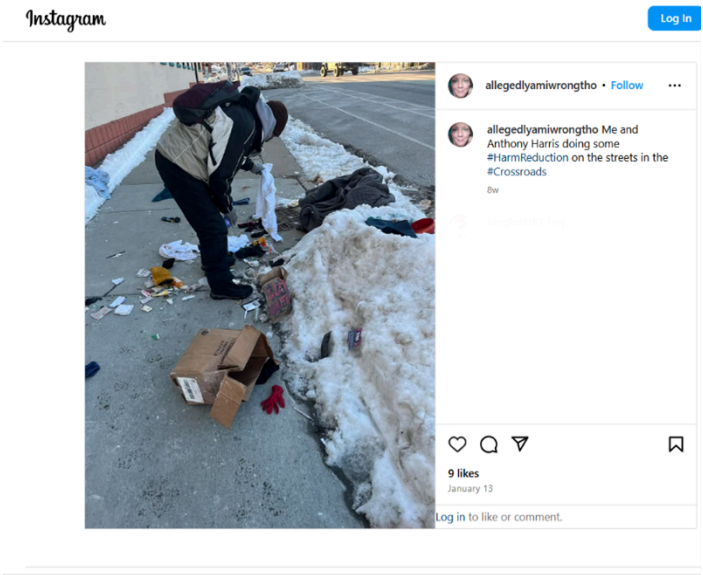


FIGURE 3. Screenshot of Livingston's last Instagram post. Posted January 13, 2025, and captured March 8, 2025.

Livingston's work was similarly focused. While she was out "in the streets" doing harm reduction work, her behind-the-scenes work advocated for housing-first solutions to homelessness, and transitional housing models led specifically by people with lived experience of homelessness. Livingston believed in working with the city to access resources when it was expedient to do so, but for long-term solutions, she emphasized supporting homeless people where they were and letting them guide what transitioning back into housing looked like for them, rather than punishing people for not "healing" on some specific timeline.

This approach also guided how Livingston engaged with law, policy, and state power. While Livingston wasn't the sort of person to arbitrarily follow rules, she did mobilize particular performances of rule-following as a way of working together to prevent harm. As with every other activist initiative to take up some kind of protest outside City Hall, the union faced the unique challenge of surveillance on all sides—City Hall on one side, Kansas City Police Department Headquarters on another, the county courthouse on a third, and the city employee parking garage on the fourth. The tall, concrete buildings funneled the wind down towards the tents—bitterly cold, nowhere to walk to get warm or use a bathroom that was open past business hours, no bystanders to witness whatever acts of state brutality happened in the dark.

Livingston knew that the last thing the camp could afford to do was give the police a reason to enter, and thus a part of interdependent safety was working together to keep them out. In one of our private interviews, Livingston described walking up to a group of residents who were smoking weed, waving her arms as if she was upset, and then telling them, calmly, that this was her acting like she was upset so the cameras picked up that there was "order" being kept in the camp. "We're going to have people that are going to use," she explained, "[but] don't leave this shit everywhere. Pick up after yourself. Keep it in the tent. Keep the door closed. We don't need everybody seeing all this stuff" (July 7). While an abolitionist or liberatory approach to harm reduction does not depend on the state to create safety, Livingston knew—as many abolitionists do—that keeping people safe from the state is a key part of what harm reduction looks like. Even as she did so, she worked to build alternatives—such as getting residents of the camp involved with keeping up the camp collectively:

> I'm helping people out, but I'm also creating structures. It's not necessarily, you know . . . it's not necessarily about like control or anything like that. I was just thinking at the time [that] if we work together, we can make this work, try to keep the camp picked up, so people aren't having an excuse to call the cops, and having people come in and all this stuff, getting people to work together to, you know, serve dinner . . . keeping stuff clean, security . . . having people work together in groups to help them feel like part of something greater, because they would want to participate. (Livingston, July 7, 2022)

These small, often linguistic, choices created a different kind of atmosphere in the camp: one where everyone was responsible for everyone else's safety (i.e., keeping cops out of the camp), meeting each other's material needs (meals, etc.), preventing harm (via non-police security), and, perhaps most importantly, modeling the kinds of valuing of each other that the city, the media, and the housed world refused to offer them. It was this community-building that earned Livingston her "mom" reputation within the camp, and that appears to have been the greatest threat to City Hall; when housing vouchers finally came, Livingston pointed out how she and other camp leaders were suddenly housed first—even before much longer-term residents of the city (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Housing Update"). This move was intentional, she told me—an attempt by the city to break apart the leadership of KCHU—and she fought to ensure this wouldn't happen, continuing her work taking care of people through everything

from running what amounted to a small shelter out of her home, to convening a group of predominantly homeless or formerly homeless activists for a grant-writing class so they could try to fund their own solutions, to harm reduction work and using her own social media to tell stories of homelessness herself.

Livingston called the kinds of practices she used in (and beyond) the camp "creating structures," and some of these were communal or social structures—but they were also literacy-based structures. Livingston's discursive choices demonstrate how cultivating particular literacy practices—ones that highlight shared responsibility for survival (interdependence), mutual respect for each other's humanity and self-determination, and a definition of safety not grounded in policing—might redefine a kind of citizenship, or at least collective belonging, that exists outside of state-defined citizenship.

Liberatory Care

> "We couldn't just agitate, because you have to be able to give people something so that they want to give back, you know what I'm saying?"
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

In this interview, Livingston was discussing the end of the hotel program, as she slowly realized that services weren't getting delivered as promised. She began acting as a kind of case worker, helping people connect to existing resources all the way until the program ended. She knew from the first day with KCHU that it was more than a camp, but here we see that, for her, it is also more than a protest: it's about meeting people's needs, which included community, shared governance, and mutual aid—all practices KCHU had in place at the camp but which were impossible to continue when the city spread homeless people across different hotels all over the city.

In her description of this time, we also see that Livingston's model of liberatory care held care not just as an internal practice; it was also an organizing strategy. For her, a part of *care* is understanding and attending to the self-interest of those who are—or who you want to see—involved in your movement. Meeting actual, tangible needs is part of why people show up to movement spaces to begin with (Spade 12–13) and meeting those needs as a central—not supplementary—part of organizing is part of what makes care liberatory.

We talk about care frequently in our field—in the classroom, in scholarly spaces, in community spaces, for ourselves, for others (Blankenship; Hatrick; Noterman and Meyerhoff; Novotny; Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, and Yergeau; Wilson). But for Livingston, there is a particular literacy to reading, recognizing, and labeling "care" as such. Like many homeless activists, Livingston frequently pushed back against misconceptions about what care looked like within the homeless community and from housed people to homeless community members. These interventions define a kind of liberatory care, which I argue is a way of reading care through a critical, abolitionist lens.

In the end, when the city failed the vast majority of residents in the hotel program, and they all ended up back outside at Ilus Davis Park, Livingston's plea to the Kansas City public on IMA's livestream also centered care:

> I care about all these people. They matter. And I want to make sure they don't get hurt. And I want them all to have a home by the end of this, they should have had it by the end of the 90 days, the 90 days was supposed to be an emergency, temporary stay until permanent accommodations could be found. And it was supposed to be a minimum of 90 days. . . . And then they dropped the ball. I mean, we could have had the pallet houses. Those could have been done by now. But they . . . don't want to spend money on that. I'm not trying to mention any names—*(cough)* Katheryn Shields—and yeah, [the] shrieking harpy tried to, you know, block this and say, "Oh, well, I care about the homeless." But, you know, [blocking the pallet home project] . . . discounts everything they say before that. No, we need homes. We need jobs. We need water. We need a seat at the table. (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Update from Ilus")

Here, Livingston defends a reading of *care* that invalidates what the city is, to her, falsely labelling as such. For her, promises of care without material action *simply are not care.* Rather, she foregrounded her assertion of care for her community as being grounded in the union's self-determined demands: homes, jobs, water, and a seat at the table. This kind of nuance—care, if you will—in how and when she labelled something as "care" reflects a particular definition of the term that's more in line with the description from Liberatory Harm Reduction in the previous section than it is with the often-paternalistic approach to "providing services" or, worse, "charity," propagated by the large housing and shelter nonprofits competing for city funding. When Livingston invoked *care,* it was in the context of both 1) honoring people's inherent right to self-determination ("a seat at the table") and 2) addressing root causes of harm, rather than just symptoms (e.g., lack of homes, lack of jobs). Otherwise, what you get is "shelters that feel more like prisons," which is how Qadhafi spoke of city and NGO approaches to "care" for the homeless (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless").

In this way, Livingston made care into something closer to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called "non-reformist reforms"—changes to a carceral system that take power away from that system and return it to the people most impacted by that system (INCITE!; Rodríguez). For example, while decriminalization of recreational drug use does not undo policing or prisons, it does limit the scope of police power over people's lives—a non-reformist reform; body cameras, on the other hand, end up bolstering police officers' ability to maintain control of the narrative, returning no narrative authority to those whom they police—a reformist reform. Differentiating between reformist and non-reformist reforms is a kind of literacy—one that's often overlooked in abolitionist movement spaces. We see a slippage between these two concepts in corners of abolitionist movements ranging from debates about body cameras as police reform (*NLG Statement*), to fights for the kinds of diversity, equity, and inclusion that serve more to bolster the reputation of an institution than to address systemic injustice (Ahmed), to movements for prison diversion programs that serve to expand home arrest—which simply makes one's home their prison—instead of actually keeping people out of the carceral net (Schenwar and Law). Here, Livingston's precise definition of care might help us, too, ensure that the kinds of *care* we hold as central to

the conversations and frameworks we develop in our movements are actually serving liberatory ends.

Finally, one of the things Livingston and I talked most frequently about—in interviews and in conversations as friends—was her plan for transitional housing. While she never saw this realized, her description of it offers a clear vision for what liberatory care as a literacy practice leading to systemic policy might look like:

> [I want a] transitional living plan that wasn't this rigid schedule, with indoctrination of, you know, some . . . religion . . . no strings attached, low to no barrier. Let's them get in . . . transitional housing, give them some time to rest. Because when I got housed, I slept for the first week, because you're not used to being safe. So that's what I'm basically doing; I'm trying to create this transitional living plan that has full on wraparound services, like genuine, total wraparound services, that will encompass all areas of their life to help them get them on their feet.
> And then when they're ready, then get them housed. That's gonna be a different timeline for everybody. You know what I'm saying? Some people are only going to need to be there for two weeks or something like that, you know, and then it's just a matter of getting housing, you know. Other people, maybe they've been out [on the streets] for their whole lives or something like that. They can take up to a year, maybe two years, however long, you know, to get them where they're ready, and they want to live on their own. So transitional housing for everybody will make a difference. So that's how I'm advocating. (Livingston, July 7)

When city leaders talk about homelessness, the conversation is around services and, to a lesser extent, access to care more broadly than the social. But services or care *to* or *for* isn't what homeless people have asked for; the demand for housing-first approaches is, in part, a demand that care be something homeless people can access on their own terms (e.g., when "they *want* to live on their own" [Livingston, July 7, emphasis mine]).

This is where care proves to be a literacy practice in addition to a material one. Livingston was crystal clear throughout her work that some things *aren't* care even if they're labelled as such—and some things that are shamed, criminalized, or otherwise devalued are the core of what care means. Differentiating between paternalistic, neoliberal, or carceral models of care and liberatory ones grounded in self-determination and interdependence became, then, a way of reading the world—a literacy practice that Livingston enacted and tried to build in others as part of her work. While her conceptualization of care arises from her specific context, this kind of critical reading of what gets labelled as *care* should be as integral to abolitionist literacy practices as our critical readings of "police reform vs. police abolition," and for the same reason—because the ever-expanding net of carcerality too frequently disguises itself as "reform" or "care" (Schenwar and Law).

Conclusion

> "From a place of superhuman resilience, through all the twists and turns of her life, Lulu remained hopeful and focused. . . . May we all channel some of Lulu's scrappiness, ambition, and perseverance. Long live Lulu Livingston, at your service."
> —KC Tenants, Instagram post, January 31, 2025

In the wake of Livingston's death, the homeless community and their housed allies returned to this one call: that her work was our work now. We had all worked alongside her, watched how she moved through the world, watched how she cared for people. When everyone else got tired, Lu Lu was still there. When homeless organizers needed resources, she was the one coordinating ways of getting them. In an obituary in the *Kansas City Star,* for example, Ken Simard is quoted as saying: "'On January 13, 2023, Lulu saved my life. . . . I was released from the hospital with nowhere to go except to my camp, where I would have likely been dead. . . . There was no way I would have been able to clean my wound. . . . She kept it clean for me'" (qtd. in Calfee). Comments sections on memorial articles and posts about her were all similar—story after story about how she lived out what she said she believed, however imperfectly, to the very end.

In one obituary, Qadhafi calls her a "mother hen," and this metaphor of motherhood, too, pops up throughout the memorials to her (Plake). She cared for people's wounds and fed them, but she also held movements together when every internal and external force seemed determined to pull them apart. When activists had falling outs and stopped speaking, she pieced relationships back together, telling us, gently (and sometimes not so gently), to get over ourselves. She was kind, but she also fiercely advocated for her community in spaces of power when she could and helped the next person she saw in the in-between—all the way to her last breath.

And now you've met her as best as you ever will, and you've heard her speak, and you've learned about her work, and now her work is your work, too. Do it well.

Livestreams and Media Coverage—Timeline

Throughout this article, I cite several livestream interviews and other media coverage of the Kansas City Homeless Union. These correlate to the timeline below, which offers an interactive picture of the Kansas City Homeless Union's work with Livingston's public interviews attached to it.

View the interactive timeline online.

Notes

[1] In my consent forms for interviews for the broader study from which this paper is drawn, I asked everyone to tell me how they wanted me to introduce them. Livingston said, "A white woman in my 40s with mental illness and determination, leader and organizer of the KCHU." We'll learn more about KCHU later in this paper.

[2] I've been asked by activists with lived experience of homelessness to emphasize, here, that Sixx was sober when he died. The stereotype that these kinds of deaths are addiction-related is pervasive and functions as a way for city leaders to shift blame from structural oppression and failure onto addiction, which is framed (incorrectly) as an individual failing.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, quotes come from two in-depth interviews I did with Livingston in summer 2022, when I was collecting data for what was then my dissertation and has since been expanded into my ongoing book project.

[4] The research interviews for this project were done in 2022 under the University of Kansas, IRB #STUDY00148813. The second phase of research has been completed under the University of Alabama, IRB #24-04-7524.

[5] A common protest chant directed at police in the Summer 2020 George Floyd uprisings against police brutality.

[6] For example, Livingston once told me about an interview with the *Kansas City Star* which she felt deeply uncomfortable doing—but did anyway because, in her mind, *someone had to* if the narrative was going to change.

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