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To cite this article: Maren B. Trochmann & Judith L. Millesen (2021): Transforming power with *Pose*: Centering love in state-sponsored services for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, Administrative Theory & Praxis, DOI: [10.1080/10841806.2021.1945375](https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2021.1945375)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2021.1945375>



Published online: 07 Jul 2021.



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## Transforming power with *Pose*: Centering love in state-sponsored services for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness

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### ABSTRACT

The disproportionate numbers of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness presents moral and ethical dilemmas, carries high emotional and social costs for those without safe, adequate housing, and impacts society at-large. This paper argues that rather than traditional, *power-over* responses that perpetuate oppression, ostracization, and feelings of powerlessness experienced by young people at multiple intersections of marginalization, public service approaches can foster *power-with*. The ballroom culture captured in the television series *Pose* provides critical insight to creating systemic change and justice from a starting point of communal love and *power-with*. By rejecting the politics of domination in favor of the politics of love, these approaches reaffirm self-efficacy and agency, and ultimately lead toward justice.

### KEYWORDS

LGBTQ youth services; communal love; power-with; transformative public administration

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. – Martin Luther King, Jr. (King, 1957)

The relationship between love, power, and justice is complex. As King (1957) and other civil rights leaders remind us, there is an organic—though often forgotten or one-sided—connection between love and power, which requires our continual commitment to harness both in the furtherance of a beloved community and pursuit of justice. As Francisco Cantú (2018), a former federal employee recounts, ours is not a “society moving always in the direction of justice ... This [idea] is the naivety that so often grips people who are young and idealistic, causing us to overestimate ourselves and to underestimate institutions of power” (p. 251). Many of our public service institutions are grounded in a politics of domination, using *power-over*—which is unjust power defined by control and coercion (Follett, 2003; Ledwith, 2011)—to divide and harm marginalized social identities.

In this article, we explore concepts of love, power, and justice in the context of public services and organic community-led responses to center the experiences of lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth confronting homelessness. These adolescents experience disproportional rates of homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, and violence (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2014). In a study of 354 homeless service providers throughout the United States, Durso and Gates (2012) estimated that 40% of the youth experiencing homelessness served identify as LGBTQ. They indicated that family rejection resulting from sexual orientation or gender identity was the most frequently cited reason for homelessness (68%) and that these young people often experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (54%) in their families of origin. Additionally, LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience bias and discrimination when accessing services and shelter because of the rigid cultural norms that mainstream society has about gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression (Coolhart & Brown, 2017; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). This dynamic leads to further stigmatization and discrimination, ultimately resulting in a distrust of authority figures (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Public administration plays a central role in serving LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, which scholars recognize as a moral and ethical dilemma (Colvin, 2020; Johnson, 2018). Stemming in part from laws and policies that restrict individual autonomy and limit freedoms for underage youth, we argue that service provision for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness begins from a foundation of unequal power dynamics, structural inequality, and institutionalized distrust. Because many of these young people lack the rights of adult citizens, they have limited legal control and agency over their own life choices. This means there are both *de facto* and *de jure* inequities that impede their choices to live in environments where they feel safe and supported. Therefore, public programs serving LGBTQ youth face unique challenges to reshape the societal power dynamics that create and perpetuate oppression, marginalization, violence, and feelings of powerlessness.

In response to this challenge, scholars have examined case studies and best practices, offering lessons from LGBTQ homeless youth service delivery models (e.g. Dolamore & Naylor, 2018). This paper builds upon that research to develop a theoretical framework for transformative public service, illustrating the concepts with scenarios from the television series *Pose*. We investigate how social, historical, and administrative power structures might be transformed by recognizing the inherent connections among love, power, and justice—dynamics that are emphasized by the experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth. By centering the experiences of these youth, who sit at multiple intersections of marginalization and forms of powerlessness—whether it is their lack of adult legal standing, their LGBTQ identity, their experiences with homelessness, or their racial and ethnic identities—it is possible to make visible and critique the harmful power dynamics at play.

We draw on several theoretical and philosophical traditions to advance a transformative model of service provision that redefines love as a catalyst to facilitate a deep understanding of the perspectives and experiences of others and public service power as solidarity (*power-with*); this form of love is a way to leverage power in pursuit of justice. The philosophy of “beloved community” (King, 1967) calls for transformative models of communal love and centers active, continual engagement to achieve and foster justice. This communal love, fostered through storytelling, generates self-efficacy and solidarity that enables agency and promotes justice. Loving acceptance enhances self-efficacy and

builds solidarity, or *power-with*—shared power grounded in love and reciprocity (Ledwith, 2011). Solidarity can deconstruct barriers across differences in gender expression and sexual orientation. In turn, solidarity strengthens agency, or the liberatory ability to act in one's own best interests, which is particularly essential to youth who face *de jure* limitations on their rights. Agency is the foundation of a vision of justice grounded in love and belonging.

There are also empirical studies that point to alternative and transformational service delivery approaches that lead with love to foster self-efficacy, cultivate solidarity, generate agency, and promote justice. Johnson and colleagues (2018) offer a public ethics framework that uses an intersectional lens to advance social equity and improve LGBTQ service delivery, particularly among youth experiencing homelessness. Empirically, Dolamore and Naylor (2018) share the story of the Youth Empowerment Society (YES) in Baltimore; Hicks and Best (2018) share innovative strategies that reduce the percentage of youth who experience homelessness in Cincinnati, Ohio; and Norman-Major (2018) provides examples of cross-sector collaborations that tackle the complexity of LGBTQ youth homelessness in Florida, San Diego, New York City, and Minneapolis. At the heart of every approach is a commitment to human dignity, LGBTQ-affirming service provision, increased cultural competency among staff, and the provision of trauma-informed care that prioritizes mental health services, emotional safety, and healing (Dolamore & Naylor, 2018; National Resource Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, n.d.). These benefits are consistent with the self-discovery and self-construction processes advocated for in positive youth development (PYD) initiatives (Eichas, Montgomery, Meca, & Kurtines, 2017).

These alternative service delivery models are guided by an “ethic of love” (hooks, 1994, p. 243) as they provide public services that: 1) center people who identify as LGBTQ in program design and offer training to improve cultural competency and responsiveness; 2) use peer mentors to serve as resources to LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (e.g. as a trusted confidant) and to the organization (e.g. improving responsiveness); and 3) promote a shared culture that respects mutual human dignity. As a result, these approaches are LGBTQ-affirming in ways that have harnessed both love and power in pursuit of justice. Even so, these innovative, youth-centered programs may be constrained by structural challenges, impersonal rules and regulations, particularly when the institutions delivering the services are reliant upon government funding or beholden to anti-transgender state legislation (Ronan, 2021).

To imagine beyond these constraints, we refer to a pop culture case study. The contemporary ballroom culture of the 1980s and 90s, referred to as the “house/ball community,” provides a unique backdrop from which to examine socially configured kinship structures that created alternative family arrangements where guidance, love, support, and life skills were offered by “mothers” to LGBTQ “children” of all ages, including those under the age of 18 (Bailey, 2011, p. 367). We use scenes and stories from the FX series *Pose*—a representational depiction of the 1980s ball culture in New York—to illustrate what might be possible if public service provision intentionally sought to co-create a more just community centered in love and solidarity. The focus on this population addresses the “discrepancy between what scholars study, what

practitioners face, and what queer communities need,” particularly in examinations of equity and transformative public service (Larson, 2021, p. 1).

In this article, we construct a theoretical model that offers a transformative approach to public service delivery that builds *power-with* through communal love and storytelling to ultimately achieve a more just and equitable relationship between youth seeking services, particularly those at the margins, and service providers. First, we review existing laws that govern services for homeless youth to demonstrate how current service delivery models perpetuate an allegiance to paternalistic, *power-over* approaches despite documented failures. Second, we provide a detailed description of *Pose* as a case study to illustrate not only the complex interplay among love, power, and justice but also to demonstrate a transfeminist ethic of community and mutual caregiving (Marvin, 2019). Next, we develop a theoretical model using traditional understandings of dyadic love to explain how *power-over* corrupts love and results in coercion, domination, and oppression. This framework serves as a point of departure from which we present a transformative model of communal love and *power-with* that leads toward justice. Stories from *Pose* illustrate what is possible if coercive systems of *power-over* were to give way to *power-with* in public service rooted in an ethic of love. We conclude with suggestions for public servants to create a more just, connected, and transformative ethos which centers lived experience, shares power, and celebrates difference.

Before we begin, it is necessary to assert the authors’ own subjectivity and positionality (Denzin & Giardina, 2016). Both authors have significant professional work experience in the public sector, one in federal affordable housing policy and the other in nonprofit administration. These experiences influence and shape our perspectives on public service. Although one of the authors identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community and more importantly, as a mother whose unique relationship to power in her role as a parent is intertwined with her knowledge and positioning as a scholar, neither of the authors have the lived experience of transgender individuals or people of color and we are not currently youth. Therefore, this paper is grounded in an approach of epistemic humility (Briggs, 2019). We do not profess to have unquestionable expertise, rather we link philosophical, theoretical, and critical feminist thought traditions to *Pose* as a way to demonstrate a ground-up approach to generative and creative *power-with*.

## **The current environment of homeless youth service provision**

In 2019, SchoolHouse Connection (SchoolHouse Connection, 2019) published a report that outlined state laws to support youth who are experiencing homelessness. The data are somber, particularly when considering how systems can create barriers to access. Only seven states allow unaccompanied minors access to safe shelter without parental consent or involvement of child protective services. While the Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act allows for minors to access federally funded programs without parental consent, the service provider, not the young person, makes that determination. Twenty-nine states allow unaccompanied minors to obtain routine medical or dental care without parental consent, and just 11 states have legislation that allows homeless youth the agency to move across state lines and obtain a high school diploma. Finally, only ten states have provisions that support high school graduates who are experiencing

homelessness as they transition to post-secondary education. In addition, less than 1% of the overall federal budget for homeless programs is allocated to children and youth, in a funding environment that constrains provider responsiveness (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). Service providers are also beholden to a legal system that places limits on the number of youth who can be served, the number of days they can be served, and the preconditions that must be met before service can be offered (e.g. contacting parents, guardians, or social services).

While issues of substance abuse, victimization, violence, school dropout, and family dysfunction plague the homeless youth population, the origins and severity of these issues differ for LGBTQ youth. In spite of their disproportional representation in the overall homeless youth population, there is insufficient investment in addressing the unique emotional, transitional, educational, and housing needs of young people who identify as LGBTQ (Coolhart & Brown, 2017; Dolamore & Naylor, 2018; Hicks & Best, 2018; Morton, Samuels, Dworsky, & Patel, 2018). This is problematic given that most programming for youth experiencing homelessness has a heteronormative bias—i.e. programs and policies often assume heterosexuality or cisgender identities as the “norm”; this means program designs are often not culturally responsive to LGBTQ youth (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). This has the potential to further alienate the LGBTQ population.

In their interviews with LGBTQ youth who had experienced homelessness and service providers working with youth, Coolhart and Brown (2017) explain “transgender youth may be particularly vulnerable, as providers perceived transgendered youth to have experienced more bullying, family rejection, and physical and sexual abuse than their LGBTQ counterparts” (p. 230). The authors further note that once in the shelter, legally mandated gender segregation—based on sex assigned at birth—presents uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situations for participants and providers. Youth expressed frustration about being “singled out” and segregated as well as being outed by staff who refused to use chosen names. Service providers referenced the negative experiences related to a youth’s gender identity (e.g. being unable to offer trans youth sleeping arrangements that were consistent with their gender identity).

While many of the rules governing service provision may be grounded in intentions to protect marginalized youth, it is often the case that their effects limit these young people’s self-efficacy and agency. Moreover, when confronted with such restrictions, public administrators face barriers to providing the type of services that empirical literature supports as the most equitable, ethical, and effective way forward: a path that provides both identity affirmation and agency to marginalized young people.

### **Pose as an illustrative case study**

We use stories, plotlines, and characters from the FX series *Pose* (Murphy, Falchuck, & Jacobson, 2018) to illustrate a theoretical model reconceptualizing love and power as a way to achieve transformative public service delivery. The series is a fictionalized portrayal of New York City’s LGBTQ communal houses and ballroom subculture set in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brathwaite, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The show tells the story of youth of color who identify as LGBTQ, the majority of whom have experienced homelessness.

In the absence of a coordinated state response and in contrast to publicly funded homeless services, houses provide self-organized community-based resources and the ballrooms offer liberation where house members and the broader LGBTQ community express their identities, tell stories, and find joy. The houses are headed by a “mother,” under whose love and leadership a new type of family forms: one that starts from a place of affirmation and acceptance, providing shelter and family for people who otherwise might not have either.

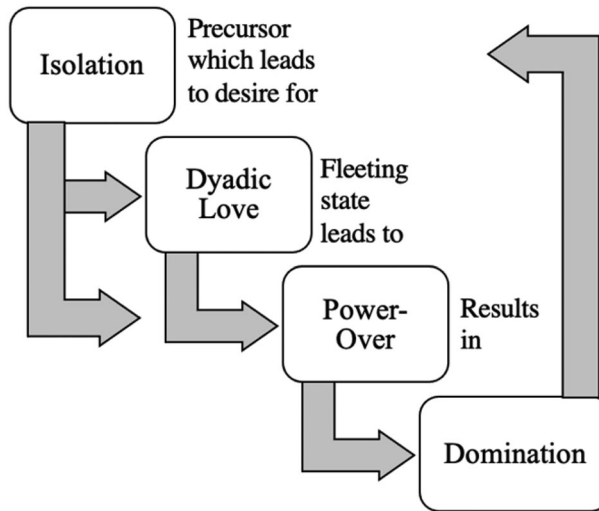
The maternal-led houses and ballrooms serve as examples of how people experiencing multiple intersecting forms of oppression create beloved community and nurture self-efficacy, solidarity, and agency to generate greater experiences of justice. While some might think the house mothers depicted in *Pose* replicate *power-over* dynamics LGBTQ youth experience elsewhere, many house mothers exert their power in ways that Ruddick (1995) might refer to as attentive love, a love that knits together the caregiving practices of protection, nurturance, and instruction. These communities of mutual caregiving (Marvin, 2019) embody a *power-with* approach to serve and empower LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, serving as both rejoinder and resistance to societal devaluation, intersectional oppression, and violence. The ballroom creates a place of mutual caregiving where those with especially marginalized identities flourish.

The series has been lauded as transformative because it elevates transgender actors, emulating a mechanism in which stories allow communities to achieve love and build *power-with* without reproducing the oppression and exploitation those communities confront daily (Gaynor, 2018). Writer, director, and producer Janet Mock is a Black trans woman, author, and founder of the #girlslIKEus movement; she provides a passionate voice for the empowerment of trans women to live visibly, vocally, and in solidarity (Framke, 2018). As Gaynor (2018) notes, *Pose* demonstrates the power of “a commitment to voice, experience, and inclusion” in the story it tells and in *how* it tells those stories.

The series has brought this generative cultural wellspring and the story of ballroom culture’s origins back into popular consciousness, expanding a vision of the community and joy that is possible for LGBTQ youth of color when they step outside of traditional power structures opting for more egalitarian structures that make space for *power-with* to create, narrate, and bear witness in community. *Pose* demonstrates the power of celebrating difference, building beloved community, and reclaiming joy at the intersection of urban poverty, the AIDS crisis, LGBTQ rights, and within gender nonconforming communities of color. The series illustrates that leading with love, together with collaborative, community-based decision-making, and engaging those with lived experience, holds great promise for more responsive, transformative, and culturally competent public service.

## Western understandings of love and power

Many traditional Western understandings of love are private, precluding its expression in the public sphere; additionally, power is often understood as synonymous with control or domination. In a classic essay on love and power, Morgenthau (1962) argues that love and power are “organically connected” (p. 247), explaining that both have



**Figure 1.** Love and power in traditional Western settings.

their roots in loneliness and that people are unable to fulfill their destiny in isolation from others. This isolation is profound to Morgenthau, who declares that an individual “cannot fulfill himself, he cannot become what he is destined to be, by his own effort, in isolation from other beings” (p. 247). A desire for connection and belonging may take constructive or destructive forms; it fuels either a longing for love or a quest for power in the absence of love.

Morgenthau (1962) describes love in terms of two souls finding their complementary half in another. Moreover, he asserts that love presupposes *similarity* or *sameness*: “Through love, man seeks another human being *like himself*, the Platonic other half of his soul, to form a union which will make him whole” (p. 248, emphasis added). The prerequisite of sameness in dyadic love relationships closes possibilities for societal transformation. Love, conceived narrowly as dyadic, romantic love, is short-lived with those involved resorting to a lust for *power-over* to sustain the transitory feeling: “Without power love cannot persist; but through power it is corrupted and threatened with destruction. That destruction becomes actual with *A* and *B*, by trying to reduce each other to an object of their respective wills, transform the spontaneous mutuality of the love relationship into the unilateral imposition of the relationship of power” (p. 249).

While love finds its strength in a fleeting and constructive mutuality, power creates connection through unilateral imposition. In this tradition, Morgenthau (1962) defines power as *power-over*: a zero-sum game, “man over man” and the unilateral imposition of one’s will over another (p. 249). Power entails a process of wielding influence, threats, promises, orders, charisma, persuasion, and even fear. *Power-over* denotes control, hierarchy, domination (Abel & Sementelli, 2002) or even manipulation and oppression. He notes, “What man cannot achieve for any length of time through love he tries to achieve through power” (p. 249). For Morgenthau, it is power, specifically *power-over* (see Abel & Sementelli, 2002), which threatens and corrupts love and ultimately results in domination for a few, marginalization for many, and leads back to the precursor state of isolation. Figure 1 illustrates this theoretical model.



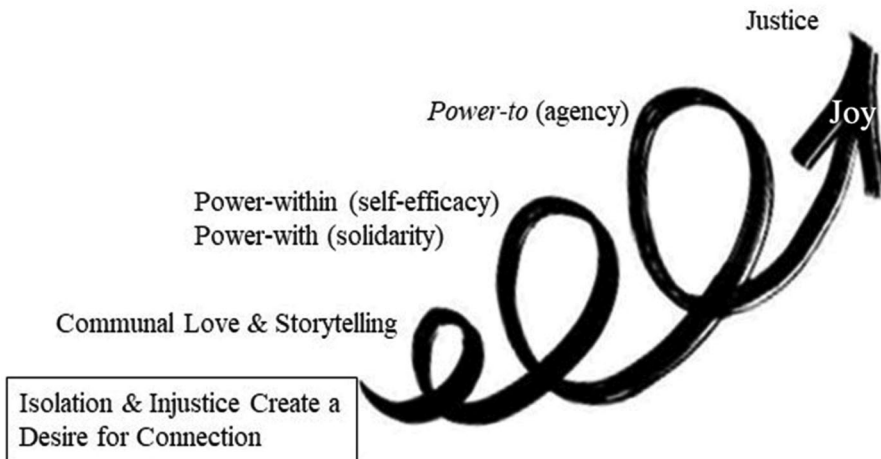
If a normative and moral vision of a just society requires a system of social cooperation over time for an impartial and fair distribution of benefits and burdens to *all* members (Rawls, 1999), then these visions of love and power leading to domination and marginalization preclude this possibility. Without a different understanding of love and power, there is little hope for public administrators to achieve justice. As Tillich (1967) argues, “Ultimately love must satisfy justice in order to be real love, and that justice must be elevated into unity with love in order to avoid the injustice of eternal destruction” (p. 14). Absent a foundation of communal love, public administration practices have the capacity to perpetuate paternalistic tendencies of *power-over* in the implementation of policy believed to be in the best interests of a group of people.

Arguably, the search for “one best way” to address intractable public problems has deep roots in the discipline of public administration and relies on a traditional understanding of *power-over*. The instinctive practice to rely on “neutral experts” with the requisite knowledge and skill to develop a program or strategy overlooks the non-cognitive wisdom that comes from connection, love, and shared, lived experiences (King & Zanetti, 2005; Leuenberger, 2005). This disconnect is a common complaint among street-level bureaucrats charged with the responsibility to administer expertly-crafted programs and policies, relying on cognition and best practice alone while leaving emotive aspects of care and love at the door (Guy & Mastracci, 2018). Transformative public service requires a rejection of this notion of “doing for” marginalized people; it means tossing aside the “savior” mentality that is pervasive in hegemonic scripts (Blessett, Gaynor, Witt, & Alkadry, 2016).

## Reconceptualizing love and power

Human difference has often been used to divide and marginalize, focusing attention on scarcity over abundance, on individualistic gain over community empowerment. The sense of isolation and injustice felt throughout society and in traditional settings of family life still exists in this transformative model. It is also woven throughout *Pose*, as the characters seek the love and support of mutual caregiving through trans and queer communities. Multiple characters find themselves rejected by their biological families of origin: from Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain) who is cast out by religious, conservative parents for being gay, to Blanca (Mj Rodriguez) and Candy (Angelica Ross) whose families reject their transgender identities. The series demonstrates how storytelling forms the foundations of mutual caregiving, trust, and loving community in families-of-choice.

Individualistic notions of dyadic love and *power-over* must be replaced in the pursuit of justice. We argue that King’s (1967) concept of beloved community integrates communal love and *power-with* in a way that leads to justice, centering those who have been historically oppressed and marginalized. The philosophy and concept of beloved community is an ongoing and intentional process that recognizes the sacredness of humanity, not in spite of but *because of* each individual’s difference and singularity. This vision of a beloved community is one that rejects violence and oppression in favor of the creative, redemptive, and transformative capacity of love. Instead of leading back to isolation or domination, it leads toward a more just society and generates joy



**Figure 2.** A transformational model of love and power.

throughout the process. The freedom to fully express and claim one's own complex and nuanced identity in loving community is affirming rather than isolating. The joy generated in this process sustains long-term change by serving as a reminder of the transformational possibilities even through the challenges, setbacks, and injustices.

In the context of public administration, beloved community reminds us that broader conceptions of love and power are not only necessary in the pursuit of justice but can be harnessed to realize transformative public service. While domination and isolation still exist in Western society, the alternative model starts with the belief that people have a longing for connectedness (Stout, 2010) and weaves together three core philosophies: Follett's (1998) observation that human potential can only be realized through group life; Arendt's (1970) assertions that "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (p. 44); and King's (1957) declaration that love and power must satisfy justice. As shown in Figure 2, these philosophies allow for the creation of beloved community that promotes self-efficacy (*power-within*), solidarity (*power-with*), and agency (*power-to*) that generates justice, as well as a sense of joy that can generate positive feedback throughout the iterative and ongoing process. Joy transforms power from a font of subversive knowing and spiritual pleasure, which can be itself an act of resistance in oppressive systems (brown, 2019). Rather than viewing the long road to justice as drudgery or work, the process is an act of creative reimagining, of connection and community (Follett, 1998). Joy has the power to sustain transformation over time in a way that the fleeting understanding of dyadic, private love does not. It creates space for celebration of shared humanity and *power-with*, which uplifts *power-within* and honors *power-to*. The following subsections explain the transformative potential of this model. Illustrations from *Pose* are used to imagine what is possible if LGBTQ youth homelessness programs were guided by these understandings of love and power.

### ***Communal love and storytelling as a path to power-within and power-with***

In a 1957 column, Martin Luther King Jr. asserted, "Love builds up and unites ... force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything

permanent; only love can do that” (p. 306). Whereas traditional understandings of love minimize it as dyadic partnerships grounded in similarity, a deeper concept of communal love originates from a more expansive vision that celebrates shared humanity while also elevating difference. The tools to achieve transformative and communal love include storytelling to allow for the recognition of the sacrosanct *uniqueness* of each person while also situating that singularity within a context of connectedness, and ultimately building community. Achieving beloved community is a continual and iterative process which requires vulnerability on the part of an individual who willingly exercises their *power-within* (self-efficacy). Self-efficacy is particularly important to build a positive sense of identity, self-worth, and belonging (Bandura, 2010). In building this self-efficacy, stories are entrusted to a loving community that holds and honors those stories, generating *power-with* (solidarity).

Storytelling is a universal human experience through which people build community and forge connection across difference. The way one chooses to tell their story provides an opportunity for self-efficacy (*power-within*), and the act of vulnerably entrusting one’s story to another builds solidarity (*power-with*). To share a story is an act of profound vulnerability: a choice “to make something important to you vulnerable to the actions of someone else” (Brown, 2015). Ledwith (2011) asserts the importance of story when discussing the emancipatory potential of community development practice, arguing that the search for a more just and sustainable world must rely on practical knowledge grounded in experience.

Stories not only connect us with others in the abstract, they also build trust, intimacy, and ultimately community. The practice of storytelling to express and celebrate identity echoes across cultures. Black feminists have a long tradition of addressing injustice and isolation through storytelling (hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2007). Additionally, Italian feminists in the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (1990) share their belief in a practice called *affidamento*—roughly translated into English as “entrustment.” *Affidamento* asserts individual identities can only be fully realized in relation to community. Entrustment as a philosophy shifts individuals from surviving *within* institutional structures of *power-over* into a community in which *power-with* is possible, where the individual finds *power-within* and self-efficacy, strength, and validation via relationship in beloved community. This storytelling is not just about finding commonality, but also about building community *across* difference. Entrustment entails a commitment to difference that allows members to share what makes them unique. The Collective asserts that this practice addresses a uniquely human necessity: the need to *be narrated*. Instead of seeking commonality, *affidamento* recognizes, affirms, and celebrates *difference* as strength (Cavarero, 2000). The women in the Collective practiced entrusting their identities and stories to one another in order to understand themselves better, in a generative communal act. They recognized that differences in their stories allowed the creation of themselves in a reciprocal, respectful community of deep trust (Cavarero, 2000).

*Pose* illustrates the power of vulnerability through storytelling in forming bonds between a chosen family. In Blanca’s House of Evangelista, her trans daughter, Angel, entrusts her story to her house mother, recounting why she dislikes the holidays. Angel tells Blanca that as a child, while Christmas shopping with her birth father, she stole a pair of red pumps. Angel recalled that she “had never seen anything quite so beautiful.”

Angel tells Blanca that, as she was scurrying to her room, the shoes fell from her coat in front of both her birth parents. Angel says, “My father slapped me across the face,” and she continues, in tears, “For stealing, but more so for what I chose to steal.” At the close of the episode, in spite of continued resistance to participating in any holiday festivities and frequent mention of financial constraints, Angel receives a pair of patent red pumps from Blanca. By entrusting her story to Blanca, Angel experiences joy and the unconditional love and acceptance all children deserve from their parents. Thus, the process of creating beloved community generates joy, builds community, and sustains generative love over time. As Lorde (2007) asserts, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them” (p. 56).

The series highlights how an ethic of love is foundational to create beloved community. The house members co-create their own image and status in their community with their mother, through the ballroom competitions which serve to elevate or cement their reputations. Children abide by the mother’s rules, which are not always popular but are mutually enforced by all who live in the house. These rules are attentive to the mother’s responsibility to safeguard her children via an ethic of love. As bell hooks (2000) notes,

Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all dimensions of love—“care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge”—in our everyday lives. We can successfully do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn. (p. 94)

Viewers see this ethic of love in Mother Blanca, who sets strict rules about drug dealing but takes a more nuanced approach in regard to sex work. Her own lived experience as a trans woman of color and former sex worker leads her to understand when Angel, a member of her house who is also a Black trans woman, relies on this sex work as a means of survival. Blanca not only recognizes Angel’s *power-within* and self-efficacy in pursuing this work, but also knows there is a caring community of trans sex workers who will walk alongside of Angel on the streets. Blanca uses her maternal power to protect her children from the vulnerabilities they face as youth, a form of maternal preservative love (Ruddick, 1995). Her strict rules pertaining to drug dealing are in response to her knowledge of police brutality and an unforgiving judicial system that further victimizes people of color and trans youth, while her leniency regarding sex work reflects her lived experiences and the nurturance and care she received from other trans sex workers. Where there is trust, Blanca allows others to protect and nurture her children.

*Pose* reveals how the ballroom culture institutionalizes storytelling and celebrates differences, and in so doing, builds a beloved community that is affirming of the complex and varied aspects of self, giving space for *power-within* or self-efficacy in one’s own expression of their identity. For example, the opening credits for every episode of *Pose* feature Pray Tell (Billy Porter), the ballroom emcee, announcing, “And the category is . . .” This proclamation recognizes the many intersecting aspects of individual identity. It is a public declaration of acceptance that encourages and celebrates community members as they claim and reclaim various aspects of self while competing and participating in categories that elevate their distinct identities. In doing so, the ballroom creates a

community that uplifts, awards, and celebrates differences, from the erotic and exotic (e.g. butch queen and intergalactic best-dressed) to the mundane (e.g. weather girl and working girl). As Rowan, Long, and Johnson (2013) note, “Members of the house/ball culture may be viewed as possessing an assortment of identities and related self-representations, including a house/ball identity that becomes defined and refined through social interaction with and expectations from other house/ball members” (p. 182). The subcultures each category encapsulates —nested within the broader subculture of the ballrooms of LGBTQ people of color—creates space to express identity, find love, and claim worth on one’s own terms *and vis-à-vis* communal recognition and affirmation.

The sense of community and solidarity created through communal love and storytelling reimagines power as renewable and generative tool given freely through an expression of self-efficacy and *power-within* alongside one’s chosen community. As Mary Parker Follett (1998) notes, “it is possible to develop the conception of *power-with*, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power” (p. 101). This process, Follett reminds us, “must bring to politics passion and *joy*” (p. 340, emphasis added). Arendt (1963) concurs, suggesting that to describe power as coercion (*power-over*) is inaccurate and ignores the role of community in generating and sustaining *power-with*.

### **Power-to and justice**

Follett (1998) asserts, “The potentialities of the individual remain potentialities until they are released by group life. Man [sic] discovers his true nature, gains his true freedom only through the group” (p. 6). Individuals can only become more fully themselves *within community*, and the end goal must not be amplification of one’s own individual achievement, but rather a jointly developed power exercised as *power-to* or agency in pursuit of justice. The process of achieving beloved community offers a path toward power that is noncoercive, jointly developed, and a means to achieve both self-efficacy (*power-within*) and solidarity (*power-to*). Agency (*power-to*) springs from these foundations of beloved community and in the context of relationship where community members confront injustice in solidarity. While the *Pose* characters create beloved community, they also build solidarity (*power-with*) that reaffirms agency. Shared governance and living together in community, where one’s public life and politics invariably intersect with the private and individual, opens up possibilities for both individual and group agency (*power-to*) (Ledwith, 2011).

The personal power of self-efficacy is not only individual strength fostered within beloved community, but a necessary requirement to create *power-with* and to build and maintain transformative solidarity in seeking social change. From Lorde’s (2007) famous assertion that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, arose a non-domination doctrine of power that relied upon and celebrated solidarity across difference and the agency it affords:

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the *concomitant power* to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is *that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged*. (p. 112, emphasis added)

What Lorde calls “true visions of our future” intersect with concepts of justice that go beyond simple fairness or an equal distribution of benefits and burdens (e.g. Rawls, 1999). This vision of justice is a radical reimagining, a vision of what may be possible. Follett (1998) argues that the harnessing of joy sustains transformative power and is not a gospel of “mere duty” (p. 340). Like Follett a century ago, the work of creating a more just community that disrupts systems of hierarchy and oppression, both stems from and generates joy. Achieving those visions requires individual agency (*power-to*).

This agency is illustrated in *Pose* as Mother Blanca supports her children to pursue their passions, in a manner Ruddick (1995) or Marvin (2019) might refer to as nurturance, and in so doing fosters self-efficacy (*power-within*). Her rules and expectations focus on fostering growth and creating the conditions in which her children will thrive. She fights for her son Damon’s opportunity to join a dance company, pressuring the dean of the New School for Dance, to allow him the opportunity to audition. When he is accepted into the company, Blanca holds him accountable to keep his commitment to the company, in spite of various common milestones (e.g. falling in love, job offers) that arise throughout his journey to adulthood. During that time, under Blanca’s watchful eye and full heart, Damon blossoms to a preeminent dancer, develops a relationship of mutual respect with Helena, and upon graduation, secures a job in Paris where he ultimately starts a house of his own.

Group agency can also be harnessed in solidarity to pursue societal justice. In the Season 2 premiere of *Pose*, Blanca and Pray Tell visit Hart Island off the Bronx where hundreds of people who died of AIDS-related complications are buried in mass unmarked graves (Kilgannon, 2018). As the characters face societal injustice, the indignity of that moment sparks their subsequent participation in a “die-in” protest at St. Patrick’s Cathedral to object to the archdiocese’s stymying of AIDS-related legislation and refusal to teach safe sex methods that could save lives. Agency is demonstrated by how Blanca and Pray Tell reconcile multiple conflicting feelings that arose when making the decision to participate in the protest. While both were horrified by the misinformation that was being spread by institutions that hold great authority (the church), they had to confront and ultimately overcome feelings of invisibility and powerlessness to join a community of “friends and equals” in this fictional reimagining of one the largest protests to ever occur in a church (O’Loughlin, 2019). Both were able to discover self-efficacy, solidarity, and agency with others in their house and through their association with allied communities (e.g. AIDS treatment centers, gay and lesbian community centers) united in pursuit of justice. This act of resistance demonstrates how beloved community can harness transformative power to work toward justice on a macro or systems-level.

As John A. Powell (2012) asserts, “Justice involves claiming a shared, mutual humanity” (p. xvii). A just society, what Civil Rights leaders called beloved community, is constructed step-by-step as individuals join small groups which join neighborhoods which join larger associations which eventually join a larger political body (Follett, 1998). Each step in this process requires coordinated and co-active development of group power. This relational conception of *power-with* leads to an idea of beloved community as a constant living force that struggles and strives toward justice together, a *process* rather than a destination.

### ***The work of transformation is a continual process***

*Pose* demonstrates the difficulty of overcoming societal norms of dyadic love and *power-over*, even in a community that centers the voices and leadership of LGBTQ people of color. While *Pose* offers a transformative vision, at times it demonstrates *power-over* dynamics and the difficulty of overcoming Western societal norms, even in a community that is led by and centers LGBTQ people of color themselves. While we maintain there is much to be learned from the stories depicted in *Pose*, not all forms of domination were abandoned in furtherance of a more egalitarian *power-with* community. The ongoing process of creating beloved community and transforming power requires continual attention to navigating the tensions and oppressive societal norms.

In fact, Mother Elektra (Dominique Jackson) serves as a complex and nuanced foil throughout the series, as she vacillates between a strict adherence to *power-over*, clinging to her status as “passing” in dominant society and learning to embrace *power-with*. Elektra demonstrates how these practices are dynamic and people, just like fictional characters, evolve as the possibilities of transformation and *power-with* remain open. In this way, she, her trans sisters, and the ballroom community experience solidarity as she addresses her most challenging of setbacks, including rejection in romantic relationships, eviction and financial hardship, and even the death of a client from a drug overdose. Elektra’s complex relationship to power serves as an important reminder that the ballroom and house culture is not a utopian panacea, but rather a community that continually renegotiates its own relationships in the midst of joy, sorrow, and striving.

In one episode, Blanca confronts Elektra about the destructive nature of relationships that are rooted in *power-over*. After Elektra’s gender-affirming surgery, Blanca visits the hospital to find Elektra alone, “no flowers, no cards, no children to celebrate with her, hold her hand, or do her hair.” Elektra’s response to Blanca is to assert that her children will “pay for their mistreatment;” at which point Blanca offers, “That’s your problem . . . You are not kind. You don’t care for [your children]. You are not walking the walk in our community. You are beautiful, you pass, and you think that makes you better than us.” Recalling how Elektra offered her refuge, Blanca (who has just buried her birth mother) tells Elektra, “You are the only mother I have left; you may be a terrible mother, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be the loving daughter I want to be.” Blanca recognizes that even though Elektra’s relationship to power has been corrupted, her past behavior also fostered self-efficacy and agency for her, as Elektra took her in when she first arrived in New York. Thus, Blanca demonstrates the *power-with* that generates communal love and thereby opens space for Elektra to recognize her own capacity to eschew domination and *power-over*. Elektra’s response to Blanca’s observations and her acceptance of Blanca’s love illustrates this point quite well. On the night Elektra returns home from the hospital, she prepares a feast for her children; purchases clothes they will wear to compete in the Mother’s Day Ball; she apologizes and takes responsibility for abusive behavior: “I realized I was getting all of the love and attention I deserved; none. I gave you children nothing and expected everything in return.” Her actions demonstrate the struggle—and also the potential—of transforming *power-over* into *power-with*.

## Toward transformational practice

Societal transformation is even more challenging beyond the intimate maternal-led houses of *Pose* in broader community-based settings or on a state-wide or federal policy stage. Yet, to ignore the imperative of transformational public service in this arena risks further marginalization and the perpetuation of harmful systems of *power-over*. Public and nonprofit administrators hold positions of authority in how services for LGBTQ homeless youth are designed and delivered, so it is incumbent upon them to engage in transformational work. King and Zanetti's (2005) vision of transformational public service reminds us that "the time is ripe for practicing the kind of public service that seeks to transform people and institutions in a way that focuses on social and economic justice" (p. 35). A focus on justice as the ultimate end goal requires centering love, care, and the importance of relationships in the professional and personal lives of transformational public servants. Moreover, *power-with* advances King and Zanetti's (2005) concept of a transformative public service that gives community members real voice in decisions that affect their lives, leading ultimately to justice.

Practically, those providing services to LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness often find themselves in uncomfortable power-related circumstances, caught between a dominant rules-based hierarchical system that espouses a power-free position of neutrality and a community of young people who have been marginalized by the very system that was purportedly built to be responsive to their most basic needs. The systemic challenges that providers face are formidable and deeply rooted in traditional public service, which rejects the emotive and affective needs of providers and citizens alike (Guy & Mastracci, 2018). While direct service providers may recognize the value of *power-with*, the dominant *power-over* system in which these providers work encumbers their capacity to generate a collaborative model. Yet, as Cantú (2018) notes:

What I have learned from giving myself over to a structure of power, from living within its grim vision ... is that small impulses and interactions have the power to lead us back towards humanity, and heeding them can be a means of extricating ourselves from systems of thought and policy that perpetuate detachment. (p. 268)

It is the human interactions—the stories and connections formed within those same *power-over* structures—that offer a path forward and a way to recognize and reclaim *power-with* to allow for reimagining and transformation.

*Pose* illustrates creative reimagining of how services for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness could be designed and delivered. Moreover, it offers a signpost for public servants who wish to center marginalized voices in a transformative vision of public administration (King & Zanetti, 2005). The ballroom culture and communal house setting allowed the characters portrayed in *Pose* to move from surviving within *power-over* structures to a platform from which they thrived in a beloved community formed on their own terms. This path relies on storytelling and mirrors the philosophy of *affidamento* that allows individuals to have *power-within* (self-efficacy) in how they choose to pursue *power-with* (solidarity), *power-to* (agency) and justice.

The transformative theoretical model developed in this article offers guidance to public service providers on how to use strategies like centering lived experience and storytelling to build self-efficacy, solidarity, and agency *with* youth experiencing



homelessness at the crossroads of multiple forms of marginalization. A transformative public service democratizes and requires leaders to “facilitate or serve the needs of others, as an actively engaged participant in shared processes” (King & Zanetti, 2005, p. 233).

Imagine, for just a moment, what our programs, organizations, and local communities might look like if public servants were encouraged to pursue solidarity and *power-with* instead of neutrality and *power-over*. Imagine if a transformative model of public service centering love and *power-within* were the norm. Imagine public service given the mandate to unleash human potential in ways that explicitly center the complexity and intersectionality of human experience, instead of “expert” advice and “one best way.” Imagine living in communities of abundance, where power is shared, and all people are accepted and encouraged to be not only authentic but also continually evolving.

So, we end with where we started, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love” (King, 1957). Those charged with the task of providing services for LGBTQ youth, especially those who have left abusive situations in search of a beloved community, must leverage the institutional power of their positions toward community and solidarity. Through a commitment to pursue justice and center lived experience through storytelling, a transformative public service grounded in communal love has the capacity to amplify the voices of its most marginalized communities while fundamentally altering the power relationships that exist between citizens and their governments.

## Note

1. While Pose is set in the late 1980s, it is important to note that these houses still exist today. The “kiki scene” in New York City offers LGBTQ homeless youth (mostly Black and Latinx) refuge from surrogate family structures that promise youth-focused leadership and radical acceptance (Matthes & Salzman, 2019).

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