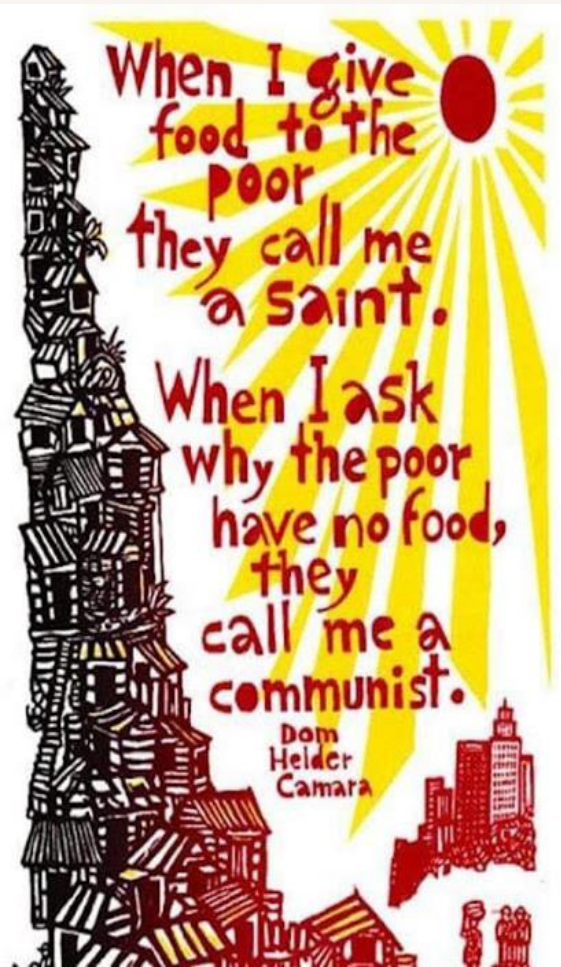


# Homelessness as a Social Justice Issue

Vikki C. Terrile, MSLS, MA, ABD  
Assistant Professor  
Queensborough Community College, CUNY  
vcterrile@gmail.com  
vterrile@qcc.cuny.edu

**We need to reclaim the power of critique as the sword arm of social justice and not relinquish it.  
-Peter McLaren, Professor and Critical Pedagogue**



Social justice is concerned with the structures of society and their results. Because it is results-oriented, it discerns whether the structures of society—in other words, the social system as a whole—are just in their efforts.

- Marcus Borg, scholar and theologian

Homelessness is a **RACE**  
**CLASS**  
**GENDER**  
**AGE**  
**ABILITY**  
**SEXUALITY** issue.

There is a 19% gap between the food/housing insecurity of Black college students and White college students.

40% of people in shelters have a disability.

LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ+ youth.

In 2021, more than 4 of every 10 people experiencing sheltered homelessness were Black or African American.

Since 1965, home prices have jumped 118%, while income has only increased by 15%.

84% of families experiencing homelessness are female-headed and more than 90% of homeless mothers have been physically and/or sexually abused.

Housing insecurity and housing deprivation mark out some populations for the probability of enduring a life without housing, denied the safety and health that a home helps secure. Housing draws from already existing racial subordinations and entrenches and intensifies the death-making effects of those racisms, and so this “some populations” is neither arbitrary nor accidental.

-Craig Willse, *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States*

Homelessness is a *necessary* feature of capitalism, not an accidental one, or one that can be solved by focusing on individuals and their problems—even if focusing on these problems and fighting for decent affordable housing might be very important indeed.

–Don Mitchell, researcher, author of *Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space, and the Limits of Capitalism*

As a result of this historical confluence of factors, the medicalization of homelessness has produced “the homeless” as a category to which a pathological dimension is endemic. Among all of capitalism’s cast-offs, the homeless in particular have been imagined as incapable of self-management and in need of direct and constant supervision and intervention.

– Craig Willse

Homelessness in the midst of plenty may shock people into the realization that homelessness exists not because the system is failing to work as it should, but because the system is working as it must.

– Peter Marcuse, Professor of Urban Planning

## Medical/Therapeutic Models

- ◆ Power is held and wielded by “experts”
- ◆ Solutions geared towards fixing/changing individuals
- ◆ May question but doesn’t attempt to disrupt unjust systems
- ◆ May be rooted in pity, charity, guilt
- ◆ Use monitoring/surveillance as a means of control

## Justice/Equity Models

- ◆ Power is shared
- ◆ Solutions geared towards fixing/changing systems and structures
- ◆ Doesn’t preclude services needed by individuals
- ◆ Should be rooted in love, equity
- ◆ Respect individuals as agents with rights and dignity

**Charity.....Justice**

**Social service.....Social change**

**Individual acts.....Collective acts**

**Requires repeated actions.....Resolves structural injustice**

**Response to immediate need.....Response to long-term need**

**Directed at effects/symptoms.....Directed at root causes**

**Matter of personal attributes.....Matter of public policy**



# Shifting the Narrative in Libraries

What would the conversation about homelessness and libraries look like if we approached it as a racial/economic/social justice issue?

- Modeled after prison abolitionist approaches to library services for those under carceral control
- Services that are patron-directed and patron-centered
- Programs that are not corrective or deficit-focused

*Sustained* political change is unlikely unless those individuals who are most vulnerable to unjust distributions of wealth and power figure significantly, as *agents*, in reinvigorating our political institutions and practices, from the ground up.

—Lucie White, Professor, Harvard Law

# Working it in the Real World

- Relationships
  - With patrons
  - With grassroots organizations
- Programming ideas
  - Literature, writing, art programs
  - Community conversations around housing, wages, equity
- Outreach
  - Families & youth
  - Gathering places
- Enact your own conscientization
  - Read, reflect, act

Be one with the people—not only meditatively but through praxis—through acting on and in and even alongside the world with them.

And it is only through love that we can transform this world.

—Peter McLaren

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**Thank you!**  
vterrile@qcc.cuny.edu  
vcterrile@gmail.com

