

“Homeless Chic” in the Classroom

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I teach a course at Villanova University entitled “Homeless Chic? U.S. Poverty & Privilege.” In it, we examine poverty in its most extreme form – through the experience of homelessness. Though some Americans may wish to ignore the problem of domestic homelessness, the exploration of these particular underprivileged persons and their unique experience is crucial to the education of our students not only because the gap between rich and poor in this neo-liberal economy continues to widen, but because what it reflects about “being American” must be acknowledged: that we care and do not care about this issue, that we want to help and yet desire to maintain distance, and that we empathize with but still marginalize those who are different from us. The class is essentially a cultural studies course, an advanced English and Sociology elective through the Center for Peace and Justice Education. In the few semesters that it has been offered, the high enrollment suggests a real appetite among college students to deeply consider what it means for fellow U.S. citizens to live day to day without adequate, stable shelter.

Interestingly, this course attracts a wide-ranging student population – including service-learning sophomores, various student-athletes, and senior Honors majors. The first assignment asks students to write a “coming to class consciousness” piece in which they are asked to produce an analysis of an individual experience that led to a more profound awareness of a contemporary social issue. Or, they may simply reflect on their own personal class background. Another option is to recount a moment that urged them to think about class in this country and why. From the intimate responses, it is clear that these young people, from privileged class backgrounds, from disadvantaged inner city upbringings, and from spaces in between, are eager to enter into dialogue about our nation’s poorest citizens. Thus, our discussions about the juxtaposition of poverty and privilege offer tremendous occasion for critical thinking about the intersections of marginalized identity and exclusionary citizenship in America, and this intellectual discourse sometimes even gives way to practical application (an example of which I will mention below).

The term “Homeless chic” was inspired by a current trend in the world of couture where the images of stereotypical homelessness become defined as high fashion. After viewing images of trends in style, reality television, and even toy industry advertisements,¹ my students are perplexed by contradictions between these cultural representations and current demographics on the realities and causes of homelessness. Although these manifestations of “homeless chic” in popular culture demonstrate the fact that homelessness is, in many ways, being “honored,”

celebrated, and aligned with American identity, the ambivalence first illuminated in the 1980s towards homelessness continues to sprout, especially in legal decisions² based on fear and the desire to separate the rich from the poor. In class we ask if this fashion trend reflects something deeper than an aesthetic choice. What might be at stake for the face of an American culture that fetishizes mass media images that reflect the very identity the legal system works to hide? Why are we both fascinated and repulsed by homelessness? How does one negotiate and maintain an individual, elevated social status while helping someone with considerable “throwaway” status? How can one empathize and reach out, yet desire to maintain a protective distance without marginalizing the “other”? The inconsistencies posed here strike a moral and political chord with students that, like the oxymoronic fashion term “homeless chic,” ultimately serve as a metaphor for U.S. culture’s conflicted approach to homelessness.

Using this term as an overarching guide, we explore and respond to certain problems and ethical questions with regards to the ways in which homelessness gets represented in literature and in the media. Students consider the challenges United States culture faces in its attempts to think differently about homelessness – at the ways it appropriates or makes use of figures of homelessness, and the ways literature markets, thematizes, racializes, and symbolizes homelessness. Through engagement with contemporary American literature, film, politics, cultural geography, psychology, music, sociology, and journalism, we examine how U.S. culture actually *likes* certain narratives that block the ability to think differently about homelessness. The readings model how conflicted American readers are on this social problem, illustrating that these contradictions are so deeply ingrained culturally that they then arise in cultural products.

From critically reading works by Steve Lopez,³ Sherman Alexie,⁴ and Ron Hall and Denver Moore,⁵ to analytically viewing HBO’s television series *The Wire* and films like *The Blind Side*, for example, we unpack some of the unexpected ethical challenges that tropes about homelessness pose. Moving beyond the paradigm of a romanticized or objectified experience of poverty as put forth by John Allen,⁶ we begin challenging definitions of literal and metaphorical homelessness and critiquing narratives that perpetuate the problem of homelessness. For instance, the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*⁷ – the story of a struggling man played by Will Smith who works his way out of homelessness to form his own a multi-million dollar brokerage firm – sends the message that all persons experiencing homelessness can rise out of poverty and become extremely wealthy if they merely persevere. Yet students are quick to point out that not all people living without homes in this country are born with above-average intelligence, and that Chris Gardner’s situation represents an anomaly in the experience of homelessness. A movie like this makes housed audiences feel good – by watching it, we are caring about an important social problem – but we can maintain our distance of comfort because the solution lies with the will of the homeless protagonist.

In Alexie’s novel *Indian Killer*, however, homelessness gets re-imagined as a source of community and agency through its unending slew of characters with hybrid identities – racial, ethnic, schizophrenic, and religious, to name a few. Depicting all types of “homeless” figures marginalized by their identity, Alexie’s text demonstrates that the definition of “home” extends

beyond a dwelling place, and can function as a sense of belonging to a particular family, population, or group, or even to a peaceful understanding of one's own history and identity. This resonates deeply with students' own understanding of "home." Alexie's *Indian Killer* expands on a traditional understanding of homelessness in contemporary culture, offering readers an experience of identifying with marginalized identities as they are forced to deal with the uncomfortable ethical quandary of how to respond to the cultural ambivalence toward contemporary forms and tropes of homelessness. For although the novel makes inroads in creating productive, participatory literal homeless citizens as characters, it also offers representations of metaphorically homeless figures as victims, as angry and threatening, and as invisible. Therefore, students arrive at the conclusion in class that these cultural products (books, films, etc.), are ultimately complicit in offering narratives that perpetuate common myths and stereotypes about homelessness yet are also committed to challenging or changing them, indicative of our own cultural ambivalence to homelessness.

By the end of each semester, my "Homeless Chic" students wonder whether the exploitative use of images of homelessness, along with the problem of homelessness itself, will ever be solved. They question why such an extreme form of poverty exists in our own backyard, particularly in contrast to the extreme wealth present in the U.S. As we come to understand the structures and systems in our society that enable homelessness, we discuss how one can educate, volunteer, contribute, or advocate as a means for creating change. The difficulty in this, we decide, is how to effectively proceed without marginalizing or making a spectacle of homelessness, or without augmenting our own position of power in the process. I worry that even the dynamics of the course itself reinforce class boundaries. Nonetheless, seeing students voluntarily transform what they have gained intellectually into serviceable action and participatory citizenship reconfirms how the results of education often extend far beyond the classroom and gives hope that as a culture, perhaps we can begin to think in new ways about ending homelessness. Recently, one former "Homeless Chic" student emailed to share that she now works in the Bronx at a homeless shelter for women and children. Speaking with great enthusiasm, she noted, "Already it is so wonderful to see all that [we learned] in action and in real life right in our backyard. So many of the stereotypes out there about homelessness do not ring true." So although homelessness is not at all "chic," it seems learning about it is.

Notes

1. In 2009, Mattel introduced a homeless doll, Gwen, to its American Girl Collection. See American Girl, "Gwen Doll and Paperback Book," 2010, <http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/item/id/142095>.
2. Here I am referring to city ordinances regarding public space and homelessness.
3. Steve Lopez, *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music* (New York: Berkley Books, 2008).

4. Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (New York: Warner Books, 1996).
5. Ron Hall and Denver Moore; with Lynn Vincent, *Same Kind of Different As Me: A Modern-Day Slave, An International Art Dealer, and the Unlikely Woman Who Bound Them Together* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006).
6. See Allen’s book, *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
7. *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Dir. Gabriele Muccino. Columbia, 2006.