

1-1-2016

The War on Poor Bodies

Lindsey Krinks

lindsey@opentablenashville.org

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Krinks, Lindsey (2016) "The War on Poor Bodies," *Leaven*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact paul.stenis@pepperdine.edu.

The War on Poor Bodies

Lindsey Krinks

Some things stay with you, haunting you. Things you can never forget. Like how after the police and medics had come and gone, your dear friend collected the charred remains of a man named Kevin at his campsite and then solemnly, lovingly, released them into the Cumberland River. How the chill reached into your bones as you cared for the toeless, frostbitten feet of a man named Thomas in the dark heart of winter, in the shadow of the city's new convention center. How the frantic screams of an unhoused mother named Lee echoed through hospital halls as her newborn was placed in state custody, how tenderly she held him in the NICU four months later before he died and how hollow her eyes looked when you visited his grave with her again, so many years later.

Yes, these things stay with you: hot tears in the psych ward, defeated letters from prison, the long months of waiting for subsidized housing, the damp mildew and rot of slums, the bed-bug bites on the bellies of children, the smells, the roaches, the fury, the dead. These stories are war stories and, like going to war, working on the streets changes you, breaks you open, rubs you raw. It makes you feel exposed, powerless, hardened, angry, and fierce. But most of all, if you can ward off cynicism, if you can ward off numbness, it makes you feel alive, achingly and wholly alive. And slowly, together, we learn what's worth fighting for. We learn how to fight.

This is an essay about war, casualties, and lost ground. But it's also an essay about love, strategy, resistance, and learning to overturn the tables of warlords. It's an essay about learning how to "pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living," as labor organizer Mother Jones once said.¹ What, then, does the war on poor bodies look like? What strategies and tactics are being deployed? Who profits? Where is God? And, perhaps most importantly, how do we join the struggle and fight back? To engage these questions, I want to focus on one particular city: Nashville, Tennessee, where I've lived for over a decade.

Beneath the Shine

Nashville is home to both established and budding musicians, over seven hundred faith communities, seven colleges, a growing and privatized healthcare industry, and the chambers of the Tennessee state legislature whose members continue to target poor, queer, and non-white communities with harmful legislation. Nashville is also home to the descendants of people who have had the courage to risk themselves and fight for justice and change. In 1960, during the Civil Rights Movement, a group of college students led a series of sit-in demonstrations and successfully desegregated Nashville's lunch counters. With the cloud of witnesses who went before them and came after them, they dreamed of a world free from the prisons of poverty, the dehumanization of racism, and the spirits of fear, greed, and hate. They fought with everything they had, worked to embody their dream of the Beloved Community, the kingdom of God, in the here and now, and changed the course of history.

1. "Mother Jones: The Woman," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2001, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2001/05/mother-jones-woman> (accessed January 21, 2016).

Nashville is known as an “It City,”² the “new face of the South,”³ and the “destination city of the year” for 2016.⁴ It seems everyone is eager to come here and, by some estimates, as many as eighty people are moving to Nashville *every day*.⁵ But what many people don’t know is that last winter, eight people on the streets died of exposure-related injuries and illnesses including my friend David and, in 2015, deaths in the homeless community outnumbered homicides seventy to sixty-five.⁶ Last year, Nashville’s poverty rate increased to 19.9 percent, meaning that one in every five Nashvillians is struggling just to make ends meet.⁷ While wages have stagnated, rent prices and the cost of living are at all-time highs. In Nashville, our friends working minimum-wage jobs would have to work over 110 hours a week just to afford “fair” market rent housing. Here, the shelters are overcrowded, the waiting list for Section 8 housing vouchers has climbed to over 14,000, and, while countless families are being displaced by gentrification, millions of dollars of public funding are being pumped into financing more luxury condos, hotels, and high-end development projects.

This story is the same in cities across the nation—Atlanta, Charlotte, Denver, Dallas, Seattle—and across time. In Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to condemn the king of Judah, Jehoiakim, son of Josiah. “He builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor” (22.13 NIV). In the midst of great poverty, the king builds a “palace with spacious upper rooms” and “panels it with cedar” (22.14). “Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?” asks God. “Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the Lord” (22.15–16). And I wonder what God and the prophets would say to us in cities like Nashville today.

If your eyes are open, driving through Nashville is dizzying. There are new traffic circles, luxury condos, and a \$750,000 public art display of large cedar sticks jutting out of ground like war spikes. In the urban core and first ring of the city, new foodie restaurants, trendy boutiques, and expensive hotels are going up every few blocks. In the last five years, we have opened a new \$623 million convention center, a \$75 million baseball stadium, and a \$35 million riverfront park expansion complete with a dog park and amphitheater. Still in the works is an \$18 million pedestrian bridge that will extend over a patch of train tracks, bridging one center of luxury and commerce, the Gulch, to another, SoBro. *Is this what it means to know me?* asks the Lord.

Other blocks look like a war zone. Last year, over 1,500 demolition permits were issued in Nashville, many to tear down small, older homes and replace them with expensive “tall and skinnies” that rake in, on average, \$200,000 in profit for developers. In the downtown area, if you didn’t see the bulldozers, bobcats, and cranes, you would think you were looking at the rubble of bombed-out buildings with crumbling floors and twisted, exposed steel. But the rubble won’t last long. One monstrous hole two blocks from the downtown public library, where a large portion of the homeless community goes to access resources, is set to be

2. “Nashville’s Biggest Hit Could be the City Itself,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/09/us/nashville-takes-its-turn-in-the-spotlight.html?_r=0 (accessed January 10, 2016).

3. “Atlanta and Nashville: The Face of the New South,” *Telegraph*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/northamerica/usa/10858819/Atlanta-and-Nashville-the-new-face-of-the-South.html> (accessed January 10, 2016).

4. “Destination of the Year: Readers’ Choice,” *Travel and Leisure*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.travelandleisure.com/articles/destination-of-the-year-readers-choice> (accessed January 10, 2016).

5. “Over 80 People are Moving to Nashville Each Day. Here’s Why,” *12th and Broad*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.12thandbroad.com/story/news/2015/05/20/over-80-people-are-moving-to-nashville-each-day-heres-why/27642437/#.VrCwVvkrKM8> (accessed January 10, 2016).

6. “Nashville’s Homeless Death Rate Tops Homicides,” *WSMV*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.wsmv.com/story/30728555/nashvilles-homeless-death-rate-tops-hmicides> (accessed December 15, 2015).

7. “19% of Nashville Lives in Poverty,” *The Tennessean*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2014/04/09/nashvillians-live-poverty/7529685/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=> (accessed January 21, 2015).

the tallest building in Nashville—the Paramount. What will it hold? More luxury condos. And to build this, developers were given \$12.5 million dollars of public funding from the Metro Development and Housing Agency (MDHA). It's clear who gets the real welfare in Nashville. And it's not the poor. *Is this what it means to know me?* asks the Lord.

Then, if your eyes adjust from the opulence, you see them: tens of thousands of people—the working poor and unhoused—surviving. Look in the shadow of the new stadium and Germantown apartments for three people shivering in tents by the Jefferson Street bridge. Look beneath the Broadway interstate ramp and you'll find a disabled man with a haunting list of chronic health conditions and no health insurance. Look on the heating grates, beneath train trestles, in parking garage stairwells, and in any patch of woods. Look in the housing projects and slums, the emergency rooms, the Walmart parking lots, and the seedy motels. But brace yourself for what you find. Just beneath the shine is the underside of our city where the poor live and struggle and die.

This is War

Two weeks ago a 69-year-old woman named Alyce froze to death in her car for lack of adequate shelter and housing. The next week, after we celebrated Martin Luther King Day, one of our friends who lived in a campsite had his feet amputated, another lost seven toes to frostbite, and two of the men I worked with—who had finally received their Section 8 vouchers—died. James, 53, was beaten to death, and Jimbo, 41, was found dead at his camp.

Yes, this is war. When people ask why we work long hours and late nights, we lean in with puffy, reddened eyes and tell them it's because our friends, people we love, are literally dying and being dismembered in the shadows of progress, in the living hell of poverty and homelessness. We spend ourselves in hopes of transforming a system that is utterly broken and brings only violence, trauma, and death to those on the bottom.

In Nashville, the proximity of lavish wealth and destitute poverty is more than staggering; it is offensive, nothing less than a social sin. Nashville organizer and political science professor Sekou Franklin recently said, “Nashville is being built like a playground for the rich and a prison (or graveyard) for the poor.” And we know these prisons and graveyards also have a sharp racial edge. Despite gains during the Civil Rights movements, discrimination and racism still thrive in our city, particularly through criminalization, mass incarceration, disparate housing and economic policies, and gentrification. To be poor in Nashville means increased likelihood of displacement, incarceration, and death at an early age. But to be poor *and* black or brown, not to mention anything about mental health, is like a death sentence. Had Jesus—a brown, homeless, misunderstood vagabond born to a working-class family in the margins of empire—lived in Nashville, we would likely find him wasting away in a shelter, a prison, or on death row. After all, we know all too well how those in power treated his body when they decided he was a threat. Yes, this is war.

Why, then, is the war on poor bodies being waged? Why did metro police begin arresting more unhoused people like my friend Charles for things like sitting on the sidewalk—“obstructing the passageway”—at the very same time more luxury condos were being built downtown and the Urban Residents Association was growing in wealth and influence? Why is the Church Street Park, the smallest park in Nashville just across from the downtown public library, the most heavily patrolled by police? Why were over thirty public benches removed from the blocks surrounding the library while new benches were being added to wealthy, predominately white areas? Because visible poverty—the *presence of poor bodies*—is a threat to the status quo and to the comfort of the middle and upper class. The presence of poor bodies reminds us of our own vulnerabilities and insecurities and that all is not well—that there are deep, gaping wounds in our society and that the American dream is not a reality for millions of people. But instead of working to heal the wounds, we quickly cover them up so the *dis-ease* is out of sight, out of mind.

We “clean up” the streets with police officers who move “the problem” to the jails. We remove public benches from downtown and then criminalize people like Charles for sitting on the sidewalks. We shout,

“Get a job!” to people like my friend Tony, who work double shifts and still can’t make ends meet. We tell ourselves the problem is with them—not with society, and certainly not with us. *After all, we reason, the poor are lazy, defective, and criminal. They are unclean, dangerous, and disease-ridden. Their poverty is their own fault, a result of their personal flaws and failures.* And these attitudes, these deeply engrained prejudices and beliefs, pave the way for their dehumanization, disposal, and ultimately, their destruction.

We dehumanize the poor (and, by extension, Christ) not only by our prejudices, policing, and policies, but also by answering their suffering with mere charity—Band-Aids that fall off after a day or two and never heal the deep trauma, the festering systemic wounds. We dispose of the poor by warehousing and crucifying them in the calvaries of shelters, jails, prisons, slums, and substandard housing projects. The destruction ripples through each generation in waves of distress, grief, and violence that begets more violence. And their bodies become the casualties and carnage of war. *Is this what it means to know me?* asks the Lord.

What kinds of tactics, then, are being deployed in this war on poor bodies, and who profits? From 2007–2015, Nashville’s former mayor Karl Dean and our housing authority, MDHA, rechanneled public funding that was being used for affordable housing into costly and elite development projects without so much as a slap on the wrist from other officials or the public. It happened quickly, quietly, and in the fine print of lengthy technical policies. During the same time, Nashville and other cities across the nation established “business improvement districts” and “quality of life ordinances” to criminalize poverty in downtown and developing areas. And over the last thirty years, federal funding for affordable housing and mental health care has been utterly gutted. Yet somehow, in the same time period, public funding has *increased* for jails and prisons whose management is often contracted out to private corporations like Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). Private prison corporations like CCA profit from every filled bed, and their shares are traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

If the war strategy is to eliminate (or at least hide) poor bodies, then one tactic is to quietly move public funding from the poor to the wealthy, to defund public programs, and subsidize cheap labor through prison populations. It’s to build our upper rooms by injustice, making our countrymen work for nothing. This way, the status quo is maintained and those with power not only keep, but, also, expand their power. And it’s all too clear who profits in this system: a small cluster of people at the top—the CEOs, shareholders and stock traders; the developers and colonizers of the world (or at least of an *It City* like Nashville) and all of us who have access to and benefit from the reality they create. *Is this what it means to know me?* asks the Lord.

Yes, this is war.

Learning to Fight Back

I’m one of the cofounders of Open Table Nashville, a faith-based homeless outreach nonprofit in Nashville. Our friends on the streets don’t come to our building or office, like they would another service provider. On any given day, our “office” is found on the front lines, in the condemned and contested spaces where the war rages in our own backyards.

We meet people where they are and help them navigate available resources and obtain necessities like health care and housing. We seek to be a consistent presence in their lives and remind them they’re not alone. When Metro threatens to close their campsites though there’s nowhere else to go, we stand beside them and remind them they too have voices and power. But our work doesn’t end on the streets or in the camps. We also attend hours upon hours of City Council and Planning Commission meetings and we march on the cold granite of Legislative Plaza with others, fighting for justice, equity, and change.

In his last speech to the Southern Leadership Council in 1967, Martin Luther King said that we must change our tactics in the fight against racism and poverty and ask bigger questions about the whole society.

8. James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 250.

“We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace,” he said. “But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”⁸ Perhaps in the segregated and poverty-stricken South of King’s time, in a rapidly developing It City like Nashville, or in Jeremiah’s Jerusalem, restructuring an edifice that produces beggars is what it means to know God. And if this is one of our strategies, what could our tactics look like in Nashville and beyond?

In this war on poor bodies, we have found ourselves shifting from tactics of service and charity to those of justice. While one-time service events where the *haves* give temporary relief to the *have-nots* can meet immediate needs, they do nothing to change the larger system where so many require such relief. Part of our mission at Open Table Nashville is to *disrupt cycles of poverty* so we don’t just help the people who are drowning in the waters of poverty and despair; we go upstream to see why so many people are in those waters in the first place. In the end, what is needed is not service but solidarity; not charity but concrete, systemic change. What is needed is not our isolation, suspicion, and cynicism, but astounding love and grace lived out publicly. After all, the poor are not projects to manage or problems to solve—they are siblings to love, journey with, and struggle alongside. They are our friends, comrades, and co-liberators. And perhaps as we enter into this world beneath the shine, we will find that we are entering into the world of the living, breathing Christ who still breaks bread with and reveals himself through the poor.

The work of solidarity, then, begins with relationships. It begins with closer proximity to those who are cast out, those who are struggling. This means that if we don’t know the poor, we must first learn their names and struggles, go down to the rivers of despair and wade with our neighbors. We enter into their lives, not just in one-time ways, but in consistent and sustained ways. And then, we go upstream.

When we started doing homeless outreach and organizing work, we had little more to fight with than our own bodies and hearts. When Metro tried to close Tent City in 2008, we said we would put our bodies in front of the bulldozers, that we would get arrested alongside the residents. And while we still use that tactic if and when needed, we’ve gotten more savvy. We have armed ourselves with a network of relationships throughout the community with attorneys, faith leaders, council members, researchers, the media and other organizers, and we work to change things from both the bottom up and the top down.

We change things from the bottom up by reminding our friends on the streets that they have rights, voices, and power. We host "Know Your Rights" workshops, encourage their leadership, and learn from their examples. We sit with them at their campfires strategizing, plotting change, and stoking the flames of their dreams.

And we change things from the top down by sharpening our analysis of what’s going on and changing policy. We partner with other organizing and advocacy groups to transform housing policy, and while this can be tedious and technical work, it’s one of the ways to effect immediate systemic change. In Nashville, we’re currently working to secure more funding for our local housing trust fund that provides a dedicated source of public funding for affordable housing. We’re advocating for a community land trust that could help us preserve existing affordable units for decades to come. We’re working on inclusionary zoning that would mandate that new developments have a certain percentage of affordable units. And we’re looking at how to rechannel tax increment financing—the public funding tool used by former Mayor Dean almost exclusively to fund high-end development projects—back to affordable housing.

But reform isn’t enough. We’re also fighting for broader systemic transformation; we’re seeking to embody the Beloved Community, the kingdom of God, in the here and now. We’re base-building with other groups who are working on issues like workers’ rights, prison abolition, food justice, healthcare, racial and economic equity, LGBTQIA rights, and climate change. In the end, all these issues are deeply interconnected. One of our tactics, then, must be to organize ourselves so when the next crisis (or perhaps, the revolution) hits, we’ll be ready. Because this is war. And pursuing justice, defending the cause of the poor and needy, and restructuring an edifice that produces beggars is what it means to know God, to affirm the image of God in every human being. This work, this fight, isn’t only for the community organizers of the world; it’s for every person of faith and conscience. We all have a place in this struggle and no one can do this alone.

A couple months ago, as my coworkers and I were taking supplies to some of the most dilapidated outlying campsites, we stumbled upon something we weren't expecting. One of the camps had Christmas bells tied up with red ribbon next to the tarps and another had a bouquet of red roses arranged neatly in the hole of a tree. Christmas bells and roses. In the face of poverty, winter, and death, these items were signs of dignity, hope, life, and love. They were symbols of resistance. They were reminders that as we sharpen our strategies and tactics in this fight, we are called to move through the struggle with a hope that is fierce and a love that is achingly and wholly alive. After all, our real enemy isn't the CEO or shareholder or developer. It's the spirit of fear, greed, and hate; it's the death-dealing principalities that can only be overturned when we come together and lean into the spirit of life, hope, and love. And perhaps in doing this, we'll find our own liberation.

LINDSEY KRINKS IS A COFOUNDER OF OPEN TABLE NASHVILLE, AN INTERFAITH HOMELESS OUTREACH NONPROFIT WHICH WAS HAILED AS THE BEST NONPROFIT IN 2015 BY THE NASHVILLE SCENE. LINDSEY IS A STREET CHAPLAIN AND PUBLIC THEOLOGIAN WITH DEEP ROOTS IN THE HOMELESS OUTREACH AND ORGANIZING COMMUNITY. FOR NEARLY TEN YEARS, SHE HAS WORKED ON THE UNDERSIDE OF NASHVILLE—THE TENT CITIES, JAILS, SLUMS, AND UNDERPASSES—WHILE ALSO WORKING WITH FAITH LEADERS, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING GROUPS, AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS TO MAKE NASHVILLE A MORE HOSPITABLE AND JUST COMMUNITY. LINDSEY IS CURRENTLY A BEATITUDES SOCIETY FELLOW AND GRADUATED FROM VANDERBILT DIVINITY SCHOOL IN MAY 2013. WHILE AT VANDERBILT, SHE WAS A CAL TURNER FELLOW, A BRANDON SCHOLAR, AND A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FELLOW. ON ANY GIVEN DAY, SHE CAN BE FOUND IN TENT CITIES, WASHING FEET ON THE STREETS, LEADING GROUPS AROUND DOWNTOWN, MARCHING FOR CHANGE, OR FORAGING FOR NATIVE HERBS AND PLANTS. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT LINDSEY'S WORK, VISIT HER BLOG OR CONTACT HER AT LINDSEY@OPENTABLENASHVILLE.ORG.

