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Homeless In Seattle

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While the demographics, living conditions, and treatment of unhoused populations have changed greatly over the many years since the struggles of Henry Moore and Kikisoblu, several things have remained the same. Overall, we have maintained similar rationalizations about the unhoused to avoid responsibility and guilt.

The first of these rationalizations is not limited to homeless people but to all marginalized demographics. To rationalize the bondage of people of color from Africa and the murder and mass deportation of Native Americans, white settlers created the “excuse” of race. The existence of the idea of race implied racial differences (at least according to profit-seeking slaveholders), and the perpetrators of violence decided to imagine themselves as harbingers of civilization. This circumvented any guilt over slavery and Manifest Destiny. The systems they put in place were in line with their concepts of racial hierarchy, which made it easier for Native Americans to become part of the homeless population. While overt and explicit systematic racial discrimination is mostly absconded with nowadays, the grandchildren of many of these systems exist today. One of the most substantial impacts is redlining, in which housing options were limited by a person’s ethnicity and immigration status. The neighborhoods outlined as having “negative quality” by redlining are still recovering and are generally lower income areas. These types of housing options are what is afforded to the homeless. One individual stated that, “There was no way of like the good housing, you had to, at that time, you had to meet a certain standard or criteria, whatever you call it...The housing that is offered is in bad areas, and a lot of people relapse like that.” (SPARC, 13)

Another rationalization that has been used since the era of Kikisoblu is the idea of wasted support for the homeless. In order to alleviate guilt from seeing an individual on the street and suffering, society has created a rationalization to make them feel comfortable with not offering support to the homeless. This idea centered around the ways in which the homeless would use the money. The individuals present in Seattle during Kikisoblu’s era, “when asked why the city was not doing more to support Angeline in her old age, replied that if she was fifty dollars she would give it all away by nightfall.” (Ensign 49) Notably, the text does not say that money was ever actually given, which makes this statement an assumption. A similar assumption regarding the homeless today is that you shouldn’t give them money, because they will use it to buy drugs. This assumption that all homeless individuals are users who need you to keep them in check, allows modern citizens to avoid the responsibility of supporting the homeless.

Finally, people tend to be unhappy to see homeless encampments. Their immediate urge is to see them disappear, however the essential question of “where should the homeless go” needs to be circumvented. Instead, displeased citizens create the myth of the unsanitary homeless. While homeless encampments are not necessarily spotless, it’s extremely unlikely that, unless one goes walking between tents, they will come into contact with any detritus from the encampment. However, the concept endures. For Kikisoblu, that meant that settlers “equated Native people with contagion, including the dreaded smallpox” (Ensign 49), however, it is also stated that “the settlers also disliked the shanties and the beach encampments in the city” (Ensign 49). These two impacts combine, and result in the destruction of Native encampments during the Seattle fire. In the modern era, homeless encampments are often considered dirty, as sources of contagion or violence, and are swept through.

In conclusion, homelessness is a complex debate. Intuitively, humans look down on those who require help without necessarily giving back to the community. It is an evolutionary incentive. However, people still feel guilt for not supporting their homeless peers, and myths and concepts are invented to circumvent that guilt. These have included the idea of race, the idea that the homeless will squander donated money, and the idea that encampments are a hotbed of disease, and a threat to the average citizens. Before we can do something about homelessness, we need to dismantle these ideas.