

Activism and Empathy ChLA 2018 Program Proposal

Title: Vera B. Williams, Activist, Writer, and Artist: A life committed to radical social change.

Vera B. Williams was a writer and illustrator for young people whose picture books, poetry, and novels centered on the lives of children and families at the bottom of the economic strata. Titles like *A Chair for My Mother*, *Scooter*, and *Amber was Brave and Essie Was Smart*, tackled topics rare for books of the period including homelessness, cultural diversity, incarcerated parents, living in housing projects, and food insecurity. Ms. Williams drew on her own childhood experiences with deprivation and displacement, yet her characters and stories illuminated the resilience, community, and joy of living.

A multiple-award winner, Williams was frequently arrested at political protests and demonstrations. In an interview quoted in the reference work *Contemporary Authors*, Ms. Williams described what was, for her, the enduring connection between creative work and political activity. "I don't make a point of ending up in jail," she said. "But if you try to put your hopes and beliefs for a better life into effect, arrest is sometimes a hazard."

Examination of her texts and correspondence through primary source research from the Kerlan Collection as well as interviews with Susan Hirschman- editor, Ava Weiss-art director, and colleagues like Susan Kuklin and Chris Rashka as well as activists of her cohort who were dedicated to nonviolent radical social change will enable me to present a portrait of an artist who trusted the reader's ability to handle hard truths and empathize with the struggles of others than their own family and community.