

## Book Review

### Picturing Addiction

**Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.**

*By Matthew Durington and Natalie Demyan*

Perhaps the most obvious way to engage *Righteous Dopefiend* is by addressing the main impetus of the ethnography, the everyday lives of the Edgewater homeless and their collective struggles with heroin addiction. With solely that focus, this ethnography of drug abuse offers a significant contribution to the literature on street-level drug ethnography. While principal to an understanding of this collaborative ethnography, another way to engage this groundbreaking visual-based study is to analyze how *Righteous Dopefiend* informs a set of methodological practices that can be utilized for research by North American anthropologists. These range from media-driven methods to deconstructions of neoliberal agendas and other trends to address political economic structures in profound ways. The operational theoretical structure that Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg create as a guiding premise for both their fieldwork and the dissemination of their research by combining Foucault and Bourdieu, among others, creates an accessible template for ethnographers to emulate. Essentially, *Righteous Dopefiend* provides the reader with a critique of the lumpenized modus operandi of the state apparatus that continues to fix individuals in a perpetual subaltern status, while simultaneously providing a profound new direction in visual urban methodologies. This is done through a combination of reflexive experiences, embedded field notes, and a scopic viscosity presented through the photographic lens of Jeff Schonberg heretofore never seen in North American ethnography.

Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's *Righteous Dopefiend* seeks to introduce "lumpen abuse" as an innovative theoretical framework for interpreting structural and interpersonal mechanisms of marginalization. Their ethnography of homeless individuals (also known as the Edgewater community) living within San Francisco during intense development and affluence denotes the inherent contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. Such a political economic ideology endorses the marketplace as the creator and defender of personal freedom, and simultaneous disinvestment in social security, welfare, and State services which ensure the ability of the poor to survive. Lumpen abuse is the result of a combination of "biopower" and neoliberal trends. Michel Foucault discusses biopower as a means of self-control to replace violent forms of control, while neoliberal environment is a rebirth of that violence from the State. Bourgois and Schonberg assert through their ethnography that "[their] theory of lumpen abuse highlights the way structurally imposed everyday suffering generates violent and destructive subjectivities" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:19); they also believe that lumpen abuse has transformed over time from a mechanism of structural violence to its own subjectivity which defines those victims of such violence. Because "... bureaucratic regulations and dysfunctional policies exacerbate the patterns of psychodynamic interpersonal abuse" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:311), subaltern communities are demobilized by both the State and their habitus-driven personal violence. Such apparatuses of violence mask the actual victims of lumpen abuse, engender self-hatred and the abhorrence of the public at large, and legitimize broad social inequalities navigated through ethnic, gendered, and economic divisions.

Lumpen abuse is a mutually deployed mechanism of structural violence that is compounded by manipulation of the senses. Because sensory experience determines one's conceptualization of self and reality, utilization of the senses to create a hierarchical system of bodies reifies lumpen abuse as deserved or "natural." In this way, the term "homeless drug addict" becomes synonymous with "lumpen" as an adjective within the Edgewater community, and can be reformed and attributed to multiple marginalized groups. The Edgewater community experiences subjective states such as place, time, and pain in ways that are mutually inscribed by power brokers and themselves to embed the alienation of illicit drug use within their bodies and psyches. This is visualized throughout the ethnography through vivid photographs that display the inscription of these forces on the literal bodies of the ethnographic collaborators that elicit, with intention, a visceral response from the reader. While this could be critiqued as an objectification of human suffering, it would be shortsighted to do so. What the sensational photographs of the Edgewater homeless offer most closely parallels the "scopic regime," as defined by Metz, that seeks to disassociate the visual referent into a neutral field where larger structural forces can be attached (Metz 1982).

"The Hole," an oft-frequented space between expressways within which Edgewater members would consume illegal drugs that is the principal site of fieldwork (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:4), embodies the hierarchization and fusion of sensory experiences required to define a "lumpen" class. Neoliberal strategies have the stated objective of "developing" spaces through aesthetic means, but their reinforcement of historical inequalities also paradoxically necessitates the creation of spaces of abandonment like the Hole. Living in spaces of abandonment is an experience totally unlike life nestled within the formal economy, as it requires daily reassertions of legitimacy and State citizenship. The daily struggles of living in such a place include hygiene, sanitation, and security, which are compounded by the struggles of addiction and social subjectivity (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:216-220). Such struggles inscribe spaces with unequal levels of access to the formal economy, but also force lumpen experience of an environment from its invisibility into the consciousness of the formal stage. Domestication of public spaces by the Edgewater community for survival within a neoliberal metropolis sabotages said community's place within the public imaginary because the formal political economy of San Francisco conceptualizes space as a grid in which public and private are clearly delineated. The Edgewater community's homelessness superimposes a "moral economy of sharing" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:6) upon the formal grid that is both at odds with neoliberal capitalism and a necessary component of its structured inequality. However, the often traumatic childhoods of many Edgewater members make "the street safer than home" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:143), leading the domestication of public space to be a psychological as well as pragmatic coping mechanism.

Employment, especially long-term waged labor, is nearly impossible for Edgewater community members to maintain due to the isolation of encampments from urban areas, as well as the incongruent rhythms of both sectors' daily patterns. Neoliberal trends in production and consumption resulted in the steady migration of industrial labor overseas, and reinforced the necessity of informal markets of drugs, stolen goods, and services; thus, "[e]conomically obsolete, members of the lumpen become unable or unwilling to engage in disciplined productive labor" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:150). Employment for the Edgewater community is short term, seasonal, and highly exploitative given the needs of employers, giving lumpen individuals no impetus to maintain a regular, "nine-to-five" internal clock. Al, a collaborator, was forced to be perpetually "on call" to move furniture for an opportunistic employer who would disrupt Al's "junkie time" with demanding hours as well as "'... give [Al] enough so [he] can go cop, fix, and return to work'" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:164). Employers often manipulate time through capital in such a way as to guarantee obedience and competition for labor, such as "pay[ing] out cash advances that could be reimbursed on a piecework basis" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:154); securing long stretches of labor by providing informal housing (2009:155); and offering piecemeal employment rather than steady wages in order to prevent the homeless from

being paid to “stand idly” (2009:156). The paternalistic relationship employers maintain with laborers through favors, cash advances, and preferential treatment further demobilizes the lumpen community at large by segmenting time used to raise money to “fix,” and by exhausting workers so much that their lives revolve around work, finding work, and staving off dopesickness. Time must be recognized as a mechanism by which to unequally distribute wealth, rather than a “natural” product of biology, in order to more critically address the ways in which daily experiences of life work in tandem with structural violence to manufacture lumpen abuse as visualized through the Edgewater Homeless. Experiences of psychological and physical pain so vividly illustrated through visual ethnography are intense as well as inescapable within the Edgewater community, and illicit drugs such as heroin soon become the only options to alleviate such suffering. Bourgois and Schonberg note that homelessness adds an additional layer onto an addict’s landscape of pain when they write, “... fieldnotes and tape recordings contain hundreds of descriptions of being cold, wet, filthy, hungry, and exhausted” (2009:113). Law enforcement institutions wield everyday physical suffering upon the Edgewater community by dispossessing members of shelter and resources with the agenda of “... push[ing] drug users into the farthest margins of public space” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:113). Top-down lumpen abuse within the neoliberal context aims to eradicate the unsightly lifestyles of the homeless, and consequently “purify” the metropolis for tourist, professional, and governmental use by the international community. The San Franciscan municipal government has consolidated its resources and committed to punitive reactions to social inequalities (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:239) in ways that directly inhibit homeless individuals’ relief from pain.

The medical community also manipulates the Edgewater homeless through pain, but often deploys suffering through the denial of adequate treatment rather than proactive assault. Bourgois and Schonberg often describe the ordeals of hospital visits by the homeless, who typically submit to such an apparatus as a last resort (2009:223). The visual component of the ethnography devotes much attention to the macabre medical conditions that many hospitalized Edgewater members endure, and describes the cavalier attitude of numerous medical professionals toward these patients due to their subjectivities. Doctors use withdrawal, strategic surgeries, and premature discharges as tools to punish addicts for their chemical dependence, as seen when one participant “... was often undermedicated for heroin withdrawal symptoms... [doctors] did not, as usual, discuss with Hank [an impending surgery]’s potential effects of surviving on the street” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:226). Resultant outbursts of anger from patients that are caused by inadequate pain management are subsequently used as legitimization for medical professionals’ meager treatment, and to reinforce the subjectivity of the “thankless bum” in response to condescending acts of charity as opposed to justice.

Legalization of heroin for the purpose of addiction treatment would be a positive transition from the neoliberal, privatized standard which the United States currently employs, but a productive psychological component of treatment that centers upon the utilization of pain by the lumpen community would also be an essential occupational therapy for former addicts. The avoidance of the pain of dopesickness is a significant thread along which Edgewater members find solidarity with each other. However, avoidance of this type of pain does not substitute the suffering that members inflict upon themselves as a result of opportunism as well as profound psychological distress. Nurturing abscesses to the point of hospitalization is a complex ritual that is utilized by Edgewater members often for practical reasons, as “... an abscess is a convenient and effective site for injecting,” which “... provides a rush of exhilaration that is almost as intense as that of a direct deposit into a functional vein” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:100). This is perhaps the most profound visualization that takes place within the pages of the ethnography. While one could assume what this process would entail, the actual visualization and probable visceral reaction by readers renders the impact immediate.

The visual component of *Righteous Dopefiend* seeks to delineate the role of photography in mitigating as well as reinforcing lumpen abuse through sensory manipulation. Although Bourgois and Schonberg’s goal for their multimedia approach is to “... clarify the relationships between large-scale

power forces and intimate ways of being in order to explain why the United States, the wealthiest nation in the world, has emerged as a pressure cooker for producing destitute addicts embroiled in everyday violence" (2009:5), their methods allow for the possibility of their representations to devolve into a "voyeuristic pornography of suffering" (2009:5). Depictions of medical maladies, abscesses in particular, have a dismembering effect upon participants, as attention to a photograph revolves not around the subject as a complete person but around a single limb or extremity. Still, this scopic viscosity, the combination of photographs as sources of ethnographic elicitation and forced visceral reaction, provides a point of access and emulation that holds an incredible potential for combining visual and urban anthropology in the future.

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## **Reference**

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