Ethical Exclusions: Culpability in the Suffering of Vulnerable Populations

Abstract

This paper incorporates various sources, especially the ethnography Righteous Dopefiend, in order to analyze mainstream culpability in the suffering of vulnerable populations. It does so by seeking to draw to attention certain exclusions of information regarding the suffering of others and by calling attention to the systemic forces which affect this suffering. Specifically, this paper explores the topic of systemic exclusion in the Kansas City greater metropolitan area. It analyzes the development of racial segregation in the city and the forces which created it. It discusses the topics of gentrification, segregation, ghettoization, homelessness and the exclusion of vulnerable populations in public places in relation to Kansas City and Righteous Dopefiend. This paper seeks to develop the connection between our ideologies and actions and our contribution to the suffering of disenfranchised people.

Regardless of whether or not we are aware of it, we as a society are constantly making choices about what to include and exclude in our ethical thinking. In the words of Amartya Sen, each ethical judgment we make is “characterized by its informational basis: the information that is needed for making judgments using that approach and -no less important- the information that is ‘excluded’ from a direct evaluative role in that approach” (Sen 56). Because of the role they play, it should be obvious that these exclusions are not without ramifications. On a societal and socioeconomic level, some people may be insulated from these ramifications while others, especially those living on the margins of society, are not.

In the ethnography Righteous Dopefiend, Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg capture years of fieldwork with homeless heroin addicts living on Edgewater Boulevard in San Francisco. They follow the lives, deaths, relationships and daily struggles of individuals living a severely marginalized and extremely difficult existence. These are people who are painfully isolated from
mainstream society and their suffering is often outright excluded or twisted by mainstream discourse. Because their severe addictions and lack of resources make every day a struggle to avoid the pain of withdrawal and to survive without steady shelter and food, they are unlikely to hold traditional, legal day jobs or live up to dominant standards of success. Put simply, they do not have a productive or socially sanctioned place in the economy or labor force. This lack of position makes them especially vulnerable to exclusion in a capitalist-and profit-driven society (Bourgois and Schonberg 306). These anthropologists’ ethnographic fieldwork digs deeply into the daily challenges and perpetual suffering of those they study, while continually relating it back to the structural and ideological forces at work in shaping and deepening the problems and experiences they face. It is abundantly clear in Righteous Dopefiend that the profound impact our exclusions, both intentional and unintentional, have on policy and discourse, both of which are embodied in daily experience. This ethnography shows that decisions or ideas that might seem distant or irrelevant to the suffering of others (such as spending our tax dollars on revenue development or moving to the suburbs) actually make a profound impact. As demonstrated in Righteous Dopefiend, we often have and act on beliefs that we feel are simply our own rightful and justified personal opinions or priorities without fully understanding the concrete effect this has on others’ lives.

With that being said, it would be an ethical injustice to simply use Righteous Dopefiend to reflect solely on the suffering of the people portrayed in it. To do so would be a glaring exclusion in our ethical thinking. Instead, it can be used as a tool to help us address parallel suffering to which we bear witness as members of our stratified society and divided cities. In this paper, I will do just that. I will consider Kansas City in the light provided by the tool that is Righteous Dopefiend. I will argue that our ethical exclusions in the Kansas City area translate into the direct suffering and physical isolation of vulnerable populations. My intention in this paper is to show that, because our ethical exclusions translate so significantly and directly into the abject suffering of others, we have culpability in this suffering and a responsibility to expand our ethical thinking and our actions.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that in this paper I will use the terms ‘us’ and ‘we’ to describe those with a more privileged socioeconomic background as individuals and mainstream America as a whole. I will also sometimes, for convenience, use ‘them’ to refer to people who are disenfranchised, homeless, impoverished, isolated or otherwise routinely excluded from significant consideration in prominent discourse. I do not intend this to draw or reinforce a clear distinction and separation between the two, as that
would be contrary to the goal of this paper. Instead, I intend to distinguish an important sector of the population of the United States, which is perceived separately and unfairly by those who are given more consideration, and to indicate the culpability of the latter majority in the suffering of the former. Before we can begin to address the exclusions and suffering that occur in Kansas City, it is important to consider Kansas City as a whole, and to understand a bit about how it came to be structured the way it is. The main factors in the physically and geographically embodied inequality of Kansas City are gentrification, suburbanization, ghettoization and division.

Kansas City has been a leader in the process of suburbanization. According to author Thomas Frank, Kansas City’s well-known Country Club Plaza district was “the nation’s fully restricted, fully-planned automobile suburb” (113). It is a shopping district located on the western edge of the city comprised of mostly expensive stores and ornate and decorative buildings that cater to affluent consumers. The Country Club Plaza and the development of suburbia in Kansas City were spearheaded by the developer J.C. Nichols. Nichols is arguably the single most important person in the development of the urban and suburban landscape of Kansas City. Nichols said himself he wanted to propagate the idea that “what was good for Kansas City was good for the J.C. Nichols company, and vice versa” (Frank 123). The problem with this vision however, was that J.C. Nichols’s idea of good excluded vulnerable and impoverished people. Thomas Frank’s article about Kansas City’s suburban development outlines Nichols’s dream of “City Beautiful” and his desire for perfection (119). As Frank says, Nichols’s idea was to “restart the town elsewhere, with all-new neighborhoods, rigid restrictions, and no poor people” (119). Nichols did just that. Kansas City has an astonishingly affluent suburban community in Johnson County, referred to by author Richard Rhodes as “Cupcake Land”. Rhodes goes on to describe Cupcake Land as “pleasantness, well-scrubbed and bland” (51). This seems to accurately portray the dream of J.C. Nichols and the reality of Johnson County today with its low crime rate, excellent schools, clean streets, nice houses and manicured lawns.

The sharp division of Kansas City neighborhoods is directly related to, and partially a result of, suburbanization. Troost Avenue is a particularly divisive line, which separates Kansas City sharply by class and race. On the east side there are poorer, predominantly Black neighborhoods. There are affluent and predominately white neighborhoods on the west side. The creation of this dividing line was no accident. Kevin Fox Gotham addresses the “building of the Troost Wall” in his book *Race, Real Estate and Uneven Development*. He identifies the school board’s efforts to preserve segregated schools by using Troost Avenue as a “racially identifiable school attendance boundary
from 1955-1975, separating White schools to the west and Black schools to the east (93). He writes, “School boundary decisions transformed Troost Avenue into a cognitive racial boundary that profiteering real estate agents and “blockbusters” manipulated to stimulate White flight from neighborhoods east of Troost Avenue” (93). This dividing line, manipulated and manufactured for profit and to exclude certain populations, has remained in Kansas City as a visible and significant divider that still has profound impacts on the community as a whole and particularly those living on the east side. The divide has become legitimized and normalized as a part of Kansas City life. It is often taken for granted, as some sort of natural feature that arose as a conglomerate of individual choices and preferences. However, as we have seen, this is not the case. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Kansas City was not always this way. Gotham writes,

Before the rise of the modern real estate industry and creation of segregated neighborhoods, there is no evidence that residents in Kansas City perceived a connection between race, culturally specific behavior and place of residence. [...] Blacks and whites tended to live close to one another in shared neighborhoods[...] (23).

As Gotham shows, we cannot assume this boundary to be natural, rational or justifiable because it is none of those things. It is manufactured. When we normalize its existence we acquiesce to an ideology that allows us to justify such visible inequalities and exclusions. When we subscribe to this ideology we fail to recognize the racist and classist systems at work. In doing so, we perpetuate systems to manufacture inequality and suffering.

My argument as a whole is that when we exclude the unique struggles of vulnerable populations we participate in and contribute to their suffering and oppression. We do so not just on a level of policy or funding although those are directly and incredibly significant—but on an ideological level that is embodied in daily experience, mental and physical suffering, and interpersonal relationships. Even in the instances where we do not directly or even consciously exclude the suffering of vulnerable or excluded people (such as when we make choices to benefit ourselves or when we engage in blame-the-victim discourse) we are still doing harm. We are doing harm because we are still creating, enforcing and perpetuating systems that create, reinforce and perpetuate unnecessary suffering. Placing individual blame on those in dire situations of homelessness, drug addiction, unemployment, and poverty is an easy resolution, but it fails to hold accountable the structural, systematic, and intuitional forces impacting their realities. Failing to recognize true
Responsibility can be incredibly harmful to those already suffering. As Bourgeois and Schonberg write in *Righteous Dopefiend*,

The widespread misrecognition of class power [...] subjects the poor, the powerless, and especially those addicted to drugs to dismissive moral judgments. [...] Condemning the actions of the powerless colludes with and exonerates those who are directly responsible for creating gray zones. (318-19)

It is easy to confuse the middle class struggle to find a good job, or the work put into getting a college education or advancing in a career, as proof of the validity of the individualist American Dream ideology. However, when we apply the rhetoric of individual responsibility to those who not only lack the same opportunities and resources but also face unique and incredible challenges we may not even know exist, we are not only grossly mistaken but acutely harmful as well.

As referenced with Kansas City, the exclusion of vulnerable people in discourse and consideration is often embodied in physical exclusion and geographic isolation. Geographic isolation is a self-reinforcing social structure. Our exclusions in our ethical thinking of ‘undesirable’ or ‘problematic’ populations translate into structural force, which manufactures physical isolation. This in turn removes their suffering from our experience and grants us ignorance, thereby isolating us further from the situations they face.

Thus, we become less and less in touch with the complex experience of other people, perpetuating our perceived reason for physical isolation, and feeding our growing misunderstanding and misinterpretation of what little we do see. This can contribute to racism, stereotyping and blaming the victim. A Missouri report on homelessness elaborates on our exclusion of vulnerable populations based on our physical isolation. It reads,

One explanation for the ‘invisibility’ of the homeless: those who are financially well off are spending less time in spaces occupied by the poor. The trends are away from public schooling, public transportation, public parks and city living and towards private education, remote homes, health clubs and online shopping. (Gould, Langton)

As we can see, the physical isolation and exclusion of certain people is not an accident and its consequences are not harmless. When we do not interact with a diverse range of populations we lack the experience to understand the impact of the choices we make and the systems we create and perpetuate. We
are left in blissful ignorance of the suffering caused by the structural forces in which we participate. Our ethical exclusions can become embodied in physical exclusions that serve to isolate and perpetuate exclusionary systems.

**Ghettoization**

Ghettoization is a concept central to the exclusion that is a theme common to both *Righteous Dopefiend* and Kansas City. Ghettoization involves the relegation of excluded and vulnerable populations deemed problematic or inferior to physical spaces characterized by decay, crime, drug use, violence, poverty and an overall poor infrastructure. However, the suffering of people effectively confined to these spaces does not stop at limited resources and increased structural obstacles. Mainstream dialogue propagates an individualist ideology that puts the responsibility on each person to better their situation without regard to the practical limits and structural forces working against them. This involves a blame-the-victim discourse that creates a sense of failure in those who, as to be expected, cannot achieve a middle class ideal of success amid such significant obstacles. Often this supposed failure can be used as justification of inequality, proof that they did not work hard enough and are therefore undeserving.

In Kansas City, Troost Avenue provides a clear line that delineates “ghetto” neighborhoods from affluent ones. It separates the physical decay and higher crime rates from the well-kept wealthy neighborhoods. David Sibley describes distinct borders such as this in *Geographies of Exclusion*, “the delineation of a border between the inside and the outside is the simple logic of excluding filth” (2). In Kansas City, the manufacturing of a divisionary line allows affluent residents to avoid acknowledging the structurally imposed suffering on the other side, and creates a clean barrier to exclude the problems of the east side. Although the Troost barrier may be a convenient way to exclude problems, it has serious and damaging ramifications for those isolated in areas with poor resources and infrastructure. The suffering of each individual is exacerbated when their immediate community is condemned to an area where systemic and structural problems such as poor housing, low quality education, and exposure to violence and drug use are prevalent. As Bourgois and Schonberg write in *Righteous Dopefiend*, the problem is “the social isolation that occurs when poor people become ghettoized by the geographic concentration of subsidized housing neighborhoods with inferior infrastructures” (310). As aforementioned, more privileged people become increasingly isolated to the realities of life for vulnerable and impoverished populations, which leads to exclusion in ethical thinking and policymaking.
Once again, this isolation was not accidental but a deliberate expression of systems of power relations and exclusion. As Sibley says, “power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments” (14). In Kansas City the development of poorer, homogeneous Black neighborhoods was not a coincidence. Gotham writes that during the 1950s through the 1970s, “real estate firms began advertising property ‘east of Troost’ and ‘west of Troost’ implicitly designing the race of those to whom property was available within the city” (103). He continues, “The profiteering actions of local real estate agents and blockbusters played a key role in encouraging racial turnover and contributing to the subsequent physical deterioration” (103).

This pointed exclusion of vulnerable people has dire consequences that persist today. The vast discrepancy in infrastructure on the east side created massive ghettoization and suffering. The suffering of people facing life in a neighborhood stigmatized as ‘dangerous’ or ‘ghetto’ is twofold: their opportunities are impaired by the structural obstacles brought on by poverty and poor infrastructure, but they also suffer on a personal level when we blame them for their inability to overcome those challenges or to improve their neighborhood, and when we stigmatize them as failures, further isolating them from ‘success’ as perceived in affluent America.

In 2009, the *Pitch*, a local Kansas City newspaper, ran a story entitled “Murder Factory: 64130 the ZIP Code of Notoriety in Missouri.” It was an article about a particularly poor and crime ridden ZIP code in Kansas City that included interviews with people incarcerated for murder who lived in the ZIP code. According to the article, its residents make up 6% of the state’s population, but 20% of those incarcerated for murder or voluntary manslaughter. The article goes on to describe the reason for the “Murder Factory” designation, “if society set out to design an assembly line for producing killers, it’s hard to imagine any model more efficient than what exists inside its boundaries” (Rizzo). While society may not have set out to design an assembly line, Kansas City’s intentional exclusions have produced conditions, that precipitate violence. By failing to seriously consider and include the structurally imposed suffering of certain populations, we have created a situation where violence has become normalized. The newspaper article mentions factors precipitating the violence such as single parent homes, poverty, and the violent death of loved ones. It states that 60% of people surveyed from that ZIP code reported having at least one family member killed in a violent crime (Rizzo). The article also touches on the idea of isolation, referring to “a ZIP code that many outsiders see only when they zoom through” where “decades of relentless violence have left too many feeling under siege and cut off from the wider community” (Rizzo).
This reference to exclusion is noteworthy because it relates to the previous discussion of how isolation perpetuates itself. Because the rest of the city avoids the ZIP code and its violence, we lack the experience to understand the experiences of people within it. This can contribute to harmful misperceptions.

This article is of interest because it simultaneously explores direct results of exclusion while exemplifying mainstream rhetoric of individualism. The incarcerated people interviewed about the ZIP code and their own lives invariably appealed to the individualist rhetoric and blamed solely themselves for their crimes, despite their descriptions of the challenges of living in the area. As one inmate wrote in his poem “I am the master of my own destiny/ I choose to get high everyday/ I choose to take this man’s life” (Murder Factory). There is a self-blame and sense of personal failure embodied in those lines that is reminiscent of a homeless heroin addict in Righteous Dopefiend, Tina. At one point during the book, Tina had recently completed a 31-day treatment program but had started using again. “Tina took full responsibility for her relapse, despite her counselor’s inability to locate post detox and housing services. […] She mourned her relapse, convinced of her own worthlessness” (Bourgois, Schonberg 281). These sentiments are a direct result of mainstream rhetoric that blames those without resources for their problems. This rhetoric becomes internalized and creates a sense of failure in the individual. This blaming rhetoric relates back to geographic isolation and perceived responsibilities, such as discussed in the Murder Factory article. When we stigmatize people for failing to meet our standards of success, we cause them additional suffering because it leads them to lament their struggles solely as personal failures. This ignores the huge role structural inequality plays and assumes that our choices are irrelevant to the suffering of others. Recognizing the systematic and structural causes surrounding the embodied suffering of others would result in an uncomfortable culpability we are not willing to accept. We simply express sadness when faced with the suffering of others yet we maintain the current power relations and ideology that exempts us from this burden.

The blame-the-victim and individualist rhetoric is directly related to the geographic isolation and segregation present in Kansas City and elsewhere. This segregation and dominant perceptions of it lend a flawed logic of association and causation that Gotham discusses:

This connection between racial segregation, minority poverty, and deviant behavior tends to shape affluent and White perceptions and interpretations of social reality that may lead to scapegoating, and individualist explanations of social inequality that focus on the so-called pathological behaviors and moral values of the disadvantaged as the cause of social problems (150).
This association develops into a justification for holding those suffering accountable for the structural forces causing that suffering. The development and propagation of this ideology is very beneficial for some people at the expense of others. Gotham explains the manipulation of blame for profit in Kansas City, “to expedite the sale of property, real estate agents and firms attempted to define Black movement into White neighborhoods as invariably leading to increased crime, falling property values, and neighborhood decline” (103). This association, perpetuated for selfish motives, molded mainstream middle-class American discourse to be predisposed to exclude suffering. Self-interest and misdirected blame allow us to exempt ourselves from responsibility and when we blame victims we contribute directly to the perpetuation of suffering.

Gentrification and Suburbanization

Gentrification and suburbanization are important components and examples of geographic and ethical exclusion. They contribute directly to the suffering of impoverished and/or vulnerable populations and are direct results of our exclusions, while serving to perpetuate isolation and ignorance. Even though both processes involve clear structural and systematic inequality, they are often easily justified through a perceived social “common sense.” Often we justify our exclusions to ourselves, believing we are acting simply out of a reasonable, “common sense” self-interest. For example, people move to the suburbs for the good schools, the bigger yards and houses, the lack of crime. People avoid the ‘dangerous’ ZIP codes and public transportation system out of fear for personal safety. Although suburbanization and gentrification are structural processes, they are enacted through individuals. The forces at work which are perpetuating and deepening the suffering of others are obscured in what seems like an obvious personal choice. However, both of these processes make housing and jobs more difficult for vulnerable populations and contribute to the concept of invisibility discussed earlier.

The personal choice rhetoric that explains White flight in Kansas City and elsewhere is closely tied to ghettoization and the perceived causal association between poor minorities and neighborhood deterioration. Gotham explains,
The physical deterioration of majority Black neighborhoods compared to majority White neighborhoods confirmed Whites’ beliefs that Blacks caused residential deterioration and instability [...]. Once such sentiments were validated, amplified and diffused, White resistance to racial integration and flight to the suburbs became the logical course of action. (116)

Through Gotham’s analysis we can begin to see that ideologies operate within structural forces, which shape inequalities. Flight to the suburbs and resistance to integration only becomes the logical course of action if we subscribe to an ideology that identifies vulnerable populations as responsible for the structural forces working against them. When we exclude the bigger picture we mistakenly take actions and adopt ideas that contribute to the suffering of others. “The emphasis on individualism denies the structural basis of racial inequality while the reference to competition and laissez-faire disavows racial differences in material resources and justifies unequal outcomes” (Gotham 145). It is easy for us to conveniently overlook that which affects others unlike ourselves, especially when doing so appears to serve our self-interest. However, we must accept responsibility that our ideologies and actions have concrete effects on the suffering of marginalized people.

The suburbs of Kansas City were created specifically with exclusion of certain populations in mind. Gotham describes the view that “all-White racially homogenous neighborhoods were a superior atmosphere for residential life and a requisite for protecting the homeowner’s assets” (35). This exclusionary idea had dangerous consequences. Gotham proceeds to describe in detail the use of racially restrictive covenants and homeowners’ associations to keep Blacks out of developing suburbia (45). Exclusion and isolation were selling points for these suburban developments. Although exclusion was presented as a means of protection against decay and devaluation of property that is and was justified as rational, it left the urban core at a huge loss and accelerated the deterioration of poor neighborhoods, increasing the burden on vulnerable people. It is evidence that when we exclude certain information or people from our actions and decisions, they can have significant consequences.

Gentrification is another exclusionary tactic used in Kansas City and throughout the United States. Gentrification is often justified under the guise of benefiting the community. However, the reality is that gentrification pushes vulnerable populations out of neighborhoods as they become more expensive and tailored to the needs of the upper and middle class. Gotham elaborates, “Through intentional and sustained efforts [...] urban renewal became [an] oppressive device for stigmatizing racial minorities and the poor and clearing
their neighborhoods under the guise of progress” (89). As Gotham shows, gentrification is not a natural or easy process, it is a system designed to benefit some at the expense of others. These supposed ideas of ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ often benefit the dominant class while creating more obstacles and suffering for vulnerable populations.

Tax subsidies are one way in which gentrification occurs and exclusions of vulnerable and impoverished populations are structurally imposed. In reference to how tax dollars are used to spur ‘development’ and to benefit the community consider that “the federal government spends only one dollar on low income housing programs for every four dollars it gives in tax breaks to homeowners” (Gould, Langton). This gross discrepancy appeals to a common sense logic of economic growth, yet it does so at great costs. The withholding of tax dollars to provide housing aid is directly experienced in the pain of homelessness. Amid rhetoric of development and economic growth, we allow and promote suffering. Bourgois and Schonberg discuss national tax breaks oriented towards suburbanization and the middle class in Righteous Dopefiend. They specifically mention Ronald Reagan’s tax plan that gave huge breaks to middle-class America and directly promoted suburban development, but did so at the direct expense of the inner city (3). His highway development and tax breaks to homebuyers furthered the stratification of society through its resulting processes of suburbanization and ghettoization. This unfair emphasis on middle-class economic development in policy is a direct result of our ideology’s ethical exclusions. When we fail to consider the impact our actions have on other populations it leads to policies, that can cause them significant harm.

The Crossroads area in Kansas City is a prime example of gentrification funded through taxes. The area was ‘improved’ through TiFs, which are essentially taxpayer funded development projects. The Crossroads “began as an industrial section” of Kansas City, home to manufacturing jobs (Schuckman). Throughout Righteous Dopefiend, Bourgois and Schonberg discuss the devastating impact of the decline in manufacturing jobs on vulnerable populations lacking social capital and skills necessary for jobs in the emerging information technology-based market. In the Crossroads, the plan for a major TiF was to “foster an urban-live-work environment by developing office, studio, retail and residential units, the design and construction of a premiere office complex suitable for a national corporate headquarters” (Schuckman). Bourgois and Schonberg’s analysis remind us that these developments exclude some populations. People who lack a position within an information-oriented economy are excluded from benefiting from this development, and are harmed by the loss of accessible jobs. Although the seemingly harmless idea of TiFs is to
provide revenue for the city and improve its infrastructure, we often fail to consider the impact it has on those who are struggling to survive. Although the Crossroads district was not significantly inhabited prior to its ‘redevelopment’, as it consisted mostly of industrial buildings, the displacement of vulnerable people is still evident through economic displacement and elimination of job opportunities and other resources. Gotham writes, “Urban renewal not only dislocated residents, but also disrupted entire neighborhoods as residents were now forced to travel outside their neighborhoods to obtain [...] resources and services. [...] Urban renewal became a synonym for Black removal” (85, 83). The improvement for some comes at a cost of substantial disruption to others. Bourgois and Schonberg discuss throughout the book the elimination of manufacturing jobs and the inability of the impoverished people they are working with to adapt to the new labor market. San Francisco especially was a hub for information technology jobs and for shocking housing cost increases in the city. Changes such as these that the mainstream often sees as positive developments cause significant suffering in the form of joblessness, homelessness, addiction, and hunger. We often exclude this view from our perspective, blindly pursuing economic development. However, we often fail to consider that we are making a choice to fund corporate development at the cost of creating suffering.

Homelessness and Exclusion in the Public Sphere

Gentrification is not just embodied in the elimination of affordable housing or job displacement; it is also displayed in the exclusion of undesirable people from supposedly public spaces which become shaped to serve the dominant majority. “Who is felt to belong and not to belong contributes in an important way to the shaping of social space” (Sibley 3). This belonging represents, reflects and perpetuates the existing power structure. Widely known examples of exclusion of vulnerable people in Kansas City include the aforementioned Country Club Plaza and the Power and Light Entertainment District. The Kansas City Power and Light District is an entertainment district comprised mostly of bars in downtown Kansas City that cater to a particularly white and affluent crowd. Private companies operate both districts and both are for-profit. In Kansas City, both of these locations have been infamous for exclusion. I have personally witnessed many homeless people asking for money evicted from their spots on or near the Plaza, while the dress code of Power and Light specifically targeted clothing which specifically targeted certain groups, such as bandanas, work boots, long shirts and sagging pants and shorts. Both areas represent pseudo-public spaces privately run for revenue, allowing them increased ability to dictate who to exclude. Sibley brings up
another particular example of exclusion in Britain, but his analysis is relevant here also, “It should not be seen just as an arena where this particular power game was played, however but as one instance of the interaction between space and people which forms part of the routines for the reproduction of power relations in an advanced capitalist society” (XIV). Seeing suffering in the face of affluence is unsettling. Spending disposable income can be uncomfortable when directly faced with a shivering homeless person struggling to survive.

Geographic isolation in public spaces is a form of structural and symbolic violence that is normalized. The homeless are the most vulnerable population to geographic isolation and displacement because of their insecure residential status. Bourgois and Schonberg reflect on the assault on homeless encampments in San Francisco, “newspapers published front page stories with battlefield style maps peppered with red dots to indicate the locations of targeted homeless encampments throughout the city” (San Francisco Examiner 1997; March 26; Bourgois 219). Here we could make the mistake of assuming that this was specific to San Francisco at that particular time, but a news story from Kansas City from April 9, 2013 about the eviction of a significant homeless encampment proves otherwise. A representative of Hope Faith Ministries (an organization which works with the homeless) accompanied police in destroying the camp (Ortiz). The blame-the-victim rhetoric was incredibly prominent from both the police and the volunteers. They justified the destruction of the camp with the prevention of crime and an attempt to “prod its inhabitants to seek real shelter” (Ortiz). Sargent Cooley of the Kansas City police department claimed, “‘many people [...] are just resigned to this extreme existence. I don’t believe [they] will take advantage of the opportunities. [...] We can’t make them” (Ortiz). When we engage in victim blaming such as this without recognition of structural forces we place an unfair burden on those who suffer. Instead, we should examine systematically what prevents the homeless from seeking shelter. Why would people choose an elaborate and difficult underground structure over a comfortable shelter? Perhaps, as Bourgois and Schonberg would suggest, they do so because the problem and solution are not so simple. Social structures in place to help homeless and vulnerable people should be informed by the realities of their lives, and work with them for effective problem solving, not righteously prescribe a solution. When we exclude the perspective of those we are supposedly trying to help, we do an injustice to them and our efforts are thwarted. In fact, initiatives such as these which attempt a sort of zero tolerance/tough love approach to eliminating homelessness not only fail to solve the problem but exacerbate the difficulties faced by homeless people. Bourgois and Schonberg reference the
effects of amped up evictions of the camps they studied: “The instability reduced their access to outreach services, but the number of people living on the boulevard did not diminish.[...] Interpersonal relationships in the network diminished as daily life became even more precarious and isolated” (222). These efforts did nothing to alleviate the suffering of homeless or to benefit their community or access to resources; instead they presented a façade of improving the community at the expense of increasing challenges and difficulties for vulnerable people.

Homelessness is a form of suffering which is a consequence of a lack of affordable housing. Lack of affordable housing is a direct result of the choices we make as a society. These choices are made within an ethical framework that excludes vulnerable populations. Bourgois and Schonberg discuss Single Room Occupancy housing (which is intended to house impoverished people with unstable residential status) throughout Righteous Dopefiend showing how decreased access to SROs leaves vulnerable people with nowhere to turn but the streets. In Kansas City, the struggle to obtain affordable housing is much the same. Susan Miller from Rose Brooks Center describes how “the waiting lists for affordable housing continue to be so long that families are residing in shelters for a year” (Gould, Langton). Also she describes how “the lack of adequate funding for rent subsidy and housing rehabilitation is forcing low income families and individuals into substandard housing and/or homeless situations” (Gould, Langton) Miller’s examples show that when we make choices on how to distribute our tax dollars, we make choices that have an incredible impact on some people more than others. When we value economic revenue over housing impoverished people, excluding their suffering in our consideration, we leave them with nowhere to turn.

Analyzing the structurally imposed problems of homeless and vulnerable people and factoring them into our ethical framework may seem to be a daunting task. Finding solutions to reach out effectively is difficult, but we need to remember, “there is no greater cause nor solution to homelessness than the availability of safe, affordable housing” (Gould, Langton). We need to step back and remember the widespread poverty, suffering, homelessness and geographic segregation are not natural and unchangeable. Although recognizing the exclusions of others can be difficult, that is not an excuse to overlook significant suffering and systemic realities. It is a reality that people are suffering and we have the power within our choices to either attempt to alleviate it, to perpetuate it, or to deepen it. I argue that the first step to alleviating systemic suffering and social and geographic exclusions is to begin to include vulnerable populations in our framework for ethical thinking and decision-making.
Works Cited


