

BOOK REVIEW

addicted. pregnant. poor.

By Kelly Ray Knight

Reviewed by Heather Micklewright

Kelly Ray Knight's ethnography, *addicted. pregnant. poor*, gifts its readers with a thoughtful, level-headed, and even dispassionate account of women in San Francisco's Mission District who face truly searing traumas. As such, it came as a relief after more than 200 pages to encounter an honest acknowledgement of the weight of her work:

I am having lunch with a friend, colleague, and longtime interlocutor. I have let it slip during our conversation that it is very hard for me, personally, as a mother, to bear witness to pregnant women smoking crack. She asked me what I do when I see a pregnant woman smoking crack and I say, "I don't know. Sometimes I just want to kill her." Later in the conversation she says, "Kelly, I have to tell you, you seem really burnt out. I don't think I have ever heard you say you want to kill one of your women before." (231)

It is hard to imagine how four years of ethnographic work among this population could be done without periods of burn-out, and I am grateful the author persisted. Her goal is "to tease out the threads that construct a web of apparent intractability for women who are categorized as addicted, pregnant, poor" (6). The first chapter sets the stage for everything that follows by introducing the reader to daily-rent hotels, a particular form of housing instability, and to the themes of consumption and instability as related to drugs, food, sex work, housing, and pregnancy. In some of these domains, the women are consumers; in others, they are being consumed. Frequently, it is a complicated mixture of both.

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Knight goes on to outline the multiple temporalities the women inhabit with the intention of unseating a tendency towards binary categorization—homeless or housed, addicted or clean, mentally ill or stable. She counts nine such temporalities: addict time, hotel time, pregnancy time, jail time, treatment time, epidemiological time, biomedical time, memorial time, and life time. Each of these categories is explained with care for how they impinge on one another. Through understanding them, the reader gains insight into the entanglement and apparent intractability of addiction and poverty.

From this foundation, the reader is launched into the world of power structures with which Knight's subjects interact. We learn how neoliberal-influenced government policy seeks to deny assistance to persons dealing with substance abuse while retaining aid for mental illness despite these categories being impossibly intertwined. Doing so has created an industry of "neurocrats"—people responsible for assembling documentation to artificially separate mental illness symptoms from substance abuse behaviors. These policies, along with pharmaceutical industry interests, have led to labelling the women with various psychiatric diagnoses, most commonly PTSD and bipolar, even though there are compelling arguments "that the behaviors needed to survive in street settings—social withdrawal, aggression, hypervigilance, theft, and rage" (131) are as much a pragmatic adaptation to their environment as an illness. These labels give women a form of "social legibility". Thus, poverty and mental illness operate in a recursive relationship.

The remaining chapters of the book examine the socio-political aspects of addiction, pregnancy, and poverty by focusing on three themes. The first is stratified reproduction—the concept of who a society considers fit to reproduce and how such persons are empowered or disempowered to that end. Then there are "kin of last resort", family members who figure prominently in the stories of how these women became addicted yet are relied upon to care for children once the state has intervened. Finally, Knight considers how

neoliberal and neo-Marxist conceptions of the individual interact with our understanding of these women in their roles as both victim and perpetrator. It is particularly the last of these themes to which a Christian anthropology might offer an added perspective.

A neoliberal perspective on citizenship understands the individual as personally responsible for both individual and social failures, with one's own free will being the locus of all criminal intent or negligence. This view contradicts the emerging scientific understanding of addiction as a complex brain disease. Meanwhile, a neo-Marxist position locates responsibility for addiction and poverty with state neglect and structural inequalities. A Christian perspective merges the perceived exclusivity of these views through the concept of sin. The doctrine of sin recognizes that brokenness pervades the world touching every system and individual. If any conception of free will is to be upheld, then the addicted, pregnant, poor woman bears some responsibility for her state. And yet, as their stories demonstrate, these women are victims of systems outside their control. Thus, a theology of sin acknowledges and affirms the author's observation that these women are victim-perpetrators; however, sin is neither the beginning nor the end of the Christian story.

The theological beginning of the human story is creation in the image of God. While theologians might debate what this encompasses, Christians agree that it confers an innate dignity upon every person. Throughout her ethnographic work, Knight is conscious of this dignity and it is central to her attempts to paint the lives of these women both mercifully and truthfully. In her introduction, dignity is in the background as she acknowledges the tension that ethnography is a form of consumption so that she is a participant in the "culture of vulturism" (23) that marks the lives of her informants. Dignity is also critical to the book's conclusion which emphasizes the necessity of understanding addicted, pregnant women not only as victims, not only through the paradigms of the worthy and unworthy poor, but as whole persons who have "a theory, an explanation, or an opinion at least, about why it is turning out this way" (239).

The end of the Christian story is redemption of all of creation. I confess that I wish redemption was easier to come by in the pages of this book; I'm sure Knight does too. It would be the height of naivete to think that the quandaries of addicted pregnancy and poverty can be resolved by ethnographic insights, and Knight never suggests that this is possible, writing eloquently in her conclusion about her hope to give witness, to hold space, and to invite these women and their stories to become a part of herself. I was particularly struck by this statement:

Whether we construe addiction as a condition exacerbated by a woman's social position of poverty and housing instability when they become pregnant and/or as biological disease over which they have little control, it was an act of sheer resurrection to escape the pull back into her pre-pregnant social world. (234)

In spite of the pain to which she must give witness, Knight reminds us that the gifts of presence and dignity matter. These are the gifts given by the addiction treatment provider who insists that the hundredth attempt might be the one that matters, and they are the gifts given by Knight in dedicating four years to showing up, listening well, and inviting us to do the same through her witness in this book. Ultimately, these gifts matter because they call people to know and to be known, binding us together in the hope for resurrection.

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