

Critical Reflections on When Brotherly Love Fails: A History of Structural Violence in Kensington, Philadelphia

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Our project started with visits to Kensington, Philadelphia, with the service focus cohort, under the direction of Dr. Sebastián Ramírez, Dr. Yi-Ching Ong, and Professor João Biehl. As guests to the community, we listened, in seriousness and in awe, as individuals and directors of caregivers in the community discussed the media portrayals of Kensington versus their actual experiences in the community. Under our directors' care and the tutelage of the course Medical Anthropology, we learned the importance of understanding the historical narrative when tackling the health issues of today. Thus, our project explores the many historical narratives of Kensington; infrastructural changes, demographic shifts, and the progression of criminogenics, to reveal structural violence and historical truths that shape Kensington today, and the recognition of these structures and truths can help break negative cycles in Kensington.

As our project title suggests, Kensington today is a product of structural violence. Our presentation of this history of structural violence was inspired by Latoya Ruby Frazier's portrayal of her community, Braddock, Pennsylvania, in *The Notion of Family* (2014). Frazier captures the complexity of her own family dynamic and external factors of racism and structural violence parallel to the dying exterior infrastructure. Her technique includes black and white images, similar to those of Gordon Parks, as well as the portrayal of her community over generations of women in her family— from booming industry, to deindustrialization and racism, to structural violence and social issues perpetrated by the remaining power structures in her community. Similarly, for our project, we collected photos of Kensington over time to portray a

narrative that transcends generations. At the beginning of the timeline we start with the infrastructure of the earliest times using maps, policies and industry. As time moves on, we parallel the structural changes taking place in Kensington with something more personal, like Frazier, by entering the world of criminogenics and rebuking media portrayals. Therefore, our multi-generational approach gives reason to the criminogenics and social issues that Kensington is facing, and much like Frazier's Grandmother's affected body from growing up around industry, we can see the social issues propagating out of Kensington as linked to the white flight and emergence of a socially disadvantaged immigrant populations.

Given our section on criminology, it is necessary to explore the categorical implications of terms such as criminal and drug addict. In *Making Up People*, Ian Hacking (1999) examines the circular narrative of categorizing people and their intra and interpersonal interactions with categories, as Hacking asserts that relationships with a category can lead to more negative outcomes particularly relating to individual mobility and societal judgement. We were mindful of this concept when creating our section on criminology– we do not mean to categorize addicts as criminals; in fact, we aim to derail that mentality. By closely analyzing Kensington's history, we trace the changing perceptions of addiction with an emphasis on the policies and laws implemented related to addiction being classified disease or with the implementation of treatment programs rather than incarceration. Our research on the Pennsylvania Harm Reduction Coalition, as well as countless discussions as a members of Service Focus's Health & Care cohort over the term *drug addict*, have pointed out the negative connotations and media attention that it draws while in fact derailing important attention to areas in the community that work to break the cycle of structural violence. For example, Esperanza's new location in Kensington at

the former base of the famous K&A Gang provides health services and classes to teach individuals and community members useful things about health, while restoring their faith in a community and home that the media has labeled “The Badlands.”

On the topic of the media, our timeline included a video from *VICE*, a virtual magazine that depicts Kensington as a horrid place to live. This shames Kensington’s residents and criminalizes its existence instead of pointing out social inequalities in order to assist community growth. This is exactly what Hacking warns about as a negative side effect of labeling (1999). Due to the ever-present photographic media portrays of Kensington such as the New York Times (NYT) article *The Walmart of Heroin*, we can use Susan Sontag’s analysis from *Regarding the Pain of Others* to explore the dangers of these photographs (2003). These images of Kensington are shocking in much of the same way as the images of war Sontag discusses because they capture something the audience has not experienced or seen before. However, Sontag is quick to point out that these photographs always miss something due to framing, and furthermore she explains how photographs are simply used as a concise way to contextualize a much larger situation (2003, 46;22). These photographs and media portrayals from *VICE* and the *NYT* only show the drug affected side of Kensington. Thus, we denounce *VICE* and the *NYT* article in our project by focusing instead on the narratives that led drugs to propagate in Kensington, as well as the positive community resources.

As we look to the future of Kensington, it is important to understand the counter histories present throughout the timeline so that Kensington, and Philadelphia more generally, are not only perceived as the “Meth Capital of the World.” Instead, we can understand the structural implications that propagated poverty, drug use, and homelessness, among other societal concerns,

so further resources can enter these communities. We know that COVID-19 acts as a propagator of structural violence; it pushes those without care and homes to the bottom of the list when it comes to public concern and care. In light of this crisis, we hope public health officials are more eager to adopt “helping a brother” policies such as increased social safety nets. While things may be bleak for Kensington during this pandemic, although we can surely know that community members are doing everything they can, the aftershock may humanize the community and incentivize further social change.

Bibliography

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