UNEARTHING IGNORANCE

Hurricane Katrina and the Re-Envisioning of the Urban Black Poor

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Abstract

This essay explores some social ramifications of two portraits of low-income African American New Orleanians that proliferated throughout the country since the arrival of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast. The dissemination of these portraits reveals much about America's cultural understandings of African Americans and urban poverty. Some recent ethnographic and qualitative-methodological work has striven to create new depictions of this constituency, but a divide persists between general-public readings of the African American urban poor and those of liberal-minded field researchers who have studied this population. This essay concludes with some reflection on issues concerning the potential for this research to bridge the divide, given the power of mainstream media outlets to construct and promote certain images of disadvantaged and disenfranchised social groups relative to the social power of academic scholarship to achieve the same end.

Keywords: Poverty, African Americans, Underclass, Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

For some time now, images associated with Hurricane Katrina have been well crystallized in the American social conscience. Beginning on Monday morning, August 29, 2005, and continuing throughout that week, print and visual media presented a slew of pictures that captured fear, despair, frustration, anger, and death, as the residents of New Orleans and its suburbs who remained there when the hurricane came ashore struggled to survive the floodwaters that spilled into their communities. New Orleans, in particular, offered a distinct portrait of this emotional mosaic. This portrait largely centered on socioeconomically disadvantaged African Americans.

While residents of various ethnic-group backgrounds and class standings chose to remain in the city during this calamity, it was low-income African Americans who came to symbolize the people who were without the means or mindset to evacuate

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New Orleans as the impending hurricane came aground. Many Americans responded with shock, outrage, and disgust after discovering that many New Orleanians were still in the city as the waters brought forth destruction and devastation to the region. Blame abounded, and it was directed at government officials for not implementing an evacuation plan, at the residents themselves for not evacuating, and sometimes both at the same time. Many who placed significant blame on government officials at the local, state, and national levels still remained bewildered over the fact that large numbers of lower-income Black Americans had not found some means of evacuating the city within the day prior to the arrival of the hurricane. At my institution of employment, the University of Michigan, I participated in a series of conversations with students whose underlying conviction about the matter was: "What were these people thinking when they decided to stay put?"

For many social scientists who study poverty and social inequality, I suspect that it was not at all surprising that the low-income people of New Orleans either had no means of delivering themselves from the forthcoming disaster, or determined that they could not abandon all of their possessions, come hell or high water (literally). Their possessions were as precious to them as they seemed meager and paltry to those in U.S. society who live more privileged and secure lives. But researchers and others who try to remain in touch with the everyday life experiences of the poor knew quite well what had gone on for these people.

The disadvantaged African American New Orleanians who remained behind for reasons other than an inability to secure some means of departure stayed put because they could not bring themselves to abandon their meager possessions, which were contained in their modest domiciles, and which stood as all that they possessed in the world beyond their physical being. Many of these people were committed to the notion that if their private worlds might dissolve in the face of a natural disaster, then they would bear direct witness to this unfolding. Others simply felt that they could not surrender their private spaces and belongings to a strange situation or to strangers who could usurp all that poor African American New Orleanians controlled in their lives.

When more privileged people say that they have lost "everything" following a natural or human-made disaster, they often mean to say that they have lost the valued material possessions that they have acquired up to the time of the crisis. They often have the material means and social connections to replace at least some of what has been lost. In no way is this meant to understate the impact of the emotional trauma borne by anyone who suffers from any such disaster. It is only to acknowledge that many low-income African American New Orleanians needed to be in their private worlds as the impending calamity came to them because they had little or no means of replacing those worlds. The will for someone to abandon his or her home in order to save him- or herself for the future is based on a presumption that such a person can actually imagine building some kind of future. For many African Americans living in or near poverty in New Orleans, thoughts of rebuilding for the future were unfathomable. Instead, they could focus only on being with or among all that they had during the crisis.

In the course of observing the destruction brought forth by Hurricane Katrina and the flood waters, and making up their minds about who was at fault for the situation that unfolded in New Orleans, those living outside of the Gulf region were bombarded with a multitude of portrayals and interpretations of the low-income African Americans who populated that city. Media coverage of the substantial effects of Katrina provided a vivid image, though perhaps a rather short-lived moment, through which low-income African Americans and their plight became starkly visible

to any American who tuned into the evening news, read newspapers or news-based periodicals, or listened to news radio during the fall of 2005. The media-produced images and their accompanying interpretations comprised two starkly contrasting general depictions of urban-based, low-income Black Americans.

As I will explain, the first depiction represents a long-standing and common— but, more importantly, also a flawed and problematic—vision of African American urban poverty. The second depiction involves a more accurate and perhaps more intriguing portrayal of poor African Americans. This depiction concerns poor people not simply in response to a crisis, but in the context of experiencing everyday life mired in socioeconomic disadvantage, marginality, and invisibility within the U.S. social order. The stark contrast between the two depictions is telling with regard to how America thinks about its African American urban poor and the possibilities for renewed and alternative thinking about this constituency. Accordingly, here I explore each of these depictions and how they relate to public and scholarly understandings of the African American urban poor. Essentially, my commentary considers how some of the more prominent media-derived depictions of low-income African American New Orleanians affirm how a moment of crisis reveals the failure of some academic pursuits to forward certain understandings of urban-based, low-income African Americans and the views and attitudes maintained about these people in the American public mindset.

TWO PORTRAITS OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANIANS IN CRISIS

The first of the generalized depictions constructed of low-income African Americans in the midst of a Katrina-flooded New Orleans is rooted in a vision of these people that is firmly embedded in contemporary American civic culture. There actually are two dimensions of this framing, each deriving from a particularly disturbing manner by which the African American urban poor are situated in the broader U.S. public mindset. On the one hand, these people are rendered invisible (or, at best, minimally visible) in the eyes of many more-privileged Americans. By this I mean that more-privileged Americans have no or little personal interactive experience to draw upon in order to form substantive conceptions of how low-income people encounter and manage the trials and tribulations of everyday life in poverty. As a consequence, stereotypes, myths, and misunderstandings substitute for actual encounters and involvements as the basis for making social judgments about the poor.

A rather revealing example of this lack of understanding was made evident when Barbara Bush, former First Lady and mother of the current president, visited evacuated New Orleans residents who were temporarily relocated to the Houston Astrodome. At the end of her visit she proclaimed that the situation was working out quite well for the residents, thus insinuating that living in tents among strangers on the floor of the Astrodome was a valued improvement in the quality of their lives. It may have been easy for many to dismiss her comments as the words of a hyperprivileged woman who lived a life far removed from that experienced by the urban poor. However, her remarks also indicated the extent to which members of certain class sectors in the United States have little insight into what is really going on in terms of the inner emotional and cognitive dispositions of poor people. The guiding understanding is that, because they are poor, any extension of material or social support must make them feel better about their life situation. In the thinking of some of the more privileged, therefore, the gravity and complexity of the enduring hardships of

the poor barely come to the surface, if at all. This dimension of a standard depiction of the African American urban poor denies them any emotional complexity, among other things.

On the other hand, the second disturbing dimension of the public imagery associated with low-income African Americans results from more-privileged people's decidedly vulgar form of intense preoccupation with them. That is, when the less privileged are taken into consideration by the more privileged, it is often through the former being viewed with suspicion, distrust, and consternation because of their presumably disorderly, pathological, or fatalistic orientation to everyday live. Rather than being seen through the simplistic and incomplete lens posited above, the African American urban poor are imagined here in great detail and precision to be a profligate constituency. As this imagination centers on behavioral attributes, it appears to be personally problematic for others because it results in feelings of threat and insecurity rather than negligence. Thus, rather than a merely fleeting acknowledgment or recognition, in this case, the African American urban poor must be consciously avoided, if not socially controlled, in order to maintain one's own sense of inner peace and security.

As scholars who study the urban poor fully understand, this second dimension is a direct by-product of U.S. society's embracing of the label *underclass* as a descriptor of the African American urban poor. As has been well documented (Gans 1995), the advent of the term, particularly as a signifier of the pernicious consequences of ethnic poverty in urban America, can be found in media publications that promoted the term.[1] A feature story in a 1977 issue of *Time* magazine gave rise to its more contemporary, and considerably more problematic, application (Gans 1995). The article, "The American Underclass: Destitute and Desperate in the Land of Plenty," expressed the view that the underclass were a constituency of socially alien, unreachable, and hostile people. This sentiment was easily accepted by an American public which, in the prior year, had witnessed media reports and images of widespread looting following the blackout of New York City, and which was still coming to terms with the apparent rise in crime and disorder that reflected U.S. urban society in the post-1960s era (Gans 1995).

The *Time* magazine feature story was only one of a number of publications that made the term *underclass* a legitimate tool for public understanding and discussion of contemporary African American urban poverty.[2] The term implied that a criminally inclined, violence-prone, despair-ridden, and culturally deficient group of individuals locked in an inescapable web of economic deprivation and pathology formed part of the African American urban poor. The underclass was made up of the most immobile and socially isolated of these urban dwellers. They had the fewest prospects for upward mobility, and they experienced little sustained interaction with those in more mobile positions (Wilson 1987). One of the more disturbing consequences of the emergence of the modern notion of the underclass is that it forwarded a vivid image of low-income African Americans, and especially men, as a public menace that flagrantly drew upon a pernicious street culture to advance public identities as unpredictable and volatile human beings. Consequently, a concise packaging of race, poverty, aggression, and threat became a principal means by which more-privileged Americans came to think about and make sense of the cultural and social foundations of low-income African Americans in the urban sphere.[3]

The public attention generated by the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans encouraged large-scale attention to that city's low-income African American constituency. For many, that attention took the form of casting an unfavorable eye upon them. The image of the low-income African Americans left in New Orleans in

the days immediately after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina was that of an under-class gone wild. In the first few days following the hurricane, this visibility was ensconced in images of threat and hostility that are often associated with low-income, urban-based African Americans. That assessment was attributed to these people having been emancipated from the usual mechanisms of social control (e.g., residential segregation, the formal policing of more privileged areas and communities), given that municipal services either fell into chaos, or else soon after the arrival of floodwaters had to be refocused on rescue-related and other emergency activities rather than surveillance and maintenance of social order. Newspaper and television accounts of shooting, looting, tumult, and disorder were the standard images during that early period.[4]

The scenes of attention during much of this early reporting of violence and aggression were the New Orleans Superdome (an athletic and public events arena) and the New Orleans Convention Center, both facilities having been established by Mayor Ray Nagin as emergency shelters immediately prior to the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. The *British Broadcasting Center* (*BBC*), to take one example, reported that officials in New Orleans explained that many accounts of wanton violence and murder were probably false or greatly exaggerated. In their coverage, the *BBC* reported that, despite the implications and insinuations of the initial press coverage and the public statements issued by government officials, the New Orleans police reported no rapes or murders in the days immediately following the flooding. Moreover, of the fourteen deceased bodies found among the New Orleans residents who sought shelter at the New Orleans Superdome or the Convention Center, only two involved gunshot wounds. One of those two bodies was believed to have been delivered to the Superdome after the gunshot wounds had been inflicted (*BBC* 2005). Consequently, in the midst of communication failures and rapid social flux in New Orleans, the images conveyed about the city's low-income African American residents took the form of a traditional, both contemptuous and indicting, framework. This formulation allowed many observers to feel a combination of extreme outrage and certitude about their understanding of the social comportment of disadvantaged African Americans in a time of crisis.

Another of the more striking images disseminated through cyberspace and commented upon in the media was the running together of two photographs, each showing people with goods in their possession that they garnered in the midst of wading through flood water (*Daily Kos* 2005; *ABC News* 2005). One of the images of an African American produced by the *Associated Press* (*AP*) was accompanied by the following caption: "Young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, August 30, 2005." The caption of a second picture (produced by Chris Graythen for AFP Getty Images), this time of two Caucasians, read as follows: "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana." For some observers, the publication of these two photographs and a comparison of the captions associated with them, brought to surface the immediacy with which Black Americans were criminalized and demonized in public assessments of their behavior, even when such behavior was essentially identical to that of Caucasians. The uproar brought forth by African Americans and other sensitive observers (which was also documented in the above-cited web sites) drew attention to the publication of these photographs. However, it could not diminish the fact that such contrasting imagery appeared in the first place because of the comfort that many Americans had with the labeling of low-income African Americans as thieves.

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Despite the proliferation of these and other portrayals of African American New Orleanians, a few days after the arrival of the floodwaters, a different image of low-income African Americans began to emerge. Images of lawlessness and violent disorder were replaced with images of resolute endurance and perseverance. Indeed, some of the post-Katrina public conversation centered on how low-income African-American New Orleanians could have been read so strongly as a certain kind of people in the days immediately following the hurricane, and then portrayed very differently a short time thereafter.

NBC network news anchor Brian Williams reported from the New Orleans Superdome within a day of the arrival of residents in need of emergency shelter. His first-hand accounts not only challenged some of the earlier reports of lawlessness and chaos in and around the Superdome, but also drew attention to the forbearance and stoicism of many low-income African Americans (as well as others who had relocated to the Superdome), who struggled to survive the increasing malaise exacerbated by the absence of rescue and relief services. Accompanying the response by many Black Americans and other conscientious observers was increased attention by the media to what became a second depiction of African Americans. This was of a desperate, but still remarkably patient, people. This was an image of people who had little idea of how to respond to their predicament beyond hoping and waiting for the intervention of more powerful people and their resources.

Among many other media sources, this kind of portrayal predominated in the September 19, 2005, issue of *Newsweek*. That particular issue was filled with pictures and stories of distraught and nearly hopeless Black American New Orleanians who were clearly sure about what they lost through the impact of Hurricane Katrina on their homes and families, but wholly unsure about whether or how they could initiate a process of recovery. The *Central News Network*'s (*CNN*) coverage of this dimension of the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina is preserved on its web site, where a link is provided to its Hurricane Katrina web page (*CNN* 2005). That page features a series of video clips and a slide show reflecting the stress and tension that indigent Black Americans faced in trying to adjust to life after the water receded from New Orleans. Rather than violence and rampant misconduct, these images reflect an entirely different side of life in poverty: pain, distress, disappointment, and, perhaps most revealingly, vulnerability. The latter is the very trait that this population has been most denied since being placed under the rubric of the underclass.

When taking stock of this second depiction, what was stunning, at least to those who have fully embraced the underclass perspective on the African American poor, was the virtual absence of pandemonium or self-induced decadence. Instead, there were images of people congregating on street corners and sitting on portable chairs and makeshift structures as they waited—and continued to wait—and waited even further for assistance. Here was a presentation of the African American urban poor as immobile and infirm, not excitable, hostile, and threatening.

For some observers, this second depiction may have provoked a robust awakening to a different sensibility about the Black American poor. In the age of the underclass it is rare that sympathy, or even sensitivity, is coupled with readings of the African American poor. Thus, the second phase of the portrayal of low-income New Orleanians has opened up the possibility for an understanding of these people that has been far too hidden in recent decades. The failure of this second portrayal to strike a chord in the hearts of Americans must be tied to the fact that a natural disaster was the precipitating factor. Unlike some widely shared readings of the urban poor in American society (Hochschild 1995), no observers could argue that the losses suffered by the poor of New Orleans were entirely of their own making.

Had the week of August 29, 2005, been a normal one for New Orleans, there would have been no prospect for advancing this new portrait.

While media preoccupation with Hurricane Katrina in the subsequent months may have turned almost fully to issues concerning repair, rebuilding, and the relocation of tens of thousands of displaced citizens, there are valuable points of reflection to attend to concerning the contrasting depictions of disadvantaged Black Americans in the days immediately following the arrival of the hurricane. The contrast captures a critical divide in what many Americans may think about these people (best reflected by the first portrayal discussed above) and what a coterie of researchers have been trying to advance in challenging and trying to reconstruct public understandings of this population.

The attempt to tell a different kind of story has been the effort of a considerable number of social scientists over the past few years. In fact, a great deal of cultural analysis in urban poverty research, mostly situated within the urban ethnographic tradition, has aimed to present a picture of the urban poor as people who respond to their everyday life encounters, including both the mundane and the catastrophic, in ways that resemble what most others would do if forced to contend with similarly limited resources and means for taking action.

ACADEMIC VERSUS PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN POOR

The challenge for many scholars working to advance alternative cultural frameworks and interpretations about urban-based, low-income African Americans has been to defeat the enduring characterizations of this population that surfaced when they began to be identified as the urban underclass. A recent body of scholarship illustrates the strong impulse to challenge or revise the underclass imagery associated with the African American urban poor. Some of this research has taken the form of studying gang members and the complex ways in which they function as social agents in their communities (Venkatesh 2000), the attitudes and behaviors of low-skilled workers in urban pockets of the fast-food industry (Newman 1999), and the social outlooks and interpretations of low-income African American men (Young 2004).[5]

Each of these projects represents an effort to advance new cultural interpretations of people who have been subjected to extremely negative evaluations of some of their cultural attributes. Hence, a common argument linking all of these studies is that many people who may easily fit the image of the underclass, and who may be intimately connected to violent or turbulent social worlds, have the capacity to act with patience and composure during the course of much of their everyday lives, even while living in the midst of trying conditions.

In *American Project* (2000), Venkatesh looks at what is perhaps the most prominent subcategory of the underclass, the urban gang, in order to demonstrate that, as a social product, the urban gang is no mere assembly of wayward young men motivated to commit heinous and profligate acts because of their embracement of flawed values. Rather, Venkatesh demonstrates that a gang is a clientistic entity in a social milieu that otherwise lacks a significant presence of social institutions and activities that facilitate the social outcomes of more privileged communities. The centrality of the gang as an alternative source of service provision (making available food and clothing, as well as drugs) and as a regulator of social life (providing local protection and community-based social events) results in various kinds of people, with various

backgrounds and social identities (including college graduates as well as high school dropouts), choosing to immerse themselves within this domain.

In *No Shame in My Game* (1999), anthropologist Katherine Newman presents the case of fast-food sector employees as representatives of low-income communities who envision a better future and who view their current employment station as an initial step toward more secure employment. In documenting how they do so, Newman reveals that these individuals are critical readers of social environments, conscientious of the pressures working against them, and capable of thinking about long-term objectives and outcomes.

In *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances* (2004), I maintain that urban-based, socioeconomically disadvantaged African American men are not wholly given to impulsive, incorrigible, and reckless behavior. Instead, I argue that they do reflect upon their behavior, make moral judgments about it, and consider its consequences more deeply than one might expect from an underclass image-framing of these men.

Clearly, none of these works paints a portrait that directly resembles the second kind of image of the urban poor produced in New Orleans around the effects of Hurricane Katrina. What these works do share with that second portrayal is the presentation of a vision of this population as more completely and complexly human than has been rendered via the underclass-tinged vision. Whether the objective has been to depathologize the African American urban poor, or to suggest that there is much more to understand about their lives than their occasional investment in pathological behavior, these works aspire to construct a more thorough and complete depiction of this population. This general approach is based upon demonstrating the extent to which these disadvantaged people think and make choices in much the same ways as more privileged people do. More importantly, these works construct images of the urban poor as capable of handling extreme conditions and challenges without resorting to violence and hostility. Thus, the capacity to endure under duress is emphasized over the capacity to react with aggression.

An enduring problem for urban ethnographers and other researchers who have put forth such alternative views is that they rarely result in direct and widespread public impact. Instead, this work reaches other scholars or those who care to devote attention to scholarly debates (e.g., policy advocates, college students who are expected to read such literature, and members of an intellectually curious general readership). Only a minority of Americans fall into such categories. Consequently, aside from playing a role in the formation of some targeted policy initiatives, the absorption of this literature may have minimal impact on shaping the views of many other Americans.

Instead, it is primarily the media that reaches the broader public. Thus, researchers may seemingly observe with envy, but also with sincere understanding, that a message cultivated in scholarly circles for well over a decade—that there is more to the actions and thoughts of the African American urban poor than seen through the prism of underclass logic—can be disseminated to millions of Americans in a matter of a few days with a slew of pictures and commentaries about the ways in which disadvantaged New Orleanians responded to their crisis. Accordingly, the ultimate challenge for scholars who have committed so many years to what suddenly became public information in a matter of days is to determine how they might better engage the public rather than simply engaging academia. There are no easy answers to this challenge. It remains, however, for scholars who work to advance such understandings to think more deeply about the stake of scholarship in a world where media-transmitted messages reach audiences faster than academic work ever could.

Of course, the advantage of scholarly work is that it results in more robust accounts and interpretations, in contrast to the fleeting images produced by the media. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully tackle this challenge, but it can be said that, given that scholarship on American urban poverty has found a secure home in social policy arenas, it may be time to convene discussion about new and different audiences for such work, as well as the professional risks of and prospects for trying to reach them.

CONCLUSION

Hurricane Katrina led to a crisis situation for New Orleanians, one which demonstrated that the urban poor can function without aggression and enmity under very difficult conditions. Thus, the situation in New Orleans in the aftermath of the hurricane conveyed more precisely and directly what certain modalities of scholarship have been trying to communicate over the past decade. The ultimate test of whether such scholarship can truly advance new visions of the African American urban poor beyond the academic community resides in whether the final images of the New Orleans victims of Hurricane Katrina become predominant tropes for America's reading of the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

This can be gauged by assessing the extent to which Americans frame different understandings and interpretations of the Black American urban poor. Such a project is appropriate for survey researchers, and if they determine to pursue it, then some progress can be made regarding the question of whether America is truly prepared to rethink its vision of the poor. If the final images of African American New Orleanians after the passing of Hurricane Katrina do little or nothing to motivate Americans to rethink their vision of the African American urban poor, then the research community may have to be humbled in its own quest to forward such new understandings, and a return to the age-old quest of knowledge for its own sake will be in order. Even if it is determined that academic knowledge may not be the best tool for immediately changing public opinion, that such a task is better suited for policymakers or others who may more directly affect the public outlook, there will still need to be some serious thinking about the social utility of scholarship on poverty-related issues and its limits with regard to social change. Urban ethnographers as well as survey researchers will have ample reason and space to join in on that project.

In the meantime, it is crucial that the United States hold on to some degree of preoccupation with the second depiction of the most impoverished citizens of New Orleans, the image of a desperate but patient people. The call to hold on to that depiction is not being made to encourage sympathy or a patronizing tendency toward these people. Instead, the call is being made so that a new, broader, more complex, and more accurate image of the urban poor may begin to take center stage. A residue of the introduction of the term *underclass* as a descriptor of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged of our urban populace has been to regard such people as hyperagentic in their lawlessness. It has led to the idea that, without strict measures of social control and isolation, such people will bring immediate and extreme harm to the rest of us. Indeed, the subtext of the first depiction of the low-income New Orleanians who were left or stayed behind to encounter the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is that lawlessness and disorder erupt when such people are freed from the regulatory mechanisms and systems associated with normal everyday living. That this is not true for large numbers of the disadvantaged in urban America is one of the most important stories told through the second (later) depiction of the New Orleans victims of Hur-

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ricane Katrina. It is the duty of scholars who have responsibly and thoroughly studied this population and who have drawn these same conclusions to invest in making that understanding more widely realized in U.S. society.

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NOTES

1. While not the focus of this essay, it is also the case that Latinos of the same class standing also share such an identifier.
2. Its incorporation in the public imagination and lexicon was further enforced by the work of two journalists, Ken Auletta (1982) and Nicholas Lehmann (1986). Auletta published *The Underclass*, which defined this category of people as transferring from passive to hostile hustlers in social institutions, who became that way as a result of having been traumatized by their poverty. In a two-part series of articles published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Lehmann explained that the cultural dimensions of underclass behavior and outlook was a product of the transmission of southern "backward" culture during the early twentieth-century migration of African American from the deep South to the hyperindustrialized Midwest and Northeast. What both men, and many others who followed, made clear was that the category of *underclass* did not simply refer to a structural location with respect to socioeconomic divisions in American society. More importantly, it referred to a general set of cultural properties embraced by those in this category who posed a vivid sense of threat and danger, not only to other members of their group, but especially to those who occupied more privileged positions. Hence, the contemporary power of the term resides in what it was made to convey about the values and behaviors of individuals rather than their social status (see Aponte (1990); Gans (1995); and Katz (1989a, 1989b) for a more thorough review of such publications).
3. Of course, the roots of the modern depiction of the social character of Black Americans go back to the 1960s-era urban ethnographies (Hannerz 1969; Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970). A number of 1960s-era ethnographers argued that an anomic street culture in low-income communities caused the inhabitants to function in unique and sometimes aggressive ways in order to survive their social environment (Rainwater 1970; Schulz 1969). Subsequent research continued to employ this analytical framework focused on public behavior. These studies showed the extent to which despair, frustration, and tension form parts of the everyday lives of these men. Researchers argued that African American men portrayed a public persona consisting of highly expressive styles of public engagement that reflected their effort to cope with these bleaker aspects of their lives. This persona included displays of bravado and overtly sensational forms of conduct which were promoted in order to mask their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. By introducing concepts such as "anomic street culture" (Rainwater 1970), these studies aimed to shed light on why low-income communities differed so much from more affluent ones in terms of the potential for violence and the absence of social and institutional buffers from physical, economic, and emotional threat. The emergence of this persona further encouraged the emphasis on public behavior in the literature on the African American poor. Although some studies offered images of poor Black men managing the paucity of resources available to them, and maneuvering around the threats, dangers, and insecurities that constitute much of their everyday lives, the preeminent focus of the most recent work in urban ethnography has been the framing of poor Black men as prone to violence and decadence, or at least to attitudinal dispositions that lead to such behavior (Anderson 1999; Glasgow 1981; Majors and Billson, 1992). Much of the urban ethnography of African Americans in the past decade has centered on so-called notions of underclass behavior (Anderson 1990, 1999; Billson 1996; Majors and Billson, 1992).
4. The news websites of the major television networks (⟨http://www.abcnews.com⟩, ⟨http://www.nbcnews.com⟩, ⟨http://www.cbsnews.com⟩, and ⟨http://www.cnn.com⟩) all contain archives of the text of news reports that were presented in televised broadcasts of such activity. These broadcasts took place in the first few days following the flooding of New Orleans.

5. A number of other publications have also called for a broader reading of the urban sphere as it pertains to the experiences of African Americans (Gregory 1998; Jackson 2001; Patillo-McCoy 1999). While these works do not focus exclusively on low-income African Americans, they either argue that the underclass lens narrowly reduces the analytical possibilities for understanding the everyday experiences of the Black American urban poor, or that the social identities associated with the underclass do not capture the range of social identities that low-income African Americans adopt in their everyday life experiences.

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