# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON POOR PEOPLE AND POOR PLACES

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**John L. Jackson, Jr.**, *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 285 pages, ISBN 0-226-38998-7, $30.00.

**Omar M. McRoberts**, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Neighborhood*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 178 pages, ISBN 0-226-56216-6, $25.00.

**Katherine S. Newman**, *A Different Shade of Gray: Midlife and Beyond in the Inner City*. New York: The New Press, 2003, 306 pages, ISBN 1-56584-615-X, $26.95.

A series of urban ethnographies has been produced in the past several years that provide an exciting and provocative new lens on poor urban neighborhoods and their inhabitants. Three of these works, John L. Jackson, Jr.'s, *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America*, Omar M. McRoberts's *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Neighborhood*, and Katherine S. Newman's, *A Different Shade of Gray: Midlife and Beyond in the Inner City*, are pivotal contributions toward the creation of that lens. My purpose in this essay is to explore the particular ways by which each work serves that end. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to define this lens by drawing distinctions between it and the traditional lens in urban ethnography's consideration of low-income African American communities.

In the most general sense, the past thirty years of urban ethnography has depicted the African American urban community as an arena in which the dispossessed and the disfranchised struggle to maintain some consistent pattern of everyday living. During that period, urban ethnographic analyses of African Americans became steeped in a range of detailed explorations of the threats and difficulties that lower-income African Americans experience: their own role in exacerbating or re-producing these conditions, the call for interventionist efforts to ameliorate these situations, and often little else. The intense focus on various aspects of this struggle had conse-

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quences for broader perceptions of African American urban life. In fact, the enduring effect of this depiction of African American urban life was the formation of a logic of social problems in which the deleterious conditions and experiences associated with low-income, African American urban communities are made to appear as if they constitute the totality of the social milieu of these environments. Hence, the urban ethnographic portrayal of African Americans in the late twentieth century left much room for constructing a broader perspective of Black American urban life.

Throughout other periods in the course of its more than 100 year history, American urban ethnography has alluded to the fact that there is more to the metropolitan arena than poor people and their problems. The complexities of urban life experiences for Black Americans were much more apparent, and thus easier to document, in earlier decades when African Americans of various class backgrounds, who were prevented from migrating into other urban communities, lived in great proximity to each other (Grossman 1989; Hirsch 1983; Katz 1993; Katz and Sugrue, 1998). Early twentieth-century urban ethnographers surely did their part to explore and unpack the social, organizational, and cultural consequences of such living arrangements.[1] However, urban ethnography's strong turn toward a wholesale investment in the study of poverty and the social problems associated with it began in the 1960s, when increasing sectors of urban America began to take the form of impoverished and disfranchised social spaces, usually largely populated by African Americans. These residents, seemingly mired in despair, were depicted in social research as adopting the myriad outlooks and behaviors commonly associated with social life in urban squalor. Hence, the modern era of urban ethnographic inquiry often took the form of qualitative explorations of the underclass, a concept that was cemented in academic and popular circles by the 1980s and that conveyed an image of lower-income African American urban dwellers as a constituency plagued by social problems (Wilson 1987).[2]

In critical response to academic framings of low-income African Americans as an underclass, some researchers argued that a more thorough depiction of African American urban life should take into account the worldviews and activities of more privileged residents of such communities. This should hold even if such neighborhoods comprise a large number of low-income citizens. Including such actors into the picture provides a more complete, and thus more complex, vision of the dynamics of African American urban life. Thus, the new lens constructed in more recent urban ethnography results from shifting the analytical focus away from people who experience poverty to those who are not necessarily poor, but who reside or otherwise have significant daily involvement in low-income urban neighborhoods.

For those who have lived in, worked in, or thought seriously about low-income urban communities, the fact that the non-poor are highly visible and consistent actors in these places is not a new or surprising fact. What is new—and certainly surprising for those that think that poor places are little more than locales for poor people and their everyday struggles—is that studies of not-so-poor people and social institutions within what are commonly understood to be poor places provide far-reaching and insightful understandings of the significance of poor places to the non-poor (or those who are not in extreme poverty). Hence, what this new lens brings into focus is the rich and varied experiences—individual and collective—that unfold throughout poor neighborhoods in America. These experiences often were neglected in the older urban ethnographic paradigm that centered on the study of poor people and their problems.

Of course, in drawing attention to the narrow emphasis on the social problems in the past three decades of urban ethnography, one should be very careful not to disparage wholly research efforts that intensely focus on the severity of the problems

afflicting low-income African Americans.[3] Such people do, indeed, experience profound hardship, and their condition demands consistent and intensive investigation. The challenge remains in how to pursue these ends while also acknowledging the diversity of people and institutions that comprise so-called poor neighborhoods. The task at hand, then, is to be clear that urban ethnographic portrayals of predominantly African American neighborhoods may not tell the complete story of African American urban life if a logic of social problems is allowed to override more thorough accounts of who or what else is operating in these spaces, and what effects those operations have on the people (poor or otherwise) who function in those spaces.

The effort to tell this more complete story is fully underway. Its emergence can be marked by the publication of Steven Gregory's *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (1998). Gregory argued for the relevance of an urban ethnography that does not collapse into the traditional "social problems" logic. Instead, after demonstrating that broad race and class diversity exists in the largely low-income and working-class New York City neighborhood that he studied, Gregory argued that a more vibrant urban ethnographic approach necessitates including how middle-income and working-class African Americans function within and (in certain ways) against their lower-income African American neighbors in the first group's quest to achieve their desired quality of life.[4]

In making this claim, Gregory's principal issue of concern is one that Ulf Hannerz foreshadowed two decades earlier and is a common point of relevance for the three works considered in this review, namely, that what are understood today as urban poor places actually house and involve people that are not poor, and their presence in these places allows for social processes and cultural dynamics to unfold that are not adequately captured by an ethnographic approach that looks at poor places as little more than repositories for poor people. While Omar McRoberts's, John Jackson Jr.'s, and Katherine Newman's books work from the same premise, each tells a distinct story about how the non-poor make sense of and operate within what have been defined by many social scientific measures as low-income urban communities. Most important, these works demonstrate the degrees to which poor places function in vastly different ways for people in different socio-economic categories.

Set in Boston, Omar McRoberts's *Streets of Glory* explores how twenty-nine churches of various denominations function within a square-half-mile community known as Four Corners. This community consists of more than 14,000 residents, almost all of whom are African American and live in extreme socio-economic despair. Much like the way in which W. E. B. Du Bois commenced his study in the predominantly African American Seventh Ward of Philadelphia during the 1890s, McRoberts explains that his formation of a research agenda began with his profound curiosity about this neighborhood. He resided in it while pursuing his graduate studies at Harvard University, and thus was intimately connected to it prior to determining a formal research project. McRoberts was intrigued by the presence of so many churches in such close proximity to each other, and this motivated him to conduct a walk-through of the community in order to gain some initial purchase on what was going on in and for each of these churches. He then sought out the leadership in each church, which gave him the basis for conducting the inquiry that led to the material in his book. The result is a study that focuses on social organizations rather than individuals, and it offers a rich analysis and interpretation of why so many churches remain in Four Corners when the neighborhood population can neither sustain nor, ironically, be adequately served by such a large number of them.

The answer to McRoberts's core research question resides in the fact that many of the churches serve people of particular ethnic groups (e.g., Haitian migrants to

Boston) who do not reside in the community, but who come to the church in order to receive religious as well as non-sectarian services. The churches that provide such ethnically focused services often followed the migration patterns of the members of their congregations to Four Corners or else found that property acquisition in that community was more feasible than in other Boston-area locations. A number of other churches foreground their message of the virtues of otherworldliness by drawing attention to the blight, despair, and malaise in the neighborhood. In these cases, the neighborhood embodies the perniciousness congregations must avoid if they hope to attain a better afterlife. McRoberts uses both scenarios to indicate the extent to which poor places can matter for organizational entities in ways that do not necessarily return much to the poor people living in these places. Hence, the poor neighborhood is a trope for religious organizational practices that lead certain congregations to specific patterns of conduct and disposition as much as it is a site for social service activities that are not targeted for residents of the local community.

In *Harlemworld*, John L. Jackson, Jr. comments on how various African American residents of Harlem define the social significance of that community and, more important, of their personal place within it, given their widely divergent class standings. Jackson intentionally avoids placing clearly defined boundaries around the space that is the focus of his analysis. He made this decision because he is inherently interested in the symbolic construction as well as use of that space; therefore, how Harlem residents define its boundaries is more significant to Jackson than is a geographical, political, or economic designation of the space. Harlem is not just New York City's most renowned African American community; it is perhaps the most notable of African American urban communities in the United States. As such, Harlem represents the symbolic headquarters of the African American community for many African Americans (and non-African Americans as well). Thus, references to the symbolic value of Harlem abound in this work. Jackson explains that he is an African American New Yorker by birth, but as a product of Brooklyn he draws careful distinctions between himself and Harlem residents, often doing so by pointing out how the people in his analysis sometimes viewed him as an outsider to the community. However, his understanding of New York City, and, more important, of many of the cultural accouterments associated with being an African American New Yorker, clearly reflects his ability to immerse himself into the social and cultural fabric of Harlem such that his and some of his research participants' assertions of his outsiderness do not cause any extreme preoccupation with or questioning of the nature of his relationships with the people or places included in the analysis.

The fact that a large number of Harlemites contend with economic constraint means that Harlem's legitimacy as a "Black" space rests on the fact that a considerable number of its African American inhabitants also happen to be poor. However, Harlem currently also has a stable African American working class as well as a White-collar professional class, each of which reflects distinctive dimensions of the Harlem populace as well. As Jackson argues, part of the way in which Harlem functions as an African American social space of relevance to each of these class sectors is that it allows Black Americans to demonstrate or perform their Blackness in self-affirming ways (e.g., styles of dress, manners of speech, social activities) even if doing so results in challenging the ways some other Black Americans may present some aspect of their identity in their everyday lives. Thus, Harlem is a site for enduring intra-racial class conflict as the more economically secure Black Americans see themselves as responsible and appropriate citizens in the midst of a community where many other Black Americans appear to fall somewhat short of certain measures of such citizenship. Alternatively, lower-income Black Americans can question,

and sometimes directly and publicly challenge, those more privileged Black Americans who seem to the less-privileged to be insufficiently connected to or engaged with the cultural dynamics of lower-income African American life.

In putting forth his argument, Jackson elucidates how much Harlem is an active battleground consisting of people who possess varied forms of agency. He tells many stories about how Black Americans work to make themselves appear as legitimate Black people, which often means demonstrating that they are as competent or as worthy of the status of "human" as White Americans are. For instance, efforts to appear competent are exemplified by the Black Americans in his book arguing about how well they can handle their everyday business (which, for the more economically secure Black Americans, often means their professional business, and for the less secure, their management of public space). Furthermore, unique patterns of self-worth are promoted by Harlem residents' arguments about how culturally different or distinct they are (or Harlem happens to be) from the people (read White Americans) who predominate in downtown New York City. Here arguments are made about the communal flavor of Harlem in comparison to the cut-throat culture of the business districts in downtown Manhattan, or the freedom that Harlemites believe that this space offers for people to dress, talk, and interact as they desire without having to adhere to the restrictive standards of downtown.

In Katherine Newman's *A Different Shade of Gray*, readers are introduced to the experiences and worldviews of elderly residents of various New York City-based low-income communities as these people either deal with or valiantly strive to avoid succumbing to the rampant poverty that has captured most of their neighbors and a great many of their family members. Hence, Newman presents a portrait of elderly people who either live in, or on the margins of, urban poverty. Newman walks the reader through the life histories of her research participants to show that their pasts included periods of economic security (and even temporary prosperity for some), different community experiences (both within and beyond New York City), and different kinds of life expectations and desires depending on their positions over time with respect to the first two circumstances. The twist here is that rather than telling a story of poor or nearly poor elderly residents and the contemporary struggles they face in a large urban arena, Newman provides an image of people whose life histories involved more than struggle in, or in proximity to, poverty. Instead, we are presented with portraits of very different kinds of people because their pasts are so varied. Each story is a unique blend of past opportunities and struggles, and the present is handled in large part by the ways in which these individuals draw upon their readings of past successes and shortcomings. Many of the people in her book were born and raised far from New York City (including other countries). Most of them went to school, and then into decent, if not great, jobs. They worked hard and created families. As senior citizens, some of them are on the verge of severe burn-out after trying to help their children survive urban struggles that were not a part of their own childhoods many years ago. Others simply do not have the economic means to continue living in modest comfort given that their work lives are far behind them.

In addition to utilizing detailed ethnographic interviews with African American and Latino elderly residents living in various low-income and working-class communities in New York City, Newman also incorporates findings from the MacArthur Foundation's National Study of Midlife Americans. This study offers a sound statistical portrait of how the elderly regard their own health and well-being. Not surprisingly, African American and Latino elderly portray themselves as being much worse off than do majority elderly citizens. While a few chapters explore the basic findings of this study, the core of the book focuses on the voices of the African American and

Latino elderly. Accordingly, the people in Newman's book reflect one of the common stories of twentieth-century American urban life in that they came to the city to benefit from the plentiful, stable, blue-collar employment opportunities extant during that time. These elderly entered retirement (or moved close to it) as the city was radically transformed into a place where secure membership in the working class is difficult to obtain. Hence, the elderly are forced to face their own children's poverty—children who were born too late to benefit from the economic milieu that their parents encountered. Moreover, many of these elderly citizens must strive to maintain their own physical and material well-being in the absence of significant resources.

What Newman tells us is that the aging of the American population is leading to a particular crisis within the urban sphere, but in telling of the forthcoming crisis we do not lose sight of the diversity of individual experiences that constitute the urban-based ethnic elderly. Unlike McRoberts and Jackson, who present a more standard scholarly commentary that addresses, respectively, social organizational and cultural theories, Newman makes her point by way of an exposé-style commentary. By this I mean that she documents the problem by presenting her interview material without deep analytical overlay. She presents stories and accounts from a range of elderly citizens residing throughout New York City, and the interviewees are essentially allowed to speak for themselves. This interview material data is supplemented with the MacArthur data, but not with the kind of statistical detail and depth that are found in social science journals. More specifically, there is no attempt to theorize the life course position of the urban-based elderly, nor to provide a cultural analysis of their worldviews or practices. In a move that stands against what some scholars may desire from ethnographic inquiry, Newman leaves the deeper analysis to her audience. She presents the material in a manner that tries to generate an emotional response from her readers that may subsequently motivate them to determine a course of action on behalf of this constituency of minority elderly? Undoubtedly, Newman preserves a "social problems" logic in this book, yet this logic points to a problem on the horizon as more people become elderly and, presumably, face the same circumstances that her research participants do. She works against much of the traditional social problems logic, however, in presenting her research participants as individuals who tried to pursue and often realized many of their dreams, and who subsequently lived lives of more—and in most cases of something other—than a continual confrontation with the insurmountable obstacles associated with a low-income, urban life.

Although none of these authors advances the kind of social problems logic that held steadfast in urban ethnography of the past thirty years, each points in his or her own particular way to social problems that need to be addressed. Moreover, each does so without making strong claims about how to address them. McRoberts shows us that churches, long understood to be principal sites for the social advancement of African Americans, may not operate around that agenda given a particular church's orientation to its low-income neighborhood and its ecclesiastical mandate. Hence, McRoberts leaves us to re-think exactly what the presence of formal organization entities—especially those that have been historically tied to the uplift of disfranchised people—means for community improvement if we carefully dissect institutional agendas and measure them against community needs. He demonstrates that at the worst level, the presence of an institution in a neighborhood not because of a desire to serve the community, but because of an economic inability to be located in other, more privileged communities can result in patterns of hostile and callous relations between that institution and community residents. He also analyzes how an agenda

that uses the neighborhood to exemplify the extent to which otherworldliness leads to a much better state of being can result in an institution that literally offers no service to the community. Jackson demonstrates that despite Black Americans' commitment to and daily navigation of the same community space, they are a highly diverse constituency. Thus, he pushes the limits of African American solidarity and collective consciousness by placing on the table the issue of the extent to which African Americans across class lines do have the same goals in mind. He also opens further a standing debate about what it means to be "Black" when Blackness is made to operate in many different—and at times conflicting ways—all within the same Black community space.

Finally, Newman allows us to consider life history as a variable in how people make sense of contemporary struggle, and we acquire a richer and more complicated sense of people when their personal histories are put alongside a depiction of their contemporary problems. Additionally, she demonstrates that those who seemingly have survived, if not succeeded, in urban America can be brought down from their precarious position if they are forced to continue serving as the first-order line of support for the urban poor (and this holds despite many of the elderly's intense desire to provide such service to family and friends).

As with any publication, readers may want more depth than what is presented. For instance, McRoberts could pull in the voices of Four Corners residents more thoroughly such that readers hear more from these residents than their concern about the relevance of the churches to their personal interests. Readers might also learn more about how street corner interaction unfolds (or is inhibited) on Saturdays and Sundays when people come from whatever other neighborhoods they reside in to go to church in Four Corners. Jackson could talk more about the demographic shifts in Harlem, the extent to which they may ultimately render obsolete an image of Harlem as a Black American social space, and what Harlem residents feel about this (none of which is really the business of a chapter titled "White Harlem . . ."). Finally, Newman could deliver some of the scholarly analysis that was mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, in discussing what these works do provide, they allow for continued movement away from a stultifying paradigm that has emerged out of the traditional collapse of poor people and poor places in urban ethnography. These three books demonstrate that while problems certainly do abound for poor people, a more complex vision of poor places and the varied types of people functioning within them allows not only for more appropriate definitions of their problems, but also a lens that focuses on which individuals can or cannot operate in ways that might alleviate these problems. In doing so, the authors help expand the terrain for urban ethnographic inquiry on African Americans so that the experiences of such individuals are not always and immediately reduced to the classic urban poverty frameworks of poor people and their problems.

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## NOTES

1. Indeed, some of the classic urban ethnographies of the early twentieth century tell stories of different classes of African Americans living among each other in the same urban communities. W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and Horace Cayton's and St. Claire Drakes's *Black Metropolis* (1945) both explore this phenomenon. The strong contrast, however, between these works and some of those produced in the post-Gregory

era is that the ecological context of African American life in the early and mid-twentieth century was such that African Americans tended to live in the same communities, irrespective of their class standings. Perhaps, as Du Bois and Drake and Cayton elucidate, particular blocks or rows of housing units displayed certain class affinities, but the realities of racial residential segregation were such that most African Americans in the urban sphere had little more than African American urban neighborhoods available to them, and they took up residence in them whether richer or poorer. Consequently, the early works were not about poor neighborhoods per se, but about Black Americans in urban communities, a significant number of whom happened to be poor, but who shared with their somewhat more privileged brethren a profound marginalization from other sectors of American life.

2. One 1960s-era urban ethnography that clearly called for a new lens was Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (1969). In this work, Hannerz, a Swedish anthropologist, depicts the Washington, D.C. neighborhood where he conducted his fieldwork as consisting of, on one end of the continuum, people on the far edge of socio-economic stability, and on the other end, people who hold membership in stable, working-class families and who manage to make ends meet without extreme crises or tensions. Hannerz has no desire to focus extensively on neighborhood socio-economic heterogeneity in this work. Rather he aims to show that such a circumstance helps define the space within which he conducted his work, and thereafter he goes about exploring certain cultural dimensions of African American urban life (e.g., the relevance of the concept of soul to African Americans, how street-corner conversations relate to the construction of images of social reality, what forms of Black masculinity emerge among residents of this neighborhood and why, etc.). However, a great deal of the rest of the now classic 1960s ethnography of urban African American communities (e.g., Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970; Schultz 1969) neglected much discussion of neighborhood heterogeneity as it dissected the social problems that lower-income African Americans face, how those problems result in certain behavioral dynamics, and what the consequences were for these developments.
3. Accordingly, there are many studies that deliver keen assessments of how vacant of class diversity certain low-income, African American neighborhoods are, and what that means for the kinds of social interactive and organizational patterns that emerge in them (see Sullivan 1989; Venkatesh 2000; Young 2004, or, in the case of a predominantly Latino community, Bourgois 1995).
4. By remaining within the confines of a single neighborhood, Gregory moved in a different way from other contemporary ethnographers who looked at more than low-income, African American neighborhoods. Perhaps the most prominent of these other figures, sociologist Elijah Anderson, moved beyond the poor neighborhood in his well-read work, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), exploring the urban community by focusing on the boundaries separating a chronically poor neighborhood from a stable, White-collar professional, community. He argued that cultural and social commonalities in the African American experience do lead many of the African American residents of the White-collar professional community to remain more sensitive and sympathetic to, or otherwise more anxious about, the lower-income African American residents located in the adjoining, poorer neighborhood. Anderson explores all of this as a part of a broader account of the tensions, anxieties, and pressures that middle- and upper-income African Americans face when attempting to make a space for themselves in urban America. However, in his work, the non-poor African Americans live—and thus can retreat back into—a different space than do the African Americans who live in the significantly poorer neighborhood. Thus, in Anderson's case more economically secure African Americans face these concerns and challenges while living on the margins, rather than living within the boundaries, of a predominantly low-income neighborhood. Essentially, then, Anderson relies upon traditional ethnographic methods to deliver a story about urban living, but not one about different classes of people living in the same urban space.

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