

## Racism, Risk, and the New Color of Dirty Jobs

Lee D. Baker

Springtime in North Carolina is stunning. In mid-April 2006, I was driving west on I-40 between Raleigh and Durham. It was bright, sunny, and sixty-nine degrees. Various work crews were out along the highway—picking up litter, doing construction, mowing medians, and planting flowers. Of all the states in the Union, North Carolina is second only to Texas in miles of state-maintained highways—each mile is well maintained. As traffic slowed along a narrow strip near Research Triangle Park, I noticed two crews on opposite sides of the highway, each comprising about a dozen men. I distinctly remember how the Day-Glo vest each man wore paled in comparison to the pockets of brilliant-violet redbud tucked in between the equally bright white flowers of the elegant dogwoods that bespeckled that particular stand of loblolly pines. Each crew was working very hard, and each was working for the state of North Carolina; one crew was all black, and the other was all Latino. One crew had “NCDT” (North Carolina Department of Transportation) emblazoned across their vests with bold reflective lettering; the other crew had “INMATE” stamped across their vests. Probably members of the Latino crew were immigrant day laborers whom a contractor had picked up that morning from the throng of young men who milled around the local Lowe’s Home Improvement Store. And if that was the case, not one of those hardworking men on either side of the highway had legal rights afforded to employees of the state of North Carolina, and each man was being exploited and sorely underpaid. Innocent or guilty, documented or undocumented, each man labored under a pall of criminality, his status as undocumented or convict forcing him to keep North Carolina highways beautiful. For me, this tale of two crews adds an important dimension to the immigration debate that has been roiling Congress, prompting

protests en masse; it demonstrates that any discussion of immigration must be viewed against the gritty background of race and racism. That vivid image of the two work crews has gotten me thinking about the shifting politics of race in the United States such that discussions of race should be linked to immigration and discussions of immigration should be linked to race. Connecting these issues quickly leads to a major question: How is Latino immigration affecting economic opportunities and job security for black American men? Although I do not have an answer, that question structures my analysis.

Immigration is emerging as a defining issue for the first part of the twenty-first century—much as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. And today, as was the case a century ago, the politics and economics of race, labor, assimilation, and civic belonging are being stretched and contorted as they collide and ricochet off each other to the point where no one can predict exactly what the next iteration of racial formation will look and feel like.

The one proimmigrant argument that seems to resonate across party lines and between social classes is the notion that so-called undocumented workers come to this country and do the work that no other Americans want to perform but that is vital to the health of the economy and the comfort of the middle and upper classes. In testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg pushed this line of thought further when he explained that his city has some three million immigrants and is financially dependent on the half-million of those who came to this country illegally. “Although they broke the law by illegally crossing our borders,” Bloomberg explained, “our city’s economy would be a shell of itself had they not, and it would collapse if they were deported.” He emphasized that the “same holds true for the nation.”<sup>1</sup>

After all, one cannot outsource construction, janitorial services, or highway maintenance. Employers, however, can “in-source” less expensive and more vulnerable labor in the United States from the pool of undocumented labor that hails from the same countries to which so many manufacturing jobs have been relocated. The very premise of this argument—jobs no one else wants to perform—is fundamentally wrong; if the price is right, hardworking Americans will perform the most demeaning or dangerous jobs.

The Discovery Channel produces two shows that demonstrate this point every week. The first, called *Deadliest Catch*, is a derby-style reality TV show that profiles a half-dozen crab boat captains as they ply the unforgiving waters of the Bering Sea in the hunt for Alaska king and opilio crab. Focusing on each captain’s strategy and the crews’ tenacity, the producers chronicle the onboard adventure and use a leaderboard to log the number of pounds of crab meat in each ship’s cargo hold. Ostensibly a contest to see which boat catches the most crab, the drama is driven by an up-close look at the work and lives of the crew members who brave subfreezing temperatures, forty-foot waves, sleepless nights, and dangerous ice packs as they

“set the pots” and haul unwieldy steel cages from the bone-chilling sea. The producers worked hard to create television drama out of dropping, setting, and hauling seven-hundred-pound pots day after day, night after night; sometimes the pots were teeming with crab, often they were not. There is an almost 100 percent injury rate, and 80 percent of the on-the-job fatalities result from drowning; fishing for Alaska king crab is a mind-numbing, miserable, and dangerous job, but a deckhand can earn up to \$50,000 in just a few months of work. Despite the rough-and-tumble mix of cowboy and maritime culture on deck and in the galley, it’s a job no one wants to do. The reward, however, outweighs the risk of literal life and limb for these working-class men.

The second show, Discovery Channel’s *Dirty Jobs*, is hosted by Mike Rowe, the good-natured Hollywood hunk from Baltimore who made his name hawking jewelry on QVC. The show purports to “honor” workers who perform often-unpleasant jobs that “make your everyday life easier, safer—and often cleaner.” The hook is the affable host making a fool of himself as he makes a bigger mess out of a dirty job that demands some level of skill and experience. The real hook, however, is the viewer imagining his or herself cleaning blood, guts, and all forms of human remains off the walls and ceilings of crime scenes for a starting salary of \$35,000, or performing the task of a full-time Porta Potty cleaner, who can earn up to \$50,000 a year. As many game and reality shows attest, Americans will do virtually anything for money—the right amount of money. What is unique about these Discovery Channel broadcasts is that they demonstrate that many Americans will perform dangerous, gross, or demeaning work for the right amount of cash and that there is virtually no job out there that documented workers are unwilling to take on. Although it’s obvious, it is worth repeating: like the immigrants before them, undocumented immigrants to the United States today are willing to take jobs no other Americans are willing to do *for such low wages*. This is a complex issue, of course. Immigrants are not necessarily “willing” participants in this process and are forced to take these low-paying jobs, often struggling to survive in the United States while sending remittances to loved ones and dependents. Further complicating this dynamic is the idea that the American worker is entitled to high wages or higher wages than undocumented workers. I do not want to imply that documented workers will work only for high wages or to imply that they will not get off their lazy butts unless they “get paid.” Countless people labor hard every day for unfair wages, and many documented and undocumented workers do the jobs no one wants to perform, not because they want to, but because they are forced to perform those jobs for meager wages to survive. Rolling back the hard-fought struggle for safe working conditions and a living wage, employers who desire or need low-wage workers fuel the cycle of insecurity, inequality, and instability of work.

This is a tricky essay. I want to connect the immigration of undocumented workers in the United States to the enduring plight of poor black men without sound-

ing racist, xenophobic, sexist, or reactionary. I want to highlight the facts but also explain an important connection between new forms of immigration, the continued plight of poor black men, and ultimately new constructions of race in the United States. Like those two crews, poor black men and poor undocumented immigrants in the United States may be on different sides of the highway, but they are doing the same work. Both are being used to perpetuate inequality, making the American Dream a nightmare in the United States and enabling all Americans to feel more insecure.

As some of the old men in the barbershop would have it, there is a conspiracy to lock up poor black and brown citizens and recruit illegal aliens to this country to take the few jobs left that poor blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans performed before most of those jobs went overseas. In North Carolina, they often point to such industries as textiles, chicken processing, and construction, whose workforce was filled by black people but now is largely drawn from relatively new foreign-born Latino immigrants. They bemoan the fact that jail, the military, and Wal-Mart seem to be the only real options available for many black people in America. On the other hand, they are also quick to point to a perception that young black men must take on more responsibility—showing up to a job on time, paying child support, treating women with respect, and not getting caught up in the drama of the streets. This personal-responsibility narrative by these old heads, however, is often tempered with the idea that the legacy of racism is as salient a barrier to success today as it has been in the past.

It is sometimes tough to argue complexity and nuance with these organic intellectuals or barber-pole philosophers. As they see it, the facts and common sense drive interpretation, and some light-skinned professor from Duke University is not going to change their minds. I trust their instinct and observations and value their collective wisdom. These ideas, however, are also held in conjunction with the understanding that the newest population of lower-skilled workers can provide a real opportunity for African Americans. No longer relegated to lowest rungs of the workforce, some black Americans can leverage their proficiency in English, citizenship, and cultural competence—cultural capital—to climb their way up and into more stable livelihoods.

This pattern of upward mobility is particularly apparent among the jobs on Duke's academic campus that do not require a college degree. For example, virtually all of the bus drivers are black men, while the housekeeping staff is made up of mostly black women. The big distinction is with the positions that are contract labor. Some of the food service employees are employees of the university; these are mostly black Americans, the majority of whom are women. On the other hand, even more food service workers are employees of the vendors who have won contracts with the university. The majority of these employees are Latinas. There is a similar pattern with the groundskeeping staff. The university employees are mostly black men who man-

age the day-to-day keeping of the grounds but serve in a supervisory role when the big landscaping jobs are needed right before alumni weekend and graduation. The university contracts these jobs out, and teams of Spanish-speaking men descend on the campus to pull weeds, mow lawns, plant flowers, and erect the ubiquitous white tents on the manicured lawns of Duke's west campus. With high-fidelity sound systems and high-powered air conditioners, these climate-controlled mobile fundraising units are torn down as fast as they are put up, and the Latino groundskeepers are gone until the next big job.

Even though Duke's hourly wages are notoriously low, the health care, retirement, and college tuition reimbursement plans are generous. Even the old men in the barbershop will concede that a black citizen has a better chance than an undocumented worker of getting an entry-level job at a university, the Transportation Security Administration, or FedEx, or an array of the "good jobs" that have emerged as the service industry has eclipsed the "good jobs" in manufacturing. But they are also quick to point out that individuals have to show up for work, be on time, and learn that being ordered to perform menial tasks for minimum wage is not a form of disrespect. This sentiment echoes the famous words penned by African American labor organizer A. Philip Randolph: "Service is not Servitude." Or is it?

My argument in this essay is that the flow of undocumented immigrants to the United States is a component of globalization that is having a rather large impact on poor, undereducated black men—but most people don't notice. Globalization is changing the shape of racial constructs in the United States. Obviously, it is changing demographics, but it is also changing the terms and conditions of race itself.

The construction of race and the articulation of racism are intentional—not to the point of a conspiracy, but often efforts are concerted or work in concert to orchestrate the way ideological precepts bolster financial interests and partisan politics affect material conditions. Although George Fredrickson turns to biology to help identify these dynamics by explaining that "racism is a scavenger ideology," Derrick Bell is more blunt and simply calls race "an indeterminate social construct that is continually reinvented and manipulated to maintain domination and enhance white privilege."<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I address some of the collateral damage and development or unintended consequences that have affected African American communities in the United States in a post-9/11 era, when the agents of the most virulent and explicit forms of racism in the United States target "Arabs" and "immigrants." Yet African American men have not made meaningful material gains during the last decade, even though new groups have joined the ranks of the most feared in America. There has been a noticeable rise in prejudice and anxiety regarding Latino immigrants, Arab Americans, and gays and lesbians in the United States; according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, an actual increase in violence against members of these groups has coincided with the harsh public discourse around gay marriage, terrorism, and immigration.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, black Americans

still lead the FBI's hate crime statistics in terms of being targeted for such crimes, and "anti-Jewish" hate crimes are six times higher than are "anti-Muslim" crimes, according to the figures for 2007.<sup>4</sup>

There is a sense, however, within some segments of black communities that African Americans should catch a break because they did not bomb the World Trade Center, the Murrow Federal Building, or Centennial Park. Black people are not responsible for the bombing of abortion clinics, the torching of churches, or the rash of school shootings; and, although John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, charged with the so-called Beltway sniper attacks, are black, African Americans are rarely, if ever, depraved serial killers. Okay, there was Colin Ferguson too.

This sentiment is perhaps best voiced by the peripatetic comics who work the circuits of comedy clubs that cater to black audiences. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, ethnographer Lanita Jacobs-Huey engaged in fieldwork at these sites and wrote a provocative article titled "'The Arab Is the New Nigger': African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11." She captured this peculiar view well:

The "Arab or Middle Easterner as the new nigger" theme echoed like a riff in many urban comedy rooms. Comic/actor "D.C." Curry remarked at the Ha Ha Café, "It's a good time to be Black. If you ain't got no towel wrapped around your head, your ass is in the game!" Glenn B. speculated that "good things come out of bad things," since racists now deflect their hatred from Blacks to people of Middle Eastern descent. At the Comedy Store, he reported meeting a skinhead in the post office who sought to reassure him by saying, "We don't hate you. We hate the Arabs." Similarly, "A. C." acknowledged that, while the national tragedy was "messed up," it had fortuitous consequences as well. He told a crowd at Mixed Nuts, "I haven't been a nigger for a month! Everyone's like, 'Hey Brother!'"<sup>5</sup>

Although the comedians relished exaggerating this sentiment, they graphically portray how members of one racialized minority might hope for a bounce in the polls as another group falls from grace. A similar situation occurred with Chinese Americans after the government of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States declared war.

Even before the mass migrations in the 1840s, Chinese people in America were very much despised and persecuted. It got so bad that in 1882 the federal government banned Chinese immigration altogether. Japanese immigrants and their children were often viewed more favorably. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, however, Japanese Americans went from model minority to pariah caste.

Although there was little evidence and no provocation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt succumbed to fear and issued Executive Order 9066, which forced U.S. citizens, against their will and with no formal charges, into fortified but makeshift assembly centers before they were loaded by train and convoy to remote intern-

ment camps. Approximately 120,000 men, women, and children were incarcerated with no due process and were forcefully removed from their friends, businesses, and homes. They were first “processed”—tagged, labeled, and contained—and then trucked to various camps. Descendants of Italians and Germans in America, however, did not face a similar fate, nor were they perceived as an imminent threat in the same way. Just as important, Chinese Americans began to be viewed in a more positive light, and in 1943 Congress passed the Magnuson Act, which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, creating quotas for Chinese immigrants and making provisions so Chinese immigrants could become citizens. From zero to hero. Black Americans, however, have not received any legislative compensation for their historic suffering and have only witnessed affirmative action programs erode in the post-9/11 era. It appears that the comics’ hope for some positive unintended consequences never materialized.

#### THE BEST AND WORST OF TIMES

In many respects, the cliché about the best of times and the worst of times rings true as black people in the United States experience a new century and as the once-rigid color line, like many postmodern iterations of previously starkly delineated entities, has become blurred, globalized, and, well—more flexible.

Every year, the National Urban League publishes a book-length report titled *The State of Black America*. Chock-full of doomsday statistics tempered by rays of hope, it documents how African Americans are faring compared with their white counterparts. The venerable civil rights organization’s team of social scientists compiles various measurements and findings into what they call “The State of Black America’s Equality Index,” which compares the conditions between blacks and whites in economics, health, education, and social justice. Researchers assign whites a weighted index value of 1, and the index measures the equality gaps or disparities between blacks and whites; or, in the case of civic engagement, it demonstrates that members of African American communities are generally more involved in civic society than whites. Numerous subindexes contribute to this overall index, which in 2006 stood virtually unchanged from previous years at 0.73. The dizzying array of graphs and charts is not broken down by region, but many metrics are broken down by age, educational attainment, and other subcategories in an attempt to identify or capture the disparity within particular segments of black communities. Although it is not the Urban League’s intent, one could interpret the myriad of charts in *The State of Black America* to demonstrate that black people generally share a racial identity, a history, a heritage, and a sense of civic responsibility but little else. The report actually documents very different life experiences of black people that too often turn on class and educational attainment. For example, in the category “Labor Force Participation,” the Urban League pegged that index for black people

at 0.98 overall, but for black people over twenty-five years of age with less than a high school education the number dropped to 0.86. Looking closely at the labor force participation category, which does not account for wage disparity or job channeling, one finds an interesting pattern and a trend that has been gaining traction for years. Educated black people are doing better today than ever, and less educated blacks, especially men, are doing very poorly. According to the Urban League's 2006 report, black high school graduates are indexed at 1.09; those with some college at 1.07; those with an associate's degree at 1.03; and college graduates at 1.06. In short, according to the Urban League, those who graduate from high school can find work and participate in the labor force at a rate equal to, even a hair better than, their white counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Other positive indicators include home ownership in the black community, which is at an all-time high, though blacks experience twice as many mortgage denials. The number of blacks owning their own businesses is also at an all-time high. The U.S. Department of Commerce announced in April 2006 that between 1997 and 2002 black business ownership was up 45 percent and revenues for the nation's 1.2 million black-owned businesses rose 25 percent to \$88.8 billion. It is important to note that 1.1 million black-owned businesses are sole proprietorships with an average annual revenue of \$25,000.<sup>7</sup>

While revenues for black business are up, teen pregnancy in black communities is down, way down. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported that its most recent data show a continued decline in the teenage birthrate to historic lows, with the sharpest drop in births for African American teens. Overall in the United States, the teen birthrate declined by 30 percent over the past decade, but the rate for black teens was down by more than 40 percent. For young black teens (fifteen to seventeen years of age), the number of live births was cut in half from 1991 levels.<sup>8</sup>

Although respected studies produced by the Urban Institute and the Manhattan Institute report that there is roughly a fifty-fifty chance that a black student entering high school will receive a regular diploma in four years, the U.S. Census Bureau confidently reported that "the proportion of both Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites who had a high school diploma reached record highs at 80 percent and 89 percent, respectively in 2003" and that the gap between the proportions of whites and blacks who had diplomas was getting smaller and smaller.<sup>9</sup> Echoing these findings, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE)* reported that "the percentage of African Americans ages 20 to 24 who have completed high school or successfully passed a high school equivalency examination is now almost equal to the rate for whites."<sup>10</sup>

The *JBHE* has developed an overall index of racial parity that is very similar to that of the Urban League. The *JBHE* calls it the "Black-White Higher Education Equality Index" and updates it quarterly. For the spring of 2006, the journal reported



that its equity index was at its highest level ever—73.6 percent: “An Education Equality Index reading of 100 percent is the JBHE’s Holy Grail. This would mean for the most part that blacks had reached parity with whites in all important measures of presence and achievement in higher education.”<sup>11</sup> Pushing its index to its highest level ever, the journal reported, were the record numbers of black students enrolling in graduate and professional schools and the record number of blacks who have received a GED or a high school diploma.

Finally, the number of African American homicide victims has also been cut almost in half in the last fifteen years. The FBI reported that in 1991 the number topped at 12,296 but that by 2003 the number had dropped to 6,912.<sup>12</sup> From a variety of different sources and perspectives, it appears that black people have been doing relatively well in recent years, with home ownership, educational attainment, labor force participation, and business revenues going up while teen pregnancies and homicides have been going down.

The Urban League has a specific policy agenda and often highlights the negative to leverage its position to effect much-needed change. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which laid bare the stark reality of the vulnerable poor, the Urban League focused on the economic disparity that persists between blacks and whites in the United States, noting that the median net worth of black families was \$6,166 compared with \$67,000 for white families and that median income was \$34,369 for black families and \$55,768 for white families. When it comes to health and welfare, the state of black America is dire; as reported by the Urban League, a black person is ten times as likely as a white person to have HIV/AIDS, twice as likely to have diabetes, and five times as likely to die of homicide. In the same report, the Urban League invited Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, to help interpret some of the data. Her sobering but eye-opening essay recounted that in 2006 a black boy in kindergarten had a 1 in 3 chance of serving a sentence in prison during his lifetime and that today 580,000 black males are serving prison sentences, whereas fewer than forty thousand black students earn bachelor degrees each year. The homogeneous “black community” or metrics that aggregate data to give a picture of the putative “black family” are dangerous reifications that flatten the cross-cutting ways class, gender, sexual orientation, age, region, occupation, and a myriad of other factors can affect individuals, families, and entire communities.

#### BEING A BLACK MAN

These types of negative findings documenting the plight of black people have always been grist for news media and foundations. Recently, however, the focus on young black men has eclipsed the more positive findings, as well as the dire straits of the many poor black women, children, and elderly. In March 2006, Erik Eckholm wrote

a *New York Times* article entitled “Plight Deepens for Black Men.” Eckholm reviewed several recent studies that underscore the grim prospects of undereducated black men between twenty and thirty-nine years of age.<sup>13</sup> Each study, Eckholm explained, paints a grim picture of black men in America and points to the usual suspects—jobs, education, and incarceration. Culling the data, Eckholm reported that in 2000, 65 percent of black male high school dropouts in their twenties were jobless and that by 2004 that number had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts. Although the growth of the black middle class and the shrinking prospects of the “truly disadvantaged” in a deindustrialized economy are not new, they continue to be newsworthy. And as anyone who regularly attends college commencement exercises knows, it is vividly apparent that black women are faring better than black men. The reasons are complicated but rooted in a history of whites’ anxieties over threats that they see black men as embodying.

White people have always had more intimate access to black women, their labor, and their bodies, while black men’s labor and bodies have been viewed as threatening since Reconstruction. What has changed in the era of Colin Powell and 50 Cent, Barack Obama and LeBron James, is the notion that somehow racism and simply being a black man in America is no longer the barrier to success it used to be. Even if one had it hard growing up, with a little luck and a lot of pluck, one can parlay an up-from-the-ghetto narrative into a successful career as a rap artist, a colorful bad-boy backstory for a successful athlete, or a hard-work-and-determination bio for a politician. The fact that Barack Obama sits in the Oval Office compounds these dynamics, because racial barriers and discrimination are now surmountable and with hard work and determination anyone can become president of the United States. The problem with the luck-and-pluck narrative is that it belies the fact that black boys and black men are systematically discriminated against in school and in the workforce. More important, systemic and institutional racism gives way to individual shortcomings as the main reason black men don’t succeed at rate they should. The problem with the luck-and-pluck narrative is that it belies the fact that black boys and black men are systematically discriminated against in school and in the workforce. I do not want to discount the systemic sexism and racism that continue to be leveled against black women or to downplay the collective triumphs and sorrows that so many black women experience as they stake their claims to the American Dream. But the life chances for young black men and young black women today are quantitatively and qualitatively different; in the words of Ron Dellums, longtime congressional representative and the mayor of Oakland, the schools, low-wage workforce, and prison system are “grinding young men of color up like glass.”

In response to the spate of new studies on black men, as well as the widely circulated Eckholm article in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* ran a series of

articles simply titled “Being a Black Man.” To accompany the series, the *Post* launched an interactive Web site and partnered with Harvard University and the Kaiser Family Foundation to conduct a comprehensive survey and host a high-profile forum.

The long-running series detailed the findings of the survey as well as profiling the lives of several black men and boys. One of the most popular articles documented the Herculean efforts of Jachin Leatherman and Wayne Nesbit to become the valedictorian and salutatorian, respectively, of Ballou High School’s class of 2006. The *Post* journalist V. Dion Haynes described in detail how these young men successfully navigated the perilous halls of a school “tinged with every headline and grim event that has given it a reputation as one of Washington’s worst and most dangerous high schools.”<sup>14</sup> In a noble attempt to put a positive spin on grim statistics, the *Post* described how both boys had won scholarships to attend elite private high schools in suburban Maryland but had declined the offers and decided at the end of junior high school to make “a private pact with each other that by the time they graduated from high school, they would have made Ballou a better place to be young, black and male.”<sup>15</sup>

To underscore the odds faced by these two handsome kids who excelled in the classroom and on the gridiron, the *Washington Post* trotted out the grim statistics to paint a bleak picture: African American males have the lowest reading and math proficiency levels of any group; black boys represent only 8.7 percent of the nation’s public school enrollment, but they make up 23 percent of students suspended and 22 percent of those expelled—the largest for any group; only 45 percent of black boys receive high school diplomas within four years, compared with 70 percent of white boys; and, finally, black boys are overrepresented in special education programs.

What the *Post* did not mention, but the January 30, 2006, cover story of *Newsweek* did, is that “by almost every benchmark, boys across the nation and in every demographic group are falling behind. In elementary school, boys are two times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with learning disabilities and twice as likely to be placed in special-education classes. High school boys are losing ground to girls on standardized writing tests. The number of boys who said they didn’t like school rose 71 percent between 1980 and 2001.”<sup>16</sup> To properly conceptualize the *Post*’s bleak picture, one must add racism, economic disparity, and failing schools to this troubling overall trend. Additionally, when one considers the high levels of lead, mercury, and other neurotoxins disproportionately contaminating black neighborhoods, it is no wonder that too many black boys begin to fall behind by fourth grade and that many begin a downward spiral toward dropping out of school.

By articulating the all-too-American narrative of triumph in the face of adversity (a running theme throughout the series), the *Post* simultaneously articulated a seductive counternarrative; if these two boys can do it, there must be something wrong with the others who are bedeviled by gang violence, shackled by poverty, or mired in despair. Without the barriers of Jim Crow and explicit racism, the implied

narrative goes, these others must have bad brains or bad behavior—and both explanations were routinely referenced in one way or another at that star-studded forum hosted by the *Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation, where both Wayne Nesbit and Jachin Leatherman were greeted by thunderous applause and received well-deserved accolades from the likes of Bill Cosby, Ron Dellums, and Alvin Poussaint.<sup>17</sup>

Although the bad-brains narrative was muted compared with the bad-behavior discussion, Alvin Poussaint raised the specter of biology. Citing a Yale Child Study Center report, he explained that twice as many black children as white children were expelled from preschool and that nine out of ten of those black children were boys. He posed questions: “Is racial profiling happening at three and four?” “Or, is it something that has to do with the Black family?”<sup>18</sup>

Citing high rates of aggression, violence, attention-deficit disorder, and dyslexia, Alvin Poussaint actually said that many, many more black boys than black girls are “mentally handicapped” or “retarded.” “Is something happening prenatally?” he asked, but he quickly turned his attention to the role of single mothers and parenting and focused on high levels of child abuse, neglect, and the overuse of corporal punishment on boys, explaining that research shows the more you beat them, the angrier they get. Downplaying the role of white racism or anything else, he placed the responsibility for what he perceived as an epidemic of bad brains on black women—the mothers—concluding simply that “it is not totally natural for them” to raise boys.<sup>19</sup>

Although the scholars, politicians, and celebrities at the forum often cloaked these easy answers in sophistry, the *Post* readers who responded online were straightforward. For example, Bazeyi Hategekimana concluded that in the absence of “the usefulness, the accuracy, and the scientific value of IQ theory, What I can say is: ‘Give me a break.’”<sup>20</sup> He implied what many people think: the success or failure of young black men is the personal responsibility of each individual, and each individual has the capacity to achieve and be meritorious. This popular luck-and-pluck line of thought, however, does not account for the complicated racism generated at the intersection of American desire for conspicuous consumption, the low-wage workforce, failing schools, thriving prisons, crippling poverty, and the disrespect that comes from systematic and debilitating racial discrimination.

Although most of the reader responses to the *Washington Post* complimented the editors for addressing such a thorny problem head-on, many people tried their hand at armchair sociology and amateur anthropology, sharing their own explanations for the dire conditions confronting black men. As on many other interactive blogs, some posts were very sophisticated, while others were just banal. In the collective effort to identify cause and effect, one of the most popular approaches was to give a nod to racism, yet employ the rhetoric about an individual’s personal responsibility to engage in good behavior and suffer the consequences of bad decisions.

An interesting theme, however, emerged within these posts: whites' belief that their own situation was as bad as blacks' or worse. G. Butler summed up this line of thought: "THE SAME CRAP HAPPENS TO EVERY MAN IN AMERICA." One anonymous reader complained, "I may stop reading the *Washington Post* for the remainder of the year since I'm tired of pity parties from black Americans." She continued: "If I had as many incentives as a middle-class white girl that a single black (unwed) mother or father receives, I'd be living the high life and not struggling. And yes, I have a college degree. Where in the hell has it gotten me? Now, if I was black with/or without children, I'd be actively recruited for jobs, internships, etc. etc. etc. The worst thing you can be in today's world is white and middle class. You will not get anywhere!"

Although some readers claimed that America was a meritocracy and that mediocrity was not a racial characteristic, it is important to note that not one of the scores of readers responding to the series resorted to the idea that lower IQ or a higher incidence of "bad brains" explained the *Post's* depiction of black men's dire straits; ten years ago, in the wake of the best-selling *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*,<sup>21</sup> that explanation was getting quite a bit of consideration. And while opinions were evenly split, explaining the situation as the result of white racism or the sum total of poor individual decisions, another popular narrative emerged: bad behavior was the result of bad culture. This variant emerged as a result of two distinct themes, one coming mainly from the black middle class and the other coming from people of Caribbean descent. For example, R. Warren commented:

As a Black Woman in Washington, DC, I am oftentimes appalled at how we as Black Americans treat one another. Everything bad, or negative that happens to us, is not ALWAYS from the hand of a White person! We, Black America—have become out-of-control. Our attitudes, STINK. Our language is UNFATHOMABLE. Everything that our "forefathers" fought for, everyone younger than 30 care nothing at all about. We know more about the personal business of entertainers, than we do about how to get our children to school on time. We know how to manipulate the system to our own advantage, yet, when things don't go "our" way—it is always someone else' fault!! WHY?? . . . What the hell happened to us?? Sometimes, I am hurt and ashamed. This is not the way it should BE!! . . . WAKE-UP BLACK AMERICA. Prove them wrong!!

A man who called himself "Mark" expressed a similar idea about black people's putatively pathological culture and tried to distance himself from the so-called problem. In the feedback section of the Web site, he explained: "Sadly, one of the things that we as Caribbeans despise surrounds the fact that we're lumped in with Black Americans. In my opinion it would help if the survey differentiated between the two. In general we don't understand their [African Americans'] thought process and don't subscribe to a host of their theories. It's a [*sic*] unwritten rule in the Caribbean community that we stay away from African Americans."

This threadbare narrative regarding black people's pathological culture has been a standard and often quite pat explanation used by academics, pundits, and politicians to explain the reported findings. Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson is the latest in a long line of august scholars, notably Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who have argued that bad culture produces bad behavior—reasoning that has changed little in well over a century. The culprit is “what sociologists call the ‘cool-pose culture’ of young black men. . . . For these young men, it is “almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture.”<sup>22</sup>

Although Patterson makes several salient points with regard to the history of oppression and the power of the global marketplace, he too easily falls into the very old trap of concentrating on pathological and destructive behaviors among young blacks in the inner cities while ignoring such behaviors elsewhere and among other demographics. For example, he says nothing about date rape, methamphetamine use, prescription drug abuse, and binge drinking, all of which are problems among whites and in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas. And while he is quick to indict hip-hop culture, he fails to explain that baggy pants, ubiquitous tattoos, and expressive sexuality have been thoroughly adopted by many white youth, from the Outer Banks to Northern California. There is enough pathological culture in America to go around. Poor blacks, very poor whites, and poor Hmong and Laotians, however, seem to be the only subjects for this type of analysis.

One of the most debilitating aspects of this type of analysis is that by raising a simplistic notion of culture as the root cause, one depicts a complex racialized group in homogenizing and essentialist terms and implies that individuals are simply shackled by tradition. Though notions of identity and specific cultural patterns are shared among and between black people in the United States and throughout the diaspora, Irvin Hicks Jr. was correct when he explained, in the readers' feedback forum for the *Washington Post*, that “we are diverse, complex individuals who are part of a non-homogeneous fabric just like the rest of humanity.”

Race, racism, and democracy have always been fluid and flexible constructions, and new formations of race continue to emerge. Whichever way the causal arrow points, it is high time we come up with new understandings of the way that black men who for whatever reason do not graduate from high school are emerging as a specific sociological category, with devastating but increasingly predictable outcomes. The old explanations regarding bad behavior or bad brains do not have enough explanatory purchase to account for the emergence of new formations of race that are classed and gendered and integral to new economies dependent on the prison industrial complex on the one hand and new flows of migratory labor on the other.

Not one commentator for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the star-studded panel at the Kaiser Family Foundation made the connection that neolib-

eralism, globalization, and the flow of immigrants to the United States might affect the construction of race in the United States and the life chances for young black men. Nor did anyone offer an explanation that accounts for the way many manufacturing jobs, where black men once had a foothold, have been relocated overseas and replaced by service jobs, often performed by women.

One has to consider that 72 percent of black male high school dropouts are jobless while only 19 percent of Hispanic male dropouts are jobless. Something is going on, and I don't buy the idea that so-called undocumented workers or "Mexicans" work harder. On the other hand, an undocumented worker *is* less likely to say "Fuck you!" walk off the job, and then try to sue the employer for unsafe working conditions.

Three particular studies provide productive ways to interrogate the impact globalization has had on new constructions of race for black people in the United States; together, they provide novel ways of looking at the connections between immigration, neoliberalism, incarceration, and the perilous conditions in which many undereducated black men find themselves today. The first is "Race at Work: Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market," a study conducted by Devah Pager and Bruce Western. Their team of researchers sent out so-called "testers" to apply for advertised jobs in New York City. "The testers were well-spoken young men, aged 22 to 26," and each was part of a three-man team—one white, one black, and one Latino member per team.<sup>23</sup> The testers had fictitious résumés that represented comparable profiles. Like other such audit studies, Pager and Western's study showed significant differences in "positive responses": white men fared best, then Latinos, and finally black men. The researchers then added a bit of a twist. They sent out white men who disclosed a criminal background. After analyzing the job offers and callbacks in response to this new configuration, the researchers reported that the "white applicant with a felony conviction appears to do just as well, if not better, than his black counterpart with no criminal background."<sup>24</sup> They concluded that "black job applicants are only two-thirds as successful as equally qualified Latinos, and little more than half as successful as equally qualified whites. Indeed, black job seekers fare no better than white men just released from prison."<sup>25</sup>

The second study, by Michael A. Stoll, is titled "Taking Stock of the Employment Opportunities of Less-Educated African American Men." Commissioned by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, it sets forth a range of supply- and demand-side explanations for why so many young black men with little education become so-called discouraged workers or find themselves jobless. One of its important findings is that less-educated white and Latino men have been getting jobs in the construction industry, one area in the industrial sector that has experienced growth in the last decade, even as comparably educated black men have not.<sup>26</sup>

The third study was conducted by my friend and colleague Paula McClain. She and her team found that Latino immigrants to North Carolina hold negative and

stereotypical views of blacks and feel that they have more in common with whites than they do with blacks. Yet whites there do not reciprocate these feelings toward Latinos and feel that they have more in common with blacks because of shared history and culture.<sup>27</sup>

Triangulating the findings of these studies raises many questions, but one can begin to identify a pattern: there is empirical evidence that racism is thriving and discrimination is real, and this is despite the widespread idea that we are increasingly living in a color-blind society or that luck or pluck can enable anyone to succeed. Although whites, at least in North Carolina, feel that they have more in common with blacks than they do with Latino immigrants, this does not translate into better job prospects for black men in the low-wage job market. Finally, Latino immigrants, it appears, are more likely to identify or find common ground with white people than with black people. Interrogating these findings as they relate to the fault lines of class, ideas of assimilation and belonging, gender, and the wages of whiteness will help us get a better understanding of the new topographies of race in the twenty-first century.

#### NEOLIBERALISM

Most people will concede that education and taxation, job creation and competition, and the structures of housing and health care opportunity are all undergoing important changes as a result of new flows of immigration. Less obvious, but also important, is the shift in new and old forms of racism, assimilation and acculturation, and constructions of race. The annual influx of seven hundred thousand or more undocumented people from Latin America across the U.S. border to find jobs, start families, and stake their claim to the American Dream has profoundly changed both race relations and the construction of race. But how does one try to explain and unpack these more subtle cultural and sociological shifts, and how do they affect the racial politics of culture and the cultural politics of race?

I find myself cringing at the prospect of agreeing with President Bush, who argues that we need a humane and respectful policy to address the needs of poor and exploited workers who risk everything to come and work in the United States. I am sympathetic to the claim that we did not cross the borders, the borders crossed us, and I am inspired by early La Raza leaders like Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez, who organized the Chicano contingent for the 1968 Poor People's Campaign in Washington. I don't trust, however, the neoliberal rational choice theorists who somehow come off as liberal reformers and claim that the market will drive fair wages and efficiently direct the flow of poor and exploited workers to the chicken- and hog-processing plants in North Carolina, the manicured lawns of the Hamptons, and the crop fields of the San Joaquin Valley. Recent immigrants are cast as laborers who simply fill a natural market, keeping prices low, wages down, and the American



economy humming along. It seems like a naked play for cheap laborers who are vulnerable, exploited, and simply cogs in the capitalist machine, laborers who do not get workers' compensation, cannot withdraw from Social Security, and do not have access to reasonable health care.

The rhetoric of neoliberalism, to me, is reminiscent of the slavers' portrayals of happy hardworking Negroes who were better off here, enslaved, than free in Africa. I am equally loath to write, speak, or teach about limiting Latino immigration, increasing border security, or cracking down on so-called illegal aliens. The xenophobia and racism inherent in this approach are not an option.

The debate has thus been cast in either-or terms; it seems as though one must support either a neoliberal guest worker program and an eventual bid for citizenship or a racist and xenophobic position that closes the borders. The batten-down-the-hatches approach makes felons out of trustworthy people who are just trying to make an honest living from a dishonest wage, while the guest worker program institutionalizes a second class of noncitizens whose only hope is to go to the end of the line and hope for the day when they might get their bid for citizenship.

#### RACE IN THE YEAR 2050

Immigration to the United States is a formula for success that has worked for years, but seemingly only for those who have made up the storied "huddled masses." It is worth repeating Emma Lazarus's famous poem that is engraved in the stone base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me."

For a century, these famous lines served as an unofficial immigration policy. Etched into the mind of many a grade-school pupil, the mantra informs an open-borders policy that emphasizes immigrants' role in making the United States a strong and diverse nation. But if one substitutes "teeming shore" with "teeming borders," or identifies the shore as that of Cuba, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic, the tone and effect of the poem seem to change. When black and brown people come, American racism precludes the same welcoming embrace for the "wretched refuse" who are homeless and tempest-tossed.

By 2050, so-called racialized minorities will be the majority in the United States, and whites will once again be the minority—so goes the rhetoric of everyone from advertisers to demographers. And rhetoric is probably all it is. As with a weather forecast, there is no way to know with certainty what the exact demographic makeup will be in 2050. It is important to note that the same rhetoric and forecasts of certain demographic change were prevalent during Reconstruction after the Civil War: the United States, it was predicted, would soon have no more race problem because

black people, deprived of whites' paternal care, would simply die of disease or kill each other.

Nevertheless, a look at countries within the African diaspora suggests that the future will not be what most people are predicting. In a provocative article titled "Are Latinos Becoming 'White' Folk? And What That Still Says about Race in America," Alisse Waterston describes a process that many scholars are familiar with in South Africa, Surinam, Trinidad, Brazil, and indeed Florida, where members of a one-time racialized minority group emerge as "not quite white" and begin to function as "virtually white" or as a buffer race between whites and African peoples, who still suffer the brunt of racism and exploitation at the bottom of the racial and class hierarchy.

Waterston explains that the categories "English oriented" and "Spanish preferred," used by advertising agencies and marketers to split the so-called Latino market, are color- and class-coded euphemisms. Employing Karen Brodtkin's notion that an "unholy trinity of corporations, the state, and monopolistic media produces and reproduces patterns and practices of whiteness with dreadful predictability,"<sup>28</sup> Waterston reminds readers that the media, including advertisers, have long played an important role in the construction of race and that these color- and class-inflected monikers might portend the expansion of the borders and boundaries of whiteness.<sup>29</sup>

The result would be a new model minority with class mobility—English-oriented Latinos—who would have access to the wages of whiteness, while the Spanish preferred would emerge as something like a model minority with class immobility. The pattern in Florida, with the whitening of the pre-Mariel boat lift Cubans, will extend its reach from Florida to Texas and California; for that matter, it will extend to any locale where the light and often-white Latino professional class—deemed "English oriented"—assimilates to an expanding and flexible racial category of whiteness. It is a scenario in which ideas about *la familia* merge with family values, a strong work ethic complements the so-called Protestant work ethic, and conservative Catholicism merges with the values of prolife Protestants. More importantly, it is a scenario that leverages the century-long momentum of incorporating Irish, Italian, Jewish, and other racialized minorities into the category of whiteness. The Republican Party, at least, hopes this will result in more voters who favor the likes of Alberto Gonzales and fewer voters who favor the likes of Antonio R. Villaraigosa.

Access to the wages of whiteness is one thing; access to just plain wages is another. The so-called Spanish-preferred Latinos—usually darker, poorer, and more closely tied to their indigeneity—are also playing an interesting role in shifting labor mar-

kets. While some pundits employ the oft-cited “jobs no one wants,” others color-code their rhetoric by evoking the attractiveness of recent immigrants’ strong work ethic to potential employers. In this last iteration, the opposite, but equally racist, dynamics unfold in the same way as they have in the rhetoric about black people’s “pathological culture.” When nearly everyone from talk radio hosts to roofers to restaurant managers evokes the hard-won and strong work ethic of many recent immigrants, the reference is to Latin Americans, but not to the many hardworking immigrants from Latin America or the Caribbean who are also part of the African diaspora, or to the hardworking African immigrants, or to the many hardworking undocumented workers from Canada, Ireland, or India. The singling out of “Spanish-preferred” mestizos for inclusion in this category increases the unremarkability of whiteness on the one hand and codes black immigrants as lazy or as criminals on the other.

I cannot help but juxtapose this rhetoric with those two hardworking work crews I witnessed on that highway. I think what needs to be addressed is the perception that the so-called Spanish-preferred and often undocumented workers are better workers who will work for less money than their black peers. We need a more sophisticated and politically responsible analysis that focuses on class and race and gender while exploring how employment opportunities are provided to some while being stripped from others. Employers risk committing a crime by hiring undocumented workers because they do not want to risk hiring anyone whom they believe might commit a crime.

#### NOTES

1. Michael Bloomberg, testimony, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comprehensive Immigration Reform: Examining the Need for a Guest Worker Program*, field hearing, Philadelphia, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., July 5, 2006, [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109\\_senate\\_hearings&docid=f:30254.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109_senate_hearings&docid=f:30254.pdf).

2. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 8; Derrick Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law* (Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Law and Business, 2000), 9.

3. Brad Knickerbocker, “National Acrimony and a Rise in Hate Crimes,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 3, 2005, [www.csmonitor.com/2005/0603/p03s01-ussc.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0603/p03s01-ussc.html).

4. U.S. Department of Justice, “Hate Crime Statistics 2007,” table 1, [www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2007/table\\_01.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2007/table_01.htm).

5. Lanita Jacobs-Huey, “‘The Arab Is the New Nigger’: African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11,” *Transforming Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006): 61.

6. Lee A. Daniels, ed., *The State of Black America* (Chicago: National Urban League Publications, 2006), 19.

7. Michael Bergman, “Revenues for Black-Owned Firms Near \$89 Billion, Number of Businesses Up 45 Percent,” U.S. Department of Commerce press release, April 18, 2006, [www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/business\\_ownership/006711.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/business_ownership/006711.html).

8. Joyce A. Martin et al., “Births: Final Data for 2002,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 52, no. 10 (2003): 1.

9. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991–2002," Manhattan Institute for Public Research, Education Working Paper No. 3, 2003, [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_03.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_03.htm), 1–36; Christopher Swanson, *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Education Policy Center, 2004), [www.urban.org/publications/410934.html](http://www.urban.org/publications/410934.html); Nicole Stoops, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003*, Current Population Reports P20, No. 550 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), [www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf), 4.
10. "Black-White Higher Education Equality Index," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 51 (2006): 48.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 49.
13. Erik Eckholm, "Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn," *New York Times*, March 20, 2006. The studies Eckholm highlighted were Peter Edelman, Harry Holzer, and Paul Offner's *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006); Ronald B. Mincy's *Black Males Left Behind* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006); and Bruce Western's *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).
14. V. Dion Haynes, "For the Love of Ballou," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2006, A11, A1.
15. Ibid., A11, A14.
16. Peg Tyre, "The Trouble with Boys; They're Kinetic, Maddening and Failing at School. Now Educators Are Trying New Ways to Help Them Succeed," *Newsweek*, January 30, 2006, 44.
17. "Paths to Success: A Forum on Young African American Men," Kaiser Family Foundation conference, Washington, DC, July 18, 2006; for transcript, see [www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/phi071806trans.pdf](http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/phi071806trans.pdf).
18. Remarks by Alvin Poussaint at the Kaiser Family Foundation conference "Paths to Success," 33.
19. Ibid., 35.
20. "What Do You Think about the 'Being a Black Man' Project?" *Washington Post*, posted reader comments (June–November 2006), on the paper's "Being a Black Man" series of reports over that year, [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/blackmen/2006/05/what\\_do\\_you\\_think\\_about\\_the\\_be.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/blackmen/2006/05/what_do_you_think_about_the_be.html); for the series Web site, see [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/interactives/blackmen/blackmen.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/interactives/blackmen/blackmen.html).
21. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
22. Orlando Patterson, "A Poverty of Mind," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006, 13.
23. Devah Pager and Bruce Western, "Race at Work: Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market," report for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, December 2005, [www.princeton.edu/~pager/race\\_at\\_work.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~pager/race_at_work.pdf), 2.
24. Ibid., 6.
25. Ibid., 12.
26. Michael A. Stoll, "Taking Stock of the Employment Opportunities of Less-Educated African American Men," report for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, June 2006, [www.cbfcinc.org/pdf/Taking\\_Stock\\_Doc.pdf](http://www.cbfcinc.org/pdf/Taking_Stock_Doc.pdf), 5.
27. Paula D. McClain et al., "Racial Distancing in a Southern City: Latino Immigrants' Views of Black Americans," *Journal of Politics* 68, no. 3 (2006): 571–84.
28. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 177–78.
29. Alisse Waterston, "Are Latinos Becoming 'White' Folk? And What That Still Says about Race in America," *Transforming Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2006): 132–50.

