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MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS IN THE RESURGENCE OF THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

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Abstract: Recent scholarship has reintroduced cultural analysis to poverty studies. In this paper, we revisit the “culture of poverty” thesis and its variants comparing it to contemporary cultural analysis. Instead of debating its merits, we assess the value added by cultural analysis to structural theories of poverty. In particular, we evaluate the extent to which contemporary cultural analysis has incorporated intersectional scholarship that has brought variations along race, class, and gender lines in the exposure to and experience of poverty to the fore. We find that the emergent culture discourse, aimed at complicating, enriching and expanding our understanding of poverty, ultimately fails to account for ways structuralists have been doing so all along—acknowledging differences by social locations, such as race, gender, and class. We offer a roadmap for bridging intersectionality and culture by highlighting existing scholarship and identifying new directions. We re-imagine contemporary cultural analysis within an intersectional frame, highlighting how Black women in poverty illustrate the utility of both an intersectional and cultural analysis.

Keywords: culture; poverty; intersectional theory; black women; work

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Structural theories of oppression continue to be dominant in sociological explanations of the social world. In fact, explanations implicating anything other than structure have been deemed problematic, as in psychological and cultural explanations of social ills. In a 2010 special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, editors Mario L. Small, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont urged sociologists to reconsider the utility of cultural analysis in poverty research. They offer two reasons why the time to reintegrate a cultural analysis into poverty studies has come. First, the time for avoiding the culture/poverty taboo has passed, as advances in cultural theory now allow for empirical, as opposed to political, poverty research agendas. Second, contrary to risking problematic misinterpretation by policymakers, cultural analyses could actually improve policy by revealing the multiple meanings, complex strategies and changing attitudes that characterize the diverse and dynamic day-to-day lives of the poor. Incorporating cultural analysis, they argue, does not imply cultural causality or supplant well-established structural theories of poverty; instead, it should supplement them.

In this paper, we revisit the “culture of poverty” thesis and its variants comparing it to contemporary cultural analysis. Instead of debating its merits, we assess the value added by cultural analysis to structural theories of poverty. In particular, we evaluate the extent to which contemporary cultural analysis has incorporated intersectional scholarship that has brought variations along race, class, and gender lines in the exposure to and experience of poverty to the fore.

The Problem with the Culture of Poverty

The term “culture of poverty” was popularized by anthropologist Oscar Lewis. He used it to describe a litany of cultural traits he observed in Mexican shantytowns in the 1950s. Poverty, he argued, “becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a subculture of its own [with] ... its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members” (Lewis, 1959:2). He theorized that the realities of material deprivation become entrenched over generations, such that the traits he observed, like frequent violence and uninvolved parenting, were the products of socialization, and generalizable to the poor everywhere.

The culture of poverty thesis was embraced in America, giving rise to what is arguably one of the most powerful national discourses of poverty. Politically, attention turned to remediating individual-level cultural values deficiencies, easing the mounting pressure on the state to address poverty systemically. Social scientists were sharply critical of Lewis' characterization of the poor, and attempted to counteract the monolithically negative stereotype with "positive images of the worthy poor, struggling for upward mobility against all odds" (Bourgois, 2001:11905).

The culture of poverty thesis took on a decidedly racial character in the 1965 Moynihan report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Citing his empirical findings of welfare dependency, unmarried mothers, unemployment, and regressive values among the majority Black urban poor, sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, suggested that the poor Black family was enmeshed in a 'tangle of pathology' that creates and reproduces the conditions of poverty. The theory is largely discredited today, both within and outside of the academy, for what many have called a racist, "blame the victim" approach. Despite a general avoidance of cultural explanations for poverty among academics in the past 50 years, there are exceptions. For instance, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994) argued, in their controversial best-seller *The Bell Curve*, that if low-income students perform below average on intelligence aptitude tests, it is a result of their cultural influences at home, not their poverty. Further, Herrnstein & Murray claimed that the IQ differential was genetic, and therefore race-specific.

The far-reaching and profound impact of the culture of poverty thesis bears little resemblance to its humble beginnings in an anthropologist's fieldnotes. In fact, the backlash prompted Oscar Lewis to insist, in later publications, that he supported direct state intervention in eradicating poverty, and that "there is nothing in the concept [the culture of poverty] that puts the onus of poverty on the character of the poor" (quoted in Bourgois, 2001:11905). His policy recommendations to President Johnson bore this out: Black men needed jobs and training if the community was to avoid total social collapse. But when it appeared in the Moynihan report, the culture of poverty thesis suggested that poverty in Black communities was self-perpetuating, and that even if material conditions were to drastically improve, Blacks would remain culturally deficient (Harding, Lamont, & Small, 2010). Hence, a policy climate emerged that sought to alter the behavior of poor Blacks instead of counteracting the effects of systemic structural disadvantage. Significantly, this climate persists in Washington today, where welfare retrenchment continues even under democratic administrations, such as President Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and President Obama's scolding of unemployed Black men uninvolved in family life.

Sociologist Steven Steinberg argues that the problem with the culture of poverty thesis lies in its reification of culture which "occurs whenever culture is treated as a thing unto itself, divorced from the material and social conditions in which it is anchored" (1998:9). The cycle of poverty, allegedly perpetuated by culture, he argues, is not culturally driven at all:

... It is not culture, but racial and class hierarchy, that is reproduced from one generation to the next.... The culture of poor and marginalized groups does not exist in a vacuum. It is in constant and dynamic interaction with the matrix of political, economic, and social factors in which it is embedded” (Steinberg, 1998:10).

Further, when used as a causal explanation for Black poverty, culture is easily interwoven with historically powerful justifications for American racism that perpetuate the systemic disenfranchisement of African Americans today.

Culture Redefined

While sociologists of poverty may treat culture as a black box, Small, Lamont & Harding (2010) point out that other scholars—economists, psychologists, and political scientists—have taken interest in the concepts and their applicability to poverty research. While the first round of culture and poverty research inspired by Moynihan was discredited as blaming the victim, contemporary studies highlight complex, contextual and highly varied strategies used by the poor to stretch limited stores of social and cultural capital and maintain any security or status that has been achieved (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Small, Lamont, & Harding, 2010).

The sociological utility of culture has evolved and become more defined in the decades since the culture of poverty was debunked. Culture was once described nebulously as the interactive process of meaning-making, and some scholars still argue that culture functions to organize groups and solidify identities (see Geertz, 1973). But Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a French poststructural culture theorist, argues that the way these meanings and identities get expressed and practiced often correlates to one’s location in the hierarchical ranking of socioeconomic classes. In other words, culture is directly related to privilege and inequality.

Ann Swidler (1986) argued persuasively that instead being unified coherent systems of meanings shared by a group, individuals actually select from the repertoire of cultural practices available to them, employing them strategically to navigate social worlds characterized by uncertainty. This “toolbox”, as Swidler terms one’s cultural repertoire, can vary considerably from one individual to the next and over time, even within a group appearing to an observer to have shared cultural traits. Moving beyond a simplistic understanding of culture to a multidimensional construct is the goal of the contemporary cultural analysis of poverty.¹

The Case for Culture in Poverty Studies

In “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty,” Small, Lamont & Harding make a compelling case for both scholarly and policy attention to culture. First, they argue that culture helps us to “understand better why people respond to poverty the way they do—both how they cope with it and how they escape it” (2010:9). Coping

with and escaping poverty are characterized by previously unexamined variations in associated behaviors, decision-making and outcomes that ethnographers have documented, showing that variation exists across groups as well as within the same sociocultural space, such as a single neighborhood (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010:9). Heterogeneity within a group faced with the same structural constraints, they argue, can only be captured and developed using a cultural lens. Values judgments are rejected, and instead, individual are seen as strategically deploying aspects of culture available to him or her (cultural toolbox).

Second, the Annals editors argue that reinvigorating culture in poverty studies has the potential to counteract myths about the culture of the poor, challenging negative culture of poverty stereotypes that persist today. For instance, a recent rebuttal to a study claiming that poor Black students devalue school has done just that: John Ogbu (2008) argued that black students develop an oppositional culture in response to blocked opportunities and harass their pro-school peers as “acting white”, but empirical tests showed that Black students are *more* likely to have positive attitudes about their schooling (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010).

The editors’ incentive for integrating culture into poverty policy strikes an even more exigent note: “ignoring culture can lead to bad policy” (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010:11). Examples include stymied famine relief efforts in Sudan, where local efforts to distribute food aid along kinship lines instead of targeting malnourished individuals was interpreted as corruption; and recent U.S. pro-marriage campaigns based on assumptions of poor mothers’ negative attitudes toward marriage, when in fact they value marriage *so* highly that they simply don’t “settle” as commonly as their middle-class counterparts. Finally, the volume’s editors point out the multiple ways culture is always/already part of poverty policy, as both a powerful influence on policymakers themselves (e.g., the profound impact of Charles Murray’s perversity thesis on welfare reform in the 1990s) and a central tenet in political debates and platforms, exemplified by president Obama’s call for attitude adjustment on the parts of fathers who shirk responsibility and leave their children to be raised in poor, single-parent homes.

Ultimately Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) do not argue for the declining explanatory power of structure. Rather, they make the case that a purely structural approach misses some fundamentals of human interaction, adaptability and creativity on the ground. They argue,

... we do not deny the importance of macrosocial conditions, such as the concentration of wealth and income, the spatial segregation across classes and racial groups ... human action is both constrained and enabled by the meaning people give to their actions, and these dynamics should become central to our understanding of the production and reproduction of poverty and social inequality (Harding, Lamont, & Small, 2010:23).

However, the research published in *Reconsidering Culture and Poverty* does not support this pledge of loyalty to structure as well as it could. There are silences where there should be discussions of advances in structural poverty studies. For

example, the work of intersectional scholars would contribute significantly to a body of work concerned with variations in the experience of poverty.

What's Missing? An Intersectional Perspective

Small, Harding, and Lamont's (2010) rallying cry for the complicating of poverty studies originates from their broader sociological imperative that "invocations of culture [s]hould be ... informed by the much more sophisticated culture literature that has developed over the past three decades or so" (p. 13). The same imperative is not extended to developments in other literatures, however, *Reconsidering Culture and Poverty* is largely devoid of articles or commentaries that consider intersectional theory in musings over how; for example, strategies of action vary across a single neighborhood. Cultural theory is used almost exclusively. Yet intersectional theory has offered key insights into poverty research in recent years, illustrating how the bottom has by no means been the same for all groups (Branch, 2011; Duffy, 2007).

Most studies fail to simply break down the effects of poverty by gender. In two qualitative studies, the research report by Sandra Susan Smith (2010), "A Test of Sincerity: How Black and Latino Service Workers Make Decisions about Making Referrals" and "Repertoires of Infidelity among Low-Income Men: Doubt, Duty and Destiny" by Nathan Fosse (2010), the subjects were mostly men, and all men, respectively.² Smith's sample included both Latina and Black women, but she does not analyze differences by gender beyond providing the counts.³ This trend continues in four of the other eight articles, while three do not mention gender at all. The final article of the volume discusses gender as it pertains to the reprehensible lack of family-friendly work policies that disadvantage single mothers especially; however, this author doesn't mention race (see Woolsey, 2010).

While the new culture and poverty literature does attend to race, albeit somewhat monolithically, it takes the coincidence of non-whiteness and poverty for granted, leaving out ways in which white poverty (e.g., regions of Appalachia, which are historically slightly more destitute than most inner cities) is characterized by similar cultural responses to chronic material deprivation (Tickamyer, 1990; Henderson & Tickamyer, 2009). In short, an intersectional analysis is well warranted in poverty/inequality studies.

The central idea in intersectional theory is that "a member of a subordinate group is not disadvantaged just by gender or racial ethnic status or social class, but by a multiple system or matrix of domination" (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1993; Lorber, 2005:213). The intersection of disadvantaged statuses (e.g., poor, Black, woman) creates a matrix of domination that is the lived experience of various groups, and these oppressions cannot be divided to fit additively into to the dichotomous (man/woman, Black/white) nature of sociological study (Collins, 1993). Therefore a singular focus on race as the basis for observed inequality among Blacks is insufficient since it fails to take into account intersecting systems of power and the resultant oppressions.

Intersectional scholars draw attention to the multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory ways that identity corresponds with inequality,⁴ highlighting how overly general structural explanations of inequality that focus on women or Blacks have long failed to account for variations *among* women or Blacks. Gender is theorized alongside race and class illustrating how an individual's race, gender, and economic statuses result in a particular constellation of privilege and disadvantage; Glenn calls this "bringing race and gender within the same analytic frame" (2002:6). For example, a Black woman is unlikely to experience her Blackness independently of her femaleness: instead, there are a host of stereotypes, historic controlling images, social policies and labor market discrimination practices that rely on societally-produced meanings of what it means to be a Black woman specifically (Crenshaw, 1993; Browne & Kennelly, 1999).

Intersectionality and culture are not oppositional constructs. In fact, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) borrows prominent cultural theorist William Sewell's conception of social structure to define intersectionality. Sewell allows for the fluidity of other forces, like culture, to intervene in his conception of structure, which he argues, "is composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are real" (Glenn, 2002:267). Both intersectional scholarship and cultural analysis insists that we don't gloss over the complex and varied social lives playing out within the broader structures we use to understand macrosocial phenomena.

Integrating an Intersectional Perspective

Given that poverty is the empirical basis of the Annals, it makes sense to ask what intersectional scholars understand to be the most important barriers to employment (full-time, gainful, and non-exploitive) since all can and often do have a direct relationship to poverty.

A cultural interpretation of how people negotiate lives in poverty should attend to the important identity differences in job-hunting (see Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991; Kennelly, 1999), not to mention the hurdles of low-wage service sector job experiences (Glenn, 1992; Duffy, 2007; Romero, 1988; Uttal & Tuominen, 1999; Reskin, 1999; Anderson, 2001). In fact, several of these authors have even pointed out the persistent influence of culture of poverty-specific stereotypes which surface in white employers' reasons for discrimination, such as underdeveloped work ethic, defensive attitudes, low standards, lack of commitment, and single motherhood (see Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991; Pager & Quillian, 2005; Kennelly, 1999). In short, a cultural analysis must occur alongside a structural focus on who has access to work and the ways in which race, gender, and class serve as barriers to labor market entry.

The fixation on unemployment as central to the struggles of poor minorities is another problematic characteristic of the new culture and poverty literature. As many sociologists of work have shown, poor minority *women* have been swelling the ranks of the low-wage work force for decades in an attempt to make ends meet

(Andersen, 2001; McGuire, 2002; Leslie, 1995). The locus of work and poverty is a conundrum for cultural analysis since it highlights those who follow the appropriate cultural script for escaping poverty—engagement in the labor force—while facing the structural reality of “bad” jobs (Kalleberg, 2000).

Bridging Intersectionality and Culture

What would a cultural analysis informed by intersectionality look like? Existing intersectional scholarship offers some examples and potentially fruitful directions for future research. For instance, Glenn (1992) traces the history of reproductive labor and points out the modern persistence of racialized and gendered stereotypes and assumptions around who does (or should do) this work. Beginning in slavery, Black women were dually constructed as both passive and servile enough to manage and relate to children, and as too underdeveloped to provide meaningful care work. The gender-interactional component of this dual construction was key:

Although ideologies of ‘race’ and ‘racial difference’ justifying the dual labor system were already in place, specific ideas about racial-ethnic womanhood were invented and enacted in everyday interactions between mistresses and workers (Glenn, 1992:32).

Other qualitative accounts, too, reveal that domestics of color often employed cultural strategies of resistance, in which they intentionally cultivated a falsely docile, amiable exterior to their employers in order to keep their community-based identity unaffected by their demeaning circumstances (Glenn, 1992:33). Exploring the contemporary manifestations of similar cultural strategies might be an ideal launch pad for culture and poverty research to engage with gender as well as race.

Other examples of cultural analyses account quite usefully for gender differences between same-race persons. When capitalism reorganized reproductive labor, shifting much of it into the public sphere and establishing a market exchange value, the fundamental racist sexism which characterized care work as unskilled and low value remained, as did its isolation and invisibility (Glenn, 1992:30). Minority men, however, swelled the ranks of non-reproductive low-wage occupations (e.g., grounds and maintenance), often gaining social bonds and support from peers, which offered “... an alternative system of values from that imposed by the manager” (Glenn, 1992: 23). That this resistance strategy was an option—or an available tool in Swidler’s cultural toolbox—was directly related to the fact that men of color were historically not responsible for domestic labor, and actually segregated from feminized occupations (Reskin, 1999). This kind of example indicates a potentially fruitful area of investigation into contemporary gender differences within the Black community, which may reveal distinct cultural frames, narratives and strategies of action which are contingent on women’s subordinate status.

An insightful contemporary account by Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) provides an example of how intersectional theory and culture/poverty theory can overlap in ways that enrich the analysis substantially. She discusses the intersection of race and gender from another angle by racializing the concept of the “glass escalator,” used to describe the accelerated rate at which men entering female-dominated professions rise through the ranks into the most authoritative and highly compensated positions. Wingfield (2009) argues that Black men, on the contrary, are unlikely to experience this accelerated advancement, illustrating that male privilege is often insufficient to overcoming deeply embedded racist stereotypes about Black men’s dangerousness. As a result, she argues:

Black men may repudiate femininity as a way of accessing the masculinity—and its attendant status—that is denied through other routes. Rejecting femininity is a key strategy men use to assert masculinity, and it remains available to Black men even when other means of achieving masculinity are unattainable (Wingfield, 2009:8-9)

It goes without saying that it is Black women’s femininity they reject; rejecting white women’s femininity would not serve to reinforce masculinity in the same way. In this way, institutional barriers to claiming Black masculinity experienced on the job may have direct ramifications for personal and family life, and may explain some of why Black men appear to distance themselves from the community life of predominantly female-headed households (Wingfield, 2009). This serves as a prime example of how cultural theorizations of poverty can—and should—account for gender, especially in discussions where Black male joblessness is identified as the structural root of the problem.

Finally, the original culture of poverty literature was preoccupied with the role of welfare, and whether its availability was helping or hindering poor Blacks. While Black male joblessness is pegged as the problem by leading social scientists (see Wilson, 1987), the welfare discourse more commonly portrays recipients as Black single mothers, and includes a host of racist gendered stereotypes about them (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). This cultural frame of the lazy Black woman is not new; it has historically served as a controlling image used to compel Black women’s labor. The post-emancipation withdrawal of Black women from the labor pool, for instance, led to hysteria among southern farmers who accused them of trying to “play the lady” (Glenn, 2002). Freed Black women exercising their new right to not work were “shirking their duty to be productive workers,” while white women were *supposed* to stay at home (Glenn, 2002:100). This is arguably the moment when it became commonplace for whites to refer to Black women who chose to stay at home as lazy; a historic precedent to the contemporary American controlling images of “the welfare queen” and the “Jezebel” (Collins 1993; Tickamyer, 2009). Femininity, mothering, and welfare use have always been dually constructed for Black and white women. Black women are culturally demonized, while white women engaging in the same behavior are culturally sanctioned. Today, poor Blacks are continually subject to definition as either “deserving” or “undeserving” of government aid (Guetzkow, 2010). Yet, the binary of deserving vs. undeserving

poor is an entirely culturally constructed, contested and mediated discourse, and one that cannot be fully understood—let alone addressed with policy—before acknowledging its profoundly racialized and gendered composition.

Conclusion: Mapping the Intersections

We have sought in this paper to re-imagine contemporary cultural analysis within an intersectional frame. By and large, the studies featured in the Annals still heavily favor Black men as the unit of analysis, obscuring the distinct experiences of Black women. This tendency to give race primacy in identity politics is longstanding and reminiscent of one of the first Black women's studies books by Gloria T. Hull (1982) et al. titled, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.

Yet, impoverished Black women serve as a particularly probative example of the utility of an intersectional and cultural analysis.⁵ Intersectional research highlights how barriers to employment for low-income Black women are symptomatic of their double-jeopardy, due to marginalized racial and gender identities, the symptoms of which do not evaporate if/when they are able to secure gainful employment (Browne & Kennelly, 1999). Historically, employment options available to Black women were characterized by instability, exploitation, and invisibility; employment alone was rarely sufficient to enable a family to escape poverty (Branch, 2011). Contemporarily, discrimination against Black women persists, especially in the low-wage sector. For example, Kennelly's (1999) study of Atlanta employers found that they often chose not to hire Black women alleging poor reliability and inconsistent work habits due to the needs of children. Employers routinely assumed that all Black women seeking employment had children and were single mothers.

It is in many ways ironic that poor Black women's labor, both paid and unpaid, is even more invisible in the new culture and poverty literature than in more traditional subfields of organizations, social stratification, and labor studies. The reason cannot be the lack of empirical data, since both the intersectional and work literatures document the innumerable culturally-generated strategies poor Black women have deployed to cope without stable partners, a lack of affordable childcare and the demeaning quality of most low-wage work (see Leslie, 1995; Edin & Lein, 1997). Culturally-constructed narratives make sense of circumstances like men's absence (Crenshaw, 1993; Anderson, 2001), and the choice not to marry has elsewhere been described as agentic, and in terms of uncompromisable ideals black women hold for the institution of marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Beal, 2008). Finally, focusing the cultural lens on poor Black men's tenuous relationships to paid work obscures the fact that their female counterparts have prioritized the needs of family, established extensive care networks, opted to work multiple service-sector jobs rather than accept government assistance (Leslie, 1995; Woolsey, 2010), prevailing much more often than famed poverty scholar William Julius Wilson predicted in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987).

As the last several decades of intersectional scholarship reveals, Black women's experiences in a multitude of work environments, and whether their work is compensated at a living wage (if work is an option at all), is contingent on both their race and gender. The structural corollaries of racism and sexism are compounded for Black women and broadly manifested in the labor market. For this reason, analyzing chronic underemployment and unemployment in impoverished communities without attention to gender differences is to generalize poverty as a condition in which other organizing principles of power differentials are nullified.

Existing intersectional scholarship of Black working women living in poverty highlights the unique structural circumstances that shape their experience; the same must be true of the cultural strategies they employ to cope with, and make sense of, that experience. The new culture and poverty scholars might agree, but accounting for such experiences requires grounding future research in a more complex understanding of structural poverty and the multiple social locations within it. Following some of the most influential intersectional theorists of race, gender and work, we have argued that "a fuller appreciation of the problems of the Black community will reveal that gender subordination does contribute significantly to the destitute conditions of so many African Americans" (Crenshaw, 1993:391).

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Notes

¹ The new generation of culture scholars, Small, Lamont, & Harding argue, conceive of culture differently than past cohorts: the concept "tends to be more narrowly defined, easier to measure, and more plausibly falsifiable" (2010:8).

² Smith's paper looks at networking and its dependence on shared notions of what makes a 'good worker' and by contrast, someone whose work ethic might reflect poorly on the referee. Fosse's paper reports on his interviews with low-income non-white men that lead him to an alternate explanation for low marriage rates in this community.

³ Interestingly, Smith includes interview excerpts from two of the women deploring the bad work ethic of family members they would not refer: the Latina admits she wouldn't refer her own husband because he's a slob, and the black woman can't think of anyone she would refer, because those that aren't in prison are mostly "not-working people" who she describes as lazy, concluding that "we [blacks] got a lot of issues. And a lot of it is work ethic. A lot of us don't want to work" (excerpt used in Smith 2010: "A Test of Sincerity").

⁴ Most empirical research highlights intersection of race, gender and class, but other disadvantaged statuses include ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, citizenship, health, and geopolitical context (Dill & Zambrana, 2009:12).

⁵ I have chosen to include both employed (working poor) and unemployed Black women, favoring the structural analysis that reveals how permeable the dividing line between these two categories is in terms of material circumstances (Newman, 1999).