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Alford A. Young, Jr.: The Minds of Marginalized Black Men

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Introduction

Making New Sense of Poor Black Men in Crisis

LARRY¹: I'd like to get away from around the projects. I'd have my own apartment man, you know, my own place jack. I'd come home and just relax man. I'd like to have something like that, a little car. . . . Man, if I could just move out them projects, man, and get my own spot, get a nice paying job man. . . . I mean what more can I ask for man? I mean I'd be satisfied with that right there, you know. . . . I could talk about it but I know it ain't going to come true, man. . . . Seems like every time I try to get away I end up back there. And that just kills me jack. It seems like something just keeps pulling me back.

DEVIN: The main thing I want to be is a good father to my kids and to my wife. . . . I'm leaving out of Chicago and start over in Mississippi. . . . It's better down there for me. I don't have to hear that confusion that's going on now and I ain't got to gangbang. It's a country part where I could build like I want to live and do what I want to do.

CASEY: Regardless of my situation I know exactly who I am. . . . So if you have a lot more material things that you manufactured—that you made sure that *you* can only have—doesn't make me no difference. I got life. I got a family now that I love. I'm a real person. I feel like I have emotions and I'm not scared to say it. I'm a black man in a white man's world. I don't have that fear, you know. And it's *their* world, believe me.

These are the words of young black men who were born into urban poverty. The men were living in the Near West Side of Chicago, one of the most destitute urban regions in the United States. They were born and reared in the Henry Horner Homes, one of the Near West Side's most infamous public housing developments. They continued to reside in or nearby the development.² These men shared a common ground of a life without much material comfort and in the midst of despair and violence. Yet, in significant ways their personal histories are strikingly different. Larry, age 24 in 1994, had never held a full-time job for more than a month or two at a time. He and his siblings (three brothers and one sister) grew up with both parents at home (a rare occurrence for the men discussed in the following pages). He still resided with his parents because he

had not yet been able to create a secure and independent life for himself. Although he had little luck at finding work, he had never seen the inside of a jail cell, nor associated much with men who often did. Unfortunately, staying out of trouble did not mean that Larry ever came close to staying employed.

Devin, age 21, was an active gang member, on parole after serving time for possession of narcotics. He spoke his words in 1994, less than two months after surviving a hit-and-run attempt by rival gang members. This was by far the most severe of several life-threatening encounters that he experienced in nearly ten years of gangbanging. Devin's involvement with gangs began early in his adolescence. Since then, he had been shot at, had fired upon other people, sold drugs, fenced stolen goods, and had spent nearly the same amount of time in jail or on parole as he had attending high school. Although he claimed to have a more notorious reputation in the neighborhood than any of his close peers, he said that their lifestyles were similar to his own. Devin had never had any formal employment in his life.

Casey, a twenty-five-year-old ex-convict, stands somewhere between Larry and Devin in terms of participating in the illicit activities associated with the Near West Side. When he first spoke to me in 1993, he had recently completed a drug rehabilitation program that helped him to curb his addiction for the first time since he began using drugs as a teenager. His work history consisted of packing bags in supermarkets. The rest of his income came from hustling and drug dealing. Casey had an older brother who was a neighborhood gang leader until he was killed in the early 1990s during a gang-related conflict. Although his brother was heavily involved in gang activity, Casey managed to avoid that life. Casey's ability to avoid the gang life was largely due to his brother's reputation in the community, which created a protective shield for the rest of the family. Being a sibling of a high-profile gang member meant that Casey did not have to gangbang in order to reap its most esteemed social benefits: status and deference in the neighborhood. Casey still got into some trouble of his own, combining a small-scale career in drug dealing with a great deal of personal drug use. After serving a few years in jail and a few months in rehabilitation, he was back on the streets of the Near West Side and, as he said, eager to begin pulling himself together.

To the outside world these men represent the underclass.³ Their accounts reflect an all-too-familiar depiction of poor black men as some of the most disenfranchised and despair-ridden people on the urban landscape. It may not surprise anyone that such men are upset about many aspects of their lives, and would prefer to be free of their present situations if possible. Without a more nuanced exploration into their lives and worldviews, these men would seem to reflect little more than the views

and attitudes of the ultra-marginal, socially disconnected people that urban poverty scholars have been studying for the past two decades. There is no doubt that the lives of these men have been deeply affected by facets of urban life such as chronic unemployment, violence, and crime. Yet, these same men do more than merely stand either as passive reactors to such potentially debilitating outside social and economic forces, or as violent-prone individuals who mindlessly lash out at the world with hostility and aggression. Men such as Larry, Devin, and Casey are also men who critically react to the conditions in which they live, and who create a range of worldviews that help them to assign meaning to the social world around them. Unfortunately, their beliefs and thoughts—the material that comprises worldviews—have been given too little analytical attention by scholars of urban poverty.⁴

This oversight in the field of urban poverty stems in large part from a lack of dialogue between two arenas of sociological inquiry. One, the sociology of urban poverty, offers a long-standing and rich tradition of cultural analysis concerning poor black men. Yet that tradition has focused upon the presumed values and norms adopted by these men while reducing investigations of beliefs to the notion that the men think that their path to a better life is obstructed by their entrenchment in the turbulent and pernicious social world of the inner city. Values and norms have been emphasized in this tradition because they are viewed as the causal factors for behavior, and because beliefs were taken to be relatively easy to grasp and consistent over time. As we will explore a bit later, the concepts of values and norms continue to function as core terms in urban poverty research, even as debate has unfolded over the ramifications of using these terms. Unfortunately, that debate has not involved critical assessments of the historical use of other cultural attributes, such as belief systems or worldviews.

The second arena of sociological inquiry is the more recently established field of cultural sociology. Here cultural analysis has extended far beyond a mid-twentieth-century preoccupation with norms and values in order to explore the social and political implications concerning the construction of meaning systems in everyday life. A large part of the research agenda here is to explore how it is that patterns of thought become “common sense” for certain kinds of people, yet unfamiliar or odd ways of thinking for others. In the sociology of culture, questions and issues about meaning have exploded across research agendas, yet far too little of this agenda has seriously incorporated the case of poor black men. Drawing on the tools of cultural sociology, the central goal of this book is to combine these two perspectives in order to develop a richer and more textured portrait of how poor black men make sense of their lives—how

they think creatively about their lives and their future prospects—given the structural conditions that they face.

The stories told here reveal aspects of the lives of poor black men that have been neglected in the scholarship. In order to counter the traditional, often troublingly simplistic pictures of these men as either extremely passive or overly aggressive respondents to the external forces of urban poverty, *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men* employs the men's own words. These words reveal the extent to which the men function as more complex creative actors in response to those forces, weighing various possibilities for their futures and making conscious choices. The remarks by Larry, Devin, and Casey quoted above provide a unique entry into the worldviews of poor black men that lie hidden beneath the standard images of them as angry, hostile, and alienated. That entry necessitates constructing a new cultural lens on these men. I interviewed twenty-six men between the ages of twenty and twenty-five in two of Chicago's best known housing projects in the Near West Side, the Henry Horner Homes and the ABLA housing development. After introducing the setting for this initiative, we will return to a more complete presentation of the objectives for this investigation.

The Setting

The Near West Side of Chicago is the kind of place where one easily finds young black men such as Larry, Devin, and Casey, who seem to be completely left out of the flow of American social and economic mobility. The region is geographically and socially isolated from downtown Chicago and the opulent western suburbs, and resembles a holding pen for the economically immobile. It is surely one of the most difficult urban communities in which to grow up. While empty lots are quite visible, so are many large-scale public housing units. In the early 1990s public housing comprised approximately 20 percent of the total housing as well as a large portion of the residential space for the African American population of Chicago's Near West Side. Except for the Congress Expressway—a major thoroughfare that runs through the west side of Chicago—about a mile of small houses and abandoned lots separates the Henry Horner Homes from the ABLA Homes. Not surprisingly, low-income and working-class African Americans reside in the units that divide the two housing developments. Little of this neighborhood is noticeable to the suburban commuters who come into downtown Chicago on the expressway in the morning and head back to the suburbs in the evening.

The Governor Henry Horner Homes were built in the 1950s and are just about a mile west of downtown Chicago. The development is com-

prised of 19 buildings with 1,774 units, almost all of which are occupied by African Americans. According to early 1990s statistics, over 85 percent of the households receive public assistance, and only 8 percent of the households are supported solely by the employment of a member of the household (Chicago Housing Authority 1992). The United Center, the home of the Chicago Bulls of the National Basketball Association and the Blackhawks of the National Hockey League, stands across the street from the eastern edge of Henry Horner. This arena replaced Chicago Stadium in 1994 and is the only part of the community regularly ventured into by people other than poor black Americans. Nearby parking facilities and a large coterie of police officers keep the Center crowd from having much to do with Horner residents. In *There Ain't No Children Here* (1991), journalist Alex Kotlowitz tells of the intermittent interaction between two brothers from Henry Horner, the central characters in his book, and fans in need of parking for Bulls' games. The men I interviewed spoke very little of this interaction. Except for a few cases in which some got lucky and found short-term jobs, the stadium area remained a foreign country to these men. The same can be said of interaction with West Town, a community located about a half mile north of Henry Horner that is home to a vibrant Latino community, but is also a place of gentrification. Increasingly, white-collar professionals can be seen driving and walking around the area they have made their home.

I conducted interviews with the young black men from the Henry Horner Homes at the 28th Ward alderman's field office, which sits on the western edge of Henry Horner on Western Avenue. Running from one end of Chicago to the other, Western Avenue is a major north-south thoroughfare that forms the western boundary of the Near West Side (and the divider between Horner and Rockwell Gardens, another large public housing project that has a similar statistical profile and quality of life for its residents). The alderman's office has a storefront structure with a near-floor-to-ceiling window in the front. A row of hard plastic and metal chairs sit with their backs against the window. Two desks make up the only other furniture in the front room. Denise, who was the only staff member present every day that I conducted my interviews, occupied one of the two desks.⁵ It was her job to greet anyone who entered the office, answer questions, and try to solve basic problems. Whatever Denise could not handle resulted in a scheduled appointment with Diane, the office coordinator who sat in a small office on the other side of the wall behind the front area.⁶ Diane was my contact for fieldwork around Henry Horner. A large, affable, woman—I would guess in her mid-forties—she acted like a mother figure to many of the men who came to see me. Diane spread the word around the housing development that I was interested in speaking to young men, and it was thanks to her that

the first wave of men came to the office to see me. I later found out from some of the men that she had also asked them to look out for me while I was doing my project, thus giving me some measure of protection for my time at the site.

I conducted interviews in a corner of the large room behind the wall separating the front area from the rest of the office. That room was also the space for the monthly community meeting and other large gatherings. Diane's office at the south end of the large room was actually a space carved out of the larger room and enclosed with drywall and a door. Although she closed her door whenever she came in and saw that I was already at work, her voice, full of the boisterousness that one might find in dialogue among friends at the beauty parlor or barbershop, would always seep through the wall and spill over onto my tape recordings. I'll never forget her "Hey baby! How you feel?!" that came through her opened office door whenever I entered the office after she had already got to her desk. It could be heard out on the street corner. Her overall cheeriness was a stark contrast to the bleak moods and words expressed by the men in the course of the interviews.

The ABLA Homes are located one and a half miles south of Henry Horner. ABLA contains 160 buildings and 3,505 units. At mid-century ABLA operated as four different residential developments—the Jane Adams Houses (built in 1938), Robert Brooks Houses (built in 1942), Loomis Courts, and Grace Abbott Homes (both built in the 1950s). The amalgamation of low-rise and high-rise buildings in such proximity led to the cohesive development named by the acronym. Like Henry Horner, ABLA is almost entirely populated by African Americans. Over 75 percent of the households in ABLA receive public assistance, and slightly more than 8 percent of the households are supported solely by the employment of one of their members (Chicago Housing Authority 1992).⁹ The University of Illinois at Chicago is located just east of ABLA, and St. Ignatius Loyola, a Catholic high school largely attended by middle-income white youth, stands just across the street from ABLA's eastern end. Despite the geographic proximity of these predominantly white institutions to the African-American housing developments, a gaping social distance separates these two worlds. The white students coming from downtown got off the city bus in front of the high school, a few blocks from my own stop at ABLA. I never saw any of the high school youths or college students around on the ABLA grounds. West of ABLA is private housing, occupied by low-income residents much like those that live in the public development. The area about a mile to the south is the beginning of a European American ethnic enclave that forms part of the community of the Lower West Side.

At ABLA I worked out of an office located at the northern end of a facility on Loomis Street, right in the middle of ABLA Homes. The building housed the Local Advisory Council (the official ABLA tenants' association) and other community groups. The facility is much larger than the alderman's field office at Henry Horner. It is a one-story structure with rows of offices on both sides of a corridor that forms the perimeter of an open-air playground that seemed to remain unused. Around the corner to the right of my office, across the hall and about five doors south was the main office, where Ms. Beverly, my contact for that site, occupied the largest and most decorated office in the building. She was the president of the tenants' association, and, like Diane at Henry Horner, introduced me to the local men and created a public identity for me in the neighborhood. I saw much less of her than I did of Diane, but she was equally accommodating and warmhearted. Every now and then she would stop by to make sure that things were going well and that the men were "acting right."

As a series of programs were housed in the same space, I often would observe children's, teenager, and adult groups come and go throughout the day. Sometimes program directors would invite me to have lunch with a group if I was not busy (this would occur most often with the programs that included men). At both sites, I spent moments of free time on the street corners with some of the guys. Sometimes we sat on benches at bus stops; other times we watched games of pickup basketball played on cracked cement courts with bent rims and rickety backboards. These more casual conversations supplemented what I learned from the formal interviews that constitute the heart of this work.

The Mandate

When poor black men from urban communities are asked to reflect upon their life situations and future goals, one might expect their comments to be riddled either with anger, conflict, and animosity, or with hopelessness and despair. Both kinds of responses would seem to validate the standard portrait of young black men from the inner city as depicted in the print media, on television and in movies, and in certain genres of rap music. Surely, young men such as Larry, Devin, and Casey appear frustrated and angry about aspects of their lives such as pervasive racism, the lack of employment prospects, and the violence that often accompanies life in urban poverty. That part of their story, however, is not the core concern of this book. Rather, this work aims to show that research that focuses on these men's anger and hostility hinders a more complex exploration of how they take stock of themselves and the world in which they live.

As much as poor black men from urban America can appear to be despondent or angry about their future, they also show a capacity to critically assess the world around them with a profundity and complexity that is often left out of the public debate. Moreover, as my interviews with these men show, they also articulate a variety of hopes, dreams, and interpretations that matter to them greatly, but that usually get buried in the traditional stereotypical portrayals of young black men from urban communities as alienated, angry, and violent. As different as these men's lives appear when compared to more affluent Americans, it is essential to recognize that they function quite similarly to the rest of us in how they assess their social world, how they make sense out of what they see around them on a daily basis, and how they ground their visions of their futures.

The Minds of Marginalized Black Men explores the capacity of young black men to think critically and creatively about the ways in which mobility and opportunity operate in American society, showing how they situate their own lives within the broader social and economic forces that surround them. As the title suggests, rather than privileging the actions and behaviors of these men, this book seeks to place their minds at center stage. By doing so, it is my aim to break from the standard way of assessing how people see themselves in regard to the world around them. In both public policy and most scholarship on urban life, that standard approach has been to formulate a picture of what individuals think based solely on their actions. Indeed, urban ethnography, the branch of sociology that is primarily committed to observing and documenting behavior in public and private settings, has played a crucial role in sustaining the notion that what people think can be derived from what they do. Ethnography has sustained the notion that what people do with their family members, friends, and associates conveys how they make meaning of themselves, other people, and varied aspects of the social world. The flaw in this approach is that one's behavior is not a transparent reflection of one's underlying thoughts. For example, the fact that an individual is chronically unemployed and does not go to work on a regular basis (his behavior) tells us nothing about the complexity of his thoughts on the intricacies of the modern labor markets (his thoughts). Similarly, if someone has opted not to continue high school, this does not mean that she does not have a keen sense of how and why a college education might help one to get ahead in life. Thus, it is important to pay attention to what people articulate as their own understanding of how social processes work and how they as individuals might negotiate the complex social terrain, rather than simply looking at their actions. Accordingly, the main goal of this book is to uncover these men's worldviews on issues such as mobility, opportunity, and future life chances. These particular kinds of worldviews, consisting of depictions of how social processes and out-

comes are constructed, must be given sufficient analytical space if the lives of low-income black men are to be more fully understood.

In order to advance this type of understanding, this study seeks to elucidate these men's worldviews about a particular range of issues and concerns related to socioeconomic mobility. The critical issue of socioeconomic mobility is the main terrain upon which these men form ideas and meanings central to how they understand their lives and approach their futures. The part of their worldviews that concerns mobility functions as a central part of their everyday lives inasmuch as it is directly implicated in their status as disenfranchised and immobile citizens on the American social landscape.

By focusing on beliefs and worldviews touching on mobility, opportunity, and future life chances, *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men* seeks to uncover some hidden domains of thought in the minds of poor black men. In working toward this objective, this work explores thoughts about aspects of the social world that are most familiar to these men, such as the Near West Side of Chicago, and those aspects that, given their socioeconomic situation, are seemingly far beyond their purview. The following pages seek to explore how the men's capacity to make sense of these issues relates to their larger visions of how other groups of people approach the future. By attending to this often-overlooked dimension of meaning-making in the lives of poor black men, this work aims to uncover the underrecognized complexity of their lives. In short, the following pages dare to consider low-income black men as something other than public menaces who are inclined toward violence, or as a downtrodden and dispirited constituency that lashes out at the world with brutality and insensitivity. Instead, the men are portrayed here as social thinkers—as people who have the capacity to interpret the world around them and who actively compare their situations to those of others.

In addition to bringing these men's thoughts to the forefront, the book also establishes important grounds for understanding how and why their future behavior takes on a particular form. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) pointed out some time ago, one's worldview, or system of meaning, constitutes a basis for future behavior. This formula is a reversal of the flawed logic of the researchers discussed earlier, that behavior is the source of insight about certain cultural attributes. Beliefs, then, are not deducible from behavior, but rather help to create the cultural fabric that informs and encourages such action. In other words, the way people think about the processes of social and personal mobility inform us about how they choose to act with respect to future prospects and possibilities. With this analytical framework in mind, the importance of bringing to light the actual worldviews and beliefs of low-income black men becomes evident.

Indeed, the remarks of Larry, Devin, and Casey cited at the outset provide but a brief glimpse into the complex arena of images and understandings that shaped their worldviews and how they came to terms with constraints and obstacles that factored into their schemas. Clearly these men were faced daily with a set of daunting obstacles. Yet, each of the men I encountered developed very different sensibilities about the nature of those obstacles and how to manage them. For instance, Larry focused on his inability to figure out how to get away from the Henry Horner Homes. Most of what he had to say about his aims and goals for the future related to what he wanted to get away from rather than what he hoped to move toward. As we will see, Larry's life revolved around trying to distance himself from problematic people and circumstances rather than on crafting a detailed plan for a better future. Devin, however, articulated a clear sense of where he needed to go in order to have a chance at a better life. His immersion in the world of gangbanging, vice, and violence led to his coming to terms with how these activities increasingly closed options for his personal mobility—options that were already prematurely narrowed simply by his being a young poor black man. Devin fully believed that he could not overcome the obstacles placed before him in Chicago. Hence, he imagined that Mississippi, the state where he was born and which he left at the age of three (too early for him to remember anything about it), would be his best bet for turning his life around. Mississippi remained an option for him because his mother had grown up there and told him about her experiences. Finally, Casey, who had grown up across the street from the Horner Homes, might not have been sure of exactly where he was going in terms of future employment or quality-of-life prospects, but he claimed to know full well where he currently stood and what he was up against as a black man with precious few material or symbolic resources at his disposal. He had seen small pieces of the world beyond the Near West Side because he went to a high school considerably more integrated than those attended by most Near West Side youth. His hustling and dealing also brought him into contact with people from beyond the boundaries of his home base. Consequently, he had enough access to other people and places to aid him in defining precisely where he stood in “their world,” as he put it, and what he believed he had to do to succeed in it.

For those who know little about men like Larry, Devin, and Casey, it is easy to create and maintain monolithic images of them as dangerous, consistently destitute black men who are poorly equipped to help themselves. In such a view, these men often seem as though they do not want to improve their prospects in the first place, at least not in terms of mainstream societal standards for personal mobility. Yet the words of Larry, Devin, and Casey reveal that when such men are asked about their thoughts—rather than being evaluated solely on the basis of their actions

and appearances in the public—the picture that emerges highlights the deeper dimensions of their social character and comportment. Hence, the fact that black men such as these share the same general social position in the American social hierarchy, yet think very differently about where they stand and what they must do to improve their lot, gives rise to a host of questions about how life experiences relate to the formulation of ideas on mobility and opportunity.

A more enriched understanding of how these men's worldviews are formed begins by taking seriously the fact that they often create provocative and intriguing patterns of meaning about their social worlds. Even those patterns that appear provincial on the surface emerge out of a profound set of experiential circumstances and conditions. Such patterns are not adequately captured by analytical frameworks that highlight the capacity of poor people to focus only on their immediate situations, thus rendering them incapable of apprehending or planning for their lives in the long term. In challenging such flawed approaches, this work complements recent analyses that have called for more complex and provocative investigations of the culture of the African American urban poor, and poor black men in particular. It also represents a new approach for overturning a long legacy of urban ethnographic and related modes of research that has served to construct the standard and overly simplistic image of the underclass in general and of low-income African American men in particular. By offering a new perspective, *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men* strives to reconstitute that image. Accordingly, the book revisits the standing claims about the contemporary "crisis of the black male" in order to reshape the sociological analysis of poor black men—and, by implication, all low-income African Americans—by putting forth a new cultural perspective for assessing their lives. At the center of this new perspective lies the assumption that the behavior of these men emerges not simply from the adaptation of stretched values or alternative norms, but more fundamentally from the stocks of knowledge that they accumulate about how the world works, and how they might work within it. A careful and critical assessment of what these men have to say attunes the observer to the rationality inherent to their assessments of personal life experiences. It is this very rationality that is suppressed or denied when behaviors are assessed only at a surface level, thereby leading to assumptions about poor black men's capacity to function in ways that middle-class America regards as proper and appropriate. By challenging this suppression and denial, then, this work seeks to de-pathologize the image of poor black men.

The following chapters, therefore, seek not to accentuate what these men did when they had a firearm or packets of cocaine in their possession, nor any other exotic exploits or endeavors usually associated with life in

the bowels of urban squalor. Rather, this book brings to light what these men have to say when asked to define the social hierarchy of American society and their place in it. Their answers to these and related questions provide insight into their capacity for future action, and how they understand past behaviors when they talk about their future prospects. The book explores what men like Larry, Casey, and Devin understand the “good life” to be, and whether they believe that such a life is within their reach. A large part of the study focuses on the men’s orientation toward the world of work because this is key to their prospects for getting good jobs in the future. My analysis takes into account what is and what is not included in their thoughts on these issues by exploring how their personal histories and present-day realities have made it possible for them to come to certain realizations about mobility and opportunity in American life.⁷

The degree of exposure that the men have had to the world beyond the Near West Side emerges as key to understanding the differences in the breadth and depth of their worldviews. Such exposure might have come about for some through a few months of work in a downtown fast food restaurant, for others, through incarceration in a penal institution. Whatever the circumstances, such exposure provided opportunities for these men to interact across racial and class lines. Overall, interaction with other worlds led to the acquisition of a more profound understanding of the inequities in social power and influence, and how these forces can affect individual lives. Quite often it led to intimate encounters with racism. The men who never experienced this kind of contact found it much harder, if not impossible, to express how these and other external factors mattered for mobility and future prospects. Without a greater knowledge of the social world beyond the Near West Side, these men’s accounts of mobility rested almost solely on individual skills and abilities.

We will see that the men’s varied ideas about the social world are strongly rooted in what they learned from parents, guardians, and other family members. In most cases, the people surrounding them saw little of the world beyond the Near West Side and thus could offer limited information about the broader social world. In other cases, the men associated with elders who were born and reared in the deep and rural South, the place of recent family origin for many Chicago-based African Americans. For most of these migrants, the Near West Side, as bad as it was, represented a far better place, with better opportunities, than the South. Nevertheless, coming from the rural South often meant having no firm grip on the social dynamics of urban Chicago. Although this book introduces the reader to men who have had the kinds of experiences—including drug abuse, joblessness, and gangbanging—that are well documented in urban ethnography, a very different kind of story is told here. This study does not dwell on how the men handled these and other turbulent

aspects of their lives. Instead, it explores how they think about the nature of the world in which they live. This focus sheds new light not only on why these men have acted as they have throughout their lives, but also on what the potential for future action might be. That potential is found in taking careful note of how access to people across race, class, and social experiential boundaries provided these men with the capacity to build different mental maps of how the social world works and how they could or could not work within it. The ideas that they present open up entirely new arguments about how such men should be thought about and approached by the public sector, or other parties that interface with their lives. While the contemporary mandate may be one of increased social control via incarceration or police-based surveillance, this study illustrates that the men's future capacity to act is built upon how they evaluate and articulate their past and present circumstances together with their sense of how the social world operates. That package of ideas, more so than any amalgamation of values and norms, speaks to what they are prepared to do in the future. Consequently, beliefs or worldviews deserve a central place in the configuration of cultural impulses for action.