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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mitchell Duneier. *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 192 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-17030-5.

Reviewed by Raymond Albert (Associate Professor and Director, Law and Social Policy Program, Bryn Mawr College)
Published on H-Ethnic (March, 1994)

Let's play a game of word association: What images come to mind when you hear the words "black urban male?" Dangerous? Unemployed? Undereducated? Irresponsible? In *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*, Mitchell Duneier tells us that these and other equally offensive ideas are inherent in an American psyche shaped by social scientists and popular culture.

Duneier, a University of Chicago trained sociologist, offers a portrait of men who are nothing like the stereotypes suggested by these ideas. He argues for nothing less than a paradigm shift in the way we think about black inner city males. Duneier's study, based on four years of ethnographic research, effectively disputes popular conceptions of black men and provocatively challenges urban ethnography's account of them. His depiction of the close relationship among a group of black working class men is a brief against contemporary stereotypes and an argument for a vision of black men as vital, morally-grounded, responsible members of society.

What, and where, is Slim's table? The book's title refers to a physical setting as much as a state of mind. The physical setting is Valois–a popular cafeteria serving home-style cuisine located on the margin of a Chicago ghetto, near Hyde Park and within the shadow of the University of Chicago. Although the restaurant caters to a racially mixed clientele, Duneier's study focuses on a group of older black males who have frequented the place for many years. Slim, an auto mechanic, has held forth for over a decade at a table that serves as the meeting place for this diverse group. Joining Slim are: a self-employed extermi-nator, a film developer for Playboy who was honorably discharged from the army after twenty years, an administrator for the Board of Education, and a retired meter inspector. Most of the men reside in the vicinity; all are disillusioned by the consequence of neighborhood changes. They are aware of the economic distress that has overwhelmed Chicago's South Side in the past twenty years, and they are intimately familiar with the implications for the employment prospects of black males. Many other black men frequent Valois and practically all the patrons take notice of the activity and camaraderie at Slim's table.

Duneier offers a portrait of men who value work and its concomitant life-affirming habits, such as independence, self-reliance, and providing for one's family. They refuse to be marginalized by a community that often views them as anachro-nisms. Duneier contends that these men eschew dependency; work is a defining masculine experience as well as the avenue to independence. Their conversations suggest that they occasionally share the prevailing unflattering assumptions about the so-called urban "underclass." That their views on this phenomenon echo sentiments not unlike those of racist whites is disturbing, but not surprising given their middle class sensibilities. What accounts for this anomaly? Duneier explains that Slim and his friends subscribe to a code of conduct drawn from an earlier era, a time when the causes and consequences of poverty differed from the conditions that presently confront the ghetto poor.

"Some of the black regulars [at Valois] are themselves prone to claim that those folks who remain at the old hangouts are somehow lacking in dignity. As Ted says, 'Those who don't think like us, they stay in the ghetto and never venture out.' Some upstanding men like the regulars feel out of place in such company. Regardless of the extent to which the ghetto has been transformed, there is no doubt that these men are acting in accord-ance with the belief that it has" (p. 57).

Thus, Duneier argues that the men depicted in *Slim's Table* seek to reproduce the type of intimate, face-to-face contact that once existed in the social world of the ghetto. Their conduct toward each other, their gentle protectiveness of each other, even their easy relationship with a number of white patrons is reminiscent of a vision of community attachment that, in their view, is sadly out-of-sync with contemporary reality. Duneier quickly points out that these men do not long for some nostalgic fantasy. Rather, their gathering at Valois is emblematic

of their connec-tion to a wider community and to a set of shared beliefs. More important, they congregate to fortify their self-image as morally upstanding members of a larger society.

Duneier notes other paradoxes in the conversations and conduct of the men congregated around Slim. These men feel cut off from both ghetto blacks and middle class blacks. They dismiss ghetto blacks for their ostensible lack of connection to community and their apparent repudiation of a work ethic. They feel estranged from middle class blacks–patrons from downtown and students from nearby University of Chicago–because they believe middle class blacks feel economically and intellectually superior to blacks in the South Side. To cast Slim and his friends as intellectual inferiors is especially hurtful, Duneier suggests, because the men clearly feel connected to all sorts of current political and social issues. Indeed, their lively debates on such matters are a self-affirming antidote to feelings of alienation.

In the course of rendering his ethnographic account, Duneier blames social scientists and journalists for our confused percep-tions of black males. He disputes several prominent commenta-tors, such as Shelby Steele, Elijah Anderson, and Nicholas Lemann for their unexamined assumptions about black men. "The danger of a literature constituted exclusively of reports [drawn from classic urban ethnography or popular journalism], derived from inaccurate inferences and selective samples," Duneier argues, "is not only that such images may lead to selective perception. No less dangerous is the manner in which we internalize the images" (p. 147).

Duneier saves his harshest criticism for scholars who have failed to acknowledge the historical strengths of the black working and lower working classes–the majority of American blacks. He rejects the conventional wisdom that these classes lack the requisite role models to develop a sound moral base. The poor are moral beings capable of providing their own models for moral conduct, Duneier argues. Hence, to hold out the middle class as a role model for the lower classes is ultimately a destructive, racist paradigm.

Duneier seems respectful of the men in his study. He views them as people who live complete lives. He does not evaluate their stories or their lives against some ideal standard. The men treated him with respect, and he responded in kind. Against this background, however, I note several weaknesses in his account. First, Duneier seems too surprised by what he finds. Scholarly literature and popular culture notwithstanding, he should not be amazed that honorable black men exist within the working and lower working class; indeed, many of us need look no further than our own dad. Second, his analysis of the discus-sions among Slim and his friends occasionally brought him danger-ously close to a behavior-based explanation of urban poverty. Even these men would not be so harsh as to ignore certain struc-tural economic changes and how these have complicated the lives of the "underclass" they appear to disdain. Third, Duneier seems to want to explain the bonding among the men in *Slim's Table* within the context of the men's movement–an unfortunate error because this movement certainly doesn't align itself with Slim and his compatriots. Fourth, he offers a relatively superficial discussion of a central issue in the lives of Slim and his friends: Their relationship with their women and the implications for the extent to which they treat black women as equals. This is a really complex issue for the men, and Duneier's discussion falls short of a full account. Finally, a brief discourse on his methodology would have been illuminating: Did it matter to him that he was a white researcher studying a group of black men? Did it matter to the men? Did this reality put some matters beyond his understanding? I am certain he confronted these sorts of questions; no responsible ethnographer can ignore them. I wish he had shared his thinking–and reactions–with us. In sum, however, these flaws are not fatal.

Ultimately, *Slim's Table* is a satisfying portrait of positive relationships among black urban males. The care and friend-ship these men demonstrate toward each other is wonderful, and is likely to resonate for many readers. Our hunch is that the men congregating around Slim, as well as the other black men who frequent Valois, are the rule rather than the exception. And there's a bonus: Duneier urges us to "use scholarship and media to make the 'respectable' masses part of the on-going perceived reality." To the extent that scholars and journalists heed his admonition, black men–and all the rest of us–stand to gain.

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Citation: Raymond Albert. Review of Duneier, Mitchell, *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity.* H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. March, 1994.

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