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Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community

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ON A February evening in 1987 Community Board 4's Neighborhood Stabilization Committee met in the basement of a co-op apartment building on the southern border of Corona, one block from the massive and predominantly black Lefrak City housing development. Helma Goldmark, chair of the all-white committee and a resident of the well-kept Sherwood Village co-ops, took her place alongside three other committee members at a folding table that had been set up in the back of the brightly lit community room. A handful of white and black residents, two uniformed police officers, and other invited guests chatted among themselves as they waited for the meeting to begin.

Goldmark invited Judith Shapiro, a Sherwood Village resident, to open the meeting and address the first item on the agenda: the problem of security at the Lefrak City library, a public library located next to the black housing development. Shapiro complained that the library was being used as an after-school "baby-sitting service" by Lefrak City parents. These "latchkey kids," she claimed, were disruptive and making it difficult for others to use the library appropriately. She called for increased library security so that "the problem kids can be identified and removed by force if necessary."

Joseph Sardegna, chief of investigation and security for the Queens Bonough Public Library, interrupted. Sardegna, invited by the committee to attend the meeting, argued that Shapiro was exaggerating the threat posed by the Lefrak City kids, remarking cryptically: "The mind conceives and the eyes perceive. Lefrak isn't so bad."

The official's comments provoked an outburst of protests. Rose Rothschild, Community Board 4's manager, retorted, "Lefrak security *is* bad. These kids are ten going on forty. They have no respect for authority." She went on to argue that people in Corona were afraid to use the Lefrak City library and for that reason wanted a library of their own. Goldmark agreed. She asked Sardegna to station a security guard in the library from 3:30 in the afternoon until closing.

"We don't want to have a library under siege," Sardegna responded, insisting that the security problem was not serious enough to justify stationing a uniformed guard.

He reached into the pocket of his powder blue blazer and pulled out a pager. "We are only a beep away," Sardegna declared, holding up the device. "We already have plainclothes guards a beep away."

Rothschild stood, pressing her palms against the table: "You know, you've already repeated the same thing in a million different ways. Lefrak City is an entity in itself – a city in a city. I don't care what you say, security is bad in Lefrak." When Sardegna reiterated his point that more security would not solve the Lefrak library problem, Rothschild threatened to call his supervisor. Indignant, the library official, trailed by his assistant and two librarians, walked out.

The Neighborhood Stabilization Committee turned to the next issue on its agenda: drug dealing on Fifty-seventh Avenue, a commercial strip bordering Lefrak City. New York City Police Officer Sharpner, assigned to the 110th Precinct in Elmhurst, reported on his department's efforts to arrest drug dealers. Ken Daniels, a white Lefrak City resident and member of the committee, testified that he could see drug dealers flagging down cars from the window of his apartment.

"You know, when I moved to this neighborhood," Rothschild remarked, "there was no crime. I met with [District Attorney] Santucci and for some reason they don't want to face the fact that we need more policemen."

Phil Clark, chief of Lefrak City's private security force, responded. "Lefrak City has a lower-than-average crime rate," he said, adding that there had been a decrease in violent crime in the housing complex in the past few years. What crime there was, the Lefrak official opined, was owing to a lack of "parental guidance." Rose Rothschild agreed. "No father around, single mothers. Isn't it a shame that people have to live in fear?"

Edna Baskin and two other black residents of Lefrak City remained relatively silent as committee members and security officials discussed the problem of the latchkey kids, drug dealing, and the lack of "parental guidance" in Lefrak City, offering only their confirmation that there were real security problems in the library and housing complex. As African-American tenants of the complex, they were excluded from this discourse of neighborhood stabilization that linked crime to family disorder in a racialized topography of urban space. It was their children and neighbors who were being described as "disruptive," as drug dealers, and as objects of surveillance and law enforcement.

Although race was never explicitly referred to, the issues of crime, drugs, and parental discipline bore racial connotations that remained precariously close to the surface of discourse. For example, when Officer Sharpner reported an incident involving two "white girls from Forest Hills" who were mugged after a drug buy in Lefrak City, Rothschild quickly interjected, "We're not talking about race." Later, when the committee's chair described a mugger who was robbing people in her co-op building, she avoided explicit reference to his race: "He is about thirty-five, has bushy hair, and is Jamaican." Ethnicity served in this latter case both to signal and to deflect race within a discourse of "stabilization" that was overdetermined by an ideology of black crime.

This chapter examines the struggle of black Lefrak City residents to disrupt this conflation of race, crime, and space in the discourse and practice of everyday politics. In public forums ranging from the monthly meetings of the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee and Community Board 4 to the mass-mediated reports of

journalists, Lefrak City was viewed as a threat to the quality of life of surrounding neighborhoods; a potent symbol linking anxieties about urban decline and crime to ideologies of black welfare dependency and family pathology.

At stake in this politics of representation was more than the perpetuation of racial stereotypes: the all too familiar tropes of the deviant welfare mother and her "fatherless," crime-prone progeny. More important, by constructing Lefrak City and its residents as objects of surveillance and law enforcement, this discourse of black crime and family pathology hindered, if not precluded, their participation as subjects in the process of neighborhood stabilization. In presenting this case study I emphasize the close interplay between struggles over the representation of identity and the meaning of place, and those over the distribution of political power and resources.

In mobilizing to address the needs of the latchkey kids, Lefrak City activists would contest and subvert the discourse of black crime and family disorder underpinning the "stabilization" strategies of local governing institutions such as the community board. Moreover, they would create new political networks and spaces from which to construct alternative interpretations of the identities, needs, and interests of black youth.

Lefrak City: "Crucible of Racial Change"

Lefrak City's twenty high-rise apartment buildings occupy an entire census tract, roughly nine blocks in size, adjacent to the eight-lane Long Island Expressway that forms Corona's southern border with Rego Park, a predominantly white middle-class neighborhood across the expressway. The rental and co-op apartment buildings, office buildings, and bustling commercial strips in the Lefrak City area contrast sharply with the lower density single-family homes and storefront businesses typically found in Corona Heights and North Corona to the northeast.

In 1990 Lefrak City's population of nearly twelve thousand was 73 percent black and formed a population of African-Americans and people of diverse Caribbean and African origin in northern Queens second only in size to Corona-East Elmhurst to the north. Hispanics of equally diverse origins accounted for 19 percent of the complex's population in 1990, and whites and Asians, 5 and 2 percent, respectively.

Lefrak City was constructed on a forty-acre tract of swampy land that had served throughout much of Corona's history as a dump.¹ In 1960 Samuel J. Lefrak, one of New York City's most prolific developers of middle-income housing, purchased "Mary's Dump" from Lord William Waldorf Astor. Between 1945 and 1960 Lefrak's development company built nearly 20 percent of the new housing in Queens County (*New York Daily News*, 14 February 1982). In 1973 Samuel Lefrak was reported to be landlord to a quarter of a million, largely middle-income New Yorkers (Tobias 1973).

Completed in 1964 the six-thousand-unit Lefrak City apartment complex was envisioned by its planners to be a self-contained "city within a city" for the middle classes: a "magic world of total living" that would offer shopping, recreation, security, and other services and amenities within easy walking distance (*New York Times*, 24 October 1971).

Until the early 1970s Lefrak City's tenants were predominantly white and middle-class, reflecting the racial, if not socioeconomic, composition of the nearby and largely working-class neighborhood of Corona Heights (Cuomo 1983). [...]

But in 1972 the U.S. Justice Department filed a housing discrimination suit against the Lefrak organization charging that it had discriminated against blacks in the renting of apartments owned by the company in Brooklyn and Queens. [...]

Although the suit was not directed specifically at Lefrak City, the Lefrak organization by some accounts relaxed tenant screening procedures and income criteria and began aggressively recruiting black tenants for the twenty-building complex. A former Lefrak City tenant leader reported to me that the Lefrak organization had concentrated black tenants in Lefrak City so as to comply with the terms of the consent decree without affecting the racial composition of other Lefrak-owned properties.

As a result, the black population of Lefrak City increased dramatically from 25 percent in 1972 to nearly 80 percent in 1976. Many tenants and other area residents complained that the new arrivals were disruptive and were threatening the community with crime, drugs, and "urban blight." [...] The rapid increase in black tenants, coinciding with a precipitous decline in building maintenance and security services, fueled perceptions that Lefrak City had become a "welfare haven," a black ghetto enclave which, like the Northern Boulevard "strip" in Corona, menaced nearby white neighborhoods with poverty, crime, and drugs. [...]

Despite the findings of a 1976 city-sponsored report that only 3 percent of Lefrak City tenants were receiving public assistance, blacks, crime, and "welfare" were conflated in the political discourse of white community activists.² These images and anxieties were enlivened by two political conflicts that had been brewing in Corona and nearby Forest Hills since the mid-1960s involving the construction of low-income, "scatter-site" housing for minorities. White civic groups in both communities had opposed the New York City Housing Department's housing integration plan, and in 1972 (the year of the Lefrak City suit) the controversy in Forest Hills was coming to a head and receiving nationwide media coverage.³ [...]

Mario Cuomo, appointed by Mayor John Lindsay in 1972 to mediate the Forest Hills dispute, described the attitudes he encountered while working with white anti-integration activists in Forest Hills.

I'm inclined to think that no matter what statistics and evidence we're able to marshal, this community's fear will not be totally dissipated. One story of a mugging at a project – whether or not true – will overcome in their minds any array of statistics. The syllogism is simple: Welfare and Blacks are generally responsible for a great deal of crime; there are Welfare and Blacks in projects; there will be a great deal of crime in and around the project. And then, too, there is a quick projection from the problem of crime – however real, fancied, or exaggerated – to all other middle-class complaints: taxes, education, etc. All of these may be legitimate, but this coupling of them with the crime problem results eventually in an indictment of the project for all the sins against the middle class (1983:49).

This conflation of race, poverty, and social pathology was also encoded in media coverage of the Lefrak City "crisis." A 1976 *New York Times* article noted that the "principal issue within Lefrak City is not one of race but of standards of behavior,"

yet carried the headline, "Lefrak City Crucible of Racial Change" (1 February 1976). Complaints of poor building maintenance, inadequate security, and "undesirable tenants" were often reported as problems of *racial balance* as in "Lefrak Moves to Correct Racial Makeup at Project" in the *Long Island Press* (31 March 1976). In an effort to "stabilize" the complex and to allay neighborhood fears, the Lefrak organization pressured city officials for federal Section 8 rent subsidies which local community leaders were assured would make it possible to rent vacant apartments to low-income, elderly whites. An infusion of elderly white tenants was presented as a strategy for restoring the "racial balance," offsetting the threat symbolized by the welfare mother and her offspring.

A white member of Community Board 4 recalled the visit of a Lefrak organization official to one of its meetings to win the board's support for the rent subsidy plan. His account provides a good example of the complex and shifting entanglements of race and class in white activist ideology.

[The Lefrak official] came to the Community Board and he wanted *us* to fill his vacant apartments. So we got Section 8 approved. And he claimed – well in Section 8, that he would put 90 percent senior citizens in. You know, in order to . . . uh . . . stabilize the area. And also he claimed that the . . . the Section 8 would be used mostly for elderly *white* people. You know, because they were the ones being displaced and whatever. So we went along and he got the approval. And then of course it turned out that – you know, he gave all the Section 8 to the *big* minority families and *not* to the senior citizens he promised to. And even the senior citizens he promised – the security was so *bad* that they . . . they were . . . that they would run for their *lives*, 'cause they couldn't survive with the kind of people he was letting in. But *again*, it was nothing to do with the color of the black people. We had Indians, we had Chinese, we had *all* kinds of people here. But they was – it was a different *class* of people.

The counterposed images of "big minority families" and "senior [white] citizens" fused race, class, and age differences in a symbolic shorthand that encoded complex and at times conflicting ideologies and social forces. White opposition to black welfare families converged symbolically and in practice with local resistance to the exercise of power by big government and big business. On the one hand, white residents felt that their neighborhood was being victimized by city officials because of its political weakness as a "middle-class" community: low-income housing and other undesirable projects were "dumped" on Corona because, as one resident put it, "we were a soft touch." On the other hand, many residents attributed the decline of Lefrak City to the greed and opportunism of the Lefrak organization which some held was resolving its lawsuit at their expense while failing to provide proper maintenance services.

For example, in response to the *New York Times* article, "Lefrak City Crucible of Racial Change," a Queens reader wrote to the editor: "It was sad to read about what is happening at Lefrak City. Yet an unhappy thought keeps nagging at my mind. Those young hoodlums, the modern-day Visigoths who are ripping doors off their moorings may not be bringing any new techniques to that high rise mausoleum. Perhaps they are merely continuing the ripoff policies of the management" (21 March 1976). Opposition to black "undesirables" in Lefrak City was entangled in white activist ideology with resistance to the power of big government and corporate greed.

[...] Within the span of a few years the “city within a city” for the middle class had been transformed in the minds of many residents into a predatory beachhead within a rapidly shrinking white enclave.

By the early 1980s the worst of the Lefrak City crisis appeared to be over. Community activists, supported by local politicians, city officials, and the local press, succeeded in their effort to pressure the Lefrak organization to evict “undesirable” tenants and embark on an extensive renovation program. Strict tenant screening procedures were enacted and minimum-income criteria were reinstated to reduce the number of low-income tenants. In “Troubled Lefrak City Turning the Corner,” a *New York Times* article pronouncing the recovery, Samuel J. Lefrak praised his rehabilitated tenantry: “They’re decent, hard-working, middle-class people who pay their rent and pay their full share of taxes. What’s happened is the best kind of gentrification” (11 March 1984).

Despite such assertions, many white residents continued to regard Lefrak City as a site of black crime and poverty symbolizing the vulnerability of the community to violence, decay, and the arbitrary exercise of elite power. These perceptions were institutionalized in part with the founding of Community Board 4’s Neighborhood Stabilization Committee. Created in 1973 under the auspices of the city’s Commission on Human Rights, Corona’s Neighborhood Stabilization Committee defined its purpose as the promotion of “understanding and cooperation between different ethnic groups.”⁴

Although the committee’s initial efforts focused on integrating Corona’s rapidly growing Spanish-speaking population into neighborhood affairs, by 1976 the committee had turned its attention to Lefrak City where its on-site office coordinated the stabilization efforts of city officials, community groups, and the Lefrak organization. By 1987, when the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee met to address the problem of the Lefrak library’s “latchkey kids,” it was functioning as a subcommittee of Community Board 4. Unlike the board’s other committees (e.g., Traffic, Public Safety, and Youth Services), the purview of the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee was limited to Lefrak City and its environs, thereby institutionalizing the perception that the black housing complex represented a peculiar threat to the stability of the community. Before the formation of Concerned Community Adults to which I now turn, black participation in neighborhood politics within Community Board 4 had been limited to, if not contained by, this committee.

“Rubbing Against the Grain”

Concerned Community Adults (CCA) was organized largely through the efforts of Edna Baskin, an African-American woman who moved to Lefrak City with her husband and two children in 1979. Raised in Buffalo, New York, Baskin had been active in community politics and Buffalo’s antipoverty program as well as in a local Baptist church founded by her grandfather.

Although Baskin had been employed earlier as a medical lab technician, on her arrival in Queens she began working in her home as a “sitter” or child care provider for women living in her four-building section. Since the few licensed child care

centers in the Lefrak City area were expensive, many parents used unlicensed sitters located within the apartment complex.⁵ Baskin estimated that twelve of the eighteen floors in her building had sitters caring for preschool children.

Through her child care work, Baskin developed a network of relationships with Lefrak City women. Each evening, when these women, whom Edna referred to as her “mothers,” came to pick up their children they would gather in her apartment to socialize and exchange information about community services and issues. Baskin also endeavored to welcome and orient new tenants to the apartment complex and the surrounding community, a consideration she found lacking when she arrived in Lefrak City.

When I moved here, I had to try to learn about the community by myself, because there was nobody to help me or to tell me where things were. And when people move in now, I tell them where the best places are to shop and, if they have children, which schools I think are the best. Even people on my floor – like when new people move on this floor, I immediately go and introduce myself, tell them who I am, and give them a voter registration form – because the first couple of weeks we were here, I was like, “Well, will somebody come and tell us where we go to vote?”

These everyday networks of child care, communication, and exchange among women, linking households, floors, and buildings within the complex, would provide the social base for the mobilization of Lefrak City tenants as a political force within the community. Not long after Baskin arrived, her “mothers” and other neighbors elected her to be a representative to the Tenants Association.

The Lefrak City Tenants Association was organized during the 1970s crisis and was instrumental in pressuring the Lefrak organization to renovate the complex and tighten security. However, by the 1980s some tenants had come to feel that the association had sold out to management and become little more than a “social club.” Moreover, though community leaders regarded the Tenants Association as the institutional voice of Lefrak City, its leadership played a relatively minor role in neighborhood affairs. The Tenants Association’s lack of involvement in local politics, coupled with the perception of many that it was working in concert with Lefrak management, contributed to the political isolation of Lefrak City’s black tenants. In 1987, for example, few if any Tenants Association members attended meetings of Community Board 4, the most important governing body in the community. [...]

In 1986 Baskin was encouraged by Rose Rothschild, Community Board 4’s district manager, to participate in the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee. Rothschild and the board’s chairperson, also a white woman, had made significant efforts to increase the involvement of people of color on the board. Under their leadership Korean, Chinese, and Latino persons had been seated on the predominantly white-American board, reflecting the changing demography of the community. However, despite Lefrak City’s large black population, only one African-American sat on the thirty-four member Community Board in 1987. [...]

Meetings of the Stabilization Committee generally focused on crime, drug sales, and other “quality-of-life” issues in the Lefrak City vicinity, such as traffic congestion and price gouging by merchants. Agenda items frequently targeted threats posed by Lefrak City residents (primarily black youth) to the surrounding area rather than

to the problems faced by residents within the complex. Similarly, problem-solving strategies emphasized law enforcement rather than the mobilization of Lefrak City tenants around shared concerns.

After attending a number of Stabilization Committee meetings, Baskin came to feel that the committee was not addressing the needs of Lefrak City residents and, in particular, those of its youth. Her participation on the committee waned as she began to form her own group, organizing her "mothers" to that purpose. In June 1987, in her apartment, Baskin convened the first meeting of Concerned Community Adults.

[...]

Baskin and her "mothers" had drafted a statement of purpose for the new group and adopted the bylaws of a not-for-profit agency in Harlem. "The purpose of Concerned Community Adults," read the statement of purpose, "is to provide a wide range of youth advocacy, education, and development services to young people and their parents residing in Lefrak City and the surrounding area." [...]

CCA's first meeting began at 7:00 in the evening with a discussion of the bylaws.

[...]

The group turned next to defining the needs of young people within Lefrak City. A problem underscored by all was the lack of a community center and, more generally, the lack of recreational public spaces for youths and adults alike to congregate. Despite its population of twelve thousand, Lefrak City had scant indoor or outdoor public facilities. An empty, apartment-size space located in the basement of one building served as an all-purpose meeting room for the entire development. Little playground space was located on the complex's grounds, and its two outdoor swimming pools were no longer in use. Much of the open space between buildings was taken up by parking lots.

[...]

This lack of public space, Baskin and others pointed out, also limited interaction among adults and made organizing tenants particularly difficult. [...]

For an hour, the board members discussed strategies for creating this "mutual meeting ground" at Lefrak City and for mobilizing its tenants. Baskin suggested pressuring the Lefrak organization to build a community center at the site of one of the abandoned pools. [...]

In the midst of this discussion Jonathan Bates arrived. A student in communications at Long Island University, Bates had attempted to form a youth organization in Lefrak City the year before. When he approached the Tenants Association with the idea, they invited him to head a youth committee within the association but provided little support. Moreover, the Tenants Association would not give the youth committee control over its budget, which Bates felt set limits on its effectiveness as well as its autonomy. When Jonathan heard that Baskin was forming a new organization, he telephoned her.

Dressed in a dark gray suit and red silk tie, Bates told the group about his organizing experiences in Lefrak City and stressed the importance of involving youth in decision making. Baskin and the others agreed and resolved that the goals and activities of the new organization should be defined by the young people themselves. To ensure this "youth viewpoint," the board decided that the first activity of Concerned Community Adults would be a public forum where Lefrak

City youth could voice their concerns and set the group's agenda. Jonathan volunteered to make flyers for the event and said he would spread the word among youth in the complex. In the meantime Firdasha Jami would develop a "needs assessment survey" that would be passed out to parents in the complex before the meeting.

The first Lefrak City Youth Forum was held two weeks later in the Continental Room, Lefrak City's all-purpose community room in the basement of the Rome Building facing troubled Fifty-seventh Avenue. About fifty Lefrak City youth, a dozen parents, Boy Scout and Girl Scout troop leaders, and three members of Community Board 4 gathered in the dimly lit, narrow room. The Community Board representatives included its chairperson, Miriam Levenson, and Daok Lee Pak, a Korean-born woman who worked closely with business groups that represented Korean merchants in the Lefrak area. Baskin and her board had chosen Jonathan Bates to chair the meeting as a means of stressing youth involvement in the group and countering, as she put it, "negative images of black males."

A long, folding table had been set up at one end of the room for the members of CCA and the Community Board. Behind the table a large American flag had been tacked to the wood-paneled wall. Flanked by Baskin and three women members of her board, the youthful chair of the forum described CCA's purpose and then invited the young people present to speak about their needs and problems. The teenagers remained silent, but a few adults stood and made statements concerning the need for tutoring and recreational programs.

For some thirty minutes the forum dragged on, alternating between parents' appeals for more youth services and Jonathan's inspired lectures on career planning, positive thinking, and the "new world of computers." After an adult Scout leader asked about the possibility of getting funding for bus trips, a young man sitting in the back of the room stood to speak. He was the first teenager to do so that night.

Um... all this time people been talkin' about "let's go on this trip and let's go on that trip." Why get away from the community? We should concentrate on having more fun *in* the community. They run us out – you know, like from the park or whatever. I... I mean they say it's late at night, but *think* about it. I recall last week Thursday, they ran us out of the park at 2:30 in the afternoon. You see, now there was only five of us. I mean sittin' on a *bench* – [they] said we couldn't sit on the bench. They run us out of Lefrak altogether. I don't understand that. Now you talkin' about "oh, let's go out, do this trip here, and have fun there." Why can't we have fun where we live?

The young audience erupted in wild applause. Baskin, who had not yet spoken, stood, nodding her head and motioning with her hand to the back of the room. The audience settled down.

The young man who just made that comment – thank you very much. I did not *realize* there was a problem with Lefrak security running the youth *out*. See, that's another reason for us getting together – so that we, the *other* adults here who *don't* know what's going on, can be made aware.

In fact Baskin *did* know of this problem with Lefrak security, and she often complained about the harassment that her teenage son received from Lefrak security guards, as well as from city police officers. Her comments were directed to "the

other adults" present, particularly to the members of Community Board 4 who, unlike those who were living in Lefrak City, had not yet heard this side of the story. This intervention, like many of CCA's activities to follow, served to contest and rework the discursive field within which Lefrak City was constructed as a racialized and pathological place.

The discussion, now animated and dominated by the young people, moved to the topic of the security services. A young man in his late twenties linked the harassment by Lefrak security to media representations of black teenagers as drug dealers. His comments are interesting because they mark the reduction of black teenagers to drug dealers and then expand the category at issue to include a broader "us" – an adult and employed "us": "They done blamed these young people as all drug pushers. That's what they doing. And they want to clear us *all* out. Every teenager is bad in their eyes. And the guys – you be comin' home from work and go to the park, and they push us out 'cause they suspect you to be a drug pusher."

This eruption of frustration and criticism over how black youth were stereotyped and harassed by Lefrak City's security services and the police challenged a central theme in white activist ideology and practice. By inverting the familiar relation between black teenagers and security, so central to the ideology of black crime, the testimony (and Edna's marking of its significance) raised the possibility that black teenagers who were often the targets of police action could play a constructive role in neighborhood stabilization. This novel prospect was given further support, ironically, when the forum's chair, intent on being a source of useful information, suggested that the teenagers voice their grievances about Lefrak security at the next meeting of the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee.

The Youth Forum, which ended with the planning of a youth and adult "march against crack," established CCA as a grass-roots force in the eyes of Lefrak City residents and representatives of Community Board 4 from its "outer perimeter." The importance of this event can be judged in part by the reaction of the Lefrak City Tenants Association. A few days after the Youth Forum, the president of the Tenants Association approached Baskin and asked her to place her organization under his "umbrella." When Baskin refused, the association's president warned that CCA would never get off the ground without his support. Nonetheless, the forum had legitimated Concerned Community Adults and encouraged the leadership of the Community Board to deal directly with Baskin on youth issues without the mediation of the Tenants Association.

Equally important, the mobilizing efforts of Baskin and CCA created new political spaces and ways of envisioning neighborhood stabilization that not only invited the involvement of residents who had been marginalized in local political institutions and discourses but also created public forums where alternative interpretations of the identities, interests, and needs of black residents could be publicly formulated.

Contesting the Politics of "Urban Blight"

A few weeks after the Youth Forum, CCA became involved in a neighborhood "cleanup" competition that further increased the organization's visibility and influence in neighborhood politics. Community boards in Queens were invited by the office of

the Queens Borough president to organize teams of youth to clean sidewalks and educate merchants about sanitation codes. The winning team would go to Disneyland.

Again mobilizing her network of women, Baskin organized a team of twelve youth, many of whom she had "sat" for at one time or another. Since no other organization in the community had been able to organize a group, CCA's cleanup team, composed entirely of black Lefrak City youth, became the official representative of Community Board 4. CCA also gained the support of the area's Korean merchants through Daok Lee Pak, the Korean-born woman who had attended the Youth Forum representing the Community Board and the Mid-Queens Korean Association, an organization of Korean businesspersons. Because relations between Korean merchants and African-Americans in New York City had often been strained, this linkage was politically important.

The cleanup team's activities received considerable attention from community leaders and the press. Community Board members visited the cleanup team at work in the Lefrak City area. Merchants donated refreshments, free haircuts, and school supplies, and posed with team members during picture-taking sessions. The Korean owner of a local grocery store offered to hire two cleanup team members when business picked up. Lefrak City management informed Baskin that Samuel J. Lefrak himself had noticed that the neighborhood looked cleaner. Viewed within the context of Lefrak City's history as a political issue and object of discourse, the cleanup campaign was extremely significant.

The image of black Lefrak City youth removing rubbish from the streets surrounding the housing complex undermined the construction of Lefrak City as a site of danger and urban blight – images tied symbolically to pollution and disorder (Douglas 1966) as well as to "blackness" and poverty (Gilman 1985; cf. Conquer-good 1992).⁶

The potency of garbage as a polysemous symbol of disorder and threat to community was intensified during the summer of 1987 by a highly publicized political brawl concerning the disposition of a garbage barge. A seagoing barge containing more than three thousand tons of New York area garbage had been turned away by officials in Louisiana where it was to be dumped. After wandering around the Gulf of Mexico for a few days, the barge returned to New York City where it triggered a crisis of sorts. City officials refused to allow the barge to dock until it could be tested for environmentally hazardous materials. A supreme court judge in Queens ordered the barge to be put under "24-hour surveillance" while city officials and politicians debated the origin and content of the garbage (*New York Newsday*, 21 May 1987).

"It's nothing but 100 percent, all-American garbage," a New York State inspector assured the public, responding to fears raised by some politicians that it might contain "vermin," carrying diseases from Mexico or Belize (*New York Newsday*, 19 May 1987). When the town of Islip, Long Island, agreed to accept the garbage for its landfill, the borough president of Queens refused to allow it to be transported across her borough until more testing was done. The town supervisor of Islip accused the Queens official of using the garbage as an issue to mask her "image problems," alluding to a political corruption scandal that had rocked Queens the year before. "I heard her say Islip's garbage will never travel the streets of Queens," he declared. "And she presides over the corruption capital of the universe" (*New York Newsday*, 20 May 1987).

The complex meanings associated with garbage, manipulated by Queens politicians to represent corruption and violations of turf, resonated with local symbolic deployments of such notions as “vermin” and “garbage” to signify the threat posed by Lefrak City. For example, a Community Board 4 member once reported to the board after a Lefrak “tour” sponsored by the Stabilization Committee that the inspection team had encountered the “smell of rats,” a claim that was duly recorded in the minutes.

Baskin was well aware of the potency of the “garbage barge” as a mass-mediated symbol framing the activities of her cleanup crew.⁷ I asked, “Do you think the fact that it was a cleanup campaign, as opposed to something else, had something to do with its success?”

Of course. Because, all during the summer – you know – the garbage barge sitting out there – okay? – only emphasized the problem the whole country is having with *garbage*. You understand? And that *our children* could see that this is really a problem. See, we have to make our children aware that there’s a problem today. So that when *they* become adults, *they* have some . . . some knowledge to draw on, as to how to *deal* with problems like this. You have to *learn* this. This is nothing that somebody . . . that you could read in a book and do. It’s something you have to get out here and do.

Of interest here is less the symbolic investments of garbage per se than the manner in which Baskin and her organization deliberately engaged in a politics of representation that drew on and reworked deeply historical and mass-mediated discourses about the interrelation of race, place, and urban blight. The practice of constructing black identity was an integral component of CCA’s strategy and tactics of community mobilization.

Although the CCA’s team did not win the boroughwide cleanup competition, Baskin was able to strengthen support for her group among politicians, Community Board members, local merchants, and representatives of a major new immigrant community in Queens. The Mid-Queens Korean Association, noted above, invited Baskin, her team members, and representatives of Community Board 4 to a dinner party at a Korean restaurant to “honor” the young people. Although black-Korean relations were not the explicit focus of the event the topic surfaced repeatedly, suggesting that race and ethnic relations were being negotiated through activities surrounding the cleanup competition.

[. . .]

The cleanup competition, like the Youth Forum, undermined key ideological themes that had been articulated in activist and mass-mediated discourses since the desegregation of Lefrak City. Through cultural practices ranging from the cleaning up of streets and public spaces to everyday interactions with merchants, city officials, and neighborhood residents, CCA and its cleanup team challenged and reworked the racialized economy of space and its underlying power relations that had constructed Lefrak City as a threat to middle-class stability.

By summer’s end CCA activities had attracted the attention of local politicians. An awards dinner held to honor members of the cleanup team was attended by Helen Marshall, the area’s state assemblywoman, and by an aid to the local city councilman. Both officials had begun to explore ways to provide CCA with public funding

in order to support a tutorial program the the group had begun in the Lefrak library. CCA awarded certificates of merit to merchants, supporters on Community Board 4, and to cleanup team members. Rose Rothschild, district manager of the board, described CCA's activities (and her certificate) at the Community Boards's next meeting and redoubled her efforts to have Baskin seated on the board.

[...]

For Edna Baskin and Concerned Community Adults, the "hard work" of community organizing rested less in mobilizing ready-made subjects in response to fixed grievances and ideologies than in constructing an alternative political space or public sphere in which the needs, interests, and identities of Lefrak City residents could be collectively contested, negotiated, and recast in empowering ways.⁸

CCA's Youth Forum, cleanup campaign, and other youth-oriented activities challenged and reworked politically disabling discourses about Lefrak City that had obscured and depoliticized the needs of black youth by constructing them as threats to neighborhood stability and by locating the origins of this criminal deviance in the disorder of the black family. As in the case of the "latchkey kids" and the teenage drug dealers, this ideology of black crime and family pathology interpellated black youth as subjects in need of discipline and policing rather than community services. By subverting this racialized ideology of space and identity, CCA established the educational and empowerment needs of black youth as legitimate subjects of political discourse and action within a more inclusive construction of community.

Subsequent activities, such as the Area Policy Board campaign, the creation of the Joint Youth Services Committee, and the publication of the *Clarion*, expanded and deepened this public sphere of neighborhood activism creating alternative and more inclusive arenas of political participation and deliberation. In mobilizing black "families" and households, Baskin and CCA not only contested ideologies of black family pathology but also disrupted and manipulated gendered constructions of political space and agency that privileged formal, officially recognized modes of political activism over the more fluid, "submerged," and sometimes household-based networks of everyday politics.

If an important legacy of the state's response to civil-rights-era activism has been a harnessing of the black public sphere and a depoliticizing of racial inequalities, the case of Edna Baskin and Concerned Community Adults demonstrates that these processes of subjugation are recognized and challenged through the everyday practices of neighborhood activists. CCA's success in mobilizing Lefrak City residents and in mustering the support of neighborhood institutions and political elites rested on the constitution of a heterogeneous and relatively autonomous public sphere through which the needs of residents could be publicly articulated in ways that yielded new and sometimes oppositional forms of collective action and identity.

NOTES

- 1 In the late 1940s the dump was cleaned up and Quonset huts were constructed to provide temporary housing for World War II veterans and their families (*New York Daily News*, 14 February 1982).

- 2 See Hall et al. (1978) for an analysis of the development of an ideology of black crime in Britain during the 1970s, and see Rieder (1985) for a discussion of how blacks, welfare, and "mugging" were conflated in the activist ideology of whites in Canarsie, Brooklyn.
- 3 "Scatter-site" housing was a federal housing initiative designed to integrate the black poor into white middle-income neighborhoods by requiring cities to devote a portion of their federal housing funds to the construction of low-income housing projects in white communities. In 1966 the New York City Housing Department designated a site in Corona for low-income housing. Subsequent protests led to the replacement of the Corona site with one in nearby Forest Hills. For a discussion of both controversies, see Cuomo (1983:3-23).
- 4 See the minutes of 8 January District Service Cabinet meeting, Office of Neighborhood Government, New York City Mayor's Office, page 3. The Neighborhood Stabilization Committee was formed within the structure of the Corona East Elmhurst District Cabinet, which operated under the authority of the Office of Neighborhood Government.
- 5 The only day care center located within Lefrak City in 1987 charged \$85 per week and fined parents for picking up children late.
- 6 For example, a white resident of a middle-income housing complex in Brooklyn, responding to a 1987 court order requiring its owner to end discrimination against blacks, declared: "We're being dumped on. We worked so hard to keep this place the way it is. Why bring in the garbage?" (*New York Newsday*, 7 May 1987).
- 7 In fact Claire Shulman, the borough president of Queens, had spoken about the garbage barge and the political crisis it instigated at the "kick-off" ceremony for the cleanup competition, which Baskin and her crew attended.
- 8 Nancy Fraser, in her analysis of the politics of needs interpretation, highlights three axes, or "moments," of political struggle that prove helpful in conceptualizing the activist work and accomplishments of CCA:

I take the politics of needs to comprise three moments that are analytically distinct but interrelated in practice. The first is the struggle to establish or deny the political status of a given need, the struggle to validate the need as a matter of legitimate political concern or to enclave it as a nonpolitical matter. The second is the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it. The third moment is the struggle over the satisfaction of the need, the struggle to secure or withhold provision. (1989:164)

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