

**THE INEVITABLE AND THE INVISIBLE:
STORIES OF RACE AND CLASS IN TWO NEW YORK MUSEUMS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The Invisible and the Inevitable: Stories of Race and Class in Two New York House Museums examines the direct and indirect forces that shape two historic sites, and by extension, narratives of American racial and class identity embedded in the built environment. Both the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan and the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn bear witness to a significant chapter in U.S. urban history: the post-war devastation of U.S. cities caused by federally subsidized white suburbanization, deindustrialization, and capital flight. But instead of telling this story, the museums obscure it—by leaving it untold. The house museums tell neighborhood stories about the distant past, but New York’s present urban formations are the products of the recent past, a period absent from both museums’ accounts: a period during which mixed-race, mixed-class cities were transformed into hyper-segregated sites of purposeful disinvestment. Neither museum tells that story. Thus, racial and class formations that have been determined by land use policy are naturalized in the landscape. To walk through these neighborhoods is to absorb an implicit social geography. I argue that, because they are invested with cultural authority, the museums take implicitly acquired ideas and, without making them explicit, subtly legitimate them.

This dissertation argues that neither museum can tell accurate stories about the past without acknowledging two important factors that have shaped their surrounding neighborhoods: First, the federally backed extraction of wealth from mixed-race cities, especially under the FHA

beginning in the 1930s, wealth that was delivered to racially exclusive white suburbs, and second, the cultural consolidation of racial whiteness that both facilitated and resulted from mid-century suburbanization.

The same structures that channeled material wealth from mixed-race cities to the racially exclusive white suburbs continue to channel the resources necessary to construct public memories today. As a result, these museums participate in the social construction of the *inevitable white middle class* and the *invisible black middle class*.

Introduction

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is one of New York's beloved treasures. It was "an incredible experience," one online reviewer exclaimed after a visit in July 2012.¹ "Highly recommend!!!" wrote another.² The museum boasts more than 1,000 positive reviews on Trip Advisor.com, where it is "ranked #17 of 617 attractions in New York City."³ And on Google, the reviews are so complimentary that a Zagat-driven averaging tool scores the LESTM at 26 out of 30, or "extraordinary to perfection." "Visiting the Tenement Museum was by far the coolest historical experience I've had since living in New York," one resident wrote, echoing countless others.⁴ Out-of-town reviewers, many of whom hail from other countries, are no less enthusiastic: "This was one of the best things we did on our trip to NYC," one tourist remarked.⁵

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is a historic house museum in Manhattan. The museum reaches a sizable audience, hosting 200,000 visitors a year (more than 500 a day), is ranked #12 of 702 attractions on TripAdvisor.com, where 13,000 reviewers have rated the museum 4 and a half out of 5 stars, and boasts more than 200 reviews on Yelp.com (where the reviews also average 4 and a half stars out of five stars). A tenement building constructed in 1864, the structure at 97 Orchard Street housed around seven thousand immigrants over the course of seventy years (1864-1935). Tenants lived in tiny, three-hundred-square-foot

¹ H., "An Incredible Experience!!! - Review of Tenement Museum, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor."

² stlmark, "Very Informative Great Guide - Review of Tenement Museum, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor."

³ As of November 9, 2012: "Tenement Museum - New York City - Reviews of Tenement Museum - TripAdvisor."

⁴ S., "Lower East Side Tenement Museum: Visiting the Tenement Museum Was by Far the Coolest Historical Experience I've Had Since Living in New York."

⁵ WorldGallery, Member Since March 2011, "Which Lower East Side Tenement Museum Tour? | United States Forum | Fodor's Travel Talk Forums."

apartments: four families on each of the building's five floors (except for the first floor and the basement, where there were two apartments per floor and two storefronts). In short, for its first seventy years, it was a crowded building in a crowded immigrant neighborhood —“ one of the most crowded places on the planet.” The museum is dedicated to telling “the stories of 97 Orchard Street.” The seven thousand immigrants who passed through the building, the LESTM's website explains, “faced challenges we understand today: making a new life, working for a better future, starting a family with limited means.” Thousands of immigrant experiences are brought to life in the museum through the stories of a few actual residents. The museum has reconstructed their stories from archival evidence like census records and court documents, and oral histories. Unlike most museums, these residents' stories are not represented in photos and wall panels, but by way of meticulous reproductions of the apartments in which the immigrants lived. This is what makes the museum special. Visitors learn about historic figures as they walk up the same staircase, and stand in the same rooms where these immigrants once worked, ate, and slept. The museum provides an immersive experience of immigrant domesticity. Through carefully rendered narratives about a few individuals, the museum tells a larger story about the turn-of-the-century European immigrant experience.⁶

⁶ 2012 Visitor numbers from: Lower East Side Tenement Museum, “Notes from the Tenement: A Baldizzi Christmas, Evenings at the Tenement and More!”. For information on population density on the Lower East Side, see O'leary, “How Many People Can Manhattan Hold?”.



Above: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum (left) and The Weeksville Heritage Center.

But visitors do not love the museum only because it is an immersive experience. Online reviews and museum staff observations suggest that the museum’s popularity has more to do with the way the sensory experience activates their respect for immigrant ancestors. “If I was American, with family that had passed through any tenements in New York I would be both extremely moved by the information and proud of the ancestors who had survived it,” a UK reviewer wrote.⁷ Similarly, a New York resident suggests that visitors will be rewarded with a feeling of “appreciation for your ancestors” after a tour of the LESTM.⁸ Another encourages

⁷ M, “Great History Here - Review of Tenement Museum, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor.”

⁸ Reens82, “An Interactive Trip Back in Time - Review of Tenement Museum, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor.”

visitors to “learn where our ancestors came from, what they coped with in their new country, and how they adapted and, eventually, thrived.”⁹

But how did turn-of-the-century European immigrants adapt and thrive? That is a story the museum does not tell. Of the five families the museum profiles, one lost a newborn baby to poisoned milk sold in an unregulated market in the 1860s. Soon after their baby died, Irish immigrants Bridget and Joseph Moore lost their apartment too, finding themselves back in the Five Points slum they had been trying to escape. The Moore family experienced downward, not upward mobility. The Rogarshevskys, another family that once lived in the building, lost their breadwinner-father to Tuberculosis. Widowed, Mrs. Rogarshevsky held the family together by working as the building’s “janitress.” Natalie Gumpertz was abandoned by her husband, left to care for her small children alone. And the Baldizzis were evicted when the city declared the building unfit for human habitation. The museum tells stories of hardship, devastating setbacks, and downward mobility.¹⁰

At the Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC), another house museum across the East River in Brooklyn, museum visitors respond in ways that are similarly out of touch with the stories the house museum documents. The WHC is a smaller house museum with a smaller audience. The WHC reaches a much smaller audience (10,000 visitors a year, roughly equal to 5% of the LESTM’s audience). Only four people have reviewed the WHC on Yelp.com, where they rate the museum five out of five stars. In contrast to LESTM visitors, whose trips to the museum tend to concretize a wistful certainty about hard-working immigrants, many WHC museum-goers

⁹ Bob Casper Wyoming, “Learn Where We Came from and ‘How the Other Half Lived...’” For more on museum staff observations of the visitor experience, see: Russell-Ciardi, “The Museum as a Democracy-Building Institution”; Weglein Kraus, “Petticoats and Primary Sources: Lessons Learned Through Public History.”

¹⁰ LESTM tours, Summer 2009. See also: Lower East Side Tenement Museum, “The Tenement Museum | Virtual Tour of the Tenement at 97 Orchard Street.”

remain unclear about the significance of the Weeksville settlement documented at the WHC. Touring the area in 2005, a New York public television producer explained that “one life-long Bed-Stuy resident we interviewed was proud of the [WHC] site’s “historical” status, but believed the houses were slave quarters.”¹¹

The Weeksville Heritage Center is a collection of four frame houses in Central Brooklyn, the oldest of which was probably built in the 1850s or 60s. While the tenement at 97 Orchard Street housed poor white immigrants, these Central Brooklyn houses were home to middle-class black citizens. Instead of living in tiny apartments in “the most crowded place on earth,” residents of the Weeksville houses lived in a somewhat rural, hilly area on the outskirts of what was once called the Eastern District of the city of Brooklyn, an area that later developed into a suburb, and was eventually absorbed by the city of New York . In short, it was a small, rural, intentional black that, by the early twentieth century, developed into a mixed-race neighborhood before experiencing extreme segregation in the late twentieth century. The Weeksville Heritage Center “is a multidimensional museum dedicated to preserving the history of the 19th century African American community of Weeksville, Brooklyn.” And as their website explains, “Using a contemporary lens, we activate this unique history through the presentation of innovative, vanguard and experimental programs.”¹²

Both museums are situated in the postwar urban landscape of New York, surrounded by neighborhoods that confuse the stories the museums try to tell. The LESTM tells stories of poor white immigrants but it is situated in a neighborhood characterized by middle class consumption.

¹¹ Visitor numbers from: Green, “Celebrate 40 Years of Weeksville: Letter to Weeksville Heritage Center Members.”

¹² Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History, “Weeksville Heritage Center.”

As one observer puts it, the Lower East Side is “an amusement park for suburban day-trippers.”¹³ The surrounding neighborhood becomes the default conclusion to the stories told inside the museum, suggesting an *inevitable white middle class*. Similarly, the Weeksville Heritage Center tells stories of middle-class-black settlement in an urban black ghetto. The eight-block walk from the Utica station takes tourists through a shadowy strip of seemingly abandoned industrial buildings and under the elevated railroad tracks abutting a stretch of barracks-like public housing. Though many neighborhood residents maintain a middle-class lifestyle in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the aesthetics of the neighborhood do not suggest a middle-class community. Windows and doors are covered in bars. Corrugated metal sheets cordon off the scruffy city lots. The tension of a significant police presence is palpable. Both museums’ attempts to tell stories about the past — about poor white immigrants in a neighborhood of middle class consumption, and middle-class blacks in a “stop-and-frisk” neighborhood suffering from decades of decapitalization — are heavily influenced by their physical surroundings.

This dissertation argues that neither museum can tell accurate stories about the past without acknowledging two important factors that have shaped their surrounding neighborhoods: First, the federally backed extraction of wealth from mixed-race cities, especially under the FHA beginning in the 1930s, wealth that was delivered to racially exclusive white suburbs. And second, the cultural consolidation of racial whiteness that both facilitated and resulted from mid-century suburbanization. The two museums and their neighborhoods bear the mark of this history, but neither museum addresses it.

During the past quarter-century, new urban and suburban historians such as Thomas J. Sugrue, Kenneth T. Jackson, Colin Gordon, and Andrew Highsmith have rewritten the history of

¹³ Stapinski, “Here’s Hoping the Max Fish Magic Travels.”

postwar ghetto formation. These scholars and others have conclusively demonstrated that planners, federal officials, local politicians, members of the private housing industry, and ordinary white homeowners deliberately segregated citizens by race.¹⁴

Despite these historians' critical contributions, however, the structural instruments behind the formation of the postwar ghetto remain largely absent from public narratives about the city. Instead, cities are frequently represented as mysteriously broken, as if unable to function without the white residents who once lived there. Gene Marks exemplified this sentiment in a widely read opinion piece on Forbes.com in 2001. Marks compared his own children with the "poor black kids of West Philadelphia" arguing: "My kids are no smarter than similar kids their age from the inner city... My kids are just lucky enough to have parents and a well-funded school system around to push them in the right direction." Marks framed the racialized city/suburb

¹⁴ This paragraph borrows heavily from Andrew Highsmith, who elegantly summarizes this field of scholarship in his recent dissertation. Scholarship on the creation of the postwar ghetto includes: Highsmith, "Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan"; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 1987; Davis, *City of Quartz*; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; Massey and Denton, "Hypersegregation in U.S. Metropolitan Areas"; Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Nightingale, *Segregation*; Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*. Highsmith also cites the following studies in his summary of the scholarship: David L. Kirp, John P. Dwyer, and Larry A. Rosenthal, *Our Town: Race, Housing, and the Soul of Suburbia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Peter Schrag, *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); H. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*; Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Self, *American Babylon*; L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Howard Gillette, Jr., *Camden after the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Robert M. Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006);

divide in terms of luck and parental fitness, not a history of racialized wealth distribution. He then argued that if poor black kids took advantage of technology, they could find a way to succeed. Within hours, an overwhelming and furious response took shape on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. Within days, hundreds of rebuttals were published on blogs, and in online magazines and newspapers. The response to Marks's article can only hint at the larger set of tensions to which it is connected. At the very least, the explosion surrounding Marks' article suggests that his perception of racial inequality, especially as it manifests in cities, reflects a broader set of assumptions shared by other Americans. As Cord Jefferson put it in his *Good* magazine response, "You find this sort of thing a lot among the white, moneyed, conservative set: 'If only blacks and Latinos would work harder, they'd be fine.'" Almost three decades of scholarship have conclusively demonstrated that the inequalities Marks observes are the result of public resources having been extracted from mixed-race cities and delivered to racially exclusive, white suburbs. Yet misinformed analyses like the one offered by Gene Marks continue to proliferate. Why?¹⁵

First of all, people like Gene Marks, people who live outside today's urban ghetto, are more likely to reach a wide audience with their personal explanation of urban cultural geographies than those who live inside today's urban ghettos. People who have experienced generational wealth degradation are less likely to have access to such wide-reaching public

¹⁵ Marks, "If I Were A Poor Black Kid - Forbes"; Jefferson, "An Ode to a 'Poor Black Kid' I Never Knew: How Forbes Gets Poverty Wrong"; Virella, "If I Were The Middle Class White Guy Gene Marks"; Coates, "A Muscular Empathy." In one of these responses, Kashmir Hill points out that Forbes' payment model "rewards controversy," by "encourage[ing] writers to bait readers with offensive material." Hill, "Trolling The Internet With 'If I Were A Poor Black Kid' - Forbes." But even if Marks' only agenda was to make money, the traffic he generated reveals that he chose a resonant topic. As of April 6, 2013, an internet search for "If I Were A Poor Black Kid Forbes" yielded 34 pages of Google results. In order to include at least a few of these responses here, I draw from Hill's catalog, though I have not read the following closely: Edgar, "If I Were Gene Marks"; DNLee, "If I Were a Wealthy White Suburbanite"; Hilton, "If Gene Marks Were a Poor Black Kid Who Went to Ballou In 2003"; Anonymous, "If I Was A Poor Black Kid, I'd Key Gene Marks's Car."

media outlets. Marks' article serves as a particularly incendiary example of such a public narrative, but this dissertation is concerned with more substantial, carefully designed, well-intentioned, federally funded narratives produced by responsible public historians at reputable historic sites. This dissertation illustrates how museum staff with good intentions are involved in the production of narratives that leave the story of racialized wealth distribution unacknowledged and uninterrogated. These museums and their surrounding neighborhoods are connected to a story much larger than the one they tell: a story about the economic violence inflicted on mixed-race cities, which enabled the consolidation of wealth and whiteness in the suburbs. By obscuring (or ignoring) this larger history, public narratives like those constructed at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (or not constructed at the Weeksville Heritage Center) can function to justify white wealth in the public imagination.¹⁶

To justify white wealth is to justify the idea of racial whiteness. Not only did federal home loan policies make white suburbs, but the suburbs helped make ethnic immigrants white. Thus the history of racialized wealth distribution in U.S. cities is not simply a story about money extracted from one group and delivered to another, but rather about the construction of categories that functioned to channel resources out of the city. Many of the people who make up today's white middle and upper classes are descendants of poor European immigrants like those who once lived at 97 Orchard Street on the Lower East Side. They were "white on arrival," as

¹⁶ For an example of someone who has experienced generational wealth degradation, who reaches only a small audience with her story about urban social geography, consider Selena M. Blake and her documentary on the Queensbridge Public Housing Project in New York. Frustrated by public perceptions of public housing, Blake documented "a place where bus drivers, postal workers and seamstresses kept an eye on one another's children in the courtyard jungle gyms, and borrowed potatoes to finish off a stew." The film was independently produced and never reached a wide audience. Elsewhere, public housing has been "routinely painted as 'zones of apocalyptic social decay, wanton violence, and depravity' in media representations," to borrow language from urban policy scholar Edward G. Goetz. This is one example of the way that consolidation of material wealth leads to the consolidation of social and cultural capital, or the authority and resources to tell stories about how wealth works and who deserves it. Blake, *Queensbridge: The Other Side*; Berger, "Her Film Project Happens to Be Her Project." Goetz, "The Audacity of HOPE VI."

Thomas Guglielmo has shown, but still they felt the material effects of significant marginalization. Their ascent into the middle class is also the story of their becoming fully white. Since the emergence of whiteness studies in the 1990s, scholars such as Mae Ngai, Matthew Frye-Jacobson, Thomas Guglielmo, George Lipsitz, and Jennifer Peirce have tracked a history of white racial formation that parallels the formation of today's hypersegregated cities. Just as the story of this country's racialized distribution of wealth is absent from both these museum's narratives, the story of white racial formation is also absent.¹⁷

Among scholars of urban history, there has been little focus on the way the redistribution of wealth in cities informs our ability to tell public stories about what happened. While historians of suburbanization and what George Lipsitz calls "the possessive investment in whiteness" continue to document both the formation of the urban ghetto and its relationship to the construction of post-war racial whiteness, few historians have turned their attention to questions about how that wealth consolidation restrains our ability to tell stories about race and the city in public.¹⁸

This dissertation contributes to two primary fields of scholarly analysis: scholarship on racial formation (especially the nineteenth and twentieth century history of white racial formation) and twentieth-century urban history (specifically the creation of racially segregated

¹⁷ Much of this scholarship specifically addresses immigration and white racial formation, for example: Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*; Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*; Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; Fairchild, *Science at the Borders*; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Foley, *The White Scourge*. Other studies look beyond immigration and migration to explain broader processes of white racial formation (in relation to eugenics and criminality, popular culture and social capital, or mechanisms for accumulating wealth and privilege, for example): Hage, *White Nation*, 2000; Hartigan, *Odd Tribes*; Hartigan, Jr., *Racial Situations*; Rafter, *White Trash*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Pierce, *Racing for Innocence*; Hale, *Making Whiteness*; Fairchild, *Science at the Borders*; Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*; Rothenberg, *White Privilege*.

¹⁸ On the twentieth-century construction of racial whiteness, especially as it relates to the accumulation of assets, see: Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Ngai, "History as Law and Life: Tape v. Hurley and the Origins of the Chinese-American Middle Class"; "Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics, 1997 - Videri"; Nightingale, *Segregation*.

cities in the mid-twentieth century). I argue that the LESTM, WHC, and the neighborhoods in which they are situated are products of white racial formation and mid-century racialized suburbanization, but because neither museum acknowledges these factors, the museums participate in a disavowal of structural racism.

In addition to whiteness studies and twentieth-century urban history, the following study contributes to the field of Museum and Heritage Studies, which is expressly concerned with public storytelling about racialized space. While scholars such as Robert Rydell, Peter H. Hoffenberg, C.M. Hinsley, and Annie E. Coombes have clearly situated the exhibitionary complex as an instrument of nationalism, others have interrogated the process of identity formation in sub-national, often ethnic museums. Carl Grodach, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideri, and Victor J. Danilov have documented the rising number of ethnic museums in the U.S. since the 1970s. Scholars such as Tony Bennett, Ghassan Hage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Corinne A. Kratz, and Ivan Karp have argued that, in the era of multiculturalism, both ethnic and traditional museums have become what Bennett calls “differencing machines.” This dissertation argues, following Bennett, that the proliferation of ethnic and subnational museums productively removes ethnic identity from a system in which the world’s peoples are fixed in hierarchical relationship to each other, but it also problematically removes ethnic experiences from *any* relationship to each other, confounding our understanding of the relationship between class, race, and nation: in this case white upward mobility, the construction of the racially segregated urban ghetto, and notions of American identity that are bound up with bootstrap success.¹⁹

¹⁹ On museums and nationalism, see: Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*; Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display*; Hinsley, “The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893”; Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities”; Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship”; Cameron, “The Museum: A Temple or the Forum.” On ethnic museums and multiculturalism, see: Bennett, “Difference and the Logic of Culture”; Hage, *White Nation*, 2000; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Exhibitionary

It is impossible to understand the development of these two museums without understanding the emergence of multiculturalism, a logic that, as scholar Lisa Lowe puts it, “that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history.” A rich body of scholarship analyzes the emergence of aestheticized ethnicity, particularly color-blind racism in the post-civil rights era. While these analyses have been integrated into museum studies to some degree, no one has analyzed the way multiculturalism limits interpretive possibilities in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum or the Weeksville Heritage Center.²⁰

Though the history of New York City has been richly documented for centuries and the history of the Lower East Side has, for decades, been the subject of memoirs, films, journalistic work, popular literature, and scholarly analyses, Bedford-Stuyvesant has received comparatively little attention. Scholars like Craig Wilder, Wendell Pritchett, Carla Peterson, and Jerald Podair have tracked the production of racialized space in Central Brooklyn, but there is no scholarship on the history of Weeksville. Thus, the following dissertation contributes to the field of New York history by tracking the story of the racial integration of the Weeksville school, the story of

Complexes”; Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach, “Displaying and Celebrating the ‘Other’”; Karp and Kratz, “Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations”; Danilov, *Ethnic Museums and Heritage Sites in the United States*.

²⁰ A few key texts on multiculturalism include: Lowe, “Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism”; Scott, “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity”; Lavine and Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism”; Kaplan, “Identity.” A significant number of articles interrogate the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s attempt to “promote tolerance,” but this work does not engage analyses of the limitations of a multiculturalism that aestheticizes ethnicity. For examples of meditations on the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s attempt to promote tolerance and civic engagement, see: Abram, “History Is As History Does: The Evolution of a Mission-Driven Museum”; Abram, “Kitchen Conversations”; Abram, “Tempest Tost”; Abram, “Using the Past to Shape the Future”; Sevchenko, “Activating the Past for Civic Action”; Sandell, “Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion”; Conforti, “Ghettos as Tourism Attractions”; Duffy, “Museums of ‘human Suffering’ and the Struggle for Human Rights”; Weglein Kraus, “Petticoats and Primary Sources: Lessons Learned Through Public History”; Tutela, *Becoming American*. For an example of an article that questions the whether the museum’s mission can be achieved, see Bruner Foundation, “2001 Rudy Brunner Award Silver Medal Winner.” “The success of LESTM’s efforts to promote tolerance is... difficult to assess,” the report’s author asserts. “While the tour proved to be a powerful experience — a visceral comprehension of tenement conditions — the connections with contemporary conditions of immigrant struggle, exploitation and overcrowding that exist elsewhere in the neighborhood were not explicitly made to visitors.”

the formation of the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History (which would eventually become the Weeksville Heritage Center), and putting these histories in the context of the existing scholarship on the Lower East Side and New York. Furthermore, the following chapters contribute to the history of New York’s disinvestment (beginning in the 1930s with FHA policies) and recapitalization (beginning 1970s when the city, especially Manhattan, absorbed a wave of private reinvestment).²¹

The following dissertation might have been situated in the scholarship on the construction of regional spaces and racial meanings, especially considering geographer Richard Shein’s argument that the city is a cultural landscape and a “constitutive element” of American ideas about race. But this field is dominated by close readings of racialized space, and instead of a close reading of the two museums, the following study offers a synthetic history of two urban spaces and the efforts to preserve domestic structures in those spaces. In other words, the following dissertation attempts to weave two seemingly separate neighborhood histories into one narrative about the construction of racial whiteness, racialized distributions of wealth, and the

²¹ Some examples of scholarship on Central Brooklyn include: Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*; Podair, “‘White’ Values, ‘Black’ Values”; Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*; Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*; Peterson, *Black Gotham*. The voluminous body of work on the Lower East Side cannot be adequately cited here, but a few examples include: Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*; *Studies Among the Tenements of New York*; Roth, *Call It Sleep*; Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*; Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*. For a more exhaustive catalogue of Lower East Side stories, see: Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 51–53. On the transformation of New York after the 1975 fiscal crisis, see, for example: Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*; Hackworth, “Postrecession Gentrification in New York City”; Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development”; New York State, “History of Empire State Development”; New York State, “Welcome to Empire State Development”; Shalala and Bellamy, “A State Saves a City”; Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York”; Sites, “Public Action: New York City Policy and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side”; Unger, “The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood”; Zukin, *Loft Living*.

way obscuring this history helps to perpetuate and compound racialized inequality, or in other words, the way multiculturalism obscures a history of wealth extraction.²²

In sum, only a few scholars have endeavored to explain how the distribution of wealth that *created* the racialized postwar ghetto in the U.S. has defunded the possibilities for public storytelling *about the creation* of the racialized postwar ghetto. By weaving together the stories of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Weeksville Heritage Center, and their surrounding neighborhoods, the following dissertation constitutes one such effort.²³

The Inevitable and the Invisible begins by situating the two museums in one chronology. Both museums emerged in the context of what Anthony Shelton calls the “radical interrogation” of the mainstream in the 1960s. While the WHC was propelled by the Civil Rights Movement, which was dedicated to the problem of race and material inequality, the LESTM emerged almost twenty years later, in the climate of multiculturalism, which aestheticized ethnic difference, denying the material inequalities embedded in racialized identities. In addition to situating the two museums in the chronology of museology and American thinking about race, this chapter reviews some of the other factors that inform the museums’ ability to convey their stories: cultural symbols, stereotypes, racial attitudes or bias, and histories of racial violence.²⁴

²² Schein, *Landscape and Race in the United States*. For more on the racialized space and public memory, see, for example: Barton, *Sites of Memory*.

²³ Katznelson does something like this when he tells the story about “when affirmative action was white,” He argues that we have naturalized affirmative action for whites which makes it difficult to support the idea of affirmative action for non-whites. Ned Kauffman’s book *Place, Race, and Story* looks at the challenges of public preservation in NY. He engages the history of segregation but not the history of capital extraction that makes storytelling difficult. Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Schein, *Landscape and Race in the United States*.

²⁴ Shelton, “Museums in an Age of Cultural Hybridity”; Glaude, “Introduction: Black Power Revisited.” (Both museums represent fraught attempts at transvaluation. (at worst hypostation of blackness))

Chapter two offers a window into the process of racial formation in Weeksville in the 1890s, just before most of the WHC founders were born. The story of the Weeksville school is included in the dissertation for two reasons: First, it is a story about race and property values: in short, a failed attempt to define racial blackness as an attribute that devalued property. In the 1930s, real estate dealers would successfully link race and property values on the federal level, thereby extracting wealth from mixed-race cities and funneling that wealth to racially exclusive suburbs. The Weeksville school integration reveals that local efforts to link race and property values failed to find traction forty years earlier. In this way, the story of the Weeksville school is the pre-history of racial redlining, which is relevant to the story of the Weeksville Heritage Center because racial redlining created the conditions that prompted the formation of the WHC. Secondly, the story of the Weeksville school illustrates an instance of contested racial meanings. While some participants in the debate argued that racial blackness was a permanent attribute, others argued that the mark of racial difference would soon fade if African-Americans were given access to the same material resources as whites. Today, the LESTM and the WHC participate in the construction of racial meanings. The story of the Weeksville school puts these museums and their surrounding neighborhoods in the context of a long, complicated, social and economic process through which race and racialized space are constructed.

Chapter three tells the story of the Weeksville Heritage Society. After the racial integration of the Weeksville school, the neighborhood remained integrated for almost fifty years. But in the 1940s, as federal policies lured white residents to suburban developments with low-cost mortgages, Central Brooklyn suffered from a swift and devastating loss of both middle-class residents and the capital that sustained the community. This exodus to the suburbs came on the heels of the black migration from the south. The simultaneity of the growing black population,

capital flight, and redlining created a distorted perception of blackness as the cause of urban decline. The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History (later the Weeksville Heritage Center) emerged to counter the culture of poverty thesis with a story about the community's black middle-class roots.

Chapter four offers a window into the logic of multiculturalism at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. While the Weeksville Heritage Center emerged in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum developed in the context of the nation-of-immigrants movement, or what Matthew Frye-Jacobson calls the white ethnic revival. And while the WHC was established to *counter* misperceptions about blackness and the city, the LESTM ultimately *confirmed* other, simultaneous efforts to honor America's turn-of-the-century European immigrants. And while the WHC initially received public funding from institutions devoted to fair housing and social justice, the LESTM was largely supported by public institutions devoted to the privatization of Manhattan real estate. Because the LESTM emerged in the climate of Manhattan's recapitalization, staff positioned the museum as a driver of economic development. This inadvertently revealed the inadequacy of a multiculturalism that celebrates aestheticized ethnicity and denies the material and structural foundation of racial logics. The story of Ruth Abram, Louis Holtzman, and the Empire State Development Corporation is presented here because it dramatizes a complex of factors that ultimately authorize visitors' construction of white middle class inevitability. These factors include the LESTM's access to capital and power, the appeal of the immigrant narrative to developers and consumers, and the limitations of the logic of multiculturalism.

The Inevitable and the Invisible tracks the development of two house museums situated

in racialized spaces in New York, and argues that the same structures that channeled material wealth from mixed-race cities to the racially exclusive white suburbs continue to channel the resources necessary to construct public memories today. As a result, these museums participate in the social construction of the *inevitable white middle class* and the *invisible black middle class*.

CHAPTER I

Two Museums, One Story

The following chapter compares and contrasts the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM) with a similar museum across the East River in Brooklyn: The Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC). The two institutions reveal two sides of the same story about the transformation of American cities in the mid-twentieth century, but in practice, they function two separate, unrelated sites where ideas about an inevitable white middle class and an invisible black middle class are produced.

I juxtapose the two museums to review their contrasting stories, and by extension the forces that enhance—or limit—their capacity to produce symbolic capital.²⁵ In other words I contrast the museums' cultural, historic, and geographic contexts: One museum rejects pervasive, damaging narratives about blackness and poverty. The other embraces and amplifies popular narratives about whiteness and upward mobility. The museums are also located in opposite neighborhoods: one in an under-resourced region, and the other in a gentrifying area. And they developed under opposite circumstances: One was founded in 1968, as a part of a larger movement to reject narratives that upheld white privilege. The other was founded in 1984, during the white ethnic revival, which coopted the language of ethnic otherness in service of the

²⁵ By symbolic capital, I mean to reference the now-familiar trope of the hard-working, upwardly mobile European immigrant. Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as a form of social capital, and he defines social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." See: Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 119. I use the term symbolic capital because the museums are a virtual resource that operate on a symbolic level in a field of political struggles, and as Bourdieu says, "It is this field of political struggles, in which the professional practitioners of representation, in all senses of the word, clash with one another over another field of struggles, that has to be analyzed if one wants to understand...the shift from the practical sense of the position occupied...to specifically political manifestations." See: Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups."

status quo. After contrasting the circumstances of the two museums' development, I put the story of the two museums in the context of the history of museology, then turn to some of the literature on stereotypes, pedagogical theory, and implicit social cognition. In addition to the cultural, geographic, and historical forces at work in the construction of public memory, this chapter considers the Sociology of perception and racial categorization. The chapter concludes with a detailed, narrative account of a visit to each museum.

The Two Museums

Both the LESTM and the WHC are house museums. Both tell stories of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century New York, both are New York City landmarks, and both are on the National Register of Historic Places. The former is an 1864 tenement building restored to reveal the nuances of European immigrant life at the turn of the century. The latter is a collection of four nineteenth-century frame houses in Central Brooklyn. Like the LESTM's brick building in Manhattan, the modest wooden houses in Brooklyn are used to help visitors imagine the texture of life in times past. In the case of the Weeksville houses, however, the residents were not immigrants, but free, black, middle-class, American citizens living in a rural settlement founded before the civil war, in the 1830s. The Weeksville hamlet was eventually absorbed by the growing city of Brooklyn, and today the houses are nestled inside a city block, arranged along a tiny remnant of a forgotten colonial road near the corner of Bergen Street and Buffalo Avenue, where Bedford-Stuyvesant meets Crown Heights.²⁶

²⁶ Weeksville was not a village (there were no elected officials), but rather an informal settlement. As New York's superintendent of schools described it in 1855, it was "a hamlet of small, neat white houses consisting of some thirty or forty colored families." see New York Daily Times Staff, "Long Island: Brooklyn Public Schools."

Two museums: one story

Considered together, the two museums reveal two sides of the same story.²⁷ In the 1930s, New York City closed dilapidated fire-trap buildings like 97 Orchard Street in the Lower East Side, and built low-rise, sunlit, state-of-the-art public housing projects, one of which was built on top of Weeksville.²⁸ Key staff members at the New York City Housing Authority like May Lumsden and Alfred Rheinsein were fiercely committed to racial integration. But simultaneously, the Federal Housing Administration and the Home Owners Loan Corporation began channeling federal dollars through a real-estate industry committed to racial *segregation*. Within a decade, the city lost a tremendous number of white residents, along with their property taxes, a trend that continued through the 1990s, by which time the Weeksville area was only 0.8% white (down from 75% in 1940).

Who controls our collective memory of the white ethnic experience? Or the black experience? Who determines that the white middle class seems *inevitable* while the black middle class remains *invisible*? This dissertation will show how the production of public memory in these two museums continues to be determined, not by the museums' founders, staff, or boards, but by events that prefigured both institutions, namely the formation of the Federal Housing Administration, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and what historian Thomas Sugrue calls "a

²⁷ I draw on reviews of the LESTM more than reviews of the WHC because there are very few reviews of the WHC. (2 reviews on Yelp, compared to the LESTM's 180. None on Trip Advisor, compared to the LESTM's 1,030.) This, in itself is revealing. The LESTM is making a significant impact on the public imagination, and on the formation of collective memory, while the WHC remains hidden in Central Brooklyn. Yet the WHC was founded 20 years before the LESTM. I will discuss the significance of this in greater detail, and make a stronger case for the legitimacy of this comparison later in this chapter.

²⁸ The Kingsborough Houses were completed in 1941 and featured both hot and cold running water, unlike many of the houses they replaced. Each apartment had a gas instead of a coal burning stove, a refrigerator, a private bathroom, and access to fresh air and sunlight.

largely hidden, forgotten history of actions by policymakers, large corporations, small businesses (particularly realtors), and ordinary citizens that created and reinforced racial and class inequalities and perpetuated the political marginalization of African Americans in modern life.”²⁹

Stories Are a Form of Wealth

That New Deal policies siphoned money from cities, primarily from people of color, and distributed wealth to white suburbs has been amply documented.³⁰ This dissertation traces the development of the Weeksville Heritage Center and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in the wake of mid-century suburbanization to reveal another layer of wealth transfer at work. When federal programs delivered economic capital to white suburbs, they also delivered symbolic capital to middle-class whites. By symbolic assets, I mean to reference the now-familiar trope of the hard-working, upwardly mobile European immigrant. Federal policies created concentrations of wealth in the white suburbs, but not only that: the concentration of assets in white suburbs nourished the propagation of inaccurate stories about the massive mid-century transfer of wealth. Though it is certainly true that many European immigrants worked hard, stories about their hard work obscure the enormous structural inequality that made mid-century white upward mobility possible. Because their upward class mobility looks like an

²⁹ See the introduction to the new edition of *Origins of the Urban Crisis*. Sugrue also says, "As capital relocated to suburban and exurban places that were overwhelmingly white, cities saw their tax bases depleted by job loss, shrinking property taxes generated by shopping malls, office campuses, and industrial parks. City governments found themselves burdened with an aging infrastructure, an increasingly impoverished population, and fewer resources than ever to pay for infrastructure repairs, education, or social services. The result was a reallocation of political power and public resources to the increasingly privatized, exclusionary world of white suburbia."

³⁰ Freund, *Colored Property*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Dean, "Only Caucasian"; Jackson, "Race, Ethnicity, and Real Estate Appraisal The Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration"; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Ware, "Invisible Walls"; O'Connor, "The Privatized City The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York"; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 1985; Highsmith, "Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan."

individual achievement, the upwardly mobile European immigrants are now associated with a collection of valued traits: determination, a strong work ethic, and an apparent refusal to remain poor. The narrative of immigrant struggle and reward misrepresents structural inequality as individual strength.

The story of hard-working immigrants hides structural inequality, but it also hides from view the fate of the cities from whence suburban wealth was extracted. This leaves us to perceive underresourced, hyper-segregated cities and wealthy white suburbs as two discrete, unrelated phenomena rather than one story about the unfair distribution of wealth which continues to have an enormous impact on our country today. The “bootstraps” narrative results in both an accumulation of symbolic capital for whites (who can attach themselves to a story of hard work and determination) and a loss of symbolic capital for African-Americans (who are unfairly tainted by a presumed association with our underfunded, decaying cities).

This is important because symbolic capital is a resource, or in other words, an asset or a form of power. Like economic capital, it is only valuable when the specific logic of its value is shared by the social group.³¹ In the U.S., the specific logic of the nation-of-immigrants narrative has powerful credibility. It is a shared, cultural logic. Therefore, association with the nation-of-immigrants narrative conveys a kind of status.^{32 33} The symbolic value conveyed by the nation-of-

³¹ For example, the dollar is only valuable because this culture recognizes the specific logic which decrees that dollars hold and transmit value. You cannot pay for your new tennis shoes in bottle caps, even if you value bottle caps, because your specific logic --of valuing bottle caps-- is not shared by the wider community. In the same way, symbolic capital can only be deployed in groups where its specific logic is recognized.

³² Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as a form of social capital. And he defines social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual..."

³³ For a definition of symbolic capital, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*. For a discussion of social capital and nationalism, see Hage, *White Nation*, 2000. I also want to add this idea somewhere: the LESTM's stories contribute to a broader tendency to see whiteness as **evidence** of middle-class respectability. Because respectability is such an essential precondition for social mobility, it is a valuable asset. Like compounding interest, New Deal policies, long after their initial material impact has been delivered, continue the work of status reproduction at places like the LESTM.

immigrants narrative is activated when a person associates themselves with the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century immigrant experience, thus associating themselves with the desirable traits we ascribe to those specific immigrants: perseverance, hard work, and success: attributes many associate with being *truly* American.

But when positive attributes are ascribed to whites, on top of the structural advantages delivered to whites over the past century, we only exacerbate a cultural logic that has historically “rendered the best pickings of America the exclusive province of unblackness.”³⁴ The WHC, on the other hand, has not been empowered in the same way, and has less influence over public perceptions of blackness. There are several overlapping explanations for this.

Four Sets of Circumstances

The LESTM and the WHC reflect the historical and cultural context in which they developed. Four factors deserve our sustained attention: the culture in which the museums developed, our country’s history of racialized wealth distribution, the museums’ surrounding neighborhoods, and the history of suburbanization.

First, culture: As the museums developed, American culture was increasingly saturated with stories about the country’s heritage as a nation of immigrants. Today, the LESTM amplifies

³⁴ I take this language from from Ta-Nahesi Coates. He uses these words to describe overt expressions of racism in the 2008 presidential election but I think the wording is appropriate for my argument. Fear of a Black President is the name of the article. And he talks about the dying embers of the same old racism but in this case, the embers are not dismissible or dying, really.

messages *already disseminated* at other public history sites like the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island — and in other formats like film, scholarship, fiction, and textbooks.³⁵

“We should be proud of our ancestors' sacrifices,” one reviewer wrote, suggesting an almost mathematical certainty that a willingness to endure immigrant poverty will yield generational socioeconomic stability. While this trajectory has been the pattern for many European immigrant families, their progression toward socio-economic stability has not taken shape in a political and historical vacuum. Federal intervention, global politics, and changing theories of racial meaning have all contributed to the European immigrant experience. But expressions that link immigrant sacrifice and class mobility correspond neatly with the popular belief that, as sociologist Nancy Foner put it, turn-of-the-nineteenth-century European immigrants “worked hard; they strove to become assimilated; they pulled themselves up by their own Herculean efforts... They were, in short, what made America great.”³⁶ However, as Ira Katznelson and others have shown, it was not just hard work that propelled European immigrants into the middle class, it was a monumental collection of New Deal social programs that delivered economic and social assets, disproportionately, and unfairly, to whites.³⁷

In contrast to the LESTM, the WHC is working *against* collective memories in public circulation. Historic sites dedicated to black history tend to be focused on slavery, like the *National Underground Railroad Freedom Center* in Ohio, or on civil rights like the *National*

³⁵ Jacobson, *Roots Too*; Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*.

³⁶ Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK*.

³⁷ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; See also: Freund, *Colored Property*; Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*; Highsmith, “Demolition Means Progress Urban Renewal, Local Politics, and State-Sanctioned Ghetto Formation in Flint, Michigan”; Biles, “Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing, 1937–1942.”

Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Nashville, Tennessee. Public memorials to the antebellum free, black, middle class are rare.

Not only are African-American historic sites usually focused on slavery or civil rights, but so are textbooks. As Sundiata Cha-Jua and Robert E. Weems point out in their 1994 review of fourteen common history textbooks, most students only learn about twelve years of African-American history, from the end of the civil war in 1865 through Reconstruction in 1877, before skipping almost 80 years to *Brown v. Board* in 1954. Textbooks tend to cover some of the civil rights movement, but then they stop cold again after 1970. The story presented at the WHC fits in the cavernous gap between 1877 and 1954, which means most visitors have little chance of fitting this evidence of Weeksville into stories they already know. In sum, the LESTM amplifies widely held beliefs that are already in circulation while the WHC works against pervasive stereotypes that flatten black history into a story of slavery and civil rights.

Secondly, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum also reaches a wide audience because they are authorized to narrate official American history. Their affiliation with the National Parks Service provides a significant portion of the LESTM's operating budget, but more importantly, the relationship implicitly authorizes the LESTM's story, making it an official narrative of American history. The WHC wields considerably less authority as an independent neighborhood heritage center.

Third, the LESTM supplements the funding they receive from municipal, state, and federal sources with an abundance of private funding while the WHC operates on a much smaller budget.³⁸ Although it may seem obvious, it is worth stating that advocates for the LESTM had a

³⁸ For information about the LESTM's funding sources, see Bruner Foundation, "2001 Rudy Brunner Award Silver Medal Winner" Also newspaper coverage and the LESTM's own "97 Orchard Street FAQs."

different kind of access to wealth than supporters of the WHC because access to wealth has been historically unequal.³⁹ Thus, the LESTM's access to private funding sources is an indirect result of the federal government's mid-century distribution of wealth along racial lines. For example, when the museum opened the Sadie Samuelson Levy Visitor and Education Center in November 2011, it was in their newly acquired building at 103 Orchard Street. The eighteen-thousand-square-foot building is valued at over 18 million dollars, and was purchased with funds from the Leon Levy Foundation.⁴⁰ As a Wall Street investor born in the early twentieth century, Levy's ability to accumulate wealth — the wealth he eventually transferred to the LESTM — was facilitated — in part — by forces larger than himself. Through this example, we can see how policies introduced more than seventy years ago remain a powerful force in the construction of public memory — and the New York cultural landscape — today.

Mr. Levy was immune to the devastation incurred by millions of African-Americans and other non-white people as a result of FHA lending policies on account of having been folded into what we now call racial whiteness.⁴¹ In other words, the federal government's discrimination against non-white people in the 1940s and 50s created a cascade of long-term effects, including Levy's uninterrupted opportunities to accumulate wealth. In turn, Levy's resources can now be used to fund the process of rehearsing narratives that individualize success and obscure federal involvement in a major instance of racialized wealth distribution.

³⁹ see Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*.

⁴⁰ Sources for valuation of property include census records, LESTM press release.

⁴¹ When the federal government introduced programs that extracted wealth from mixed-race, mixed-class cities in the 1940s,.. for more on the hardening of racial whiteness, see Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, Matthew Frye-Jacobson *Whiteness of a Different Color...* and... Levy would have been recognized as Jewish, of course, and Jewish people did suffer discrimination in the housing market under FHA policies.⁴¹ But as racial categories shifted in the mid-twentieth century, emphasizing a general whiteness rather than ethnic particularity, people like Levy were less vulnerable to the ravages caused by the federal redistribution of wealth along racial lines.

In contrast to the LESTM, many of the advocates for the The Weeksville Heritage Center did not have access to such capital. African-Americans were not shielded from racialized wealth distribution but rather, targets of discrimination. Museum founders were the very same people who saw their property values plummet when federal policies declared Bedford-Stuyvesant off-limits for the circulation of capital in the 1940s.

The museums reflect the cascading effects of mid-century wealth distribution: Twenty-five years into their project, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum acquired an 18-million-dollar piece of property and embarked on a 13-million-dollar restoration. Twenty-five years after the WHC was founded, on the other hand, the four houses the group had saved from demolition were plagued by a crack house next door and then vandalized and flooded (the vandals demolished the plumbing in search of copper pipe). In their twenty-fifth year, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum received somewhere in the neighborhood of 18 million dollars from the Leon Levy Foundation. Across the East River, the Weeksville Heritage Foundation had their vandalized plumbing repaired by neighborhood resident and one of the museum's founders, Joseph Haynes. Because the WHC was operating on a shoestring, Haynes put the plumbing repairs on his personal credit card.

Finally, the fate of these museums is bound up with the fate of the neighborhoods that surround them. The building at 97 Orchard Street is a memorial to people who lived there from 1864 to 1936. But immigrant poverty, in the context of gourmet gelato stands and upscale eyewear shops, becomes an object of nostalgic reverie, a fetish that affirms middle-class authenticity and respectability. Furthermore, a visit to the LESTM suggests that affluence follows naturally from poverty (barring defects of character that might impede one's

progression). The wealth and consumerism surrounding the Lower East Side Tenement Museum become the default conclusion to stories told inside. The nation-of-immigrants narrative, once a radically welcoming sentiment, has come to naturalize class inequality by positioning the poor as the soon-to-be middle-class. In the Lower East Side, racial and class formations that have been determined by land use policy are naturalized in the landscape.⁴² This is no less true at the Weeksville Heritage Center.

The WHC successfully advances its mission, but on a much smaller scale than the LESTM. The Brooklyn heritage center can boast of impressive achievements, such as the ambitious new LEED-certified cultural center now under construction and the expansion of their Garden Party concert series, which draws a growing neighborhood audience. But despite their successes, the WHC remains relatively powerless against national and global perceptions of blackness, a racial category that is not implicitly associated with wealth and success in the same way whiteness is.⁴³ While the LESTM can nurture ideas about European-immigrant respectability, thereby enhancing the value of whiteness, the WHC cannot enhance the value of blackness with the same power or reach. Located in an under-resourced neighborhood and lacking high-end restaurants or boutiques, the museum does not draw tourists to the area: not international visitors, not even tourists from other states or cities. Most days, the WHC does not draw any visitors at all.

Though the Weeksville Heritage Center was founded twenty years before the LESTM, its location at the core of a troubled urban infrastructure kept the center from developing like the

⁴² The geography of New York is tangible, but the social processes that produced it are not. This dissertation documents what Edward Soja calls “the social production of (in)justice,” -- by comparing the race-neutral public memories produced at the historic tenement building in Manhattan with the story of how capital moved in and out of the city attached to whiteness.

⁴³ Or remains disturbingly linked to characteristics like economic and moral poverty.

LESTM. As a result, memories of the black middle class remain submerged in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The WHC was founded to “preserve memories of self,” but that task has proved incredibly challenging. Without resources, the staff has been unable to conduct research or provide robust educational programming, and thus the WHC, like other neighborhood organizations, is ill equipped to combat the character damage wrought by postindustrial urban decline and the pernicious “culture of poverty” thesis. In other words, in addition to economic decline, or a lack of economic capital, the area suffers from reputation decline, or a lack of symbolic capital.⁴⁴ Memories of the black middle class were put at greater and greater risk for disappearance as the area experienced economic decline. After federal policies extracted wealth from cities like Brooklyn, delivering resources to racially exclusive suburbs, the poverty of black neighborhoods appeared to affirm a causal relationship between blackness and declining property values. In other words, economic inequality created symptoms, which in turn, looked like causal agents.⁴⁵

But black residents did not devalue property. Real estate professionals devalued property. In the 1940s, they segregated black people into discrete geographic regions, and then declared those areas off-limits for the circulation of capital. The Weeksville neighborhood, once home to a vibrant, mixed-race community, was in the 1940s, made into a wealth vacuum. Banks stopped circulating money in the region.⁴⁶ Existing assets could not be maintained without infusions of capital, and property fell into disrepair. And as property values fell, property taxes dwindled. Schools worsened. Police protection faded. This was not *because* black people lived there. But rather, because real estate professionals and policy-makers conspired to limit the field in which

⁴⁴ for a clear, compelling explanation of social and cultural capital, see: Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*.

⁴⁵ Moynihan, Rainwater, and Yancey, *The Negro Family*.

⁴⁶ see *Covenant With Color*, for example. Also Laura Wolf-Powers

capital could circulate. And they limited the field by articulating capital's boundaries in terms of race.

The Weeksville neighborhood, once home to a vibrant, mixed-race community, was, in the 1940s and 50s, made into a wealth vacuum. Deindustrialization and the dismantling of public housing and Great Society programs further accelerated the deterioration of an already troubled urban infrastructure. Thus, the white upward class mobility celebrated at the LESTM is inseparable from the economic violence inflicted on the people of color who endured the withdrawal of capital from America's cities after World War II. In short, the story commemorated at the LESTM, the story of the white ethnic immigrants in the Lower East Side, is inseparable from the story of the black middle class neighborhood commemorated at the WHC.

The story of the two museums begins in 1968.

The LESTM, the WHC, and the Radical Interrogation of Museums

The neighborhood community group that began documenting 19th century Weeksville in 1968 was part of a larger movement to reject the versions of history then prevalent in public museums. Local amateur historians rejected the old temples of white culture and their stories of a homogenous American nation. In the late 1960s, "mainstream" museums, alongside schools, libraries, and other institutions of learning were, as Anthony Shelton put it, "subject to radical interrogation by disjunctive populations they once tried to represent."⁴⁷ The goal for most nineteenth-century libraries and museums, at the time of their founding, was to "encourage new

⁴⁷ as quoted in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Exhibitionary Complexes," 58.

forms of civic self-fashioning on the part of newly enfranchised democratic citizenries.”⁴⁸ But the nineteenth-century museums failed to resonate with diverse twentieth-century publics. Museums and other institutions across the globe found their authority challenged. As historian Jeremy Suri put it, “organizations throughout America argued that social progress required the rejection of established authorities.”⁴⁹ Activists pushed for racial equality in the U.S. while new democratic citizenries formed across the globe, notably in Africa. In this context, nineteenth-century museums that celebrated a static and racially fixed national identity proved inadequate tools for civic self-fashioning.⁵⁰

Museums faced “an audience increasingly made up of peoples they once considered as part of their object.”⁵¹ In response, large national museums (that had once housed ethnological displays of nonwhites) worked to reconfigure their relationships to the American public. The worst of existing museum displays positioned nonwhite people as human exhibits, “savages” as spectacle. In other words, museums displayed people as ordered collections. Like the world’s fair ethnology exhibits, they were set up by showmen but endorsed by prominent anthropologists – which lent scientific credibility to popular racial attitudes and helped to build public support for domestic and foreign policies.⁵² But in post-civil rights America, museums that once buttressed a racially exclusive “imaginary American community”⁵³ were now subject the same skepticism

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁹ Suri, *Power and Protest*, 105.

⁵⁰ “Another wave of interest in nationalism and nation-forming rose from the slow collapse of the great European overseas empires in the decades after 1945.” From *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Class, State, and Nation in the Age of Globalization*. Berch Berberoglu - 2006

⁵¹ Shelton, “Museums in an Age of Cultural Hybridity,” 222.

⁵² Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*.

⁵³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

as the nation itself. In short, this moment of decolonization and global activism forced museums to reconsider their civic responsibilities.⁵⁴

While large American museums made room for critical engagement with the nation they once helped to define, smaller museums like the WHC (1968) and the LESTM (1988) emerged to tell alternative stories.⁵⁵ Indeed, as Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach noted in 2004, “the last thirty years have... witnessed an explosion of ethnic and culturally specific museums.”⁵⁶ While the WHC emerged on the cusp of this “explosion,” the LESTM followed later. Both told stories that had been left out of mainstream museums, stories of working-class domesticity (LESTM) and nineteenth-century middle-class black life (WHC).

Today, forty years since the radical critique of the 1960s found such powerful traction, we can see that museums have both changed and stayed the same. Under the nineteenth-century museum model, as Tony Bennett put it, “museums translated the logic of culture into hierarchical organizations of the relations between peoples, cultures and knowledges.” Ethnology exhibits told the story of humankind’s ascent from savagery to civilization. Today, museums have abandoned overt assertions of racial hierarchy, but they continue to “orchestrate social relations and perceptions of difference.”⁵⁷ For example, the Hall of the Age of Man at the American Museum of Natural History, a 1921 exhibit that promoted eugenicist theories of “progress,” has been overhauled. And stories about what Bennett calls “relations between peoples, cultures and knowledges” have migrated from science museums into cultural and historical exhibits. But still,

⁵⁴ the quote actually comes from the University of Chicago Press description of Rydell’s book.

⁵⁵ Moresi, “Exhibiting Race, Creating Nation: Representations of Black History and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, 1895-1976”; Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum”; Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach, “Displaying and Celebrating the ‘Other’”; Cameron, “The Museum: A Temple or the Forum”; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Exhibitionary Complexes.”

⁵⁶ Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach, “Displaying and Celebrating the ‘Other’.”

⁵⁷ Bennett quoted in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Exhibitionary Complexes,” 59.

museums continue to organize and categorize people. Whether stories of ethnic difference are told in separate ethnic museums or in mainstream museums, the “official policies of multiculturalism” ensure that museums become what Bennett calls “differencing machines.”⁵⁸

This taxonomizing project results in museum displays that are governed from and by a position of whiteness, Ghassan Hage argues. Whiteness constructs diversity as a national possession, and as a sign of its own tolerance and virtue.⁵⁹ Hage calls this “zoological multiculturalism,” signaling the strong residue of the now-discredited ethnological displays of the nineteenth century in today’s celebratory exhibitions of multiculturalism. In short, the new museology carries the potent, unwelcome residue of the old museology. Even as museums strive to meet their responsibilities to a diverse citizenry, the strategy of multiculturalism reinscribes the racial stratification it claims to dismiss.⁶⁰

Bennett and Hage offer an incisive critique of multiculturalism but their analysis obscures the way racial logics code class distinctions. Writing in 2000, near the height of academic enthusiasm for whiteness studies, Hage described the museum as an institution governed “from and by a position of whiteness.” But as Teresa Ko and others have persuasively argued, whiteness has historically been a flexible concept. The concept of whiteness may signify a national identity, class identity, a biologically-fixed racial identity, an acquired status marked by refinement and civilization, or a temporary stage of evolution.⁶¹ Class distinctions are embedded in concepts of racial difference. Thus, Hage’s assertion that the museum is governed from a

⁵⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Exhibitionary Complexes.”

⁵⁹ Hage, *White Nation*, 2000.

⁶⁰ Thanks to Nadine Hubbs for crucial help organizing these ideas, particularly the word “residue.”

⁶¹ Ko, “Making Identities Visible and Invisible: The Uses of Race in Argentine National Identity”; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*; Jacobson, *Roots Too*; Moss, *The Color of Class*; Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History”; Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class*; Fairchild, *Science at the Borders*; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Ngai, “History as Law and Life: Tape V. Hurley and the Origins of the Chinese-American Middle Class.”

position of whiteness calls for an interrogation of the unstable meanings of whiteness itself. In other words, Hage's analysis prompts questions about racial formation, or what Bourdieu calls "the inscription of social structures in bodies."⁶²

If official policies of multiculturalism produce museums that simultaneously function as "differencing machines," and orchestrate the taxonomizing project of "differencing" from a position of whiteness, and if whiteness is inherently unstable, then museums are sites where the meaning of whiteness is constructed. Though the LESTM never approaches a discussion of what it means to be white, the museum tells a story about white people whose descendants experienced upward class mobility, and presents it as a universal story.⁶³ For example, in an April 2011 newsletter, President Morris J. Vogel wrote, "Whether our roots are in South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, or right here in New York, we can all find commonalities with the people who started new lives at 97 Orchard Street... The United States has been a nation of immigrants from the start." The museum tells the pre-history of American culture's structural valuation of whiteness and presents it as a race-neutral story. As a result, a racial experience (of access to racially exclusive assets delivered only to whites by New Deal policies) can be interpreted as a simple, race-less class experience (of upward mobility). Furthermore, by avoiding the question of race, the links between upward class mobility and whiteness are naturalized, and made to seem inevitable.

⁶² Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172.

⁶³ "...Our culture reflects this in the foods we eat, the music we hear and the holidays we celebrate; our economy is fueled by the labor and innovation of immigrant workers and entrepreneurs. Here at the Tenement Museum, we celebrate the strength and variety of our immigrant experiences every day. Often, visitors find that the stories we tell mirror those of their own families." The problem with this seemingly innocuous statement is that Mexican immigrants do not have the same experience. The idea of the illegal immigrant arose after the wave of European migration. Native Americans, slave-descended African-Americans are not immigrants. This happy-talk about immigration just obscures all kinds of material and racial inequality with a happy story of celebratory diversity.

These two museums are sites where racialist ideologies can be shaped or questioned, entrenched or contested. At present, they are sites where the links between whiteness and wealth are strengthened, and the links between blackness and poverty are rendered visible, but not quite disturbed. In other words, when Americans see whiteness as evidence of middle-class respectability, it is partly because of the ideological work performed at places like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Thus, the museums are sites where social structures are inscribed in bodies. This dissertation suggests that to understand the racial thinking evident in these museums, we need to understand how class gets racialized..

The Weeksville Heritage Center and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are examples of museums where racial meanings are produced, where racially determined class trajectories are imagined to be race-neutral, or race-less. The idea of race is often substituted for the idea of class... thus obscuring how class works by treating only class and not race. race and class are conflated. Visitors bring ideas with them about what race means. The museums may challenge, intervene in, or affirm those beliefs. This dissertation will demonstrate that like the nineteenth-century exhibitionary complex, which arranged seemingly discrete racial groups in hierarchical order according to a single curatorial perspective, museums that avoid histories of racialization affirm a belief in static racial identities.

Now, instead of a monolithic museum articulating an officially authorized racial order, we have a proliferation of museums, each dedicated to different ethnic experiences. While this removes ethnic identity from a system in which the world's peoples are fixed in hierarchical relationship to each other, it also removes ethnic experiences from *any* relationship to each other. The outcome in the case of these two museums is that a story of white ethnic upward class

mobility in the Lower East Side of Manhattan is presented as if it has no relationship to the story of the black middle class community's disappearance from Central Brooklyn. As scholars like Thomas Sugrue and Ira Katznelson have shown, however, these stories are deeply interwoven.⁶⁴ It was, after all, federally-subsidized white flight to the suburbs that transformed urban sites into under-resourced, racially segregated spaces, or what Soja calls "an area of purposeful disinvestment and superexploitation."

The Museums in Their Geographic Context

When visitors enter the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, they enter through a bubble of middle-class consumption.⁶⁵ In the two-block walk from the Essex Street station, shops offer vintage couture, upscale handbags, and artisanal cupcakes. The eight-block walk from the Utica station takes visitors through a shadowy strip of warehouses under the elevated railroad tracks abutting a stretch of barracks-like public housing. Though many neighborhood residents maintain a middle-class lifestyle in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the aesthetics of the neighborhood do not suggest a middle-class community. Windows and doors are covered in bars. Corrugated metal sheets cordon off the scruffy city lots. Immigrant poverty, in the context of gourmet gelato stands and upscale eyewear shops, becomes an object of nostalgic reverie, a fetish that affirms white middle-class authenticity. The wealth and consumption surrounding the museum become the default conclusion to the stories told in the museum. In other words, a visit to the LESTM suggests that affluence naturally follows from poverty.⁶⁶ Evidence of middle-class black history,

⁶⁴ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

⁶⁵ Stapinski, "Here's Hoping the Max Fish Magic Travels."

⁶⁶ I added the "from poverty comes affluence" sentence thanks to Kate Klimut.

In other words, museum visitors are mostly white middle and upper classes. When they visit the museum, they are surrounded by other white middle and upper class visitors. The LESTM affirms their position by presenting a story

when surrounded by shadowy warehouses and auto parts stores, becomes a sad prehistory of poverty.

The Museums in Their Cultural Context

The museums' local surroundings can only reveal part of what shapes visitors' experiences at these historic sites. The cultural context that informs visitors' perceptions of race and class includes larger, more culturally pervasive influences like cultural symbols, stereotypes, racial attitudes or bias, and histories of racial violence. Though the census reports nearly three times as many poor white people (almost 28 million) as poor black people in the U.S. (around 10 million), the idea of poverty is less likely to evoke associations with whiteness than with blackness.⁶⁷ As sociologist Kirby Moss put it, "poor Whites are the silences we speak least of in political and academic debates about... common social ills." (Moss, 2003) When asked to describe the poor, Moss's interviewees (who were themselves poor whites) consistently summoned images of black and Latino people, not whites. The idea of poverty, Moss shows, is associated not with whites, but with people of color, particularly blacks and Latinos. In the context of such pervasive cultural beliefs, telling a story of poor whites involves challenging the common assumption that whites are always already middle class, both culturally and morally.⁶⁸

Likewise, in the twenty-first-century U.S., middle-class belonging and blackness are not implicitly linked. As sociologist Karyn Lacy put it, we live in "a country in which blackness is

that explains and justifies their position, and the position of the surrounding neighborhood. As if to say: all this is the result of hard work.

⁶⁷ 2000 Census – these statistics are somewhat crude measures because they force us to flatten racial and ethnic distinctions, but they provide some approximation of the knowledge and ideas people bring with them into the historic sites. There are far fewer black people in the U.S. than white people, but the percentage of black Americans living below the poverty line (27.1%) is more than double the percentage of white Americans living below the poverty line (12.3%).

⁶⁸ As scholars like Michelle Lamont and Sherry Ortner have shown, the way we think about class in the U.S. is as much about moral characteristics as it is about wealth. I will say more about this later.

conflated with poverty and the public face of the middle class is a white face.” Therefore, telling a story of the nineteenth-century black middle class at the WHC requires disrupting the conflation of blackness and poverty. Lacy documents the way middle-class blacks do this in their every-day lives. She finds that “middle-class blacks employ identities instrumentally.” In other words, they mention their Ivy League credentials, their upscale neighborhood, or pay meticulous attention to their wardrobe, to minimize the danger of being mistaken for a poor black person, which can carry significant penalties. Lacy says middle-class blacks employ “status-based, racial and class-based, or suburban identities... to establish their position in American society relative to white strangers, their white middle-class neighbors, lower-class blacks, and one another.” These strategies are particularly important in “public settings, where they are likely to encounter white strangers who are not automatically aware of their class position.”

In his work on the cultural work performed by such symbols, sociologist Steven Dubin suggests that “under the best of circumstances,” it would be desirable to interview people about how they perceive such symbols (the symbols middle-class blacks deploy, for example). In an article about the symbolic violence performed by tchotchkes like racially insulting salt-shakers, paper-towel holders, and laundry spritzers, Dubin suggests that interviewing owners of such items is unlikely “to elicit a full disclosure of information and feelings... While such direct inquiry might be interesting phenomenologically, it would not exhaust the meanings which can be teased from these material objects,” Dubin argues. Like Dubin’s salt-shakers and Lacy’s

upscale neighborhoods, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Weeksville Heritage Center function as symbols that relay meaningful messages about larger power relations.⁶⁹

While symbols are visible and tangible, the meanings they convey are not. Symbols can activate, or hold unconscious beliefs, stereotypes or biases, and these inform the way we navigate our social world. The museums attempt to intervene in conscious beliefs, but as the growing field of implicit social cognition (ISC) reveals, there are mental processes that operate without conscious awareness or control. ISC is concerned with “how people encode, represent, and retrieve information about the relations among natural categories...” (like “furniture and fruit” on the one hand, and people on the other). In other words, categories “that people reason about outside of the laboratory.”⁷⁰ In short, ISC is concerned with the way the brain forms categories and sorts people into them. An early study conducted by John Dovidio tested participants associations between black and white people on the one hand, and characteristics like ambition and laziness on the other. Survey responses suggested “positive traits are more strongly associated with whites than with blacks, and negative characteristics are more strongly associated with blacks than with whites.”⁷¹ Dovidio’s research thus reveals that racial identities are associated with moral characteristics. This does not explicitly link race and class, but as Michelle Lamont has shown, the way we understand class in the U.S. is laden with moral connotations. Thus, the persistence of negative black stereotypes is relevant to a discussion about

⁶⁹ As Steven Dubin argues in his article on black cultural stereotypes, “repetition of... images of various minority groups in popular culture indicates the availability of a metaphor which locates their inferior position.” Dubin, “Symbolic Slavery,” 138. Likewise, middle-class blacks’ social strategies indicate the availability of a metaphor that links blackness and poverty. And on the other hand, poor whites’ tendency to ignore their own poverty and instead, summon images of blacks and Latinos when they think about what poverty looks like, indicates the availability of a metaphor that links whiteness and wealth.

⁷⁰ Dovidio, Evans, and Tyler, “Racial Stereotypes,” 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

the visibility – or invisibility – of the black middle class at the two museums. At the LESTM, European immigrants are presumed to have positive moral characteristics: they strive, work hard, and endure. These positive characteristics are associated with the middle class.⁷²

Dovidio's work is designed to bypass affect-based influences, instead concentrating on the cognitive process of category formation. In other words, ISC is concerned not with how people *feel* about each other, but how people's brains perform sorting tasks. In fact, findings suggest that a person's self-reported racial attitudes are not consistent with the way their brains sort people into categories. Researchers believe that "individuals are not necessarily withholding their 'true' attitudes and beliefs but rather that they are unable to know the contents of their mind."⁷³

In sum, museum visitors must contend with a range of material, metaphorical, and unconscious forces that influence their understandings of the past. Part of the work this dissertation will perform will be to witness how this works in the context of these two museums. Among these are processes of implicit social cognition (the way we sort people into categories along with positive or negative characteristics), the existence of cultural symbols (which "symbolically reflect the social control mechanisms underlying majority-minority relation"),⁷⁴ and the demographic realities of these neighborhoods (stories of poor whites presented in a white, middle-class leisure destination while stories of middle-class blacks are presented in a deindustrialized, black, urban neighborhood).

Another element of the difficulty these museums face involves the very real danger blacks faced when they did accumulate wealth. This is illustrated by the story of Ida B. Wells'

⁷² Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

⁷³ Kang and Banaji, "Fair Measures."

⁷⁴ Dubin p. 122

good friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart. For these men, owners of the People's Grocery Company in Memphis, Tennessee, financial success led white businessmen to attack their grocery store in a brutal lynching in 1892. Integral to the story of black middle-class invisibility is the history racial violence inflicted on black people who accumulated wealth. Not only did this affect people who experienced financial success, but all the people who aspired to do so. In other words, the black middle class has been less visible in part because the black middle class has been small, and kept small by the threat of violence.⁷⁵

In order to successfully convey an unfamiliar story to visitors, museums must take seriously visitors' prior knowledge —about the present— and look for ways to “restructure the new information” in order to connect and synthesize their understandings of the past *and* present. Why is Bedford-Stuyvesant 88% black and poorer than average? Why is the Lower East Side such a trendy destination for white middle-class descendants of European immigrants? Why did the immigrants leave the Lower East Side in the first place and why are they coming back now and why are the mostly Chinese residents carrying picket signs saying “Don't erase living history with artificial history!”?

If museums are to succeed in telling stories about the past that explain, rather than distort the racial and class stratified cities that characterize the American landscape, the recent past must be incorporated into their narratives. This includes the history of racialization, the way racist ideologies get mapped onto bodies, thus coding class stratification into racialized bodies. Especially in the face of such freighted assumptions about what it means to be middle class, adequate historical explanations provide crucial leverage for minimizing social distortion. These museums tell stories about the *distant past* to visitors who live in a *present* influenced by the

⁷⁵ Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings; The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*.

recent past. By leaving out the *recent past*, visitors are given inadequate tools for integrating history into their prior knowledge – their knowledge of the world they live in, of the present. Instead, moral explanations crop up.

Stories The Museums Tell: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

The LESTM’s story is not distorted by design, but rather by omission. As an explanation of the atmosphere surrounding it, or as an explanation of the life experiences people bring with them to the museum, it is inadequate. The most important factor that explains the relationship between the nineteenth-century past and the present visitors know, the federally-subsidized, mid-century construction of the white middle class, is not part of the LESTM’s story. As a result, visitors come away from the museum with deeper insight into nineteenth and early twentieth-century immigrant life, but no understanding of how the descendants of these immigrants ended up living lives of relative privilege — no understanding of how these stories about the distant past influenced the recent past, which in turn, influenced them.

To be clear, educators at the LESTM do not tell a story of inevitable upward mobility. If anything, museum educators reveal instances of downward class mobility. In the Moore Family apartment tour, for example, museum educators point out that Brigid Moore’s infant Agnes died of marasmus, “the first of many such losses the Moores would endure during their lives in New York.”

Visitors encounter the story of Agnes Moore when they purchase tickets for the “Irish Outsiders” tour. Like all the museum’s tours, this one begins at the gift shop at 103 Orchard Street, where a museum educator gathers ticket-holders and asks them to briefly introduce

themselves to each other before they enter the preserved building. From there, the group is guided down the street to number 97. For a few minutes, the educator talks about the building, encouraging visitors to contemplate the negative connotations of the word “tenement,” which simply means “multi-family unit.” After a brief introduction, visitors follow the educator up the iron steps and through the heavy front door of the building. A dark entryway greets them: crumbly plasterwork, a chipped tile floor, shabby tin ceilings, and a bare bulb dangling above. In the hallway, tourists are asked to observe their surroundings, and the resulting discussion prompts a deeper empathy with residents who would have traipsed up the stairs in the dark, before electric lights were installed, perhaps carrying buckets of water pumped in the backyard, before indoor plumbing was installed.



LESTM visitors in the front hallway of 97 Orchard Street

From there, visitors file up the stairs and into a tiny 300-square-foot apartment that has been restored to look as it might have when the Moore family lived there. The door to the apartment opens into a crowded kitchen, dimly lit but neatly arranged. On the table sit a stack of plates, potatoes, a fresh loaf of bread (faux bread, to be precise), a few earthenware jugs, and a gas lamp. Laundry hangs from a clothesline stretched over the coal-burning stove. As the educator unfolds the story of Brigid and Joseph Moore, he or she ushers visitors into the parlor,

where a baby casket sits on the table and chairs are arranged for guests who might have come to the apartment offering their condolences. The tour also includes an audio component which exposes visitors to the songs Brigid and Joseph might have heard in the 1860s — songs about the danger of swill milk, which was probably the cause of baby Agnes’s death.

Finally, visitors learn that shortly after the death of her infant child, Brigid and her husband Joseph were forced to move out of the apartment at 97 Orchard Street, back to the infamous Five Points neighborhood. The Moores experienced downward class mobility. We don’t know why, but after one short year, the family had to move back to the very neighborhood they had been trying to escape. Similarly, when Abraham Rogarshevsky died of tuberculosis, his family experienced downward class mobility. With two sons to raise, Abraham’s widow Fannie had to find work as the “janitress” of the building. From Agnes Moore to Abraham and Fannie Rogarshevsky, these true stories underscore not just the difficulties of immigrant life but the dangers of unregulated capitalism. Without oversight, unscrupulous peddlers sold poison milk to Brigid Moore, and as a result, her newborn baby died. Abraham Rogarshevsky worked in the unregulated sweatshop quarter, in damp, crowded quarters where he contracted tuberculosis and died. Thus, the LESTM tells stories about the importance of social safety nets for the poor. They do not represent immigrants as heroic individualists.

Even though the LESTM tells stories of people who often experienced downward, rather than upward class mobility, visitors tend toward the versions of the past they already know. “I reflected once again on the bravery of my own immigrant ancestors, leaving Prussia, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, and Austria, for a new, if incredibly difficult, life in America,” one reviewer explained after a visit to the museum “My knowledge of how people lived at 97 Orchard has enriched my genealogy, inspiring me to... discover...the sacrifices [my ancestors] made for my

family's betterment," wrote another. Comments like these reveal the power of pre-existing narratives of European immigration —stories of success — to obscure the messages the museum tries to convey.

Stories The Museums Tell: The Weeksville Heritage Center

Despite the WHC's importance, tourists are unlikely to visit. Lacking nearby restaurants or other consumer attractions, and requiring a fifteen-minute walk from the nearest subway stop, as described above, the WHC remains something of a hidden treasure. Visitors who do find their way to the site will pass through the chain-link gate off Bergen Street, finding themselves, surprisingly, on a shady little lane lined with picture-perfect, nineteenth-century homes. Like visitors to the LESTM, people who encounter the Hunterfly Road Houses map a problematically one-dimensional story (in this case, the story of slavery) onto the houses. Community members have labored for more than forty years to preserve traces of the village, but despite the determined efforts of people like longtime-president Joan Maynard, the WHC remains relatively unknown. And even then, people who *do* know about the WHC tend to fold the houses into the stories they already know – stories of slavery and oppression. This not only obscures black middle class history and stories of self-determination, but it obscures the story of Central Brooklyn's experience of mid-century suburbanization. In the 1940s and 50s, New Deal policies extracted capital from Brooklyn (people, money, and resources) and delivered them to the suburbs. But the WHC will not teach you this.

Most people have never heard of the Weeksville Heritage Center in Central Brooklyn. Like Mount Vernon or Hearst Castle, the WHC is a house museum open to tourists. Unlike most

house museums, on the other hand, the Central Brooklyn houses are not associated with anyone famous. Instead of offering insight into the domestic lives of the rich and powerful, the WHC illuminates a neglected chapter in American history: the story of a nineteenth-century middle-class black village called Weeksville.

Once situated atop the hilly ridge that bisected Long Island, the settlement was swallowed by the expanding city of Brooklyn in the 1890s. Today, the four houses are situated across the street from the Kingsborough Housing Project, at the place where Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights meet. The WHC is one of the only African-American historic sites in the Northeast still on its original property, and according to the WHC web site, among the ten most prominent African-American cultural organizations in New York City.⁷⁶



The Weeksville houses arranged along the forgotten Hunterfly Road.

Public tours begin at the end of the lane in a yellow house with green shutters. Offered daily at 3:00 p.m., they only happen if visitors appear. (Most of the museum's visitors are schoolchildren, and their teachers make special arrangements to visit outside regular hours.) After checking in at the office, the rare, non-field-trip visitor will be led to an adjacent house

⁷⁶ Weeksville.org.

along the tiny strip of Hunterfly Road—through the picket-fence gate, and up the two wooden steps to a small covered porch. The staff person, usually one of the educators, will unlock the door and usher their visitor inside. The tour is relatively informal. Standing inside the tiny, bare interior, one might wonder what to look at. Wide-plank wood floors are burnished with age. A simple built-in fireplace is the room's only feature — excepting an open door that reveals an empty, shallow closet. A door next to the fireplace leads to a modest-sized bedroom, just big enough to hold its double bed and side table. Beneath the furniture lie neat strips of hand-loomed carpet. A second bedroom with a bed, and a tiny third room flank the other side of the main living space. All four-hundred square feet of the dwelling can be seen from a single vantage point in the center of the main room. A little back room may have been a kitchen, but there is no stove, no evidence of its purpose. Another door leads to a wide, grassy backyard shared by all four of the Hunterfly Road Houses.



Interior of one of the Weeksville houses (image via New York Times, June 5, 2005)⁷⁷

Museum staff can offer little concrete information about the buildings. Three of the four homes once faced Hunterfly Road. William and Susan Johnson lived in this particular house in the 1890s. William worked as a “truckman.” At some point Susan left Weeksville for her native Barbados. Their son was a carpenter. A binder filled with photocopies of historic documents helps a bit. Tour guides encourage visitors to leaf through the plastic-sleeved pages, but in the end it does little to help imagine the past with any clarity or texture. There was a school. There was a Home for the Aged. There was an orphanage. There was a baseball team.

⁷⁷ Ramirez, “Haven for Blacks in Civil War Riots Now Safeguards History - New York Times.”



The Freedman's Torchlight is featured in the WHC tour.

After a perplexing experience in the empty old house, visitors walk out the way they came, from the one-story duplex to a two-story single-family home next door. The second house is less spartan. In the parlor, an upholstered sofa, chair and a floor lamp complement a few glass-plate photos arranged on a doily-covered table. The furnishings hint at the lives once lived in the house. A poster featuring “Distinguished Colored Men,” including Weeksville’s own Henry Highland Garnet, hangs above the mantel. And a tea-stained photocopy of the *Freedman’s Torchlight* serves as evidence of Weeksville residents’ political work. Post-reconstruction-era Weeksville residents were deeply invested in the fate of African-Americans in the South, the WHC staff-person explains. They printed and circulated reading, writing, and religion lessons in the *Freedman’s Torchlight*. They founded the African Colonization Society, hoping to set up a self-governed colony where the damage wrought by slavery could be ameliorated.

Though the second house helps visitors imagine actual residents, the story remains difficult to grasp. Popular narratives about the nation’s past rarely include details about African-Americans living in the north in the nineteenth century. Maybe visitors have heard of Frederick

Douglass, the escaped slave, but probably not Henry Highland Garnet, or his wife Sarah, who was born, free, to a wealthy farmer in Weeksville, New York.⁷⁸ Where does this story fit? Standing in a parlor, once home to middle-class, educated blacks living in the North: people who formed societies, published newspapers, and advocated for the formation of a new colony for freed slaves, it is difficult for visitors to make sense of it all.

The third house, the final stop on the tour, was still occupied by its owners when the four houses were declared historic landmarks in the 1970s. Of the three on the tour, it is the most likely to capture the public imagination because the furnishings help visitors picture the family who once lived there. The first two structures face the now-defunct Hunterfly Road, but this one faces present-day Bergen Street. Furnished just as it was in the 1930s, it might seem like any old historic house if not for the Tuskegee Choir music piped into the living room. (Tour guides turn on a hidden stereo system as they lead visitors into the house.) The elegance of the men's warm voices serve as a reminder that black people, not just white people, ate dinner together at their dining room tables in the 1930s, answered glossy black rotary-dial phones, and donned floral-print aprons in front of cream-colored enamel stoves. Far from living an *Imitation of Life*, as one of the few pop-culture representations of black life in the 1930s suggests, African-Americans in Central Brooklyn lived their very real lives in lovingly maintained homes, in a racially integrated community, attended quality schools, and benefited from decades of reform efforts aimed at integrating both black and white migrants into the fabric of New York society.⁷⁹ But even this

⁷⁸ "Sarah Smith Tompkins Garnet was the first African American female principal in the New York public schools. Her parents, Sylvanus and Ann Smith, were prosperous farmers of African, European, and Native American ancestry." (from Blackpast.org) The 1860 census, Sarah's father Sylvanus lived in Weeksville and owned \$8500 in real estate. (Roughly equivalent to \$100,000 in 2012 dollars.)

⁷⁹ See Jane Caputi's 1990 article on the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*. In the film, two mother-and-daughter pairs live in the same house, one white, and one black. While the white daughter lives a "real life," her peer, a light-skinned black woman must choose between a servile existence like her mothers', or pass as white and leave her family behind. Either way, she will be forced to live an "imitation of life."

fully furnished house is rarely capable of interrupting visitors' conflation of black history with slavery.

Despite the rich furnishings, the soaring harmonies, and the bits of information the museum staff can share about the people who lived in this house, the tour does little to illuminate the texture of life in middle-class Weeksville, or explain how the rural, black village became present-day Bedford-Stuyvesant. Looking through the front windows from the parlor at 1698 Bergen Street, visitors can see the Kingsborough Houses, a public housing superblock constructed in 1941. The two sets of structures stand across from each other like two worlds, the city and the country mysteriously co-existing. How did the once-rural village become the densely populated, almost all-black and Puerto-Rican, under-resourced "inner city?"



The final house on the tour, at 1698 Bergen Street (left). Looking out the windows from the front room, visitors see the Kingsborough Houses, a public housing superblock constructed in 1941.

After meandering through the last of the three houses, visitors are free to wander the grounds. The grassy lot behind the homes is partially filled with raised beds where neighborhood children grow vegetables for their summertime farmers' market. A clothesline stretched from a wooden pole to an upstairs window prompts visitors to consider the more

mundane aspects of every day life in Weeksville, and a bench in the leafy shade seems to gesture toward the slower pace of rural life. Still, this evidence of a nineteenth-century village cannot be easily situated in the public imagination — because most visitors have so little knowledge of nineteenth-century black life in the north to which this evidence can be attached.



Three views of the Weeksville grounds, from left: the screened-in structure Muriel Williams' Brown built for the family in the 1930s. In the summer, the family took their evening meals outside; The vegetable gardens at the WHC; the grassy back yard shared by all four houses.

As Sundiata Cha-Jua and Robert E. Weems point out in their 1994 review of fourteen common history textbooks, visitors' ignorance can be traced to the stories textbooks tell. Most only cover about twelve years of African-American history, from the end of the civil war in 1865 through Reconstruction in 1877, before skipping almost 80 years to *Brown v. Board* in 1954. Textbooks tend to cover some of the civil rights movement, but then they stop cold again after 1970.⁸⁰ The story presented at the WHC fits in the cavernous gap between 1877 and 1954, which means visitors have little chance of fitting this evidence of Weeksville into stories they already know. African-American history, almost fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, remains largely untold.

As education scholars have shown, in order to learn, students must be able to “restructure... new information [and] their prior knowledge, [and synthesize the two] into new

⁸⁰ “Although ample coverage is given to African Americans from 1865 to 1877 and from 1954 to 1970 (the first and second Reconstruction periods), they receive far less attention in discussions of the periods from 1877 to 1954 and from 1970 to the present,” Cha-Jua and Weems find. His 1994 survey covered fourteen textbooks.

knowledge.”⁸¹ How can visitors synthesize new information about black life in Weeksville if they have no prior knowledge of nineteenth-century black life in the north? Furthermore, if visitors’ only prior knowledge about black history is limited to slavery, how can visitors begin to build connections between what they know about the experience of slavery in the south and what the museum wants to share about freedom and self-determination in the north? If their prior knowledge is limited to slavery, reconstruction, and Martin Luther King Jr., none of which come into play in the WHC houses, how do they fit this evidence of Weeksville into the stories they already know?⁸²

It was precisely these gaps in the historical canon that preservationists wanted to fill when they saved the houses more than forty years ago, in 1967. But since then, the WHC has scraped together just enough funding to save the houses, then restore them, pay a staff person or two, and put together a modest, though increasingly significant public programming calendar. As of 2012, the WHC has more funding than ever before, new leadership, and they are now constructing a new cultural and research center. The WHC is growing. As funding levels increase, the WHC will have more resources to address their formidable interpretive challenges. But the faintness of the story at the WHC points to the persistence of black middle-class invisibility. Memories of the nineteenth-century black middle class are palpable here, at a site dedicated to preserving memories of the black middle class, but only barely palpable. Elsewhere, this story has an even weaker hold on the public imagination.

⁸¹ Vs. traditional teaching method, one premised on the assumption that learners enter a learning situation “with minds like empty vessels or sponges to be filled with knowledge.” But there are alternatives.

⁸² [or I could say, “If their prior knowledge is limited to slavery, reconstruction, and Martin Luther King Jr., none of which come into play in the WHC houses”] p.s. thanks to Robert Peddlar for this.

How can the WHC tell a story so burdened by invisibility: tethered not to common knowledge or popular public memory, but to centuries of other untold stories? Especially under the weight of other hyper-visible stories about black oppression: about slavery and Martin Luther King Jr.? How can the museum even begin to tackle what amounts to a national challenge like this one?

Invisibly Interwoven Ethnic Experiences: Stories the Museums *Don't* Tell

When the federal government subsidized the construction of U.S. suburbs after World War II, only white applicants were eligible for loans to buy the new homes.⁸³ Though the Weeksville area had been a successful example of racial integration since the nineteenth century, the neighborhood experienced a dramatic drop in white residents after the Second World War, when the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlined Central Brooklyn. Between 1950 and 1960, the white population dropped precipitously. The following decades repeated the trend until the area was 99% non-white (up significantly from just a quarter of the population in 1940).⁸⁴ In addition to losing white residents of all classes, the area lost black middle-class residents. And those who stayed could do little to balance the influx of poorer southern migrants who arrived between the wars.⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ On top of the challenges presented by the Great Black Migration and the destruction wrought by HOLC policies, public housing in New York took a turn for the worse. A program that had, for the duration of the 1930s, worked to improve and

⁸³ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Hillier, "Residential Security Maps and Neighborhood Appraisals."

⁸⁴ The white population of census tract #307, where the Hunterfly Road Houses are located, dropped from 52.6% in 1950 to 19.2% in 1960.⁸⁴ By 1970, the white population was 9.4%, and in 1980, 1.4%.

⁸⁵ Between 1910 and 1960, 4.6 million people left the South for industrial jobs in the North. (Landry 1988, 19) Many settled in New York. They settled in areas with existing black population, like Harlem in Manhattan, and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. As recently as 1910, almost 90% of black Americans lived in the South.

⁸⁶ Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*, 214.

racially integrate New York neighborhoods was replaced by a much weaker and less visionary program.⁸⁷ Though supported by Robert Moses in the 1940s, by the late 1950s city planners turned their attention to highway projects that facilitated white suburbanization and destroyed stable neighborhoods. In New York, displaced residents were deposited into substandard housing projects.⁸⁸

All of this “reinforced perceptions of race,” to borrow language from historian Thomas Sugrue. His 1998 *Origins of the Urban Crisis* remains one of the most successful illustrations of what Soja calls a “socio-spatial dialectic,” or the “social processes [that] configure and give meaning to the human geographies or spatialities in which we live,” and the way spaces, in turn, shape social processes.⁸⁹ About Detroit, another post-industrial city, Sugrue says the “physical state of African American neighborhoods and white neighborhoods ... reinforced perceptions of race... [and] the completeness of racial segregation made ghettoization seem an inevitable, natural consequence of profound racial differences.”⁹⁰ Similarly, what it meant to be white in Central Brooklyn, or rather, what it meant to be *non*-white, took a sharp turn in the context of mid-century disinvestment. Black and Puerto-Rican people found themselves living in increasingly segregated communities, which were at the same time growing increasingly unstable as a result of lost revenue and devastated infrastructure. What it meant to be non-white was thus tethered to an experience of disinvestment and devastation, or poverty. In short, the story commemorated at

⁸⁷ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*.

⁸⁸ Ballon and Jackson, *Robert Moses and the Modern City*.

⁸⁹ Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

⁹⁰ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 9.

the LESTM, the story of the white ethnic immigrants in the Lower East Side, is inseparable from the story of the black middle class neighborhood commemorated at the WHC.⁹¹

Collective Memory

Both the Weeksville Heritage Center and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are national historic landmarks (NHL). A status conferred on significant places by the U.S. secretary of the interior, an NHL designation signals a serious investment in the preservation of specific memories, or what we might call specific versions of history. The practice of preserving buildings or sites gives material form to otherwise unstable and ephemeral memories. As the National Historic Landmarks Program (NHLP) puts it, sites like the Hunterfly Road Houses and 97 Orchard Street “possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States.”

By structuring the process of remembrance, institutions like the NHLP play a powerful role in determining which stories will be remembered and which will be allowed to fade away, but their influence has limitations. The NHLP can do little to ensure that visitors engage with a landmarked site after the designation process is complete. It is only when visitors connect with the material traces of history that they enact what Durkheim calls a “periodic renewal of sentiment.” Through commemoration a community “periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity.”^{92,93} While a historic designation encourages the amplification and renewal of some memories, it does not, in itself, ensure that a community will engage in the

⁹¹ Also see Gail Radford ch. 7 on the 1937 passage of the Wagner Public Housing Act, which mandated a weaker public housing program, significantly cheaper construction compared with PWA housing of the 1930s (Harlem River Houses up through Kingsborough Houses)

⁹² Durkheim, Cosman, and Cladis, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

⁹³ as quoted in Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, “Emile Durkheim (1858-1917),” 136.

practice of remembrance. Nor can it decisively dictate *which* memories or versions of history will be renewed at the site. The NHLP alone cannot prevent a memory from fading into obscurity. Ensuring public participation in the rituals of remembering requires dedication, determination, and of course, money.

This dissertation looks at two sites that have been designated national historic landmarks. While the LESTM has become a site where sentiment is regularly and enthusiastically renewed, the WHC is, by comparison, neglected. In both cases, however, the sentiments renewed at the sites obscure as much as they reveal. The story of poor white European immigrants who came to the U.S. and experienced upward class mobility has become so familiar that many recognize it as truth. This is in part because of the LESTM, but also because of the restoration of Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and all the other tangible outcomes of what Matthew Frye-Jacobson calls the “heritagefest of the bicentennial.”⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the stories of the black middle class in antebellum Central Brooklyn, and by extension, stories of the black middle class in general, remain relatively invisible. This dissertation asks questions about how collective memory works on the ground. Why is the LESTM story so familiar to Americans? Why is the story of Weeksville so unknown?

Why, if the WHC was founded twenty years before the LESTM, has it remained relatively unknown while the LESTM has grown into a financially strong institution, been transformed into “high heritage,” or official history, by the National Park Service, and enjoyed prestigious attention, indeed international recognition?

⁹⁴ Jacobson, *Roots Too*.

On the one hand, museum and memory studies offer a productive terrain for the exploration of these questions. Memory, as Jeffrey Olick has argued, is a “grossly substantialist metaphor, implying cold storage instead of hot use.”⁹⁵ Echoing Durkheim, Olick reminds us that memories are constantly made and remade, not stored and retrieved. Furthermore, collective memory is a fluid process. “All remembering,” Olick argues, “takes place in group settings and is a matter of social interaction.” Museums and historic sites are “social technologies” and they manage the social process of remembrance.⁹⁶

But museum and memory scholarship tells us little if not explored in the context of material resources. Memories are renewed when they are deemed important, which is to say when they are adequately funded. Thus, the story of the two New York historic sites and the funding that fueled their development can explain the prevalence of some narratives over others in the popular American imagination. If we follow the funding streams, we find them tied to the histories of the two neighborhoods themselves. The WHC was founded in response to Central Brooklyn’s devastation in the wake of what is often called “white flight,” but might be more productively labeled capital flight. Early funding came from government coffers: Great Society programs like Youth in Action and the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. In other words, funding for the WHC came through channels we might categorize as public relief. The LESTM, on the other hand, was founded in the thick of the Lower East Side’s privatization. The museum received crucial support from quasi-governmental agencies tasked with the project of remaking Manhattan for middle and upper class consumption.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Olick, *States of Memory*, 6.

⁹⁶ Karp and Rockefeller Foundation., *Museum Frictions*.

⁹⁷ The rebranding of New York will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4. This thread of the dissertation is rooted in urban history, particularly the history of deindustrialization, privatization of public wealth, and the

Conclusion

The LESTM and the WHC are perfectly positioned to tell the story of structural forces that created the racially and class-segregated city that surrounds the museums, but they do not. The museum, as a cultural authority, feels like truth. By positioning themselves as narrators of neighborhood history and remaining silent on the subject of the racially exclusive wealth transfer that shaped these neighborhoods into what they are today, the museums participate in the erasure of recent history, which, intentionally or not, helps to authenticate whatever simplistic, uninformed, moral explanations crop up instead.

destruction of American cities in the post-World War II era. For more on this, see: Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*.

CHAPTER II

Racial Integration at the Weeksville School in 1890s Brooklyn

It is nearly impossible for the contemporary Weeksville Heritage Center visitor to imagine the nineteenth-century black middle class. Most high school textbooks only cover about twelve years of African-American history, from the end of the civil war in 1865 through Reconstruction in 1877, before skipping almost 80 years to *Brown v. Board* in 1954. In other words, the stories most Americans are taught about nineteenth-century African-Americans are limited to stories about slavery. High school students are usually exposed to some information the civil rights movement, but most textbooks only cover a few years of that era before trailing off again.⁹⁸ The story presented at the Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC) fits in the cavernous gap between 1877 and 1954, which means visitors have little chance of fitting the story of black, middle-class northerners into stories they already know. Much of African-American history, almost fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, remains surprisingly invisible.

Not only do visitors face the challenge that comes with the gap in our collective memory of African-American history, but they also face the challenge of trying to understand a radically different social structure. And without some understanding of how race worked and what it

⁹⁸ “Cha-Jua and Weems, “Coming into Focus.” This 1994 survey covered fourteen textbooks.

meant to be black, or “colored,” in nineteenth-century New York, it is impossible to understand the longer genealogy of race and class as it has attached itself to the black middle class in the present.⁹⁹ It was precisely the invisibility of the black middle class in Central Brooklyn in the late 1960s, in fact, that prompted WHC founders to preserve the Hunterfly Road Houses.¹⁰⁰ Founding President Joan Maynard described the project as “a search to discover, an effort to preserve memories of self.”¹⁰¹

In the late 1960s, people like Jack Newfield were writing about Bedford Stuyvesant as a place where “diseased debris” was rotting in the gutter, where families lived behind boarded up windows in burned up houses, where “everyday reality [was] like a bad LSD trip,” but neighborhood residents refused these descriptions of themselves.¹⁰² As Weeksville-area native Charles Hobson, put it, “Bed-Stuy was represented as risky and drug-infested in the mainstream media.” Hobson responded by creating a television program called *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* that “focused on the real Bed-Stuy, an area with a stable black middle-class, beautiful privately-owned buildings, multiple ethnic enclaves, [and] lots of churches.”¹⁰³ Using the Hunterfly Road houses as leverage, WHC participants contributed to a larger effort to push back against the

⁹⁹ On terminology: I use the word “colored” because it is the term people were using in 1890. When they use the term Afro-American, I use that term. Because I want to avoid reifying race, I don’t want to flatten the difference between colored, black, negro, Afro-American, African-American and other labels. Racist ideologies are technologies of power relations, not static identities. These terms emerged in response to specific socio-historical developments. Thus, I fear that avoiding the terms would obscure, rather than reveal, the way those terms work to both categorize people and structure power relations.

¹⁰⁰ Working in the context of the “culture of poverty” thesis, WHC activists faced both the invisibility of their history, and their own invisibility as members of the middle class in their own present time. See chapter 3. See also: Moynihan, Rainwater, and Yancey, *The Negro Family*.

¹⁰¹ Some readers have suggested this statement from Maynard needs more explanation. (Thanks to Matt Pfaff and Karen Miller for crucial help with this paragraph so far.)

¹⁰² Newfield, “Robert Kennedy’s Bedford-Stuyvesant Legacy”

¹⁰³ Hobson was born of West Indian parents; he grew up about six blocks north of the Model Cities demolition site where Project Weeksville participants began their history project. “Anomaly TV: Inside Bed-Stuy - The Brooklyn Rail.”

narratives that obscured their very existence. The four structures they worked to preserve could serve as evidence that the black middle class was not only present in Central Brooklyn, but had deep historical roots there. While some neighborhood activists addressed structural issues facing the post-industrial city — job and population loss, fiscal stress, crime, property abandonment — WHC founders focused on the four frame houses. They had the potential, *Project Weeksville* participants argued, to serve as a “defiant counterpoint” to media representations that caricatured the neighborhood “as decaying and pathology-ridden if they rendered [the neighborhood] visible at all.”¹⁰⁴

Residents like William Harley and Oliver Williams remembered growing up in a rural settlement turned suburb, a place that eventually became the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn. Harley and Williams could draw on their own memories, but also on stories they had heard from their parents. William’s mother Carrie, for example, experienced the flurry of construction after the Brooklyn Bridge opened, and when William was still small, she and her family lived among the European immigrants who crossed the bridge to settle in the new rowhouses surrounding their apartment at the corner of Schenectady Avenue and Dean Street. Harley and Williams remembered the wave of Caribbean migration in the first decades of the twentieth century, the dramatic drop in Southern and Eastern European immigration with the institution of immigrant quotas in 1924, the black migrants who arrived between the wars, and the Puerto Rican migrants who arrived in the 1950s. All the while, the neighborhood remained diverse, both in terms of race *and* class. For nearly fifty years — between the racial integration of “Colored School #2” in 1890, and the effects of the Federal Housing Act passed in 1937 —

¹⁰⁴ Wolf-Powers, “Expanding Planning’s Public Sphere: STREET Magazine, Activist Planning, and Community Development in Brooklyn, New York 1971-1973,” 9.

Central Brooklyn's neighborhoods and schools were racially integrated.¹⁰⁵ It was only in the 1940s and 50s, as a result of real estate redlining, that Bedford-Stuyvesant grew segregated and fell into disrepair. When real estate agents "red-lined" the area in the 1940s, the neighborhood suffered from disinvestment, capital flight, and white flight.¹⁰⁶ And suddenly, it was as if those fifty years had never happened.

After federal mortgage-lending policies extracted wealth from cities like Brooklyn, delivering resources to racially exclusive (white-only) suburbs, the poverty of black neighborhoods appeared to affirm a causal relationship between blackness and the deteriorating urban infrastructure. As Kenneth Clarke said to Studs Terkel in the early '90s: "We have come to believe that the social problems in our cities *are* indicative of the inferiority of blacks."¹⁰⁷ But in fact it was the implementation of the Federal Housing Act that created ultra-segregated cities all over the country. Mixed-race neighborhoods in Central Brooklyn lost nearly all their white residents between 1940 and 1970. (Central Brooklyn's non-white population jumped from just a quarter of the Weeksville area's residents in 1940 to ninety percent in 1970.)¹⁰⁸ At the same time,

¹⁰⁵ Not only does the census data tell us this, but neighborhood residents, in their oral histories, tell stories about growing up in a mixed-race, mixed-class community.

¹⁰⁶ On redlining in Brooklyn see: Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*. On the FHA and white suburbanization more generally, see: Freund, *Colored Property*; Highsmith, "Demolition Means Progress Urban Renewal, Local Politics, and State-Sanctioned Ghetto Formation in Flint, Michigan"; Nightingale, *Segregation*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*.

¹⁰⁷ "...A black friend calls this a self-fulfilling prophecy," Kenneth Clark continued. p. 337 Terkel, *Race*. Or as residents put it when they published a neighborhood self-study in 1968: "Despite expressions of ridicule ... from outside the community, this [community faces] very real and distressing condition[s]." Center for Urban Education., Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation., and Bedford-Stuyvesant D & S Corporation., *Community Attitudes in Bedford-Stuyvesant; and Area Study*. See also: Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., "Black-Jewish Relations in New York"; Moynihan, Rainwater, and Yancey, *The Negro Family*. Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ see appendix (to be attached). These are figures from the WHC census tract, which reached 99.2% non-white in 1990. Down to 95.8% in 2010.

Central Brooklyn suffered from capital flight. This did not prove that blackness devalued property, but to many, it looked like proof.¹⁰⁹

Put another way, black residents did not devalue property. Real estate professionals and federal mortgage policy devalued property. In the 1940s, federal policies segregated black people into discrete geographic regions, and then declared those areas off-limits for the flow of capital. The Weeksville neighborhood, once home to a vibrant, mixed-race community, was in the 1940s, made into a wealth vacuum. Banks removed assets from the region.¹¹⁰ Existing assets could not be maintained without infusions of capital, and property fell into disrepair. And as property values fell, property taxes dwindled. Schools worsened. Police protection faded. This was not *because* black people lived there. But rather, because real estate professionals and federal policy-makers conspired to limit the field in which capital could circulate. And they limited the field by articulating capital's boundaries in terms of race.

Federal mortgage-lending policies had transformed Central Brooklyn into what Edward Soja calls an “area of purposeful disinvestment and superexploitation,” but when the WHC was founded, these structural forces were not yet fully understood.¹¹¹ Residents only knew that evidence of the nineteenth-century black middle class suggested the antithesis of emergent popular beliefs (that black poverty was caused by black cultural deficiency). As founding president Joan Maynard put it, “We’ve got to make sure our kids know how they got here... the

¹⁰⁹ See scholarship on the “culture of poverty” argument. e.g. Moynihan, Rainwater, and Yancey, *The Negro Family*.

¹¹⁰ see Wilder, *A Covenant with Color* especially ch. 9 “Vulnerable People, Undesirable Places”; Wolf-Powers, “Expanding Planning’s Public Sphere: STREET Magazine, Activist Planning, and Community Development in Brooklyn, New York 1971-1973”; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. See also: previous footnote on FHA and white suburbanization.

¹¹¹ Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*. It was only in the 1990s that scholars began to apprehend the full impact of FHA policies and federal mortgage-lending practices. See Sugrue, etc. listed in earlier footnotes.

kids have to learn they're not trash.”¹¹² But what could explain the development of a segregated ghetto — in the very place where Weeksville once thrived?

Today, a growing body of literature on the Federal Housing Administration and the degradation of capital in American cities makes it possible to answer this question. But still the museum continues to tell stories of the distant past — leaving out stories of the recent past — which further confounds the relationship between the black middle-class village of Weeksville on the one hand, and present-day Bedford-Stuyvesant on the other. Like the history textbooks that leave enormous gaps in the national public imagination of black history, the Weeksville Heritage Center leaves gaps in the local public imagination of Brooklyn history. The WHC’s version of local history both contributes to, and is a symptom of larger gaps in public memory.¹¹³

This chapter casts all the way back to the 1890s, when *Project Weeksville* participant William Harley’s mother lived at the corner of Schenectady and Dean. To a time when the new school across the street from her house was still in the design phase, but would soon open its doors to a mixed-race student body. It took four years to make that promise a reality. Once completed, the racially integrated public school in Weeksville set the stage for more than fifty years of racial integration in Bedford-Stuyvesant. It was the sudden dissolution of this social system, in the 1940s and 50s, that prompted residents to found *Project Weeksville*, thus attempting to “save memories of self.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² quoted in: Martin, “In Black History, Reconstruction Is Also a Struggle.”

¹¹³ I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter 3, when I tell the story of *Project Weeksville* and the efforts to preserve the Hunterfly Houses that began in 1968. In short, Weeksville is invisible because of gaps in our national memory, but Weeksville’s invisibility means it is not well-funded, which further obscures the history and *contributes* to gaps in the national memory. The invisibility of the WHC is both a symptom and a cause. It’s a cycle.

¹¹⁴ “save memories of self” became a shorthand version of the public history project’s mission statement. See Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York.”

Through the lens of the battles over the local school, this chapter tells the story of neighborhood change in 1890s Weeksville in order to contextualize the economic violence inflicted by the Federal Housing Administration in the 1940s and 50s, and the consequent invisibility of the black middle class circa 1968, which fueled the development of the WHC.

What the Weeksville School Story Tells Us

This account of the Weeksville school debates is about the competing meanings of race in 1890s New York, particularly in the twenty-fourth ward, where the city of Brooklyn gave way to unincorporated farmland. The hilly Weeksville settlement had, until the late 1880s, remained relatively rural. But the Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883, the city was expanding, and real estate dealers began buying and selling property at the periphery of the city. An 1888 advertisement announcing the sale of “433 elegant building lots” in the Weeksville area described the twenty-fourth ward as “the ward of mansions, villas and villa sites, in the territory of the boulevards...on high ground, commanding extensive views of all the surrounding country and New York Bay.” Real estate dealers who held such aspirations for the property’s potential argued that African-Americans had a “detrimental” impact on the property. In other words, they argued that races were fixed social groupings, that African-Americans constituted a permanently inferior caste with a fixed, detrimental impact on the land. A mixed-race group of Weeksville residents, on the other hand, argued that African-Americans were evolving. Most of the race had been enslaved

for centuries, and in the twenty-five years since the close of the civil war, they had shown incredible growth and improvement.¹¹⁵

If the real estate dealers won the right to define race, the mark of inferiority would attach itself to blackness with renewed ferocity. If Weeksville residents won, on the other hand, they could hold reductive ideas about race in abeyance while they accumulated wealth and education. The mark of racial inferiority was temporary, residents suggested. “The old racial distinctions are dying out,” Samuel Barrows argued when he spoke before the Brooklyn Ethical Society in 1892.¹¹⁶ Once African-Americans were granted equal access to the same resources as others, racist ideologies would lose relevance—and could be dismissed, Weeksville residents suggested. The very idea of race would lose meaning.¹¹⁷ “Race...is an ideological construct,” historian Barbara Fields reminds us. “That does not mean that race is unreal: all ideologies are

¹¹⁵ As I will illustrate in the coming pages, in New York in 1890, the very idea of race was in transition. Black Americans’ release from slavery raised questions about their place in American society. Could ex-slaves evolve from slaves into citizens? Some imagined a racial continuum, with the less civilized gradually moving from one end of the spectrum into another, more civilized position. Others imagined a static hierarchy of races, one that was fixed and unchanging. The “racial continuum” was really more like a class continuum but people talked about upward mobility as a process of racial evolution.

¹¹⁶ For an account of Barrows’ speech, see Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Race Problem: The Evolution of the Afro-American.” For more evidence of this thinking see: FREDERICK DOUGLASS., “THE FUTURE OF THE COLORED RACE.” I will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter. For more on the idea of “hardening” racial categories in general, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Ngai, “History as Law and Life: Tape V. Hurley and the Origins of the Chinese-American Middle Class.”

¹¹⁷ When Barrows (white) spoke before the Brooklyn Ethical Society, T. McCants Stewart shared the podium and echoed Barrows’ assessment: “No race is a better subject for development on the moral side,” he said. Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Race Problem: The Evolution of the Afro-American.” Elsewhere, T. Thomas Fortune wrote, “Nowhere in the North has the race made such substantial progress along certain lines as in Brooklyn. This is due to many causes, but mainly to the character of the race... In social, material, spiritual, intellectual, and political progress the race in Brooklyn has substantial grounds for encouragement. The future is full of promise of good results.” 1893, Aug. 18 Eagle, “Politics and the Colored Race.” But similar discussions and public events were happening all the time, for example, as Ceasar Simis said in 1893, when he came out in favor of the mixed school, “at the outset he had been controlled by class prejudice against the negro which was based upon the knowledge of their former servile condition. [But at P.S. 83 he found students] clean, tidy, and studious.” ... In 1901, Booker T. Washington spoke before the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences about “how the negro responds to outside influences, in stimulating self help, and... ability to make of himself a creditable American citizen.” On this topic, see also Mitchell, Michele. “‘The Black Man’s Burden’: African Americans, Imperialism, and Notions of Racial Manhood 1890–1910.” *International Review of Social History* 44, no. Supplement S7 (1999): 77–99. Maybe I need more secondary sources here?

real, in that they are the embodiment in thought of real social relations.” Weeksville residents proposed to dismantle the ideological construct of race by dismantling a system that distributed resources along racial lines.

Reflecting beliefs similar to Fields’, Weeksville residents aimed to reorganize what Fields calls “real social relations,” or in other words, ensure that African-Americans had equal access to the same resources as others, specifically to education. Only by guaranteeing access to material equality, they argued, could the nation diminish the power of what Fields calls “racialist ideologies,” or the idea that races of people exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other. In 1894, Weeksville residents won a crucial battle in the ideological contest over competing meanings of race.¹¹⁸ They did this by securing a racially integrated school.

Aside from contextualizing *Project Weeksville*’s 1968 efforts to correct public history, the following story is important for three reasons. First because it presages the academic debates of today, specifically claims made by scholars like William Julius Wilson (1997) and Barbara Fields (1982). Wilson argues that race remains salient because it is a product of economic, political, and social situations.¹¹⁹ If those situations could be adequately remedied, he argues, race would “decline in significance” for the black poor, as it has for the black middle class.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ This is the reverse of the way people typically talk about race, as if we have to reform our sentiments first, and material changes will follow.

¹¹⁹ Wilson, *When Work Disappears*. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History.” I am citing work from 1997 and 1982. This footnote needs to be expanded and updated. Some other scholarship that considers the racialization of class includes: Ngai, “History as Law and Life: Tape V. Hurley and the Origins of the Chinese-American Middle Class”; Gaines, “Race at the End of the ‘American Century’”; Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century*.

¹²⁰ As Wilson himself has said, “The original argument, as outlined in *The Declining Significance of Race*, was not that race is no longer significant, or that racial barriers between blacks and whites have been eliminated. Rather, in comparing the contemporary situation of African Americans to their situation in the past, the diverging experiences of blacks along class lines indicate that race is no longer the primary determinant of life chances for blacks (in the way it had been historically).” Wilson, “Reflections on a Sociological Career That Integrates Social Science with Social Policy.”

The story of the Weeksville school is an untold story about what happens when economic, political, and social inequality *is remedied*. This story shows that, in 1890s Weeksville, economic, political, and social equality *did* diminish the salience of race, for a time.

Second, the story of the Weeksville school is important because the real estate industry would wage this battle again, fifty years later. Unsuccessful in the 1890s, real estate dealers restaged the same ideological contest in the 1930s and 40s, and the second time, they won. Branding African-Americans as a “detrimental” force, banks and local property appraisal firms, in partnership with the U.S. federal government, inflicted terrible economic violence on the residents of Central Brooklyn. Redlined neighborhoods were deprived of capital and fell into disrepair while racially exclusive white suburbs multiplied and flourished. Schools, social services, police protection: everything suffered. In other words, real estate dealers’ unsuccessful efforts to introduce racial segregation in 1890 foreshadow the practice of redlining that flourished from the 1940s through the 1970s, resulting in the ultra-segregated cities that characterize the U.S. today.¹²¹

The Weeksville school thus historicizes 1940s redlining, revealing that the connection between race and real estate values was constructed, not natural. In his once-authoritative text on the subject, FHA’s chief appraiser Frederick Morrison Babcock described the effect of race on property value as a fact — as if, obeying a law of nature, property in mixed-race neighborhoods would inevitably lose value, and do so quickly.¹²² Thus, he proposed segregation as a “device” that could be employed to protect property values from the natural and inevitable decline that came with mixed-race neighborhoods. Even as recently as 2008, historian Colin E. Gordon

¹²¹ On redlining, see the footnote at the beginning of this chapter. Wilder, Sugrue, Freund, Gordon, Lipsitz...

¹²² Babcock, *The Valuation of Real Estate*. P. 91 Babcock talks about using segregation as a “device” to protect property values. On Babcock’s role at the FHA, see Nightingale, *Segregation*, 344–347.

suggested it was *natural* for investors to view black occupancy as a hazardous neighborhood “nuisance.” That idea “followed logically,” Gordon argues, from the accepted belief that tanneries, stockyards, or tenements constituted a “nuisance,” and should thus be restricted to discrete geographic zones.¹²³ Because the relationship between race and real estate has been treated as natural, it is important to point out that in Weeksville, attempts to brand black occupancy as a nuisance were not seen as a natural extension of that logic at all.¹²⁴

Finally, and most important to this dissertation, the story of the Weeksville school contextualizes, even helps explain the story of black middle class invisibility in Central Brooklyn in the late 1960s. Project Weeksville participants like William Harley attended the newly integrated Weeksville school in the early twentieth century. They remembered the racially integrated schools and the black middle class community that nurtured their own personal development as they grew up. When federal mortgage-lending policies gutted Central Brooklyn in the mid-twentieth century, the black middle class suddenly became virtually invisible. The story of the effort to preserve memories of Weeksville can only be understood in relation to the memories *Project Weeksville* participants sought to save. The story of the Weeksville school is one of those memories.

Only two articles include mentions of the Weeksville school in their treatment of the broader subject of racial segregation in Brooklyn’s schools. But both Rae Banks’ and Marsha Hurst’s articles rely on imported, anachronistic meanings of race, which distorts their findings. In her 1967 *Freedomways* article, for example, Rae Banks describes the efforts to integrate the

¹²³ Gordon, *Mapping Decline*. This is not the central theme of his argument, the book is generally fantastic, but his wording warrants scrutiny.

¹²⁴ Deleted: [As Trevor Kollman argues, the real estate industry’s prediction was a self-fulfilling prophecy.] Kollman referencing Gunnar Myrdal.

Weeksville school as a story of whites versus blacks. She writes about “white citizens [who asked] the Board to build a school for white children on the site and ... Black citizens [who asked] the Board to honor its previous resolution.”¹²⁵ But from the very first meeting in defense of the mixed-race school, a quarter of the speakers who took the floor were white.¹²⁶ The commonality that bound the group together was not color, or what we might call race, but rather something else, something more like shared local experiences that informed shared values, and a commitment to the project of civilization.

In her 1980 article on the Weeksville school, Marsha Hurst also flattens the social order in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. While she makes class distinctions between elite and non-elite blacks, which is important, she treats the category “white” as monolithic. Hurst’s and Banks’ omissions distort the story by painting all white people as the aggressors, thus obscuring the central role of capital, specifically the real estate dealers, who were the real aggressors.¹²⁷

Hurst and Banks also project what might have been national or global racial meanings onto a unique, local landscape, flattening regional differences and silencing local successes. This collapses the complexity of history by erasing the many cross-racial alliances that animated Weeksville’s fight for a the mixed-race school.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Banks, 1967, p. 293. Banks, “Weeksville.”

¹²⁶ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Colored Citizens Up In Arms.”

¹²⁷ Hurst, “Integration, Freedom of Choice and Community Control in Nineteenth Century Brooklyn.”

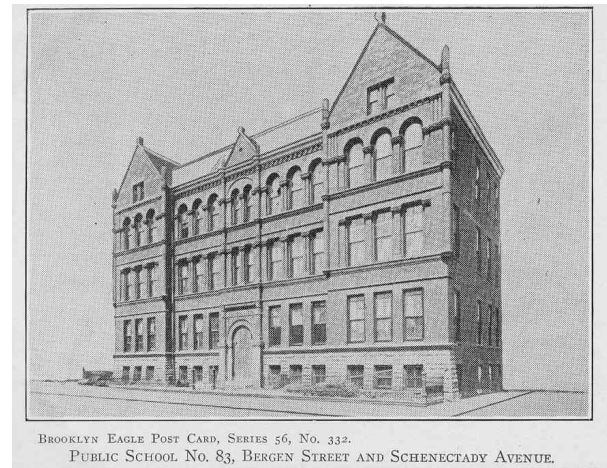
¹²⁸ This chapter fills a void in the scholarship on nineteenth-century black life in Brooklyn. David Ment’s unpublished dissertation on racial integration in New York schools covers the period up to, but not including the integration of the Weeksville school. Historian Craig Wilder’s *Covenant With Color* tracks two centuries of Brooklyn history, but his broad focus does not allow for a detailed rendering of this event. Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*. 1890s Brooklyn, however, remains relatively undocumented. Carla Peterson’s *Black Gotham* is a welcome addition to the field, and tells us more about some of Brooklyn’s black elite who figure in the story of the Weeksville school. But again, that book does not tell the story of the Weeksville school. Peterson, *Black Gotham*.

A New Building for Weeksville Students

In 1889, the Brooklyn Board of Education passed a resolution to build a new school in Weeksville. The Board bought a sizeable piece of land, more than three times the size of the old schoolhouse, and began plans for construction. The new school would meet the latest architectural standards: it would be outfitted with a boiler for steam heat and would have enough windows to ensure adequate light and ventilation. It would also be bigger than the old school, big enough to avoid overcrowding, but most importantly, it would be less vulnerable to fire. The old building was made of wood, and probably heated with a wood-burning stove. The new structure would be made of brick.¹²⁹



The old Weeksville Schoolhouse, photographed some time before the 1890s.



Plan for a new school in Weeksville ca. 1890s

The old, rickety, wooden structure had seen better days. New York's superintendent of schools once described the Weeksville school as "a fine tasteful house" that stood "in a beautiful grove of oaks, surrounded by the small, neat white houses of a hamlet, consisting of some thirty

¹²⁹ These details include information from the Sanborne maps, the Board of Education records, and Eagle articles. I need to look at the BOE records again to see if I can get a better description.

or forty colored families.”¹³⁰ But that was in 1855. By 1890, it was “a wreck and a deathtrap,” according to William F. Johnson, superintendant of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum around the corner.¹³¹ Professor Johnson refused to send his own son there, instead sending him three miles north, to the nearest school that would accept a “colored” student. “No children ought to be there at all,” he explained to the school board at a public meeting in November 1890.¹³²

Not only was the old building in poor shape, but its role was complicated by social and legal ambiguity. Once known as “Colored School #2,” the building at the corner of Troy and Bergen was re-numbered in 1884 when the city abolished separate schools. Instead of being identified as one of the three “colored” schools in Brooklyn, it was folded into the larger public school system and labeled P.S. 68. Legal desegregation came to the school in 1884, when it was assigned its new number, but “school No. 68 [had] always been a mixed school,” local lawyer T. McCants Stewart pointed out.¹³³ White Weeksville residents “said...some of them had been taught in this very P.S. No. 68 by colored teachers.”¹³⁴

To further complicate matters, even after 1884, Brooklyn’s legally integrated schools remained informally marked as “colored” schools. Maybe a few white students attended the Weeksville school (P.S. 68) but in general, all three of Brooklyn’s “colored” schools continued

¹³⁰ Superintendent’s Report in the New York Times, July 19, 1855. New York Daily Times Staff, “Long Island: Brooklyn Public Schools.”

¹³¹ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “For Colored Scholars. Negro Citizens Make a Demand of the Board of Education.”

¹³² “Rev. William F. Johnson...said his boy had been refused admission at Mr. Welch’s school, the principal stating that the local committee had objection to him on account of his color. He said that the colored children had to walk many more miles than the white ones to reach a school they could attend, and that he had to send his child to Flushing on that account. He felt that he had rights as a taxpayer and a native born American.”*ibid.* Somehow it seems important to mention that Johnson was blind. Perhaps he sensed the danger of poor architecture more acutely than his sighted contemporaries?

¹³³ McCants Stewart, “Interesting and Important Explanation: Counsellor T. McCants Stewart on Why No. 83 Grew Out of No. 68.”

¹³⁴ The city abolished separate schools in 1884, and at that point, Colored School #2 was renamed P.S. 68. The school had always been open to children of all races, so the re-numbering only formalized this arrangement.

to be staffed by “colored” teachers and attended by mostly “colored” students.¹³⁵ On the other hand, all of this was flexible. It was up to individual school administrators to decide who would be admitted to their school. So when “colored” Weeksville resident William F. Johnson, for example, refused to send his son to P.S. 68 (the legally integrated and actually integrated but unofficially “colored” school around the corner from his house), he sent him three miles north to the respected Professor Clark in Flushing.¹³⁶ Clark’s was the nearest option, Johnson said, because Mr. Welch, the principal of the next closest school, he could not accept Johnson’s son “on account of his color.” In short, the city’s racial practices were inconsistent and in flux.

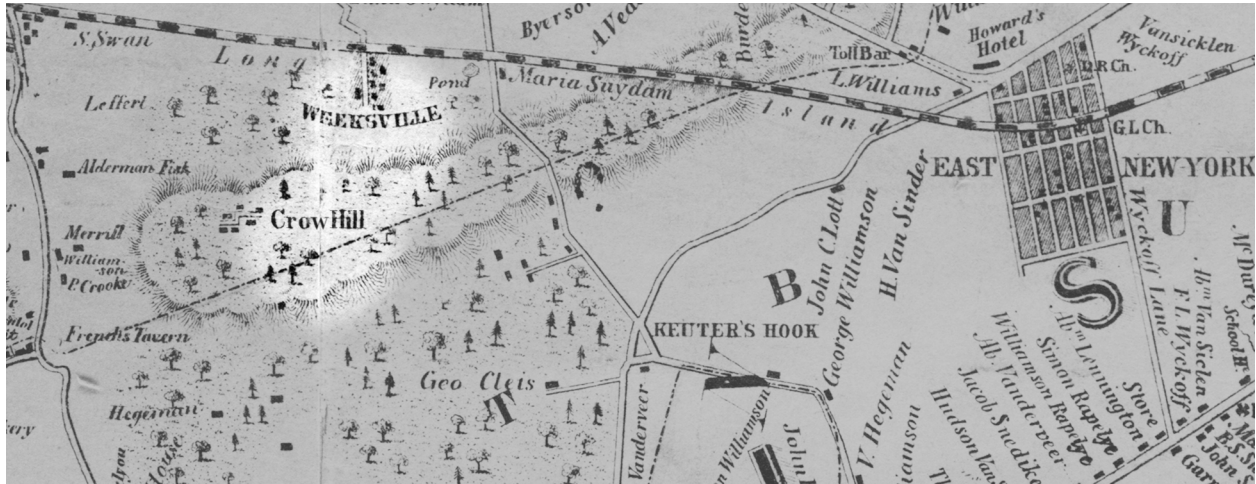
The situation was further complicated by real estate speculation and an influx of new residents. Shortly after Dr. Philip A. White proposed the new school, the Weeksville area developed into a bustling construction zone. A real estate dealer might buy eight lots at a time and build eight new rowhouses in one swoop.¹³⁷ Where farmhouses had been scattered unevenly about the hills, suddenly there were tightly packed structures and grids of city streets. Though Weeksville was officially absorbed into the city of Brooklyn in the 1860s, all the “localities” in the Bedford Hills (Crow Hill, Carrsville, Malbonneville, and Weeksville) remained relatively untouched by development at first. Hilly terrain kept developers away in the 1870s and 80s, but by 1888, a Brooklyn Eagle contributor predicted that, “within the next five years the Bedford Hills will have nearly disappeared, and inside of ten years there will be nothing left of them, and

¹³⁵ While white students were welcome at the “colored” Weeksville school and “colored” students were welcome at “white” schools like John Holley Clark’s, there is no evidence of “colored” teachers working at “white” schools, which made the “colored” schools valuable to the “colored” community. These were places where “colored” women could be employed in middle class jobs.

¹³⁶ This story comes from one of the Brooklyn Eagle articles, maybe the October 1890 meeting at the Bethel AME?

¹³⁷ This is evident from a comparison of the 1888 and 1908 Sanborne maps.

where they stood will be graded streets and thousands of dwellings, a part of this magically growing city.”¹³⁸



Undated map of the “localities” in the Bedford Hills
Crow Hill and Weeksville are visible on this map. Malbonneville and Carsville are not labeled. (ca. 1848-1855?)¹³⁹

The mixed-race arrangement that had developed organically at the Weeksville school, in a relatively autonomous rural settlement, was suddenly more vulnerable than ever before. The somewhat informal social order of rural Weeksville faced opposition with an influx of new, mostly white residents in the 1890s, especially because there was money to be made in real estate speculation. For those wishing to make a profit off of Weeksville’s development, racial segregation emerged as a possible “device” for minimizing risk and maximizing returns. Thus, when the Board of Education decided to replace the existing Weeksville schoolhouse with a new

¹³⁸ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Strolls Upon Old Lines: Crow Hill and Some of Its Suggestions.” “Streets are being cut through [the Bedford Hills]; the hill is being dumped into the hollow. and there is a general leveling going on,” the author noted. The “localities” quote comes from this article too.

¹³⁹ This map comes from the Brooklyn Historical Society. It probably dates to 1848-1855 because the larger map includes Cypress Hills Cemetery (founded 1848), and identifies Williamsburg(h) as a separate town (Williamsburg consolidated with Brooklyn in 1855).

building, the decision was treated by some as a plan to build a new “colored school,” even though the city had abolished separate schools more than five years earlier. And the construction of a brand-new state-of-the-art schoolhouse for “colored” children was met with opposition.

Just as work on the building was due to commence in October of 1890, a petition appeared at the Board of Education offices. Signed by “24th-ward inhabitants,” the petition relayed their opposition to the new school building. As the *Brooklyn Eagle* put it, “some queer persons objected to a colored school in the 24th ward,”¹⁴⁰ Describing themselves as “property holders and residents of the twenty-fourth ward,” John W. Croger, William Tilly, and about a hundred others (nine of whom were listed by name) said they feared the new school “would be detrimental to surrounding property and to the residents of this vicinity.”¹⁴¹



A path from the Hunterfly Road houses (now the WHC) to the old Weeksville school.

The children who lived in the Hunterfly Road houses might have walked this way to school. Note that both Dean and Bergen Streets stop before they intersect with the old Hunterfly Road at the right edge of this 1883 map. The box of diagonal stripes indicates the proposed location for the new school. The yellow box = the Union Bethel A.M.E. Church and the lavender squares indicate Tilly, Croger, and other petitioners’ residences.

¹⁴⁰ The petition relayed their “opposition to the erection of the proposed public school house for colored children at Bergen street and Schenectady avenue... Some queer persons objected to a colored school in the 24th ward,” the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported on October 8, 1890.”

¹⁴¹ Oct. 1890 eagle. The original petition no longer exists, according to David Ment at the NYC Municipal Archives. Petitioners listed in the paper were: William Tilly, John W. Croger, George F. Debicke, Charles Head, William Shannon, G.H. Rieper, S.J. Geddes, W.H. Caufield, and John E. Greany. Most of the men lived in the block just east of the site purchased for the new school.

Weeksville Responds to the Petition

If the Board of Education responded in any way, the *Eagle* did not report it. But three weeks later, a group of Weeksville residents gathered at the Union Bethel A.M.E. church to “denounce the signers of the objectionable petition.” African-American lawyer T. McCants Stewart spoke first. He “characterized the petitioners’ action as a stigma on the entire colored race.”¹⁴²

Born to free parents in South Carolina before the civil war, Stewart moved to New York when he was appointed pastor of Weeksville’s Bethel AME church in 1880.¹⁴³ By 1890, when he spoke out against the petition, he had left the ministry to set up a private law practice in Brooklyn. As an African-American who earned both a bachelors degree and a law degree, taught at the university level both in the U.S. and in Liberia, worked as a pastor, and as corresponding editor of the *New York Freeman*, his presence likely lent weight and authority to the community meeting. He was joined at the church that night by local leaders like Professor William F. Johnson, superintendent of Howard Colored Orphanage (just around the corner from the old school), Rufus L. Perry, and Reverend L. M. Becket, pastor of the Bethel.¹⁴⁴ It was a mixed-race

¹⁴² Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Colored Citizens Up In Arms.”

¹⁴³ See Broussard’s biography. Stewart’s father was a blacksmith, a skilled tradesman, not a farm laborer. So Stewart came from a family with some social and economic capital it seems. See also T. Thomas Fortune’s description of Stuart’s career when he was voted into the BOE. Ca. 1891. Broussard, *African-American Odyssey*.

¹⁴⁴ Rufus L. Perry’s role in the community is not as easy to describe as the others. When the mayor agreed to the “colored” community’s request to have a “colored” member appointed to the Board of Education, he asked black leaders for a recommendation. They recommended Rufus L. Perry. The mayor was not satisfied with their recommendation and eventually, the two sides agreed on Philip A. White, a light-skinned black pharmacist.

meeting of Weeksville residents. Of the eight people who spoke, two were white, six were “colored.”

The speakers’ comments offer a window into contemporary thinking about race. Each of the two groups (the petitioners on the one hand and their opponents on the other) reflected a different interpretation of their contemporary social order. John Croger, William Tilly, and the petitioners who opposed the new school emphasized race, or color. T. McCants Stewart, and Reverend Hamilton on the other hand, stressed civilization when they made their arguments in favor of the new school. In response to petitioners who said a new schoolhouse would be “detrimental” to property and residents, Dr. Hamilton (white) gestured to contemporary ideas about race, nation-building, and uplift, “characteriz[ing the petition] as an outrage upon civilization.”¹⁴⁵ Not only did the petition threaten black Americans, Dr. Hamilton implied, it threatened the larger project of human progress toward civilization. Local builder Denike (white) said “every man who had signed the prohibitory petition had made a great mistake of judgment.” He said he “had worked forty-five years ago alongside of negroes while mastering his trade and was proud of their friendship.”

The debate reveals a conceptual slippage between the two ideas. Color (whiteness) could be seen as evidence of social superiority, but cultural refinement, or civilization, was important too. Where did that leave the people who were educated and “refined” (or civilized) but were not white? Were did “refined” colored people fall in the social order?¹⁴⁶ The petitioners

¹⁴⁵ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Colored Citizens Up In Arms.” Also follow up on: Dr. Jay Benson Hamilton, born in Ohio.

¹⁴⁶ Sometimes people referred to the men who signed the anti-Weeksville-school petition as belonging to “the third rank” of citizens in the ward, which suggests some kind of numbered, recognized social order in rural Brooklyn. Perhaps refined, cultured white people occupied the first rank educated blacks constituted the second rank, and poor whites made up a third rank, below which were poor blacks?

suggested color could not be transcended: to be colored was to be permanently inferior: an inherited status. But Stewart and his peers argued that “colored” people were still evolving. They placed emphasis not on color or whiteness, but on acquired traits associated with civilization.

To be racially marked was to be placed on a continuum of cultural and social refinement, or evolution, white speakers at the Bethel A.M.E. argued.¹⁴⁷ Reverend Hamilton’s argument spoke directly to an urgent national question: the debates surrounding the “progress made by the colored population since the [civil] war.”¹⁴⁸ And at the same time, his words resonated with international concerns.

The concept of civilization indexed a broader set of meanings bound up with colonial projects across the globe. In other words, the story of the Weeksville school unfolded in the context of racialized imperialism. At the same time local leaders invoked civilization when they declared the petition an “outrage,” these ideas were deployed on a national level, and even internationally. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Education and Civilization Department invoked the idea when they reported to congress on Native Americans’ “progress towards

¹⁴⁷ P. 25 Bederman. Civilization “denoted a precise stage in human racial evolution —the one following the more primitive stages of ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism.’”

¹⁴⁸ This quote is taken from a talk delivered by Samuel Barrows to the Brooklyn Ethical Society. Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Race Problem: The Evolution of the Afro-American.” T. McCants Stewart spoke after Barrows: “No race is a better subject for development on the moral side,” he said. Elsewhere, T. Thomas Fortune wrote, “Nowhere in the North has the race made such substantial progress along certain lines as in Brooklyn. This is due to many causes, but mainly to the character of the race... In social, material, spiritual, intellectual, and political progress the race in Brooklyn has substantial grounds for encouragement. The future is full of promise of good results.” 1893, Aug. 18 Eagle. But similar discussions and public events were happening all the time, for example, as Ceasar Simis said in 1893, when he came out in favor of the mixed school, “at the outset he had been controlled by class prejudice against the negro which was based upon the knowledge of their former servile condition. [But at P.S. 83 he found students] clean, tidy, and studious.” ... In 1901, Booker T. Washington spoke before the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences about “how the negro responds to outside influences, in stimulating self help, and... ability to make of himself a creditable American citizen.” Reverend Samuel Barrows, for example, spoke of progress and evolution interchangeably when he delivered a speech before the Brooklyn Ethical Society the following year. “The evolution in [the black American’s] condition has kept pace with that of any other race,” he said, “and I think has been even a little better. The same forces of evolution that have brought him to where he is now will bring him further.”

civilization,” and African-American George Washington Williams questioned the project of *civilization* as it played out in the “dark continent” of Africa.¹⁴⁹

The European partitioning of Africa forms an important backdrop to the Weeksville school debate because, as historian Michele Mitchell argues, black Americans “viewed empire as playing a decisive role in stabilizing — or destabilizing — their position vis a vis other Americans.”¹⁵⁰ Just as local leaders invoked the language of civilization in the debate over the Weeksville school, so too did commentators on the colonization of Africa:

Against the deceit, fraud, robberies, arson, murder, slave-raiding, and general policy of cruelty of your Majesty’s Government to the natives,” George Washington Williams wrote in an open letter to Belgium’s King Leopold II, “stands their record of unexampled patience, long-suffering and forgiving spirit, which put the boasted *civilisation* [*sic*] and professed religion of your Majesty’s Government to the blush.” [italics added]¹⁵¹

The same year Brooklyn’s Board of Education received Croger and Tilly’s petition opposing the “colored” school in Weeksville, Belgium’s King Leopold framed his imperial project in Africa as an effort to civilize the natives, thus linking race and civilization — and people like Williams used the same logic to challenge King Leopold, uncoupling whiteness and civilization, attributing civilized traits to the Africans instead. As Gail Bederman argues, “‘civilization’ was protean in its applications. Different people used it to legitimize

¹⁴⁹ Fletcher and the Commissioner of Education, “Indian Education and Civilization: a Report Prepared in Answer to Senate Resolution of February 23, 1885.” United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior*. and Geo. W. Williams, Stanley Falls, Central Africa, July 18th, 1890, reprinted in Cromwell, Hill, and Kilson, *Apropos of Africa*.

¹⁵⁰ Mitchell, “‘The Black Man’s Burden’.”

¹⁵¹ Geo. W. Williams, Stanley Falls, Central Africa, July 18th, 1890, reprinted in Cromwell, Hill, and Kilson, *Apropos of Africa*.

conservatism and change, male dominance and militant feminism, white racism and African American resistance.”¹⁵²

Was blackness an eternal mark of permanent social inferiority? Or was it temporary? Would the importance of color diminish as African-Americans acquired civilization, wealth and education? The outcome of the Weeksville school debate would contribute to a much larger conversation about what race meant.

Put in the context of an international obsession with the idea of civilization on the one hand, and a national discussion about the progress, or evolution, of the “colored” race since the war on the other, Reverend Hamilton’s choice to deploy this language can be seen as a tactical move toward legitimizing a mixed-race neighborhood school. Though colonization of Africa and U.S. imperial expansion may not seem immediately relevant to the story of the Weeksville school, the discourse of civilization was intensely relevant, because it could be used in multiple ways to legitimize different sorts of claims to power.¹⁵³

Another meeting attendee brought the debate closer to home when he said, “Every man whose name was attached to the petition should be furnished with a free ticket for Chicago by the colored residents of Brooklyn so that they could be placed on exhibition at the world fair as attractions.”¹⁵⁴ Plans for the 1893 World’s Fair were still in development then, but the incredible popularity of ethnic villages in Paris the year before ensured that fair organizers would reproduce them in Chicago.¹⁵⁵ The villages were designed to display what ethnologists called “the spectrum

¹⁵² Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵⁴ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Colored Citizens Up In Arms.”

¹⁵⁵ As historian Robert Rydell explains: “Following the example of colonial villages established at the 1889 Paris Exhibition, living ethnological displays of Native Americans and other nonwhite people were introduced en masse at the Chicago fair and appeared at subsequent expositions as well.” Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 8. Interestingly, Ota Benga, brought from Africa to be put on display at the 1893 World’s Fair, was later brought to the Howard

of human types” arranged in ascending order from the least to most “civilized,” with whites representing the apex of civilization.¹⁵⁶ When Reverend Merrill suggested putting petitioners on display, he drew a parallel between the egotism of fair organizers, who positioned Europeans at the top of an invented global hierarchy, and the arrogance of petitioners who positioned whites at the top of an invented local hierarchy. Merrill implied that if the “colored residents of Brooklyn” were to deliver their judgment on the matter of who counted as civilized, the distinction would not be drawn along color lines. Merrill argued that petitioners Croger and Tilly occupied a lower stage of development, were less civilized, and if anyone should experience the humiliation of being put on display, it should be them.¹⁵⁷ “Those who drew up the petition should have a little more education,” Merrill later concluded, noting grammar errors in the poorly worded petition.¹⁵⁸

After they spoke in opposition to the petition that night at the church, attendees adopted a resolution “viewing with sincere sorrow and astonishment so public a display of ignorance by members of our community.” They asked the Board of Education to “relegate to oblivion any document which renews race prejudice.” In short, the Weeksville school became a vehicle for the contest over racial meanings. It was not a white versus black debate, but rather, a debate over the meanings of black and white. How important was color? What did it mean to be black? Or white? Could color be more important than civilization? Or would color soon lose its significance, losing its purchase on Americans imagination as it was overshadowed by the more

Colored Orphanage by Brooklyn ministers who objected to his living in the primate cages at the Brooklyn Zoo. That was around 1906.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵⁷ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Colored Citizens Up In Arms.”

¹⁵⁸ “He thought those who drew up the petition should have a little more education, so they would not say that what they desired was a “needed necessity.” Brooklyn, “Are Indignant: Colored Citizens Make a Vigorous Protest.”

important and seemingly egalitarian measures of cultural refinement, education, and civilization?¹⁵⁹ If given a chance to evolve, Stewart argued, color would lose significance. But if people like the petitioners were allowed to “stop the progress of our race,” he implied, the stain of social inferiority would be nearly impossible to remove.

A Few Queer Citizens and Their Foolish, Insignificant Petition

Echoing the *Eagle* reporter’s characterization of the petitioners as “queer persons,” T. McCants Stewart depicted them as out-of-step with the sentiments of the larger community. “We resent the stigma which *a few* citizens would put upon us [italics added],” Stewart declared at a larger meeting the following night. Other meeting attendees described the petitioners as an insignificant group of uneducated people who were not to be taken seriously. “I know many of these petitioners,” Reverend Rufus L. Perry said, “some from their cradles. Some have come over so recently that I haven’t had time to get acquainted. They belong to the third rank of citizens in the ward.” Professor W.F. Johnson said that “a number of the petitioners were unable to write their names; that when the [Board of Education’s] committee on sites came to look

¹⁵⁹ Contemporary conversations on the subject confirm that it was not just Weeksville residents who considered the questions of color to be open for debate. Samuel Barrows, for example, said that “the old distinction is still made, but from his observation even that was dying out, and in a few of the Southern States color lines are almost entirely obliterated.” (1892, Feb. 15). An article about the city’s first black police officer proclaimed “No Color Line Will Be Tolerated in the First Police Precinct” in 1891 (April 3). When a [cycling] race committee for the Metropolitan Association of Cycling Clubs drew the color line in 1894, members “endeavored...to have the petty action repudiated.” (1894, May 22) And finally, when the Weeksville school was finally integrated in 1893, the *Eagle* called it the “Last of the Color Line.” (march 8, 1893) None of this is to say that the color line was disappearing as fast as people would have liked. To give an example of how insidiously entrenched the color line remained in 1890s Brooklyn: When Rev. George E. Smith died, his friends called it “race prejudice,” explaining that when he fell suddenly ill, they called three doctors but each had some excuse for not tending to Rev. Smith. An *Eagle* reporter said the charge was serious, if it could be proven, but argued that “It is not likely that the question of color entered into their minds...The belief that all men are brothers regardless of color is spreading and men are acting in accordance with it. We are more humane than we used to be,” he confidently asserted. (1894, April 2)

logically at the petition they would see nothing before them.”¹⁶⁰

Not only were the petitioners a peripheral group, speakers argued, but their logic was nonsensical. “Rev. William T. Dixon thought the whole thing was foolishness — too insignificant to be noticed.” The Board of Education’s initial silence on the matter suggests that the petitioners were, in fact, too insignificant to be worth the board’s attention. “Few responsible citizens were among the signers,” Perry argued, and “the logic of the petition was absurd. That one thing alone ought to kill it.” But despite its absurdity, and the fact that it had been signed by minors, “whiskey men,” and by people who were not property owners, the people who gathered at the Bridge Street Church on October 29 prepared a forceful response.¹⁶¹ “We are here tonight to strike another blow at the hissing serpent whose head has been raised again to stop the progress of our race, Stewart said. “We hate to be confronted with this venomous reptile of prejudice in this form, but since we are here to put our foot on its head, let us down it with all the force we can.” To that end, meeting attendees unanimously adopted a counter petition (which I will call the Bridge Street petition).

What does Race Have to do With Property Values?

The language of the Bridge Street petition is striking because its authors are incredulous at the suggestion that race and property values have anything to do with each other. While stables, tenement houses, or elevated railroads could affect the value of adjacent property, petitioners’ suggestion that black Americans could devalue property struck Brooklyn residents as

¹⁶⁰ Here is the quote I referred to earlier, in which the petitioners are categorized as belonging to “the third rank” of citizens in the ward, which suggests some kind of numbered, recognized social order in rural Brooklyn. Perhaps refined, cultured white people occupied the first class, educated blacks constituted the second class, and poor whites made up a third class, below which were poor blacks.

¹⁶¹ do I have this full quote somewhere?

absurd. “They declare that [the school] would degrade the neighborhood and depreciate the surrounding property.” The Bridge Street Petition reads. “What do these citizens mean?”

They practically say: we do not want colored children in our schools, because it depreciates our schools, and we do not want colored children in our neighborhood because it depreciates our property. What do they want? What would they have colored children do? Grow up ignorant and swell the ranks of the shiftless and criminal classes, we suppose.

Their use of the word “practically” is important here. They characterized Croger and Tilly’s petition as *practically* saying what the petition *actually* said. As if the Bridge Street group could believe the words were ever put to paper. The original petition does not practically say it, but rather, quite literally, argues that the school “would be detrimental to surrounding property and to the residents of this vicinity.” The Bridge Street group’s bewilderment suggests that linking race to property value was a new idea.

In response to the argument about property values, the Bridge Street group invited local property owner J.B. Lung, a doctor, to speak “on behalf of those white Twenty-fourth warders who had no grievance,”¹⁶² While Croger and Tilly suggested a social order that positioned all whites above all black Americans, the Bridge Street petition represented **ten times** as many people who understood their social order differently. Theirs was “signed by men of standing,” Perry argued, “and represents ten times the real estate that this miserable paper does... Our petition, which is being signed by men of both classes, has already received more than 1,000 names,” he announced.¹⁶³ In short, Croger and Tilly’s petition did not represent popular

¹⁶² His name sounds Chinese but he’s white according to the census. There are Chinese Lungs living in Brooklyn too.

¹⁶³ Again, Perry references a recognized hierarchy of “classes,” when he says “both classes.” What does that mean? It could mean blacks and whites but I think it means property holders and poor people.

sentiment. As the Bridge Street petition put it, it reflected “a narrow prejudice not shared by people of Brooklyn at large, but confined to the small class of persons represented by these ‘queer’ citizens.”¹⁶⁴

Real Estate Dealer Isaac Halstead and the Two Views Expressed Before the Board of Education

After receiving the two petitions: one asking the Board of Education *not* to build a new school for colored students in Weeksville, and the other asking the Board to “relegate to oblivion any document which renews race prejudice,” the Board arranged a hearing at which both parties could present their views. The hearing was scheduled for November 7, 1890, ten days after the Bridge Street meeting, a month after the petition was initially delivered to the Board of Education office. The most surprising development at the hearing was the presence of Isaac Halstead, a real estate dealer who did not live in the neighborhood, but who recently purchased a great deal of property in the area, and J.V. Bolz, who presented “charts and figures” to support the claim that a “colored” school would depreciate property values.

As Rufus L. Perry pointed out, most of the people who signed the petition were not actually property owners. “Many had been deceived into signing the petition,” Perry said. “Non-residents had their names on it, as had minors and people who had no property interest in the ward...[and] several whiskey men had signed it.”¹⁶⁵ “A number of the petitioners were unable to write their names,” Professor W.F. Johnson said. In other words, the Bridge Street group implied that the initiative was driven, not by the community, but by someone seeking to cloak their

¹⁶⁴ This language comes from the petition itself, probably drafted by T. McCants Stewart, the full text of which appeared in the Brooklyn Eagle. Brooklyn, “Are Indignant: Colored Citizens Make a Vigorous Protest.”

¹⁶⁵ nov. 7, 1890 hearing before the board Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “For Colored Scholars. Negro Citizens Make a Demand of the Board of Education.”

private interests in the language and protocol of community concern. It is impossible to know for sure if Halstead or Bolz manufactured the argument about depreciating property values, or if one of them drafted the petition. What we do know is that they joined Weeksville residents William Tilly and John Croger that night at the hearing before the Board of Education, in a neighborhood that was not their own. They were there, the *Eagle* reported, to “support” Tilly and Croger’s claims. Croger and Tilly, on the other hand, were making an argument about their property values, but it is not clear that either actually owned property in the ward.¹⁶⁶

“A large contingent of the white and colored citizens of the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth wards” attended the hearing. “Their eloquence put any ordinary meeting of the board to shame,” the *Eagle* reported.¹⁶⁷ Croger spoke first, saying “the present school, with some repairs, was good enough for the colored scholars, as the attendance was not large.” In other words, he did not make an explicitly economic argument, but said “the need of the district was the need of a new school house that should accommodate the white children there.” J.V. Bolz “supported Croger’s statements with maps and figures.” He “had nothing to say against the erection of a school for colored children, but he said he wanted a school for white children too.” He then

¹⁶⁶ When Tilly signed the petition in 1890, he listed his address at 1664 Pacific. Because the 1890 census burned and the 1892 New York State census does not include information about property ownership, it is impossible to tell from census data if Tilly owned the property at 1664 Pacific. According to the 1900 census, however, ten years later, Tilly rented part of a house at 73 Schenectady from storekeeper John C. Monsee. (Census records from 1880 do not include information about property ownership.) For conclusive evidence that Tilly did not own property in 1893, it would be necessary to consult with a New York Public Librarian to learn about property ownership records. These bits of information, however, paired with Perry’s argument that many of the people who signed the petition did not own property in the ward, provide enough evidence to throw suspicion on Tilly. There is no census evidence that Croger owned property either. Unlike Tilly, Croger stayed at the same address between 1880 (when the census captured him at 1554 Dean), and 1890, when he signed the petition. Again, the 1880 census does not tell us if Croger owned the house where he lived. But Croger died in 1892 and, according to legal documents (“the executor affidavit as to value of estate”), left only \$300 to be split three ways between his wife, daughter, and son. This would have been enough money to buy a piece of land, however. (\$7,700 in 2012 dollars, according to an inflation calculator at <http://www.davemanuel.com/inflation-calculator.php>, which uses data provided by the Oregon State University Political Science department at <http://oregonstate.edu/cla/polisci/sahr/sahr>). For further research: The Real Estate Record and Builders Guide should have some information, but now requires a Columbia University password. I emailed the librarians on March 6, 2013.

¹⁶⁷ Board member William Harkness presided. This is important because he remained a proponent of the mixed school for quite a while.

echoed Croger, saying “a new school was hardly needed for the colored children.” Board member Harkness (white) interjected at this point, correcting the two. There were more than two hundred students in a building much too small and outdated to hold them, he argued.¹⁶⁸ Making “a few repairs,” as Croger suggested, would not solve the problem.¹⁶⁹

Real estate dealer Isaac Halstead and carpenter William Tilly spoke next. Halstead simply agreed with Croger, but Tilly tackled the question of property values head on. He said “he had always been a Republican and a friend to the colored man, but he felt that the school in that neighborhood depreciated property.” Importantly, the only one of these four men who definitely owned property in the ward was Halstead. Newspaper reports of Halstead’s recent purchases in the 24th ward provide conclusive evidence that he was there, not in the interest of residents, but in the interest of profit. The day after the hearing, in fact, the *Eagle* reported Halstead’s purchase of three lots just two blocks south of the site purchased for the new school building. From his Court Street office in downtown Brooklyn, Halstead had not missed the opportunity to capitalize on the new areas open for development in Weeksville.¹⁷⁰ He was likely the driving force behind both the petition and, more importantly, the very idea that color could devalue property.

After the petitioners presented their charts and figures, members of the Bridge-Street group took the floor. They argued against the idea that color was paramount, and instead demanded to be treated as citizens. Reverend Johnson said “he felt he had rights as a taxpayer and a native

¹⁶⁸ The average attendance at the school was 140, and the registry was 220, a significant number. The old building was too small for such a large group.

¹⁶⁹ We cannot know what Bolz said when he presented the maps and figures, or what his documents purported to prove, but maps and figures implies a quantitative argument. Bolz probably used his documents to make an argument about property values. Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “For Colored Scholars. Negro Citizens Make a Demand of the Board of Education.”

¹⁷⁰ Isaac Halstead listed at 49 Court Street (home address), 73 Fort Greene place [20th ward] (business address). His business is real estate (Brooklyn City Directory, 1888-1890). For information on real estate purchases see Brooklyn Eagle notices April 19, June 21, and November 8, 1890.

born American.” He called the old school a wreck and a deathtrap. Responding to Croger and Bolz’s assertions that the student body was too small to warrant attention, he said “there would be an attendance of 500 if there were a decent school there... though white children used to attend it, they were withdrawn when the building became unsafe.” He would not let his own son attend the old school house. He felt so strongly about the schoolhouse that he sent his son send him three miles north to a school in Flushing, rather than letting him attend the school just a few steps away from home.

The *Eagle* described the final speaker of the night as “a quiet looking black man who made the briefest and best speech of the evening.” Rev. William A. Merrill said “he did not think that the question of property values should be considered, because the public schools were built with public money for public use, and lack of wealth was the greater reason why the children should have an education.” Echoing the Bridge Street petition, he questioned the relationship between property values and color. “By inference the petition [said] that white children’s schools would not hurt property but those for blacks would.” Furthermore, Weeksville residents “did not ask for a colored school but for a school in the neighborhood that colored children could freely attend.” Indeed, the schoolhouse on Troy had been open to all. The school had been labeled a colored school because most of the students were colored. But in fact, the school had never been without white students or teachers.

Board of Education Decides on a Mixed-Race School

“After an exhaustive consideration of the subject,” T. McCants Stewart later recalled, “both sides agreed that they wanted a building large enough to accommodate all the children of

the neighborhood, irrespective of race or color.”¹⁷¹ Weeksville residents said “no colored school was wanted in that neighborhood but a school was wanted there which could be attended by colored children, and be a relief to the one now there... The white representatives said that they had no objection to colored teachers as some of them had been taught in this very P.S. No. 68 by colored teachers.”¹⁷² ¹⁷³ In other words, Bolz and Halstead’s efforts — to use local residents as proxies to support their real estate interests — had failed. Even with their charts and figures, they could not convince the board that a colored school would devalue property, or even that residents really objected to the colored school.

The solution was simple: the board resolved to erect a twenty-four instead of a ten-room building. The school would be big enough to accommodate all the children in the area. “We Win!” T. Thomas Fortune announced in the *New York Age* on November 15, 1890.¹⁷⁴ Not only had the residents of Weeksville secured a new school building for a mixed-race school, but they had successfully repudiated the claim that color could influence property value.

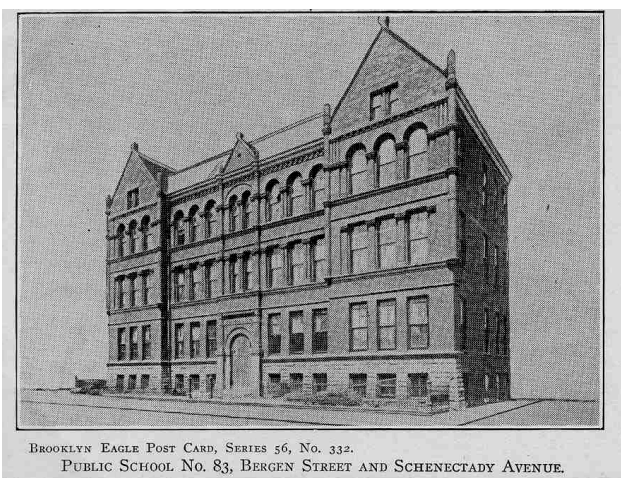
A Misnumbered School Building Reignites the Debate Over a Mixed-Race School

¹⁷¹ Stewart said later in one of his many speeches recorded in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Get citation.

¹⁷² May 3, 1892, p. 341 BOE minutes. T. McCants Stewart says: "After an exhaustive consideration of the subject, both sides agreed that they wanted a building large enough to accommodate all the children of the neighborhood, irrespective of race or color; and the white representatives said that they had no objection to colored teachers, as some of them had been taught in this very P.S. No. 68 by colored teachers."

¹⁷³ Stuart, too, spoke to the question of property values when he said, “He was glad to see the words ‘colored school’ taken from the school on North Elliot Place. It had not depreciated property. On the contrary property had advanced in the neighborhood and was all rented by white people exclusively.” He quoted School Board President Hendrix and Ex-Senator Murtha, who were in favor of the mixed school. Stewart also “praised the memory of ex-Commissioner Thomas Carroll for his work in that line.”

¹⁷⁴ Fortune, “We Win.”



P.S. 83 (plan, above left). When the building's exterior was nearly complete, residents noticed that builders had etched the number 83 into the school building's façade. It should have been labeled 68. (above right)

After the Board of Education issued a decision for a mixed-race school in the late Fall of 1890, it seemed the matter was settled. But a year later, when the new building was near completion, the wrong number appeared on its façade. It should have been labeled P.S. 68, the number assigned to the Weeksville school, but the new building was mysteriously labeled P.S. 83. Confusion ensued and the debate over the mixed-race school was reignited.

A few board members argued that a new number constituted a new school, and they used this slight technicality to argue for the dissolution of the school's existing leadership, which would have unseated the board's one "colored" member, T. McCants Stewart, from his position on the school's Local Committee. (In the early 1890s, schools were governed by a three-person Local Committee, which had primary control over the schools. The Local Committee was accountable to the board.) Stewart had been appointed to the Local Committee in the 24th ward by the mayor himself as a representative for the "colored" community, but board members argued that the new number warranted a new committee and a reformulation of the board's plans for the building. In other words, board members didn't specifically mention race, but rather,

suggested that new leadership should reconsider who would attend this school. It was an oblique attempt to create an all-white school. This time, instead of private citizens making an argument about race and property values, board members made an argument about legal entities and bureaucratic processes. By articulating their argument in legal language, they disavowed any race or profit-motivated agenda.ⁱ

The original plan, adopted by the Board of Education on November 15, 1890, was to close down the wooden schoolhouse on Dean Street and move the students into the new brick building. The old building, most everyone agreed, was “a disgrace to the city.”¹⁷⁵ But thanks to a series of confusing discussions at the Board of Education, spearheaded by board members Ceasar Simis and Albert C. Aubery, discussions made even more confusing by convoluted newspaper coverage, the wooden schoolhouse came to be known as the “colored” school, P.S. 68, and the new brick structure became a phantom entity, a whole new school — a “white” school called P.S. 83. Once these new definitions took hold, the board was able to manage a series of sneaky maneuvers.

Stewart wanted assurance that the students of P.S. 68 would be transferred, as promised, to the new building come Fall. He tried passing a resolution just before the school year ended in 1891: a resolution confirming that the Board would follow through on its promise, but the resolution failed. Seventeen board members voted in favor of Stewart’s proposal but nineteen voted against it. What had seemed settled and closed a year and a half earlier was now, apparently, re-opened for debate.ⁱⁱ

¹⁷⁵ see, for example, anti-integrationist Ebenezer Miller’s comments in Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Not This Year: Will They Mix Colored and White Children.”

WHY Renewed Opposition to the Mixed-Race School? Philip A. White, John Holley Clark, and Weeksville's New Residents

Why, when the board agreed to the community's wishes a year earlier, would anyone try to circumvent the promise? At least three local phenomena deserve consideration: first, Philip A. White's death. He was the Board of Education's first "colored" board member and the new school was promised to him. Second, John Holley Clark's forced resignation from the mixed-race school in Flushing likely influenced board members' approach to the local situation. And third, Weeksville's steady growth probably infused the anti-integration camp with new energy.

Residents were badly in need of a new schoolhouse for years before the Board finally approved the funds. In fact it was only because Philip A. White was appointed to the board, under pressure from colored elites, that a new school had been planned for Weeksville at all. A wealthy pharmacist and light-skinned member of what Bart Landry calls the "old mulatto elite," White "was one of the best-known colored men in [the] city, and for many years he enjoyed also the esteem of a wide acquaintance outside of his own race." So reported the *Brooklyn Eagle* in an article announcing his death in February 1891.¹⁷⁶ "His business prospered until... he was worth close to \$200,000," the *Eagle* explained. White's death surely emboldened the Weeksville School's opponents. It was to Dr. White that the new school had been originally promised, and now he was gone. Few members of the colored community commanded so much respect.

Whether White's death prompted board members to reconsider or not, they might have been influenced by simultaneous developments in Flushing; specifically the Flushing Board of Education's decision to build a new, modern school building for their white students which relegated the colored students to the old building. In the 1880s, Flushing Principal John Holley Clark refused to draw the color line in his school — but in 1891, the Flushing Board overruled

¹⁷⁶ Feb. 1891

him. At one of the early meetings with the Brooklyn Board, John Croger attempted to do the exact same thing in Weeksville. He argued that “the need of the district was a new school house that should accommodate the white children... and...the present school, with some repairs, was good enough for the colored scholars...”¹⁷⁷ Those who shared Croger’s opinion would have surely taken notice of this turn of events in Flushing, where just as Croger proposed, the white students got the new school and the old school was deemed good enough for the colored students.

The Flushing board’s insistence on segregation reveals the intensity of contemporary contests over racial meanings. As readers will recall, when William F. Johnson refused to send his son to P.S. 68, calling it a “wreck and a deathtrap,” he sent him three miles north to the respected Professor Clark in Flushing.¹⁷⁸ Clark’s was the nearest school that would accept colored children, Johnson said, because Mr. Welch, the principal of the next closest school, said his “local committee had objection to [Johnson’s son] on account of his color.” In other words, in Mr. Welch’s school in Brooklyn, color was deemed more important than civilization. At Mr. Clark’s school, on the other hand, color did not constitute a reason to deny a child a chance to “evolve” via education. At Mr. Clark’s school in Flushing, civilization and refinement transcended the importance of color – at least until the businessmen on the board of education overruled him.

The story of John Holley Clark is important because it reveals that the *civilization vs. color* debate was not just happening at the Weeksville school, but all over Long Island. Schools were sites at which battles over racial meanings took shape: ideas were formed, policies were

¹⁷⁷ Nov. 7, 1890, Eagle

¹⁷⁸ I talk about this at least three times in this chapter. Where did I put the citation?

instituted, questioned, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Such was the case when the popular and respected Professor Clark instituted a policy of accepting all students, thus emphasizing civilization and refinement over color. But by April of 1891, he faced terrible treatment from his board, and by May, was forced to resign. This happened because the Flushing Board, composed of businessmen like the Brooklyn Board, began working behind Clark's back, creating a climate of uncertainty by firing teachers without due warning. The board was making decisions that put their own economic and social interests before the intellectual priorities of the school. The board relegated the colored students to the old school building. Because the new school was so much nicer than the old one, this move widened a social chasm along color lines. The new school was equipped, not just with the latest technology: indoor plumbing and steam heat, but with its own library and museum! (And that was after the Board's plans were scaled down to meet their \$45,000 budget — which indicates that their original plans were, apparently, even more elaborate.) In short, popular sentiment was with Clark and his ideas about civilization, but once wealthy board members instituted segregated schooling, the social order would begin to harden along color lines.¹⁷⁹

Finally the building boom, the third of these three sets of events, probably influenced the Weeksville school debate most of all. Way back in 1890, when the petition first arrived at Board of Education offices, speculators were already buying up property in Weeksville. But by late 1892, when the new school building was nearly complete, the building boom was in full force. The land had been advertised as “elegant lots...situated in ...the ward of mansions, villas and villa sites, in the territory of the boulevards... on high ground, commanding extensive views of

¹⁷⁹ see Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects*, introduction, on “hardening” racial categories.

all the surrounding country and New York Bay.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, developers and speculators had money at stake in Weeksville in 1892, more than they had in 1890. If they believed Halstead and Bolz’s claims that property would be devalued by a colored or mixed-race school, they would have likely redoubled their efforts to prevent the new colored school as their real estate interests grew more pressing.¹⁸¹

Not only were speculators buying up property in the ward but they were moving new residents into their newly constructed townhouses. Though long-time residents and property owners like J.B. Lung declared they “had no grievance” with the mixed-race school idea in 1891, significant chunks of land had changed hands by 1892. Thus, people like Lung likely held less sway over the outcome of the school debate. New landholders and residents with no history in the area, limited familiarity with the Weeksville School’s history of mixed-race education, and perhaps no relationships with the residents of Weeksville, would have only economic, not social priorities at stake in the decision. If the Weeksville school was integrated, developers’ ability to turn their real estate investments into profit depended on consumers’ willingness to buy property in a district with a mixed-race school.¹⁸² And if anything threatened their economic goals, speculators and new residents would likely fight against it.¹⁸³

With a close vote of 19 to 17 at the April 1892 meeting, board members effectively reversed their earlier decision to create a mixed-race school in Weeksville. It is impossible to

¹⁸⁰ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “433 Elegant Building Lots.”

¹⁸¹ a colored school is basically equivalent to a mixed-race school as it is open to all.

¹⁸² (As it turned out, consumers were willing to buy. But in absence of this knowledge, speculators wanted to eliminate the risk altogether by preventing the mixed-race school.) Emerging development: the way people were advertising this land was “mansions and villas.”

¹⁸³ Board member Thomas Cacciola, who worked in law and real estate, voted for the integrated school in 1891. But in 1892, he switched sides, voting against the integrated school. Did he change his vote because of his own real estate interests or alliances with real estate dealers? Possibly. also giving business to friends, related? Mr. Guilfoyle, Mr. Bouck, and Mr. McNulty criticized the school house committee for awarding a contract without advertising [As Perry said, they bought all their property from blacks anyway... play with our children...]

know exactly why the tide turned and the decision was reversed, but these three factors likely contributed to board members' shifting alliances.

WHO Was Behind the Renewed Opposition to the Mixed-Race School?

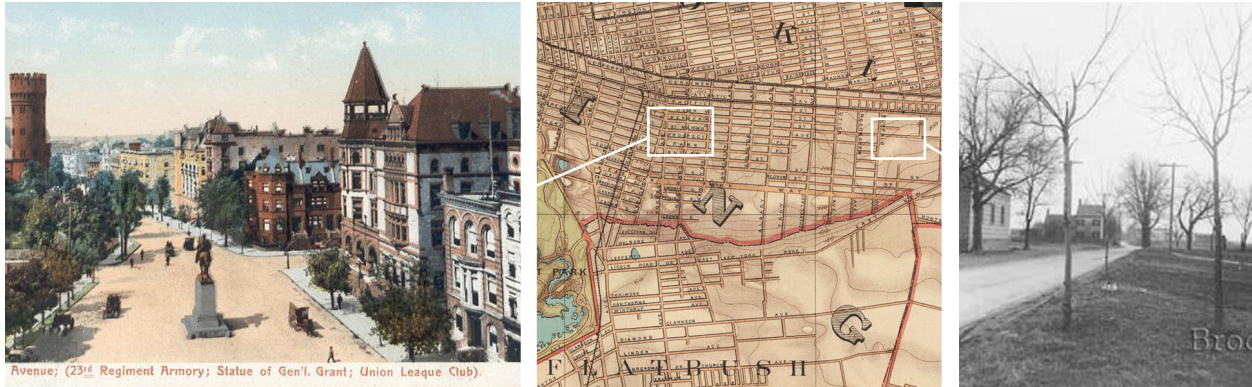
By rejecting Stuart's end-of-the-school-year proposal — to transfer Weeksville's students to the new building — the Brooklyn Board of Education refused to follow through on their promise.¹⁸⁴ “NOT THIS YEAR Will They Mix Colored and White Children,” an *Eagle* article declared on April 8, 1892. At this point, the residents of Weeksville had waited more than two years for their school, only to be told they would not have the new school after all.¹⁸⁵ While factors including Weeksville's continuing development, the segregation of the Flushing schools, and Philip A. White's death likely contributed to this outcome, they do not suggest specific actors behind the scheme to evade the Board's promise. Who was driving the campaign to reverse the board's decision?

Weeksville leaders had not only organized two major community meetings, but collected more than a thousand signatures on the Bridge-Street petition, easily convincing members of the board that an integrated school would meet everyone's needs. Who had undone all their hard work? Rufus Perry suggested it was “the action of C. Simis, one of the members of the board of education.” Simis was not a real estate dealer, but he did own property in the ward. He owned a grand, new home about seven blocks west of the (now preserved) Hunterfly Road houses, five

¹⁸⁴ made at the November 1891 hearing to build a mixed-race school.

¹⁸⁵ P.A. White responded to requests from the “colored” population for a new building, got a resolution passed to get a new plot of land and build a new building in 1889 (BOE minutes, 1889, p. 542). Also see T. McCants Stewart quoted in a *Brooklyn Eagle* article May 4, 1892.)

blocks west of the new school building.¹⁸⁶ It was a mansion, actually. “In this city of churches, in this nineteenth century of civilization,” Perry argued, Simis “has allowed his prejudice of the colored race to come into the question.”¹⁸⁷



Cesar Simis owned a new, grand home about seven blocks west of the Hunterfly Road Houses. (see postcard view of the intersection 2 blocks from Simis’ house -- at left, above.) Both the Hunterfly Road Houses and Simis’s mansion were in the same school district and the same ward, but they were in radically different neighborhoods.

Simis’ neighborhood reflected the tide of development sweeping in a southeasterly direction from downtown Brooklyn (note the expanse of undeveloped land on the above map; including the Weeksville area which was semi-developed in 1890, compared to the grid of developed land in the northwest corner of the map). While Simis’ neighborhood was built up with mansions and townhomes, the Weeksville area remained rural and undeveloped in the 1890s (see image at right). Simis passed two separate resolutions to ensure that the Weeksville school district did not include his house. He outlined the school district boundaries so they included every block up to, but not including his own.

Indeed, Simis had worked with Aubery to reopen the question of the Weeksville school when the number 83 appeared on the new building, in October of 1891. Though the two were unable to reverse the board’s decision at first, they were probably responsible for the board’s reversal of their original decision, five months later, which would keep the “colored” students from moving into building. When Simis was appointed, just after the board rejected Stewart’s proposal to move the “colored” students into the new building, to the powerful, three-person, local committee governing the Weeksville school, whatever might have seemed temporary about

¹⁸⁶ , on the newly developed New York Avenue. He inherited his Brooklyn-based business from his German-born father.

¹⁸⁷ April 30, 1892 brooklyn eagle

the board's reversal was almost guaranteed to become permanent. As the third member of the Local Committee, Simis formed a majority (of 2) opposed to the mixed-race school. This virtually guaranteed that a mixed-race school would not be realized.ⁱⁱⁱ

“MIXED SCHOOLS WILL NOT BE IN ORDER YET AWHILE”

By May of 1892, this had been going on for a year and a half.¹⁸⁸ To summarize: real estate men Isaac Halstead and J.V. Bolz—along with local residents William Tilly and John Croger—petitioned to prevent the new school building in 1890. Their petition found little traction, however, and only prompted the board to plan a larger building to accommodate Weeksville's growing, mixed-race population. Having failed to prevent the school through formal channels, opponents may have shifted their efforts underground. Or perhaps other opponents acted independently. Either way, the number 83 appeared on the new building in the Fall of 1891. Board members Aubery and Simis used the number as leverage in their efforts to unseat the two members of the Local Committee who were in favor of the integrated school (T. McCants Stewart and William Harkness). They asked the board to appoint a new local committee. After all, it was “practically a new school,” they argued. This underhanded effort to prevent the mixed-race school gained more traction than previous efforts, but not quite enough. It was only when Local Committee member William Harkness resigned, unexpectedly and without explanation, that Simis was appointed to take his place, thereby forming a Local-Committee majority opposed to the mixed-race school. Anti-integrationists were now in a position to secure the result they desired, but Weeksville residents would not give up easily.

¹⁸⁸ Or thirteen years, depending how you measure. 1.5 years since the nov. board meeting.

Simis was appointed on April 12, 1892, and by April 30, Stewart, Perry, and other local “colored” leaders organized yet another meeting to protest the board’s actions. How might Weeksville’s residents have felt that night, as they walked to the Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church, remembering the first meeting a year and a half earlier in that same space, having worked so hard to see the new building go up in their neighborhood, watching the construction over the course of an entire year, and now hearing that it would not be theirs after all? Reverend Perry spoke first. His comments suggest exhaustion, and maybe even resignation. He reminded his audience of the school’s long history. “Twenty-five years ago that school was a public school known as colored school No. 2,” he began. “The word colored attached to it was a stigma and we demanded that it be removed.”¹⁸⁹ “No. 68 was then and is now an old, rickety, tumbledown structure. We wanted to have a new building and asked for representation on the board.¹⁹⁰ We got what we asked for and Dr. White was appointed as a member. He was made chairman of the committee on school No. 68 and when he saw the shameful condition it was in he determined that we should have a new one.” Perry proceeded to describe the petition of November 1890, the Bridge-Street counter petition, the hearing before the board and the decision reached at that hearing. “A few weeks ago we were told that we were not going to get the school, that we were to continue sending our children to the Troy avenue school,” he announced.

As with every one of the meetings before this one, both black and white community members spoke in favor of a mixed school. This time, it was the Reverend James S. Chadwick (white) whose comments were recorded in the *Eagle*. “A public school is open to all, irrespective of color or nationality,” he said. “And colored residents of this city are entitled to all the rights of

¹⁸⁹ . [The Weeksville school was renamed P.S. 68 in 1886, when it was removed from a separate “colored” numbering system and given a number in the regular school system].

¹⁹⁰ Cite newspaper article where they ask for representation. July 16, 1882, see also Dec. 1881.

American citizens and all the help in educational facilities given by the board. There is no longer any use in making a discrimination in the race, in this city at least,” he said. And as the *Eagle* reporter put it, “several others spoke in a similar strain.”

To summarize a complex series of events, Weeksville residents drew up a new petition, sent it to the Board, and were disappointed once again.^{iv} At the Board of Education meeting on May 4, 1892, Stewart again proposed that the Board follow through with the decision made in November of 1890. Fourteen members of the board voted in favor of Stuart’s resolution, six shy of a majority. Twenty-five voted against it.¹⁹¹

The board opposed Stewart’s resolution but approved a resolution put forth by Ceasar Simis and Ebenezer Miller, the majority bloc on the three-person Local Committee. ~~joined the~~ Local Committee, he formed a majority with Ebenezer Miller — the two were opposed to integration. This left T. McCants Stewart to defend the mixed-race school alone. Since the Local Committee had been granted the power to design a new plan for the school, and since Simis and Miller constituted the majority of that Local Committee, they presented a report to the Board of Education, proposing that the “colored” students occupy the basement of the new building until a new building could be constructed for them.¹⁹² The “colored” students and teachers could remain organized as a separate school with separate teachers and thereby avoid mixing with the white children. They would be temporary visitors at the new building, waiting out their time until another new building could be completed.

¹⁹¹ Of the eighteen people who had voted with Stuart a year and a half earlier, when he proposed to remove the number 83 from the new building, eight switched sides to vote with Simis (including Miller.) But four members who did not vote the first time (because they were absent or because they had not yet been appointed) voted with Stewart. As for Miller and Simis, they captured votes from eight people who switched sides, including Thomas Cacciola, a real estate dealer and lawyer, and General Horatio T. King and Daniel W. Northup, also lawyers. There were six, including Aubery, who were opposed to Stewart all along. Eleven votes from new board members made twenty-five in total.

¹⁹² See Board of Education minutes May 3, 1892. Some say first floor, some say basement. Technically, it is a basement because it is partially below-ground. See Brooklyn Eagle March 8, 1893, for a reference to the basement.

Stuart left the meeting “thoroughly disgusted.” For the first time in the year and a half since the Weeksville residents’ triumph in October 1890, he admitted exhaustion and defeat. “While I have some thought of seeking a reconsideration,” he said, “I regard the matter as practically settled and it seems to me that under some circumstances American race prejudice is stronger than its sense of justice.”

When the board’s discussion was reported the following day on the front page of the *Eagle*, the headline read: “MIXED SCHOOLS Will Not be in Order Yet Awhile... The Board of Education Refuses to Indorse T. McCants Stewart’s Scheme for No. 68 — The Colored Member Made a Galiant [*sic*] Fight, but Was Easily Outvoted — He Says American Race Prejudice is Stronger Than Sense of Justice...”¹⁹³

With that, the school year came to a close, and the matter was laid to rest for the summer with the understanding that, come Fall, the “colored” students of the Weeksville school would be transferred, along with their teachers, into the basement of the new building where they would await the construction of another, new building designated for “colored” students.

Opening the New Building

About two weeks before their first day back to school in the Fall of 1892, the *Eagle* declared “the fight over the color line still on.”^v As if hovering over a chess board, the reporter described the state of affairs.¹⁹⁴ “Messrs. Simis and Miller, who, with Mr. Stewart, also constitute the local committee of the new school, No. 83, have...been watching Mr. Stewart’s movements very closely... It is thought that [Stewart] will try to carry out his threat by persuading the

¹⁹³ May 4, 1892

¹⁹⁴ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Stewart’s Little Plan To Start a Mixed School, Make or Break.”

various pupils of the colored school to apply at school No. 83...¹⁹⁵ In other words, the *Eagle* reporter was pointing out that “colored” students could legally apply to attend P.S. 83 instead of P.S. 68, thereby avoiding the segregated classes in the basement of the new building.¹⁹⁶ If admitted to P.S. 83, (and the school could not legally refuse admission to neighborhood residents), students would become members of the newly organized school, and would attend mixed-race classes on the upper floors of the building.^{vi}

“Less than fifty...colored pupils” ended up at P.S. 83 this way. Some of them were entering school for the first time but others were probably new to the area. As the *Eagle* reported on September 8, “All the children applying who have been members of the old colored school No. 68... were directed...to go back to their former school... until such a time as the committee may decide to transfer them in a body to the new building.”¹⁹⁷ Meanwhile, no time had been set for transferring the “colored” school to the new building, and parents feared that the “educational authorities meant to keep them out of the new building entirely.”¹⁹⁸

Predictably, Principal Frank Perkins’ refusal to accept students from P.S. 68 caused considerable upset. Parents protested at the new building on Tuesday, September 6, probably the second day of the school year. Not only were their children refused admission at P.S. 83, but the board failed to follow through on their promise to transfer them from the old building to the new building. The *Eagle* did not offer a detailed account of the protest, but rather noted that it was a

¹⁹⁵ In other words, students could simply register as legitimate members of P.S. 83 instead of being sent there for temporary quarters as members of the colored school 68.

¹⁹⁶ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Now Will It Be Successful? A Clever Trick Which T. McCants Stewart May Try.”

¹⁹⁷ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Stewart Gives Up Fight for 83 Integration.”

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

“somewhat threatening demonstration.”¹⁹⁹ Parents were determined to get their children out of the old building. If the children’s only option was to attend the “rickety,” “ramshackle” building on Troy Avenue, they would not attend at all. According to Principal Georgiana F. Putnam, the “number of pupils in attendance [at P.S. 68] was only about half as large as usual, a²⁰⁰d attributed the low attendance to “persons who refuse to send their children to the old school.”

“Mr. Stewart appears to have given up wholly his right to make No. 83 a mixed school,” the *Eagle* reported on September 8. But Weeksville residents had not given up. The Friday after their demonstration, a group convened again at the Bethel A.M.E. church. “The attendance included a number of Brooklyn’s best known citizens,” an *Eagle* reporter noted. This was their third public meeting at the Bethel A.M.E., having been forced to organize at least once each year since the new school building was promised.²⁰¹

School had been in session for almost two weeks, students and teachers had not been officially transferred to the new building. Parents like Isaac Hicks and Rufus L. Perry again called for action. “We the residents ...[and] taxpayers...petition the honorable board of education to abolish school No. 68,” their petition read. And “the principal of public school No. 83 be directed to admit, as pupils, all children in [the] district as shall apply.”²⁰² Accompanied by 75 signatures, their petition made its way to the Board of Education, where it would be considered at the October meeting. “The colored citizens of Brooklyn are much agitated over the

¹⁹⁹ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “They Want School No. 68 Abolished: A Big Fight On Hand In Favor of Colored Children.”

²⁰⁰ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Stewart Gives Up Fight for 83 Integration.”

²⁰¹ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “They Want School No. 68 Abolished: A Big Fight On Hand In Favor of Colored Children.”

²⁰² When considered at the oct. 4 meeting, the language was distorted. Is this important?

refusal of Principal Perkins of public school No. 83 to admit those children who had attended colored school No. 68,” the *Eagle* reported.²⁰³

It seemed the people in opposition to the mixed-race school had won. Despite all their efforts, Weeksville residents were blocked at every turn. But in a strange turn of events, the teachers at the new school threatened to strike in the second week of the school year, which for reasons that require an elaborate explanation, meant that school board members were forced back to the negotiating table.²⁰⁴ Stewart probably masterminded this turn of events by calling in favors from board members who blocked the teachers’ paychecks, thus applying indirect pressure to get the board back to the negotiating table.^{vii}

Students Suddenly Transferred to the New Building

On Friday September 30, the Board of Education Office announced that students and teachers would be transferred to the new building:

The pupils of the colored school No. 68, whose parents recently made a somewhat threatening demonstration at the new school building known as No. 83... have been transferred to the latter place in a body.

The timing of these events invites scrutiny, since such a decision would normally be the result of a board meeting. In this case, the announcement came from the Board of Education offices just days *before* they were scheduled to hold their monthly meeting. This lends further evidence to the possibility that Weir’s teachers committee (who met the week before) used their power to

²⁰³ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “They Want School No. 68 Abolished: A Big Fight On Hand In Favor of Colored Children.”

²⁰⁴ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Teachers May Quit Work: A Complication Touching Salaries at School No. 83.”

force the hand of those in charge of P.S. 83. Whatever the case might have been, the “colored” children were transferred some time between the teachers committee meeting on the 22nd, and the announcement on the 30th. “The joint occupancy of the place with the new intermediate school organized there has thus far been attended by no conflict between the white and colored children,” the *Eagle* reported on the 30th.^{viii}

Committeeman Simis Converted

The plan was to keep colored students in the building until a new structure could be completed. But after students jointly occupied the building for two months, a gossip column reported “new life for the fight over public school no. 83.”²⁰⁵ Suddenly, and without explanation, Mr. Simis declared himself in favor of an integrated school. “A great change has occurred. Mr. Simis ... is in agreement with Mr. Stewart,” the *Eagle* reported. Now the chairman of P.S. 83 was in favor of integrating the school, “making a majority of the three-person local committee in favor. “This means that the school will have a single organization of teachers, white and colored,” the *Eagle* reported, “and that the white and colored children will have to sit together unless the board interferes... Undoubtedly, there is a bitter contest in store.”²⁰⁶

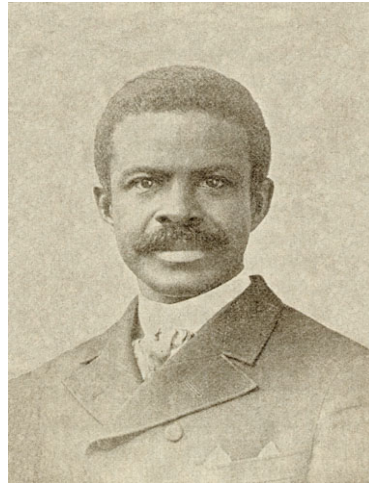
²⁰⁵ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “The Gossip of the Town: New Life for the Fight Over Public School No. 83.”

²⁰⁶ Ibid.



CAESAR SIMIS.

Caesar Simis



T. McCants Stewart

But in a convoluted turn of events, the authority to make this decision had been delegated *from* the Local Committee, *back* to the board, and then to the Teachers Committee. Thus, Simis' change of heart, which made a majority of the Local Committee in favor of consolidation, did not mean the school would be automatically consolidated. The news of Simis' change of opinion reached the public on a Friday, hours before the Teachers Committee was scheduled to meet — and just four days before the Board would meet. At the Teachers Committee meeting that afternoon “Messrs. Simis and Stewart appeared... together with a number of colored citizens and argued for the consolidation of the schools.” All the new “colored” pupils in that neighborhood wanted to attend P.S. 83, they said. None wanted to enroll in P.S. 68. Therefore P.S. 68 must, “sooner or later die a natural death.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “To Consolidate Two Schools. A Movement Toward Uniting No. 68 With No. 83.”

The Teachers Committee was convinced. They “decided to report to the Board in favor of placing both schools under one organization, transferring the colored teachers now employed...” Finally, after two years, Weeksville would have their racially integrated school.

The following Tuesday, the morning edition of the *Eagle* predicted “some warm discussion at the meeting of the board of education [that] afternoon over the proposed consolidation.”²⁰⁸ But nothing happened. Or if it did, no reporters were not permitted to cover the discussion. The *Eagle*’s prediction of “warm discussion” again failed to materialize, but journalists persisted: “A special meeting of the Teachers Committee of the board of education will be held to-night for the consideration of the proposed consolidation... It is expected there will be a lively fight.”²⁰⁹ But again, nothing.

The students left for the winter holidays and returned again. Perhaps the Board didn’t meet on the first Tuesday of January. Or for some reason, the *Eagle* failed to publish its customary summary of their meeting.²¹⁰ For whatever reason, the consolidation question didn’t appear in the newspaper again until February 14, 1893, more than two months after the teachers’ committee decided in favor of consolidation. Convinced on December 3, the committee was wavering by the following February. “The question... is still unsettled,” the *Eagle* reported. “There was no quorum of the...committee [last night]...nothing but a desultory conversation.”²¹¹

In the days leading up to the March 7th Board of Education meeting, the consolidation question grew more complicated. Opponents of consolidation attempted to fill the school with

²⁰⁸ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “To Prefer Colored Instructors. A New Feature in the Fight Over School No. 68.”

²⁰⁹ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “The Colored School Question Again.”

²¹⁰ Usually, a report of the Board of Education meeting would have been in the Wednesday paper.

²¹¹ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Board of Educators’ Committees. The Color Line and Cholera in the Schools Discussed.”

white students. This way there would be no room for the colored students.²¹² But their attempts failed. After a few days, parents complained so bitterly that the students were allowed to return to their old schools.

While some members of the board tried to fill the school with students, Simis remained committed to integration. He asked the *Eagle* to print a letter he had received from Principal J.O. Smith of Garfield mixed school of Columbus, Ohio. Simis had written to Garfield to inquire about the feasibility of creating a mixed school, and Garfield replied that he had seen it work.

Five years ago I was elected to take charge of a school building just being opened, half of the district of which was composed of largely a colored population... The white children of the [Columbus] school at first kept somewhat aloof in their school relations... but by the greatest tact and the co-operation of the board of education these differences were gradually reconciled... By the beginning of the second year... many families who had hitherto declined to send became patrons of the school and the proportion of white children increased until the colored children were only about 16 and a fraction per cent. of the number of pupils enrolled.

Garfield left the school at the close of his third year and “since then there has been no conflict between the two classes... Social barriers are being broken down,” he said. “Man is developing through the influence of man.”²¹³

Simis, who opposed Stewart for almost two years, was now working actively to help consolidate the schools. In his quest for evidence that mixed schools could work, he not only wrote to Principal Garfield in Ohio, but he visited several New York schools and found that “in

²¹² On March 3rd, the *Eagle* reported that students from five neighborhood schools were ordered to transfer to P.S. 83. But the plan was a disaster because the board had fixed these new district lines in such a way that students would have to cross the train tracks to get to school. “To compel children of such a helpless age to cross the tracks several times a day on their way to and from school is recognized as a hazardous requirement.” Local Committee members Simis, Stewart, and Miller were “beset night and day by parents... At times something akin to a mob sentiment [had] been manifested.” In the end the children’s parents would not allow them to endanger themselves, and they were returned to their old schools with the blessing of New York City’s Superintendent of schools.

²¹³ Brooklyn *Eagle* Staff, “Simis’ Change of Heart: He Now Advocates the Idea of Mixed Schools” Garfield’s use of the term “Classes” here to refer to races is interesting! And worth following up on.

one case 30 per cent of the pupils were colored and of high standing in their classes. There is no color line in the New York schools,” he reported. “In school No. 83 of this city, says Mr. Simis, the majority of the pupils who stood highest at the last examination were colored children.” Simis explained that “at the outset he had been controlled by class prejudice against the negro which was based upon the knowledge of their former servile condition.” But, as the *Eagle* put it, “he has lately had a complete change of heart...and now pulls together with Mr. Stewart to further the scheme for consolidation.”²¹⁴

The Board of Education was scheduled to meet to decide the issue, once and for all, in the late afternoon on Tuesday, March 7th. Two of the three members of the Local Committee were now in favor of a mixed school. The children were already in the same building. Everything was running smoothly. Opponents seemed to have exhausted all their options. But on the day of the meeting, a new petition appeared on the front page of the *Eagle's* four o'clock edition:

We are sincerely of the opinion that public school No. 83 will never be the agent for good in this district that it should be until it receives the cordial support of the white residents, and their support is to be gained by granting this petition for which we pray.²¹⁵

This time, no one bothered with an argument about property values. Petitioners simply objected to sending their children to “a school where there are so many colored children.” But unlike most petitions printed in the *Eagle*, the names of those signing the petition were not printed in the article. An unsigned document, it could have been drafted by anyone. “The proposition to

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Against the Mixed School Idea.”

consolidate [the schools]... will, it is expected, be finally disposed of by the board of education this afternoon,” the *Eagle* reported. And it was.

The Integration (Finally) of P.S. 83

“A GREAT NOISE IS MADE Over the Abolition of the Color Line,” read the front-page *Eagle* headline the following afternoon. Not one, but two articles were devoted to the subject in the March 8, 1893 *Eagle*.²¹⁶ “THE LAST OF THE COLOR LINE: White and Negro Schools to Be United,” the article on page five announced. The two articles captured the exhilaration and drama of the heated meeting, included the full text of T. McCants Stewart’s moving speech, and closed with a tally of votes on the long-awaited proposal. “The motion to consolidate the schools was put and carried by a vote of 17 to 11. The hour of 7 o’clock having arrived the chair declared the meeting adjourned.”²¹⁷ Two and a half years after the fateful hearing in October of 1890, on March 8, 1893, the new building at the corner of Bergen and Schenectady welcomed a mixed-race student body.

Conclusion

This story is important for four key reasons. First, the story paints a picture of Central Brooklyn’s nineteenth-century social structure, a variegated structure in which race was *not* the primary, overriding identifying characteristic. It shows how race and class were not quite separable concepts in U.S. Northern cities for a time after the Civil War. For Ceasar Simis, who spent at least a year working actively against integration, the problem with colored students was

²¹⁶ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “A Great Noise Is Made Over the Abolition of the Color Line” The first of two articles on the subject in that day’s *Eagle*, this one was dedicated to the opposition, quoting “a well-known member of the board” who declared the measure “an outrage upon the white people.”

²¹⁷ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “The Last of the Color Line: White and Negro Schools to Be United.”

that he saw them in terms of their “former servile condition,” in other words, their blackness marked them as belonging to a lower socio-economic class than himself.²¹⁸

The story is also important because it replaces a simplistic story of blacks versus white, with a more carefully rendered story about five businessmen whose wealth was so great, whose political power so densely penetrated the workings of nineteenth-century Brooklyn life, that they were nearly successful in their attempts to override the entire community’s wishes for almost three years. Isaac Halstead, J.V. Bolz, August Aubery, Ebenezer Miller, and Ceasar Simis acted as ringleaders in the attempt to deny Weeksville residents their mixed-race school. After Halstead and Bolz failed to convince the board that real estate values would be devastated by the mixed-race school, Aubery, Simis, and Miller worked against integration for reasons they failed to make plain. Perhaps Aubery and Miller had economic interests at stake, we cannot know. As for Simis, he admitted to misguided sentiment. Together, these men illustrate a picture of racism that is not simply about sentiment, but rather about money and social class. These economic interests were reflected *through* sentiment. Racist ideologies were the result of material inequality. Not the other way around.

This story is also important because the integrated school in Weeksville set the stage for fifty years of racial integration in Brooklyn. When Brooklyn absorbed hundreds of thousands of black migrants from the U.S. South, from Barbados and other Carribean islands between the wars, they arrived to find a racially integrated neighborhood with racially integrated schools. The battles waged and won by T. McCants Stewart, Ceasar Simis, and all the residents of Weeksville had a lasting, cumulative impact on the city of Brooklyn.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Brooklyn Eagle Staff, “Simis’ Change of Heart: He Now Advocates the Idea of Mixed Schools.”

²¹⁹ Census data reveal that the neighborhood was integrated, in terms of both race and class. This dissertation would benefit from more documentation concerning the racial integration of the schools. Albert Vann, who led the AATA

Finally, this story illustrates the contrast between Weeksville in 1968, when the Hunterfly Road houses were saved — and nineteenth-century Weeksville, when ideas about race and class were still in flux. Unlike the popular public memory of *Brown v. Board*, which presumes that schools were segregated *until* 1954, this story shows that the Weeksville school only experienced segregation *in the 1940s and 50s*. Thus, when the African American Teachers Association demanded local control of schools in the Weeksville area, charging teachers with racism in 1968, it was because fifty years of racial integration had dissolved into a under-resourced super-exploited landscape as whites fled to the racially exclusive suburbs and middle-class blacks who left for less devastated areas of the city. The story of the Weeksville school and the subsequent fifty years of racial integration counters a popular progress-narrative.

when they sparked the Ocean Hill Brownsville Teachers Strike, described attending mixed-race schools when he grew up in Bed-Stuy in a *New York Magazine* article. Neighborhood residents report the same in a number of oral histories. The NYCHA archives also provide robust evidence of mixed-race public housing in the neighborhood. Klein, “The Power Next Time?”.

CHAPTER III

“Clues Are Found to Lost Negro Colony”: The Weeksville Heritage Center

“The present status of the colored residents of this city ... must occasion gratification,” the *Brooklyn Eagle* declared in 1886. “There is a large number of property holders and “wealth seems to be...evenly distributed” among them. Just over twenty years after the close of the civil war, the widely read local newspaper was celebrating an impressive community of black people living prosperously in the city of Brooklyn, New York.²²⁰

Eighty-three years later, anthropologist Michael Cohn remarked that he’d “long suspected that many Negroes lived prosperously in Brooklyn in the nineteenth century, despite contemporary news reports describing the area as a rundown slum.” Cohn, the anthropological curator at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, offered these comments in the context of a Central Brooklyn archeology project.²²¹ Digging through the rubble at a Model Cities demolition site at the corner of Dean Street and Schenectady Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant (popularly: Bed-Stuy)

²²⁰ “They have an aristocracy composed principally of professional men and women, or families of refinement and culture... families widely known and respected,” the *Eagle* boasted. “[Colored Institutions like] the Excelsior Building and Loan Association, the Kings County Pioneer Land and Improvement Company... the Mercantile Association are flourishing institutions. The aggregate capital invested in them... is a handsome sum.” *Brooklyn Eagle Staff*, “The Colored People. How They Have Succeeded in the City of Brooklyn.”

²²¹ The “archaeology project” was actually Model Cities demolition site. It would soon become public housing. When James Hurley learned of the city’s plans to demolish buildings situated in the center of Weeksville, he and fellow researchers sought (and received) permission to conduct an amateur archeology dig as the bulldozers worked their way through the site. As Weeksville resident and archeology project participant William Harley put it, “When the bulldozers retreat we rush in and grab, grab, grab!” The archaeology dig was staffed by the members of Boy Scout Troupe 352 and other community members. More on this later in the chapter. See also: *New York Times Staff*, “Clues Are Found to Lost Negro Colony Here”; Todd, “What Are They Digging For?”.

community members looked for evidence of the barely-documented nineteenth-century settlement called Weeksville. The artifacts they found were convincing. “The Weeksville dig has turned up the first proof of our suspicions,” Cohn said.²²² Historian and anti-poverty worker James Hurley concurred. “We have proof of affluence and literacy in a community of 30 or 40 property-owning families that most people thought was wretchedly poor and uncultivated,” he explained.

The two white men were deeply invested in the effort to unearth Central Brooklyn’s middle-class black history. Hurley, in fact, had been the one to organize the impromptu archaeology dig at the demolition site. And before that, he had volunteered to lead the workshop that launched the archaeological exploration.²²³ He spent cold winter days at the site with a shovel in hand. Cohn’s role was more peripheral, but both men shared a passion for the project.

Given their deep investment in the public history endeavor, the two men’s characterizations of Brooklyn’s black history — as mysterious, unverified lore — is revealing. Their comments expose something profoundly unsettling, not about their personal beliefs, but about the culture of race and authority in New York circa 1968. Cohn characterized the archeological finds as “the first proof” of nineteenth-century middle-class black life in Weeksville, but he offered these words as he worked alongside William T. Harley, a seventy-year old African-American man who was raised in the very spot where the group sunk their shovels into the ground, by a woman who migrated to the majority-black settlement of

²²² New York Times Staff, “Clues Are Found to Lost Negro Colony Here.”

²²³ Offered under the auspices of the Pratt Center in 1968, Hurley’s workshop was called “Exploring New York and Bedford Stuyvesant.” Workshop participants eventually formed a community research team; they called themselves “Project Weeksville.” It was Project Weeksville participants who dug through the upturned earth at the demolition site, looking for artifacts, evidence of the nineteenth century settlement. More on this later. Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York.”

Weeksville in the decades following the civil war.²²⁴ The artifacts the team unearthed could not have been the “first proof that Negroes lived prosperously in Brooklyn” in the nineteenth century.

Harley was living proof of that.²²⁵



“When the bulldozer stops, we rush in and grab, grab, grab,” said Mr. Hurley’s principal volunteer, William T. Harley, a lifetime Bedford-Stuyvesant resident. “The neighbors are getting to know us. They say, ‘Here come Hurley and Harley,’—like a dance team.”

Clues Are Found to Lost Negro Colony Here



Mr. Harley climbs nimbly about the wreckage despite the braces he’s worn since World War I shrapnel was removed from his legs. Although he is 70, he keeps up with Mr. Hurley.

The *New York Times* published this article about the Model Cities/Weeksville dig in 1969. The article focuses on James Hurley (white) while portraying William Harley (who, the article fails to mention, grew up in what the author calls the “lost negro colony” of Weeksville) as a peripheral participant.

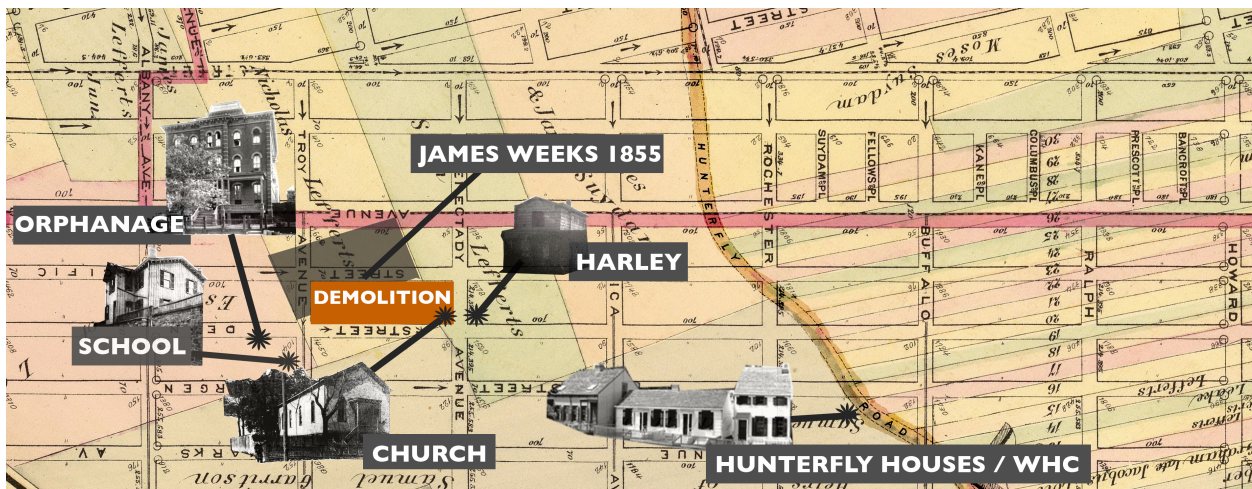
This chapter tells the story of the Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC). Now a growing cultural arts center on Bergen Street in Central Brooklyn, where Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy meet, the WHC began as a loosely formed community-research group called Project Weeksville. The group coalesced around the extemporized archeology dig they initiated at a demolition site where they city razed an entire block of old houses in the center of the historic settlement. The group later defined itself around an effort to save four of Weeksville’s remaining nineteenth-

²²⁴ Caroline (Carrie) Harley first appears in the New York census in 1900. She was 30 years old and married, but her husband was not listed on the census form. Born in Virginia, Caroline Harley arrived in Weeksville sometime between her birth in 1870, and 1900, when she first appeared on the census. Without knowing her maiden name, it is difficult to know when she arrived in Weeksville.

²²⁵ Hurley and Harley’s names are oddly similar. James Hurley (white) was the director of the Long Island Historical Society. William Harley (black) grew up in Weeksville.

century frame houses, and eventually developed into a historic site and heritage center. Today, the WHC “is a multidimensional museum dedicated to preserving the history of the 19th century African American community of Weeksville, Brooklyn.”²²⁶

At the core of the WHC are the four frame houses saved by *Project Weeksville* participants in 1968. Built between the 1840s and the turn of the century, the houses sit on a remnant of an old colonial road, tucked into the middle of a block, just off the city grid.



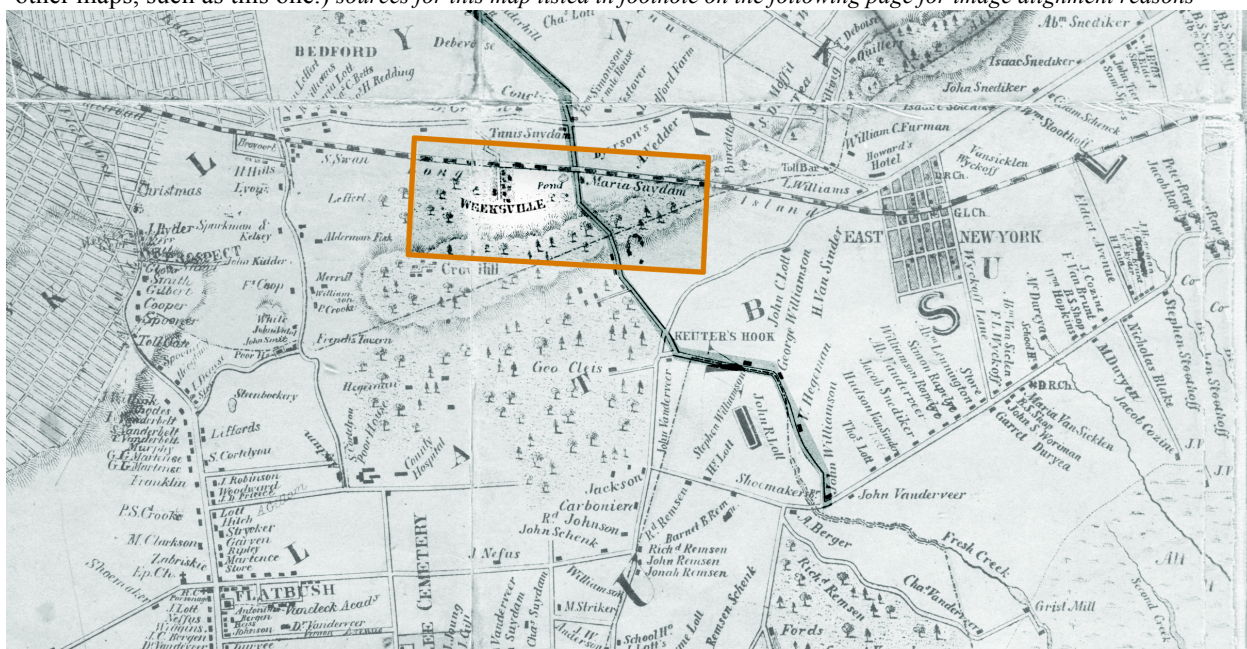
NYC “Model Cities” Demolition Site /1968 archaeology dig and the Hunterfly Road Houses that became the Weeksville Heritage Center.

As this map reveals, New York City’s plan to demolish the houses on the block bounded by Dean , Troy, Pacific, and Schenectady was a plan to demolish what had once been the center of Weeksville. The Bethel AME church was on that block, and across the street from the church was William Harley’s boyhood home. The block slated for demolition also overlapped the parcel of land purchased by James Weeks in the 1830s, after whom the settlement was named. (See translucent grey shape, above.) Weeksville’s most important institutions were clustered in this area, including the Howard Colored Orphanage (shown), the Zion Home for the Colored Aged next door (not shown), the old Weeksville school (shown), the new Weeksville school (ca. 1890, not shown).

The Hunterfly Road Houses sit roughly three blocks east on the old Hunterfly Road. After salvaging what they could from Weeksville’s demolished buildings, *Project Weeksville* participants turned their attention to saving four houses that were still standing. As of 2012, the four houses are landmarked and they serve as the Weeksville Heritage Center. (Note the way Hunterfly Road overlaps with the planned city street grid, not yet carved out of the landscape but drawn into this 1874 map. Compare to Hunterfly Road on the 1840s map, below (winding through the orange box, The road is not labeled on the 1840s map but is recognizable as Hunterfly when compared with

²²⁶ WHC Mission Statement as of October 15, 2012 Weeksville Heritage Center, “Weeksville Heritage Center.”

other maps, such as this one.) sources for this map listed in footnote on the following page for image alignment reasons



Weeksville, just outside the city of Brooklyn, New York, ca. 1840s. Map via Brooklyn Historical Society.

²²⁷ This citation refers to the maps. Source for James Weeks' land location: Brooklyn Business Directories 1823-1897. Also see Geismar, "Weeksville Master Plan EAS: Phase 1A Archaeological Assessment of the Cultural Facility Site." p. 10 for more precise description of location, which I transcribed onto this map as a shape. Source for location of structures: 1888 Sanborne maps. Images via Maynard and Cottman, "Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover: The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York"; except Harley's house (1930s municipal archives tax photos) and the orphanage (via Brooklyn Public Library). 1874 map by Fulton, via David Rumsey Maps. 1840s Kings County/Weeksville map via Long Island Historical Society.



The Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC) ca. 2011. The WHC began as an effort to preserve the story of Weeksville and coalesced around a mission to save these frame houses along the old Hunterfly Road.



One of the last remaining strips of Hunterfly Road is tucked into the middle of the block bounded by Bergen, Rochester, St. Marks, and Buffalo. The Weeksville Heritage Center is four frame houses arranged along the worn dirt path once known as Hunterfly Road, highlighted in the above Google satellite image.

Nearly fifty years after community members formed *Project Weeksville*, the WHC remains relatively unknown. Despite enormous efforts to preserve stories of a black middle class community, despite irrefutable, material evidence of the black middle-class experience in Central Brooklyn, not to mention family stories and personal memories spanning almost two centuries, starting before the civil war, Bedford-Stuyvesant remains (seemingly inextricably) associated with black poverty in the public imagination.²²⁸ The erasure that Project Weeksville participants sought to address has not been remedied by their efforts.²²⁹ This chapter tells the story of Weeksville's black-middle-class invisibility and the purposeful disinvestment in Brooklyn that sustained that invisibility since the 1940s. Furthermore this chapter documents black middle-class efforts to address the problem of their own invisibility beginning in 1968, and the structural forces that have muted the impact of WHC's work for almost fifty years since then.²³⁰

The chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I tell the story of The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History (Weeksville Society) and their early efforts to form a museum. In the second section I describe what happened to the Weeksville / Bed-Stuy area of Brooklyn between the 1930s and the 1960s, in other words, the forces that prefigured the community's efforts to preserve the Weeksville story. *Project Weeksville* was formed to preserve memories of Weeksville. But why were the memories in need of rescuing? How were they obscured in the first place? I answer this question through the story of William T. Harley, born in 1899 across the street from the Project Weeksville archeology dig, and through

²²⁸ For example, see comments from Jack Newfield and Charles Hobson ca. 1968, or Wolf-Powers: Newfield, "Robert Kennedy's Bedford-Stuyvesant Legacy"; "Anomaly TV: Inside Bed-Stuy - The Brooklyn Rail"; Wolf-Powers, "Expanding Planning's Public Sphere: STREET Magazine, Activist Planning, and Community Development in Brooklyn, New York 1971-1973."

²²⁹ For a more recent example of a representation of Central Brooklyn that ignores the black middle class, see Jay Z's "Where I'm From," ca. 1990s, or any number of present-day pop-culture representations of Bed-Stuy.

²³⁰ Tease out capital degradation, etc. growing invisibility (and willful destruction[?]) all the layers.

oral histories of other neighborhood residents. Section two is designed to explain why Weeksville Society members were so dedicated to the project of documenting their invisible history — in other words, to illustrate the Weeksville neighborhood as they remembered it and the way it changed over the years.

In the third section I describe efforts to develop the museum in the decades following the Weeksville Society's initial work. Though the Society dedicated a great deal of time & energy to the project in the 1960s and 70s, it was only in 1977, nearly ten years after they began, that the group took title to three of the four houses, then poor funding, vandalism, lack of community interest, and deteriorating urban infrastructure kept the project from developing. "Although the houses were excavated in the 1960's," a 1991 article explains, "decades passed before enough money could be raised to begin restoration. Workers used galvanized steel to keep the houses from falling down."²³¹ The Weeksville Heritage Center did not open to the public until 2005, almost 40 years after the group's initial efforts.²³²

Section 1: The Weeksville Society

"I remember waking up in the middle night and [saying] to myself ' they shouldn't be allowed to destroy the houses before some one could check them,'" James Hurley recalled. The 40-year-old white historian had recently learned of the city's plans to demolish about 40 of the Weeksville's oldest houses. "For several years he tried, but not too successfully, to delve into the past history of that particular section and why it got such a bad name," a 1969 *New York Times*

²³¹ Reiss, "Small Cultural Organizations Face Large Funding Problems. | North America > United States from AllBusiness.com."

²³² Ramirez, "Haven for Blacks in Civil War Riots Now Safeguards History - New York Times." (In contrast, according to Holtzman, Abram was able to invite visitors into the LESTM despite not being up to code.)

article explained. Hoping demolition site would yield clues, “he contacted a few city officials, Model Cities and the Buildings Department for permission to go in and dig before the bulldozers did, and he was given the green light.”²³³

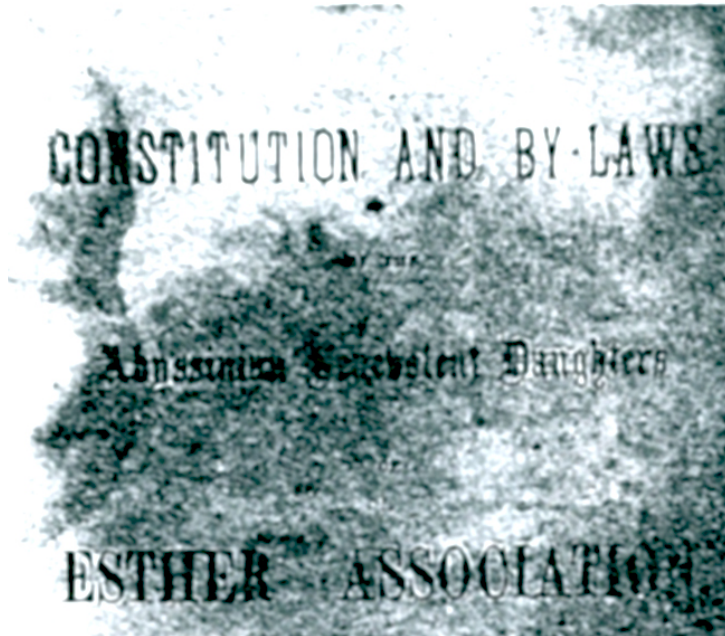
The opportunity to conduct an archeological study of Weeksville materialized just as Hurley and a group of Bed-Stuy residents were concluding a workshop they called *Exploring Bedford Stuyvesant and New York*. Hurley had volunteered to lead the workshop in the summer of 1968 under the auspices of Pratt College.²³⁴ Residents like Delores McCullough, a court reporter, and Patricia Johnson of the NYC Office of Rent Control joined him, and together, the group began assembling the story of their neighborhood. To make the archaeological dig happen, Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth-In-Action hired Hurley to run the research project and gave him an office. Hurley gathered volunteers from the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Boy Scout Troop #342, and P.S. 243. Even Jesse Simpkins, the contractor and bulldozer operator hired to demolish the buildings, participated. When “faced by those eager beavers who constantly got in his way,” the *New York Amsterdam News* reported, Simpkins “decided to join them.”²³⁵ Simpkins unearthed a constitution of the Abyssynia Benevolent Daughters of Esther printed in 1853, an object which remains one of the WHC’s most impressive artifacts. Wilson Williams, Scout master of troop 342, began spending most of his weekends digging with about fifteen members of his troop.²³⁶ Meanwhile Hurley brought on Michael Cohn, curator of anthropology at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, as a consultant.

²³³ Todd, “What Are They Digging For?”.

²³⁴ Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York”; Todd, “What Are They Digging For?”.

²³⁵ Todd, “What Are They Digging For?”.

²³⁶ Ibid.



Constitution and By-laws of the Abyssinian Benevolent Daughters of Esther Association of the City of New York, “a Black womens group founded in 1839. This pamphlet was printed in 1853 by the firm of Zuille & Leonard, located in lower Manhattan, John Zuille was a leading Afro-American abolitionist.”²³⁷ (this image is a scan of a photocopy of a reprint.)

When interviewed by the *New York Times* in 1969, anthropologist Michael Cohn’s characterized the group’s archeological finds as the “first proof” of nineteenth-century middle-class black life. As mentioned earlier, Cohn offered these words as he worked alongside William T. Harley, a seventy-year old African-American man who was born in 1899 and raised at the corner of Dean and Schenectady, where the dig took place.²³⁸ Cohn’s comment is revealing because it suggests a culture in which only a credentialed authority could authenticate Harley’s experience. In other words, so little authority was conferred on William Harley (whether by Cohn and Hurley specifically, or by white people more generally, or by the larger public imagination), that Harley was not recognizable as a legitimate source of information about *his*

²³⁷ Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York,” 19.

²³⁸ Harley lived at this address from his birth in 1899 through at least 1940. See U.S. Census records.

own life. “He climbed nimbly about the wreckage,” the journalist noted, describing Harley only as “Mr. Hurley’s principal volunteer.” But the community that nurtured Harley’s development was precisely the community whose material belongings were unearthed in the dig. When Harley found one of the team’s most impactful artifacts, a tintype of an African-American woman in Victorian dress, it was in the foundation of Russel Ordens’ house. Ordens and Harley turned nine years old together the year the census-taker visited their neighborhood in 1910. Mrs. Ordens was from Virginia like Harley’s mother.²³⁹ Whatever story the tintype held, it was a story deeply intertwined with that of Harley’s life.



Harley found one of the team’s most impressive artifacts, a tintype of an African-American woman in Victorian dress. She came to be known as “the Weeksville Lady.”

Hurley and Cohn’s language offers other insights, too. In addition to revealing the fraught relationship between race and authority circa 1969, their words reflect something about public perceptions of Central Brooklyn in the late 1960s. Most people thought of Brooklyn as “wretchedly poor and uncultivated,” Hurley said. Though Hurley was ostensibly talking about how people imagined Brooklyn in the past, his characterization matches policy scholar Laura Wolff-Powers’ description of the way people spoke about Brooklyn in that very moment: “The

²³⁹ According to the New York Times article, Harley found the tintype at 86 Schenectady. New York Times Staff, “Clues Are Found to Lost Negro Colony Here.”

media of the time tended to caricature [Central Brooklyn neighborhoods] as decaying and pathology-ridden if they rendered them visible at all.” In an August 1968 article, the L.A. Times described Bedford-Stuyvesant as “perhaps the worst slum in New York City, an honor not lightly accorded.” Closer to home, the area was no less stigmatized. As Jack Newfield put it in his 1968 New York Magazine article, “Bedford-Stuyvesant’s every-day reality is like a bad LSD trip.”²⁴⁰

Project Weeksville emerged as a direct rebuttal to negative characterizations of Bedford Stuyvesant. “Despite expressions of ridicule . . . from outside the community,” Brooklyn residents reported, “this [community faces] very real and distressing condition[s].”²⁴¹ The difference between “real and distressing” material problems on the one hand, and cultural deficiencies suggested by the increasingly popular “culture of poverty thesis” on the other, was the distinction Project Weeksville participants hoped to clarify with their heritage project.²⁴² “We’ve got to make sure our kids know how they got here,” Joan Maynard, Project Weeksville’s Executive Director explained. “[They need to know about] those who came before [and what they] did to try to make a better life. The kids have to learn they’re not trash.”²⁴³ By uncovering the history of Weeksville or by documenting a pre-civil war free black, intentional community, Central Brooklyn residents could help draw a distinction between their own racial identity on the one hand, and the material conditions of the postindustrial city on the other.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ These last two sentences have been copied from my intro. Need to decide how to deal with this, which chapter gets them.

²⁴¹ Center for Urban Education., Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation., and Bedford-Stuyvesant D & S Corporation., *Community Attitudes in Bedford-Stuyvesant; and Area Study*.

²⁴² Moynihan, Rainwater, and Yancey, *The Negro Family*.

²⁴³ Martin, “In Black History, Reconstruction Is Also a Struggle.”

²⁴⁴ For more on the conditions Bed-Stuy residents inherited ca. 1968, see this excellent neighborhood survey put together by the residents themselves: Center for Urban Education., Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation., and Bedford-Stuyvesant D & S Corporation., *Community Attitudes in Bedford-Stuyvesant; and Area Study*.

The story of Weeksville held the potential to disrupt the presumed causal relationship between blackness and poverty, or the culture of poverty thesis. In a moment of unrelenting urban renewal projects, deindustrialization, and capital flight, public discourse frequently painted African-Americans as the cause of deteriorating conditions. But how could the conditions of the postindustrial city be the results of African-American occupancy, Project Weeksville participants implicitly argued, if African-Americans lived prosperously in Brooklyn long before these conditions prevailed? When the group formalized their project, calling themselves the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History (hereafter: Weeksville Society) in 1969, participants expressed these sentiments in a mission statement:

The Society believes that the knowledge of our culture, heritage and our contribution to this nation will help all of us, especially our children. With this knowledge they can continue to grow with the pride, self confidence, dignity and productivity which is essential to their survival and the survival of the total society.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York.”



While Cohn could only *suspect* that black people lived prosperously in Brooklyn, black people who *did* grow up prosperously in the area founded the *Society of the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History* to tell their own stories.

L to R, Weeksville residents: William Harley, WWI veteran, b. 1899; Justice Oliver Williams, first black person elected to the New York State Supreme Court in Brooklyn, b. 1899; Dr. Archibald Glover, civil engineer, b. 1903.

Project Weeksville was not alone in the effort to wrest control of the neighborhood's reputation from those who pathologized the area and its residents. While Harley and Project Weeksville participants labored to extract black history from the earth, Albert Vann, Rhody McCoy, and the African-American Teachers Association (ATA) worked to insert black history into the schools at nearby Intermediate School 171. The ATA's efforts gained national media attention when they developed into the Ocean-Hill / Brownsville Teachers Strike of 1968. "Our strong pitch was for community control, accountability, pride, and heritage." Vann said. "We weren't organizing for better pay or better working conditions like the union: our organization was based on the quality of instruction. We wanted to improve the curriculum, introduce black

history, parental involvement, community control.”²⁴⁶ Both the ATA and Project Weeksville worked to document black history, and to render it visible.

Hurley offered his workshop through the Pratt Center; Vann worked in the public schools. But outside of educational institutions, the desire to counter unfair portrayals of the neighborhood was no less urgent. One response came from Weeksville-area native Charles Hobson, who began producing and broadcasting a television series called *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* in 1968.²⁴⁷ Hobson was born of West Indian parents; he grew up about six blocks north of the Model Cities demolition site where Project Weeksville participants were digging. “Bed-Stuy was represented as risky and drug-infested in the mainstream media,” Hobson explained. *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* “focused on the real Bed-Stuy, an area with a stable black middle-class, beautiful privately-owned buildings, multiple ethnic enclaves, [and] lots of churches.”²⁴⁸ Speaking against the stereotype decades later, Hobson pointed out “there have always been nice areas and many different kinds of people living there.”²⁴⁹

Section 2: White Flight and Capital Degredation

Why did the mainstream media represent Bed-Stuy as “risky and drug-infested?” While Hobson was right, there had always been nice areas and many different kinds of people living there, the area endured a massive change between 1930, the year William Harley’s youngest daughter turned two, and 1968, when Hobson began producing *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* for

²⁴⁶ Klein, “The Power Next Time?”.

²⁴⁷ *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* showcased neighborhood activities of all kinds, but in one 1968 episode that is particularly relevant to the WHC, a group of children called the Le-Roi Jones Players delivered a spoken-word piece in which they expressed a desire for a richer portrayal of black history in the schools. ““Hey you, you, and you too teacher. Why must it always be that the only black people I learn about in school lectures are George Washington Carver and Booker T.?””

²⁴⁸ “Anomaly TV: Inside Bed-Stuy - The Brooklyn Rail.”

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

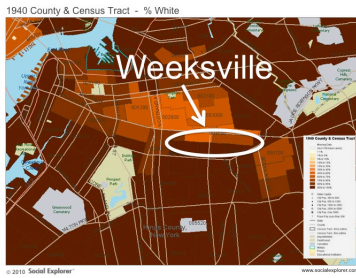
television. First of all, the white population of the Weeksville area declined dramatically, which transformed a mixed-race neighborhood into an almost-all black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in just under 30 years. Only 25% of the population in 1940, non-white residents made up 91% of the population by 1970. But the area did not suffer simply because white people left. Rather, the neighborhood suffered because federal policies extracted wealth from cities all over the U.S., delivering money to racially exclusive white suburbs. Furthermore, banks refused to circulate capital in U.S. cities for decades, which further degraded the city's wealth.

But this did not happen all at once. To illustrate how change came to Weeksville, it will be instructive to review the changes witnessed by William Harley, who in 1930, still lived in the house where he was raised at the corner of Dean and Schenectady in Central Brooklyn.

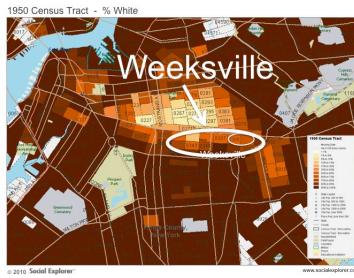
Section 2.1 Changes Witnessed by William Harley & His Neighbors

A rural black settlement when William Harley's mother arrived in the late nineteenth century, Weeksville had, by the 1930s, become a racially and class-diverse Brooklyn neighborhood. A Roman Catholic church two doors east of Harley's house anchored a substantial community of first-generation Italian immigrants. Some worked as chauffeurs, telephone operators, bookbinders, and dressmakers while others worked as laborers or "helpers." The exact racial makeup of the neighborhood is difficult to determine for 1930 because census data has not been tabulated on a census-tract level, but most of Harley's neighbors were labeled black or white on the census that year, though some were Asian and Native American. Some of Harley's black neighbors migrated from the British West Indies, others from the U.S. South, and

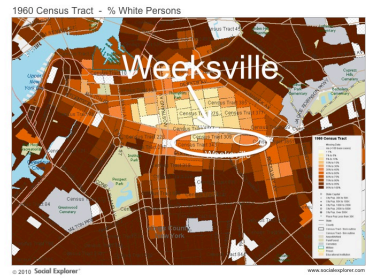
Non-white population of census tract #307, the Weeksville area 1940-2010



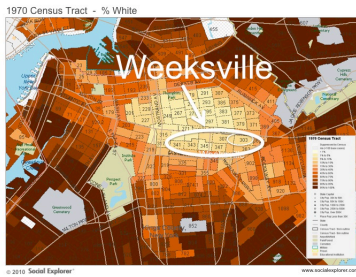
1940: Weeksville Census Tract 5200
24.7% non-white (75.3% white)



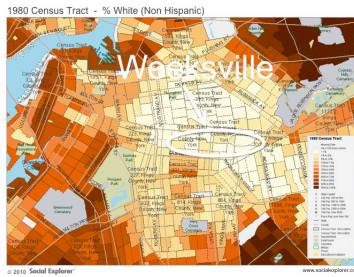
1950: Weeksville Census Tract 307
47.4% non-white (52.6% white)



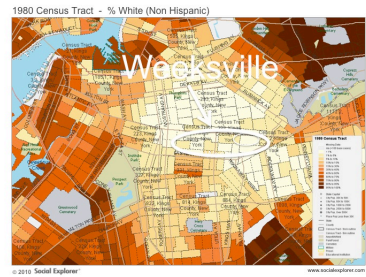
1960 Weeksville Census Tract 307
80.8% non-white (19.2% white)
250



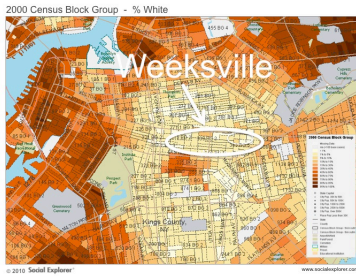
1970: Weeksville Census Tract 307
90.6% non-white (9.4% white)



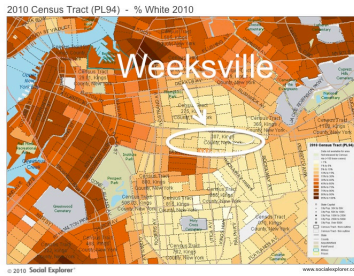
1980: Weeksville Census Tract 307
98.6% non-white (1.4% white)



1990: Weeksville Census Tract 307
99.2% non-white (0.8% white)



2000: Weeksville Census Tract 307
97.2% non-white (2.8% white)



2010 Weeksville Census Tract 307
95.8% non-white (4.2% white)

²⁵⁰ The Hunterfly Road Houses, which eventually became the Weeksville Heritage Center, are in a census tract with the Kingsborough Houses, a public housing project built in 1940. Though originally integrated, around the time control shifted from the New York City Housing Authority, which was administratively nested in the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (1934-37) to the United States Housing Authority in 1937 under Nathan Straus, FHA subsidies encouraged segregated suburbanization rather than integrated city-living. The Kingsborough Houses may have experienced turnover quicker than more established areas surrounding it. The neighboring census tracts help to give a more accurate picture of neighborhood change, esp. between 1950—1960: While census tract 307 shifted from 52.6% white to 19.2% in the decade between 1950 & 1960, adjacent census tract 347, to the South, went from 97.6% white in 1950 to 70.7% white in 1960. Census tract 301, just East of the Hunterfly Road Houses was 63.3% white, then 42.2% white. A slower change, but a change nonetheless.

some, like Harley, were born and raised in Brooklyn. Unlike their Italian neighbors, black residents around the corner of Dean Street and Schenectady worked as laborers, “helpers,” or laundresses.²⁵¹

In some ways, William Harley and next door neighbor James Riley, who was white, lived similar lives despite their racial differences. Riley was raised by a single parent, his father, in the neighboring small village of Malbonneville, another of the tiny settlements swallowed by the expanding city of Brooklyn, while Harley was raised by his widowed mother, Carrie, in Weeksville. As of 1930, both men were married and raising children in rented apartments. Neither Helen, James Riley’s wife, nor Maude, Harley’s wife worked outside the home. Both men had working-class roots. But Riley, who worked as a lineman for the oil company in his twenties, secured a job as a reporter by age 30. Harley, a disabled veteran of the first World War, was working as a cement laborer according to the 1930 census. The racial equality that Weeksville school activists worked so hard to achieve had not yet reached fruition in 1930s Bed-Stuy. Importantly, however, neither was the area completely segregated. (The area was not segregated until the 1980s, the same decade the federal government instituted a national holiday to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.)²⁵² In 1930, the Weeksville area hosted a mixed-race, mixed-class community.

But the neighborhood, so stable for the first thirty years of Harley’s life, would soon change. As census takers were out cataloguing residents in 1930, real estate dealers were beginning to codify a set of rules about the valuation of property. Segregation, University of

²⁵¹ 1930 Federal Census

²⁵² Romero, “A Brief History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.”

Michigan researcher Frederick Morrision Babcock argued, could be deliberately used “as a device” to protect property values from declining.²⁵³ Babcock would soon be invited to draft the handbook for evaluating federal home loans all over the country, where he would establish racial segregation as federal policy.²⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Weeksville area absorbed a significant number of black migrants from the U.S. South, with no adverse effect on property values. In fact, the increased demand for housing actually lifted property values in the 1930s, proving the antithesis of Babcock’s prophecy.²⁵⁵

It was only in the 1940s, when Babcock and other real estate professionals codified rules for the financial industry that made blackness into a devaluing force, that New Deal legislation began to erode the city’s stable infrastructure.²⁵⁶ It was only in the 1950s that the effects of New Deal legislation really hit residents on the ground. In other words, the neighborhood’s trajectory was shaped by a profoundly devastating, federally backed, racially exclusive withdrawal of capital from the city in the mid-twentieth century.²⁵⁷ Real estate dealers defined racial blackness as a danger to property values, then lured Brooklyn’s white residents to the suburbs with promises of stable property values. Put another way, real estate dealers channeled federal dollars through white buyers into brand new housing developments outside the city limits, thereby guaranteeing their own profits and devastating the city’s economic and social infrastructure.

²⁵³ Babcock, *The Valuation of Real Estate*.

²⁵⁴ Zimmerman, “The FHA’s First 25 Years,” 11.

²⁵⁵ Trevor Kollman conducted a study of this very neighborhood and found that property values increased during and after the great black migration. Kollman, “The Impact of African American Migration on Housing in New York City Neighborhoods During the Great Depression.”

²⁵⁶ From the FHA’s First 25 Years, cited above, ““Babcock's organization wrote the underwriting manual that has been the FHA Bible ever since. AS soon as the manual was completed, a course of training in FHA underwriting procedures was begun.... they became effective on November 1, 1934... On December 21 a commitment was issued... first house to be built with FHA-insured financing.””

²⁵⁷ Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Highsmith, “Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan”; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*.

Brooklyn residents were buffered from the full effect of federal policies at first, in part by a robust municipal housing program. In 1934, George F. Poehler of the New York City Housing Authority surveyed Weeksville neighborhood to determine its suitability for a “negro” housing project.²⁵⁸ Poehler found that 63.5% of the residents in Harley’s neighborhood were “negroes,” and 100% of the properties were over 35 years old. 87% of those properties had no heat or hot water and 8% had no indoor toilets. Since the lack of hot water and indoor plumbing were precisely the problems NYCHA wanted to correct with its slum-clearance and public housing program, it would seem that census tract #307 was an ideal site for a new project. Tearing down the houses would eliminate some of the most problematic properties in the city. But Poehler recommended finding another area for a housing project, explaining that the neighborhood was stable, easily accessible by public transportation, with good shopping facilities and fair schools.²⁵⁹

Neighborhood resident Leah Edwards was living with her grandmother (who she called Nana) in one of the wooden rowhouses across the street from the Hunterfly Road Houses on Bergen Street when Poehler visited the neighborhood. Her recollections of the neighborhood match Poehler’s assessment of the neighborhood’s stability. Interviewed in 2007, she told

²⁵⁸ NYCHA projects were aggressively integrated, but this was not public knowledge. Tenants would be put through a rigorous application process, and once they moved into their coveted new apartments, would find the projects racially integrated. Usually, NYCHA received complaints for the first several months after opening a new integrated housing project, until people found that racial integration was not really a problem. Because the integration of public housing was such a sensitive undertaking, and not publicized, and because housing for “negroes” was so limited, NYCHA received criticism for not providing enough housing for African-Americans and for not locating housing projects in “negro” areas. Thus, NYCHA described themselves as looking for a site for a “negro” project, but once the Kingsborough Houses were built, they were racially integrated. (On the site selection, see NYCHA archives Box 54B4, Folder 9. To see examples of letters from Kingsborough tenants complaining about their African-American neighbors, see Box 54D6, Folder 14. On the success of racial mixing in NYCHA developments, see Box 71B5, folder 3, particularly the memo from Naudin Oswell to Mrs. Mae Lumsden, dated February 6, 1941.

²⁵⁹ Letter from Poehler and Vladeck to Rheinstein, March 3, 1939. Box 54B4 Folder 9. I am distraught over a missing document (that I photocopied but then lost) from the NYCHA archives that would help me make this point better.

stories about her Nana cooking with vegetables and fruits she grew in her backyard, going out to the movies with the neighbor children, and interacting with a mixed-race population on the block. Seemingly hesitant to say anything too negative about the neighborhood's condition in 2007, Edwards talked *around* the disappearance of her middle-class neighbors and the appearance of poorer neighbors in the years since her childhood. "I'm glad I was born then because the... times were... much... I don't know...as far as people are concerned...at that time we were able to sleep on the roof in the summer time... but after a while you could see times changing... It was very diverse. I mean the ... the neighborhood that I grew up in... Nobody... there was no such thing as, um... *racial* disturbances or anything like that." At age 81, Edwards concluded, "I'm glad I grew up [in the neighborhood in the 1930s] because I don't know if Nana would've really even let us go to *school* today... with some of the things that are happening."²⁶⁰

Despite Poehler's recommendation, the city eventually decided to raze 6 blocks of old Weeksville to build a racially integrated housing project.²⁶¹ When the Kingsborough Housing Projects were opened in 1941, Harley and Riley were both still living at the corner of Dean and Schenectady.²⁶² Mayor LaGuardia proudly proclaimed that, with the completion of the Kingsborough Housing Project, the city would be housing approximately 84,000 persons... and these people will all be sheltered in healthful, fireproof buildings, with modern facilities."²⁶³ 709

²⁶⁰ Oral history, 2007, Story Corps archives Washington DC. Edwards never describes herself as African-American but she sounds African-American.

²⁶¹ See footnote above on NYCHA's approach to racial integration in public housing. In short, they didn't broadcast their intentions to integrate the houses.

²⁶² Edwards' family received a notice inviting them to apply for a spot in the new project when it was completed. According to Edwards, her Nana wanted no such thing and moved the family a few blocks away. Of the 357 families who were displaced, 176, almost exactly half, shared Leah Edwards' Nana's sentiments: they were not interested. In the end, only 19% of former residents (68 families) were eligible for a spot in the low-income housing project. Of those who were interested, 23 families had too much income to qualify, 50 were single persons, 6 families were too large, etc. See memo to Miss Lansing from F. Didisheim, Secretary, July 8, 1941, NYCHA archives Box 54D6, Folder 14.

²⁶³ See Mayor LaGuardia's speech NYCHA Box 54D6, Folder 14.

white families were placed in the new apartments alongside 448 negro families and 7 Puerto Rican families. Though NYCHA received a fair number of complaints from white residents who were dismayed to find that “negroes” living in the same building, the projects remained integrated for some time.²⁶⁴ According to oral histories,²⁶⁵ most NYCHA projects enjoyed conflict-free racial integration until the late 1950s or the early 1960s.²⁶⁶

Perhaps the easiest way to identify a date that marks a tipping point in the neighborhood’s material degradation is to look to the formation of the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council in 1954. Neighborhood activist Elsie Richardson recalls forming the organization as a resident of the mixed-race Albany Houses, another NYCHA project, about six blocks Southwest of the Hunterfly Road Houses. “It was made up of about 144 organizations throughout the Bedford-Stuyvesant community. It involved churches, block associations, PTAs, fraternal organizations throughout the community. I was secretary of the organization and what we did was we held meetings relating to situations within the community. If there were problems we used that as an agenda for a meeting or conference and we'd always make sure that at the end of a conference we came out with solutions so that we could see problems being solved.”

²⁶⁴ I need to do further research to determine when the Kingsborough Houses were segregated. As of July 1948, for example, 706 of Kingsborough’s apartments were occupied by white families, 457 by “negro” families: Box 71B5 Folder 3. There are more statistics in the archives. For complaints about “negro” neighbors, see NYCHA Box 54D6, Folder 14.

²⁶⁵ For more information on racial integration in NYCHA projects, see Selena M. Blake’s documentary about the Queensbridge houses, *Queensbridge: The Other Side*, and the oral history with Elsie Richardson, who lived in the Albany Houses in the 1950s, where mixed-race groups organized political meetings in each others’ apartments. NYC Commission on Human Rights, *Elsie Richardson (Fighting For Justice: New York Voices of the Civil Rights Movement)*.

²⁶⁶ Elsie Richardson: "I don't know how they did it because they weren't using the word integration at that time. That was 1950. But every floor had five white families and five black families. And we got along wonderfully. We were in and out of each others houses. We babysat for each other. we held meetings in each others apartments. And that's when I really became active." narrator: "her neighborhood would change dramatically. White flight resulted in abandoned buildings and the loss of public services. Bedford-Stuyvesant became one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. In response, Elsie became a community organizer. She got her training at the Stuyvesant Community Center."

Not only was the neighborhood losing white residents, but black residents found themselves unable to leave. In a 1947 article, John P. Dean established a pattern of racial restrictive covenants in the New York suburbs to which white residents were being lured.²⁶⁷ In part thanks to research like Dean's, restrictive covenants were outlawed with the supreme court *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision in 1948, but the FHA policies picked up where restrictive covenants left off by redlining black neighborhoods and thereby trapping black residents in neighborhoods where housing was guaranteed to lose value.²⁶⁸

Between 1954 and 1966, Richardson and her neighbors experienced a dramatic transformation of their neighborhood. So dramatic that then-Senator Robert F. Kennedy got involved. In February 1966, Richardson led Senator Kennedy on a local tour of Bedford-Stuyvesant. "When Kennedy told her he was going to do a study of the area to try to help the community, Richardson replied, "I don't know if we need another study; we've been studied to death. What we need is brick and mortar."²⁶⁹ Kennedy responded and the result was the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, an entity that put major business leaders and their capital into a partnership with local community leaders and their expertise. It was the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) that bought the Hunterfly Road Houses on behalf of Hurley, Harley, and the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History in 1968.

²⁶⁷ Dean, "Only Caucasian."

²⁶⁸ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Highsmith, "Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan"; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*.

²⁶⁹ Morris, "Obituary."

Section 3: Barriers Faced by the Weeksville Heritage Center

Thirty-four years after the BSRC bought three of the four Hunterfly Road Houses on behalf of the Weeksville Society, executive director Pamela Green described the challenges facing the organization. “There is nothing mystical or magic about successfully growing any organization... There are common challenges,” she said: “Money, marketing/audience development, money, infrastructure, money, location, money.” Describing the state of affairs at the Weeksville Heritage Center, Green said: “Today we are still emerging. In fact, we consider ourselves a 30 year old start up.”

In her speech at the 2004 National Parks Service’s *Great Places, Great Debates* conference, Green described the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in the wake of mid-century economic degradation. “We are in Central Brooklyn with a majority of the population facing hard economic times,” she began. In 2004, Bed-Stuy was perhaps feeling a very slight shift as Manhattan’s gentrification spilled over to the shores of Brooklyn, but the area had not experienced anything like the transformation that had come to Manhattan. Re-capitalized by an influx of private investment, Manhattan had, by 2004, experienced incredible growth and infrastructure development.²⁷⁰ The Weeksville area, on the other hand, reached extremes of racial segregation in 1990, when the census reported that 99.2% of residents were non-white. By 2000, a sixty-year trend of increasing racial segregation began to reverse, but only slightly: the non-white population of the area dropped from 99.2% to 97.2%. “Were we in Manhattan, some

²⁷⁰ Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 2008; Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 2008; Zukin, *Loft Living*; Sites, “Public Action: New York City Policy and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side”; Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development”; Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*.

of our struggle would be eased simply because many more people would know about us and feel an even greater ownership and cause to support us,” Green argued. “In fact, in the early days, the Society was often asked to consider moving the houses to a safer and more convenient location.” But moving to a new location would erase the very story the WHC tried to tell, Green argued. “It was important for us to have people realize that our site’s location makes us unique. We are a cultural oasis in the middle of the inner city of Brooklyn. We provide a sense of pride for our neighbors.”²⁷¹

The Weeksville Heritage Center’s fate was bound, from the beginning, to the fate of the neighborhood whose story the Center was committed to telling. Government intervention in neighborhood degradation in the 1960s and 70s buoyed the organization for a time, but gave way to a national shift toward privatization and free-market enterprise in the 1980s and 90s, and as the Weeksville area suffered from disinvestment, so did the Weeksville Heritage Center. By 1991, the WHC was “dying quietly,” then-president Joan Maynard reported in *the New York Times*. Maynard had already donated all her personal savings to the project. When the historic houses were vandalized in December of 1990, vandals took the copper pipes from one of the houses, leaving it to flood, and Joseph Haynes, the neighborhood resident who had first identified the houses with James Hurley, put the repairs on his own personal credit card.²⁷² The state cut their funding from \$80,000 to \$40,000 and it was unclear how the WHC would survive.

By 1991, many of the Weeksville residents to whose memories the WHC was committed, were gone. William Harley passed away in 1972 followed by Archibald Glover in 1979.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Green, “Civic Engagement on a Shoestring: The Weeksville Society Experience.”

²⁷² Martin, “In Black History, Reconstruction Is Also a Struggle.”

²⁷³ New York Times Staff, “William Harley, Researcher, Dies: Helped Unearth Brooklyn Colony of Free Negroes.”

Muriel Williams Brown, whose family home at 1698 Bergen Street became the centerpiece of the WHC, passed away in 1980.²⁷⁴ Justice Oliver Williams followed her in 1981.²⁷⁵ “The restoration is about two-thirds completed,” Fund Raising Management magazine reported, “with \$506,000 still needed.”²⁷⁶

A graphic artist and neighborhood resident, Maynard became the president of the Weeksville Society in 1972. She shepherded the project for almost thirty years, until 2001 when Pamela Green took over. “Because I was a free-lance without regular working hours, I could devote time to the project,” Maynard explained. “But I spent so much time on it that I almost went to the poorhouse. Then I learned that people could write proposals and get grants.” Though she hoped to see the restoration completed, in her words: “by 1976, the 200th anniversary of the creation of the United States,” it took more than thirty years to make that happen.²⁷⁷

On June 5, 2005, the Hunterfly Road Houses were “opened to the public as the Weeksville Heritage Center.” Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at the ceremony. As first lady, she had helped obtain a crucial \$400,000 federal grant for the project, as well as private money. “Any African-American historic site will teach visitors about slavery,” Ms. Green said. “But you don’t go to very many sites where the people there were self-sufficient, people who have built institutions.”

²⁷⁴ Maynard and Cottman, “Weeksville: Then & Now: The Search to Discover The Efforts to Preserve Memories of Self in Brooklyn, New York.”

²⁷⁵ CLARK, “Justice Oliver Williams Dies; Served State Supreme Court.”

²⁷⁶ “A good deal of direct restoration money has come from the federal government’s community development block grants program and New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, supplemented by other funds such as a 1989 \$150,000 contract with the city through New York’s Department of Cultural Affairs to pay for exterior work on the fourth building.” Reiss, “Small Cultural Organizations Face Large Funding Problems. | North America > United States from AllBusiness.com.”

²⁷⁷ New York Times Staff, “Weeksville Buys Historic Houses.” And Christian, “Hidden in Brooklyn, A Bit of Black History; Freedmen’s Homes Seen as Attraction.” Maynard dreamt of “crowds coming to see the four little clapboard cottages tucked behind a chain-link fence.” and in 2004, almost forty years after their discovery, and after Maynard had dedicated more than half her life to the project, the houses were finally opened to the public.

Though the houses evidence a self-sufficient, antebellum, black community, to this day, the WHC cannot tell visitors very much about that community. The research remains to be done. Furthermore, visitors are scarce. After more than forty years of work, the invisibility that WHC founders sought to remedy remains the site's greatest challenge.

Conclusion

The story of Hurley, Harley, and the Weeksville Society's efforts to preserve the history of the black middle class in Brooklyn illustrates three intertwined phenomena. First, the black middle class invisibility of 1968 remains in 2012. Second, the invisibility was a symptom of structural forces that channeled money out of Brooklyn and actively degraded the wealth belonging to black people forced to stay behind in Brooklyn. Third, the same structures that channeled material wealth to the racially exclusive white suburbs in the mid-twentieth century – continue to channel the resources necessary to construct public memories today. Thus the people of Central Brooklyn lost not only material wealth, but the capacity to tell the stories about it, to produce public memory. Thus Central Brooklyn is faced with a double invisibility: both the black middle class of the nineteenth century and the story of the nineteenth-century black middle class remain difficult to see.

The WHC was designed to tell the story of Weeksville before the extraction of capital, but *because of the extraction of capital*, the story cannot be told. The links between these two processes —the material wealth (opportunities for home ownership, municipal infrastructure) extracted from Central Brooklyn on the one hand, and on the other hand, the process which precluded the neighborhood from telling stories to a wide audience (and therefore preserving

social and other kinds of capital) is further demonstrated in the following chapter on the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, which has been the recipient of extraordinary funding while the WHC has languished in an a region of purposeful disinvestment.

CHAPTER IV

“No One Can Stop the Market”: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

In a March 2009 article about the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Eve M. Kahn relayed the story behind the tenement-building-turned-immigration-museum at 97 Orchard Street. “The museum's staff stumbled upon this time capsule in 1988 while looking for office and gallery space to rent,” Kahn explained to her readers. “The curators have since painstakingly replicated six homes of families who... actually lived there.”²⁷⁸ Kahn’s account of the museum’s founding moment echoes the museum’s account. Like Kahn, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM) describes the “discovery” of 97 Orchard Street in politically neutral terms — in a tone that emphasizes awe and delight:

[In] 1988, Abram and co-founder Anita Jacobson ... stumbled upon the tenement at 97 Orchard Street... While inspecting the storefront, Jacobsen went to the hallway to look for a bathroom. She saw sheet-metal ceilings, turn-of-the-century toilets and an aging wood banister. ‘It was as though people had just picked up and left’, Jacobson recalled. It was a little time capsule...I called Ruth and said ‘We have got to have this building.’ It was perfect.’²⁷⁹

The story about Abram and Jacobson discovering an in-tact, time-capsule-tenement in late-1980s Manhattan is an evocative one, and adds significantly to visitors’ appreciation of the building. “Since these buildings were condemned in 1930, and no one has lived there since, they have remained a time capsule of that time,” one reviewer wrote. “When you walk in to the rooms, you can feel the history and trials that these people went through to establish themselves in their

²⁷⁸ Kahn, “Poverty Preserved.”

²⁷⁹ Lower East Side Tenement Museum, “About The Tenement Museum.”

new city.”²⁸⁰ Accounts of the remarkable discovery are usually contextualized, as they are in Kahn’s article, by the history of progressive-era municipal housing policies that shuttered this tenement and other, similarly unsafe buildings all around Manhattan in the mid-1930s, effectively sealing them off from the march of time. But there is rarely any discussion about the reversal of these policies in the 1970s, a reversal that made Abram and Jacobson’s discovery anything but accidental. In the 1980s, the city of New York encouraged and subsidized efforts by middle-sized and large developers to enter and transform working-class housing markets for middle-and upper-class consumers.²⁸¹ Abram and Jacobson’s ability to obtain the building, and to exploit its in-tact history was a direct product of a political shift that reversed progressive-era municipal housing policies, delivering the very same public assets that 1930s-era activists had removed from the hands of market forces, especially housing, back into a freshly unregulated market, for cheap, in the 1970s, 80s and 90s.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ BC Amanda, “Most Under Rated Museum in NYC - Review of Tenement Museum, New York City, NY - TripAdvisor.”

²⁸¹ This language is drawn from Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 237. but the privatization of New York real estate since the 1970s has been amply documented by many scholars, including: Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*; Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*; Hackworth, “Postrecession Gentrification in New York City”; Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development”; Shalala and Bellamy, “A State Saves a City”; Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York”; Sites, “Public Action: New York City Policy and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side”; Unger, “The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood.”

²⁸² The story of the Christadora Building offers a particularly informative snapshot of this phenomenon. The city sold the 16-floor, fifty-four-year-old Christadora House on Avenue B to Brooklyn real-estate developer George Jaffee in 1975 for \$62,500. It was originally a settlement house built and staffed to help newcomers adjust to American life. Jaffee tried to get federal funds “for a low-income project but the money never materialized.” He then sold the building to developer Harry Skydell in 1982 for \$115,000, almost doubling his investment. A year later, after investing \$1.3 million in it, Jaffee sold the Christadora for \$3 million, more than doubling his investment. Between 1975, when the city sold it, and May of 1984, when Criag Unger reported the story of the Christadora in *New York Magazine*, the building had increased in price by a factor of 50. By 2012, a single unit in the 85-unit building sold for more than Skydell paid for the entire building in 1982. Though Abram and Jacobson were not real estate developers, they were developing what urban scholar Sharon Zukin calls an “arts infrastructure” which is valuable to developers because it “attracts middle-class users and enhances property values.” For more on the Christadora building, see Unger. For more on the role of an “arts infrastructure” in real estate development see Zukin, *Loft Living*.

This chapter is about the development of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, a museum that emerged to tell the story of poor and vulnerable nineteenth-century New York residents at exactly the same moment that poor and vulnerable *twentieth*-century New York residents were evicted from their homes, in that very same neighborhood, in what many saw as a necessary step toward the city's revitalization.²⁸³

Preservationists may have 'discovered' the building at 97 Orchard Street, but it is also true that the building was sort of *delivered* to them.²⁸⁴ In the building itself, Jacobson and Abram encountered evidence of public-interest policies that facilitated upward mobility for the city's poor. But since then, the building has mostly aided in the production and rehearsal of a narrative that *obscures* the government regulation that made that upward class mobility possible. Instead of witnessing the importance of housing regulation, the museum becomes a place where people concretize their already-formed beliefs about hard work, individualism, and white upward mobility. As LESTM president Ruth Abram put it in her 2008 article "Tempest Tost," "At first we thought that telling the stories of immigrants' past in a powerful and nuanced way would prepare visitors to make the connection with contemporary immigrants. However, staff often overheard visitor comments such as, 'Those [the immigrants in the Museum's tenement] were the

²⁸³ LESTM is a not-for-profit museum, but as a cultural institution, it provides crucial support to the for-profit gentrification of the Lower East Side — and has been financially backed by many of the same entities that have promoted the gentrification of the Lower East Side including the Empire State Development Corporation and the LES Business Improvement District.

²⁸⁴ In that the property in the city was deeply devalued by federal policies that channeled money through whiteness into the suburbs, which degraded the wealth of people who lived in the city, thereby creating a situation where the people who were prepared to buy the devalued city property, the only people who had money to do so, were the same people who had been protected from urban devaluation — by their whiteness — since the 1940s FHA policies were instituted. It is also important to note that Abram did ask the city to literally deliver the building to her, but Commissioner of Housing Paul A. Croft refused. See p. 106 of Tutela: "They even approached the City of New York, suggesting that it donate a tenement building. [Paul A.] Crotty recalled his first meeting with Abram: 'I first met Ruth in 1986 or 1987, when I was Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development. She came to me with the idea for a museum on the Lower East Side. She wanted a building. Even if I had such a property, I wouldn't give it to a museum; my mission was to provide housing for low-and moderate-income New Yorkers.'"

good immigrants. They worked hard, learned the language, and wanted to be Americans. Today, they don't work hard, they go on welfare, they don't learn English, and they don't want to be Americans.”²⁸⁵ The following chapter explores some of the structural forces that have informed the making of this complex, contradictory museum.

I argue that the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, like the Weeksville Heritage Center, is a product of its time and place. In contrast to the Weeksville Heritage Center, which was shaped by the Civil Rights Movement and a grassroots response to the extraction of capital from U.S. cities, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum was shaped by a shift from Civil Rights-era efforts to create material racial equality — to a post-civil-rights-era multiculturalism that aestheticized ethnic difference. Perhaps most importantly, the WHC took shape as a rebuttal to the “culture of poverty” thesis, a theory that conflated the poverty of decimated U.S. cities with blackness. Because Brooklyn, like other U.S. cities was depleted of resources, however, the museum was unable to enact a forceful rebuttal. The LESTM, on the other hand, was shaped by an influx of capital into the city of New York, particularly Manhattan, after the 1975 fiscal crisis, and concretizes the resulting conflation of whiteness and wealth.²⁸⁶

Public Welfare / Private Real Estate

“The urban pioneers who lived under these conditions have not received their due,” museum president Ruth Abram explained to the *New York Times* for an article about the opening of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in 1988. The new organization would place

²⁸⁵ Abram, “Tempest Tost.”

²⁸⁶ , real estate that had lost value as a direct result of the federally-aided extraction of capital from U.S. cities in the previous decades...

immigrants in an American lineage by comparing them to the “farmers and frontiersmen who settled the West,” according to reporter James Hirsch.²⁸⁷ The newspaper’s description of the museum contrasts with the mission for which the LESTM would later become famous: to “use the history of immigration to stimulate public dialogue about important contemporary issues.” For a time, the museum would also become well known for founder Ruth Abram’s work launching the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, of which the LESTM was a member.²⁸⁸ But when the museum opened, it was described not as an entity committed to critical thinking about immigration, but rather a celebration of European immigrant heritage.

By 1991, Abram’s ideas for the museum included a range of possibilities. Through a tenement building, she argued, “one could discuss the history of immigration and immigrant life, the role of reformers, of government, the history of housing, and our changing views as to what was an acceptable life style.” But the core question she hoped the museum could help answer was, “How will we be one nation, and at the same time enjoy, appreciate, and certainly not be afraid of the profound differences we bring to the table based on background?”²⁸⁹

Eventually, the museum developed tours that emphasized the importance of government regulation that protects vulnerable city residents. A tour of the Irish-immigrant-Moore-family apartment, for example, focuses on teenage mother Brigid Moore’s infant Agnes. Brigid’s baby died from drinking rancid milk mixed with chalk by an unscrupulous peddler. This story illustrates the importance of food and drug regulation. Another tour tells the story of Abraham Rogarshevsky who contracted tuberculosis in a sweatshop before labor laws instituted minimum

²⁸⁷ Hirsch, “Museum Memorializes Life in Tenements.”

²⁸⁸ Tutela, *Becoming American*.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

safety requirements in the workplace.²⁹⁰ These stories reflect Abram’s mission, “to use the history of immigration to stimulate public dialogue about important contemporary issues.”²⁹¹

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum tells stories about the importance of public protections for the poor. But at the same time, the LESTM has been part of a major reorganization of capital in Manhattan, at the center of which has been the dismantling of public housing for the poor. The museum’s tours are conspicuously silent on the subject of privatized real estate, diminished tenant rights, and what urban scholar Sharon Zukin calls “the flight and return of middle-class residents and investment capital” in Manhattan.²⁹² These omissions contribute to the museum’s inability to grapple with immigration in a meaningful way because the museum avoids the subject of the racialized housing market that both created a white middle class out of European immigrants, and later, created the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. By presenting a race-neutral story about immigration, the LESTM defaults to a tale of an inevitable white middle class, where the “white” part is left unspoken.

“If you can get rid of rent-controlled tenants, renovate the place, and charge \$700 a month, it's worth paying them \$10,000 or so to get them out and raise the rents,” one Lower East Side speculator explained to journalist Craig Unger in 1984. “They'll all be forced out. They'll be pushed east to the river and given life preservers. It's so clear. I wouldn't have come here if it wasn't.” If anything, Unger argued, speculators “underestimate[d] the speed with which money moved in” to the Lower East Side in the 1980s.²⁹³ The 1975 fiscal crisis paved the way for the

²⁹⁰ Author tours of the LESTM ca. 2009.

²⁹¹ LESTM’s mission as of 2001, as quoted in: Bruner Foundation, “2001 Rudy Brunner Award Silver Medal Winner.”

²⁹² Zukin, *Loft Living*, 1. The museum itself is a beneficiary of the return of capital and many of its visitors are returned middle-class residents.

²⁹³ Unger, “The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood.”

political reorganization of New York, namely the privatization of real estate. Or as labor historian Joshua B. Freeman put it, “Within a few years, many of the historic achievements of working-class New York were undone”²⁹⁴

As speculators were profiting from this transfer of wealth in Lower Manhattan, preservationists admitted to a feeling of relative powerlessness. “No one can stop the market,” Amy Milford explained. As deputy director of the Eldridge Street Project (which launched the LESTM), a member of the L.E.S. Preservation Coalition (which nurtured the LESTM), her response to the privatization of real estate in Manhattan was not to push back against the privatization of real estate, but instead to argue that “it’s important to balance this and preserve many of the buildings that speak to the history and people here.”²⁹⁵ Milford’s matter-of-fact acquiescence to the market reveals much about the post-fiscal-crisis-era zeitgeist in Manhattan. The *very reason* the building at 97 Orchard Street had become a time capsule in the first place was precisely because the market *had been stopped*. It was, in fact, the unregulated housing market of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that created unsafe tenements, which in turn, prompted housing regulation, which in turn, closed down 97 Orchard Street. But in 1988, as the same strain of for-profit speculation-fever was unleashed in Manhattan again, the incredible story of public-interest policy that tempered the housing market in the 1930s, protecting poor and working class residents, was nearly impossible to imagine, even while surrounded by the evidence of that work.

The building at 97 Orchard Street remains a powerful reminder of the far-reaching effects of progressive-era housing regulation. The 1901 Tenement House Act outlined a concrete set of

²⁹⁴ Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 256.

²⁹⁵ Lerner, “Tenement Museum Has Built a Home on Orchard St.” This quote comes from a 2006, but is relevant to the story of the LESTM’s beginnings because the gentrification begun in the 1980s was, by 2006, in full flower.

rules that, over thirty years of enforcement, dramatically improved housing for the poor and eventually closed buildings that were “unfit for human habitation.” At 97 Orchard Street, the Tenement House Department forced landlord Lewis Bidinsky to install indoor toilets on every floor in 1905.²⁹⁶ The law also ensured tenants’ access to light and fresh air, fire escapes, and other basic necessities.²⁹⁷ And when the building’s landlord refused to fireproof the building in 1935, the Tenement House Department declared it unfit for human habitation and revoked the landlord’s right to rent out the building’s twenty apartments.²⁹⁸ From that point until 1988, the building’s apartments would only be used as storage space for the four street-level commercial units. After a major review of every building in the city, in 1935, the Tenement House Department morphed into a progressive, municipal public-housing movement that created sunlit, steam-heated, state-of-the-art housing projects with indoor plumbing (and other modern conveniences not found in tenements), re-housing more than 8,000 tenement-families between 1936 and 1941, and tens of thousands more after an initial period of stunning success.²⁹⁹ Like many tenement dwellers, 97 Orchard Street’s last resident, the widowed Fannie Rogarshevsky, who worked as the building’s “janitress,” moved from the tenement on Orchard Street into the architecturally superior Vladeck Houses a few blocks away.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ See 1902 I-Card, now property of the NYC Department of Buildings, created by the Tenement House Department. Also see Lower East Side Tenement Museum Encyclopedia online at tenement.org

²⁹⁷ Fryer, *The Tenement House Law of the City of New York, with Headings, Paragraphs, Marginal Notes and Full Indexes*.

²⁹⁸ See 1936 “Post” Cycle Survey, filed with I-Cards at the NYC DOB.

²⁹⁹ Public housing projects continued to be built after 1941, but the public housing movement fell victim to federal policies that diminished the quality of public housing after the 1940s, including Nathan Strauss’s austerity-driven federal public housing projects & FHA lending policies. Still strong through the 40s and 50s, they have since gained a negative reputation that might make it hard for readers to understand how great the early public housing developments were in New York. For more, see: Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*.

³⁰⁰ David Favalaro, Curator, LESTM, conversation with author.

In short, New York's housing movement buoyed a generation of vulnerable residents long enough that they could scramble out of poverty and into the middle class.³⁰¹ But this is not the story the LESTM tells. The LESTM tells the story of the people who received crucial support from the housing reform movement, but doesn't tell the story of housing reform, leaving visitors to conclude that white upward mobility was the inevitable result of the plucky immigrants' experiences in tiny, firetrap, sweatshop apartments. The story of the privatization of real estate in New York since the 1970s is also absent from the museum. As a result, visitors witness a terrain of middle-class consumption surrounding the museum and perceive it as the conclusion to the story of the poor immigrants who arrived with nothing.

**The LESTM, the Empire State Development Corporation,
and the Privatization of Real Estate in Manhattan**

When the building at 97 Orchard Street was boarded up in 1936, it was because the Tenement House Department (THD), a public entity funded by public money and empowered by public laws to enforce housing regulation, declared the building unfit for human habitation. The THD's action thus worked in the public interest to protect vulnerable New Yorkers from the excesses of an unregulated business environment. When that same building was repurposed as a museum in 1988, it was in the context of New York's transition from what New York City housing and urban affairs scholar Charles Abrams called a "general welfare state" to a "business

³⁰¹ The housing movement was not the only factor in the immigrants' upward mobility, but it was a major factor. Housing advocates were deeply invested in ensuring that improved housing would not come at the cost of employment for the re-housed, schooling for children, or access to parks and playgrounds. For more, see De Forest and Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem Including the Report of the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900*.

welfare state.”³⁰² Instead of protecting residents, like those living at 97 Orchard Street in the 1930s, the state’s mission was shifting toward protecting businesses.³⁰³ As Charles Abrams predicted, this “blurred distinction between the public and private aspects of economic development programs [and] would eventually produce inequitable results.”³⁰⁴ Such was the case with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, as it was difficult to place the museum in either category: not a public entity, like a school or a highway project, but not a private entity either like a for-profit business, the LESTM “blurred the distinction between public and private aspects of economic development.”³⁰⁵

In this climate, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s ability to procure to funding and support depended on their ability to position themselves as an engine of private development. Some of the museum’s early funding came from entities tasked with the development of private business in New York: \$500,000 for the renovation of 97 Orchard Street from the New York State Urban Development Corporation, for example.³⁰⁶ But the museum’s entanglement with philosophies of for-profit development is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the Empire State Development Corporation’s initial support of the museum’s attempt to condemn the building next door to 97 Orchard Street, so it could be delivered to the museum under eminent domain in 2002. Though museum staff now say the whole thing was a mistake, and though the project never reached fruition, this four-year episode in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s

³⁰² Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development,” 214.

³⁰³ Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York”; Marcuse, “Urban Form and Globalization After September 11th”; Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development”; New York State, “History of Empire State Development.”

³⁰⁴ as noted by Lavine, who cites Abrams’ 1970 obituary on p. 214 of: Lavine, “From Slum Clearance to Economic Development.”

³⁰⁵ Note that Charles Abrams, NYC housing and urban affairs scholar, is of no known relation to Ruth Abram, founder of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

³⁰⁶ Bruner Foundation, “2001 Rudy Bruner Award Silver Medal Winner.”

growth reveals a great deal about the climate in which the museum developed, and the political terrain museum leaders were forced to navigate in their efforts to create the museum.³⁰⁷ The story is revealing because the museum argued that the public interest would be better served by a museum — which could enhance the neighborhood’s business-friendliness — than by housing. "I can't understand it," Abram said when her neighbors resisted the LESTM’s efforts to take over the building next door. "This would be a major economic draw for the neighborhood."³⁰⁸

The Empire State Development Corporation: A Short History

The museum’s attempt to acquire the building at 99 Orchard Street would likely have failed unceremoniously if not for the Empire State Development Corporation’s intervention. Working on behalf of the museum, the ESDC could wield powers “more extensive and wide-ranging ... than any other state government entity in modern American history.”³⁰⁹ Though technically formed in 1995, the ESDC grew out of an older entity formed in 1965, called the Urban Development Corporation, or the UDC. This history is important because the UDC was created by governor Rockefeller to ameliorate the urban strife in New York caused by the mid-century withdrawal of capital from U.S. cities.³¹⁰

As New York’s housing and municipal infrastructure deteriorated after almost thirty

³⁰⁷ As co-founder Anita Jacobson put it in a 2008 interview, “Yes, there was an issue there where we wanted to buy the building, and it got a little dicey, and we backed off, and of course, they wouldn’t sell. I’m glad that that it didn’t work out. It’s unfortunate. It was bad publicity for the museum too. It’s just as well that it didn’t work out.” Tutela, *Becoming American*, 157. (January 1999, the LESTM offered to buy the museum and the issue wasn’t even remotely resolved until at least September of 2002. Almost four years.)

³⁰⁸ “Whose Tenement Is It? | The Jewish Week.”

³⁰⁹ Siskind uses this language to describe the UDC, which was later folded into the ESDC: Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York,” 247.

³¹⁰ On the 1995 consolidation of the UDC and the ESDC, see: New York State, “History of Empire State Development” On the original goals of the UDC, see Siskind.

years of FHA policies extracting wealth from the city, governor Rockefeller proposed a solution: to create “an independent public corporation... empowered to plan, build and manage various types of residential, commercial, and civic projects.”³¹¹ But the UDC’s extraordinary powers would later prove attractive for facilitating business development in the wake of New York’s 1975 fiscal crisis. “In 1975, the Corporation was reorganized and its mission expanded from developing housing to economic development,” the ESDC web site explains.³¹² With one swift gesture, a “quasi-governmental entity with extensive powers of eminent domain... authorized to override many land-use and environmental restrictions,” was repurposed, shifting from an entity charged with developing housing for the urban poor, to an entity allied with private business development.³¹³

The alliance with the ESDC undermined the LESTM’s commitment to “promoting tolerance,” but more importantly, revealed the inadequacy of the logic of tolerance itself. It revealed what Robert S. Chang and Keith Aoki have called “the dark side of pluralism.”³¹⁴ The museum’s attempt to grow according to the logic of its surrounding, for-profit environment put the LESTM in conflict with the very people whose stories they were trying to tell. As one resident put it, “It’s the immigrant museum vs. the immigrants.”³¹⁵ As for the ESDC’s interest in the LESTM: the corporation’s interest was not in the nuances of the LESTM’s messages, but

³¹¹ Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York,” 247.

³¹² New York State, “History of Empire State Development.”

³¹³ This characterization of the ESDC comes from: Marcuse, “Urban Form and Globalization After September 11th.”

³¹⁴ Chang and Aoki, “Centering the Immigrant in the Inter/National Imagination.”

³¹⁵ Kates, “Immigrants Museum Vs. Locals: Lower East Side Divided.”

rather, in the museum's ability to draw middle-class consumers to the neighborhood, and thus facilitate the economic development of Lower Manhattan.³¹⁶

The Story of the LESTM's Attempt to Acquire 99 Orchard Street

In 1999, Ruth Abram offered the museum's next door neighbor, Louis Holtzman, \$725,000 for his building at 99 Orchard Street.³¹⁷ The building had been in Holtzman's family since 1910, and unlike many of the Lower East's Side's landowners, Holtzman held onto it through the 1970s and 80s, when the city was in terrible financial shape and abandonment was common.³¹⁸ "I want to be the first in four generations of my family to make money out of this building," Holtzman explained, refusing the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's offer.³¹⁹ The LESTM came back with an offer of \$1 million in cash, to which Holtzman responded with a request for \$6 million.³²⁰

Holtzman's tenement at 99 Orchard Street, which held so little value for so long, was suddenly situated in the middle of a gentrifying neighborhood. Putting a value on it was difficult,

³¹⁶ As reported by Jensen, "the Tenement Museum and E.S.D.C. are each citing different reasons for it: the museum seems to be focusing on the construction damage; E.S.D.C. doesn't mention the construction damage in its report but focuses instead on the museum's need to expand.": Jensen, "Board 3 Committee Critical of Museum Expand Plan."

³¹⁷ According to a Lower East Side Tenement Museum document ("97 Orchard Street FAQ"), the LESTM bought their building, 97 Orchard Street at a higher price than they offered Holtzman, \$750,000, in 1996. In other words, they offered Holtzman slightly less money for his building – three years later. Real estate values were rising quickly in the neighborhood, so the offer of \$750,000 probably didn't match market value of the building.

³¹⁸ Accounts like this one, written by Mary K. Fons, in the *Cooperator*, are common: "In the 1970s, the punk rock movement found a home in the Lower East Side, what with the small, dingy clubs that dotted the landscape and the heavy drug trade. Crumbling tenements long abandoned by landlords unable or unwilling to invest in their upkeep were taken over by groups of squatters - some artists, others homeless - who established communal living spaces in the boarded-up buildings." For more on abandonment of real estate in the Lower East Side of Manhattan see: Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, Abu-Lughod, *From urban village to east village: the battle for New York's Lower East Side*, Zukin, *Loft Living*.

³¹⁹ Kates, "Immigrants Museum Vs. Locals: Lower East Side Divided."

³²⁰ Keys, "Immigration Museum Called Bad Neighbor In Expansion Battle."

especially considering Holtzman’s 15 newly renovated, income-generating apartments and his business partner Peter Liang’s newly expanded, profit-generating restaurant on the first floor. Given the years of work the two had put into the building and their satisfaction with its capacity, finally, to generate wealth, combined with the seemingly uncapped capacity for Lower East Side property to increase in value in the early 2000s — given all this, translating the building’s value into a flat amount was nearly impossible. Holtzman and Liang, who co-owned the building, simply did not want to sell.³²¹

But Ruth Abram felt pressure to grow her museum. As the *Villager* reported, “expanding the already-cramped museum will allow the state to move ahead with three-year-old plans to affiliate the Tenement Museum with two other important symbols of the city's immigrant history, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.”³²² In fact, according to the *Villager*, “the Tenement Museum was officially linked with Ellis Island and ‘Lady Liberty’ [in 1988], but the benefits of such an association - namely joint marketing and financial support from the National Parks Service - were put off because the museum is currently too small to accommodate the influx of tourists from those sites.” In other words, the LESTM was positioned to receive a significant influx of funding — both directly, from the National Parks Service, and indirectly, from the increased traffic the affiliation would bring — if only they could expand.

“With Mr. Holtzman unwilling to sell, Ms. Abram... found the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) willing to intercede,” the *New York Observer* reported in 2002.³²³ The ESDC held the power of eminent domain and could “condemn 99 Orchard Street

³²¹ For a detailed account of this series of events, see the website created by Louis Holtzman, still hosted at www.tenementnauseum.com Holtzman, “Stop Ruth Abram!”.

³²² Jensen, “Neighbors Fear Museum Will Make Them History.”

³²³ Candace, “Tenement Museum Wants the Tenement Next-Door.”

and deliver it to the museum,” the *Observer* noted. But residents, political leaders, and the local business community were not willing to see that happen.³²⁴ The ESDC’s intervention into the Abram/Holtzman debate ignited a fierce debate about the state’s power to take property out of private hands, especially in this case, because the goal was to deliver that property, not to the public, but into other semi-private hands.³²⁵

The ESDC arranged a public hearing on the subject, but scheduled it the night before the local neighborhood housing meeting (Community Board 3’s regular Housing Committee meeting). “As a result, Board 3’s input at the E.S.D.C. hearing was necessarily weakened,” an observer argued in a January 8 editorial in the *Villager*.³²⁶ The poorly timed meeting was thus declared “the first blatant misstep in this process so far.” Others registered concern too, like “Harvey Epstein, chairperson of the housing committee,” who “criticized the museum for not coming to the public sooner with their plans, and said it seemed as if the museum was trying to sneak its plans past the community.”³²⁷

Not only was the hearing poorly timed, but the aim of the joint effort was ambiguous. “At this point, it’s a bit unclear who is really spearheading the call for condemnation, the *Village* editorial contributor argued, “since the Tenement Museum and E.S.D.C. are each citing different reasons for it: the museum seems to be focusing on the construction damage; E.S.D.C. doesn’t

³²⁴ According to another account Abram “asked state officials to seize the property through eminent domain if a deal cannot be worked out.” Getlin, “Museum Plan Hits Too Close to Home.”

³²⁵ As mentioned above, there is a much larger debate that I cannot adequately cover here about what constitutes public or private ownership. One of the articles on the LESTM’s attempted takeover of 99 Orchard Street covers this in more detail, explaining that in the early 2000s, Columbia University, for example was determined to be a civic enterprise, and therefore was made a beneficiary of eminent domain. A Home Depot in Harlem, because it was determined to be able to offer jobs to the community, was deemed a public enterprise. Both these decisions happened in the same city, around the same time as the LESTM debacle. See: Halperin, “Condemning (For) Private Businesses.”

³²⁶ Editorial, “Is Condemnation Really Needed on Orchard St.?”

³²⁷ Ibid.

mention the construction damage in its report but focuses instead on the museum's need to expand.”³²⁸ Muddying an already delicate issue, the LESTM began focusing on their claim that Holtzman’s renovations had caused structural damage to the museum. The ESDC, on the other hand, never mentioned structural damage, instead they focused on the increased revenue an expanded museum could bring to the neighborhood. The disjuncture between these two agendas suggested that whoever was behind the movement to take over 99 Orchard Street was willing to do it by any means necessary. “I think there's a certain unseemliness about bringing in the bully of the state to solve this construction problem,” said Barden Prisant, a housing committee member. The appropriate arena for resolving construction disputes would have been the courts, Prisant argued, not an eminent domain hearing.³²⁹ On top of their concerns about the appropriateness of eminent domain law in this case, residents were not convinced that claims of structural damage were legitimate.

“Here's a museum that wants to promote the history of immigration and educate people,” Louis Holtzman explained to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in April 2002. “But it proposes to do this evicting tenants and throwing 50 immigrants out of work. It makes no sense.”³³⁰ “The renters may not be the tired, poor and huddled masses of yesteryear,” *New York Times* reporter Clyde Haberman began, describing the residents of 99 Orchard Street in his 2002 article. “But there they are all the same. For some, the question is basic: to show how people used to live on

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Jensen, “Board 3 Committee Critical of Museum Expand Plan.”

³³⁰ According to the NY Daily News 4/28/02 “The agency, which held hearings in January, is expected to render a decision early next month.”

the Lower East Side, should the museum be able to evict people who actually live on the Lower East Side?”³³¹

“The dispute has galvanized the neighborhood's political power base and divided Orchard St. shopkeepers and tenants into pro- museum and pro-Holtzman factions,” the *New York Daily News* reported. State assemblyman Sheldon Silver and state Senator Tom Duane supported Holtzman, along with Community Board 3 and the Lower East Side Business Improvement District. New York Historical Society President Kenneth Jackson and Municipal Art Society Executive Director Frank Sanchis, along with some neighborhood residents and merchants, supported the museum.³³² “In turn, Mr. Holtzman and his wife, Mimi... cast the museum as a predator and Ms. Abram as a politically connected arriviste intent on making them look bad. Holtzman referred to Abram as ‘nouveau tenement phony’ who was trying to ‘rob me of my family's immigrant dream and put at least a dozen hardworking Chinese immigrants out of work.’”³³³

³³¹ Haberman, “Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Building?”.

³³² Cohen, “A Stitch in Time: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum Patches Together Immigrants’ Pasts While Dealing with Its Own Future.”

³³³ Ibid.



Protestors in front of The Lower East Side Tenement Museum with signs that say “SHAME ON THE TENEMENT MUSEUM,” and “TENANTS AGAINST EMINENT DOMAIN” www.tenementnauseum.com



Protestors in front of 99 Orchard Street with signs in English and Chinese. The signs say “Orchard Street is NOT Disneyland,” and “Don’t Put Us Out of Work Congee Employees” www.tenementnauseum.com



Illustration posted by Lou Holtzman, owner of 99 Orchard Street, ca. 2002, on his self-published web site: www.tenementnauseum.com

After four months of neighborhood protests, community board meetings, and news coverage that excited attention as far away as Los Angeles, the *New York Observer* reported that the Empire State Development Corporation was expected to render a decision by May 2002. But the ESDC did not. In August of that year, the *New York Times* explained that “the issue became less immediate when the Empire State Development Corporation, the state agency entrusted with weighing condemnation against the public good, allowed the application to lapse on May 8 without any comment.” Holtzman’s fears were not allayed by this news, however. He called it a “shallow victory,” and indeed, an official at the ESDC said a new hearing, which would reactive

the case, “will probably be held.”³³⁴ Thus, Holtzman, Liang, and all the employees of Liang’s restaurant were left in limbo. It was not until 2008, almost ten years later, that Anita Jacobson called the episode unfortunate, saying the museum had “backed off.”³³⁵ Her comments suggest that the museum had finally fully abandoned plans to take over his building by power of eminent domain.

The story of the LESTM’s attempted takeover of 99 Orchard Street is important because it situates the seemingly apolitical, in-tact, time-capsule tenement in the context of the political shift taking shape in 1980s Manhattan. The time-capsule was the result of political work: housing regulation, but it was made available for aestheticization precisely because that very political work was getting dismantled.³³⁶ The same progressive-era municipal agencies that were tasked with protecting tenants in the buildings at both 97 and 99 Orchard Street from the unscrupulous hands of market forces (in the 1930s) were, in the 1980s, tasked with the opposite agenda: protecting businesses, even if that meant evicting tenants from newly-remodeled, safe, decent housing... even if that meant forcing immigrant employees out of their jobs.

In short, Abram undermined her own mission to teach people how to respect immigrants with her willingness to evict immigrants from the building next door.³³⁷ She undermined her own proposal to bring jobs to the neighborhood with her willingness close down the immigrant-

³³⁴ Candace, “Tenement Museum Wants the Tenement Next-Door.”

³³⁵ Tutela, *Becoming American*.

³³⁶ What Zukin says about loft living could also be said about the LESTM: “To praise the [tenement museum] as a result of spontaneous market forces is to accept the real estate developers’ view of the world and to ignore the state’s and the banks’ complicity in the construction of this world.” p3

³³⁷ As a New York Times writer put it in February 2002: “The renters may not be the tired, poor and huddled masses of yesteryear. But there they are all the same. For some, the question is basic: to show how people used to live on the Lower East Side, should the museum be able to evict people who actually live on the Lower East Side?”

owned business next door and remove immigrants from their existing jobs.³³⁸ Finally, Abram undermined her argument about “immigrants from everywhere” sharing “common ground,” by treating two immigrant groups, not as part of a common whole, but as distinctly different. Turn-of-the nineteenth-century immigrants were the object of her museum’s focus, but a dynamic, cross-racial coalition in the evolving immigrant neighborhood was treated as disposable.³³⁹ The thread that binds all these contradictions together is an emphasis on aestheticized sentiment over material reality.

Does this mean Ruth Abram’s mission, to “promote tolerance and historical perspective” by presenting a “variety of immigrant and migrant experiences,” was disingenuous? It would be easy to interpret this story by simply dismissing Abram as insincere, but it would be more productive to interrogate the contradiction between her goals and the actions she took to realize those goals. The contradictions in Abram’s work reveal larger structural forces at work, which are in turn, tied to global shifts in power following a period of U.S. affluence, and to generational cycles of inequality that are massive and invisible on the ground, that perpetuate themselves, even in the hands of people who are explicitly committed to overturning them.

Aestheticized Ethnicity and the Abstraction of Justice

³³⁸ “Ruth J. Abram, the museum's president, says the expansion into the sister building will create jobs, raise tax revenue, help neighboring businesses and "preserve the historic flavor of Orchard Street and the Lower East Side Historic District.” (Halperin, *Gotham Gazette*, March 2002) But Lou Holzman’s business partner, Peter Liang was operating the Congee Village restaurant on the first floor of 99 Orchard Street, employed more than 50 Chinese and Latino immigrant workers, and under eminent domain, would not have received any compensation if evicted from the building: “If Empire State condemns 99 Orchard St., residents will receive a relocation package including free brokers, moving expenses and a stipend for their inconvenience. As a commercial tenant, Congee Village is not legally entitled to compensation,” Halperin argued. Nor would his employees be entitled to compensation. The figure of 50 immigrant workers comes from Getlin, *Los Angeles Times*, April 2002.

³³⁹ Abram’s comment about immigrants sharing common ground comes from: National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, “Great Places Great Debates: Opening Historic Sites to Civic Engagement April 1-2, 2004.”

The Abram-Holtzman conflict reveals something important, not just about the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, or about the privatization of real estate in Manhattan, but about the inadequacy of the post-civil-rights-era, race-neutral multiculturalism that animated the LESTM's mission. Abram wanted to "promote tolerance and historical perspective" by presenting a "variety of immigrant and migrant experiences." But celebrating a common immigrant heritage without examining the racial, political, and historical components of immigration avoids material reality, and instead aestheticizes ethnic difference.³⁴⁰ In other words, the museum's claim that all immigrant experiences were basically the same was in effect, a gesture of disregard for the immigrant experiences that did not conform to the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century, white, European immigrant story. Furthermore, treating this particular immigrant experience as "the majority experience" conflates ideas about upward class mobility and immigrant assimilation.³⁴¹

In desperate need of laborers to grow an industrializing economy, the U.S. nation's relationship to these particular European immigrants was different than, say, Mexican migrants in the post-NAFTA era.³⁴² The U.S. fashioned elaborate educational and housing policies designed to facilitate the process of European immigrant assimilation.³⁴³ Other immigrants in other eras have experienced the opposite: not assimilation programs but deportation and criminalization. The story of the immigrants who lived at 97 Orchard Street is not a universal story of immigration, but rather a specific story about U.S. industrial growth, the expansion of

³⁴⁰ On aestheticizing ethnic difference, see Lowe, "Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism."

³⁴¹ This quote comes from an article by Lisa Keys in the Jewish Daily Forward. On the conflation of immigrant assimilation and class mobility, see Ngai, *History as Law and Life*, p. 62: "our understanding of longer-term processes of incorporation and settlement in the host country continues to be shaped by canonical assumptions in sociology and history about the assimilation of the American-born generations: that is, that immigrant incorporation follows a generational path of Americanization and socioeconomic mobility."

³⁴² On U.S. absorption strategies, see, for example: O'Leary, *To Die For*; Fairchild, *Science at the Borders*.

³⁴³ add making americans schooling book and other stuff on eugenics and public housing

racial whiteness, and progressive-era policies that aided the upward class mobility of a limited group of newcomers. But Abram was not alone in her effort to present it as a universal story.

With the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the nation repealed more than seventy years of racially restrictive immigration policy. The 1891 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 (which regulated Japanese immigration to the U.S.) the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917, and eventually, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act that privileged Northern European immigrants over Southern European immigrants — all these were reversed with the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. President Kennedy celebrated this reimagination of American identity by rebranding the U.S. as a *nation of immigrants*.³⁴⁴

As the first president who was not a white Anglo-Saxon protestant, but rather a white ethnic: an Irish-Catholic, Kennedy's mere presence in the white house prompted celebration of white ethnicity. In the mid-1960s and in the years that followed, a new enthusiasm for Americans' immigrant heritage began to take hold, developing into an even more robust sentiment in the bicentennial era. By the time Abram began work on the LESTM in 1984, white ethnic pride in the *nation of immigrants* narrative had been developing for twenty years.³⁴⁵

While Kennedy linked his efforts to remove racial restrictions from immigration policy to the Civil Rights movement, the *nation of immigrants* model of American identity eventually launched a broader social and political shift, one Matthew Frye Jacobson calls the white ethnic revival. The Civil Rights movement made enormous gains in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s by focusing on the “material and social deprivation of minority groups.”³⁴⁶ But in the decades that followed,

³⁴⁴ Kennedy, Foxman, and Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*.

³⁴⁵ Jacobson, *Roots Too*.

³⁴⁶ This language comes from: Lowe, “Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism.”

multiculturalism of the 1980s and 90s “leveled material differences within and among various groups according to the discourse of pluralism.”³⁴⁷ A new enthusiasm for ethnic identities proposed that Irish-Americans were roughly equivalent to African-Americans, who were in turn, roughly equivalent to Italian-Americans. As Henry Yu argues, by the 1990s, “ethnic music and other forms of exotic art and entertainment were offered... as important commodities distributed and consumed in the marketplace.”³⁴⁸ All ethnic groups were different, but equally valued under an emergent logic of multicultural pluralism. As Lisa Lowe argues, pluralism “asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion.”³⁴⁹ It was precisely this celebration of inclusion and simultaneous masking of exclusion that surfaced in the Abram-Holtzman conflict.

Inclusion was exactly what Abram offered with her museum. “The dislocation and disorientation associated with being a stranger in a new land is so imbedded in the collective American memory that it lends itself as a near perfect foundation upon which to establish our common ground.”³⁵⁰ But she had to stretch to make the immigrant story into a universal one. “Indeed, even Native Americans are now believed to have immigrated to this continent from Asia,” Abram argued in a 1997 article in the *Public Historian*.³⁵¹ Here, she echoed the proponents of the Statue of Liberty Immigration Museum, who, thirty years earlier had promised

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Yu, “Ethnicity.”

³⁴⁹ Lowe, “Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism,” 86.

³⁵⁰ Abram, “Tempest Tost.”

³⁵¹ Ibid.

that “The Liberty Island exhibits will tell of all immigrants to Amercia, ‘including Indians.’”³⁵² But the story of conquest cannot not be reimagined as a story of immigration. A progress narrative cannot not erase the bloodshed of conquest, the destruction of families, erasure of language, stolen land, and all the material realities of the American Indian experience. Just as nation-of-immigrants nationalism reimagined Native Americans’ loss of material assets like land, and social and cultural assets like family ties and language under the logic of multiculturalism, Abram would have taken Holtzman and Liang’s material assets: their building at 99 Orchard Street, the cross-cultural coalition they’d forged to help sustain the neighborhood economy, and reimagine the theft as a story of generosity. Taking their building would allow her, she argued, to help others feel compassion for immigrants, and it would help bring jobs to the neighborhood.³⁵³ Such was the logic of multiculturalism at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁵⁴

The same strain of superficial inclusiveness could be found in Ward Connerly’s *American Civil Rights Initiative*, which dismantled Affirmative Action in California by arguing for “equal opportunity for everyone.” Affirmative Action policies were designed to remedy gross material inequalities. African-Americans, specifically, had been denied access to material resources like education, home ownership, and other means of wealth accumulation for generations.³⁵⁵ This had a cumulative effect on African-Americans as a whole, which

³⁵² New York Times Staff, “Birth of a Museum Nears.”

³⁵³ As reported in the Los Angeles Times in 2002, Getlin: “Abram said her overriding goal is to promote tolerance for the different kinds of people who have lived on Orchard Street--and to use history as a tool to better understand the present....’ We want people to understand how hard it must have been to come to America and live in such small apartments,” Abram said. “But I worry that a lot of the people who come away moved by the experience of Jewish and Italian families leave the museum and then look down on the Chinese and Hispanic people who live in the same neighborhood today.’... It is this very attitude, however, that infuriates her opponents.... ‘Here’s a museum that wants to promote the history of immigration and educate people,’ Holtzman said. ‘But it proposes to do this evicting tenants and throwing 50 immigrants out of work. It makes no sense.’”

³⁵⁴ On this topic, also see: Wexler, *Tender Violence*.

³⁵⁵ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*.

Affirmative Action policies were designed to remedy. By explicitly granting access to such resources, such policies moved toward material equality across racial groups. When these policies were dismantled in California in 1996, however, proponents argued that a superficial equality was more important than long-term, historically-informed efforts to create material equality.³⁵⁶

Similarly, in an article she wrote the year following Proposition 209's passage in California, Abram argued for the importance of superficial equality over material remedies for generational, structural, and economic inequality. Instead of grappling with the economic and political issues surrounding different immigrant experiences, Abram proposed cross-cultural conversation as a solution for "prejudice." Abram's museum visitors affirmed her beliefs when they said thing like, "If we only would come [to the] table like this and understand each other. My value might be totally different, but that doesn't mean it's bad or good. Just different. If we only could understand, all this fighting ... could really stop." Abram's museum was a product of the multicultural moment, the white ethnic revival, and the backlash against Affirmative Action. Her museum reflected the politics of the moment.³⁵⁷

The Material Realities of Class and Race

When Abram and the LESTM allowed the ESDC to consider the use of eminent domain to confiscate the building at 99 Orchard Street, Holtzman described Abram as "politically connected arriviste" and a "nouveau tenement phony." These characterizations point to the

³⁵⁶ Pierce, *Racing for Innocence*.

³⁵⁷ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Lowe, "Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism"; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; Pierce, *Racing for Innocence*; Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race*; Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth*.

otherwise unspoken workings of wealth and social class in the making of the LESTM.

Furthermore, Holtzman's comments invite deeper scrutiny of the museum's implied messages on the subject of class mobility — messages that are buried in a class-blind, race-blind pluralism.

“The success of LESTM's efforts to promote tolerance is .. difficult to assess,” the Rudy Brunner Award Committee noted in 2001, the year before the ESDC debacle. As for the LESTM's mission to “Use the history of immigration to stimulate public dialogue about important contemporary issues,” the Brunner Award Committee said that “While the tour proved to be a powerful experience — a visceral comprehension of tenement conditions — the connections with contemporary conditions of immigrant struggle, exploitation and overcrowding that exist elsewhere in the neighborhood were not explicitly made to visitors.” The LESTM offered an explanation: “The museum believes “that it is easier to consider an issue when it is presented in an historical context because it appears less threatening.”³⁵⁸ But the reason the museum was not able to make “connections with contemporary conditions of immigrant struggle, exploitation and overcrowding,” I argue, is that the museum approaches immigration from a class-blind and race-blind perspective.

From the beginning, the LESTM story was one of immigrant assimilation conflated with upward class mobility. Because the LESTM never approaches the topic of class directly, visitors are left to rehearse a fantasy in which immigrant assimilation is always, naturally, a process of upward class mobility.³⁵⁹ As historian Mae Ngai points out, “our understanding of longer-term

³⁵⁸ “...According to a 1993 NPS study, Chinese workers labored in about 500 garment sweatshops in the neighborhood and an estimated 40 percent of the city's Chinese residents live in overcrowded conditions, often ten to a room. The museum believes “that it is easier to consider an issue when it is presented in an historical context because it appears less threatening.”

³⁵⁹ For an example of the way racialized subjects experience immigration, see Waters on West Indian immigrants whose children tend to lose the gains their parents made on account of being folded into the black race and therefore, contending with structural forces that impede, rather than enable an upward class trajectory. Waters, *Black Identities*.

processes of incorporation and settlement in the host country continues to be shaped by canonical assumptions in sociology and history about the assimilation of the American-born generations: that is, that immigrant incorporation follows a generational path of Americanization and socioeconomic mobility.”³⁶⁰ This has been the case for European immigrants who arrived at the turn of the nineteenth century, but not for the middle-class Chinese-American Tape family, Ngai argues. Nor has upward class mobility been the default trajectory for Mexican-American immigrants or interned Japanese immigrants or Caribbean immigrants whose children lose the advantages associated with foreignness when they are folded into the racial category of blackness.³⁶¹ To leave the subject of class-mobility unspoken is to allow the conflation of immigrant experience and upward mobility to remain undisturbed.

The way we think about how class works is not a subject of discussion at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, but perhaps more importantly, the way we think about how race works is not a subject of discussion either. “How will we be one nation, and at the same time enjoy, appreciate, and certainly not be afraid of the profound differences we bring to the table based on background?” Abram asked in the early years of the museum’s formation.³⁶² The attempt to confiscate 99 Orchard Street reveals the limitations of an approach grounded in the notion of difference. As Chang and Aoki argue, “the commitment to difference itself represents a theoretical intensification rather than diminution of racism, an intensification that has nothing to do with feelings of tolerance or intolerance toward other races and everything to do with the conceptual apparatus of pluralist racism.”³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Ngai, “History as Law and Life: Tape V. Hurley and the Origins of the Chinese-American Middle Class.”

³⁶¹ Waters, *Black Identities*.

³⁶² Tutela, *Becoming American*.

³⁶³ Chang and Aoki, “Centering the Immigrant in the Inter/National Imagination.”

The “LESTM is in the process of defining indicators of tolerance,” the Rudy Brunner Award committee noted in 2001. “This is an ambitious task,” the committee noted, and one that the museum seems not to have been able to complete. Perhaps unable to define tolerance or perhaps unable to produce evidence of the museum’s impact on visitors’ levels of tolerance, the LESTM dropped that language from their mission statement in recent years.

Conclusion

There is more to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum than the story of their attempted takeover of 99 Orchard Street. But this story contextualizes the museum’s tendency to default to a story of an inevitable white middle class. It’s a beautifully rendered, imaginatively designed museum, and it is possible to come away from the museum with an understanding of structural forces that inhibit upward mobility for the poor, but if online reviewers and museum staff observations are accurate, the museum concretizes already formed apolitical beliefs about inevitable white upward mobility more often than it disrupts them.

As *New York Times* museum critic Edward Rothstein put it in his 2013 review of the LESTM’s Shop Life exhibit, “In at least two tenement tours I have taken...the daily lives become far more important than any [political] arguments. Historical understanding is found in the details. And amid the travails, sweat and sorrows, we find the continuing pulse of aspiration.” In other words, Rothstein argues that upward mobility is the result of a personal “pulse of aspiration,” not labor laws that protect sweatshop workers or the regulation of the food and drug industries. He commended the museum for mostly abandoning its earlier attempts to tell political stories. “Initially, Ms. Abram seemed to have a more polemical perspective, drawing on 20th-century working-class histories and their theories of exploitation.” The Tenement Museum,

Rothstein continues, “was partly conceived to demonstrate a series of injustices that should trouble contemporary consciences.” Relieved to see that the museum’s “initial polemical perspective” has been largely jettisoned, Rothstein suggests that such arguments should be more fully expunged from the LESTM’s narrative.³⁶⁴ “Even now there is sometimes an edge,” he argues, “as if we were being offered a lesson that we should be more welcoming and tolerant of contemporary immigrants. But is that really an issue?” he asks.³⁶⁵ Rothstein’s attitude is not uncommon. For many, a narrative about immigrants’ personal ambition is preferable to an account of the legal protections that allowed for their ambition to flourish and reach fruition.³⁶⁶

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum has indeed retreated from its mission to “promote tolerance and historical perspective.” As of 2013, the museum is no longer affiliated with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and their mission has changed.³⁶⁷ According to a new mission statement, the museum “forges emotional connections between visitors and immigrants, past and present,” and “enhances appreciation for the profound role immigration has played and continues to play in shaping America’s evolving national identity.”³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ Rothstein, “Toasting History in a Cellar Saloon: Lower East Side Tenement Museum Opens ‘Shop Life’.”

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Some of the reviewers on Yelp and Trip Advisor complain about the museum’s political messages. They feel the museum is preaching at them or treating them like children.

³⁶⁷ The museum’s web site carries a new mission statement. There was no announcement of this change as far as I know. The museum has remained similarly silent on the subject of their disaffiliation with the international Coalition of Sites of Conscience. These changes seem to reflect the agenda of the museum’s new president, Morris Vogel.

³⁶⁸ The LESTM’s mission statement as of March 12, 2013: “The Tenement Museum preserves and interprets the history of immigration through the personal experiences of the generations of newcomers who settled in and built lives on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, America’s iconic immigrant neighborhood; forges emotional connections between visitors and immigrants past and present; and enhances appreciation for the profound role immigration has played and continues to play in shaping America’s evolving national identity.” From www.tenement.org

In closing, this chapter echoes the story of the Weeksville Heritage Center by countering the three points made in that chapter. First, like the Weeksville Heritage Center, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is a product of its time and place. Having emerged in the climate of Manhattan's privatization; the museum's funding and development was tied to its ability to offer a desirable commodity, a story about aestheticized ethnicity that soothes anxieties about material inequality and affirms a belief in individualism. In other words, the museum needed to tell a palatable story in order to be a valuable asset to those middle-and-upper-class consumers developers wanted to attract to the neighborhood. Thus, the LESTM defaults to a story of an inevitable white middle class while the WHC points to an inevitable black middle class.

Second, federal lending policies created black middle-class invisibility by extracting wealth from Central Brooklyn and tethering blackness to the experience of urban disinvestment in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Those same federal lending policies also extracted wealth from Manhattan. But the stories of these two neighborhoods diverge in the 1970s and 80s, when Manhattan was remade as the command post for global capitalism. Devalued property in Manhattan was available for purchase in the 1980s (as it is now in Brooklyn) by mostly white people whose ability to accumulate generational wealth had been protected by 1940s lending policies. In other words, the same federal lending policies that extracted wealth from Brooklyn contributed substantially to the devaluation of property in Manhattan, which was then delivered back to market forces, largely to white investors, in the 1980s.³⁶⁹ In short, the LESTM stands as evidence of structural forces that have created a belief in an inevitable white middle class just as the WHC is evidence of structural forces that have created an invisible black middle class.

³⁶⁹ Zukin, *Loft Living*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*.

Finally, the same structures that channeled material wealth to the racially exclusive white suburbs in the mid-twentieth century – continue to channel the resources necessary to construct public memories today. Thus the stories rehearsed at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are the stories constructed by those with the resources to write history. The LESTM was designed to tell the story of the Lower East Side before federal policies aided the process of upward mobility for white ethnics, but *because of the largely invisible forces of federally subsidized white upward mobility*, the story gets distorted. As a result the idea of whiteness remains tethered to the idea of hard work and upward mobility.

Conclusion

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Weeksville Heritage Center and their surrounding neighborhoods reveal the effects of a massive, mid-century transfer of wealth from America's mixed-race cities to racially exclusive white suburbs. Though this history has been amply documented over the past several decades, the story of today's urban geographies remains largely unknown. In other words, these two reveal the effects of an important story about the movement of capital and the construction of race in the twentieth century. When real estate dealers channeled federal resources through whiteness into racially exclusive suburbs, the result was a "hardening" of racial categories.³⁷⁰ Instead of illuminating this story, however, the museums obscure it. This dissertation has shown that the forces determining the stories that get funded, told, and rehearsed at these museums are much larger than the museums themselves.

"The restoration vanguard is quite wealthy," Joan Maynard noted in an interview for *City Limits Magazine* in 1981. "They are interested in restoring for their own particular, though valid, reasons. Poor people, however, don't have the resources to do what they have done."³⁷¹

Maynard's comments echo those of Samuel Barrows, delivered before the Brooklyn Ethical

Society in 1892. "The advantages offered to others were always withheld from the negro,"

Barrows said. While Barrows talked about material assets, Maynard was concerned with social

³⁷⁰ On the hardening of racial categories, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; On the massive, mid-century transfer of wealth from America's mixed-race cities to racially exclusive white suburbs, see: Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment In Whiteness*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Highsmith, "Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan"; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Wilder, *A Covenant with Color*.

³⁷¹ Robbins, "Restoring History in Bed-Stuy."

and cultural capital that could be constructed with economic capital. Both Maynard and Barrows reveal an awareness that capital is the agent of racial construction.

Barrows was optimistic that race, a social construction, would lose relevance as African-Americans acquired material equality. “It is true... that the old and conventional social distinction is still made...but even that [is] dying out, and in a few of the Southern states color lines are almost entirely obliterated,” Barrows argued in 1892. Though Weeksville residents integrated their local school in 1893, the Brooklyn Eagle declared the event the “the last of the color line,” and the school integration paved the way for more than fifty years of racial integration, the mark of racial difference did not fade as Barrows predicted. Racially exclusive federal lending policies instituted in the 1930s and 40s moved the process of racial formation in the opposite direction, hardening racial distinctions along class lines.

When Joan Maynard commented on the difficulty of raising funds to preserve and restore the four frame houses that evidenced a more positive period of Weeksville’s history, she was operating in the context of hardened racial distinctions. Furthermore, she was navigating the larger structural forces that perpetuated that hardening. Without access to resources to tell an alternate story, the residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant were left to contend with an essentialized concept of racial difference that had, itself, been created by material inequality.

In contrast, Ruth Abram enjoyed the benefits of being part of the “quite wealthy restoration vanguard” Maynard observed. As Joelle Jennifer Tutella explains in her dissertation on the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, The Lower East Side Tenement Museum “evolved from a store-front operation, with a budget of \$75,000 and staff of four (two full-time and two part-time) to a fully professional public institution with a budget exceeding \$5,000,000; a staff of

139 (which includes both full-time and part-time, salaried employees, volunteers, and Board members)” in twenty years.³⁷² The Weeksville Heritage Center, in twice as many years, has not experienced the same level of growth, nor gained the same level of visibility, nor been empowered to impact such a wide audience with their story.

The point of contrasting these institutions is not to endorse one over the other but to consider the ways generational distributions of wealth continue to inform the stories we rehearse about what race is and how class works. At the LESTM, hundreds of thousands of visitors rehearse stories about an inevitable white middle class in a beautiful, artful, evocative, well-funded museum. At the WHC, a comparatively tiny audience struggles to understand the invisible black middle class at a similarly beautiful, but much less developed museum hidden at the boundary of Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights.

The social construction of race has a history. That history is embedded in the built environment. If the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Weeksville Heritage Center do not engage the structural forces that created their surrounding environment, the museums obscure the history of racial and class formation at the center of their stories.

³⁷² Tutela, *Becoming American*.

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End Notes

(Details Extracted from the Chapter About the Weeksville School)

ⁱ Though it took less than a month for the board to decide in favor of the mixed-race school, it took an entire year to complete the exterior of the new building. At that point, it came to Stewart's attention that the number 83 had been etched into the building's façade. The carved-in-stone number signaled a miscommunication at best, or deceit at worst. The new structure was expressly commissioned to replace the old, frame building used for Public School number 68 (the Weeksville school). Thus, it should have been labeled 68, not 83.

Could it have been an accident? Brooklyn's population was growing fast and the Weeksville school house was just one among many under construction at the time (see BOE notes 1890-91). Most schools would have been simply assigned the next available number, and in this case, that number would have been 83. Perhaps someone made a mistake, and applied the next available number to the new building in Weeksville? More likely, the opponents of the mixed-race school, having failed to prevent the school through direct channels, were working behind the scenes to arrange for the mysterious appearance of the wrong number on the new building.

Stewart immediately took action to guard against the worst possible scenario. He proposed to remove the number 83 from the new school house "and put in its place the number 68." [See Oct. 6, 1891 Board of Education notes "Mr. Stuart: Whereas: — the new school house on Bergen Street and Schenectady Avenue, was built for the relief of P.S. No. 68, and upon the joint request of certain white and colored citizens, was made large enough to accommodate all the children residing in the vicinity of said school with the understanding that P.S. No. 68, as now organized would occupy the entire new school house, and that the pupils and any additional teachers needed therein would be classified and employed without regard to race or color, and Whereas: It is the intention of this Board to comply with the request of said citizens, and Whereas: The number 83 has been placed upon the said new school house instead of the number 68; therefore, Resolved — That the Committee on School Houses be and is hereby authorized and directed to remove the number 83 from the said new school house, and put in its place and stead the number 68. The resolution was adopted."] Stuart's proposal was adopted by the Board in October 1891, but at the very next meeting, reconsidered. So began a protracted battle to extract the delivery of a new school building for the students and teachers at P.S. 68. Promised by the Board of Education in November of 1890, the new building eluded the residents' reach for two and a half tumultuous years.

Board member August C. Aubery positioned himself in opposition to Stewart when he made an oblique attempt to dissolve the ties between the new building and the students to whom it was promised. "The president should have the power to appoint a new committee for what is practically a new school," he argued at the November 1891 board meeting. [Brooklyn eagle, nov. 11, 1891] One can only speculate, but this turn of events suggests that Aubery had something to do with the appearance of the wrong number on the building's façade. Perhaps he was working with Bolz and Halstead, who had failed in their attempt to make an explicit link between color and property value. (Maybe the two real-estate men made arrangements with Aubery to have the school mis-numbered?) Or perhaps Aubery worked without them.

Whether or not the number 83 was deliberately planted on the school's façade, Aubery used the discrepancy to argue that the new number constituted a new school. By this means, Aubery subtly redefined the terms of the debate. Before Aubery's intervention, there was only one Weeksville school. There were two buildings, but only because the old building could not be torn down until the new building was ready to absorb its students. But after the November board meeting, there were two schools: 83 and 68. The two schools became vehicles for alternate plans.

Aubery built his case on a few fragile technicalities. He did not discuss race or property values at all. Instead, he focused on rules, regulations, and procedure. It was a practically a new school, he said, and therefore should be governed by a newly appointed committee. By choosing abstract language, Aubery disavowed his own agenda. He set up a terrain of rhetorical complexity that perhaps only a lawyer could navigate, and this was just enough to reopen the question of the Weeksville school. If Stewart had not been the "sharp-tongued" lawyer he was,

Aubery might have convinced the board that first evening to retract their promise of a mixed-race school. But that is not what happened.

There had been opposition to Stewart's appointment on the Board of Education precisely because he was so sharp. People were "afraid of Stewart's tongue, for he [knew] how to use it in debate" [as reported in the Eagle when the mayor was still considering his appointment seven months earlier.] Indeed, Stewart put his rhetorical talents to work, speaking extemporaneously for ten minutes against Aubery's proposal to form a new committee for the newly imagined "P.S. 83." BOE minutes give no indication of what Stuart said, but he probably delivered some version of what would, in the coming months, become a familiar speech. He probably reviewed the story of the petition, counter-petition, and the hearing before the board, reminding members that they had already delivered their judgment on this matter and the decisions had been made. He probably referred board members to page 130 of the 1890 Board of Education minutes, which read, "The Board...directed the... committee... to prepare plans... for a building... to be erected on... Schenectady avenue, [and] said school, when completed, shall be known as public school No. 68." Whatever he actually said, the talented "colored" lawyer delivered a speech that was convincing enough to keep the board from immediately renumbering the school.

After Stewart finished, William Harkness, the board member who had chaired the public hearing a year earlier, suggested they table the issue. Though most everyone agreed, board member Ceasar Simis refused to let the question rest. Together, Aubery and Simis made a determined effort to reopen the question of P.S. 68/83, but their insistence did not immediately convince the rest of the Board. They did succeed, however, in manufacturing a new phantom entity that night: P.S. 83. An Eagle reporter wrote up a summary of the meeting, as usual, and summarized the situation thus: "The board decided at the last meeting... to continue the school as a colored school, with Mr. Stewart as chairman of the committee. The substitution of 83," the reporter mistakenly explained, "was equivalent to making it a mixed school."

Aubery unleashed some powerful confusion that night, and that confusion added considerably to Stewart's workload. Now, instead of focusing his attention on the school building itself, Stewart was tasked with the additional work of correcting spurious versions of the past: made-up narratives that could bamboozle the public and the board of education, thus providing a phantom justification for reversing the board's original decision. The first of Stewart's efforts on this front appeared in the Eagle that very week. Upon reading the reporter's summary of the board meeting, Stewart wrote to set the public record straight. "Unfortunately, tonight's Eagle does not put the situation exactly as it is in connection with the new school building," he wrote to the editor. "Permit me to do so... Since 1888 the bylaws have mixed our children, and discussion on the advisability of separate schools is a useless waste of time," he wrote. [Eagle nov. 12, 1891] The numbers had nothing to do with anything. This was merely a new building for the teachers and students of P.S. 68. Whether it was called P.S. 83 or 68, the community had decided on a mixed school. Furthermore, Brooklyn abolished segregated schools three years prior, Stewart argued. But Aubery's introduction of the number 83 had already begun to wreak havoc. One number represented a mixed school, the other did not, people began to think.

Not only did reporters and board members kick up confusion by overemphasizing the question of the school's official number, but they began to paint Stuart as the mischievous one, deflecting attention from the board's own broken promise. They spoke of Stuart's "little plan" or Stewart's "scheme," when they reported on his efforts to set the record straight — as if he, and not the board, had been the one to manipulate plans for the new school. The more people quibbled over the numbers, the more confusion ensued. The board's original decision began to fade; it's hold on board members weakened with each mention of the number 83.

"School No. 68 has always been a mixed school," Stuart continued in his letter to the Eagle editor. He then repeated the solution reached the previous year: "At the hearing both the white and colored citizens agreed that what they wanted was a school large enough for all the children of the district; and the whites declared that they had no objections to a mixed school. Whereupon the committee reported a resolution to erect a twenty-four instead of a ten room building, and to use it for the relief of P.S. No. 68..." [See Brooklyn Eagle, Interesting and Important

Explanation, nov. 12, 1891] To the newspaper editor's credit, Stewart's rebuttal was published the very next day under the heading "Interesting and Important Explanation: Counselor T. McCants Stewart on Why No. 83 Grew Out of No. 68." But Stewart's letter was not enough to put the question to rest.

After Stuart's letter to the editor in November 1891, the issue did not surface again for five months. [until April, near the end of the school year.] As the days grew warmer and schoolchildren grew restless, Stewart grew restless too. He tried to settle the matter before students left for the summer by bringing another resolution before the Board of Education. [on April 5, 1892] This time, he avoided any mention of the number 83. He asked the Board to confirm that "the Local Committee of P.S. No. 68 [was] authorized ... to transfer the school now on the corner of Dean and Troy avenue to [the new] building." Stewart specified that the school would be "hereafter known as intermediate school No. 68," and the Local Committee would have the authority to appoint a principal and teachers.

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Though Stewart's proposal did not introduce any new ideas — he only spelled out the process of moving the school children from the old to the new building — and though the board committed to the plan a year earlier — by the Spring of 1892 the board backed away from their commitment. Seventeen board members voted in favor of Stewart's proposal to move the colored students and teachers into their new building, but nineteen voted against it. What had seemed settled and closed a year and a half earlier was now, apparently, re-opened for debate.

ⁱⁱⁱ THE SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES OF SIMIS'S APPOINTMENT

As Perry's comment suggests, the circumstances of Simis's appointment were suspicious. Not only had Simis "worked diligently to defeat the proposal to make No. 68 a mixed school," [Usually committee members lived near the school they oversaw, but Stewart, like Dr. White before him, sat on all three of the "colored school" committees. (Though the words "colored" had been removed three years prior, the system of representation remained).] but when he joined the local committee, he replaced William Harkness, who according to Stewart, "favored making the school a mixed one." Harkness presided at the original hearing almost two years prior. He also played a pivotal role in more recent debates by preventing Simis and Aubery from reversing the board's decision at the November meeting. Not only did Harkness favor the idea of the mixed school, Stewart argued, but "it was largely through his efforts that the conclusion to have it open to white and colored pupils alike was reached."

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Stewart's ally William Harkness retired from his position as a member of the three-person local committee, only to be replaced by Simis, one of Stewart's opponents. This was disastrous because it made a majority of two against racial integration. It was especially disastrous because Brooklyn's local committees were vested with more power than the comparatively weak central Board of Education. In other words, Simis' appointment virtually guaranteed that the school would not be integrated. Even the Eagle registered a hint of suspicion at this turn of events, reporting that "Yesterday Mr. Harkness sent his resignation from the committee to President Hendrix... [he] "gave no reason for [his resignation]." (April 12, 1892)

Mr. Harkness's sudden, unexplained resignation, followed immediately by the appointment of Simis, a vocal opponent of the mixed school, points rather directly to Perry's conclusion that Simis was behind the renewed opposition to the mixed-race school. Simis joined T. McCants Stewart and Ebenezer Miller on the Local Committee, where Simis's opposition formed a two-person majority with Miller. "[I] look at it from a practical standpoint," Miller said. "I think it would be much better for all of the people concerned to maintain separate schools." A wholesale paper dealer and a U.S.-born citizen of Irish descent, Miller lived in the 20th ward. Interestingly, he had voted with Stewart a year earlier, when Stewart proposed removing the number 83 from new building. (removing the number 83 and carving the number 68 in the façade instead). Perhaps Simis had convinced him to switch sides and vote against Stewart, against the mixed-race school? When questioned by an Eagle reporter, he did say he favored "erecting a good building for school No. 68... as the one which is now occupied is a disgrace to the city." [Brooklyn's Board of Education was composed of powerful businessmen. Simis inherited his father's hat manufacturing business and had recently opposed the Board's decision to erect a new school house for "colored children" in the neighborhood. But any number of people might have been involved in the sneaky scheme: list all those opposed, all of whom voted against Stewart..., on the newly developed New York Avenue. He inherited his Brooklyn-based business from his German-born father.]

Miller's comments contributed to the larger community's growing amnesia. The whole point of constructing the two story brick building on Dean and Schenectady had been to "erect a good building" to replace "disgraceful" old building. The students were already overdue for a new building years earlier, when Dr. White arranged to have this one constructed. Now it was nearly ready, and people like Mr. Miller said they should not occupy it – that the "large modern structure... one of the handsomest school structures in the city" should be delivered to the white students instead, and a different building constructed for the colored students.

iv The school board met three days later and moved ahead with their plans to segregate the students. [Before anything else, Stewart submitted a petition from the Brooklyn Literary Union, a colored cultural organization, of which he was president. "The board of education decided more than a year since to use the new school building ... as ... a public school," the petition began, and "there is an effort being made to divert said new school building to other purposes." The Literary union asked the board to "adhere to its former decision," and declared that they would be satisfied with nothing else.]

But the board had stacked the deck against the colored residents of Weeksville. Unable to come to a decision among themselves, a majority on the board voted to avoid the question. They empowered the Local Committee, now optimized to ensure a vote that would endorse the anti-integrationist position, to make a recommendation instead. (This made sense strategically. Establishing such certainty was easier in the three-person local committee, where a majority of two would seal the school's fate, than with the larger and more unwieldy central board of more than twenty members.) Granted the power to design a new plan for the school, Simis and Miller of the local committee presented a report. In short, they wanted the colored students to occupy the basement of the new building until a new building could be constructed for them. (March 8, 1893. Some say first floor, some say basement. Technically, it is a basement because it is partially below-ground.) The colored students and teachers could remain organized as a separate school with separate teachers and thereby avoid mixing with the white children. They would be temporary visitors at the new building, waiting out their time until another new building could be completed. Miller and Simis also wished to rename the new building P.S. No. 83 and appoint a new committee for the school. "Any action heretofore taken and inconsistent herewith be and is hereby rescinded," their report concluded, formally breaking the board's promise of a mixed-race school.

Stuart spoke next. "A number of colored people who were present listened to [him] and to the discussion of the question that followed with close attention." Stewart argued that his opponents' conclusions did not account for his opinion, and thus did not represent the opinion of the entire Local Committee. To remedy this, Stewart presented a "minority report." He asked the board to consider it in addition to the "majority report" presented by Simis and

Miller, his colleagues on the Local Committee. (Stewart explained that the board had “referred the matter of the reorganization” to Simis, Miller, and Stewart, who made up the Local Committee. But as Stewart pointed out, the Local Committee did not discuss the issue. Simis and Miller’s report was “not the result of deliberation but was predetermined before its meeting,” Stewart explained. Miller, he said, “expressed through the public press soon after the last meeting of this board, substantially the views contained in this report.” And Simis had been appointed to the Local Committee only after having emphatically declared his opposition to the planned use of the new school building in the public press. “Therefore, so far as the majority report [submitted by Miller and Simis] is concerned,” Stuart argued, “it should have no advantage as a deliberate paper over the minority report [which Stuart would shortly submit], but each should be considered upon its merits.”) Stewart then delivered a lengthy, detailed account of everything that had happened since the Weeksville residents petitioned to have a colored representative on the Board of Education twelve years earlier, in 1881. He reminded the board of their painstaking efforts and the promises made.

His speech must have stirred up some discomfort because, as was usually the case when board members were confronted with these facts, those advocating segregation wished to register their sympathy and support for their colored neighbors. Simis wanted “to go on record as desiring that the colored people should have equal rights and privileges with the white people. If the conditions warranted it,” he said, “he would favor mixed schools.” Harkness said he was “ever ready to do all he could to aid the colored people,” and Miller explained that he was only acting in the community’s best interest: “the white people and the majority of the colored people favored separate schools,” he said.

Miller had made this argument a few weeks earlier and Stewart emphatically dismissed it. “It is nonsense to say that it would be better for the colored pupils to have separate schools. Colored people want not only equal rights, but the same enjoyment of all public rights that white people have.” He then pointed out, as he usually did, that “as colored schools, so called, no longer exist here... it seems rather late to attempt to create a separate school where a public school for both races as been built and is nearly ready for occupancy.”(In fact, some of the wealthy were opposed)

Because the majority voted against Stewart’s proposal, the decision defaulted to Simis and Miller’s plan, and the board adopted a plan to establish a new school in the new building and call it P.S. 83. The students at P.S. 68 would be moved into the basement of the new building until a third building could be planned and built for the colored students.

^v Over the summer, there were some interesting developments:

POLITICAL ALLIANCES: NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR THE WEEKSVILLE SCHOOL

When the Weeksville students were dismissed for the summer in June of 1892, opponents of the mixed-race school had gained control over their fate. But inside the Board of Education, political alliances continued to shift, making space for new developments. The board would soon elect a new president, a coveted position, and those intent on securing a majority vote for the office were eager to trade favors.

On the last day of June, two months after the decision to house P.S. 68 in the basement of the new building, Stewart presided over the graduation ceremony at P.S. 67. (one of the two other so-called “colored schools” whose students were mostly, if not all black). It was one of the three schools in the city with a majority-colored student body. With Stewart at the ceremony that day were Mr. J.B. Bouck and Mr. H.M. Winter of the Board of Education. The three were allies; both men supported Stuart each time they voted on matters related to the Weeksville school. Stuart introduced Bouck to the assembled group as the next president of the Board of Education. Bouck had not yet been elected president, in fact, but had been promised enough votes to wrest power from President Hendrix, who had been in office five years — too long, many felt. In the end, Bouck did not win the presidency that year. He lost by one vote. But as board members reconfigured their alliances in their attempts to sway the presidential election —

and thus secure key positions and appointments — some surprising affiliations took shape. And perhaps that explains what happened over the course of the Summer and Fall of 1892.

A CLEVER TRICK WHICH T. MCCANTS STEWART MAY TRY / STEWART “THREATENS REVENGE”

The same day Stuart introduced Bouck at P.S. 67, an Eagle reporter covered the closing of P.S. 68 in Weeksville:

Public school No. 68, on Troy avenue, for colored children, is to be closed to-morrow night for the summer vacation. It may never again be opened as a school for colored children exclusively... If it is not, T. McCants Stewart, the colored member of the board of education, will have made good on his alleged threat to secure revenge and destroy public school No. 68.

Again, Stewart was represented as a scheming figure who was exacting revenge, which further obscured the history of events. Instead of portraying Stewart and the residents of Weeksville as defrauded citizens, the reporter perpetuated an invented story in which the villain was not the board of education, but T. McCants Stewart.

The Eagle continued to stir up confusion, but at the same time, reporters managed to keep other facts straight. For example, it was an Eagle reporter who reminded readers, in the late Summer of 1892, that the law prohibited segregation in the schools. If in theory, any child could enroll at any school, what had the board been fighting about all this time? If the schools were not segregated by law, what did board members hope to accomplish in Weeksville? Students could simply apply at the “white” school come Fall, thereby integrating it, as one of the board members pointed out:

One of the members of the board... said to-day that he would not be much surprised if the scholars who are now attending No. 68 would, through Mr. Stuart’s influence with the colored people, apply next fall for admission to No. 83.

Though the reporter presented this plan as a sneaky scheme, it would have been entirely logical and legal for students to simply attend their neighborhood school. “There is nothing in the law to prevent this,” the board member admitted to the reporter, who nevertheless portrayed the possibility as “a clever trick which T. McCants Stewart may try.” In short, opponents hoped to maintain de facto segregation, even as the law prohibited de jure segregation.

^{vi} There was just one major obstacle to the plan outlined in the Eagle. Observing that transfers from one school to another would have to be approved by the chairmen of both schools, the reporter predicted that Simis (chairman of P.S. 83) would not comply with any student’s request to transfer from the old to the new building. “Stewart’s game may be blocked,” the reporter noted. Simis had been very clear. He insisted on transferring the entire school, “in a body” to the new building, where students and teachers would be temporarily quartered as a separate group. He was not in favor of mixing the students. [On the other hand, William H. Maxwell, superintendant of all schools in the soon-to-be consolidated city of New York, advocated the abolition of district lines, which would result in open enrollment. If Maxwell’s plan were to be implemented, Simis would be required to admit any student who applied, as long as the school had not reached maximum capacity.]

All of this was speculation, but events played out much as the Eagle reporter predicted. Take the residents of Hunterfly Road for example. Mabel Jackson, of 3 Hunterfly Road, probably applied at P.S. 83 that Fall. If she did, she would have been admitted. If Mabel’s neighbors Hattie and Lottie DeGrant applied, however, they would have been barred from entering. Though all three girls were considered colored children, Hattie and Lottie would have been turned away on a technicality. They were students at P.S. 68 and, without a transfer form, could not become students at P.S. 83. Mabel Jackson, on the other hand, was a new student. She had just turned six and was entering school for the first time. Therefore, Principal Frank Perkins had no legal grounds on which to reject her.

^{vii} AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT

On September 17, just over two weeks into the schoolyear, the situation took an unexpected turn. Weeksville parents were stuck in a holding pattern, waiting for the October board meeting, many of them holding their children back from attending the old building in protest. But suddenly, the Eagle reported that “teachers [at P.S. 83]...may any day stop work in a body, leaving the 550 pupils to throw paper wads and chew slate pencils ad libitum.” If the teachers walked out, the whole P.S. 83 project was in trouble.

What happened to cause the teachers to threaten to walk out? The Local Committee had appointed teachers for the new school, expecting their appointments to be confirmed as a matter of routine, but the Committee on Teachers “refused to confirm the batch.” As a result, the teachers had “no guarantee that their services [would] be paid for.” Under those circumstances, the teachers threatened to walk out. If they should quit work suddenly, the Eagle reported, “the situation would be most embarrassing. . . . The outcome of the whole matter is awaited with considerable interest by the instructors in all public schools.”

Why did the committee on teachers refuse to confirm the new P.S. 83 teachers? Could it have anything to do with the concerns of colored Weeksville residents? When the Board of Education forced the colored families to wait, slowing their bureaucratic machinery to a snail’s pace, Weeksville residents could do little about it. They had no leverage. Only the teacher’s committee had any leverage. Refusing to endorse the new teachers, the teacher’s committee thrust the new school into disarray. Suddenly the board was forced to negotiate with the body in charge of confirming the teachers’ contracts. One can only speculate about the relationship, but interestingly, the chairman of the teachers committee — the person who halted the teachers’ confirmation and thus threatened to disrupt the new school entirely — was James Weir. He had shared the platform with William Harkness at the pivotal hearing before the Board of Education in November 1890. In other words, Weir was among the small group of board members who decided in favor of the community’s wishes that night, when “both sides agreed that they wanted a building large enough to accommodate all the children of the neighborhood, irrespective of race or color.” Weir voted with Stewart in the Fall of 1891, when Stewart called for the number 83 to be removed from the new school building and the number 68 carved in the façade instead. In May of 1892, when Simis and Miller submitted their recommendation to deliver the new school building to white children and subject the “colored” children to another long wait for another new building, Weir again voted with Stewart to uphold the Board’s original decision. Now it was September of 1892, two years after the first hearing, and the children were barred from the new building. Perhaps Weir refused to approve the teacher appointments out of loyalty to Stewart and to the board’s original decision. Or perhaps Weir’s upcoming bid for President of the Board of Education gave Stewart the opportunity to offer his allegiance in exchange for Weir’s throwing a wrench in the P.S. 83 machinery. Weir offered no explanation for his action. When an Eagle reporter sought him out at his place of business in South Brooklyn, the reporter “was told [Weir] was out of town and would not return until Monday.”

^{viii} What happened? Though unable to reach Weir for comment the day teachers threatened a walk-out, the reporter did learn that “the action of the teachers committee in refusing to confirm the appointments was due to the fact that more teachers were named than were needed.” The Local Committee appointed sixteen teachers but “twelve teachers would be enough to instruct the 550 pupils of the school.” The difference between sixteen and twelve is four, exactly the number of teachers to be transferred from the colored school. Simis likely appointed sixteen teachers to avoid absorbing the four colored teachers from P.S. 68. (WAITING IT OUT IN THE BASEMENT OF THE NEW BUILDING The newspaper and the BOE records give no indication of how the matter was settled with the teachers. Apparently they were confirmed, and agreed to continue working.)