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BLACK CORONA

RACE AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE
IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY

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Race and the Politics of Place

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

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

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

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

"We don't want to have a library under siege," Sardegna responded, insisting that the security problem was not serious enough to justify stationing a uniformed guard. He reached into the pocket of his powder blue blazer and pulled out a pager. "We are only a beep away," Sardegna declared, holding up the device. "We already have plainclothes guards a beep away."

Rothschild stood, pressing her palms against the table: "You know, you've

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

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

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

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

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

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

This chapter examines the struggle of black Lefrak City residents to disrupt this conflation of race, crime, and space in the discourse and practice of every-

day politics. In public forums ranging from the monthly meetings of the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee and Community Board 4 to the mass-mediated reports of journalists, Lefrak City was viewed as a threat to the quality of life of surrounding neighborhoods; a potent symbol linking anxieties about urban decline and crime to ideologies of black welfare dependency and family pathology.

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

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

LEFRAK CITY: "CRUCIBLE OF RACIAL CHANGE"

Lefrak City's twenty high-rise apartment buildings occupy an entire census tract, roughly nine blocks in size, adjacent to the eight-lane Long Island Expressway that forms Corona's southern border with Rego Park, a predominantly white middle-class neighborhood across the expressway (Figure 5.1). The rental and co-op apartment buildings, office buildings, and bustling commercial strips in the Lefrak City area contrast sharply with the lower density single-family homes and storefront businesses typically found in Corona Heights and North Corona to the northeast.

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

Lefrak City was constructed on a forty-acre tract of swampy land that had served throughout much of Corona's history as a dump.¹ In 1960 Samuel J. Lefrak, one of New York City's most prolific developers of middle-income housing, purchased "Mary's Dump" from Lord William Waldorf Astor. Be-

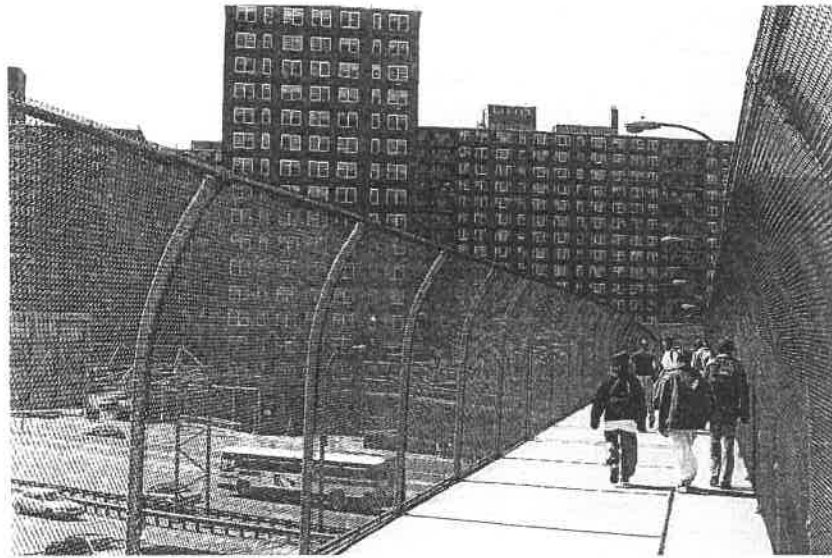


Figure 5.1. Schoolchildren crossing the Long Island Expressway on their return home to Lefrak City.

tween 1945 and 1960 Lefrak's development company built nearly 20 percent of the new housing in Queens County (*New York Daily News*, 14 February 1982). In 1973 Samuel Lefrak was reported to be landlord to a quarter of a million, largely middle-income New Yorkers (Tobias 1973).

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

Until the early 1970s Lefrak City's tenants were predominantly white and middle-class, reflecting the racial, if not socioeconomic, composition of the nearby and largely working-class neighborhood of Corona Heights (Cuomo 1983). In 1970, 69.8 percent of Lefrak City's 11,501 residents were non-Spanish-speaking whites, 14 percent were Hispanic, 7.7 percent Asian, and 8.6 percent black. Neighborhoods surrounding the complex shared a similar demographic profile. Corona Heights, a predominantly Italian-American neighborhood adjacent to Lefrak City, was 81.5 percent non-Spanish-speaking white in 1970 and 1.2 percent black. Elmhurst (not to be confused with East Elmhurst), west of Lefrak City, was 74.3 percent white in 1970, with blacks accounting for only 0.4 percent of the remaining population.

But in 1972 the U.S. Justice Department filed a housing discrimination suit against the Lefrak organization charging that it had discriminated against

blacks in the renting of apartments owned by the company in Brooklyn and Queens. The discrimination suit was settled by a consent decree: the Justice Department agreed to drop the suit if the Lefrak organization would end discrimination in apartment rentals and give a month's free rent to fifty black families as well as assist them in moving into predominantly white buildings.

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

As a result, the black population of Lefrak City increased dramatically from 25 percent in 1972 to nearly 80 percent in 1976. Many tenants and other area residents complained that the new arrivals were disruptive and were threatening the community with crime, drugs, and "urban blight." A white Lefrak City resident who witnessed the transformation while serving as a tenant leader told me:

All of a sudden we just saw different people coming in. And I keep saying to you that it has nothing to do with the color. There were always black people here when I moved in. They were friendly people. They were very high-class people here when I moved in. They were very high-class people—rich people, some of them. And you would never think anything of seeing another black person move in—or another—or another—nothing to do with it. But when you saw these people coming in—in their *undershirts*, and their *hair*, and their *staggering*. It really was the most *horrible* thing you ever saw. There were some good people too—but it was just such a drastic change. It was such a *shock*—it was the shock value. It was just unbelievable. That's what *really* did it.

Not all white residents were prone to conserve this tenuous distinction between race and social class. The rapid increase in black tenants, coinciding with a precipitous decline in building maintenance and security services, fueled perceptions that Lefrak City had become a "welfare haven," a black ghetto enclave which, like the Northern Boulevard "strip" in Corona, menaced nearby white neighborhoods with poverty, crime, and drugs. "If you bleed in Lefrak, you bleed in Corona and Elmhurst," a white activist warned at a 1975 public hearing in Corona, invoking the image of the spread of violent crime from Lefrak City to surrounding areas (*Long Island Press*, 21 November 1975).

Despite the findings of a 1976 city-sponsored report that only 3 percent of Lefrak City tenants were receiving public assistance, blacks, crime, and "welfare" were conflated in the political discourse of white community activists.² These images and anxieties were enlivened by two political conflicts that had been brewing in Corona and nearby Forest Hills since the mid-1960s involving

the construction of low-income, "scatter-site" housing for minorities. White civic groups in both communities had opposed the New York City Housing Department's housing integration plan, and in 1972 (the year of the Lefrak City suit) the controversy in Forest Hills was coming to a head and receiving nationwide media coverage.³ In fact the Forest Hills housing controversy was an important factor in inducing the Nixon administration to abandon the scatter-site housing concept in 1973 (Cuomo 1983:149).

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

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

This conflation of race, poverty, and social pathology was also encoded in media coverage of the Lefrak City "crisis." A 1976 *New York Times* article noted that the "principal issue within Lefrak City is not one of race but of standards of behavior," yet carried the headline, "Lefrak City Crucible of Racial Change" (1 February 1976). Complaints of poor building maintenance, inadequate security, and "undesirable tenants" were often reported as problems of *racial balance* as in "Lefrak Moves to Correct Racial Makeup at Project" in the *Long Island Press* (31 March 1976). In an effort to "stabilize" the complex and to allay neighborhood fears, the Lefrak organization pressured city officials for federal Section 8 rent subsidies which local community leaders were assured would make it possible to rent vacant apartments to low-income, elderly whites. An infusion of elderly white tenants was presented as a strategy for restoring the "racial balance," offsetting the threat symbolized by the welfare mother and her offspring.

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

[The Lefrak official] came to the Community Board and— and he wanted us to fill his vacant apartments. So we got Section 8 approved. And he claimed—well in Section 8, that he would put 90 percent senior citizens in. You know, in order to . . . uh . . . stabilize the area. And also he claimed that the . . . the Section 8 would

be used mostly for elderly *white* people. You know, because they were the ones being displaced and whatever. So we went along and he got the approval. And then of course it turned out that—you know, he gave all the Section 8 to the *big* minority families and *not* to the senior citizens he promised to. And even the senior citizens he promised—the security was so *bad* that they . . . they were . . . that they would run for their *lives*, 'cause they couldn't survive with the kind of people he was letting in. But *again*, it was nothing to do with the color of the black people. We had Indians, we had Chinese, we had *all* kinds of people here. But they was—it was a different *class* of people.

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

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

This perception that the middle class is being squeezed "betwixt and between the impoverished and the affluent," as Jonathan Rieder put it (1985:98), has been tied by Sidney Plotkin to the development of an "enclave consciousness," an ideological stance weaving together a diverse assortment of perceived threats to the local community. "Working- and middle-class urbanites," Plotkin wrote, "understandably feel that their enclaves are squeezed between the economic depredations of the corporate and political elite and the random street attacks of drug users. For the enclave consciousness, the city is manipulated by greedy forces from above and beset by uncontrollable violence from below. It is an external arena of predatory interests, a conflict-ridden system aimed at controlling, exploiting, and destroying the enclave" (1990:228). Within the span of a few years the "city within a city" for the middle class had

been transformed in the minds of many residents into a predatory beachhead within a rapidly shrinking white enclave.

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

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

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

"RUBBING AGAINST THE GRAIN"

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

Although Baskin had been employed earlier as a medical lab technician, on her arrival in Queens she began working in her home as a "sitter" or child care provider for women living in her four-building section. Since the few licensed child care centers in the Lefrak City area were expensive, many parents used unlicensed sitters located within the apartment complex.⁵ Baskin estimated that twelve of the eighteen floors in her building had sitters caring for preschool children.

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

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

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

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

These personal animosities more than likely reinforced the perception that Lefrak City, a "city within a city," constituted a distinct political entity.

This sense of political isolation can be gleaned from the spatial language used in a statement written by the African-American president of the Tenants Association on the occasion of its 1988 annual awards dinner.

Looking at our neighborhood and its outer perimeters over the past ten years there has been a subtle change. We must take a survey of our community but most importantly we must take a survey of ourselves. Do we knock the establishment or do we work within the system? Positive self-motivation and positive self-awareness will bring about a drastic upward change. Apathy will cause community deterioration. A convergence between all the serving agencies (Police, Sanitation, Politicians, Lefrak organization, merchants, outer perimeter groups, local community board) and our community is important to the continual upgrading process (Lefrak City Tenants Association 1988:1).

When Tenants Association leaders did not support her proposal to register voters during the 1984 presidential election, Edna Baskin organized her own voter registration drive using the opportunity to inform tenants about other neighborhood issues. After the election Baskin began attending meetings of Community Board 4, bypassing the Tenants Association leadership. After each meeting she would meet with tenants in the lobby of her building to explain how the board's actions would affect Lefrak City tenants.

"They told me that they wanted something more than what they were getting from the Tenants Association," Baskin recalled. "They came and said, 'Edna, you know, we need somebody out here looking out for our political status.' They said, 'There's nobody looking out after us politically. We have people on the Community Board, but we never get a report as to what the board is doing.'" However, Baskin stopped holding these meetings when the president of the association objected and informed her that she was "rubbing against the grain." Such encounters with the association's leaders convinced Baskin of the need to develop an alternative base of political power within Lefrak City, one that would be more responsive to the needs of its tenants.

In 1986 Baskin was encouraged by Rose Rothschild, Community Board 4's district manager, to participate in the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee. Rothschild and the board's chairperson, also a white woman, had made significant efforts to increase the involvement of people of color on the board. Under their leadership Korean, Chinese, and Latino persons had been seated on the predominantly white-American board, reflecting the changing demography of the community. However, despite Lefrak City's large black population, only one African-American sat on the thirty-four member Community Board in 1987. Rothschild, the board's manager, often complained that the Tenants Association's leadership (in particular, its male president) blocked her efforts to involve Lefrak City residents in the Community Board's activities.

Whatever the case, the Community Board's leaders perceived Baskin and her social networks to be a resource for expanding relations between Lefrak City and the surrounding community.

Meetings of the Stabilization Committee generally focused on crime, drug sales, and other "quality-of-life" issues in the Lefrak City vicinity, such as traffic congestion and price gouging by merchants. Agenda items frequently targeted threats posed by Lefrak City residents (primarily black youth) to the surrounding area rather than to the problems faced by residents within the complex. Similarly, problem-solving strategies emphasized law enforcement rather than the mobilization of Lefrak City tenants around shared concerns.

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

I arrived early at Edna Baskin's apartment on the twelfth floor of the Ceylon building overlooking the Long Island Expressway. Baskin had just returned from Borough Hall where she was taking a leadership training course sponsored by the borough president's office. Rose Rothschild, manager of Community Board 4, had nominated Baskin to the board, and the course was preparation for her expected appointment.

The kitchen table was covered with notepads, flyers announcing community events, and an assortment of booklets and other materials from the leadership course. In the adjacent living room, neatly stacked children's toys and a yellow plastic play table with chairs occupied one corner along with a Soloflex exercise machine. A sliding door led from the living room to a small terrace with a view of the expressway and the squat, red-brick apartment buildings of Rego Park and Forest Hills beyond.

Baskin lived in the two-bedroom apartment with her husband, Ron, a television news writer, and their teenage son, Previn. Her husband's brother, Duane, a Wall Street paralegal, had been sharing the apartment since his arrival from Buffalo the year before. During the week Edna took care of about six children ranging in age from three to seven years. Two school-age children attended Public School 206 across the expressway in Rego Park. On a typical weekday Baskin would take the preschoolers for a morning walk (running errands along the way), return home for lunch, naps, and playtime, and then pick up the older children from school, pulling the preschoolers behind her in a large red wagon.

Baskin was excited about the leadership training course and, in particular, the sections addressing the definition of objectives and the development of strategies. "You know women do this kind of thing naturally," she told me. "They have to plan how to spend money and send their kids to school. All those kinds of things." Baskin and her "mothers" had drafted a statement of

purpose for the new group and adopted the bylaws of a not-for-profit agency in Harlem. "The purpose of Concerned Community Adults," read the statement of purpose, "is to provide a wide range of youth advocacy, education, and development services to young people and their parents residing in Lefrak City and the surrounding area." At the meeting that evening members of CCA's newly formed board of directors were to review both documents and plan activities for the summer.

Carol Willins and Firdasha Jami were the first to arrive. Willins, an administrator at Harlem Hospital, had been born in the Albany Projects in Brooklyn and moved to St. Albans, Queens, when her parents bought their first home. After entering City College's nursing program in 1972, Willins rented a studio apartment in Lefrak City. Willins's husband, also a graduate of City College, was an architect and, like Carol, had been born in Brooklyn and raised in south Queens. In contrast, Firdasha Jami had lived in Lefrak City for only a few months. A single parent, she had moved to New York from Indiana to study communications. Baskin took care of Firdasha's preschool daughter and the Willins's two school-age children. Contrary to the stereotypes held by many residents in surrounding areas, the majority of Lefrak City's black tenants were working and middle class.

CCA's first meeting began at 7:00 in the evening with a discussion of the bylaws. Two other women who had also been invited to attend called to cancel: one could not find a babysitter for her newborn; the other had concert tickets. Baskin's brother-in-law, Duane, wandered in and out of the kitchen between innings of the baseball game that he and his brother were watching in the bedroom. He looked on with curiosity as the three women discussed each point of the bylaws. When a debate arose over the issue of membership dues, Duane took a seat at the table and joined in.

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

"We have a lot of children here, and there is nothing for them to do," Baskin declared. "To me, those children are kept like prisoners because the sitters don't have any place to take them. And those kids are stuck in those hot apartments all day. It's like my son said to me—he said, 'Mama, there's no place to go just to sit down and cool out and talk to other kids.'"

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

Willins, contrasting Lefrak City to St. Albans where she was raised, observed: "A missing aspect of this place is a mutual meeting ground—a community center. If we had one local place where tenants could meet, that would solve a lot of our problems because you would get the sense that you lived in a community even with this massive amount of people."

For an hour, the board members discussed strategies for creating this "mutual meeting ground" at Lefrak City and for mobilizing its tenants. Baskin suggested pressuring the Lefrak organization to build a community center at the site of one of the abandoned pools. Duane, her brother-in-law, replied that zoning laws would probably not allow this and advocated an immediate, if less ambitious, solution. He suggested that CCA organize a Lefrak City block party that would, as he put it, "occupy" the disused public areas for the benefit of residents.

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

Dressed in a dark gray suit and red silk tie, Bates told the group about his organizing experiences in Lefrak City and stressed the importance of involving youth in decision making. Baskin and the others agreed and resolved that the goals and activities of the new organization should be defined by the young people themselves. To ensure this "youth viewpoint," the board decided that the first activity of Concerned Community Adults would be a public forum where Lefrak City youth could voice their concerns and set the group's agenda. Jonathan volunteered to make flyers for the event and said he would spread the word among youth in the complex. In the meantime Firdasha Jami would develop a "needs assessment survey" that would be passed out to parents in the complex before the meeting.

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



Figure 5.2. Lefrak City teenagers speak out at the Concerned Community Adults Youth Forum.

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

For some thirty minutes the forum dragged on, alternating between parents' appeals for more youth services and Jonathan's inspired lectures on career planning, positive thinking, and the "new world of computers." After an adult Scout leader asked about the possibility of getting funding for bus trips, a young man sitting in the back of the room stood to speak. He was the first teenager to do so that night (Figure 5.2).

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

talkin' about "oh, let's go out, do this trip here, and have fun there." Why can't we have fun where we live?

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

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

In fact Baskin *did* know of this problem with Lefrak security, and she often complained about the harassment that her teenage son received from Lefrak security guards, as well as from city police officers. Her comments were directed to "the *other* adults" present, particularly to the members of Community Board 4 who, unlike those who were living in Lefrak City, had not yet heard this side of the story. This intervention, like many of CCA's activities to follow, served to contest and rework the discursive field within which Lefrak City was constructed as a racialized and pathological place.

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

This eruption of frustration and criticism over how black youth were stereotyped and harassed by Lefrak City's security services and the police challenged a central theme in white activist ideology and practice. By inverting the familiar relation between black teenagers and security, so central to the ideology of black crime, the testimony (and Edna's marking of its significance) raised the possibility that black teenagers who were often the targets of police action could play a constructive role in neighborhood stabilization. This novel prospect was given further support, ironically, when the forum's chair, intent on being a source of useful information, suggested that the teenagers voice their grievances about Lefrak security at the next meeting of the Neighborhood Stabilization Committee (Figure 5.3).

The Youth Forum, which ended with the planning of a youth and adult "march against crack," established CCA as a grass-roots force in the eyes of Lefrak City residents and representatives of Community Board 4 from its



Figure 5.3. Jonathan Bates (*center*), chair of the Youth Forum, and Edna Baskin (*right*) listen to complaints about police harassment.

“outer perimeter.” The importance of this event can be judged in part by the reaction of the Lefrak City Tenants Association. A few days after the Youth Forum, the president of the Tenants Association approached Baskin and asked her to place her organization under his “umbrella.” When Baskin refused, the association’s president warned that CCA would never get off the ground without his support. Nonetheless, the forum had legitimated Concerned Community Adults and encouraged the leadership of the Community Board to deal directly with Baskin on youth issues without the mediation of the Tenants Association.

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

CONTESTING THE POLITICS OF “URBAN BLIGHT”

A few weeks after the Youth Forum, CCA became involved in a neighborhood “cleanup” competition that further increased the organization’s visibility and influence in neighborhood politics. Community boards in Queens were invited

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

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

The cleanup team’s activities received considerable attention from community leaders and the press. Community Board members visited the cleanup team at work in the Lefrak City area. Merchants donated refreshments, free haircuts, and school supplies, and posed with team members during picture-taking sessions (Figure 5.4). The Korean owner of a local grocery store offered to hire two cleanup team members when business picked up. Lefrak City management informed Baskin that Samuel J. Lefrak himself had noticed that the neighborhood looked cleaner. Viewed within the context of Lefrak City’s history as a political issue and object of discourse, the cleanup campaign was extremely significant.

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

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

“It’s nothing but 100 percent, all-American garbage,” a New York State inspector assured the public, responding to fears raised by some politicians that it might contain “vermin,” carrying diseases from Mexico or Belize (*New York Newsday*, 19 May 1987). When the town of Islip, Long Island, agreed to

accept the garbage for its landfill, the borough president of Queens refused to allow it to be transported across her borough until more testing was done. The town supervisor of Islip accused the Queens official of using the garbage as an issue to mask her “image problems,” alluding to a political corruption scandal that had rocked Queens the year before. “I heard her say Islip’s garbage will never travel the streets of Queens,” he declared. “And she presides over the corruption capital of the universe” (*New York Newsday*, 20 May 1987).

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 5.4. Edna Baskin (*far right*) poses with members of the cleanup team and “Leo the Greek,” a local merchant who donated refreshments during the summer campaign. Rose Rothschild, district manager of Community Board 4, stands at the far left next to Miriam Levinson, the board’s chairperson.

During a brief speech Edna remarked that relations between Korean merchants and Lefrak City had been good during the summer. “The most important thing for our group,” she continued, “is our children. When we brought our children to you, you helped.” Daok Lee Pak, the Korean-born member of the Community Board who had attended the Youth Forum, responded: “Our body is just a rented car. Sometimes you are driven by a back-seat driver but the real driver is colorless.” The dinner was reported in the *Korean Times*, a Korean-language newspaper.

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

By summer’s end CCA activities had attracted the attention of local politicians. An awards dinner held to honor members of the cleanup team was attended by Helen Marshall, the area’s state assemblywoman, and by an aid to

the local city councilman. Both officials had begun to explore ways to provide CCA with public funding in order to support a tutorial program that the group had begun in the Lefrak library. CCA awarded certificates of merit to merchants, supporters on Community Board 4, and to cleanup team members. Rose Rothschild, district manager of the board, described CCA's activities (and her certificate) at the Community Board's next meeting and redoubled her efforts to have Baskin seated on the board. Already active on the board's Youth Services Committee, Baskin was appointed co-chair of its Day Care Committee.

However, the most telling translation of the summer's organizing work into political power involved CCA's participation in the election of the local Area Policy Board. As discussed in chapter 4, the Area Policy Board, or APB, is a locally based, elected body that defines local funding priorities and makes recommendations to the city concerning the allocation of community development block grants. Area Policy Board members serve as volunteers and, at least in theory, are "representatives of the poor" insofar as candidates are required to live in designated "poverty areas."

Procedurally, candidates must submit petitions to the New York City Community Development Agency (CDA) in order to appear on the ballot. Once formed, the Area Policy Board holds public hearings to assess neighborhood service needs and then meets to review proposals for funding received from local service providers. Although the APB is only empowered to make recommendations for funding, the city generally supports their decisions. For this reason, APBs wield considerable power over local resources, particularly in the wake of the national and local retrenchment policies of the 1970s and 1980s.

After concluding that Lefrak City needed better access to community development funds for youth service programs, Baskin and her board decided to field candidates in the APB elections. To that end, CCA invited representatives from the city to speak to residents in Lefrak City about the Area Policy Board and election process. After the orientation Baskin encouraged a number of Lefrak City residents to begin the process of collecting petition signatures.

Most of these candidates were members of social networks that had been mobilized by CCA during the summer. For example, six of the eight candidates who qualified for the APB election in Lefrak City were women: three were among Baskin's child care mothers (one of these women was co-leader of the cleanup team), two served as volunteer tutors in CCA's Lefrak library tutorial program, and the sixth was a senior citizen activist and former director of the Lefrak City Senior Center. Of the two male candidates, one was the husband of a "mother" on CCA's board of directors, and the second was a retired civil servant who lived in Baskin's building. Since the retired civil servant would serve on a citywide advisory board, Baskin decided to select, as

she put it, "a man of experience, familiar with the way government bureaucracies work."

Baskin's increasing visibility and clout as a grass-roots leader in Lefrak City was demonstrated when Assemblywoman Helen Marshall contacted her about the APB elections. Aware of CCA's growing influence in Lefrak City, Marshall wanted Baskin to support six candidates from Corona-East Elmhurst along with CCA's Lefrak City slate. However, Baskin declined on the grounds that she did not know Marshall's candidates. Moreover, since Marshall's APB candidates would be competing for votes with those in Lefrak City, supporting the former would draw votes away from CCA's slate.

Before the election, the Community Development Agency sponsored separate "Candidates Nights" in Lefrak City and Corona-East Elmhurst. The purpose of the meetings was to inform the public about the election process and provide APB candidates with a platform to present their thoughts about the community's development needs. Baskin and her board made flyers publicizing the meeting and held a luncheon for CCA's candidates to develop a platform stressing day care and educational services.

On Candidates Night I met Edna and Ron Baskin at their apartment. Ron had become increasingly involved in CCA during the course of the summer and had been delegated to handle the group's public relations. Together with his brother, who served as corresponding secretary, Ron was planning a newsletter.

"People here don't support anything that has to do with the education of our kids," Ron remarked, as Edna gathered an assortment of informational material to hand out at the meeting. Ron lit a Kool 100 and pursued his point, referring to a television program he had seen in which a member of the Klu Klux Klan was interviewed at a "survivalist" training camp. "Now this KKK guy said, 'We're going to teach our kids how to survive, not play basketball.'"

Duane, standing by the refrigerator, raised his eyebrows. "Hello! Tell me about it."

Ron continued. "Now, I could relate to what that cracker was saying because they're teaching their kids how to survive against what they perceive to be the enemy."

Duane closed the refrigerator door. "Thank you! They use our bodies and abuse our minds."

The importance of providing young people with educational services, rather than just recreational activities, was a major theme at CCA's biweekly meetings. Ron, Edna, and other members of the organization frequently criticized the "sports mentality" that they felt dominated the youth programs provided by schools and by the city's community development programs. Ron and Duane, who had both worked with War on Poverty programs in Buffalo,

argued that current programs, like those of the 1960s, were developed to keep "black people off the streets" rather than to equip them with the necessary tools to survive in the modern economy. CCA's board meetings often digressed into discussions of the global economy, junk bond trading on Wall Street, and the impact of information technologies on the educational needs of black youth.

When the Wall Street stock market crashed in the fall of 1987, these discussions reached a crescendo, influencing CCA's strategies for providing youth services. Concern about the job market for African-American youth had led Baskin and her board to explore ways of utilizing the Lefrak City library to provide educational services. After a librarian informed her that the Lefrak library's small auditorium was not being used, Baskin organized an after-school tutorial program and recruited two volunteer tutors from Lefrak City.

Riding down in the elevator, Baskin told me that her brother-in-law, Duane, would soon be meeting with Queens Borough Public Library officials to discuss other ways of using the Lefrak library for CCA's activities. "We want to do just like they did at Langston Hughes," Baskin remarked, referring to the Langston Hughes Community Library and Black Cultural Center on Northern Boulevard in Corona-East Elmhurst (see chapter 4).

As we negotiated the maze of underground tunnels linking Lefrak City's twenty buildings, Baskin pointed out broken lightbulbs and unlocked security doors along the way, jotting down the location of each in a pocket-sized spiral notebook. When we arrived at the Lefrak Senior Center in the basement of the Rome building, Baskin greeted CCA's six candidates and introduced herself to the seven candidates who had come from North Corona. Not counting the candidates, about thirty neighborhood residents attended the meeting.

By the time the forum was scheduled to begin, the city's representatives who were to lead it had still not arrived. In fact an earlier forum in Lefrak City had been canceled when the same officials simply did not show up. Baskin felt that the last-minute cancellation of the first forum, which had been widely publicized by CCA, had turned off many residents to the APB election process. After waiting fifteen minutes, she began the meeting herself.

Baskin described the purpose of the Area Policy Board and suggested that the candidates and audience join in a discussion of the community's development needs. One of the priorities of Concerned Community Adults, she said, was to ensure that public libraries serve the educational needs of children and not function merely as "babysitting services." One of the candidates from Corona-East Elmhurst asked, "Are you talking about Lefrak City or about the *entire* community?" Baskin responded that people in Lefrak City looked to the Langston Hughes library in Corona-East Elmhurst as a model.

A second candidate, a member of Corona-East Elmhurst's NAACP, declared: "That library only exists because the community fought for it and

fought to make it work. That's what we have to do here with this Area Policy Board."

The audience applauded.

"That's right," Ron Baskin remarked, "and do you want to know why? Because as soon as white folks know that you want to educate your kids, that money will dry up."

Just as the NAACP activist had begun to elaborate on the efforts of his branch to improve early childhood education in Corona-East Elmhurst, the officials from the city's Community Development Agency arrived and took over the meeting. The two CDA officials repeated the APB orientation that Edna had given and then asked each candidate to give a brief summary of their reasons for wanting to be elected.

All the candidates stressed the need for day care services and tutoring programs for youth. "We need educational programs," one of Baskin's "mothers" stated, "because we are losing our children. We have 'recreationalized' our kids to death." A man from North Corona stressed the importance of providing math and computer skills training. A PTA president and church activist from North Corona complained that her children had to commute to Queens College for tutoring in math and reading. "We should put things into this community," she continued, "instead of always going somewhere else."

Despite the Community Development Agency's poor planning of the event, Candidates Night provided an important opportunity for African-American tenants and activists in Lefrak City to meet with their counterparts in Corona-East Elmhurst in order to discuss common needs, compare organizing experiences, and define priorities for public funding. Because Corona-East Elmhurst and the Lefrak City area were represented by different Community Boards (Boards 3 and 4, respectively), there were few public forums that brought black activists from the two neighborhoods together to deliberate about neighborhood needs and problems.

This widening of the public sphere of community activism was enabled in part by the city's assignment of the two communities to the same Neighborhood Development Area—one that linked "poverty areas" in the two Community Boards. However, equally significant were the efforts of activists themselves not only to mobilize residents to participate in the election process but also to renegotiate bureaucratic definitions of space, political identity, and community interest. On the one hand, CCA's ability to marshal rapidly a Lefrak City slate for the Area Policy Board elections depended on the existence of activist networks that had been cultivated through the summer cleanup campaign and other activities. The mobilization of these grass-roots constituencies in turn prompted politicians and officials, such as Helen Marshall, to pursue strategies for coordinating CCA's activities in Lefrak City with those of black activists and groups in Corona-East Elmhurst, such as Elmcors Youth and Adult Services, the community's largest Community Development Agency.

Moreover, Baskin and CCA members endeavored to overstep the administrative and symbolic boundaries that had politically isolated Lefrak City and its residents from wider circuits of power and influence. For example, Baskin visited the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center in Corona-East Elmhurst and met with its director, Andrew Jackson, to gain support and expertise for CCA's programs in the Lefrak library. And later, during Black History Month, CCA organized bus trips to the Langston Hughes library for Lefrak City youth. Baskin's reference to the Hughes library as a "model" for Lefrak City residents not only flagged this transneighborhood tie but also linked CCA and its black constituency in Lefrak City to one of the most powerful symbols of Corona-East Elmhurst's civil rights-era struggles. In claiming this legacy Baskin and her group appealed to a notion of community that transgressed bureaucratic boundaries and appealed instead to a common interpretation of black needs, identity, and historical experience.

Although voter turnout for elections to the Area Policy Board was light, three of the candidates fielded by Concerned Community Adults were elected.

NEGOTIATING THE SPACE OF POLITICS

Shortly after the APB election Baskin's organization was incorporated. Status as a not-for-profit corporation would enable CCA to receive public funds and corporate donations. However, Baskin and her board members were wary of applying for public funds: it was felt that such funding might compromise CCA's ability to act independently. "Public sector funding is a trap," Ron Baskin argued at a CCA board meeting in September. "If you want to take money from the city, you have to hire people who are acceptable to the very same people who failed us already." Edna and others expressed similar apprehensions.

Ron Baskin and his brother often disagreed with Edna about strategy. After a dispute over accepting donations from Lefrak management, the two brothers contended that Edna had "stacked the board" with her "mothers" to offset their voting power. When a subsequent meeting led to the reversal of the earlier decision to accept the Lefrak donation, Edna remarked that she had lost the vote because "her people didn't show up," referring to two women board members.

Ron and Duane often appealed to "professional," workplace-based expertise when structuring arguments in opposition to Edna and her supporters on the board. And although Edna tended to discount the significance of gender relations when explaining the internal dynamics of the organization, she frequently emphasized the role that gender identity played in her dealings with outside agencies.

For example, when CCA held meetings with officials of government agencies and private corporations, Edna often encouraged her husband or brother-in-law to serve as the group's representative because, as she put it, "men get more respect—they take you more seriously." Before a meeting with Lefrak management that was to be conducted by her husband, Edna explained: "This is a white man's world. It's much easier to deal with corporate America if you are a black male. Women act as backup." She went on to say that it was also important for black men to be seen in leadership positions and "as positive role models for our youth." This dual purpose stood behind her decisions to appoint Jonathan Bates to chair the Youth Forum, to invite her husband to take charge of CCA's "public relations," and to insist that her teenage son (much against his wishes) participate in the cleanup campaign.

Edna's tactical appropriation of patriarchal ideology to present a strong face to institutional power *and* to disrupt negative images of black masculinity illustrates not only the complex manner in which racial and gender ideologies crosscut in the construction of political subjects and space; it also illustrates, as Lila Abu-Lughod put it, that "intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together," sometimes positioning women in the equivocal situation of both resisting and supporting existing power relations (1989:42).

The distinction drawn by Edna and her "mothers" between the public face of masculine political authority and women's roles as organizers or "backup" resonates with Karen Sacks's description of women union activists at Duke University (1988). Sacks found that some women activists expressed the view that women are organizers and men are leaders. "They suggested," Sacks wrote, "that women created the organization, made people feel part of it, and did the routine work upon which most things depended, whereas men made public pronouncements and confronted and negotiated with management" (1988:78–79). Contrasting the movement's "spokesmen" with what she called its "centerwomen," Sacks observed that the latter played key leadership roles in constructing social networks at the workplace and transforming them into a social force. Centerwomen politicized notions about work, adulthood, and responsibility, first learned in a household context, by bringing them to bear in the workplace in the form of an oppositional working-class culture (cf. Westwood 1985).

The concept of the centerwoman and the attention it draws to the politicization of everyday social ties and networks prove helpful in understanding how gendered relations and forms of resistance inscribe the political terrain on which racial meanings and identities are contested and rearticulated. Just as Edna used a gendered ideology of leadership to negotiate institutional power and to undermine racial stereotypes, so, too, did she appropriate a rhetoric of "family" and "family values" to signal political unity and a broadening of the public sphere of political participation.

When asked why, given his marginal involvement, she had paid special tribute to the husband of one of her "mothers" at the cleanup competition's closing, Baskin replied:

I wanted people to see that there were families involved. Not just my family, but other families like [this] family where we had mother, daughter, father, smaller daughter—you know. That was our whole point—to show we had *family* involvement, which of course makes you a stronger group—when families can see what you doin'. And of course this would encourage other families to become involved with us.

Like women organizers at Duke University, Edna often explained her strategy, her political relations, or, more generally, her political philosophy in terms of a conception of women's political power and collectivity rooted in "familistic" values and—in her case—tied to household and church.

STEVEN GREGORY: Now that your organization is established, would you consider getting involved in politics? I mean, let's say, running for political office?

EDNA BASKIN: I always want to be just where I'm at right now—right in my own home, working to organize an extended group. But see—

SG: A what?

EB: An *extended* group. Just like the Area Policy Board—that's an extension of what our committee [i.e., CCA] is. We're just extending ourselves outward, you know. Because that's the problem. We have nothing. And a long time ago, of course, coming from this good church background, I learned that women are the key. And as a woman, *you* set the tone in your household—I set the tone. I set the rhythm in here. You know what I'm saying? And so do other women in their households. *You* set the tone. You set the *rhythm*, you know. You determine how we're gonna make this work, and how we're gonna make this flow. You know when you want your husband to do something and he's not agreeable, you just work around him, find another *way*, you know. Find *another* way to deal. And it's the same thing here.

SG: How would a political role be different from this—from what you called before "grassroots"?

EB: Because you're dealing—as a politician you're dealing with *other* people's ideas and how you have to implement those ideas—versus me in this setting. We're dealing with our ideas and *we* wanna do it collectively, as a group, without any input from outside. Whereas when you're a politician, you have other influences that are paramount to what you're doing.

The household serves here as a *political* model not only for grass-roots autonomy but also for negotiating relations of power. This is not a "family ideology" that reduces black political, economic, and social conditions to the "stability" of the African-American family. Rather, Baskin's deployment of

"family" and "household" speaks to a wider conception of political mobilization, accountability, and power that, although anchored in part in the household, is not contained by domestic ideology.

Indeed, the efficacy of Concerned Community Adults rested precisely in its ability to cultivate and sustain what Alberto Melucci called the "submerged networks" of everyday political life where actors produce and practice alternative frameworks of meaning, social relations, and collective identity below the horizon of established or officially recognized institutions (1989:70). The Youth Forum, cleanup campaign, and the everyday meetings of "mothers" and tenants in Lefrak City apartments and public areas laid the groundwork for new modes of collective action by producing new forms and alignments of political identity, and by creating relatively autonomous public spaces where the needs and demands of residents could be interpreted and communicated in alternative and, often, oppositional ways.

Melucci, referring to the work of these submerged networks, captures a paradox that is key to understanding CCA's strategy and, in particular, the resistance its organizers showed toward participation in "regular" politics:

The forms of action I am referring to are at one and the same time prior to and beyond politics: they are prepolitical because they are rooted in everyday life experiences; and meta-political because political forces can never represent them completely. Paradoxically, unless collective action is represented it becomes fragmented and dispersed; at the same time, because it is never fully capable of representation it reappears later on new ground, with changed objects and altered strategies (1989:72).

Edna Baskin's reluctance to place her organization under the "umbrella" of the Lefrak City Tenants Association or to link CCA's slate in the Area Policy Board elections to that of the area's state assemblywoman was an effort to remain rooted in this paradoxical space before and beyond representational politics in Melucci's sense. For to succumb to the "trap" of representational politics (recall Ron Baskin's concerns about accepting public funding) would risk exposing CCA's submerged and "nomadic" activist networks to the disciplinary pressures and interests of political elites. Indeed Baskin's concept of an "extended group," one that, based in grass-roots social networks, extends itself outward onto the truncated field of electoral politics, captures concisely the strategic impulse to check the conceit of power with the unruliness of the everyday, to juggle rather than reconcile the terms of Melucci's paradox.

This strategy of resisting political incorporation and the severing of links to the undisciplined social spaces and networks of grass-roots activism was demonstrated in CCA's relationship to the Community Board. In January 1988 Edna Baskin was officially seated on Community Board 4 and soon afterward

appointed to co-chair its Youth Services Committee. Concerned that this heightened participation on the Community Board would weaken her ties to Lefrak City residents, Baskin created a "joint" Youth Services Committee representing *both* Community Board 4 and Concerned Community Adults.

Meetings of this ad hoc, joint committee, held in the Lefrak City library, blurred the administrative identity and spatial jurisdiction of the Community Board's Youth Services Committee, creating in its place a hybrid and structurally amorphous political entity and public forum, one that enabled the participation and cooperation of a heterogeneous cast of political actors. For example, a February 1988 meeting of the joint committee, chaired by Edna Baskin, was attended by officers of Community Board 4, CCA's board members, Assemblywoman Helen Marshall, members of the newly elected Area Policy Board, Scout leaders, librarians, and an assortment of "invited guests" specializing in the field of day care. At a March joint committee meeting, which also focused on the need for day care services, a PTA activist and a youth organizer from Forest Hills (Community Board 6) were invited by CCA to share their experiences, as Baskin put it, "from the other side of the [Long Island] Expressway." Alberta Ridgeway-Brown, one of Lefrak City's representatives on the Area Policy Board and a volunteer tutor in CCA's library program, also gave a presentation on the availability of city funding for day care and youth services.

This widening and diversification of the public sphere of community politics enabled activists to construct neighborhood needs, strategies, and alliances in ways that stretched beyond the rigid functional and territorial jurisdictions of officially sanctioned political bodies such as the Community Board, the Area Policy Board, and the offices of elected officials.

Like the fluid joint committee, CCA's newsletter, the *Clarion*, provided an important public forum for coordinating the organizing work of neighborhood activists and for publicizing local and national political issues. Produced on the Baskins' home computer, the *Clarion* served as a clearinghouse, informing Lefrak-area residents about community resources and programs, public hearings, and about the structure and functioning of neighborhood government. Editorial features often interpreted the local significance of national economic and political news.

For example, in an editorial entitled "Duck You Suckers," the *Clarion* warned its readers of the possible impact of the 1987 Wall Street crash on youth services in the city, citing the 1974 fiscal crisis as a historical precedent:

Mayor Koch has recently unveiled a proposed City Budget which should be sending chills up and down the spines of parents in the five boroughs. Only in terminology does this surprise package differ from the draconian documents of the fiscal crisis. Only now, instead of the fiscal crisis getting the blame (you know about the subways and highways and bridges and everything else that couldn't be

maintained because of the "fiscal crisis"), it's the stock market crash. Many people who never benefited from the bull market of the past few years will nevertheless pay the price for Wall Street's greed and folly, and those people are likely to be our children.

The editorial ended with a call to political mobilization: "One of the ways to halt the crisis is to remain vigilant. Time will not permit us the luxury of sitting back and waiting for someone else to do it, for this crisis is truly our own. We must be prepared to identify and challenge ANY person or body which attempts to reduce services to our youth . . . There is no mystery to organization. There is only organization and hard work" (*The Clarion* 1, no. 2 (1988): 1).

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

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

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

If an important legacy of the state's response to civil rights—era activism has been a harnessing of the black public sphere and a depoliticizing of racial inequalities, the case of Edna Baskin and Concerned Community Adults demonstrates that these processes of subjugation are recognized and challenged

through the everyday practices of neighborhood activists. CCA's success in mobilizing Lefrak City residents and in mustering the support of neighborhood institutions and political elites rested on the constitution of a heterogeneous and relatively autonomous public sphere through which the needs of residents could be publicly articulated in ways that yielded new and sometimes oppositional forms of collective action and identity.

A Piece of the Rock

"I THINK blacks missed the boat," George Lopez said wryly, rattling the tumbler and then glancing up at John Booker. "Right in front of my eyes," he continued, "the Koreans are all opening up businesses. And blacks are having a numbers drop. We're still waiting for the last figure to come out the way I put it. Next door, the Korean's got his store fixed up with oranges."

Booker slid to the edge of the leather sofa, eyes flashing with indignation. George Lopez, a Howard University-trained dentist and state assembly leader, was one of the "old crowd," as Booker put it. The son of a seaman from Jamaica, West Indies, Lopez's roots reached deep into the history of Corona, tracing the rugged terrain of black progress.

"But we're not enterprising, George," Booker responded. "We've got a dependency syndrome ingrained in us. We like to be hangers-on."

"That slave mentality," Lopez continued. "We're waiting for the check. And waiting for the last number to come out. And it never comes."

Booker half grinned, sensing controversy. "But there was a strong determination after they brought the blacks here to America. Our lives were broken way back then."

"But I mean, John. When is it going to change?"

"I don't know," Booker replied, shaking his head wearily, eyes glazed in thought. "The thing the young blacks clamor for is to be a corporate executive. They want to put on a Brooks Brothers suit. That's all they want."

Lopez nodded briskly, raising his eyebrows. "They're making so much money in those corporate setups—far more than professionals like us."

"But I'm afraid the rug is going to get pulled out from under them," Booker said, looking to me for agreement.

Lopez laughed. "I don't know, boy. Some of those guys that hang out with my daughter, those buppies. Man, they make megabucks." He leaned back in his chair and told a story. "Last week my daughter gave a political fund-raiser. Man, that was some beautiful affair. And John, I looked at those buppies. They were doing something. One gal leases Lear jets to companies. A person's a damn fool to go into medicine or dentistry now, with those kinds of things open. They're not making *that* kind of money. I tell you if I had it to do all over again, I'd take the corporate route."

Between leasing Lear jets and "waiting for the last number to come out," Booker was describing a broad spectrum of black class identities which, like all social identities,