

**Mike's Note: In this excerpt, Jonathan Reider describes the reactions of Canarsie, Brooklyn's Jews and Italian-Americans to a growing black presence in their community and the prospect of racial integration. The excerpt contains extremely racist and offensive language. As you read, pay special attention to Reider's explanation of racist stereotyping on pages 57-67 and 85-87.**

## *3. Vulnerable Places*

### **Images of the Ghetto**

*“Flashy cars, booze, and broads is all they care about. They don't even want to get ahead for their families!”*

To the residents of Canarsie, New York City in the 1970s had come to feel like an alien place. Their perception of the physical environment as dangerous and unpredictable was grounded in a set of undeniable realities—the proximity of large numbers of lower-class ghetto dwellers, the eruption of conflicts in the 1960s between blacks and whites at all class levels, and the breakdown of old patterns of racial dominance and deference. These factors shaped the way Canarsians experienced material and symbolic space.

Busing edicts and racial tipping undermined the faith of whites in the stability of their neighborhoods. What Canarsians took to be the menacing street style of black men appeared to violate the proprieties that make it possible to treat public encounters with strangers as routine happenings. Street crime diminished feelings of personal security and limited people's freedom to move through the city. Broad forces of economics and politics established the context of these abrasions, but rather more modest forces of space, numbers, and contact determined their precise impact on the people of Canarsie.

The immediacy of the dangers of place was ominous for the vitality of the New Deal coalition. Even where the new obsessions did not undermine liberal economic beliefs, closeness to the ghetto created new concerns which overshadowed the old ones or made them seem dreamily remote. One left-wing Canarsie man, who despaired over the rightward movement of many of his neighbors, understood the significance of closeness to the ghetto. “When the people of Canarsie

ran from East New York and Brownsville, they ran from their New Deal concepts of integration. They accepted the concept of civil rights, liberty for all, and freedom of expression until it impinged on them and their basic right to maintain the kind of society which doesn't threaten them. The basic fear of the minority community is participating with them where they live."<sup>1</sup>

Canarsians observing the unfamiliar folkways of the ghetto lacked the detachment of the anthropologist. They did not have the luxury of theoretical distance to compensate for their physical immersion in polyglot Brooklyn. The ghetto did not remain within a neatly bounded space, to be savored or reviled in safety. Contact with the people of the ghetto activated denigrative opinions of the minorities and hardened preexisting ones. A few Canarsians lumped all blacks together as if they were an alien species, dissolving their individual qualities in the primordium of race. An Italian worker stressed, "All the social classes don't mix. Take the blacks for example. Their culture is different from ours." He recalled the words of a former official: "We got to find a formula to mix two vegetables without making us nauseous," but he rejected that advice. "I say, don't put animals in the street without training. I seen what happens, and you don't put the animals with the civilized people. Does a cat and a dog mix? I can't see it. You can't drink milk and scotch. Certain mixes don't mix."

An ominous biological imagery stained the animal metaphors. One conventional way to explain white complaints about black sexuality, family life, and criminality is to look at the needs of the blamers themselves. Is deeming an entire race deficient in some primal substance a way to enhance a faltering sense of self? Canarsians seemed to agree with those Andalusians who believed that "it is always the people of the next-door town who are the cause of the trouble, who come stealing the crops, whose wives are unfaithful, who swear more foully, are more often drunk, more addicted to vice and who do one down in business."<sup>2</sup>

The strangers act as scapegoats and warnings; projecting forbidden wishes onto others works like an exorcism. "The tensions of the internal structure are projected outside the group where they serve, as an exterior threat, to strengthen the group's solidarity."<sup>3</sup> The projective metaphor illuminates some dark corners of the mind, but it is plagued by a variety of problems, only one of which need concern us here: the downplaying of real differences between groups. Great disparities of class, color, and culture divide Canarsians from

the people of the ghetto. Like the Andalusians, they presume that the villagers next door steal more, suffer greater family breakdown, and are more addicted to vice—but the presumption is undoubtedly true.

The subtleties of vernacular epithets disclose the dangers of deciphering racial judgments without reference to the settings in which they are uttered. Lifting a phrase out of context obscures shades of meaning buried in the tacit understandings of conversation. A noteworthy feature of “natural talk” about race in Canarsie was the line frequently drawn between blacks and “niggers.” A Jewish antibusing activist elaborated upon that distinction. “Back then in 1948,” he began, “there was none of this ‘I’m black and you’re white’ stuff. New Yorkers were New Yorkers.” He fondly remembered his army days in Texas, where he and his pals had run up against the taboos of southern racial etiquette. “One day, I was with ten of my army buddies, and we sat down in the back of the bus.” The driver told them, “We’re not starting the bus until you move out of the back, that’s for the coloreds.” The man and his New York colleagues told the driver, “See, we’re not going to move nowhere. We come from New York and we don’t know from blacks in the back of the bus.” A black woman got on the bus. “She was clapping her hands and yelling, ‘Praise the Lord, white peoples is in the back of the bus.’ Who cared if they were black? I still don’t care.”

His sufferance did not extend to the poor blacks of the ghetto. Middle-income blacks he saw as “just like me . . . But if they are going to send shit from Brownsville down here, it’s a different ballgame. You’re not talking the language I knew growing up.” Vernacular usage, then, did not always coincide with the approved usage of the broader society. The distinction between niggers and blacks was the foundation of a ranking of the profligate lifestyles of lower-income blacks and the respectable lifestyles of middle-income blacks. Beneath the surface of apparently racial judgments was the ineluctable reality of class cultures in conflict.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, breeding shaped the way Canarsians talked about that reality. Plebeian Italians more often resorted to pungent language, with few restraints on coarse word like “nigger.” Canarsie also had its fair share of Jews who were not unlike the unpolished *prosteh* of the eastern European shtetl. “To ‘talk like a *proster*’ means not only to talk inelegantly and ungrammatically but also that one is not above using ‘ugly words.’ ”<sup>5</sup> The distinctions made by an educated Jewish housewife did not differ in kind from those of her *prost*

neighbors, except that the contrast of refined and unrefined replaced a more vulgar idiom. “It’s really a class problem. I don’t care about the color of a person if they’re nice people. The black parents in the school programs I work with are beautiful and refined people. They’re like us.”

The images of the ghetto held by both crude and cultivated whites were formed and reinforced in encounters with blacks. Many Canarsians viewed black street slang as a sign of blacks’ reluctance to observe the most basic proprieties. An Italian working-class couple complained that the blacks failed to maintain the accepted division of social life into a vulgar male sphere of work and a respectable female sphere of home. “These maniacs, the way they walk the streets and the language they use, forget it! UGGGH! They curse the way we say ‘Hello, how are you?’ ” Working-class culture provided a masculine realm of raunchiness untamed by female gentility, but cursing in public violated the norms of demeanor. The husband, who was free with profanity in the presence of other men, described the rules. “I never walked around the house cursing. It’s unreal the way they talk, ‘motherfucker this,’ ‘cocksucker that.’ The way they talk to you in the streets is the way they talk in their houses! All right, if you’re out on a job with your friends, it’s okay. But you don’t bring it home. I wasn’t brought up going ‘motherfucker,’ ‘motherfucker,’ ‘motherfucker.’ ”

Sometimes blacks hurled the language against whites like a weapon, untempered by the rules that cushion repartee in the black rhyming ritual of insult, the Dozens. An Italian salesman hated driving across Brooklyn. “These colored bums, they bang on your hood when you’re waiting at red lights. My wife and I were called ‘white motherfuckers’ just driving across the ghetto.”

Changes in the visual landscape accompanied the barbs of language. The display of black folk art on the side of a Brownsville tenement injected an anomalous presence into Canarsians’ visual space, just as the large transistors favored by ghetto youths invaded their auditory space. An Italian worker considered a mural depicting scenes from slavery as the triumph of an alien people. It was as if the blacks’ need to reclaim a portion of their suppressed history could be gratified only at the expense of the dignity of his white tradition. “I seen one painting of a girl with a slit in her dress and hustling and two dudes. But that’s not the drawings of a middle class area. A lot of this stuff is displayed as art, they say that people are expressing themselves or saying something. But I can’t read it. It’s not what I

want to see. They even have black schools where kids paint pictures of kids picking cotton! But this is 1976, not 1876.”

The profusion of graffiti on the city’s subways and buildings, which Canarsians attributed mainly to ghetto vandals, added to the visual estrangement. Some cosmopolitans read graffiti therapeutically as a symptom of urban alienation or aesthetically as minority art nouveau, a primitivism broken free of stuffy formalism. Canarsians, however, viewed graffiti moralistically. “You want to lock them up!” cried a Jewish man. “It’s disgusting, I’m appalled by it,” said another.

The spread of the arabesques onto the face of the city marked sinister forces crossing the line between public rules and private whim. Even the picturesque examples struck many as the acts of predators who violated the rules of place that reassure pedestrians in anonymous urban spaces. “Graffiti don’t belong there. If they want to be artists, there are plenty of schools for it. Put it back on the canvas where it belongs.” The defacement seemed to show a willingness to defy the unstated rituals that underlie the impression that “everything is okay here.” Canarsians translated ugly scrawls and obscenities as a form of sensory mayhem carried out against the public. “It’s a senseless defacement of property,” claimed one man. “Nobody has the right to destroy things of others. We never had this graffiti stuff when we were growing up, and we didn’t have muggings back then either. It’s destructive, these are sick people who have no respect.” The ultimate message of graffiti was that the public sphere was full of unseen dangers and no longer belonged to the law-abiding.

Canarsians reached their judgment about the people of the ghetto by reading such palpable signs. The slums of Brownsville give it an unruly appearance. Canarsie is neat and trim, a grid of repetition, the landscape of order. When whites looked north across Linden Boulevard, the chaos transfixed them. Memories of the old immigrant neighborhoods forced them to compare the ghetto and Canarsie, but also the Brownsville they knew from their youth and what confronted them now. Like archeologists of moral life, they peeled back the layers of time and read signs of vice and virtue in the crumbling buildings. One Jewish craftsman mused, “I can’t help thinking of the immigrants. I mean, they tried to make a living, they sacrificed so the next generation could live a better life. They gave their family values. Don’t shit where you eat. My grandfather lived in Brownville, and look what they did there! He had a little garden in back, but now it all looks like a science fiction movie. The niggers

have ruined it. They have no pride. Just because you're poor doesn't mean you have to live in filth."

The judgments of shame entered the folklore as received truth. An Italian youth, surrounded by his buddies, mostly the sons of plumbers, electricians, and carpenters, said blacks were "pigs who just throw their shit around." His parents, who grew up in East New York, told him "how in East New York and Brownsville, you know, the niggers moved in slow and sure, and the white people didn't want to live there no more." His father wondered aloud at dinner, "How could people live like those animals?" The kids took in the contemptuous tone along with the content and vented that indignation second hand. "The way they leave the streets, there ain't no excuse for that shit. Look at the way they make those houses! What about the white people who used to live in those houses? Those houses were clean! But now you think somebody's mother or father would want to live there or walk around there?"

Canarsie's image of ghetto culture crystallized out of all the visual gleanings, fleeting encounters, and racist presumptions. Lower-class blacks lacked industry, lived for momentary erotic pleasure, and, in their mystique of soul, glorified the fashions of a high-stepping street life.<sup>6</sup> The hundreds of thousands of female-headed minority households in New York City, and the spiraling rate of illegitimate births, reinforced the impression that ghetto women were immoral. A Jewish shopkeeper in Brownsville was sure that black women were given to sexual excess. "I know this black, see, and he told me, 'My sisters are not blacks but niggers. All they like is boozing and getting laid.'"

The verdict of immorality also applied to ghetto men, who were said to be aficionados of the "going-out life" of bars, hustling, and pimping. A young Italian man compared the "normal married guy—his concerns are making sure the bills are paid and coming home to the family"—to his minority-group workmates. "It's a drag to say it, but most of your blacks and Puerto Ricans are a little different. Getting out on that Friday night is very important to them, and having that bottle of whiskey. It's very hard to put it across the board, because I know blacks and Puerto Ricans who are very strong family people, but there's quite a few of them, their main thing is for girlfriends on the side when they're married."

People apprehend their own identity most keenly through encounters with the forbidden. As Kai Erikson has crisply defined the seeming paradox of that interplay, "Deviant forms of behavior, by marking the outer edges of group life, give the inner structure its

special character.”<sup>7</sup> Canarsians felt most like family people when they railed against “the element”; all the separate accusations—blacks loved to party, used profane language in public, did not take care of their dwellings—formed an indictment of the weak ghetto family. A Jewish salesman claimed, “I had the same problems they did, but few of them niggers want to make much of their life. Flashy cars, booze, and broads is all they care about. They don’t even want to get ahead for their families!”

Racism, which primed whites to select fragments of reality that confirmed their prejudgments, accounts for a good measure of such distorted and mean-spirited claims. But that interpretation suffers from at least three drawbacks. First, it neglects the social forces that shape racial judgments. Canarsians’ obsession with the worst in ghetto life reflected ghetto realities: a high proportion of lower-class blacks and soaring rates of drug addiction, family breakdown, and criminality. The high life is only one of the lifestyles in the ghetto repertoire, which also includes righteous and respectable, but the signs of pathology were florid enough to distract even the casual observer. The evidence of the streets was jarringly accessible, while the interior scenes of family life remained dim and opaque.

The seamy aspects of ghetto life were so vivid that they overwhelmed the ability of whites to note all the other aspects that did not conform to the stereotypes. A Jewish businessman urged minorities to perfect the politics of impression management and to punish wayward members who tainted the collectivity. As he saw it, only cohesive ethnic organization could filter out the negative messages:

It only takes five bad black kids in a project of 140 to spoil the group image . . . I always thought Eddie Cantor and Liebowitz were great. You need someone to look up to, you have to show your heroes. The problem is you only see the *shvartzes*’ bad side, you only see people getting handouts. Now we Jews, we never showed the outside world our worst face. We showed the doctors, the lawyers, the scientists. But the blacks send their worst element, the fighting kids, out into the world. They ought to get their Reverends, and if they catch a kid messing around, then beat the living shit out of him, because he’s harming the group image.<sup>8</sup>

Each Canarsian’s round of work and play led to contacts with minorities that qualified or embellished the shared imagery. Middle-

class Jews and Italians met black teachers, office workers, and civil servants, but a Jewish bill collector's job took him deep into the inner sanctums of the underclass. "I'd immediately see the difference between a nigger and a negro when I was collecting. In the nigger's case, you walk in and the kids are on the floor, the bedroom door is wide open, and the mother is banging away with a guy right in front of the kids. Of course, the kid is going to grow up haywire like that, but I don't want my kid around that element."

A second problem with the emphasis on racism is that it neglects the cultural rule that breaches of moral norms must be punished. When provincial Jews and Italians recoiled from the riven families of the ghetto, they were prisoners of ancient notions of right as well as vituperative passion. "The blacks have ten kids to a family," the Italian wife of a city worker observed. "Their overpopulation is a problem. The wrong people are having children. You see, it's the quality that's important, not the quantity. Bring up a few, give them love and education." She compared the apparent licentiousness of ghetto dwellers with the moral density of immigrant life, which shrouded the self in a blanket of family obligations. "Our parents came from Europe with the feeling of working hard and paying their own way, and it was all for the family. You see, we did what we *had* to. We worked hard and lived right. It's not right that they think they can do what they *want* to. I mean, who doesn't want six or seven children, but we couldn't be conscientious about that many."

The contrast of quantity and quality, like doing what you want and living right, repeated the primal contrasts of appetite and obligation. In traditional Italian culture, "give them education" meant the lessons of family honor. The woman who failed to perform her role as the center of *la famiglia*, like the mother of illegitimate children, risked censure as a *disgraziata*.<sup>9</sup>

The final drawback of the emphasis on racism is that it downplays the desire, which was contained in all the racial classifying, to decipher enigmas. It is hard to exaggerate the bewilderment Canarsians felt when they considered the family patterns of the ghetto. To be without a family in southern Italy "was to be truly a non-being, *un sacco vacante* (an empty sack) as Sicilians say, *un nuddu miscatu cu nenti* (a nobody mixed with nothing)."<sup>10</sup> As Canarsie Jews and Italians saw it, many ghetto dwellers *were* nobodies mixed with nothing. "They are different from us Jews and Italians," an Italian plumber reflected. "You see, we were poor, but we helped one an-



other. But the colored don't have that family life like we used to. I don't know what it is with them. I can't understand them people."

The common patterns of desertion, transiency, and illegitimacy reinforced Canarsians' impression of the volatility of ghetto family life. The loosely joined families seemed to lack the distinct positions that Jews and Italians relied on to define the very existence of a family. "Their families are strange," said one man. "I don't like the shenanigans going on with all these families living together. Where are the morals? Where is the father? Does he go out with another woman and just leave the family?"

Canarsians often attributed the pathologies of the ghetto to the nature of the family rather than to sin, genes, poverty, environment, or exploitation. "I'll tell you why I don't believe in this environment stuff," began a member of the Knights of Columbus. "I used to run a drugstore on Cambria Street, that's in Bedford Stuyvesant, and I knew plenty of black people who brought their kids up right even though they were poor, they were as good as my kids, and I bring mine up right, good kids who are decent and want to earn a living and be good citizens, kids from families with seven or eight kids. So I don't think it's so much environment. It's more the family and the habits you learn." The contention that blacks lacked a normal family life reflected the need to hold poverty constant to distinguish the effects of ethnicity. If poor Jewish and Italian immigrant families had not suffered catastrophic levels of breakdown, was it unreasonable for Canarsians to conclude that the black family was different from the families of other immigrant groups?<sup>11</sup>

Not all residents reckoned causality in the same way. Some emphasized the moral failings of ghetto dwellers, others had more sociological discourse at their disposal. One day three PTA leaders—two Italian and one Jewish—sat around a dinette table discussing white immigrants and black ghetto dwellers. The Jewish woman said of blacks, "The problem with them is that their culture is a matriarchy." Her two sidekicks razed her with affectionate sarcasm, "Hey, I like that fancy word," thereby marking the border between two symbolic communities, each with its own code of speaking. The more educated white-collar Jews were the fancy speech community; the less learned blue-collar Italians were the down-home speech group.

The culture of the blamer as well as that of the blamed thus helped shape the process of appraisal. A Jewish elected official in the

Jefferson Democratic Club said, “I’m not smart enough to figure out how you solve the problem, but it’s really one of socialization. You have sociological problems that are vast. Take the blacks and Hispanics and counterculture them. Create a kibbutz to break up their matriarchal society. You can’t start integration with blacks when they don’t have the family structure. In order for whites to live with blacks, you have to change their sociology.”

What separates reflections about “matriarchy” from philippics about “shenanigans”? The substance is identical: poor blacks suffer from brittle family ties. The difference lies in the strength of taboos on vulgarity, the degree of self-consciousness about generalizing, the sophistication of the lingo. “Matriarchy” did not change the reality covered by claims that blacks “ain’t got no family”; it merely translated it into a more respectable idiom. Regardless of any differences in their levels of racism or precariousness of status, the educated had resources of theory and discourse available to them which the provincial could not claim.

There is a unity tying together many of the complaints leveled by Canarsians against ghetto dwellers. “The element” had unbridled appetites. Their culture, considered an anticulture, devalued the respect and duties that convert natural beings into civilized people. Rather than abstaining from the joys of the flesh, ghetto dwellers were seen as abstaining from the restraints that socialize instinct and create a body politic.<sup>12</sup>

The white Canarsians’ self-righteousness, whatever its sources, punished the black poor and diminished whites by submerging their generous impulses. It clouded the complex reality of the ghetto, the diversity of its lifestyles, and the valiant struggles of black people to survive. And it hurt the larger social order, dividing citizens who were dependent on each other without forging a conception of the public good. Living so close to the ghetto, Canarsians might have developed compassion for the ghetto dwellers and sensitivity to the forces that strangled their life chances. They too had descended from poor minorities, had toiled hard and suffered long. Unfortunately, physical closeness to blacks widened the moral and social chasm between them. The legendary sacrifices of Jewish and Italian immigrants nourished contempt for poor blacks, who seemingly failed to bust their chops as had the forebears of the whites. Some whites became excited by primal fantasies of sex and violence. In a sorry repetition of history, blacks, already victims of words like shit

and pigs, became the casualties of white moralism and spite. Violence was no less real for being symbolic.

### Crime in the Streets

*“It’s a physical reality. You have to protect your body and your children.”*

An official in the Jefferson Democratic Club once described the people of Canarsie as “gun shy” refugees who had suffered “financial beatings” when they fled the old neighborhoods. They also risked actual beatings and real armed robberies, even after moving into their new community. Street crime united all residents in fear. On a cool autumn night in the mid-1970s some citizens met to discuss a rash of muggings in Canarsie. A survivor of the Nazi death camps declared, “It’s like Hitler’s time. I am still not free. I have not been liberated yet.” The analogy had a special Jewish flavor, yet it conveyed the intensity of all Canarsians’ concerns about lawlessness.

Demagogues inflamed popular fears about crime, turning “law and order” into a talisman. The adept orator could speak the unspeakable with a wink, leaving little doubt that he was talking about “niggers.” When would-be avengers recited the phrase, some residents heard a promise to satisfy their fantasies of reprisals against blacks. Racism does not exhaust all the meanings encompassed by “law and order.” In a world of changing morals, traditionalists used the formulation to affirm a world of discipline and decency. Garry Wills has described the yearning for timeless verities contained in the phrase. “The desire for ‘law and order’ is nothing so simple as a code word for racism; it is a cry, as things begin to break up, for stability, for stopping history in mid-dissolution. Hammer the structure back together; anchor it down; bring nails and bolts and clamps to keep it from collapsing. There is a slide of things—queasy seasickness . . .”<sup>13</sup>

One did not have to reach far to discover the basic appeal of law and order: simply put, there was less of it than there used to be.<sup>14</sup> Like virtually all of his neighbors, an Orthodox Jewish man saw the contraction of safe and usable space as a mockery of a liberal society. What good were constitutional rights if danger made it impossible to enjoy them? He was methodical in work and worship, and trans-

gression of the law offended his vision of a well-ordered universe. "People's homes are their prisons," he said late one night, as we sat on the deck of his home, looking down into the street. "If I can't sleep and I want to go out on the street for a walk at four in the morning, I am not permitted to do that. It's the fear. We live in a degenerate society. Why are there so many criminals? They kill people like they would kill a fly."

Canarsie suffered a rise in burglaries and muggings in the late 1970s, but most local police considered the neighborhood relatively safe. However, the residents could not sequester themselves away from the rest of the metropolis. They lived next door to some of the highest crime areas in the entire city. To work, to visit, and to shop, they had to travel back and forth through the city, and their mobility made them vulnerable to attack. I met few residents who were strangers to street crime. If they had not been victimized, usually only one link in the chain of intimacy separated them from the victims—kin, neighbors, and friends. Canarsians spoke about crime with more unanimity than they achieved on any other subject, and they spoke often and forcefully. Most had a favorite story of horror. A trucker remembered defecating in his pants a few years earlier when five black youths cornered him in an elevator and placed a knifeblade against his throat. "They got two hundred dollars and a gold watch. They told me, 'Listen you white motherfucker, you ain't calling the law.' I ran and got in my car and set off the alarm. A group of blacks got around the car. If anybody made a move, I'd have run them over. The police came and we caught one of them. The judge gave them a fucking two-year probation." The experience left an indelible imprint. He still relived the humiliation of soiling himself.

Neighbors occasionally tried to best each other in duels of grotesque incidents. "Forget about that," a utility worker broke into his wife's account of her mugging. "Did you see what they did to the guy who gives you the tokens up near Van Sinderen Avenue? They took the money off the guy, but then they didn't leave him alone. They poured gasoline on him and threw a match inside the cage, and they barbecued him."

The vicariously lived suffering of kin was almost as injurious as one's own. In spite of entreaties by his daughter, a mulish old Jew living in an ancient building in Brownsville refused to budge from his home. In areas like that, the few remaining elderly Jews were sometimes mugged on the way to Friday night services, an especially

senseless crime since the Orthodox do not carry money on the Sabbath. In a number of cases splashed across the pages of the tabloids, the enraged hoodlums had killed these pious people. But the old man refused to relocate; in fact, he berated his daughter for racism when she warned that “the schvartzes” were going to kill him. “My own daughter, how dare you speak like that! I am ashamed for you. You should feel compassion for your fellow man.”

People’s rounds of work extended the radius of liability beyond the neighborhood and expanded the reach of rumors about crime. Police work especially breeds an intimacy with urban danger that forces cops to refine suspiciousness into a fine art. By concealing their intentions, predators stage faked presentations of the impression that ‘nothing is happening here.’ Hiding the clues that recommend caution or avoidance, they exploit the dramatic possibilities of social life. To compensate for such scams, police too can adopt the theatrical ploys of miscreants. The veiling of official appearances in undercover work or a stint on the “granny squad” was a chance to play a confidence game in reverse.

One police officer explained that he earned his living by getting mugged. On his roving beat he had been mugged hundreds of times in five years. “I only been mugged by a white guy one time. All right, one instance, I went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They got a huge mugging rate there. I was dressed like an old man, a scar on my face, a little blood dripping like I was just in an accident, a cast on my arm, wearing old clothes.” He had been out on the street for barely five or ten minutes when a band of black youths approached him. “The first words I heard were, ‘Get the old white man.’ Somebody got around me, I got kicked, I got punched, one guy says, ‘Grab him, let’s take his wallet,’ I got stabbed in the hand. It was a savage thing. I also found that it was because I was white. ‘Look at the old white guy,’ ‘Let’s get the old white guy,’ ‘Get the fucking white scumbag.’ What the hell does ‘white’ mean?”

The cop told his story in the Knights of Columbus lodge. The nods and shouts of his audience were part of a process that recurred in other jobs. Those who worked in and around the ghetto were involved in or heard about incidents, and these trickled back to Canarsie. Bringing home their stories of risk to kin, neighbors, and friends, workers formed an information network linking external sources of danger to the locale. At both the work and neighborhood ends of the chain, talk collectivized the experience of danger.

The police, as emissaries of the state, were trained in the craft of

violence, reinforced by the majesty of law, and compensated for risk. Yet many residents worked in ghetto areas as bill collectors, merchants, landlords, teachers, delivery men, cabbies, salespeople, firemen, utility workers, social workers, or repairmen. Their livelihoods did not permit easy flight or evasion. One worker displayed the fearsome knife that was his badge of a dangerous occupation. "If I come home and tell the little woman stories," he said, dropping his voice to a hushed whisper as his wife hovered in the kitchen, "her hair would stand on end. You know, I carry this knife with me the whole time I been working in the ghetto." In an eerie rhythm he chanted, "I figure I got a chance, I got a chance, I got a chance. At least I'm going to take somebody with me if I gotta go, believe me."

When there were riots in the ghetto, whites tended to fuse the political violence of black protest with the ordinary criminality of the underclass. A Jewish schoolteacher who had worked for a national civil rights organization lamented the change in the movement. "It's a pity that pressure was required for blacks to get anywhere. In the beginning it was bloodless, they followed the Gandhian philosophy. But later it became more bloody, and I felt conflicted emotionally and intellectually. I think there's a belligerence about blacks today. They are always yelling, 'Why you pickin' on us blacks?'"

By the middle of the 1960s the image of violence had tarnished the positive reputation earned by black protesters earlier. When asked in 1966, "Would you say that the actions Negroes have taken to get things they want have been generally violent or generally peaceful" during the past year, 68 percent of a Brooklyn sample, more than half Jewish, said "generally violent." Of the New York "backlash" Italians queried by Louis Harris and Bert Swanson in the spring of 1969, 49 percent felt blacks wanted to tear down white society; only 22 percent disputed that verdict.<sup>15</sup>

Fear of black vengeance prompted some whites to take a dim view of *Roots*, the television dramatization of Alex Haley's search for his African origins. One woman had wanted to suppress its airing as an inflammatory program. "Did you watch *Roots*? Well I watched every one of them, and if they keep shoving that stuff down our throats, there's never going to be peace. What upset me was they rehashed history, but *history is dead!*" Her objection came from a fear that slavery remained a vibrant memory for many blacks, who might hold whites responsible for it. "And I expect this summer the blacks will be out there on the streets with axes to cut off white feet. It's going to be pushed and pushed and pushed how they were mis-

treated, and there will be a holocaust. This was over two hundred years ago that this slavery bit was! Yet *Roots* showed all the violence, and how the white people were mean to them. The blacks were treated worse than animals, they were taken up from their own happy soil." But, she added, "They don't need to be reminded of that."

Such dark thoughts were not confined to conservative or hysterical Canarsians. A liberal Jewish teacher praised *Roots* as a needed education for blacks and whites but admitted, almost sheepishly, to a nagging thought. "I was concerned, frankly, on the first day of school about any kind of reaction from unstable hoodlum groups." Another Jewish teacher who felt that "George Wallace filled the bill of a racist dictator, he was everything I despised" also expected racial turmoil, "and it happened in some Brooklyn schools since *Roots* was shown. Black kids, twelve and thirteen years old, are using the name Kinte Kunte, and they have called white students 'white murderers.' They had to call in the police at one school."

Writers have pointed out the presumptions that frame people's view of social life and have written of the power of demagogues and the media to frame perceptions, but Canarsians' understanding of crime and protest was shaped by actual contingencies in the environment. Proximity to the ghetto gave black power an immediacy from which those at a remove from the underclass were shielded. Vulnerability forced on the residents of New York City's boroughs interpretive strategies that differed from those of secure suburbanites, as well as of scholars exposed to academic black nationalism.

Many Canarsians, concluding that vast stretches of Brooklyn had become dangerous places, nervously shifted their patterns of movement through the city or retreated into protective asylums. Evasion established a reluctant trade: forgoing the enjoyment of public places like subways, parks, and streets, refusing the risks of lonely dispersion in anonymous urban spaces, and getting in return the safety of a less random, yet less stimulating, environment.

Whites ceded many areas of the city, but crime followed them into Canarsie. Social policy and administrative decisions, such as housing for the poor in middle-income neighborhoods, school zoning and busing schemes, and the inadequate screening practices of public housing projects, increased the permeability of the community. By forcing mutually suspicious groups to mingle together, such mandates disrupted local rituals that served to prevent disputes, thereby increasing the chances of racial abrasion.<sup>16</sup>

Tensions between black and white students in a Canarsie junior high school in the mid-1970s exemplified the sometimes unhappy consequences of mixing black and white children under structurally inauspicious circumstances. Wilson Junior High drew its one-third black enrollment from the low-income Breukelen Houses project and students bused in from Brownsville and East New York. During an outbreak of racial fighting, a melancholy Jewish girl peered out the front door of the school. As police cars circled the block, she said poignantly, "I'm afraid to go outside, because it's white against black. The whites are prejudiced because of what's happened. The black kids have their protection rackets and their shakedowns. I still have my black girlfriends, but if it comes to a fight, I'll have to go with my own. I'll have to stay with the whites."

A key source of opposition to busing lay in the apprehensions of white parents about exposing their children to tough lower-class kids. While racism and hysteria inflated those fears, the nervousness was based on a realistic grasp of the greater proficiency of lower-class children in violence. The painful lessons her children learned from racial contact depressed a progressive Jewish woman. "Most Canarsians are against busing. They're afraid their property values will decline, but they're also afraid their kids will be killed in the hallways." She ruefully described the chasm of the generations. "Our kids' experience in mixed schools hasn't been positive. My daughters are extremely bigoted, they tell me, 'I hate the niggers.' You see, they've had frightening experiences. It's funny, but the racial feeling is generational. I was more liberal than they are, but I didn't have to deal with the dangers they face."

Danger forced many parents to revise their views of child-rearing. Comparing the perceived violence of ghetto kids with white defenselessness, they wondered if they had prepared their children for city life. Genteel residents reluctantly embraced reprisal. Realism came more easily to street-smart Jews and Italians who knew by heart the lessons of the piers, the sweatshops, the poolroom. One merchant advised a course of study at odds with Talmudic edification. "It's a problem of education. Our kids just aren't educated to fight. I was tough. My parents were from Kiev, and I grew up on the Lower East Side, so I can take care of myself. But my kids?" He remembered back to the antibusing protests of 1972. "I used to carry a gun, and the blacks saw I had a gun. But my kids ain't tough like that."

Both Jews and Italians began to see liberalism as being out of key with the requirements of urban living and to equate it with a self-



destructive idealism. In this revised interpretation liberalism did not embody a vision of transcendent justice; rather, it ignored the demands of bodily survival. “The Concerned Citizens of Canarsie are too extreme,” a Jewish teacher argued; she referred to the militant organization that had arisen during the busing crisis of 1972–73 as a “fascist” group with “racist” leanings. “But the problem is that we Jews are too liberal and moderate and soft. We don’t want out kids to fight. The Wilson Junior High [black] kids who come from Brownsville and East New York sweep our kids into the gutter. It’s a physical reality. You have to protect your body and your children.”

The structure of this woman’s analysis, split in half with that intrusive, hedging “but,” exemplified the growing dissociation between the principled force of a liberal tradition on one side and the demands of everyday life on the other. Sympathy for the minorities was an emotional requirement of political closeness between blacks and whites. Black threat, however, diminished the ratio of positive to negative contacts with blacks that nurtured that sympathy.<sup>17</sup> Abrasive encounters with specific blacks began to dwarf abstract notions of support for blacks in general, and the image of blacks as victims yielded to an image of them as victimizers. Physical realities did not entirely vanquish liberalism; they did force many residents to engage in agile maneuvers to reconcile physical realities with moral principles, or they drove liberalism underground for a time.

In Canarsie High School, violence between the races had broken the peace recurrently since the school was completed in the 1960s. By 1977 the student population was 27 percent black. The school was not a wildly dangerous place, nor did antagonism prevent friendships from forming across the barrier of race, and students were not all equally likely to become embroiled in disputes. Yet the mixing of adolescent boys from different economic and racial backgrounds created a tinderbox in which a simple dispute could turn into full-fledged racial war. In the absence of agreement on territorial rights, hostile factions vied for primacy in hallways, classrooms, stairwells, bathrooms, the lunchroom, playgrounds, and exits. Italian boys often inveighed against the incursion of blacks, and their gait and mien. Depending on the context, the references to “niggers” might mean “all black people” or they might mean the particular blacks uppermost in the boys’ mind at the time. “We only bother with the ones that are like friends with us. But then there’s always

them fucking arrogant ones that, the only way, if you don't kill them, they'll kill you."

Nodding off in a drug-induced haze, one youth slurred:

The blacks are trying to take over Canarsie High School. The teachers are afraid of them. That's why the whites get blamed for every little thing. I seen *Roots*, man, you know, I say it's not really our fault in a way, 'cause it was really the English who tortured them. The niggers hint it to you, like you're responsible. In history class we talked about it. They just look at you and start talking about *Roots*, "these honkies this" and "these honkies that." They shouldn't have put the blacks in slavery then. They should do it now! Keep 'em in hand!

A common opinion among the tough Italian boys was that blacks violated the ethical character of disputing defined by "a fair one." One protagonist in a racial battle claimed, "That's another thing with them niggers, like, they are such pussies, that if I was to go up against a guy who's six foot tall, I mean he would pull a knife out on me or some kind of weapon. Being that he's six feet tall, he should be able to kick my ass. Like, he'll pull out a knife, because they're like yellow dogs. I never carry a weapon on me. In their own neighborhoods they got to carry guns. That's how *baaad* they are! We don't carry no pieces on us when we hang out." Another youth chimed in, using the colloquial phrase "having words" for disputing, "The only thing we share is words and punches." A third boy crossed over into a parody of black slang. "The niggers all got that attitude—*baaaaaaad!*"

Greil Marcus wrote of the black ideal of "badness," personified by the mythic story of Stagger Lee, "That bad man, Oh, cruel Stagger Lee." "Locked in the images of a thousand versions of the tale is an archetype that speaks to fantasies of casual violence and violent sex, lust and hatred, ease and mastery, a fantasy of style and steppin' high. At a deeper level, it is a fantasy of no-limits for a people who live within a labyrinth of limits every day of their lives, and who can transgress them only among themselves."<sup>18</sup> But the bad style of some ghetto teens quickly crossed the threshold of provocation formed by the Italian boys' tetchy sensitivity to slight.

The accumulation of incidents and stories of crime inside and outside of Canarsie weakened the credibility of appearances. An Italian politician described the average constituent's reasoning about crime.

“He doesn’t philosophize *why* it was a Negro mugger. His experience is being mugged by blacks, so all blacks are muggers or potential muggers. The syllogism is there.” An act of violence sabotaged the victim’s sense of reality and left a diffuse sense of mistrust. As Erving Goffman observed, “It seems that the surround is constructed out of elements easily seen as members of classes, and the tendency is to generalize from one member of a class to the other members. If one chair breaks under the individual, he begins to suspect the others.”<sup>19</sup> One fearful Canarsie woman lamented, “It would be different if I could walk down the streets without worrying, if I didn’t have to stop to say to myself, ‘Hey, that Negro man coming down here, is he going to knife me ’cause he’s looking for revenge [on whites], or is he my friend?’ It would be okay if I could feel they were my friends, just as much as I am their friend.”

Canarsie’s chief attraction was the immunity it promised from the dangerous classes. After a flurry of muggings by black youths around the subway station near the low-income project, the residents were especially unnerved. All the classifications of safe and dangerous places they relied on for an illusion of order were thrown into turmoil. One evening dozens of people crowded into a synagogue basement to discuss the muggings. The rabbi sermonized, “We need another night to be in synagogue just to deal with those hoodlums on the streets. Five blacks broke the ribs and shoulder bone of the last person who was attacked. The entire perimeter of the project has become hazardous.”

A congregant said with sanguine equanimity, “I’m sure that the [precinct] captain will enlighten us.” The captain, parrying the request for illumination with a hopeless language of bottom lines, deployment formulas, and fiscal crisis, failed to assuage the crowd’s demand for consolation. In a thick Yiddish accent, a man cried, “We are handicapped. So broken ribs and shoulders are not enough? We need a murder too?” A man in a skullcap declaimed, “The answer is vigilantes. We had vigilantes in Crown Heights, and we stopped the niggers there. The community has to do it ourselves.” An elected official said, “Look, off the record, I carry a baseball bat under my car seat.” The rabbi added, “I was driven from the Bronx. I know. How much is your home worth if you can’t tell your friends to get off at the 105th Street subway station?” Someone else interjected with crisp finality, “Club them to death! You have that right!” An elderly somber-faced woman sitting near me drew a historical parallel that electrified the gathering. “I am locked up like in the ghettos of Eu-

rope. I am afraid of people knocking down my door. I still am not free.”

All across urban Middle America, citizens performed such acts of communion. From a distance the gatherings seem like the folly of the horde, but emotional contagion does not do full justice to their meaning. They also formed fleeting moments of culture-building, in which residents helped one another work out new definitions of permissible and forbidden behavior.

Fear of a menacing environment had produced heated political discussions by the middle of the 1960s. A referendum in 1966 asked New York City voters to weigh the merits of establishing a civilian grievance board to hear charges of police brutality. The question quickly supplanted its stated purpose—to assuage the concerns of minorities about sadistic police practices—and became a verdict on the civil rights movement.

The precincts most opposed to civilian review all lay within Italian Old Canarsie, but the referendum failed to gain a majority in any Canarsie precinct. As much as 90 percent of the Italians voted against the board, approximating the boroughwide figures for Irish and Italian Catholics. The four most antireview precincts had given William Buckley, the Conservative party’s 1965 mayoral candidate, about 20 percent of the vote in a three-way race, and Barry Goldwater had received more than 40 percent of the presidential vote in his 1964 crusade against liberalism. Such developments marked the potential appeal of a New Right populism among Catholic lower middle-class voters who liked muscular responses to racial and global danger.

Civilian review did best in Jewish areas of Canarsie where Buckley received only 5 percent of the vote in the 1965 mayoral race, and Goldwater had taken barely 10 percent in 1964. Yet even in the precincts most sympathetic to the CRB, support crested only at 40 percent; in most Jewish precincts, one-third or less voted for the board. This level of endorsement was consistent with the pattern detected by a team of scholars who took soundings of the Brooklyn electorate in 1966. While 30 percent of Jews with high school or grade school education voted for the board, 54 percent of those with a college education supported civilian review.<sup>20</sup>

Brooklyn residents who were most nervous about crime, the same survey revealed, tended to oppose the civil rights movement. But what about liberals who admired Martin Luther King and approved of the Miranda ruling yet feared crime? Fervent ideology pulled

them in one direction, physical realities in another. Among strong Jewish supporters of the civil rights movement, 55 percent of those who said they felt safe supported the review board. Only 38 percent of those who felt in jeopardy did the same. “The attitudes of liberals on social and economic equality, civil liberties, and procedural rights had such a low correlation with their attitudes towards the CRB that it suggests just how disassociated these values were in the minds of rank-and-file voters.”<sup>21</sup>

The vote against the review board dealt a stunning blow to the liberal forces that had dominated New York politics for a generation. Andrew Hacker wrote, “It brought to the surface some issues which had hitherto been considered off limits in election campaigns . . . But once civilian review of the police reached the ballot, it made visible a division that would affect almost all later elections.”<sup>22</sup> The vote disclosed the first breach in Jewish unity, divided conservative lower-middle-class Jews in the other boroughs from the liberal Jewish gentry in Manhattan, and moved the Jewish and Catholic petty bourgeoisie closer together.

Throughout the decade after 1966 lower-middle-class Jews parted company with their affluent brethren on a range of racial issues. Some writers have attributed this class division to internal dispositions of the enlightened and the know-nothing. Upper-middle-class professionals are said to have a flair for abstractions, an ability to rise above self-interest to empathize with others, and faith in using trained intelligence to solve social problems. The argument has some truth, but Milton Himmelfarb has captured the potential abuses of such a claim. “In 1966, was it chiefly education that prompted Jews to vote for the civilian review board, and lack of education to vote against it? Perhaps it was prosperity and lack of prosperity. The prosperous could afford their votes. The unprosperous (and elderly), living in apartment houses without doormen and riding subways rather than taxis, may have voted as they did, not because of ignorance but because of concerns explicable by the reality of their lives—a reality against which prosperity shields the prosperous.”<sup>23</sup>

The political fallout of crime was evident in a less precisely measurable decline in support for an oppressed group. An older Catholic woman stated:

I didn't have such hatred before. I started disliking the blacks about ten years ago, in 1967. I was on a subway and got mugged.

I still don't know why they slashed my face with a razor. It was a black girl and a Puerto Rican that done it. That finished me feeling sorry for them. And once I was on the "J" train [of the subway], and a black boy came up and kicked me, so I says, "What was that for?" and he tells me, "Your feet are in my way," so I kicked him back. That's the pay-off you get. They won't even let you sit in your seat in peace. I don't mistreat them, so why do they mistreat me? It's sad. Did you know that I used to help the blacks back during the Depression? I used to try to get their rents lowered. They were being exploited by the landlords, this was on President and Nivens streets in South Brooklyn, so I went to the OPA office to protest because I felt so bad about how they were treated.

Through the reflections of many Jewish liberals on the civil rights movement ran a strain of betrayal, a growing suspicion that they had been suckered and played for fools. A person who had been mugged by a black found it hard to feel sanguine about race relations or proud of past acts of support. A beating in exchange for sympathy seemed an uncharitable restitution. Crime turned liberalism into a synonym for masochism: the indulgence of one's victimizers.

An Italian construction worker in 1977, observing his Jewish neighbors with wry detachment, noted their liberalism, but also a new anger. "The Jews have been crucified a lot now by the blacks, they've been having a lot of trouble with them the last ten years. My neighbor next door was mugged. She's a schoolteacher, she used to be real pro-black before, but she hates them now. The blacks were about to kill her the other night. You can see how she's changed. She used to be, let's put it, broad-minded, right, very liberal, and now she has no use for the blacks."

An adviser to a Canarsie politician, sitting in the back of the synagogue on the frenetic night described earlier, analyzed the impact of environment on ideology. "What we are witnessing," he said portentously, "is the deliberalization of people with pronounced liberal tendencies." The insight was a good summary of the result of crime in the streets in Canarsie. Physical reality explained the urgency of the demand for law and order. Racists simply added their own hateful emotions to a concern that gripped everyone. Residents liked to regale a stranger with the popular aphorism, "A conservative is a liberal who's been mugged." Occasionally a sardonic raconteur would twist the standard form to dramatize the utter certainty that blacks

would deliver harm: “A liberal is a conservative who hasn’t been mugged—yet!”

### Neighborhood Integration

*“Maybe they used to be liberals, but not after they were scared out of East Flatbush.”*

Real and imaginary threats to property values and racial balance quickened the struggle over territory. Resistance to integration went beyond cupidity, but the economics of land, housing capital, and debt payments best explain the residents’ fear of racial change. A school official, who once had cheered George Wallace at a Madison Square Garden rally, described to me one source of Canarsians’ demonic perceptions in the mid-1970s. “With the economy so bad, people are getting crazy. If busing goes in, they figure, ‘Hey, I can’t make a living, I’m falling behind and now they’re going to ram this busing down my throat and take my house away.’”

The apparent racial stability of Canarsie did not console its nervous residents. For two decades they had been watching white Brooklyn shrink down to a thin sliver along its south shore, extending from Bay Ridge in the west to Bensonhurst, Sheepshead Bay, and lower Flatbush in the center, to Canarsie in the east. “We’re finished here in Brooklyn, I tell you,” one man avowed. “It’s like we’re the Israelis. They are surrounded by fifty million Arabs, they have to fight, but there’s no place to retreat. Their back is against the water. Well the white middle class in Canarsie is up against the same wall.”

Signs of incipient change in the late 1970s lent some credence to the fear of engulfment. The central core of Canarsie remained lily white. In all but seven of its thirty-three census tracts between 1970 and 1980, the number of blacks remained constant at zero or increased from two or three to less than a dozen. Yet change was coming to the peripheral tracts that abutted adjacent neighborhoods and to anomalous zones like the two projects.

Bayview Homes, a middle-income high-rise public project, went from 15 to 22 percent black in the 1970s, and the increase in Puerto Rican tenants brought the minority population to one-third. At the northwestern threshold of Canarsie, in a tract that looked across Ralph Avenue toward East Flatbush, the black population of 47

quadrupled, rising by 1980 to 161 blacks, or 4 percent of the total. In Canarsie's northeastern quadrant north of Flatlands Avenue, a striking exodus of whites left the low-income Breukelen Houses a minority enclave of youth gangs, female-headed households, and welfare recipients. The halo effect of the project touched the surrounding blocks. Directly to the west was a buffer zone between the project and all-white Italian Old Canarsie across Rockaway Parkway; that tract jumped from a dozen to four hundred blacks in a decade. Most ominously to Canarsians, the commercial strip along the south side of Flatlands Avenue across from the project had an increasingly seedy and abandoned appearance. And dozens of middle-income black and Hispanic families were moving into the eleven front-line blocks south of Flatlands Avenue opposite the project. They had penetrated only one block deep into the heartland of eastern Canarsie, but the direction of movement, south toward Seaview Village and Jamaica Bay, was obvious.

People's forebodings varied with the steepness of their investment, their reserves, and their options for disengagement. One Jewish woman had lived most of her life in walkup apartments and middle-income projects in Brownsville before buying a home in Canarsie in the early 1960s. "Canarsie people don't have a lot of money. We got a little house and it's a big achievement. We don't want to lose what it took our entire life to build."

Caution underwrote stiff resistance to integration. In 1976, at the first meeting of a block association in the central section of New Canarsie, a speaker told the audience, "Jimmy Carter used the phrase 'ethnic purity' and had to apologize for it. But I use the term and I won't apologize for it. I am not a racist. I just want to keep my community pure. I sunk every dime I have into my house and I don't want to be chased. I won't be chased."

Canarsians had an earthy, materialistic view of the link between attitudes and property. A carpenter dismissed his sister's self-righteousness as the luxury of transience. "She don't even care who lives next door to her. She wouldn't care if an Eskimo moved into the neighborhood. But what do you expect? She lives in an apartment in Manhattan." To some extent, attitudes toward laws against discrimination in selling homes reflect property interests. The motives that created an informal version of apartheid in Canarsie, however, cannot be reduced to the racist greed of a privileged segment of the housing market trying to hang onto its advantages. White views of blacks moving in resulted from forces of ideology and environment as



well as of investment, and all three forces influenced the others.<sup>24</sup>

Nationally, urban Catholics score respectably high on measures of integrationist sympathy when compared to nonsouthern Protestants. They come close to the stereotype of know-nothing ethnics only when compared to Jews, whose support for civil rights laws is striking.<sup>25</sup> A Jewish teacher insisted that race was an invidious, even un-American, criterion for selecting a home buyer—adding the proviso that the buyer should have attained the same level of social rank and respectability as she had. “It’s the American way. Minorities should live where they want. It’s part of our philosophy: life, liberty, and freedom for all.” In contrast to this universalist statement is the virtually phobic fear expressed by an Italian machinist. “I bag all the niggers together. They do nothing for themselves. They are a useless people. They have different traits from us. I don’t want to mingle with them.”

Comparing a Jewish teacher with a master’s degree, whose father was a Socialist tailor, to an Italian machinist with eight years of education, whose father liked Joseph McCarthy, hardly offers a fair test of ethnicity, a tag that partially hides influences of education, class, and occupation. Surveys permit the analyst to weigh factors that may remain hidden from the ethnographer; their drawback, however, is that the respondents are treated as lonely atoms with no ties to local communities that impart to their members distinct moral learning.

The commandments and taboos that pervaded the speech of Jewish political and school leaders signaled the vibrancy of a public culture of democracy. A PTA leader stated, “Of course it’s the blacks’ right to move in. Everybody has the right to civil rights.” Her tolerance was not a mysterious gift, something she had merely by virtue of being Jewish. Cultural teachers, by harping on a set of precious “shoulds,” had imbued her with a self-conscious striving toward universalism. “I try not to see color. I wouldn’t care if a black bought a house next to me. You should take each person on their own merits.”

Italian leaders in the Republican party, the North Canarsie Civic Association, and the Conservative party had different notions of “should.” Unabashedly defending the exclusion of blacks from Canarsie, they affirmed the personal wishes of kith and kin rather than the canons of formal law.<sup>26</sup> The acceptance of prejudice as inevitable upheld a strict division between the rights of citizenship, which prevailed in the larger society, and the rights of settlement, which applied to the smaller world of community. “Some prejudice is legal,”

insisted one Italian man who was active in Old Canarsie civic affairs. “You have to do it to keep out undesirables. It’s a cooperative effort of neighbors. They have the right to pick their neighbors. The social and the business world are two entirely different things.” Citing human nature rather than human rights, a Republican leader rejected the perfectionist ideal of law as an instrument of social change or guarantor of liberty. “The government is trying to equalize the races by moving people around, but law can’t accomplish this sort of thing. Brothers like to be close to brothers. People moved into communities because they wanted to be close to people who are like them. It’s not up to the government to throw things over.”

His claim evokes the naturalistic sensibility that weakens the persuasiveness of law in provincial neighborhoods, as well as the realistic ethos that lies at the core of white ethnic culture. A far cry from individualism, ethnic provincialism views life as a field of social entanglements. Its conservatism rests on deference to communal prejudices, on the belief in the natural quality of personal ties, and on its suspicion of the formal remedies of strangers, including those of the state.

Provincial people tend to shy away from airy generalities in favor of judgments conditioned by local context and immediate experience. “That’s completely different out there on [Long] Island with those blacks,” exclaimed an Italian blue-collar worker, who moments before had insisted, “We don’t want them blacks in Canarsie, I tell you, I wouldn’t want to live next door to them.” The material differences between the worlds of here and there made the comparison academic. “The [black] ones who live out on the Island, you never hear of an incident out there. Not really.” Incidents, his euphemism for crime, was the relevant issue, not race. “The only incidents you ever hear of is right here—in Bedford Stuyvesant, the ghetto, East New York, and Brownsville. All the incidents are mostly out this way.”

A policeman’s mistrust of abstract moralism made him angry over sanctimonious condemnations of white racism:

We aren’t racist pigs. We are only people looking out for the survival of our community and children. Did you ever notice anyone who talks of an area being prejudiced? I love this, I look at this: We had a Nyquist on the Board of Regents. Where does he live? Where does his kid go to school? They ain’t never lived in Brooklyn, they ain’t never lived in East New York. A Kennedy

who says this, “Oh, we got to live together, we’ll have busing,” or a Nyquist, why do you live out in Long Island, why is there an eight-foot fence around your property with armed guards, how come your kids don’t go to public schools?

The world close at hand affected the theoretically adept as well as those with a penchant for concrete thinking. An odd collusion emerged among lofty democrats who affirmed the rights of mankind, race-baiters who berated blacks with all their might, and the shrewd ones, indifferent to the abridgment of rights, who loved their property more than they disliked blacks. They all distinguished between ideal states and the exigencies of the environment. The common denominator was aversion to risk. Fearful that morality or legality might prove too costly, given the chancy guarantees, even supporters of equal rights trimmed their commitments. A home-owning humanist who had grown up in Brownsville cited the Declaration of Independence. “It’s the minority’s right to move where they want. I wouldn’t mind if a colored family moved next door if they were upstanding and fine like me. Educated and intelligent blacks, why not? They are people. Color shouldn’t have any place there.” A few moments later, she backtracked to physical realities. “But I don’t want trash who will frighten me. My problem is walking in the streets and seeing people in the street who I don’t know whether they are going to bother me. There is no reason to walk in fear.”

Restrictionism was accompanied for some by guilt or regret, for others by glee, and for still others by indifference. A Jewish civic leader resorted to the most convoluted apologetics to justify exclusion: “The black is infringing on the right of those who don’t want him. I understand his reason for leaving the ghetto, but he has to understand my reasons for not wanting him. I wouldn’t want to move into a neighborhood where I wasn’t wanted. If I wanted to live in East New York, I couldn’t. My rights are abridged in that way too.” A realtor found in that logic the handy grounds for defining “good blacks” and “bad blacks.” “I showed one black around who wanted to move into the East 80s, near Flatlands Avenue. He got the idea real quick. The good blacks don’t want to move in. Only troublemakers demand a house in Canarsie. But they usually get the message.”

History reinforced the residents’ vigilance. A woman trenchantly defined the difference between novices and veterans of displacement. “I’m for anyone buying a home as long as they’re neat and

clean and they don't ruin the block. Their race really doesn't matter to me. But many Canarsians are bigots because of what happened to them in East Flatbush and Brownsville. Lower-class blacks pushed them out. They talk about *shvartzes*. They never knew the middle-class blacks. But the two of us are different. We weren't pushed out. We don't have that hate."

The experience of Jews from different milieus explains the gulf between a national Jewish commitment to equal housing and Brooklyn Jewish fears of integration. A comparison of answers to questions about concrete situations rather than abstract values sharply modifies the stereotype of pure Jewish enlightenment. In Manhattan 39 percent of the Jews said they would be nervous if more blacks moved into their neighborhood; 63 percent of Jews in Brooklyn felt alarm at the prospect. Of the Manhattan Jews, 70 percent hoped for an integrated society, but only 43 percent of those in Brooklyn shared that hope.<sup>27</sup>

The new buyers in Canarsie who fled East Flatbush in the early 1970s plunged into heavy debt. One realtor in 1973 estimated that buyers made down payments of \$15,000 to \$20,000 on a \$45,000 home, which locked them into twenty-five years of mortgage payments at \$400 a month. Property taxes took another bite, of between \$700 and \$1,500 annually. Families with incomes between \$10,000 and \$20,000 a year felt the pressure. "Maybe they used to be liberals," said the realtor, "but not after they were scared out of East Flatbush and put every cent they had into a house and went up to their necks in debt . . . When a guy makes those kinds of sacrifices, you can't push him around."<sup>28</sup>

Like survivors of a disaster, veterans of displacement kept reliving the experience, as if they could glimpse no future beyond a compulsive repetition of the past.<sup>29</sup> In a fleeting moment of relaxation they might say, "It's a rough problem, the blacks would like to live in a nice community," but then they would fret, "What if the merchants in Canarsie run as fast as they ran from Pitkin Avenue?" Or they would whisper to themselves, "I better get out before something happens I can't control." A Canarsie man who had vivid memories of the binge of blockbusting that had swept through his East Flatbush neighborhood replayed this scenario in his mind. "We're not just talking about a few blacks. At first, it would be ten, then it would be twenty, and then who knows what might happen? We've run from neighborhoods that changed overnight. How do we know Canarsie will be viable five years from now? We're scared to death."

In reckoning the risks of integration, whites performed a kind of exorcism. Tipping is a self-fulfilling prophecy, the outcome of white susceptibility to superstition more than an inherent dynamic of integration. But whites displaced onto blacks responsibility for the stampede touched off by white fear. Yet the imagery of irrationality should not be extended too far. Individual residents who did not mind the idea of blacks as neighbors had to mull over the likely responses of their panicky neighbors as well as the objective qualities of a black buyer.<sup>30</sup> Once a certain number of stampedes had taken place, realism obliged the cool-headed to read the legacy of flight as a portent of things to come. Experience showed that after the “good element” arrived, the “bad element” followed. That sequence happened mainly because whites panicked, but as investors primarily concerned with limiting their risk, Canarsians did not bother about the whys. One housing activist asked bitterly, “People have the right to move in if they can afford it, but you tell me, what happens after the black doctors come in and the others panic and we lose everything? You tell me *that!*”

This local reading of selling panic suggested a need for a preemptive strike; middle-class blacks were excluded not as the goal of white supremacy but as a means of keeping the lower class from entering the neighborhood. Once again the residents of Canarsie proved to be highly selective in their devotion to free markets. The exclusion of worthy blacks was the price paid to immunize whites against the risk created by their own fright and racism.

Perceptual obstacles added to apprehensions of instability. According to many whites, blacks ignored the familiar norms that informed their own language, gesture, and action. The apparent diffusion of black styles of dress, laughter, handshakes, dancing, and gait across class lines created opportunities for misreading. As a Jewish carpenter defined it, “The problem is that we see blacks as a mass. It is unfortunate. We can’t tell the difference between a black pimp and a black mailman. When I look at a white man, I can tell what social class he is, but if he is colored, I can’t tell.”

An array of social and political factors diminished the faith of whites that they were able to size up the character and status of black buyers. The active members of home-owner groups were well versed in the arcana of FHA provisions, which allowed certain categories of buyers to purchase homes with virtually no down payment. In a few instances three or four marginally middle-income black families had pooled their funds to try to buy a two-family home in

Canarsie. Even those who had the money to buy a home were not necessarily trusted by some residents. Many middle-income blacks were not “really middle class,” said an Italian police detective, “because they are often in civil service, and they get there by special methods [affirmative action], so they are not necessarily any more industrious than ghetto blacks.”

A buyer’s chains of association complicated the guessing game. Homeowners are exposed to danger by their neighbors, but also by the neighbors’ kin, clients, associates, enemies, and poor cousins, as well as impostors. The sprawl of a person’s networks diminishes the control neighbors can exert, the caliber of the people who visit the community, and its general tone. One realtor captured the residents’ apprehension. “You see, they know the new blacks have pride in ownership. They tell you that. But they’re afraid the Brownsville blacks will hang around and blend in, and they don’t know the good ones from the bad ones. You can’t tell. The bad ones bring down the good ones. Before, when there weren’t as many middle-income blacks, you could tell who belonged in the neighborhood. You saw people and knew they didn’t belong. But now you can’t tell.” Social change made the familiar hunches obsolescent. The ambiguous position of the new blacks deprived white residents of adequate strategies for promoting their own well-being, deciphering the environment, and appraising risk.

More than a tiresome slight, the notion that one could not tell blacks apart bespeaks the intricate way urban dwellers scan their environment, sift visual and other clues for forecasts of danger, and make guesses about the intentions of strangers. People generalize from experience to reduce uncertainty and manage alarm. Employers, pedestrians, and home owners do not operate on the presumption of innocence that lies at the core of legal reasoning. They associate individuals with classes of events and merge past incidents with hunches about repetition. Erving Goffman has summarized the essence of this “design of vulnerability.” “We need not concern ourselves with anxieties about the not possibly real. Recent bedevilements of the environment have introduced enough real issues, and each real possibility breeds its own set of unjustly suspected appearances.”<sup>31</sup>

In their concern for false appearances, in the attempt to seek out fakeries, in the vigilance to signs, Canarsians resembled the subjects of fancy philosophic theories who must sort out a wink from a rehearsal of a wink from a parody of a rehearsal of a wink. But all the

mental gymnastics were more than exegesis for its own sake. The attempts to define righteous neighbors had a practical aim.<sup>32</sup>

Residents tried to keep an eye on hysterical whites as well as hypothetical black buyers. After all, a “bad sale” involved an incompetent, panicky, or “disloyal” seller as much as an unknown or unwanted buyer. Betrayers included well-intentioned liberals who were glad to sell to blacks, speculative realtors wanting to exploit a selling wave, and neighbors wishing to liquidate their holdings on the most favorable terms.

The transiency of a neighbor’s tenure in Canarsie weakened the reciprocal bonds among home owners who ostensibly shared common interests. A neighbor’s decision to move meant a precipitous break in status, transforming a reliable neighbor into a restive seller seeking to maximize gain or cut losses. An Italian vigilante who had squelched a number of sales of houses to blacks captured the risks created by the conflicting interests of movers and stayers. “Sometimes you have to use forceful methods with them, you have to be firm with the sellers. You explain to them, ‘Hey look, you raised your kids, you’re on your way to Florida, but many of us still have children here. You got your price, but I need mine.’ You make threats over the telephone, you threaten their children. That’s okay, ‘cause they are threatening other people’s children. It’s self-protection for the staying.”

A seller’s relationships with others on the block could enhance or diminish the jeopardy movers imposed on stayers. A loner, for example, was presumed to be immune to local wishes; that wary distance from others might permit either the seller’s avarice or integrationist sympathies to sway his selling behavior. A man who was involved in organized efforts to prevent integration complained of the sale of a house to a black family in Old Canarsie, although the transaction was reversed by a delegation of local men who prevailed upon the realtor with unmistakable warnings. “Now I blame this on the civic organization in that area, they should have been in on it and talked to the seller to bring in our own kind. You got to deter a sale like that. It’s the shut-ins, they’re the ones most likely to sell black, the ones who don’t have a lot of friends in Canarsie or have much to do with people on the block.”

Involvement in the neighborhood provided a crude measure of reliability. Respect for the wishes of neighbors or knowledge of possible reprisals often led residents who loathed racism to selectively practice discrimination. In this sense the anxiety or racism of a small

but active and organized minority controlled the behavior of more democratic segments of the community. “I have a black friend who’s a vice president of a New York bank,” explained a Canarsie attorney who was married to a progressive schoolteacher, “and I told him, ‘Look, I wouldn’t sell you my house. I don’t care, but my neighbors would kill me.’”

Civic leaders also bowed to the imagined wishes of the neighborhood. The first black family on one Canarsie block did not attend the block association meeting, and the head of the group felt chagrin at what he thought had prompted their stand-offish attitude. “The black family wasn’t invited to the block party last summer, which was a bad mistake on my part. Some of the people said, ‘Don’t do it, don’t invite him.’ You gotta go by what the majority of the people want. So I think maybe the blacks said, ‘They didn’t invite us to the block party, and now he’s inviting us to the meeting,’ maybe there’s a little animosity for what I did to them.” The black family had been a credit to the block. “They keep their house better than a couple of white people round here. They’re polite people. I went to their house, I was amazed, they kept everything clean.” The block leader resolved never again to yield to public objection. “I’m ashamed of the other people around here. But now this block party we have for the summer coming up, I’m going to invite them, because they live on the block, and they showed me they want to live here and keep it clean and they’re good people.”

When nervous residents began to detect the early signs of racial change, even local block pressures could not restrain an owner’s temptation to “sell black” while the asking price was high, either as a hedge against loss or a chance to score a handsome profit. Then the charade of a unified neighborhood quickly fell apart. In one such situation in the late 1970s, as middle-class blacks began to buy homes on the blocks south of Flatlands Avenue across from the Breukelen project, a panicky woman warned, “They’re getting scared in the Flatlands Avenue area. We have an obligation to tell them to hold tight.” A community watchdog informed a gathering of conservative activists, “The neighborhood is starting to move out and they’re selling to blacks now. The [black] people whose house was bombed are still moving in.” A neighbor reported, “A Puerto Rican rented on 105th Street. And an absentee landlord threatened to sell to ‘what you consider objectionable elements.’” A housewife retrieved the image of jittery residents, eager to jump ship. “The average person



on 103rd Street is waiting for it to turn black, so they won't feel bad when they sell. People want to sell, but they are asking incredible prices. I hear them saying out loud now, if they can't get white, they'll take black. Those people who won't sell at reasonable prices are reserving the right to screw their neighbors."

A right to screw their neighbors speaks a plain truth: most talk of a united Canarsie was hype or hyperbole. Economic cunning, not good neighborly feeling, was the prime factor in selling. Put a shade differently, neighborliness depended on shared financial destiny. After one block near the projects registered six black buys in a row, a local resident described the shakiness of the norm of neighborliness. "It's all over now. Originally, I gave the block seven years, but it will be all black in two. The stigma of selling black is gone." The high interest rates of the late 1970s would slow the pace of her prediction. Nonetheless, between 1970 and 1980 the number of blacks in the three census tracts south of Flatlands Avenue and east of Rockaway Parkway increased dramatically: from 12 blacks (0.6 percent) to 286 (17 percent), from 28 (1 percent) to 349 (14 percent), and from 21 (0.8 percent) to 317 (12 percent).

In countless ways Canarsians denied blacks the equal opportunity they were always trumpeting as the virtuous route to success. That transparent guile did not escape one Canarsie black man. Typical of many in the black middle class, he blended pride in his blackness with a yearning for respectability. His definition of betrayal came from transcendent ideals, not the venal turf of homeowners. Treachery for him meant subverting the Constitution, not selling a neighbor short. He remembered his dream of becoming a home owner:

In 1962, I found a basically racist community in Canarsie. I tried to buy a house in Seaview Village and I was denied that. This racism is even more widespread in 1976 in the Northeast among liberals than it was in the South. I can't understand Jews who persecute black citizens. They say that the Jews understand about persecution. In 1962 my wife and I were earning \$25,000 when we wanted to buy in Canarsie. Isn't that middle class? There was no justification for what they did. I understand that they don't want a low wage earner. I don't want what I don't deserve. I only want what I am entitled to. I say, don't exclude anyone from the things you want. I want the same things they want. But I won't become a racist to achieve my ends. I un-

derstand the fears of white people in Canarsie, but their appeal is one-sided. How can they justify it? I'm not wrecking homes and hurting anyone. I'm an architect! I construct!

### Memories of White Brooklyn

*"In 1956 . . . it was one big happy Flatbush family. But now? Ninety-five percent of them have been mugged and moved away."*

The vulnerabilities of place pushed Jews and Italians, regardless of their personal or ideological bent, toward wariness. However, people have more dimensions than simple adaptation or risk aversion. They dramatize their experience in bursts of gratuitous symbolic action. They invest the material world with sentiment. The residents had staked emotion in their old homes as well as money in the new ones. Fond images of an older Brooklyn produced home-grown versions of the urban elegy. There is a poetics of place as well as a politics of place.

The present physical desolation of their old Brooklyn neighborhoods had special meaning for the Jews and Italians who had lived there. For elderly first-generation Jews and Italians, looking back at the tenements was not just a blasé judgment about a strange people who seemed not to respect themselves enough to take care of the buildings. The destruction they saw was an insult to their memories of childhood and ancestors. As a result, the shock of racial transition could not so easily be put away as an emotion of the past. Proximity kept the old wounds active and made them an uncanny part of the present.

Some residents would swerve from the most direct route to their destinations in order to drive by the old homestead. Their children would often listen to parental reveries with impatience or tired bemusement. "I remember my old place in Crown Heights fondly; I ride by it and the kids get annoyed when I say, 'That's my candy store!'" Pilgrims to childhood homes were incredulous. "I couldn't believe it. The houses were all marked up, the streets were filthy, and there was garbage and graffiti everywhere. There was no respect for property. It was very sad. I started to cry." Tears welled up as