Beyond Nostalgia: The Old Neighborhood Revisited

by ROGER WALDINGER

The mythology of immigration and assimilation describes the path from Hester Street to Great Neck. But today's new immigrants are charting their own courses; some, for good or ill, establishing new ethnic enclaves in Queens and Brooklyn; others, defying history and the ghetto.

The ethnic neighborhood looms large in the popular iconography and the scholarly interpretation of the American ethnic experience. The highwater mark of immigration to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century saw the creation of distinctive ethnic enclaves wherever the newcomers settled. There they concentrated together for both sustenance and support: New York's teeming Lower East Side, where Jews, the Irish, Italians, and Germans were packed into distinctive and contiguous clusters, had its counterpart in the Germantowns, Little Bohemias, and Swedentowns in all the other urban immigrant centers. Over time, the immigrants and their descendants moved on to newer, better neighborhoods. But the original area of settlement often remained a center of ethnic stores and services and thereby a symbol of common ethnic identity.

In the new neighborhoods to which the immigrants and their children dispersed, they continued to live in considerable isolation from the native population. The "urban village" of the midtwentieth-century American city, as Herbert Gans showed in his classic portrait of Italian-Americans in Boston, was a world circumscribed by the converging contours of class and ethnicity, in which everyone knew everyone else. The centrifugal forces of the American city have since emptied many of these older urban villages; but even as attachment to the old neighborhood has waned, a new set of immigrant groups—mainly from Asia and the circum-Caribbean—has arrived. In turn, they have placed their own stamp on the urban landscape, seeming to replicate in burgeoning Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and little Odessas-by-the-Sea the experience of their predecessors.

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EXAMINING THE MYTH

There are more than a few problems with this story of the ethnic geography of American cities—however firmly ensconced it may be in the academic and popular imaginations. To begin with, there's the issue of sameness in the ethnic neighborhood story: the implications that all immigrants are destined to follow the trajectory of their predecessors, and that the pattern is cyclical, with each new wave of arrivals settling down in the very same quarters that an earlier immigrant generation had just abandoned.

History, however, tells us that the ethnic neighborhood is not a timeless feature of American cities but rather the product of a particular moment in the technology of urban economies. In the walking city of the midnineteenth century, the small scale of most urban economic activities encouraged the diffusion of jobs; and since there was, as yet, no concentration of cheap housing into which immigrants could mass, workers instead lived in close walking distance to the jobs where they worked. Thus, rather than concentrating in dense neighborhoods, the mainly Irish and German immigrants who flocked to northern American cities scattered. In most wards in midnineteenth-century New York, the immigrant share was close to the average for the city as a whole, and in even the most heavily immigrant wards, close to one-third of the population was native-born. By 1880, conditions began to change. As the scale of economic activity grew and manufacturing burgeoned, industries began to cluster in specialized areas. The onset of suburbanization drew out native whites. Their abandoned houses provided cheap accommodations to immigrants, who wished to settle as close as possible to their places of work. Hence, the emergence of distinct ethnic neighborhoods, hard on the heels of the distinctive industries in which the immigrants worked: the Yorkville breweries and their German workers; Hell's Kitchen whose Irish inhabitants worked on the Hudson River docks; the Lower East Side, where Jewish and Italian greenhorns bent over the sewing machine.

The imperatives of clustering led to settlements of extraordinary density with the awful consequences that muckrakers like Jacob Riis documented and decried. With the building of the subway lines and the movement of industry out of New York's core, densities diminished as the original immigrant concentrations began to disperse. The pathways of outmigration were laid down by the contours of the subway system. From 1900 on, Jews and Italians followed the eastside IRT to East Harlem and the Canarsie line to Williamsburg. When the garment industry moved from Union Square to the mid-Thirties in the 1910s and 1920s and the IND lines were completed in the 1930s, garment workers and contractors flocked to the West Bronx, while their bosses headed to Manhattan's West Side. (See "Manhattan's Jewish West Side," by Selma Berrol, this issue.) The movement of industry to the outer boroughs also swelled and guided the outward flow: Brownsville started up as a kind of Jewish fac-

tory town, Ridgewood an enclave of German knitters and brewers, Park Slope (or at least its lower portions) a reservoir of Irish labor for the massive factories of Bush Terminal.

As blacks and Puerto Ricans, the next wave of newcomers, arrived in the 1940s and 1950s, they crowded in among the earlier immigrant concentrations, in and around the central business district and close to the heavy industrial areas of the outer boroughs. While the density of settlement in the ghetto areas had the same baneful consequences on health and living standards as the immigrant neighborhoods had seen a few decades before, economic necessity kept the newcomers there. Of course, special barriers lay in the way of those black and Puerto Rican in-migrants who sought access to the suburbs or to middle-class neighborhoods within the city's boundaries. But many blacks and Puerto Ricans concentrated on the Lower East Side, in Harlem, Williamsburg, and the South Bronx for much the same reasons as did earlier immigrants: the availability of cheap housing and proximity and ease of access to their places of employment. (As late as the 1960s, almost one-fifth of the manufacturing workers in the then-bustling South Houston Industrial District lived in the Lower East Side within walking distance of their jobs.)

Leapfrog Migration

But if the in-migrants of the immediate postwar period in some ways followed in the neighborhood pathways of their turn-of-the-century predecessors, it is apparent that a new pattern is at work among the immigrants of today. The salient characteristic of this new pattern is a type of leapfrog migration, to borrow a term from sociologist Ivan Light (*Cities in World Perspective*, Macmillan, 1983). In only a few cases have the new immigrants started out in the old neighborhoods of the foreign-born. To be sure, Manhattan has roughly its "fair share" of the post-1965 arrivals (with 22 percent residing there as of 1980); Queens and Brooklyn, however, contain the more important settlements, with each of the two boroughs containing about one-third of the new immigrants as of 1980. In choosing the outer boroughs the immigrants have also skipped over the older neighborhoods that had served as ethnic enclaves. Instead, many have settled in somewhat newer middle-class neighborhoods: Crown Heights and East Flatbush in Brooklyn; Jackson Heights, Woodside, Flushing, and St. Albans in Queens; and Williamsbridge in the Bronx.

What accounts for the newcomers' distinctive settlement patterns? One reason is that the old ghetto areas no longer provided much shelter by the 1970s, in some cases because of accelerating abandonment, as in Harlem, the Lower East Side, and the South Bronx; and in others because urban renewal and gentrification (the impact of which accelerated rapidly after 1980) had turned

the areas over to higher-paying users. Moreover, with the shift from goods to services, fewer manufacturing jobs were to be found close to the established immigrant neighborhoods, which, of course, reduced their attractiveness to immigrant job seekers. Also, the service jobs most available to newcomers—in hospitals or petty retailing—are not centralized and, therefore, ample employment opportunities exist in the outer boroughs.

A more important factor, however, was that the massive demographic transformations of the 1970s accelerated the life cycles of many neighborhoods. Though the city's total population fell during the 1970s, the outflow of whites was far more severe. Consequently many neighborhoods of reasonably good housing quality, and, by city standards, with fairly young stock, emptied out suddenly. A case in point is Jackson Heights, with an extraordinary melange of newcomers from all parts of the world, which makes it the city's quintessential immigrant neighborhood. In 1970, 67 percent of the area's residents were white; by 1980, the white proportion was down to 42 percent. In the process, the neighborhood acquired a large new immigrant population, with the highest concentrations representing the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and a host of Latin American and Asian countries. As for the newcomers, they gained access to an area of good housing (one-third of which has been built since 1950) with average densities of one person per room, far below the norm for the typical immigrant concentration of yore. The immigrants' occupational adaptation corresponded to the leapfrog pattern as well. Many newcomers—in particular, West Indians, Asians, Hispanics from Latin America—began not at the bottom of the labor market but in its middle reaches; consequently they were able to take advantage of the housing opportunities that arose as white neighborhoods like Jackson Heights emptied out.

STARTING WITHOUT THE GHETTO

There is something else new beneath the sun. The huddled masses that turn-of-the-century muckrakers and journalists observed on New York's Lower East Side were crowded together not only because of economics and convenience, but also because they found mutual sustenance, support, and comfort in a familiar environment of shared languages and institutions. From this observation flowed a theory of ethnic neighborhood change: Immigrants start out together in dense ghettos sharply segregated from natives, and then, with each generation, gradually disperse to areas where more and more of their neighbors are folk of a diverse and different sort.

Indeed, densely populated immigrant neighborhoods are to be found in New York today and I will discuss them later at greater length. But among the new immigrants is one important group that is beginning without ghettoization: the Asians. They are starting life in New York at much lower levels

of segregation than has been true in the past, and dispersing at a much more rapid pace than history would suggest.

New York's Asian population grew rapidly during the 1970s; the limited data on post-1980 immigration patterns suggest that the flow remains on the upswing. The city's Asian population is also far more diverse today than it was before 1965 with Indians, Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese as well as Chinese providing substantial additions to the local demographic mix. The net influx of 110,000 Asian immigrants between 1970 and 1980 has produced noticeable Asian ethnic enclaves. Most renown, and most remarkable, is Manhattan's Chinatown, which has overflowed its traditional boundaries, burgeoning into Little Italy, the Jewish Lower East Side, and most recently, the Puerto Rican "Loisada." Whereas in 1950 a small and aging population was concentrated in a section of the census tract known as "old Chinatown," by 1980 there were four contiguous tracts with populations more than one-half Chinese, another four with populations more than one-quarter Chinese, and rapidly growing Chinese concentrations in the adjacent tracts. Unbeknownst to most New Yorkers, there is also a fast-growing Koreatown, located at the edges of the garment center, smack in the heart of midtown. Though this area is bustling—containing some 350 Korean wholesale and import businesses, three South Korean bank branches, and numerous restaurants and other business establishments, interspersed with scores of Indian import-export houses—it remains strictly a commercial emporium, not a place where newcomers make their homes.

Despite the growth of these clusters in Manhattan, Asians have increasingly flocked to the outer boroughs, giving Queens the city's single largest concentration of Asians. In 1980, Chinatown was home to barely one-fourth of the city's Chinese; among Koreans, Indians, and other Asians the tendency to take up residence outside Manhattan was far more pronounced. Consequently, a growing number of sizable Asian settlements has sprung up, mainly in Queens. Flushing is now home to the city's second most important concentration of Asians, who have spawned businesses, new housing developments, and other institutions. Satellite communities also exist: Woodside boasts a very substantial Korean population; 74th Street in Jackson Heights is an emporium for the East Indian community; Ridgewood and Ozone Park also have large Asian populations.

But while the growing Asian presence in Queens has made them more visible and provided the critical mass for businesses and institutions that serve a strictly ethnic clientele, the Asian move to Queens clearly differs from that of earlier immigrants who left the Lower East Side for new neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. As Deborah Dash Moore has shown in *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1981), when Jews gravitated out of the Lower East Side in the 1920s and 1930s, they settled in areas where they continued to live apart from others. In these second-

generation settlements, Jews were even more segregated from non-Jews than they had been on the Lower East Side; by 1930, almost three-quarters of the city's Jews lived in areas where at least 40 percent of their neighbors were also Jews.

By contrast, Asians have settled in the outer boroughs by dispersing over a wide expanse. Table 1 shows the concentration ratios for all Asians, Chinese, Indians, and blacks residing in Queens and in Brooklyn in 1980. In contrast to Chinatown, where the core tracts were almost homogeneously Chinese, the most heavily Asian areas were four tracts in which a varied group of Asians made up just over 30 percent of the population; fourteen other tracts had Asian concentrations between 20 and 30 percent; and the twenty most heavily Asian areas contained only 15.4 percent of the two boroughs' total Asian population.

What the table doesn't directly show can be confirmed by mapping the 1980 census tract data. This indicates that Asians had scattered over the two boroughs, despite a slight tendency toward an "Asian belt" in Queens running through the northern part of the borough from Sunnyside to Flushing and then dipping down into Ozone Park. None of the four largest (30 percent or more) Asian tracts was contiguous with one another; there were only two clusters of contiguous tracts in which Asians made up 20 percent or more of the population. One such cluster was a fairly dense twelve-tract area in Elmhurst; the second was a slightly less heavily settled five-tract area in Flushing. In Brooklyn, settlement was still more dispersed, with no tract 20 percent or more Asian. The only three Asian clusters—in Sunset Park, Kensington, and Midwood—were lightly settled and distant from one another.

The data for Chinese and Indians—the two most numerous Asian ethnic groups in the city—is also revealing. The degree of concentration of each group was lower than that of Asians on the whole: Only three tracts—together containing less than 2 percent of the two boroughs' Chinese population—were 20 percent or more Chinese; and the only tract in which Indians made up more than 10 percent of the population contained 580 Indians, out of a total of more

Table 1

Ethnic Concentrations in Brooklyn and Queens

	Number of tracts with:	Percent of these tracts with ethnic concentrations of:						
		<5%	>=5 <10	>=10 <20	>=20 <30	>=30 <40	>=40 <90	>=90%
Asians	1,363	82.8	10.7	5.0	1.3	0.3	0.0	0.0
Chinese	1,148	91.5	6.8	1.5	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Indians	1,054	98.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Blacks	1,302	49.5	5.8	6.8	2.3	1.9	20.0	13.8

SOURCE: 1980 Census of Population and Housing. Census Tracts, New York, N.Y.-N.J., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. Section 1, Table P-7

than 33,000 living in the area. The basic pattern, thus, is the scattering of Asians among communities of considerable intra-Asian heterogeneity in which income, rather than ethnicity, is the main determinant of residential choice.

Asians are also leaping over the usual stages in ethnic residential location. If Brooklyn was the promised land for New York's second generation European ethnics, suburbia was their children's Zion. A substantial proportion of Asians, however, had already made it to the suburbs as of 1980 and anecdotal information since then suggests that the suburban drift has quickened, rather than slowed. Table 2 shows the degree to which various immigrant groups are represented in different parts of the greater New York area (New York City, all other area cities, and the suburbs) relative to their share of the total population. Immigrants on the whole were underrepresented in the suburbs and overrepresented in New York City, not surprisingly since most immigrants usually begin their new lives in large urban places like New York. The very recently arrived Asians, however, were better represented in the suburbs than was the overall immigrant population, a remarkable pattern given that in 1980 the single largest group of immigrants was long-term residents of the area who had originated in Europe. Indeed, the recently arrived Indians were at parity

Table 2

1980 Residence of Immigrants and Natives, New York Standard Consolidated Area

	Total Population	*Index of Representation*		
		NYC	Other Cities	Suburbs
Total Population	16,121,278			
Native Born	13,389,159	88.7	97.1	112.4
Foreign Born	2,732,119	139.4	96.2	61.0
Europe	1,139,109	115.7	101.5	83.5
Asia	338,726	144.5	70.2	63.7
China	72,754	190.1	16.3	33.1
Korea	31,396	137.7	53.2	75.8
India	44,782	114.4	107.0	83.1
West Indies	559,360	168.7	96.7	30.9
Jamaica	144,289	196.1	61.7	13.7
Dominican Republic	113,924	181.7	70.7	25.7

KEY: The index of representation shows the degree to which a group is concentrated in an area relative to its total share of the population in the NYSCSA. Thus, if a group's share of the population residing in New York City is equal to its share of the total NYSCSA, then the index for New York City takes on the value of 100.

SOURCE: 1980 Census of Population, V. 1, Chapter C, General Social and Economic Characteristics, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Table 116

with the European-born. And though the Chinese lagged behind in this respect, they had still gained more access to suburbia than had their equally green counterparts from the West Indies.

Choice or Constraint: West Indian Enclaves

Though we are more than a century from the onset of the "new immigration" of Jews, Italians, and Slavs, the panegyrics to the "old neighborhood" never cease to appear. Viewed from Columbus Avenue or Great Neck, the urban villages of Rivington Street, Bensonhurst, and Bay Ridge undoubtedly have some appeal, but there is little question that the past has been memorialized only because it has been abandoned with ease.

For New York's blacks, however, leaving the "old neighborhood" has not been so easy. Blacks who have succeeded in this quest have found that the limited tolerance of whites for more than a handful of black neighbors has made integration short-lived; part-black areas have been quick to tip to all-black, and, thus, the "old neighborhood" has too often caught up with those who thought they had left it behind. The bare facts are that blacks in New York remain sharply segregated from whites. To be sure, the level of segregation is slightly lower than in other big northern cities. But as sociologist Karl Taueber has shown, black New Yorkers remained almost as segregated from whites in 1980 as they had been a decade before: The level of segregation was such that three-quarters of blacks would have had to move to be evenly distributed among the city's whites ("Racial Residential Segregation, 28 Cities, 1970-1980," Working Paper 83-12, University of Wisconsin, 1983).

The data cited above capture the distributional dimension of segregation—namely that blacks and whites live in very different parts of town. There is a second dimension to segregation—concentration—and, on this score, the relevant finding is that blacks are found in areas that are almost overwhelmingly black. As Table 1 shows, blacks in Queens and Brooklyn remain confined to communities almost as heavily ghettoized as the Harlem of the 1920s. In extraordinary contrast to Asians, who in 1980 never comprised more than 31 percent of a census tract but often comprised between 10 and 30 percent of a tract, such intermediate levels of concentration were almost never to be found among blacks. Even more amazing is that blacks were crammed into fewer census tracts than Asians, though blacks outnumbered Asians by more than ten to one. In 1980, blacks in Queens and Brooklyn either lived in census tracts where they were such a small fraction as to be virtually invisible or they resided in tracts in which few of the other residents were not black, the latter being the fate of most. In 1980, 32 percent of the more than one million blacks living in Queens and Brooklyn made their homes in one of the 179 census tracts

in which 90 to 100 percent of their neighbors were also black; another 45 percent of the boroughs' blacks were spread among 260 tracts where the black concentration ratios ranged from 40 to 90 percent. However depressing, these data probably understate the actual level of segregation, since they aggregate both non-Hispanic and Hispanic blacks and the latter are somewhat less segregated from whites than are non-Hispanic blacks.

What accounts for the persisting residential separation of blacks from whites? In the conventional wisdom, the ingredients of segregation are part constraint, part choice. Ethnic groups remain segregated because dominant groups do not want them, but ethnic groups also congregate because together is where they want to be. The case of Jews illustrates the point. Anti-Semitism is certainly one reason why Jews have the highest levels of segregation among white ethnic groups. Though realtors can no longer advertise "restrictions, convenience, and service," Bronxville and Darien have kept themselves effectively Judenrein, as did the higher-status neighborhoods of Jackson Heights, Park Slope, and Fieldston before World War II. But Jews also want to live among other Jews, and that preference appears to be more than a preemptive attempt to avert unpleasant encounters with non-Jews. The fact that 53 percent of Jews questioned in the 1981 New York Area Jewish Population Survey said that a neighborhood with a sizable number of Jews was "very important" suggests that self-segregation still keeps Jews apart from others.

If choice is thus a potent factor in determining the residential patterns among white ethnic groups, might not the same be true for blacks? Geographers have shown that Norwegians and Swedes—seemingly similar to one another in religion and time of migration and partially intermarried—were nonetheless considerably segregated from one another as recently as 1970. As for those white ethnic groups, such as Jews and Irish, with marked cultural differences and often strained relations, levels of geographical separation were not that far below the pattern for blacks and whites. Reviewing this evidence, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan opined in *Beyond the Melting Pot* (MIT Press, 1969) that

> *if groups that do* not *face discrimination also show a high degree of segregation, we must resort to [an] additional explanation of the Negro pattern of residence . . . that there is also a positive element in the association of Negroes in given areas . . . formal and informal social life, churches and other institutions, distinctive businesses, all serve to make neighborhoods . . . desirable and attractive . . . for Negroes.*

The admixture of almost 300,000 Caribbean immigrants to New York's black population between 1965 and 1980 forces a new look at the influences of race and ethnicity on black residential patterns. Like other immigrants, these newcomers migrate under the auspices of friends and kin and therefore settle down among the people to whom they are attached. Michel Laguerre's descrip-

tion of one ethnic group's search for shelter holds unquestionably for other Afro-Caribbeans as well:

> *In many Brooklyn buildings all the residents are Haitians. These buildings either are owned by Haitians or have Haitian superintendents. Haitians in search of an apartment often inquire about such buildings among friends or members of the church to which they belong. Haitians are always alert to inform their pastors and friends when there are openings in the buildings, and most Haitian immigrants in Brooklyn find their apartments through word of mouth* (American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City, *Cornell University Press, 1984*).

But if informal networks lead willy-nilly to the formation of ethnic enclaves, more deliberate and conscious efforts seem to point to a self-segregation from native blacks. As Philip Kasinitz notes in this issue, the simple growth in numbers of Afro-Caribbeans has led to a heightened sense of ethnic identity apart and distinct from native, New York blacks. One byproduct of this ethnic consciousness seems to be an attempt to lessen the impact of prejudice by emphasizing their cultural difference and maintaining social distance from native blacks. What better way to do this than by living apart?

If these circumstances lead Afro-Caribbeans to segregate themselves from American blacks, other factors might lower the barriers that have thus far prevented more blacks from living among whites. To begin with, Afro-Caribbeans have achieved considerable economic and occupational success. Average incomes, as Kasinitz notes, are higher than for native blacks; Afro-Caribbeans also have a lower unemployment rate and a higher employment-to-population rate than do American blacks. These data suggest that racial discrimination has not been an insuperable obstacle to upward mobility in the labor market. As anthropologist Nancy Foner has shown, the perception among Jamaicans and other West Indians is that whites tend to treat them differently, and more favorably, than they do American blacks ("Race and Color: Jamaican Migrants in London and New York City," *International Migration Review*, 1985). Finally, when compared with Asian immigrants, Afro-Caribbeans are quite similar in the percentage that hold white-collar jobs and have received a high school education or more; this suggests that their economic resources would permit a residential pattern similar to that achieved by Asians.

Just how separated are Afro-Caribbeans from whites and from American blacks? To answer this question, I have calculated segregation indices from data on ethnic population concentrations at the community-board level for non-Hispanic (native and foreign) whites, non-Hispanic American blacks, immigrants from Jamaica, "other West Indies," China, and India. The index (known as the index of dissimilarity) takes on its maximum value of 100 in a situation of total separation between one group and another and approaches the minimum value of zero as the two groups are evenly distributed.

What the data in Table 3 show is that there is some discretion in the Afro-Caribbean's choice of residence in relation to American blacks, but for better

or worse (and I would assume worse), race still seems to constrain their spatial relationship to whites. Thus, the lowest degree of separation characterizes the relationship between Jamaicans and "other West Indians," a finding that suggests a structural basis for the emergent pan-Caribbean ethnicity that Kasinitz discusses. Furthermore, the level of separation between Jamaicans and other West Indians, on the one hand, and American blacks, on the other, is a good deal higher.

Relative to whites, however, Afro-Caribbeans are just as segregated as their American black counterparts. Seventy percent of Jamaicans would have to move to be evenly distributed among whites; similar proportions hold for other West Indians and for American blacks. Afro-Caribbeans, however, have not been confined to the least desirable neighborhoods. In 1980, building abandonment in the two most heavily West Indian community boards was well below the percentage citywide, and the proportion of blacks owning homes was above the average for blacks citywide. By contrast, in central Harlem abandonment was over three times the citywide level, while black home ownership rates were one-sixth the average for all black New Yorkers. But whatever the mitigating factors, it remains the case that West Indians are far more segregated from whites than are either Chinese or Koreans; and the economic differences between the groups are not sufficient to produce disparities as glaring as these. Moreover, the pattern of separation appears to extend beyond the boundaries of the five boroughs as well. As Table 2 shows, West Indians are far more underrepresented in the suburbs than are Asians, and the situation for Jamaicans is even worse. To the extent that outward movement has occurred, the path mainly leads to older, less vibrant cities—Yonkers, Jersey City, and Elizabeth—where native blacks have long been a presence, not to the verdant expanses of the suburbs.

Table 3

Index of Residential Segregation. New York City, 1980

	Non-Hispanic White	Native Non-Hispanic Black	Jamaica	Other West Indies	Chinese
Native Non-Hispanic Black	67.8				
Jamaican	71.1	37.9			
Other West Indies	68.7	38.6	22.1		
Chinese	50.0	77.5	75.8	72.6	
Indian	38.8	65.0	68.5	65.0	46.5

SOURCE: City of New York, *Demographic Profile: A Portrait of New York City from the 1980 Census* (City of New York: Department of City Planning, 1983); "Count of Foreign-Born Persons by Country of Birth," Special Tabulation from 1980 Census, City of New York, Department of City Planning; 5 Percent Public-Use Microdata Sample, 1980 Census of Population

THE NEW OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

The ethnic neighborhood is alive and well in New York. Whether that is cause for celebration—as so much of the ethnicity literature would suggest—is ambiguous. To be sure, good can be found in the immigrant clusters; proximity to coethnics and kin is an important source of social and economic support. And not only is it newcomers who rely on their neighbors for orientation to the ways of their new world; for settlers, the presence of other landsmen is equally crucial, though in somewhat different ways. Large and dense ethnic settlements spawn a panoply of useful institutions: clubs that serve as meeting places, businesses that cater to special ethnic tastes, associations that assist in the process of immigrant adjustment. Out of the gatherings that take place on the neighborhood street corners or in the institutions come a sense of ethnic identity, which is often the foundation for the political assertion of the group's needs.

But if spatial isolation has its virtues, its vices are all too well known. For native black and Afro-Caribbean New Yorkers, race remains the central constraint on their securing good housing in integrated neighborhoods, which in turn would open the door to better schooling and other important amenities of urban life. To be sure, the consequences of confinement to heavily black neighborhoods are not quite as pernicious as they were in years gone by. In the case of Jamaicans settling in Williamsbridge or Flatbush, newly arrived West Indians are no longer packed into the very worst slum areas where their stiff competition with one another bids up the price of housing. Rather, ethnic succession in the New York area has been so vast that the supply of housing available to blacks has loosened up: The filtering down process is finally working. Yet, in the case of the Afro-Caribbeans, the bare facts of racial separation are no less troubling now than they were yesterday. The racial discord that permeates New York undoubtedly has its roots in the circumstances that keep blacks and whites living apart.

Thus, there are numerous new immigrant neighborhoods to be found, but not in the "old neighborhoods" that were previously the chief immigrant concentrations. For some immigrant New Yorkers, in particular, the Asians, settlement is occurring without ghettoization and movement to the suburbs is taking place at a record pace. For Afro-Caribbean New Yorkers, confinement to densely black areas remains a fact of life, yet even here there is something novel, since many Afro-Caribbeans are living apart from native blacks.

The crucial issue lies beyond nostalgia, not in the reappearance of ethnic enclaves in all their quaintness, but in their future. Are the new ethnic settlements temporary phenomena, like the "old" neighborhoods of the past? Or are they closed-off ghettos, whose walls the newcomers may never successfully traverse? In the answers to these questions lie the prospects for our town—the immigrant's promised city.