

'Guttersnipes' and 'Eliterates':
City College in the Popular Imagination

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ABSTRACT

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Philip Kay

Young people go to college not merely to equip themselves for competition in the workplace, but also to construct new identities and find a home in the world. This dissertation shows how, in the midst of wrenching social change, communities, too, use colleges in their struggle to reinvent and re-situate themselves in relation to other groups.

As a case study of this symbolic process I focus on the City College of New York, the world’s first tuition-free, publicly funded municipal college, erstwhile “Harvard of the Poor,” and birthplace of affirmative action programs and “Open Admissions” in higher education. I examine five key moments between 1940 and 2000 when the college dominated the headlines and draw on journalistic accounts, memoirs, guidebooks, fiction, poetry, drama, songs, and interviews with former students and faculty to chart the institution’s emergence as a cultural icon, a lightning rod, and the perennial focus of public controversy. In each instance a variety of actors from the Catholic Church to the *New York Post* mobilized popular perceptions in order to alternately shore up and erode support for City College and, in so doing, worked to reconfigure the larger New York public.

The five episodes consist of the following: (1) In 1940 a state judge barred the philosopher Bertrand Russell from joining the faculty and a sweeping “investigation” followed that resulted in a purge of fifty allegedly Communist professors from the faculty. (2) Ten years later seven members of City College’s national championship basketball team, all of them Jewish or black, were convicted of consorting with professional gamblers to fix games. (3) Then in

1969, in the midst of a mayoral primary, black and Puerto Rican students seeking greater access for members of the surrounding Harlem community seized control of City's South Campus and shut down the college for two tense weeks that were followed by a series of violent racial clashes. (4) Those events in turn ushered in the school's radical and hotly contested experiment with "Open Admissions" along with a decade of relentless media attacks, nostalgia for an imaginatively constructed golden age, and series of dramatic cuts to the college's budget and staff that occasioned the end of its century-old tradition of free tuition. (5) Finally, in 1991 one Afrocentric professor's outrageous remarks about Jews coupled with an accident at a student-sponsored fundraiser in the college gym that claimed nine young lives came—through the offices of the mass media—to stand for the anarchy and physical danger that seemed to be engulfing not only the institution but the city itself.

Taken together these five moments, with their attendant tabloid scandals, ritual sacrifices, and manufactured crises, foreground the cultural dimension of City College's history and the construction—including the self-construction, even performance—of particular varieties of student and teacher, both past and present. Newspapers and their various publics were central to—indeed, constitutive of—the process by which different communities claimed disparate meanings for the institution and deployed those meanings toward their own, distinctive ends. The press provided the main stage upon which to enact bitter struggles and excommunication ceremonies and encouraged readers to use the college to reimagine themselves and their place in the changing city and nation.

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The encounter of student and text is often portrayed by canonists as a transmission. Information, wisdom, virtue will pass from the book to the student if the student gives the book the time it merits ... learning is stripped of confusion and discord. It is stripped, as well, of strong human connection...[My mentors] knew there was more to their work than their mastery of a tradition. What mattered most... were the relationships they established with me, the guidance they provided when I felt inadequate or threatened.

—Mike Rose, 1989¹

The night Professor James W. Carey died in May 2006 after a long illness, I was writing him a letter to let him know that only that afternoon I had been offered a full time position teaching journalism at the City College of New York, the fulfillment of a longtime dream. The letter, never finished and long since misplaced (some things still need to be written by hand) said how profoundly his vision of communication, community, the American university tradition, and the education of the working class had touched me and how I hoped I would now be able to build upon that vision and carry it into the larger world. As much as anything else, this dissertation has been an effort to justify Carey's faith in me and honor his legacy. Rather than a fulfillment of that effort, however, I have come to think of it as a continuation of that unfinished, dead letter, a formulation that, whatever he might have thought of the present work, I like to believe would have pleased him.

Haydée Vitali, another mentor of mine who died a decade before Carey, was a Puerto Rican immigrant who broke into the teaching profession during the upheavals of the 1960s and introduced me, a lifelong New Yorker, to the *WPA Guide* as a work of literature, to the

¹ Mike Rose. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggle to Educate America's Underprepared*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990 (c. 1989), 225.

relationship between *soledad* and *solidaridad*, and to the foreign, and vaguely subversive idea of college as a place to make oneself a home.

With the help of the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the late Professor Eli Ginzberg first brought me to Columbia as a Revson Fellow on the Future of the City of New York. He and his colleague Karen Vrotsos made it possible for me and other grassroots folk to look upon the academy as a place where people like us could explore far-ranging interests, exchange ideas, and solve big-city problems. Ginzberg, who completed his Columbia dissertation during the Great Depression at the age of twenty-three and was still teaching there when he died nearly seven decades later, also planted a seed when, some years later, he scanned my resume and commented matter-of-factly that I had “never really bitten the bullet.”

Among those no longer with us, the late S. Willis Rudy (CCNY '39) and Peter J. Rondinone (CCNY '78) also deserve mention (although I never met either of them). Rudy's extraordinary 1948 dissertation on the first one hundred years of City College's history has been invaluable to me and to other scholars. I'm sorry he never got a chance to read this sequel. Rondinone took his own life not long after completing his own doctoral dissertation, a brutally honest educational autobiography and “metatext.” I wonder if he ever knew what a courageous and valuable contribution it represented.

Oddly, I had never heard of James W. Carey when I applied for doctoral study in the idiosyncratic program he founded and presided over. It was meeting his junior colleague, Andie Tucher, who would ultimately shepherd this dissertation into being, reading her book about New York's penny press, and listening to her lecture before a gathering of public high school teachers that convinced me there were people in at least one corner of the academy who cared as much as I did about clarity and elegant prose and for whom journalism was something more than a

product or an industry. As a dedicated teacher, and a thoughtful, attentive, assured, and patient advisor she has more than lived up to that initial impression. I have Alan Brinkley to thank for first introducing me to her.

Elizabeth Blackmar welcomed me, an outsider unschooled in the finer points of historiography, into her department's dissertation seminar and took an early interest in this project. Beyond all the critical insights and direction she offered, her palpable enthusiasm, heartfelt responses, and the way she treated me from the start like a member of the historical profession all helped me believe in myself and get the thing done.

Few people are fortunate enough to arrive on a campus and find someone who so fully shares their interests and outlook as LynNell Hancock has with me. I have come to treasure that connection and her delightful friendship. Under the sponsorship of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Andrew Delbanco and Casey Blake included me in their seminar on the history of higher education, brought me into close contact with leaders in the field, and offered invaluable criticism and encouragement during both the project's early and final stages. Robbie McClintock and David Rosner also encouraged me and were gracious both in agreeing to serve on my committee and in offering their generous comments. Other Columbia professors who offered guidance and energy were Todd Gitlin, who first alerted me to the basketball scandals; Eric Foner, who encouraged me to attend to the role of Catholics; and Nancy Woloch, who responded enthusiastically to my work. Students too numerous to mention made me feel welcome and offered me their good fellowship, among them Jeff Pooley, the late Daniel Bernheim, Joe Cutbirth, Jan Ellis, Karen Aho, Olivier Sylvain, Chris Anderson, Lucas Graves, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen.

Had it not been for the tremendous flexibility afforded me by David Cronin and my

colleagues at the New York Council for the Humanities I might not have undertaken doctoral work at all. David Nasaw and Richard McCoy, with whom I collaborated on projects there, offered their encouragement and support. In my years at the Council and since I've had the good fortune to interact with scholars of enormous stature, but Rich's example continues to stand out for his extraordinary dedication, humility, and generous spirit.

Long before I ever thought of going back to school, Peter Parisi of Hunter College gave me my first job teaching at a CUNY college. He told me two things: (1) that he pitied me for what I was getting myself into and (2) that a PhD was like a union card in this profession—yet another seed planted. Not long after that Jill Nelson and Linda Prout asked me to teach a course in City College's Shepard Hall. It was snowing lightly when I emerged from that first, magical evening class and I was overcome with the romance and mystery of the place. Some years later Linda, Lynn Appelbaum, Andrea Weiss, and Jerry Carlson invited me to return there full time, an extraordinary opportunity without which this dissertation would have been something else altogether. City College Professor Mary Soliday was a kindred spirit who took a keen interest both in my research and my teaching career and whose own work was vastly important to this study. Like her, Carla Capetti and Campbell Dalglish also deserve thanks for their helpfulness and kind words during some particularly difficult moments.

College students in their infinite variety have been my single greatest inspiration. Among the multitude a handful stand out in memory. Denise Turner, a Trinidadian woman who worked in a bank and, when she started out, wrote pedestrian prose in big, schoolgirlish handwriting but nonetheless managed to do penetrating and devastatingly moving reporting on the lives of Manhattan nannies and impress upon me the hidden potential locked within so many apparently unremarkable students from immigrant and working-class neighborhoods. Fanny Betances,

Maria Billini, Wil Cruz, Mirelis Gonzalez, and Joshua Peguero all loved asking tough questions of themselves and others, and for none of them was college a foregone conclusion.

Several City College alumni and former faculty and administrators contributed their time, recollections, and impressions in the form of lengthy interviews: Allen B. Ballard, Robert Gurland, Paget Henry, Stephen Koch, Leonard Kriegel, Paul Milkman, Louis Reyes Rivera, Cindy Rodriguez, Irving Rosenthal (with the help of his son, Robert), Mort Sheinman, and Blanca Vazquez. Floyd Layne barely spoke to me at all, but managed to communicate powerfully nonetheless. Layne's friend Jerry Izenberg filled in many of the things he wasn't able to tell me himself. Not all of these people are cited here, but all helped immeasurably to shape the larger portrait of City's place in people's hearts and memories. CCNY Archivist Sydney Van Nort was immensely helpful to me from the very beginning.

Many of my ideas about journalism, urban education, and public life were forged in the offices of the citywide magazine *New Youth Connections*, which I edited for eight years when I was scarcely more than a youth myself. Publisher Keith Hefner built and sustained that institution and made it possible for so many of us, young and old, to find purpose in our lives and thrive. His expansive vision of the press shaped me in important ways, as did his patience and friendship. Tom Brown may have been the first City College graduate with whom I ever worked closely. Very subtly, he marked all of us with his piercing intelligence and profoundly democratic spirit. Efrain Reyes, Rachel Blustain, and Al Desetta all taught me lessons that have stayed with me to this day. Of the hundreds of talented young writers who passed through our newsroom, a handful grew up to become colleagues and longtime friends: Mohamad Bazzi, Loretta Chan, Ferentz Lafargue, and Sheila Maldonado.

I've lived alone most of my adult life, sustained by a handful of deep, enduring

friendships. For more than thirty years my former neighbor Michael Dinwiddie has been a sounding board and, off-and-on, an almost daily presence in my life. Lately, in addition to his abiding love, he has repeatedly given me shelter. Jeff Ruth and Sara Villa have also opened their home and their hearts to me. Besides leading the way down the doctoral path, their abundant tenderness and joy has been a source of great personal comfort. Through his good humor, companionship, and gentle nudging (“How’s that term paper going?”) Buddy Garfinkle has proven worthy of his name.

Long before I ever considered writing a dissertation Martin Walz took my writerly ambitions seriously and dropped in from time to time to see what I was up to. On one of those visits, Martin said what might have been the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me: that somehow New York always felt like a small town to him, perhaps because he knew me, a feeling that I aspire to conjure in my readers. For decades now the Bertram-Nothnagel and Dando-Haenisch families have made me feel that I was one of them. They have reveled in my successes, come to the rescue during more than one crisis, and when I was most in doubt were among the very first to suggest that a doctorate was well worth undertaking. If the Bertrams helped me get started, David Fel was instrumental in my bringing it in for a landing.

Of all my friends and colleagues, however, no one has occupied a more central place in this process than Andrea Estepa, my unofficial advisor not only on this dissertation but in virtually every meaningful undertaking of the past twenty years. As co-editors at *New Youth Connections* we forged an extraordinary working relationship and a friendship that has endured through several book projects, professional triumphs, and personal tragedies. As I write these words, she, too, is putting the finishing touches on her dissertation and faces a brilliant future as a historian and mentor to young scholars.

My parents made two choices that profoundly shaped both the fact and the focus of this study. When others of their class were abandoning New York City for the suburbs they chose to stay behind. They made many sacrifices to ensure that my siblings and I got the best educations possible and impressed upon me a role for schools in people's lives that was more than instrumental. In all of my endeavors they and my brother, Peter and sister, Darcy, have been nothing if not supportive.

Finally, just as I was completing the prospectus, my partner, Maria Rubert de Ventós, reappeared after an absence of many, many years and filled a void in my being I had long since forgotten was there. On a practical level, she taught me to see the built environment as something that expresses human desires and tells a story. She understood the process of writing a dissertation in ways that my other family members could not, hounded me with metaphors about making tortillas, and insisted that it didn't have to be perfect or even good; it just had to be finished. While the other people on this list share only the credit for what appears here, Maria believed in me so completely and was so integral to the entire process, so much a part of it and of me, that she shares even the blame. Though it seems almost redundant to do so, I dedicate this to her.

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‘GUTTERSNIPE’S

The experiment is to be tried, whether the highest education can be given to the masses, whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of learning of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will; not by the privileged few but by the privileged many.¹

—Horace Webster, 1849

There are in fact no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses.²

—Raymond Williams, 1958

¹ Horace Webster, Presidential address delivered on the occasion of the opening of the Free Academy, Jan. 29, 1849, quoted in S. Willis Rudy, *The College of the City of New York: A History, 1847-1947* (New York: CCNY Press, 1949), 29.

² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 300.

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In the taxonomy of the 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City*, the City College of New York belonged neither to Irish German Manhattanville to the south and west nor to the teeming, expansive “Negro Harlem” to the east. It sat atop a “rocky bluff” at the tip of a deracinated Washington Heights, unmoored from any discernible neighborhood.³ Surrounding it lay the soon-to-be-demolished Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the school buildings of the Society of the Sacred Heart, and Alexander Hamilton’s 1802 country house. What is one to make of such landscape? The college’s location beside a Jewish orphanage and a Catholic boarding school for girls situated it among caretaker bureaucracies and centers of religious and moral instruction, each with its own ethnic cast. The proximity of Hamilton Grange linked it to the nation—not to Franklin or Jefferson, however, but to the immigrant, the banker, the one killed in a duel.⁴

With its “aged and blackened” walls of Manhattan schist, its “*imperfect quadrangle split by Convent Avenue*” giving “an impression of spaciousness despite its *limited area*,”⁵ the quintessentially urban campus these authors described was precarious, isolated and forlorn. They did not discuss the life of the college, its lunchroom alcoves, notable alumni, faculty, or basketball team, much less its reputation for radical politics or the fact that over eighty-five percent of the students were Jews. They did, however, devote considerable attention to Lewisohn Stadium, a six-thousand-seat Greek amphitheatre “known to the public less for its sports events than for the summer night concerts” that had allowed a cross section of New Yorkers to enjoy cheap classical music since well before it was ever played on the radio. And

³ Federal Writer’s Project, *WPA Guide to New York City* (1939; repr. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 294-295. The guide was written and edited by emerging literary figures like Richard Wright and John Cheever.

⁴ Besides being a well-known founder of the American republic and its banking system, Hamilton started the *New-York Evening Post*, which went on to have a fateful relationship with City College.

⁵ Federal Writers Project, *WPA Guide*, 295; emphasis mine.

they made sure to mention the Works Progress Administration's excavations for a new wing of the college library (never to be completed). Such were the preoccupations and iconography of the New Deal, an abiding concern with bringing modern amenities and high culture and to the masses.

Founded in 1847, the controversial Free Academy, as the school was then known, was the world's first tuition-free, publicly funded municipal college. The original impetus for its creation had come from native-born artisans worried about their children's declining prospects amidst growing industrialization. The Workingmen were a group of skilled New York crafts workers who organized across trades and attacked disparities in educational opportunity.⁶ In 1829, they demanded not only a ten-hour workday and periodic redistribution of wealth, but also free, universal schooling until the age of eighteen.⁷ Though their party soon collapsed, it was the latter, least threatening of these persistent demands that the Free Academy was designed to accommodate and the sons of this same class of journeymen who were ultimately to make up the bulk of its first students.

Whig opponents argued that a public high school and college would be "onerous to the city finances, injurious to [private] institutions for learning already established, [and] the fruitful source of strife among different classes and religious sects," and they added the requirement of a popular referendum to the Academy's enabling legislation in a devious effort to thwart the whole undertaking.⁸ But together with wealthy merchants on the City's new Board of Education, the

⁶ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (1984; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 214-215 and 157.

⁷ Five years later, they made one of the first calls for free, public libraries in American cities and towns and set up, in Philadelphia, an independent society for workers set up "not only to enlighten the mind on general subjects, but to teach that class, who supply the fountain of existence, whence their evils spring and how to remedy them." See National Trades' Union, Jan. 30 & Apr. 16, 1836, quoted in Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 1:115.

⁸ Editorial. *Courier & New York Enquirer*. June 3, 1847, in Cosenza, 167.

egalitarian-minded penny press, and a Tammany political organization that mobilized immigrant workers to paper the city's wards with posters and leaflets that read "Vote for the Free Academy for the poor man's children," the artisans prevailed in securing the first public monies for a free college in any city in the world.⁹

In the space of just two generations, New York's population had already quadrupled, and it needed, if nothing more, a symbolic mechanism by which poor people could rise up in the society. Until the creation of public high schools a half-century later, City College provided one of the only unbroken ladders anywhere leading from the common school to a college degree. It would later launch the first night school for working students and sponsor the nation's first affirmative action program.¹⁰ Various labels "The Cheder on the Hill," "The Little Red Schoolhouse," "The Subway College," "The Proletarian Harvard," and "The University of Harlem" with each successive budget crisis and wave of new immigrants, no other school has been so savagely attacked nor so lovingly mythologized. As a symbol of both "meritocracy" and "equal opportunity," as well as a legendary incubator of public intellectuals, PhD's, and Nobel prizewinners from the working class, during the postwar era City College commanded the attention of journalists, politicians, and neoliberal critics who invoked it as a symbol to express the middle class's alienation from the contemporary city and to reassess the society's

⁹ Eileen F. Lebow, *The Bright Boys: A History Of Townsend Harris High School* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁰ City College was also the birthplace of the elected student government and the site of the very first campus sit-in. In 1938, it instituted the first formal system of tenure and faculty governance. The student sit-in occurred on Apr. 23, 1936 on behalf of the dismissed English tutor, Morris U. Schappes. See Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 66. For a discussion of how the arbitrary firing of Schappes and other professors led to a tenure system, see Abraham Edel, *The Struggle for Academic Democracy: Lessons From the 1938 "Revolution" in New York's City Colleges* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000).

responsibility to the urban poor.¹¹ By the end of the twentieth century the institution had, for many, come to stand less for the promise than for the excesses of popular education in America.

This dissertation examines that symbolic process. Rather than focusing on an amalgam of deans and departments and demographics, I chart the institution's emergence as a cultural icon, a lightning rod, and the perennial focus of public controversy. Spirited debates over Communist professors, gambling in intercollegiate sports, declining standards, tuition hikes, slashed budgets, and academic freedom are among the raw materials from which the larger New York public has often fashioned and reconfigured itself. And on several of those occasions City College's own fate has hung precisely on which publics it could rally.¹² I've organized this study around a handful of such moments of heightened discussion and used them to explore the ways in which a variety of actors from the Catholic Church and the *New York Post* to right-wing think tanks and disaffected alumni have mobilized popular perceptions of the college to advance far reaching political agendas and to alternately shore up and erode the institution's own public support.

But scandal and publicity are merely the most visible dimension of the school's publicness. Underpinning that is the ambient and embedded discourse of public higher education itself, a discourse embodied in a particular set of rituals, mythical structures, and quotidian expectations, to say nothing of the subjective, deeply felt sense of our own fitness that any of us brings to the college experience.¹³ In that sense, City College has served not only—or even principally—as a public good over which contending tribes have done battle, an instrument of power, but also as an enclave and a mechanism for maintaining the cultures of a number of

¹¹ Mary Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*, (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2002), 15.

¹² I owe this formulation to Elizabeth Blackmar.

¹³ It was during a conversation in 2006 that the late James W. Carey first pointed me in this direction.

different groups. While more than one community and set of interests may have claimed disparate meanings for the institution and deployed those meanings toward their own, distinctive ends, they have no less importantly used the college to reimagine themselves and their place in the changing city and nation.

INDIVIDUAL ‘JOURNEYINGS’ & PUBLIC IMAGININGS

In his celebrated work on the “imagined communities” that both constitute and are constituted by nation-states, Benedict Anderson wrote of one variety of pilgrimage brought about by the twentieth-century colonial school system:

From all over the vast [Indonesian] colony, but from nowhere outside it, the tender pilgrims made their inward, upward way, meeting fellow pilgrims from different, perhaps once hostile villages in primary school, from different ethnolinguistic groups in middle school, and from every part of the realm in the tertiary institutions of the capital and they knew that from wherever they had come they still had read the same books and done the same sums. They also knew even if they never got so far—and most did not—that Rome was Batavia and that all these journeyings derived their ‘sense’ from the capital, in effect explaining why ‘we’ are ‘here’ ‘together.’¹⁴

A corollary to Anderson’s “journeyings” takes place every time a young mother in Queens drops her child off with a relative and boards the subway to her biology class in Manhattan or a postal worker in Midtown sets out for Harlem at the end of his shift with a textbook and yellow highlighter in his lap. City College students like these understand their own journeys in the context of family, neighborhood, city, and nation. The writer Vivian Gornick described her daily commute to school during the 1950s as a profound dislocation:

[While] on the face of it a mockery of the idea of ‘going to college,’ [it] was in fact like committing a subversive act. On the surface life appeared to be what it had always been: you still used the subways, still walked the familiar city streets between classes, still ate in grubby luncheonettes, returned to the old

¹⁴ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 121. Batavia was the Dutch colonial name for modern day Jakarta.

neighborhood each night, talked continuously to your high school friends on the block who had not gone on to college, felt the steady flow of the city's current running through the dailyness of your life. Beneath the surface, though, you had begun to live in a secret world inside your head where you read and thought and talked in a way that separated you from your parents and the life of the house, and that of the streets on which you had grown up and apparently still lived. It was a world that came to expressive life when you got off the train at 145th Street in the morning, and went back into stifled seclusion when you got back on the train each night.¹⁵

Such hard-won understandings are not necessarily held in common, however. Gornick's immigrant mother had assumed her daughter was at City College training for a workaday job as a public school teacher, not reading novels and preparing for a life of independent thought. When she discovered her error she felt "swindled."¹⁶ Discourses like these point to what Raymond Williams called the fugitive "structures of feeling" or "lived experiences" that add up to more than the sum of the parts of any cultural milieu and are largely irrecoverable to future generations.¹⁷ I have located traces of them in a variety of texts: in novels and newspaper articles and memoirs and oral histories, in the Ephebic Oath through which City College graduates, following the tradition of ancient Athens, even today pledge themselves to serve and do honor to their great city, in the list of demands of black and Puerto Rican students who seized the South Campus in 1969, and in commencement addresses like the one from which Gornick's own reflections are taken. But they lived more fully in the arguments between the Stalinists and the Trotskyites that raged through the alcoves of the old college cafeteria and in dozens of other

¹⁵ Vivian Gornick, Commencement address, Bennington, VT, May 1979. Quoted in Betty Rizzo and Barry Wallenstein, eds. *City at the Center: A Collection of Writings by CCNY Alumni & Faculty*, (New York: City College of New York, Division of the Humanities, 1983), 84-85.

¹⁶ Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 107. There is a dangerous tendency to cast the discourse of higher education in opposition to home or neighborhood discourses as Gornick appears to be doing here. In fact, the two often function in creative tension and mutually shape one another. For more on this, see Mary Soliday, "Access as Translation," chap 5 of *The Politics of Remediation* and "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives," *College English* 56, no. 5 (Sept. 1994): 511-526.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 65.

conversations and communicative acts that form the connective tissue of any “imagined” community.

City College should thus be understood at once as (1) a social or discursive space wherein reality itself is, in James Carey’s formulation, “produced, maintained, repaired and transformed”; (2) a physical space, a collection of buildings and rooms assembled in a particular corner of one American city; and finally, (3) a metaphorical space, the stage upon which social dramas are enacted and public meanings collaboratively arrived at.¹⁸

MASS EDUCATION & THE PROBLEM OF PRESTIGE

The Free Academy had been founded at the taxpayers’ expense so that, in the words of its founder, the self-educated merchant Townsend Harris, “the children of the rich and poor [could] take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect.”¹⁹ Until the very end of the nineteenth century, however, it had managed to attract neither. For the first fifty years of the school’s existence, one didn’t even need four years of college to become a doctor or a lawyer, much less to get a decent job. The poor were in too much of a hurry to earn a buck and the rich were either going into the family business or off to Princeton or Columbia. As several scholars have noted, artisans and the only marginally well-to-do families who enrolled their sons at City often did so less out of utility than what Thorstein Veblen called “conspicuous leisure,” a way of demonstrating that *their* children didn’t have to

¹⁸ James W. Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (1975; New York: Routledge, 1989), 23.

¹⁹ Plain Truth, letter to the editor, *New York Courier and Enquirer*, Mar. 22, 1847, quoted in Mario Emilio Cosenza, *The Establishment of The College Of The City Of New York as the Free Academy in 1847, Townsend Harris Founder: A Chapter in the History of Education* (New York: Associate Alumni of the College of the City of New York, 1925), 81. Although signed with a pseudonym, based on its contents the letter is widely attributed to Townsend Harris. 79.

work for a living—at least not right away.²⁰

In this respect, a lifelong inferiority complex was encoded in City College's very DNA. The founders had stipulated at the outset that although free, the Academy's curriculum be "in no way inferior to our other colleges" and offer a full menu of Greek and Latin and compulsory chapel, for instance. But it was also to remain, somewhat incongruously, more relevant "to the active duties of [the] operative life" of the mechanic than to those of the priest, solicitor or surgeon. Rather than upending the class structure, the goal was merely to "add dignity to labor."²¹

In noting the "prestige value" of academic institutions' conspicuous waste of both time and space, often at the expense of what he termed "the republic of learning," Veblen captured still another of the key contradictions to be found at the heart of City's later development. The nagging desire on the part of its officials to prove that they were every bit as good as their competition and their persistent need to pander to the "good will" of "unlettered" outsiders militated against the very academic quality they sought to trumpet, and, at the same time, blinded them to the peculiarities and strengths of their natural constituency. When, in 1899, Veblen generically described "the higher seminaries of learning" as stubbornly clinging to status markers like the idle "acquisition of dead languages" and wasteful "architectural mannerisms," he could just as easily have been describing City College as schools like Yale, Cornell, and the University of Chicago with which he was more familiar. All embraced what he later called "the disjointed grotesqueries of an eclectic and modified gothic" and "bastard antique" style, and remained

²⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899; repr. New York: Vanguard Press, 1928), 35-67. The specific connection to City College has previously been made by, among others, Martin Mayer, "Higher Education for All?: The Case of Open Admissions," *Commentary* 55, no. 2 (Feb. 1973): 37.

²¹ New York City Board of Education, "Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the application of that part of the Literature Fund, which is apportioned by the Regents of the University to the City and County of New York," Jan. 20, 1847, quoted in Cosenza, 30.

indifferent to the exigencies of light, heat and ventilation, thereby “housing the quest for truth in an edifice of false pretences.”²²

In the case of private colleges and universities, such pretensions were designed to appeal primarily to the Gilded Age sensibilities of “successful men of affairs.” A public college, on the other hand, was required to enlist a much wider and more complex network of support. This was the second, arguably more fraught question that the great “experiment” that was the Free Academy had originally been created to test and the central focus of this inquiry: not “whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people can be educated” but rather “whether an institution of learning of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will.”²³ Well into the twentieth century only a handful of state legislatures, none of them on the eastern seaboard, had created public universities that could begin to compete with the top private institutions. Public pressure often forced those that had to follow a much more conservative course than privately endowed modern research universities like Johns Hopkins or older institutions like Columbia and NYU that were, with their defiantly forward-looking Beaux Arts campuses, casting off tradition and reinventing themselves for a new, scientific age. Education historian Laurence Veysey has noted how anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric flourished among meddlesome politicians, and

Everywhere and at all times newspapers gleefully emphasized academic misdoings, real or imagined...During the early years of the American university movement, until about 1890, academic efforts burgeoned largely in spite of the public, not as a result of popular acclaim.²⁴

²² For Veblen’s discussion of the classics, see his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 394-398. On academic architecture, see Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (1918; repr. Stanford, CA: Academic Reprints, 1954), 145-147.

²³ Horace Webster, “Presidential Address,” 29.

²⁴ Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 16.

After that, Veysey writes, “an almost insatiable need” for such prestige arose among educators, one that existed in tension with an older, contrasting ideal of the university as a “refuge” from the vagaries of public opinion. This lust for approval was scarcely confined to the public sector. As the president who built Columbia’s new Morningside Heights campus with the help of five million dollars in public money and served terms as mayor of both Brooklyn and the newly consolidated City of New York, Seth Low understood as well as anybody that even elite private universities depended on the resources and good will of a sympathetic public. The German research universities after which so many American institutions were being modeled had the full support of the state and operated as official gatekeepers to teaching and the learned professions. But Low and his contemporaries enjoyed no such luxuries. In order to fulfill the task of supporting costly research that, by definition, “only a very few out of the vast multitude” could ever hope to take advantage of and to do this “in the midst of a democratic community” that, while tending to favor higher education, was equally “tempted to draw the line in education at the point where the masses are seen to profit by it,” Low felt the modern university must involve itself deeply in the life of the city and devote itself to public service.²⁵

This note of caution, which Low’s successor, Nicholas Murray Butler, would summarily dismiss, was later echoed by the critic Peter Sourian during the tumult over City College’s Open Admissions experiment of the 1970s, which transformed the institution from an exclusive and highly competitive academic enclave into a resource available to tens of thousands of non-traditional students, many of them woefully underprepared. Sourian felt that Open Admissions

²⁵ Seth Low, “A City University” (address delivered at the nineteenth commemoration of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, Feb. 22, 1895), quoted in *State Aid to Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1898), 59.

had revolutionary ambitions and potential but lacked crucial popular support. Americans, he pointed out, did not have a revolutionary system of government like those of the Bolsheviks or Robespierre and St. Just, all of whom were disposed to keep on paying for the slow work of educating their people and were insulated from vocal opposition. The active sabotage on the part of the public university's critics, paymasters, and disgruntled employees alike and the attendant game of "political football" inevitably obliged us, he argued—as had Seth Low seventy-five years earlier— "to work things out in our own topsy-turvy American fashion."²⁶ In the case of City College, those negotiations have played themselves out in a uniquely spirited and public fashion.

THE COLLEGE & THE CITY: GEOGRAPHY & ARCHITECTURE

In 1907 City moved out of its cramped quarters on Manhattan's Twenty-third Street to its current location on Hamilton Heights overlooking Central Harlem and the Hudson River. The move followed shortly after Columbia and NYU had chosen similarly commanding heights upon which to build sprawling new uptown neo-classical campuses far removed from the pandemonium of the city streets. Both of these were urban variations on the Jeffersonian model with a great library placed under a cupola and at the head of a central quadrangle ringed by smaller buildings arrayed around its periphery, all facing inward. While City's gated, neo-Gothic campus also had open space at its core and towering Shepard Hall as its focal point, provisions for a small library within the main structure could scarcely have been more modest, and indeed, for the next half century what plans did emerge were continually scuttled for lack of funding or shifting priorities.

What most distinguished the public campus from its wealthier and more exclusive

²⁶ Peter Sourian, "A Pilgrim's Progress" *The Nation*, Feb. 12, 1973, 210. Sourian had previously taught in City College's Evening Session.

counterparts were, first, its neo-Gothic design, a nod to tradition and gravitas at precisely the moment when the modern research university was being invented; second, its reliance on native Manhattan schist for its construction, underscoring the school's rough, local character; and finally the way the façade of its main building looked not inward, but out over the city that paid its bills, its tower serving as a kind of beacon missing from the neighboring campuses.²⁷

Inside was the Great Hall, City College's architectural crown jewel. Rather than building a great library in which to enshrine the wisdom of the ages and foster inquiry—a place for study and reflection, in other words—something the college had never had nor, it seems, considered, the trustees had opted to create a space capable of assembling over 2,500 people under a sixty-three-foot ceiling. None of the private universities had such a grand meeting space. With its new, state-of-the-art organ, the Great Hall was an outgrowth of the chapel where students had gathered daily at the old Twenty-third Street campus. Both the outward appearance of Shepard Hall and the design of its principal interior space harkened back to medieval Oxford and Cambridge and seemed to emphasize religious instruction over the self directed study and knowledge creation increasingly taking hold in American colleges and universities.²⁸

The Great Hall was not merely a place for the elders to address captive convocations of students, however. It was intended to serve as a magnificent civic forum as well, in the same vein as the Great Hall at the city's other tuition-free college, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, where Lincoln had given his pivotal 1859 speech on slavery and vigorous public debate had flourished for decades. The city fathers would welcome foreign dignitaries in City College's Great Hall, it was thought. Scientists and cultural figures would

²⁷ In a further irony, whereas in the Jeffersonian conception the church is replaced by a domed library, Shepard Hall looks—both inside and out—like nothing if not a church, this at a moment when Jews were already the majority of the student body.

²⁸ Paul David Pearson, *The City College of New York: 150 Years of Academic Architecture* (New York: City College, 1997), 9.

offer public lectures. Thus had the design been sold to skeptical taxpayers.²⁹

Within a decade of the opening of the new campus, a prominent alumnus had underwritten the construction of a neo-classical amphitheater and athletic field immediately to the south of the college buildings with more than double the Great Hall's seating capacity. Lewisohn Stadium soon became the place where generations of ordinary New Yorkers with no connection to City or any other college came on hot summer nights to listen to the New York Philharmonic, to hear George Gershwin play his brand new *Rhapsody in Blue* or Marian Anderson sing arias. For as little as a quarter they could watch their first Greek tragedy performed.

One of the people most instrumental in helping City secure both the funds it needed to build its new campus and a more important place in the life of the city was Nicholas Murray Butler, the young president of Columbia University twenty blocks to the south. Butler was an immensely important figure in American education, largely responsible for the creation of huge, comprehensive public high schools on a national scale and for legislation that made a high school diploma a prerequisite for admission to college. He was interested in turning Columbia into a training ground for a national elite and felt that in order to do that he needed a mechanism with which to stem the flow of bright Lower East Side Jews with their rough manners and over-serious ways. In the course of his forty-three-year tenure, Butler would establish quotas limiting the number of Jewish students Columbia would accept and aggressively recruit students from beyond the tri-state area—doubling undergraduate enrollment even as the college became more discriminating and discriminatory in its admissions practices. In order to insulate the more refined and good-natured gentile students from their immigrant counterparts, he built Columbia's

²⁹ Albert Einstein would later speak there, as would Malcolm X and several U.S. presidents, but no one quite realized at the time that City College was also being set up as a place where it would be possible to raise a racket.

first dormitory, and, as the historian Thomas Bender has noted, symbolically walled off the campus from the surrounding metropolis in the process.³⁰ Butler also helped establish extension programs in order, as Columbia historian Robert McCaughey put it, “to keep Brooklyn in Brooklyn.”³¹ In these and other ways he shrewdly helped make it possible for City College to absorb the surge of talent emanating from New York’s immigrant neighborhoods and serve as a training ground for the teachers who would staff the burgeoning new public high schools while Columbia was left to focus on molding the “character” of captains of industry and future presidents.³² By design, Columbia became, in Bender’s phrase, both physically and intellectually a university “in the city but not of the city,”³³ while City, despite its traditional setting and curriculum, was programmed to play the role of a tower that was anything but ivory, a kind of way station and buffer between the public and the intellectual.

After World War II, the college’s location in Harlem, the cultural capital of black America and infamous urban ghetto, just a short walk from one of the country’s wealthiest research universities and only a few subway stops from the center of its national media, dramatically shaped events there as well as the way the public understood those events. In 1952 City annexed the adjacent Manhattanville College campus, a former convent, to its South, the walled design of which would also play a decisive, if paradoxical, role in opening up the school to the surrounding neighborhood. For a time, the South Campus became the school’s liberal arts and countercultural center. Then, in the 1970s college officials tore down Lewisohn Stadium

³⁰ Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 290.

³¹ Robert A. McCaughey, “History of Columbia University” (lecture, Columbia University Colloquium on American Higher Education: History and Prospects. New York, Apr. 5, 2004). This was the origin of Brooklyn College.

³² The teachers would be City College graduates and the principals would get Master’s degrees at the newly created Columbia Teachers College. See Sherry Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor: Education in New York, 1880-1924* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981), 109-110. According to the historian David Rosner, it was at the graduate level that Jewish students first integrated Columbia. Interview with author, Dec. 21, 2010.

³³ Bender, *New York Intellect*, 279-293.

and, in the midst of New York's fiscal crisis, erected in its place a huge, gray, largely windowless complex of classrooms, offices and cafeterias that appeared tailored more to withstand urban riots than to express any affirmative educational vision.

Former student radical Paul Milkman, who spent his college years on the now mostly abandoned South Campus, recently described how he got stuck in traffic and accidentally found himself driving past his alma mater for the first time since he graduated forty years ago. "That monstrosity that they built out into the middle of Convent Avenue," he said, referring to the new North Academic Center, "was so horrendously ugly... I couldn't believe how ugly this thing was they put there..."

The South Campus was lovely so I was sorry to see it all sort of shuttered and then this kind of factory building being put up to replace it. You can have a city campus which is still pretty. Columbia is that. Of course, Columbia has money; Columbia drips money. But City College was a pretty place and it's not a pretty place anymore.³⁴

Milkman is a public high school teacher who has lived and worked his entire life in New York's outer boroughs and seems to have little penchant for the pastoral. His reaction expresses New Yorkers' pervasive sense of loss over far more than City College's physical plant.

In countless ways, then, from the initial absence of a major library and primacy of secular gathering places to the antiquarian pretensions of its neo-gothic design and the outsized industrial scale of its late twentieth-century buildings, the values and social practices that made up the college and distinguished it from its peers are inscribed in its very architecture.

DAVID LEVINSKY'S SECULAR TEMPLE

In much the same way, many of the most evocative metaphors for higher education, at City College and elsewhere, have been of the architectural variety (Veblen's "edifice of false

³⁴ Paul Milkman, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, Feb. 25, 2010.

pretenses,” “the ivory tower,” “standing in the schoolhouse door,” “diploma mills...”). Bender, for example, pitted Seth Low’s vision of a “city upon a hill...the exemplary and observed behavior of men trying to live good lives in the midst of ordinary experience” against Butler’s “acropolis, with its suggestion of a ‘protected’ sacred district under the control of a priestly class.” The incipient tension between these two models, the first of them a university *of* the city, the other merely *in* the city, amounted to a contest between democratic dialogue and expert authority (not unlike that later taken up by John Dewey and Walter Lippmann), a contest which, for Bender, came to shape much of intellectual life in New York during the twentieth century.³⁵

But by the time they settled in amidst the gargoyles and Greek columns of their new, uptown digs, the vast majority of City College students were coming from a tradition that was neither Puritan nor Greco-Roman, and they brought with them an altogether different set of associations. In his 1917 picaresque novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, about a struggling young Russian Jew on New York’s Lower East Side during the 1890s, Abraham Cahan charted the protagonist’s pilgrimage from the *cheders* and *yeshivahs* of the old country to the night schools and settlement houses of New York’s Jewish ghetto, a journey over which City College loomed large. Cahan was the founding editor of the newspaper *Forverts*, a novel mix of advice, propaganda, opinion, and popular literature that helped establish the Yiddish vernacular as a cultural force in America. He also saw himself as an educator and established a popular Sunday supplement called “The People’s College.”³⁶ *The Rise of David Levinsky* was a cautionary tale about the corrupting influences of American capitalism with education at its center. What sustained its hero, who began as a pushcart peddler and advanced to the position of sweatshop

³⁵ Bender, *New York Intellect*.

³⁶ Melech Epstein, *Jewish labor in U.S.A.: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish labor Movement*, vol. 1 (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950), quoted in Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 24.

worker and, eventually, wealthy businessman, was the distant prospect of a cultivated life, a mythic quest with explicitly religious overtones.

At the end of a grueling day behind his cart, night school held out for Levinsky the prospect of “divine pleasure” and he threw himself into his studies “with religious devotion.”³⁷ His teacher, a customs house clerk by day and model of “diligence, perseverance [and] tenacity...[who] had fought his way through City College,” introduced Levinsky to the mysteries of the English language and upward mobility in America and seemed to offer a way out of what he termed his “greenhornhood.”³⁸ His workmates in the cloak maker’s shop counseled him to take the Regent’s exam and go straight to a school of medicine, law or engineering, but Levinsky disdained American professionals as men “of doubtful intellectual equipment” and their education as “a cheap, machine-made product.” He vowed to “aim higher,” to go to City College, study the liberal arts, and transform himself into “the genuine article.”³⁹

The image of the modest college building was constantly before me. More than once I went a considerable distance out of my way to pass the corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third Street, where that edifice stood. I would pause and gaze at its red, ivy-clad walls, mysterious high windows, humble spires; I would stand watching the students on the campus and around the great doors, and go my way, with a heart full of reverence, envy, and hope, with a heart full of quiet ecstasy.

It was not merely a place in which I was to fit myself for the battle of life, nor merely one in which I was going to acquire knowledge. It was a symbol of spiritual promotion as well. University-bred people were the real nobility of the world. A college diploma was a certificate of moral as well as intellectual aristocracy.

My old religion had gradually fallen to pieces, and if its place was taken by something else, if there was something that appealed to the better man in me, to what was purest in my thoughts and most sacred in my emotions, that something

³⁷ Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; repr. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 133.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 135.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 167-68.

was the red, church-like structure on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third Street.

It was the synagogue of my new life. Nor is this merely a figure of speech: the building really appealed to me as a temple, as a House of Sanctity, as we call the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. At least that was the term I would fondly apply to it, years later, in my retrospective broodings upon the first few years of my life in America.⁴⁰

City College here represented a refuge from the soulless world of brute commerce that had come to dominate so many immigrant lives, one that embodied the millennial hopes of the Jewish people. The irony was that, for all his worldly success, Cahan's hero never actually made it there. That his teacher and one of his co-workers *had* studied there, however, was enough to thoroughly capture David Levinsky's young imagination and to give expression to many of his greatest hopes and, ultimately, disappointments.

'RETROSPECTIVE BROODING,' GOLDEN AGES, & THE LIMITS OF MEMORY

In a way, whenever we talk about institutions like City College, we are each of us David Levinsky standing outside on the corner gazing up at them or brooding from many decades' remove over the educations we never got. One thing this study reveals is the extent to which the schools we think we remember are rarely the same ones we, in fact, attended. Late in his life, the literary and social critic (and City College graduate) Irving Howe discovered that school reformers were planning to shut down his East Bronx alma mater, James Monroe High School. Howe was described as "indignant" over this news until it was explained to him that Monroe graduated only twenty-seven percent of its incoming freshmen. Had it really come to that? Howe swore that when he studied there in the 1930s Monroe graduated nearly all its students. After some checking, he was told that, no, the percentage then hadn't been all that much higher.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 197-198.

“It can't be,” Howe insisted. “Everyone I knew graduated.” Everyone *he* knew, that is.⁴¹ In a school of over 10,000 students.⁴²

The education scholar Richard Rothstein has studied this phenomenon and points out that

As adults age...good students from prior generations stand out in memory compared to average or below average students today...We compare our own relatively homogenous, even segregated school experiences to the contemporary experiences of children whose counterparts in earlier generations either dropped out of school or were tracked into custodial nonacademic programs.”⁴³

Notwithstanding the handful of prominent alumni and scores of others who did indeed manage to use City College as a kind of ladder, the sociologist Sherry Gorelick argued that for more than one million New York Jews like David Levinsky at the turn of the twentieth century, “college was more a matter of mythology than experience.”⁴⁴ Later immigrant groups struggled to take their places within an institution at once expanded and vastly diminished. In an atmosphere often

⁴¹ Deborah Meier, “Where Do We Go From Here” *Education Week*, Bridging Differences blog entry posted Dec. 3, 2009, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2009/12/blog_for_dec_3_dear.html (accessed Mar. 1, 2010).

⁴² Meier describes the earlier graduation rate as being “way below 50 percent.” In an email to me, she attributed this figure to an unnamed Board of Education employee who looked it up for her at the time. I originally heard the story shortly after the events Meier describes from her colleague Norm Fruchter, who remembered the number as having been “in the low thirties,” a recollection he confirmed in a subsequent email. See Meier, “Where Do We Go”; Deborah Meier, email to author, Mar. 7, 2010; and Norm Fruchter, email to author, Feb. 3, 2010. Nathan Glazer, the Harvard sociologist and professor of education, who graduated from Monroe—and later City College—a few years after Howe, has repeatedly used the same dropout rate as exhibit A in his case for the decline of urban public high schools. Glazer, a meticulous and steadfastly fair-minded scholar, cites a 1941 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* that puts the school’s enrollment at over 10,000 and that year’s graduating class at 2,000. While I cannot fault the arithmetic, no one knowledgeable about public education finds it at all plausible that anywhere near eighty percent of entering freshmen could have come out the other end. Well into the 1930s fewer than half of all high-school-age Americans even *started* ninth grade, much less graduated. Urban high schools may indeed have declined, but the more salient fact is that whereas many high school dropouts then were able to get unionized jobs in factories and shipyards, to raise themselves up into the middle class and send their kids to college, today the lack of a high school diploma consigns dropouts to a permanent urban underclass. Glazer further elides the distinction between “academic,” “commercial,” and “vocational” diplomas of the era. That a scholar of his stature can be so blinded by the romance of his own school experiences is testament to my thesis that, in the area of education, memory is necessarily fraught with nostalgia and error. Sadly, the existing records of the Department of Education make it difficult to document dropout rates at individual high schools. See Nathan Glazer tk. And Samuel Lubell, “Biggest High School in the World” *Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 20, 1941, 18+; and David M. Ment, of the Municipal Archives, email to author, Dec. 29, 2010.

⁴³ Richard Rothstein, *The Way We Were: The Myth and Reality of America’s Student Achievement* (New York: Century Foundation Press, 1998), 24-25.

⁴⁴ Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 123.

fraught with condescension and hostility, they sought to shape that institution in their own image.

Among a broad spectrum of New Yorkers that included many older alumni, however

A mystique has been created and recreated and retold and used against those ethnic groups who now attend or seek to attend the City University. A never-never land has been imagined in which docile Jews, living in safe slums, gratefully, respectfully, obediently lap up the gifts of Anglo-Saxon culture to the admiration and love of their teachers. In this never-never land democratic and free institutions open gladly and bountifully to receive the hopes and passions of their eager entrants.⁴⁵

Gorelick was interested in probing the true social function of such institutions and the extent to which they lived up to the hype. I want to argue that the hype itself is an integral part of that function and to interrogate this process of creation, recreation, retelling, use and reuse—of re-membling. Probably no other institution of higher education, certainly not in the United States, has had a more pronounced golden age or a more precipitous decline—in prestige if not academic standards. In the early part of the century City College was transformed from a largely undistinguished, glorified high school and status symbol for families who could afford to delay their children's entry into the workforce into one of the most exclusive and fiercely competitive colleges in history.⁴⁶ A confluence of three factors precipitated this transformation: (1) the arrival of massive numbers of Jews, many of whose parents came from cities in Europe where they had attended school, celebrated the culture of the book, and who now recognized in the new city high schools and colleges one potential pathway to middle class jobs; (2) the high tuition and ethnic quotas at schools like Columbia, Princeton and Harvard that worked to restrict the number of qualified Jewish students and left even the brightest among them few alternatives; and finally (3) the crash of 1929, which ensured that, no matter how brilliant or resourceful you were in the

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁶ Richard Hofstadter notes that most ante-bellum "colleges" were no such thing and that people were generally satisfied with the name. Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1955), 224.

1930s, you weren't likely to find a decent job at seventeen—not even on the industrious Lower East Side. So you might as well keep yourself out of trouble by packing a lunch and going to college for the price of a nickel subway fare. With so many talented students vying for every seat, the publicly funded, tuition-free college had little choice but to continue raising its entrance requirements. While this might have been how City College came to produce so many Nobel prizewinners, it was not, finally, how it would come to be remembered as the Harvard of the poor. It would take a whole new set of conditions and newcomers' claims on the institution to engender that kind of "memory," a memory that served more to delegitimize those contemporary claims than to recover any authentic college or immigrant experience.

To return to Benedict Anderson, when individuals and societies alike undergo wrenching change—the metaphor he uses is puberty—they suffer "amnesias," failures to remember earlier states of consciousness—in this case, childhood. They are forced to rely on "documentary evidence": birth certificates, photographs, and report cards to maintain a sense of continuity with their pasts. Because one's past selves can no longer be "remembered," Anderson says they must be "narrated,"⁴⁷ which here I take to also mean "curated." The student uprisings of 1969 and dramatic broadening of access the following year constituted one such trauma and produced a concomitant process of selection and narration. The Open Admissions experiment of the 1970s that was at once so revolutionary and doomed to founder because of the dearth of funding and public support not only transformed City College's exclusive character and ethnic mix. It also reinvigorated a vibrant, though submerged, tradition of educating the merely qualified students, who, even when they failed to graduate, went on to form the core of New York City's middle class. This threatened to complicate—if not eclipse—the narrative of its intellectual elite. "To

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

embrace Open Admissions,” wrote Constancia Warren, “meant not only to relinquish, at least temporarily, the cherished status of a quasi-elite institution, but also to acknowledge a less than glorious past.”⁴⁸

A CULTURAL APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In considering City College’s institutional responses to foreign and potentially hostile student populations, it’s important to take into account the ritual dimension of education in particular and of communication more generally.⁴⁹ City College cannot be said to exist merely as a data transfer station where wisdom and skills are passed down the generations with varying degrees of efficacy. In a sense City College cannot be said to exist *at all*, in fact, except insofar as a vast army of citizens and workers and learners and teachers wake up every morning and choose to collaboratively reinvent it, as long as applicants solicit admittance, employers and graduate schools recognize degrees, legislators factor it into their budget appropriations, journalists rank it and report on it, and subway conductors call out the stop. This is not to deny the materiality of its stones and laboratories or its very concrete role in the larger processes of social reproduction. I merely want to assert, with James W. Carey and Raymond Williams, that culture has its own materiality, that it doesn’t only represent reality, it produces it.

Nor is this solely a metaphysical or epistemological, if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest kind of question. During the period I was researching and writing this dissertation I served for several years as a professor and director of the journalism program at City College, in which capacity I had the occasion to supervise a number of adjunct instructors who were also professional journalists. “What’s wrong with these kids?” one of them asked me one afternoon in the

⁴⁸ Constancia Warren, “Open Admissions at City College: The Implementation of an Egalitarian Reform in a Meritocratic Institution,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1984), 41-42.

⁴⁹ I am referring to James W. Carey’s classic distinction between the “transmission view” which emphasizes the sending of messages through space for the purposes of control and the “ritual view” that stresses “maintenance of society in time...[and] representation of shared beliefs.” Carey, “A Cultural Approach,” 13-23.

hallway. “I ask them, ‘What year are you in? Are you a junior? A sophomore?’ They don’t know!” I explained that at our college—like most colleges—the thirty percent of students who earned a bachelors degree at all took an average of six years to do so. “It’s not the students’ fault,” I told him. “We have yet to invent a language to describe their experience.”⁵⁰

This was perhaps a too-simple statement of the problem, however. It presumed that their experience had a life independent from our descriptions of it, descriptions that either succeeded or failed to “capture” that experience and that, in spite of everything we know about the effects of teacher expectations, had little or no shaping influences of their own. In the five years leading up to that conversation, the *New York Times*, our newspaper of record, published fifty-four percent more articles about Harvard alone than it did about all of the nation’s community colleges—where the majority of American students go for their post-secondary educations—put together. Such discrepancies point to what Carey called the “magic in our self-deceptions.”

We not only produce reality but we must likewise maintain what we have produced, for there are always new generations coming along for whom our productions are incipiently problematic and for whom reality must be regenerated and made authoritative. Reality must be repaired, for it consistently breaks down... Finally, we must, often with fear and regret, toss away our authoritative representations of reality and begin to build the world anew.⁵¹

Such a breakdown appears in *The Rise of David Levinsky* when the immigrant hero asks his American-born teacher “the real difference” between “I wrote” and “I have written,” and the most he can offer is a tautological “the perfect refers to what was, while the imperfect means something that has been.” Levinsky concludes that his teacher is “a blockhead...

⁵⁰ Some students would no doubt be similarly nonplussed to discover that a considerable number of their professors have day jobs that require doing something other than teaching, conducting research, or, God forbid, holding office hours and attending faculty meetings, and that they earn less discharging their teaching duties, sometimes less than they would flipping hamburgers or stocking drugstore shelves.

⁵¹ Carey, “A Cultural Approach,” 30.

The trouble with him was that he pictured the working of a foreigner's mind, with regard to English, as that of his own. It did not occur to him that people born to speak another language were guided by another language logic, so to say, and that in order to reach my understanding he would have to impart his ideas in [those] terms.⁵²

A half century later, Open Admissions's remedial writing guru, Mina Shaughnessy, described the "baffled" incomprehension of teachers forced to ask themselves, "How is it that these young men and women whom I have personally admitted to the community of learners cannot learn these simple things?" Slowly, she wrote, it dawned on them that the educational process wasn't as simple as they had imagined and that the students' errors had a complex logic all their own.⁵³

The *New York Times*'s distorted portrait of American higher education necessarily runs up against such harsh realities from time to time, too, and requires its own maintenance and repair. For Carey, communication was not only symbolic, but also a social process, one that encompassed the use of a plethora of cultural forms including "art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, [and] mythology" to create, maintain, repair and transform reality.⁵⁴ To this list I would add education. Understanding education as one more of what Raymond Williams called society's "systems of learning and communication" raises a further difficulty, however.⁵⁵ For in so treating City College and its construction in the popular imagination, we are inevitably using one form of communication to account for and inform others.⁵⁶ The messiness of that undertaking extends in more than one direction and well beyond the analytical project that is this dissertation. The City College of New York had, for example, a formidable influence in molding

⁵² Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 134.

⁵³ Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 27, no. 3. (Oct. 1976): 236.

⁵⁴ Carey, "A Cultural Approach" 30.

⁵⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 133.

⁵⁶ Carey, "A Cultural Approach," 31. In Carey's formulation we draw on existing forms and, rather than revealing some Platonic essence, "teach what we only mean to display."

the assumptions and methodological toolboxes of several generations of professional communicators and opinion leaders. To choose just one illustration, Lawrence Cremin, one of the most influential historians of American education of the twentieth century, who as president of Columbia Teachers College was also responsible for training tens of thousands of schoolteachers, graduated from Townsend Harris High School, the sub-freshman division of City College, at fifteen and then went on to earn his bachelor's degree there. With the exception of his post-graduate work, in other words, most of Cremin's actual experience of what it meant to go to school he got on City College's two campuses.

Journalists ranging from the muckraking critic of American institutions, Upton Sinclair, to *New York Times* education editors, city editors, labor editors, letters editors, and executive editors, as well as to sportswriters and editors at the *New York Post* and *Daily News* and several of Edward R. Murrow's "boys" all spent their college years at City.⁵⁷ The labor leader A. Philip Randolph founded the Harlem Renaissance journal *The Messenger* while he was a student there and went on to be the intellectual author of the 1963 march on Washington. Lyricists Ira Gershwin and Yip Harburg met and worked on the school paper at Townsend Harris and together continued on at City. Lewis Mumford, the writer who did so much to shape how we think about cities, was a graduate, as were the famous New York Intellectuals so important to postwar urban policy and the theorists and engineers who first got computers talking to one another and laid the groundwork for what we today know as the Internet.⁵⁸ And this list doesn't

⁵⁷ I refer respectively to Fred Hechinger, Arthur Gelb, A.H. Raskin, Kalman Siegel, A.M. Rosenthal, Sid Friedlander, Ike Gellis, Edward Kosner, Marvin Kalb, Daniel Schorr, and David F. Schoenbrun.

⁵⁸ Here I am referring to Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol. The Internet pioneers were Robert E. Kahn and Leonard Kleinrock. But my all-time favorites include social psychologist Leon Festinger, who created the theory of cognitive dissonance and contributed to social network theory by studying the way college freshman living in dormitories befriend one another based on "propinquity" (an experience he missed out on as a Jew in inter-war New York City) and journalist Ralph Ginzburg who was convicted of violating federal obscenity

even include the Nobel prizewinning scientists, New York City mayors, U.S. Supreme Court Justices, Senators, and Secretaries of State, or the developer of the Polio vaccine, all of whom, not having covered campus uprisings, founded journals of opinion or invented packet-switching technologies, one might be tempted argue were tangential to the interwoven processes of communication.⁵⁹ Though this kind of alumni influence may well be fading, behind these and other luminaries who are ritually trotted out whenever the conversation turns to City College, stand many thousands of anonymous public school teachers, union organizers, social workers, beat reporters, and other graduates, the product of whose labors consists almost entirely of what other people think and say.⁶⁰

WAYS OF SEEING: RAYMOND WILLIAMS & ‘THE MASSES’

The phrases “Cold War” and “post-industrial society” were coined by Bernard Baruch (CCNY 1889) and Daniel Bell (CCNY 1938) respectively, and I would not be the first suggest that this type of formulation often serves as more than a helpful way of understanding current events, that it can so profoundly order and proscribe our thinking as to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In just this way, through our language, emphases, and our social practices, we have come to cleave schools from learning and communication and to relegate them to Williams’s systems of maintenance, decision, and control. While it’s possible to think of education as vocational training, and hence a subset of economics, or as social, a dimension of politics, both of these fail to account for core elements that transcend political and economic relations.⁶¹ The terms in which we cast these matters are ultimately constitutive of the learning and

laws in 1963 for sending his quarterly journal, *Eros*, through the mails. Julius Rosenberg was another City College graduate convicted of transmitting inappropriate messages, of course.

⁵⁹ City College has trained ten Nobel laureates, Mayors Abraham Beame and Edward I. Koch, Justice Felix Frankfurter, Senators Robert F. Wagner and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell, and Jonas Salk, whose vaccine eradicated Polio in the 1950s.

⁶⁰ Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 177.

⁶¹ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 133-34.

communications we get. Children are thought of as raw material, schools as factories, diplomas as a tool of the market. “Because we have looked at education principally in terms of its potential for economics and politics,” wrote Carey, “we have turned it into a form of citizenship, professionalism and consumerism, and increasingly therapy.”⁶²

That is one consequence of our contingent ways of seeing schooling in America. A related and equally problematic tendency involves social class and begins with what in England were once known as “the scholarship boys,” or in the U.S. as “affirmative action babies.” The legendary City College philosophy professor Morris Raphael Cohen wrote approvingly of the school’s willingness “to ignore or forgive my defects in the social graces, as well as the unorthodoxy of many of my views” during his own days as an undergraduate there at the end of the nineteenth century. “That the college tolerated me became, to me, a symbol of liberalism in education.”⁶³ For a kid like Cohen, whose father sold seltzer in a Lower East Side poolroom, college seemed to offer a clear choice between assimilating into middle class culture and remaining on its destitute fringe.⁶⁴

For Raymond Williams, the son of a Welsh railroad signalman, the lonely journey to resolutely upper-class Cambridge University in the 1930s was more ambiguous, at once a great liberation and, according to Carey, himself the university-trained product of a family of New England mill workers,

It was obvious in every manner of dress and deportment and outlook, accent, tone, cultivation that one doesn’t belong there. That one is the intruder into a world where [one’s people have] never appeared before. And [one] tries to adjust to an

⁶² Carey, “A Cultural Approach” 34.

⁶³ Morris Raphael Cohen, *A Dreamer’s Journey* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 90.

⁶⁴ This formulation belongs to Raymond Williams, who was speaking of his own generation in England. See Raymond Williams, “The Culture of Politics,” *The Nation*, Jan. 3, 1959, 11.

environment which, even if not designed to be hostile, inevitably is experienced as a kind of hostility.⁶⁵

Through this baptism of fire as well as in the crucible of his subsequent fifteen years as an Oxford don teaching adult education classes to manual laborers, Williams forged a thoroughgoing critique of what he called the culture of the tea shop and its self-serving formulas for seeing people like him and his students as “masses,” their education as “ladders” to “opportunity” and training for public “service.”

Williams was deeply suspicious of two alarming tendencies among postwar British intellectuals. The first, epitomized by his teacher F.R. Leavis, set its hopes for rescuing civilization upon “a cultivated minority” over and against “a ‘decreated’ mass” with an attendant nostalgia for “a wholly organic and satisfying past set against a disintegrated and dissatisfying present.”⁶⁶ The second, an imprecise, Marxist interpretation of history, reduced all culture and social relations to a struggle between classes, to base and superstructure. Its analysis depended on the existence of uniformly ignorant, exploited “masses.”⁶⁷ Though sympathetic to aspects of both, Williams felt that in equal measure these views distorted and cheapened actual, lived experience. Like all words, “mass” arose out of a particular set of historical circumstances: the literal massing of populations in industrial towns and of workers in factories as well as out of the development of an organized working “class” (yet another semantic byproduct of the industrial revolution). Finally, new technologies of communication kept senders and receivers at an unprecedented remove from one another and further encouraged their interpretation as faceless

⁶⁵ James W. Carey, “British Cultural Studies” (lecture to the Seminar on The History and Literature of Communications Research, Columbia University, Dec. 2002).

⁶⁶ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 263.

⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary” *The Raymond Williams Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 14.

and formless.⁶⁸ In this brave new world,

much of the old social organization broke down and it became a matter of difficult personal experience that we were constantly seeing people we did not know, and it was tempting to mass them as “the others” in our minds...Masses became a new word for mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond one.⁶⁹

But Williams observed that this appealing formula, this collective image failed to correspond to anyone he knew personally or to be of much use in understanding his own or his neighbors’ problems. “There are, in fact, no masses,” he concluded, “only ways of seeing people as masses.”⁷⁰ And the so-called “public” was just a more polite version of the same thing.⁷¹

Williams also rejected arguments that expanded access to literacy and cultural products in England was somehow wasteful and destructive, that the new masses were unfit to carry on our traditions or to govern themselves without the expert guidance of an aristocracy of talent. The same criticisms have been leveled against City College and its perennial efforts to broaden or restrict its constituency. “Whether the highest education can be given to the masses,” was among the first enigmas to occupy the attention of the school’s leaders in 1849, and it has continued to nag at them ever since.⁷² For Williams this was never even a question. Education was neither more nor less than “the process of giving to ordinary members of society its full and common meanings, and the skills that will enable them to amend these meanings in the light of their personal and common experience.”⁷³ Many of the most imposing barriers to this process existed in the mind, he wrote: in the notions that only some fixed proportion of the populace was college material, that universities served primarily for training supervisors or useful citizens, for

⁶⁸ Williams, *Culture & Society*, 297-300 ; and “Culture Is Ordinary.”

⁶⁹ Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” 18.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Culture & Society*, 300.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 315.

⁷² Horace Webster, “Presidential Address” in Rudy, 29.

⁷³ Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” 22.

instilling a spirit of “service,” or for providing a ladder by which an individual might rise.

The ladder, long one of predominant metaphors applied to City College, was something Williams saw as “a perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because, while undoubtedly it offers the opportunity to climb, it is a device which can only be used individually: you go up the ladder alone.” Drawing from personal experience, he wrote:

Many indeed have scrambled up, and gone off to play on the other side; many have tried to climb and failed. Judged in each particular case, it seems obviously right that a working man, or the child of a working-class family, should be enabled to fit himself for different kinds of work, corresponding to his ability.⁷⁴

But in the end Williams scorned the ladder for two reasons: 1) like the idea of service, it undermines the superior ethic of solidarity and mutual betterment with which he had been raised, what he would later call “the common highway,”⁷⁵ and 2) “it sweetens the poison of hierarchy...offering the hierarchy of merit as a thing different in kind from the hierarchy of money or of birth.” A scholarship boy such as he had nothing to apologize for “in either direction,” he wrote, but neither should he be expected—as he most certainly was—“to agree that such an opportunity constitutes a sufficient educational reform.” This is a distinction he warned “the growing number who have had the ladder stamped on their brows” to get straight once and for all.⁷⁶ For Williams, the idea of “the masses” or examination of discrete behaviors of a “public” was a cheap and limiting substitute for a broader vision of a community working in concert to raise up all of its members.⁷⁷

SCHOOLING & SOCIAL COHESION IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Williams and the other pioneers of British cultural studies were working-class kids who

⁷⁴ Williams, *Culture & Society*, 331.

⁷⁵ “We should emphasize not the ladder but the common highway for every man’s ignorance diminishes me, and every man’s skill is a gain of common breath.” Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 22.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 331.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 307 and 319-20.

began their teaching careers in adult education classrooms the likes of which have never existed in the United States. They were products of a particular culture who focused their analysis on a particular literary tradition and forged it in the encounter with a particular generation of working-class British students; and they must be understood primarily in those terms.⁷⁸ If their analysis invites certain comparisons, it is equally vital that we recognize the important differences between the two societies. Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel have noted, for instance, the paradoxical role of American schools in reproducing class privilege:

It is difficult...to miss the social-class implications of the traditional division of British secondary education into secondary modern technical, grammar, and “public” schools; the class implications of such a system are relatively obvious. In comparison, the American educational system conveys a strikingly democratic appearance, and its contribution to the transmission of inequality from generation to generation is, accordingly, rather opaque. As a general proposition, it seems likely that the more opaque the mode of transmitting inequalities, the more effective it is likely to be in legitimating these inequalities.⁷⁹

As a consequence of this opacity, America public schools have borne a greater symbolic burden as ladders and have at various times been the focus of exaggerated claims about their efficacy as engines of widespread social mobility. In this context, Colin Greer suggested that they are perhaps best understood as a “mechanism that holds a diverse, highly competitive society together.”⁸⁰ Indeed, for Thomas Jefferson, national systems of public higher education, of roads and canals, and of a free press were meant to serve as the three primary instruments for accomplishing precisely that, albeit not in the sense of operating as metaphors or master

⁷⁸ I am indebted to James Carey for this note of caution.

⁷⁹ Steven Brint & Jerome Karabel, *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 224.

⁸⁰ Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 153.

narratives.⁸¹

In our time, the narratives have come to serve important functions not only in constructing an image of a unitary nation moving, in Anderson's formulation, "through homogenous empty time," but also in forming an understanding of one's own particular place within that nation, in effect undermining, when not altogether shattering, its unity.⁸² In this regard, critics have pointed to the corrosive resilience of the Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches myth as emblematic of American society's complex and "unrelenting" "ideological apparatus":

How many times a day does the message get conveyed on the airwaves, in the classrooms, in public celebrations of the American Way? How many people, young and old, mostly poor, are injured each of these days by their sense of personal failure if they have not moved significantly beyond the social position of their parents?

...How is it that grand lies (such as those relating to divine rights, free markets, fair or equal opportunity, and communities of scholars) survive and flourish in the age of the information superhighway?⁸³

Such hegemonic messages and lies are our cultural equivalent of the glaring structural barriers that exist elsewhere in the world and are no less intractable for being harder to spot. Education scholar Mike Rose, yet another working-class kid who beat the odds and for years toiled in the remedial back rooms of academe, argued that from a very young age, American students slowly internalize others' judgments about their abilities and prospects such that

[they] incorporate a stratifying regulator as powerful as the overt institutional gatekeepers that, in other societies, determine who goes where in the educational

⁸¹ Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 11. Perhaps more so than in Britain, the media have been entrusted to the market while education and roads have not.

⁸² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

⁸³ Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, eds. *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*, 2nd. ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 110 & 299. These quotations come from an academic study in which the informants are not named. It is not clear, in fact, that the first and second paragraphs here necessarily come from the same person.

system. There is no need for the elitist protection of quotas and exclusionary exams when a kid announces that he just wants to be average.⁸⁴

UNRAVELING SYSTEMS OF MEANING

One of the key contentions of this study is that like individual students, institutions also internalize outside judgments about them and begin to alternately act the part or define themselves in active opposition, adding still another layer of messages and lies to the mix. Even manufactured crises, in other words, can have demonstrable consequences for teaching and learning. In her history of the New York City public schools, Diane Ravitch wrote that, beyond their role in recording events and for all their obvious limitations as primary sources,

What I found remarkable was that the news stories themselves tended to become events which people reacted to, regardless of accuracy. Many participants in unfolding crises received their information from newspaper accounts, which made them more significant than they would be if they were simply a record. For this reason, I found the tone and content of newspaper coverage to be an important historical sequence in itself.⁸⁵

Nowhere is this truer than at City College whose reputation is constantly being held up to public scrutiny and where so much is often at stake. Richard Rothstein describes a related phenomenon whereby “newspapers, magazines, television, and business, political and academic leaders all insist that the schools are deteriorating. Swayed by this commentary, the public concludes likewise. The same experts then report growing dissatisfaction with public schools as evidence for their own claims.”⁸⁶

This complex interplay between images of the college in the press and the fragile sense of the institution that students, professors, and administrators gather each day to conjure and contest

⁸⁴ Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggle to Educate America's Underprepared* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 225.

⁸⁵ Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 429.

⁸⁶ Rothstein, *The Way We Were*, 29.

is as significant as it can be hard to grasp. Patricia Mann has noted the difficulty of “disentangling” the meaning of events at City College “as media events from their meaning within the public sphere of CCNY.”⁸⁷ And while it is undoubtedly useful to form a picture for ourselves of these interlocking spheres, it’s also debatable whether such a disentangling is even entirely possible. In order to burrow into such intricate processes, it is, in any event, not enough to merely isolate and analyze the rhetorical strategies or to find some artificial and expedient way of parsing and quantifying their reception. One must, as the cultural historian Robert Darnton has written, “discover the social dimension of thought and tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again...”⁸⁸ To do this:

Anthropologists have found that the best points of entry in an attempt to penetrate an alien culture can be those where it seems most opaque. When you realize that you are not getting something—a joke, a proverb, a ceremony—that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it.⁸⁹

‘UMBRELLA ROBINSON’ & HIS ‘GUTTERSNIPES’ GRIPE

Taking a cue from Darnton, and by way of introduction to my overall method, I would like to briefly interrogate a single, unintended joke of October 9, 1934 to see what it can teach us about the system of meanings during City College’s fabled golden age. On that date the college president, Frederick B. Robinson, addressed a convocation in the Great Hall welcoming a delegation of sixteen university students visiting from fascist Italy. Robinson was a well-known petty tyrant who had repeatedly suppressed publication of campus newspapers, suspended and

⁸⁷ Patricia S. Mann, “Unifying Discourse: City College as a Post-modern Public Sphere” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 95.

⁸⁸ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 4.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 78.

dismissed dozens of students and faculty on the flimsiest of pretexts, called police onto the campus, and most famously charged a gathering of peaceful student protesters with his umbrella, beating them about the head and shoulders before being subdued. He nonetheless enjoyed the continuing support of the business leaders and Tammany Hall appointees to the Board of Higher Education and the complicity of a substantial number of the faculty (who had no tenure protections). In spite of widespread opposition in the student community, Robinson had pressed ahead with plans to welcome the fascist delegation and now, as he rose to speak, faced a hissing, heckling crowd.

“Guttersnipes!” he exclaimed in frustration. “Your conduct is no better than guttersnipes.” The students were reportedly astonished by this outburst, but several couldn’t contain their laughter either.⁹⁰ Why “guttersnipes” and why were they laughing?

Let’s begin with the word itself. To modern ears, guttersnipe sounds peculiarly sneering and Victorian and indeed, its ornithological origins notwithstanding, the term wasn’t much older than Robinson himself. It ostensibly referred to a Dickensian street urchin and had a strong taint of both linguistic and moral corruption. But according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word’s first recorded use was in a pseudonymous 1856 novel to describe a ragged “class of beings in New York” with no discernible past who would smoke your cigarette butts, run errands for you, and pocket the change.⁹¹ In the American idiom it soon came to refer alternately to the unlicensed curbside stockbrokers who congregated outside the Wall Street exchange and to a

⁹⁰ James A. Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus* (1935; repr. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1973), 391.

⁹¹ Knight Russ Ockside, M.D. and Q.K. Philander Doesticks, *The History and Records of the Elephant Club: Compiled From Authentic Documents Now in the Possession of the Zoological Society* (New York: Livermore and Rudd, 1856), 57-58.

type of small handbill pasted onto curbstones.⁹² Mark Twain used the word ironically (“noble savages, illustrious guttersnipes”⁹³), but it is more likely that the young Robinson would have come across it in the popular adventure stories of Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells. Stevenson applied the epithet as a nickname for one of a stable of “low-born” “out-islander” “wenches” who serviced merchant ships in the South Sea Islands. “You may find her image in the slums of any city,” he explained, “the same lean, dark-eyed, eager, vulgar face, the same sudden, hoarse guffaws, the same forward and yet anxious manner, as with a tail of an eye on the policeman.”⁹⁴

Use of the word in books and periodical literature exploded while Robinson was a City College student at the turn of the century and reached its apogee during his presidency, once the flow of poor Jews and other immigrant youth had been staunched.⁹⁵ As a longtime speech teacher involved in the project of assimilating those immigrants and as the author of a 1915 textbook on *Effective Public Speaking*, Robinson would almost certainly have encountered the word as a description of speakers who bastardize the King’s English or of slang words themselves, which his colleagues condescendingly classified as “*gamins* or guttersnipes.”⁹⁶ By the time the term escaped his lips, it was common in spoken parlance: “the guttersnipe talk of a

⁹² *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Guttersnipe,” <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/82737?redirectedFrom=guttersnipe#> (accessed Feb. 18, 2011).

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Tales of the South Seas* (1896; repr. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 183.

⁹⁵ I base this assessment on Google’s new Books Ngram Viewer tool, which quantifies the incidence of particular phrases across hundreds of thousands of books. http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=guttersnipe&year_start=1860&year_end=2000&corpus=5&smoothing=3 (accessed 13 Feb. 2011).

⁹⁶ William Freeman, *Plain English: a Book for Those Who Seek a More Intimate Acquaintance With Their Own Language* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1939), 69. The book was edited for American readers by Blanche Colton Williams, head of the English department at New York’s Hunter College, with whom Robinson would likely have had some acquaintance.

hoodlum,”⁹⁷ “the guttersnipe press,”⁹⁸ and “the contemptible [student] guttersnipes who sought inspiration in liquor instead of the milk of human kindness.”⁹⁹

But if those were the meanings of the word with which Robinson would have been acquainted, they say nothing of the speaker himself, the particular setting or what moved him to utter it. The Brooklyn-born educator was the first City College alumnus to be named president. He told the *New York Times* of his pride in serving alongside professors who had taught him as a boy as well as other, younger faculty who he was confident “will transmit the college to their successors ‘not only no less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to them.’” This variation on the Ephebic Oath that he and his classmates had sworn when they graduated in 1904 at once emphasized the values of continuity and service and elevated the college to something of a polity in its own right.¹⁰⁰ Upon his being formally installed in the post,¹⁰¹ the *Times* editorialized that this “son of the city” had “the impress of [the college’s] rigorous discipline...[and is] intuitively possessed of its traditions and well acquainted with its machinery.”¹⁰² They neglected to comment on his vision.

Fifteen years of the city’s continuous teaching often transforms even a child of foreign birth into a new nature, fitted for leadership in this city. What she has done in training one of her own native-born children for such an office is, however, an occasion for special pride. Dr. ROBINSON enters upon his

⁹⁷ Fred D. Pasley, *Al Capone: The Biography of a Self-Made-Man*, (1930; repr. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 138.

⁹⁸ Walter Hines Page, *The World’s Work*, vol. 60 (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1931).

⁹⁹ Henry Wales, “Co-Ed’s Capers on World U. Tour Stir Faculty” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 24, 1929, 3. These were the words of a frustrated college president who had forgiven the youthful transgressions of a group of students, who then showed their ingratitude by complaining about the quality of academic administration.

¹⁰⁰ “Robinson Elected City College Head,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1927, 9.

¹⁰¹ Robinson had already served as acting president off-and-on for some time.

¹⁰² “A Son of the City” editorial, *New York Times*, May 7, 1928, 22.

Presidency of the city's own college with such good wishes as no stranger could have...¹⁰³

Such references to the traditions and strict discipline of an earlier era, to children “of foreign birth” and undeserving “strangers” were not benign. They expressed the prejudices of the *Times*'s affluent readership and German Jewish owners at a moment of intense anti-immigrant—not to mention anti-Semitic—sentiment. New York's city fathers were scarcely immune to the civic equivalent of the so-called “City College fear” taking hold on campuses like Columbia and Harvard, namely that the sheer numbers of Jews would transform the character of their institutions and destroy their fragile sense of “unity.”¹⁰⁴ If anyone had the background to smooth out the rough edges of this alien hoi polloi, to neutralize and make loyal Americans out of them, it appeared to be Frederick B. Robinson.

Within the college, Robinson had made his name as a highly competent, if heavy-handed bureaucrat introducing modern business methods, mostly around the margins. He served as director of the school's expanding evening session and launched a new, eight-week summer semester, a vocational division, and a pilot program training students for the civil service. A PhD economist, he eventually became dean of the college's downtown school of business and presided over its expansion and new construction.¹⁰⁵

But for all his accomplishments developing these ancillary, utilitarian programs and meting out discipline, he was thoroughly undistinguished as a scholar and was ill suited for presiding over the college's liberal center during a period of unprecedented intellectual and political ferment. One alumnus later recalled then-Professor Robinson debating the Marxist

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Harry Starr, “The Affair at Harvard: What the Students Did” *The Menorah Journal* 8 (1922), 266, quoted in Helen Lefkowitz-Horowitz, *College Life: Undergraduate Cultures From the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 77; William T. Ham, “Harvard Student Opinion on the Jewish Question,” *The Nation*. Sept. 6, 1922, 225.

¹⁰⁵ Rudy, 380.

economist Scott Nearing on the comparative benefits of capitalism and socialism for workers before a crowd of 3,000 students and faculty in the same hall where he would later face the “guttersnipes”: “Nearing had the audience with him,” he said, “and ‘mopped the floor’ with Robinson.”¹⁰⁶

PINK PARASOLS & THE FORCE OF WORKING CLASS INSTITUTIONS

In seeking to recover the peculiar resonance of Robinson’s remark, we turn, finally, to his audience on that fateful day eight years and one economic cataclysm after Scott Nearing “mopped the floor” with him. As we’ve already seen, though the faculty and administration remained largely unchanged, massive European immigration together with the onset of the Great Depression five years earlier had pushed the academic level of the student body into the stratosphere. Four of the ten twentieth-century Nobel prizewinners who would pass through City College were enrolled there that semester, as were Alfred Kazin and several of the New York Intellectuals. Jonas Salk and yet another future Nobel laureate had only just recently graduated.

Most of the teaching was nevertheless “mediocre,” as Irving Howe, who arrived two years later, recalled it. “Many of the [English] professors were drained out, coasting along on memory and decayed notes; some never had much to give...Our [social science] professors could not satisfy our hunger for meaning.”¹⁰⁷ Whenever he ducked out of class as soon as the roll was called to return to some more stimulating argument going on in the lunchroom alcoves, whenever he composed a new political pamphlet to mimeograph—his equivalent of the 300-word freshman essay—Howe was following a tradition that extended back to the 1920s.

It is something of a paradox that under Robinson’s iron hand and the tutelage of such an

¹⁰⁶ Unidentified CCNY alumnus quoted in Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 165.

¹⁰⁷ Irving Howe, *Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982) 63-64.

uninspiring faculty, City College should have produced arguably the most vibrant representational public sphere of any institution of higher learning in history. Not only were dozens of “social problems” and “liberal” clubs and student councils meeting day and night and sending fact-finding delegations off to the Kentucky coalfields, but each organization seemed to publish its own leaflets and reports to supplement the regular campus newspapers, humor magazines, and literary journals. When Robinson exercised prior restraint on their publication, underground papers sprang up with students hawking them in the surrounding streets and their classmates actually *paid* for them with their Depression-era lunch money. When he proposed charging tuition, dismissed outspoken students and popular professors or banned student clubs from meeting on campus, they would organize protest rallies thousands strong, general strikes, colorful “mock trials,” trips to City Hall, and, after their unfortunate run-in with the business end of the president’s umbrella, parades of thousands carrying pink parasols.¹⁰⁸

Where Robinson was weak, in other words, the students were strong: intellectually, spiritually, and imaginatively. They built their own institutions. History was on their side and well they knew it. “To them the menace of fascism in America looms very close,” wrote the dean charged with investigating the events of October 9, 1934. “They cannot afford to wait, they feel, until the Fascist movement has grown stronger, but must combat its every manifestation.”

We are dealing with forces beyond our control that spring from the general economic and social conditions of our time. We can no more deter the pulsating life of the city in which we are situated from penetrating our walls than we can prevent the blowing of the wind or the falling of the rain.¹⁰⁹

When Frederick Robinson stood in the Great Hall before his Italian guests and scolded

¹⁰⁸ *New York American*, June 7, 1933. For fuller descriptions of these and other events see Oakley Johnson, “Campus Battles for Freedom in the Thirties” *Centennial Review* 14 (1970), 350-364; Weschler, *Revolt on the Campus*, 373-396; and Rudy, *The College of the City*, 379-432.

¹⁰⁹ Morton Gottschall in *Minutes of the General Faculty, C.C.N.Y.*, vol. 7, Nov. 13, 1934.

the students for behaving like “guttersnipes,” in other words, he was like a man trying to beat back the wind with a feather duster. His arsenal largely exhausted,¹¹⁰ Robinson was now appealing to them on a basis that was not only absurdly anachronistic but perversely moral: You are supposed to be the *deserving* poor, he was reminding them, aspiring *gentlemen*. Don’t throw all that away by revealing your true nature, your base instincts—not in front of *company*. Had his guttersnipe epithet been a tad less shrill or condescending, this appeal to good manners might have sounded merely pathetic in its cluelessness. But gathered there in the very pit of the Great Depression surrounded by mounting intolerance and the threat of world war, these students faced an unspeakably bleak and menacing future. With rare exceptions, Robinson and his colleagues had little of value to offer them; the students could rely only on one another and *their own* traditions to guide them. In that context such bombast was just plain laughable.

The students permitted Robinson to finish his address, after which the president of the student council took the podium and said that while he intended no discourtesy to “our guests” he wished to extend greetings to the “tricked and enslaved” students of Italy.¹¹¹ That was as far as he got before being clobbered by Robinson’s goons. An all-out riot then ensued, and to raise money for the defense of their twenty-one expelled comrades and the disbanded student council, students sold “I am a Guttersnipe. I Fight Fascism” buttons by the hundreds. “It became a kind of fad to wear them,” one student activist later recalled. “The atmosphere of that time is called up with perfect clarity when I think of those buttons.”¹¹²

In the ongoing saga of the pink parasols and the guttersnipes buttons we can begin to

¹¹⁰ Robinson had denied the anti-fascist students permission to rally around the flagpole on the other side of Convent Ave. or to make a statement at the ceremony, which left them no recourse but civil disobedience.

¹¹¹ Rudy, *The College of the City*, 421.

¹¹² Milton Hindus, “Politics—A Chapter from: The Confessions of a Young Jew,” *Twice-a-Year* 16/17 (1948 *Art & Action*, Tenth Anniversary Issue), 375.

glimpse not only Darnton's "system of meanings," but also Raymond Williams's crucial distinction between institutions like City College that are produced *for* working people by others—"often for conscious political or commercial advantage"—and the ones they create themselves.¹¹³ For Williams, working-class culture was primarily located not in artifacts like paintings, statues, or literary texts but in collective institutions like churches, trade unions, newsletters, and political parties—it was social, rather than individual. And it was the institutions themselves that represented their singular achievements, their "descriptions of the world embedded in material form."¹¹⁴

Clearly City College had never been such an institution. And yet, because Jewish, working-class students now made up well over eighty percent of the student population, they formed what Sherry Gorelick has called (with apologies to Williams) "a critical mass," one that

offered some protection from the ideological confusion and schizophrenia that assaults the few token students at elite colleges. No matter how oppressively the official curriculum cloaks them with invisibility or batters them with insults, there is some safety in numbers. This is the value of consensual validation: if many are uncomfortable, they cannot *all* be crazy.¹¹⁵

Given this kind of psychic cover, they were able to laugh it off when the old man called them guttersnipes and to go on building their own institutions within and around and in creative tension with the larger college. Like Williams's British working class, these students "never sought to destroy" the institutions that we traditionally think of as housing learning and culture, but rather "pressed for their extension, for their wider social recognition, and, in our own time, for the application of a large part of our material resources to their maintenance and

¹¹³ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 307.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, 327 and Carey, "British Cultural Studies."

¹¹⁵ Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 179; emphasis in original.

development.”¹¹⁶ If the higher learning was somehow cheapened or degraded, in other words, it was not their doing.

‘THE DRAMATURGICAL NATURE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE’

Earlier I mentioned the need to attend to the ritual dimension of education, a reference to Carey’s invitation to recover an ancient, religiously based view of communication, one that stresses not transmission but affirmation—not the sermon but the prayer.¹¹⁷ The citizens of ancient Athens didn’t attend a performance of *Oedipus at Colonus* in order to discover how it turned out in the end. Nor were the Athenian youth or the graduates of City College who came later exchanging messages when they swore the ritual Ephebic Oath to leave their respective cities better than they found them.¹¹⁸ For Carey, this focus extended to every facet of culture:

[It] will, for example, view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. Moreover, as readers make their way through the paper, they engage in a continual shift of roles or of dramatic focus. A story on the monetary crisis salutes them as American patriots fighting those ancient enemies Germany and Japan; a story on the meeting of a women’s political caucus casts them into the liberation movement as supporter or opponent; a tale of violence on the campus evokes their class antagonisms and resentments. The model here is not that of information acquisition, though such acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins the world of contending forces as an observer at a play.¹¹⁹

I want to extend this metaphor even further, to the realm of education and use it to interrogate our peculiar ways of conceptualizing learning solely as an inert product of the

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 327-328.

¹¹⁷ One definition says that every prayer contains within it its own answer. See James P. Carse, *The Silence of God: Meditations on Prayer* (New York: Scribner, 1985).

¹¹⁸ Of course, more recent cohorts may indeed have been exchanging text messages at the same time.

¹¹⁹ Carey, “A Cultural Approach,” 20-21.

market. “Only in education,” wrote John Dewey a century ago, “never in the life of the farmer, sailor, merchant, physician, or laboratory experimenter, does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing.”¹²⁰ For Dewey, the aims, beliefs, aspirations and knowledge that a community holds in common “cannot be passed physically from one to another like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces.”¹²¹

Accordingly, I have chosen to examine City College not as a storehouse or a transfer station, but, following Carey, as a public stage, “an arena of dramatic forces and action...[that] invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it.”¹²² It happens that a great many people have taken up this invitation where the college was concerned and have been swept up in the drama. The Lewisohn Stadium Concerts and public programs in the Great Hall serve as an apt metaphor for this phenomenon; they invite the citizens onto the campus and engage their collective passions. As with all great theater, the play is enfolded in a larger social drama, and what the audience brings to it determines both the quality of the performances and the action itself. To paraphrase the architect Louis Kahn, the university is where our aspirations take shape; the marketplace serves our material needs. Between the two lies the forum, where both our aspirations and our needs find expression.¹²³

Just before he won his third screenwriting Academy Award, this one for the film *Network*, the great American dramatist and City College graduate Paddy Chayevsky confessed that he, too, had seen this dramatic potential in his alma mater but had ultimately thrown up his

¹²⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; repr. New York: MacMillan, 1930), 218.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 5.

¹²² Carey, “A Cultural Approach,” 21.

¹²³ Romaldo Giurgola and Jaimini Mehta, *Louis I. Kahn* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1975), 109. It is striking to consider this framework in light of 1) Jürgen Habermas’s analysis of the interpenetration of the private and public spheres and 2) the professionalization of knowledge and corporatization of the university.

hands:

When the students set those buildings on fire at the outset of open admissions, I went to the campus with a photographer. In the evening. Incognito. Thousands of black, Hispanic, and white radicals storming the gates, demanding to enter. I wanted to do a script about open admissions, but it was too much. It was surreal. The subject needs a modern Shakespeare. So I dropped the project. It was more than I could understand.¹²⁴

More than once in the course of my research, I've come close to reaching the same conclusion. But my task here is more modest in both scope and ambition than I suspect was Chayevsky's. In the first place, I don't pretend to *create* anything, merely to locate the inherent drama and to interrogate some of its underlying dynamics. As with the "guttersnipe" incident discussed earlier, I have chosen a handful of public spectacles for which City College has served as the principle stage.

All have involved scandal, public shaming, and excommunication, a class of rituals that, while they certainly have the potential to strengthen communities and their sense of shared values, have, in practice, tended to do just the opposite. Scandals are a symptom of what the sociologist Ari Adut calls, "the dramaturgical nature of the public sphere."¹²⁵ In order to qualify as scandals, they require not only the contravention of social norms but, crucially, publicity. As we shall see, scandals often focus on heretical speech acts that transgress the boundaries of acceptable discourse. But in at least two important ways they are themselves communicative in nature. Like lynchings, they send a powerful message and serve as a mechanism of social

¹²⁴ Paddy Chayevsky, quoted in Theodore L. Gross, *The Rise of Roosevelt University: Presidential Reflections* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois UP, 2005), 11.

¹²⁵ Ari Adut, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (July 2005): 242. Durkheim has written that the collective sentiment which stands in opposition to an act of criminality "far from deriving from the crime, constitutes the crime. In other words, we should not say that an act offends the common consciousness because it is criminal, but that it is criminal because it offends that consciousness. We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it." Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933; repr. New York: Free Press, 1997), 40. I am indebted to Andie Tucher for this reference.

control. And although scandal usually originates with a single revelation or “scoop” from an individual source, it is also a collaborative enterprise. The revelation doesn’t a scandal make, in other words, the resonance does. In this sense, scandal is, for Adut (following Durkheim), “the creation of the collective consciousness of a society, the media, or the performative discourse of moral entrepreneurs,” and serves as “a ritual through which groups assert their core values and purify themselves by publicly marking certain individuals and behaviors as deviant.”¹²⁶ Finally, just as the individual scandalmonger or provocateur cannot create a scandal singlehandedly, rarely if ever is the transgressor the only one tainted by it. A good scandal often weakens or even destroys entire social institutions. For that reason, City College has spent its entire modern history, in fact, steadfastly trying to avoid further scandal, a strategy that has backfired on more than one occasion.

BARUCH SPINOZA & THE RITUALS OF EXCOMMUNICATION

However useful this theory of scandal may prove in helping us to understand the uproar precipitated by public denunciations and overheated newspaper stories, the mere exposure or “marking” of deviant behavior and attendant gasps of collective horror have rarely proven satisfying in themselves, at least not in cases involving City College. More often than not, they have been accompanied by public excommunication ceremonies. The religious language is not entirely figurative here. The Catholic hierarchy has been a major player in public education in New York since before the founding of the Free Academy until today. It was deeply implicated, for example, in the *New York Sun*’s campaign to eliminate college altogether during the fiscal crisis of the 1870s. So, too, would City later emerge as a minor icon in the young republic’s civil religion. But only after Jews began to predominate among the students, and then the faculty, did

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 217.

controversy increasingly take the form of witch-hunts and excommunications. For this reason it is worth considering the practice through a Jewish lens.

Among history's most drawn-out excommunication ceremonies was the Spanish Inquisition and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. Under the supervision of secular authorities, the inquisitor's mission was to smoke out those Jews who resisted assimilation and secretly clung to the religion of their ancestors and to protect the society and the other *conversos* from their negative influence. By the dawn of the Enlightenment the descendants of these exiles were self-administering their own high-profile excommunications. On July 27, 1656, the lay leaders of Amsterdam's Portuguese synagogue pronounced a *cherem* against twenty-four-year-old Baruch de Spinoza for unspecified heresies and he was publicly cursed and banned from the community, its members forbidden to interact with him. Unlike virtually all such bans, this one had no expiration date and offered no possibility of Spinoza's reincorporation into the fold.

Spinoza's excommunication is a striking point of reference for considering the contours of corresponding rituals at City College in the former New Amsterdam two and a half centuries later. In both places a community of relatively recent Jewish refugees was struggling to accommodate a massive and diverse wave of new immigrants and to maintain its own hard-won and precarious position vis-à-vis the larger society. They accomplished this in part by enforcing decorum among the newcomers, often without the explicit prompting or active participation of religious or secular authorities. For Amsterdam's Sephardic Jews, Spinoza's excommunication wasn't simply a tool for maintaining internal order and cohesion, however. It was also a way of letting their Dutch hosts know that everything was "kosher," that the independent franchise they'd recently been granted to practice their own religion was being well looked after and was

capable of policing itself.¹²⁷ Whether it was expected of them or not, after more than two centuries of repression and dislocation, the Portuguese Jews felt an acute need to reassure the powers-that-be that they need not worry about any extra trouble from us.¹²⁸ Rituals of excommunication were directed, in other words, to more than one public at a time, advanced a variety of interests, and performed social functions within and beyond the local community.¹²⁹

Although a severe punishment, a kind of social death symbolized by the tolling of a bell, the closing of a book, or the snuffing out of a candle, formal edicts of excommunication have historically held out the distant promise of a welcome home and were meant to be redemptive both for the sinner and the congregation. Yet in neither of the above examples were the banished offered any discernible path toward readmission into the community of the faithful. Expulsion, unlike excommunication, was irreversible, and “The expulsion of *groups*,” argued media scholar Linda Steiner, “only protects the expellers.”¹³⁰ Finally, where the bell, the book, and the extinguished candle may once have been sufficient vehicles of publicity for maintaining internal discipline, as societies grew and became more diverse and complex they required public acts of penitence, civil penalties, notice boards with blacklists posted outside parishes, and names read

¹²⁷ Steven Nadler, “The Excommunication of Spinoza: Trouble and Toleration in the Dutch Jerusalem,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 19, no. 4 (2001): 40-52.

¹²⁸ The Dutch authorities were facing “remonstrances” at home and in the colonies and were struggling to balance religious tolerance against a host of commercial and other considerations. The 1657 Flushing Remonstrance did much to shape New York’s culture and traditions of religious tolerance. Whether our systems for assimilating new groups and instilling mechanisms of self-censorship were also shaped during this period invites further study.

¹²⁹ A little more than a decade after Spinoza’s expulsion from the community of the faithful, Amsterdam’s Jews petitioned the city for permission to build a new, larger synagogue that would accommodate its expanding population. At the same time they requested that city magistrates reauthorize what today would be called the community’s bylaws and expressly called attention to the power of the congregation’s lay leaders to excommunicate “unruly and rebellious people.” Jaap Meijer, *Beeldvorming om Baruch: Eigentijdse Aspecten van de Vroege Spinoza-Biografie* (Heemstede, Netherlands: 1986), 57-58, quoted in Nadler, “The Excommunication of Spinoza,” 51.

¹³⁰ Linda Steiner, “The Excommunication of Don Imus” *Journal of Media and Religion* 8, no. 4 (Oct. 2009): 204, 192; emphasis in original. Here she has in mind the “canonical” expulsion of 1492.

aloud during mass.¹³¹ As Carey recognized in the 1987 Senate confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Robert A. Bork, in spite of their striking similarities, the modern, mediatized shaming rituals that evolved from this process often fail to fulfill either the essentially integrative functions of traditional excommunication ceremonies or the definition of what Dayan and Katz called “media events.”

The Bork hearings and the larger family of events of which they are a part do not meet a model, I believe, of the celebration of consensus. They touch on core, sacred values but are episodes in the production of dissensus, episodes in the recreation, indeed redefinition of the civil religion by social demarcation and exclusion. Rather than uniting the audience and the polity either in expectation or fact, they divide it ever more deeply. Their central element is not merely conflict but bitter discord and struggle. The event produces neither catharsis nor relief but ever widening and expanding ripples of civil disquiet.¹³²

Carey, who was particularly interested in the televised spectacle, and traced the genealogy of this family of quasi-judicial events back through the Iran-Contra and Watergate investigations to the Army-McCarthy hearings and House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). As we shall see, at City College even before that they had already become a way of life.

HISTORIOGRAPHY & METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The extensive literature on City College includes histories of the founding, the first hundred years, its role in the lives of Russian Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, and the transformation brought on by the postwar migration of Southern blacks and Puerto Ricans.¹³³ There are books chronicling the development of the architecture, the business school, and the “subfreshman” or preparatory division as well as several collections of reminiscences by

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 199.

¹³² James W. Carey, “Political Ritual on Television: Episodes in the History of Shame, Degradation, and Excommunication” *Media, Ritual and Identity*, Tamar Liebes & James Curran, eds. (London: Routledge, 1998), 67.

¹³³ Cosenza, *The Establishment of the College*; Rudy, *The College of the City*; Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*; James Traub, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

alumni.¹³⁴ Faculty and administrators who lived through dramatic periods in the college's history have published numerous memoirs, particularly after the abrupt transition to Open Admissions in the early 1970s.¹³⁵ Other chapters in the school's history such as the controversial and ultimately abortive appointment of Bertrand Russell to the philosophy department in 1939 or the basketball scandals of 1951 have also received book-length treatment, often more than once.¹³⁶ Participants have written books about governance at the college, as well, and studies of the logic of error in the work of basic writing students there, and of the long term effects of remediation on individual learners and the efficacy of "mainstreaming" students who lack preparation for college level work in key areas.¹³⁷

City College has also figured prominently in studies of the immigrant Jews of the Lower East Side, of the anti-Communist hysteria and persecution of faculty on college campuses in the 1940s and '50s, of the history of remedial writing programs in American colleges and universities, the long-term, cumulative effects of the Open Admissions policy at the sprawling

¹³⁴ Pearson, *The City College of New York*; Selma Cantor Berrol, *Getting Down to Business: Baruch College in the City of New York, 1847-1987* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989); Lebow, *The Bright Boys*; Philip J. Mosenthal and Charles F. Horne, eds., *The City College: Memories of Sixty Years* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1907); Betty Rizzo and Barry Wallenstein, eds., *City at the Center: A Collection of Writings by CCNY Alumni & Faculty* (New York: City College of New York, Division of the Humanities, 1983).

¹³⁵ See, for example, Adrienne Rich, "Teaching Language in Open Admissions: A Look at the Context" in *The Uses of Literacy*, Monroe Engel, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 257-273; Leonard Kriegel, *Working Through: A Teacher's Journey in the Urban University* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972); L.G. Heller, *The Death of the American University: With Special Reference to the Collapse of City College of New York* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973); Theodore L. Gross, *Academic Turmoil: The Reality and Promise of Open Education* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1980); Robert E. Marshak, *Academic Renewal in the 1970s: Memoirs of a City College President* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982).

¹³⁶ Thom Weidlich, *Appointment Denied: The Inquisition of Bertrand Russell* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books: 2000); John Dewey and Horace Kallen, eds. *The Bertrand Russell Case* (New York: Viking Press, 1941); American Civil Liberties Union, *The Story of the Bertrand Russell Case* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1941); Stanley Cohen, *The Game They Played* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); Charley Rosen, *Scandals of '51: How the Gamblers Almost Killed College Basketball* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

¹³⁷ Edel, *The Struggle for Academic Democracy*; Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Marilyn S. Sternglass, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997); Mary Soliday, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation" *College Composition and Communication* 47, no. 1 (Feb. 1996): 85-100; Barbara Gleason, "Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation" *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 4 (June 2000): 560-588.

City University of New York (of which City College is the flagship campus), of the academic “culture wars” during the 1980s, and of countless other aspects of twentieth century American educational and urban history.¹³⁸ In the biographies of dozens of prominent alumni and faculty from Upton Sinclair, Ira Gershwin, Felix Frankfurter, A. Philip Randolph, Bernard Baruch and Lewis Mumford to Jonas Salk, Kenneth Clark, and Colin Powell, City College has played a decisive role. Besides being an important site in the educational narratives of a variety of racial and ethnic communities, City College also lies at the very heart of the founding myths of the “New York intellectuals,” Washington neo-conservatives, teachers and scholars of “basic writing” in colleges and universities across the United States, and—along with Hunter and other municipal colleges—of several generations of New York City public school teachers.¹³⁹

In recent years, one book more than any other has set the terms and tone of discussion about City College’s legacy and its ongoing role. Journalist James Traub’s 1994 *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*, sections of which were published in the *New Yorker*, describes the school as the ruin of a once great institution, reduced by its own demoliberal good intentions to serving as little more than a remediation mill and purgatory for barely literate victims of ghetto schools and an ideological circus for crank, afrocentrist professors. Traub’s book crystallized decades of widespread ambivalence about the college’s identity and social function and helped usher in a new era of controversial reforms. But curiously few of its themes were anything new.

¹³⁸ Howe, Irving, *World of Our Fathers* (1976; repr. New York: Galahad Books, 1994); Schrecker, No Ivory Tower; Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation*; David E. Lavin & David Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984* (Boston: Routledge, 1986).

¹³⁹ See, for example, Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Howe, *Margin of Hope*; Irving Kristol, “Memoirs of a Trotskyist,” In *Reflections of a Neo-Conservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Horner and Lu, *Representing the “Other”*.

This dissertation places *City on a Hill* in the context of more than sixty years of media attacks, elegies for a lost golden age, and efforts to redefine the City College of New York from both within and without. It explores the interplay between the way people outside the college have sought to represent it and the perspectives of students, faculty, and others on the inside. Unlike previous scholars who've focused their attention on the dynamics of its governance, protest politics, admissions policies, ethnic, class, and race relations, compensatory programs, basic writing pedagogy, even its stadium events, I have chosen to pursue the fugitive "structures of feeling" that make up the armature for these disparate elements of the school and its mission, to understand City College not only as a site of struggle or laboratory for social experimentation but as a worthy expression of New Yorkers' hopes and fears in its own right.

Such an enterprise, I should acknowledge from the outset, is fraught with risk in at least two respects. Ideologically driven discussions of higher education have all too often been overrun by cultural arguments and explanations that conveniently elide important structural impediments to student access, success, and social mobility. As with Edmund Burke's "swinish multitude," the reification of an urban "underclass" or "culture of poverty"—not to speak of the archetypal Jew congenitally "thirsting for knowledge"—is as easy a trap to fall into as it is tempting to overcompensate for this tendency by veering wildly in the opposite direction. My approach to education rises or falls, in other words, on its ability to deploy a conception of culture that is broader than values or racial pathology and a conception of structural impediments that is broader than politics or market forces.¹⁴⁰ In the preceding pages I've attempted to outline the sources I've drawn upon to articulate that broader conception.

If my methodology and timeframe are broadly based, however, my focus on City College

¹⁴⁰ This amended formulation takes off from Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, 185.

and a series of disconnected moments is nothing if not narrow, and like looking through a moving telescope, that can be disorienting. By this I don't only mean the major physical dislocations discussed earlier. Rather, from its inception the Free Academy was as much a glorified high school as a college and even after that line was more clearly drawn at the turn of the century it maintained a close physical and institutional relationship with its former "sub-freshman" division for another fifty years. Similarly, for most of the school's modern history more students have enrolled in its Evening Session, downtown School of Business, engineering school, and itinerant Center for Worker Education than in the iconic "uptown Day Session" (the last bastion to admit women). Thus, even in the most pedestrian sense it is often far from clear what people mean by "City College" or "CCNY." That confusion was further exacerbated by the creation of new, autonomous municipal institutions in Brooklyn and Queens during the interwar years, at which time City formally became nothing less than "The City College of the College of the City of New York."¹⁴¹ After the 1961 formation of the City University, City College was, for a time, the new university's "flagship" institution, a designation it never formally lost. But as the CUNY Graduate Center and twenty-one other institutions have asserted their own identities and surpassed City College in many areas, the college's distinctiveness has receded to the point where even its own alumni and elected officials often conflate or are at a loss to explain the difference between "City College," "CUNY," and "CCNY." Notwithstanding this confusion, Open Admissions is just one of several university-wide policies and scandals which were produced, repaired, and transformed in large part on the Hamilton Heights campus. Insofar as any stage can be described as a site of continuing action bounded by barriers to

¹⁴¹ Hunter College remained exclusively for women until the 1950s and had its own identity as a Normal School extending back to 1870.

perception (hence “off-stage” and “back-stage”),¹⁴² I have chosen this one advisedly and made every effort to orient the reader to the stage’s management as well as the larger panorama evolving around it.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Robinson era was rife with suspensions, firings, expulsions, *mea culpas*, protests, and assorted other spectacles. Indeed, Robinson’s own disgrace, exile, and resignation in 1938 constituted a critical turning point in the college’s history. But it was not until a New York court nullified Bertrand Russell’s appointment to the philosophy faculty two years later after a bitter, public struggle and a committee of the state legislature then orchestrated the firing of fifty allegedly Communist City College faculty and staff that a pattern of scandal mongering, scapegoating, and resistance that would repeat itself for decades to come was firmly established. Part one introduces some of the key players in this process. I briefly examine the role of the Hearst press, the Catholic Church, Tamanny Hall and other political actors in these twin scandals as well as the ambivalent responses of the *New York Times* and the emergence of Dorothy Schiff’s *New York Post* as a trusted defender of City College and its ethnic constituencies. Besides these patterns and relationships, it is here that many of the ongoing tropes associated with the college first took root.

Part two explores the ritual sacrifice of seven of City College’s championship basketball players in what more than fifty years later the editors of *ESPN* ranked the second most damaging sports scandal of all time.¹⁴³ Coming in 1951, on the heels of the Holocaust and G.I. Bill of Rights at the threshold of the Civil Rights Movement and suburbanization of America, the

¹⁴² Carey, *Political Ritual on Television*, 56; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 111-112.

¹⁴³ Page 2 staff, “Worst Sports Scandals,” *ESPN*, <http://espn.go.com/page2/s/list/scandals.html> (accessed Feb. 22, 2011). Only Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 Black Sox scandal was even worse, they determined.

unprecedented—and still unmatched—double championship of a city-bred squad of Jewish and Negro underdogs was the occasion for extraordinary celebration. New Yorkers invested their victories over opponents from the American heartland with epochal meaning, and when the same athletes were caught consorting with gamblers and fixing games the following season it shattered the multiethnic, meritocratic terms in which the hundred-year-old college had staked its claim to popular allegiance. Because the basketball scandals coincided with postwar prosperity and the massive expansion of higher education, however, City College was able to escape the threats to its survival and growth that accompanied so many other crises. What this episode most illuminates is the way that sport helped to configure a diverse urban community and how, in such a context, the sacrifice of carefully chosen individual actors served to safeguard entrenched institutional interests, including those of the press.

If part two emphasizes the city as a unit struggling to assert itself within a larger, national culture, the following section explores deepening divisions and contradictions within the city itself and the ways particular elements used the college to expose those divisions, define their identities, and advance often conflicting agendas. In 1965 City College took higher education's very first stab at what later came to be known as affirmative action in the form of its pre-baccalaureate SEEK program, a halting, last-ditch effort to accommodate rising demands and to preserve a distinctive cosmopolitan vision of New York as a special place of opportunity and racial comity. It was no coincidence, I argue, that that same year a *New York Times* writer and Brooklyn College graduate invented for City College the wistful term "proletarian Harvard." Then, in a vivid illustration of the difference between institutions *for* the working class and institutions *of* the working class, black and Puerto Rican SEEK students from across the city huddled in their dorm rooms inside the seedy Alamac Hotel and hatched a plan to force the

college to confront its contradictions and open its doors to greater numbers of their younger brothers and sisters. With the important exception of the forced resignation of the college president, there were no public excommunication ceremonies in the spring of 1969. But it was the first time in the school's history that the college gates were literally locked shut, an unprecedented act of exclusion that nonetheless offered a clear path of readmission and healing. *You can come back inside*, said the SEEK students, *as soon as you've agreed to these five demands*.

Part four describes how these students got both quite a bit more and less than they bargained for after they took over the campus that rainy April morning. In 1970 the university-wide Open Admissions program nearly doubled the size of City College's freshman class and transformed the school overnight from one of America's most exclusive to one of its more accessible. This led to competing efforts to both demonize and sacralize the new students, as well as to a great deal of public wailing and gnashing of teeth. In this section I introduce the issue of role playing and students' and teachers' attempts to construct authentic-sounding but ultimately fraudulent stories in order to satisfy or confound the expectations of what composition scholar Mary Soliday has called the "power brokers of discourse."¹⁴⁴ To placate still other powerful constituents, the college imposed stringent entrance requirements, downsized its signature remedial programs, and, for the first time in 129 years, began charging students tuition. It thereby succeeded in significantly reducing enrollment and costs without marking individual bodies as guilty or holding out the promise of a second chance. Here the excommunications were designed to be not dramatic but preemptive and coldly bureaucratic. In targeting an already stigmatized population, however, the apparent absence of blame did little to lessen these

¹⁴⁴ Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation*, 152.

draconian measures' symbolic freight.¹⁴⁵

In part five the city's fiscal crisis takes a further toll when a heretical display, in the pages of a national magazine, of doubt, exhaustion, and loathing on the part of Dean Theodore Gross, a member of the president's trusted inner circle leads to his permanent exile. Gross's transgression was accompanied by a full frontal assault on the institution in the pages of Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, with a muted chorus of voices rising in its defense. Here we saw New York's retreat from liberalism take its decisive turn and the metropolitan and periodical press driving events as never before. By the end of the 1970s there appeared to be little left to write about City College or Open Admissions except for their post mortems.

Part six focuses on the mercurial figure of Professor Leonard Jeffries and the way, beginning in 1991 he used and was used by the news media and neo-liberal politicians to conjure a new, racially charged, mad-scientist persona for the college and to further alienate Jews and other ethnic whites from blacks and the city's public institutions. The tragic crush of bodies that killed nine young people on the steps of the college gymnasium later that year only served to consolidate the college's image as a site of danger and deviance. Jeffries's internal exile, followed by his court-ordered reinstatement constituted a deeply dysfunctional excommunication ceremony at best and left many attendant feelings unresolved. Even the forced resignation of City's first African American president in the midst of this process did little to mitigate the sense that the institution, like the city around it, was spinning further and further out of control. The final chapter in this section describes how Giuliani-era journalists, conservative think tanks, and local politicians mobilized these negative perceptions and stoked popular sentiment against a new wave of immigrants to hasten the wholesale retreat from Open Admissions and the

¹⁴⁵ That it coincides with the moment the complexion of the majority of students changes complicates this portrait somewhat.

longstanding project of giving poorly prepared students a leg up that was its centerpiece. For better or worse, by the beginning of the twenty-first century City College had freed itself of the baggage of its signature remedial programs and set off on an unambiguously new path to restore its damaged reputation.

CITY COLLEGE IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

On June 7, 1847, the popular referendum that was engineered to bring it down in defeat authorized by a margin of six-to-one the use of public funds for a “Free Academy.” New Yorkers were grappling with a population explosion that had already quadrupled their numbers in the decades since the American Revolution and were busy working out brand new arrangements of work, family life, public discourse, class and gender relations. By then, they were also used to rolling up their sleeves and solving big urban problems; the Erie Canal and the finest system of reservoirs and aqueducts since the Roman Empire were just two of the great feats of popular imagination that preceded the college’s founding. Central Park and the Brooklyn Bridge would soon follow. All were paid for entirely with public money and contributed immensely to turning New York into one of the most prosperous and cosmopolitan cities on earth. But like Central Park, the common schools, and other democratic spaces opened up by the nineteenth century imagination, City College has never fully lived up to the rhetoric that surrounded its creation. Waves of immigrants, depressions, wars, and crises of the cities and the culture have changed the institution and its various constituencies, sparking wildly different levels and sources of support and animosity. Through it all, one thing has remained constant: each moment has been marked by a commensurate investment of *meaning*.

There can be little doubt that the coming decade will feature another epochal transformation of higher education in America unlike anything we’ve seen since the end of

World War II. The economics alone cry out for it. Should current trends continue it's likely that for the first time in our history fewer Americans will go to college than did in previous generations.¹⁴⁶ When my mother and father enrolled at City and a rural, land-grant college during the 1940s, the people of New York and Pennsylvania shouldered virtually the entire cost of their education. At the time, the idea that they, their families, or the institutions they attended should be expected to pull their own weight would have been a complete anathema, like suggesting that subways and buses be self-supporting. Today, less than a third of the budgets at the putatively public City and Pennsylvania State universities comes from city and state appropriations. More than a third of the students work full time and study subjects they hope will someday enable them to pay off high-interest loans. Most of their classes are taught by a poorly paid, contingent labor force without medical or pension benefits (or office hours), a scenario inconceivable in the days of the New Deal, G.I. Bill, Baby Boom, or Sputnik.

The idea of marshalling our shared resources and imaginations to effectively maintain, repair, or transform—much less to produce—a public good like the City College of New York appears today more tenuous than ever. As the professor Arnold Rampersad once put it referring to his own college's century-old Core Curriculum, “[Its] like the interstate highway system: we are glad we have it, but we could never build it today.”¹⁴⁷ By exploring what one particular and extraordinary public good has meant to us at different moments in our history, how we've celebrated it, fought over it, memorialized it, trashed it, and otherwise sought to explain it to ourselves and one another, I hope this dissertation can help us to develop a deeper understanding of the stories we tell ourselves about public things and to recover the kind of vision and

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Delbanco, “Does College Really Matter? The History of Undergraduate Education, Why It's in Trouble, and What to Do About It,” Stafford Little Lecture, Princeton, NJ, Dec. 1, 2008. iTunes U.

¹⁴⁷ Arnold Rampersad, address on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Columbia College Core Curriculum, New York, 1994, quoted in Andrew Delbanco, “The Endangered University,” *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 24, 2005.

commitment it takes to build them.

I. 'LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE'

Outside a few domains—the practice of religion, sex, morality and education—the priest exerts little influence over his parishioners. But when these areas are affected he may react violently, even a little unreasonably. He may suspect a threat where none has been intended. He may confuse a political situation with a moral issue.¹

—Joseph Shuster, 1940

It unfolded first in the press. You're talking about a lot of papers, screaming headlines in the Journal American and in the News and The Mirror and The World Telegram, "Names Forty-three Communists," that kind of thing. These were big headlines and this is big stuff. It came as a big shock to us, obviously. We weren't prepared for this... You were up against the legislature, the press, the administration of the college, everybody was going, you know. It became a question of a matter of time before the thing would unload on you.²

—Moe Foner, 1985

The average citizen does not know much about education, but he does read the headlines. You can see from the headlines what has been served up to the public. Of course you say the press has done this. But we, in a measure, furnished the material.³

—Acting President Wright, 1941

Amid the sonorous, brassy tones of radio commentators, the screaming headlines belching out the hell on earth, the asinine dodderings of cacophonous politicians who would force an unwilling people to kow-tow before the human-destroying Chimera of war, there stand a few petty politicians who would further their own selfish careers by destroying free thinking and free education in City College...The Class of 1941, troubled with the thought that they may soon die on a foreign battlefield, will rise as one man to stop [them].⁴

—Yearbook Dedication, 1941

¹ George N. Shuster, "The Conflict Among Catholics," *The American Scholar* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1940-41): 15.

² Moe Foner, Interview by Robert Masters, New York, Feb. 21, 1985 (session 3), transcript: Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office, 70.

³ Harry N. Wright, quoted in "3,000 Students Hear Dr. Wright Denounce Reds," *New York Herald Tribune*, Mar. 13, 1941, 18.

⁴ "Dedication," *MICROCOSM*, 1941.

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To understand City College's at once precarious and pivotal position in New York culture and politics during the run-up to World War II, consider the image of Heywood Broun, a liberal columnist for the *New York World-Telegram* and member of the Algonquin Round Table, sitting by himself in the corner of a midtown Manhattan hotel lobby late one night at the end of the 1930s. City was holding its senior prom there, and when the hotel found out that Negroes would be attending, it had tried to cancel the event. "We contacted Broun," said a student who was there. "He came and sat in the lobby all evening. Didn't say a word." But with a well-known journalist standing by, the management hadn't dared to protest.⁵

This genius for rapidly mobilizing outsiders to support liberal causes was no anomaly among City College students and faculty during the contentious latter half of the decade. When, on the morning of April 23, 1936, the English department notified the popular longtime instructor Morris Schappes that his contract would not be renewed due to alleged "inefficiency," he took the news straight to a colleague and asked him to run off some leaflets in time for a meeting of the Instructional Staff Association shortly after noon that day as well as to tip off campus leaders. By 3:00 p.m. over a thousand students were staging a "sit-down" protest in the Lincoln Corridor outside President Robinson's office, the first such sit-in in American history.⁶ The newly formed local of the American Federation of Teachers published a daily bulletin on the campaign to reinstate Schappes, and sailors and transit workers carried signs with his name on them in the city's annual May Day parade. "What the hell do Meat Cutters want with academic

⁵ Kathleen A. Hauke, *Ted Poston: Pioneer American Journalist* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 247.

⁶Shrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 66. The ISA was a group of junior faculty working in concert with the union for better salaries, tenure protections, and faculty governance.

freedom?” one member of the Board of Higher Education was supposed to have quipped in frustration.⁷ Not only was the college forced to reinstate Schappes and twelve other dismissed instructors, but under organized pressure from the union and an army of exploited and insecure college “tutors,” the State legislature also went on to approve a new system of faculty governance and job protections, the most far-reaching of its kind.⁸

From the thrashings by umbrella and incident of the “guttersnipes” discussed in the previous section to events like these, City College was, during the 1930s, the locus of intense struggles over the limits of faculty and student rights and recast itself in the public mind as the site of a lively intellectual culture and rebellious spirit that sometimes bordered on heresy. With the easily provoked and vindictive college president Frederick Robinson—the Bull Connor of his era—finally forced to retire and the ascendancy of the College Teachers Union, the forties had scarcely begun when the clergy, the Hearst press, the Taxpayer’s Union, and a cadre of Tammany Hall politicians and conservative state legislators sought to restore the balance of power. They seized on the recent appointment by the newly empowered faculty of Bertrand Russell to teach in its philosophy department as evidence that a publicly funded institution had shifted, morally and ideologically, beyond the pale. Before they were finished, not only would these combined forces send Russell packing, but they would go on to undertake a public “housecleaning” that resulted in the firing and resignations of more than fifty allegedly Communist faculty and staff members.

The 1941 Rapp-Coudert “investigation” was the single most sweeping purge of political radicals in the history of American higher education. It reshaped the identity and role of City

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ This story is told in Edel, *The Struggle for Academic Freedom*.

College and served as the prototype for Joseph McCarthy's subsequent hearings and purges.⁹ In this section, I argue that more than an expression of the xenophobia and anti-Communist hysteria sweeping the country, Russell's excommunication, Rapp-Coudert, and their combined political fallout were really an attempt by local Catholics and machine politicians to exploit those fears and assert control over the city's public schools at a moment when their own influence was in decline. By appropriating the languages of Christian virtue and anti-communism and invoking the symbols with which City College was already freighted, they appealed to a variety of groups, successfully challenged the hard-won independence of faculty and students to shape the college and its future, and, not incidentally, sent a powerful message to the unions and any Jews who may have been tempted to think they were now in a position to control public resources and institutions.

The configuration of the New York press and its various publics was central to—indeed, constitutive of—this process and set the stage upon which these and subsequent rituals of excommunication would be enacted. The city had nine daily newspapers with circulations in the six figures at the time. Some led the charge against moral degenerates and political subversives in the classroom. Others defended the honor of the public colleges. Still others sought to document the events dispassionately, without going too far in either direction. But all of them followed the proceedings in great detail, and served to amplify the largely unsubstantiated charges, and all but one found it necessary to make their own anti-Communist commitments clear.

⁹ Shrecker, 83.

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1. THE EXCOMMUNICATION OF BERTRAND RUSSELL

Bertrand Russell's appointment to teach logic and semantics was the most illustrious in the City College's ninety-three-year history and, notwithstanding his well-known atheism and radical views on sex and marriage, sparked little controversy when it was first announced in October 1939.¹⁰ "He thinks so clearly, and writes with so much sparkle and gusto, that business could boom in the philosophy department," wrote even the *New York Sun*, which served a declining readership of conservative small businessmen, a paper historian Paul Milkman (CCNY '71) characterized as having "suburbanites' interests"—gardening, dogs, antiques—"at heart before there were suburbs," and that others have called, "a guardian of conventional standards."¹¹ Bagging Russell was universally seen as a public relations coup for an institution that had suffered more than its share of nastiness and embarrassment and was struggling mightily to interest a suitable candidate in becoming its next president.

But then, four days after the Board of Higher Education formally approved hiring Russell, the Episcopal bishop of New York, William Thomas Manning, wrote a letter to the newspapers decrying the philosopher's unorthodox views and questioning his moral fitness to teach in the public schools. Manning was, in historian Thom Weidlich's estimation, "a prelate who knew how to write a press release," and his call for the Board of Higher Education to rescind Russell's appointment made front-page news and sparked a general outcry and media

¹⁰ A subsequent English department plan to offer a visiting professorship to T.S. Eliot during the same period might have come close, had it not been thwarted by a group of faculty who objected to him on the grounds that he hadn't earned a Ph.D. See Morris Freedman, "CCNY Days" *The American Scholar* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 206.

¹¹ Editorial, *New York Sun*, Oct. 31, 1939; Paul Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 27; August Heckscher with Phyllis Robinson, *When LaGuardia was Mayor: New York's Legendary Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978) 269. The *Sun* would shortly change its tune, however.

circus.¹² No sooner had the board voted eleven-to-seven to uphold the appointment than a Queens dentist's wife named Jean Kay sued them, claiming that the presence on the faculty of an atheist who encouraged infidelity, masturbation, and homosexuality could potentially impinge on her high-school-aged daughter's right to a wholesome, free college education.¹³ Kay's lawyer further argued that Russell was ineligible for the position on the basis of the never-before-invoked technicalities that he was not an American citizen and, even more bizarrely, hadn't sat for any civil service exam. In an extraordinary feat of judicial activism, the judge exceeded his authority by ruling not only on these procedural questions but also on Russell's overall qualifications, thus superseding the professional judgment of the educators who had chosen him for the post. The court declared Russell unfit to serve and ordered his appointment annulled.¹⁴ While college officials were preparing their appeal, Mayor La Guardia quietly cut the line for Russell's salary from the City budget, and the philosopher went off to lecture at the other, not-so-proletarian Harvard instead and later to win a Nobel Prize.¹⁵

At the heart of Bishop Manning's complaint was his notion that "the heads of the colleges are *in loco parentis* and they are responsible for the influences that are brought to bear on their students."¹⁶ This was a somewhat tenuous claim, given that virtually all City College students lived with their parents and were subject to a variety of influences outside the control of

¹² Thom Weidlich, *Appointment Denied: The Inquisition of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 35; 20-21.

¹³ The division of City College where Russell was to teach would not admit women for another decade, nor would Kay's daughter reach college age before Russell's eighteen-month contract expired in any case.

¹⁴ For an ex post facto critique of Judge McGeehan's tortured decision, see Paul Edwards, "How Bertrand Russell Was Prevented From Teaching at the College of the City of New York," appendix to Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

¹⁵ In addition to cancelled speaking engagements and limited opportunities to publish, the dustup in New York precipitated a similar lawsuit to revoke Russell's UCLA appointment, which technically remained on the books, but the court there upheld the university Regents' autonomy and dismissed all charges. See A.D. Irvine, "Bertrand Russell and Academic Freedom," *russell: The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives* 16 (Summer 1996): 13.

¹⁶ William T. Manning, quoted in Weidlich, *Appointment Denied*, 14.

college authorities. More resonant—and oft repeated—was a vision of the university as a place where received wisdom is passed down the generations rather than an open forum for competing ideas or a laboratory for honing critical faculties and producing new knowledge.¹⁷ Within that framework, groups like the Knights of Columbus contended that, whether or not it was legally protected, taxpayers shouldn't be obliged to fund speech they found objectionable.¹⁸ “If publicly supported colleges are not to be as free as others,” one professor of education countered, “they have no hope whatever of playing an important part in the intellectual progress of our lives.”¹⁹

But such arguments for or against the Russell appointment or the proper role of the university were scarcely the point. Manning's missive to the press was designed to forestall the progress of something beyond the free play of the intellect. While they had become increasingly diverse in population and secular in practice, City and many other colleges had retained an essentially Protestant institutional culture. For Manning, Russell embodied the forces of irreligion and permissiveness running rampant since the Roaring Twenties. As a fellow Englishman, he also threatened to undermine, by association, the moral authority of the Episcopal Church. As early as 1929, two years after Russell published his pamphlet “Why I Am Not a Christian,” Manning had successfully lobbied both Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler and Acting President Robinson to cancel his speaking engagements on their campuses.²⁰

By 1940 the landscape had changed, and there was a good deal more at stake than religion or morality. In the previous decade the economy had collapsed, the corrupt Irish Catholic mayor, Jimmy Walker, had fled the country under a cloud of suspicion, and the

¹⁷ Yervant H. Krikorian, et al., “The College, the Community, and the Bertrand Russell Case,” *The Bertrand Russell Case*, John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen, eds. (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 175; Weidlich, 178.

¹⁸ Weidlich, 16.

¹⁹ Lyman Bryson, quoted in Edwards, “How Bertrand Russell was Prevented,” 248.

²⁰ Weidlich, 21.

Tammany Hall appointees running City and Hunter colleges had both been driven from office. New York City now had the largest concentration of Jews on the planet with a Jewish governor and the first mayor—also half-Jewish—in generations who did not answer to the Democratic machine. According to Catholic scholar George Shuster,

The O’Haras were now bourgeois, affluent and comfortable. [After 1920] Brooklyn witnessed a [Jewish] migration from the Lower East Side to garish new apartment house districts in its own Flatbush and Bay Ridge; and this migration inevitably meant a struggle for coveted middle class positions and emoluments at the very time when an economic depression more severe than any previously known was settling down upon the community.²¹

No single public institution was as consummately Jewish as was City College. Not only had it become, rightly or wrongly, a shining symbol of the Jews’ rapid ascent, but in a city that was only a quarter Jewish, well over eighty percent of the students were Jews. The increasingly Jewish faculty now had the authority to do its own hiring.²² It seemed, in other words, that under La Guardia the folks who traditionally presided over education and distributed its bounty had lost hold of the franchise. Whether or not Manning himself was aware of it, Bertrand Russell was to be the pretext they used to take it back.

THE PRESS BARON & ARCHBISHOP STEP IN TO SETTLE OLD SCORES

The churchman and the ward politicians weren’t the only ones with axes to grind, however, nor would their denunciations have rung very loudly were it not for the muscular participation of the popular press. The newspapers of William Randolph Hearst figured prominently in both respects. During the thirties, both Bertrand Russell and Frederick Robinson had written regular columns for the Hearst syndicate. Russell had shown the effrontery to decline

²¹ Shuster, 7.

²² A majority of instructors who’d earned bachelor’s degrees after 1930 had done so at City College, which created at least the appearance of incestuous hiring practice.

an invitation to visit “the chief” at his San Simeon castle and had later given up his column.²³ And it was over the objections of Hearst’s *New York Journal and American* and *Daily Mirror* that Robinson and his counterpart across town at Hunter had been ignominiously driven out of their college presidencies.²⁴

More important, since ending his own unsuccessful involvement in Populist politics as both activist and candidate, Hearst and his newspapers had grown steadily more anti-Communist and socially conservative. After finishing a crusade against the movie industry in 1934, Hearst directed his editors to aid the nation’s universities in ridding themselves of Communists. Reporters posed as students at Syracuse University and investigated the views of professors at NYU and Columbia Teacher’s College. When the pharmacy magnate Charles R. Walgreen publicly withdrew his niece from the University of Chicago claiming she had been taught communism and free love, the local Hearst paper’s investigation prompted the Illinois State Legislature to briefly consider revoking the private university’s charter.²⁵ “Two hundred thousand Soviet schoolbooks have been imported to America,” the same newspapers went on to assert.²⁶

Hearst had developed a particular antipathy to organized labor and it would scarcely have been lost on him or his editors that it had been a City College graduate who sponsored the 1935 Wagner Act extending protections to labor unions nor that the most progressive—and effective—teachers union in the country had formed there. In response to Hearst’s attacks on professors, the American Federation of Teachers launched a nationwide boycott of his

²³ Stephen Leberstein, review of Weidlich, *Appointment Denied*, in *Academe* 87, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2001): 84. Mussolini and Hitler wrote columns for Hearst, too.

²⁴ Charles Hunt Page, *Fifty Years in the Sociological Profession: A Lucky Journey* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press), 152.

²⁵ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 504.

²⁶ Quoted in Weidlich, 39.

newspapers, calling him “the outstanding jingoist of the country...constant enemy of academic freedom, [and the] chief exponent of Fascism in the United States.”²⁷

The rise of Fascism was the other specter that hung over Russell’s appointment and one of the issues that most divided and defined the New York public on the eve of America’s entry into the war. During the conflict in Spain, few of the city’s more than three million Catholics had been able to see beyond the burning churches, murdered priests, and the threat of godless Communism. Like Hearst, whose papers they disproportionately read, they had sided with the Fascists. But for more than two million New York Jews, the rise of Hitler had been the overriding concern.²⁸ Many City College students and alumni had, in fact, gone off to Spain to fight on the Republican side.

Then the Roman Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin began to use his national radio broadcasts to theorize about a worldwide conspiracy of Jewish bankers and to suggest that the Jews of Germany had gotten what was coming to them on *Kristallnacht*. For a time, armed “Christian Front” bands made up mostly of Irish Catholics roamed the streets of Brooklyn vandalizing synagogues and terrorizing old people and schoolchildren.²⁹ Anti-Semitism was as vigorous and institutionalized as at any time in American history and in New York had a distinctly German and Irish Catholic accent. On Manhattan’s heavily German Upper East Side a Republican candidate for Congress ran as “the anti-Jewish candidate,” and even the Jewish-owned *New York Times* routinely ran classified ads targeting “Christian” job applicants and

²⁷ American Federation of Teachers, 1936 resolution, quoted in George Seldes, *The Lords of the Press* (New York, J. Messner, 1938), 232.

²⁸ Shuster, 10-11.

²⁹ Weidlich, 40; Shuster, 13.

boarders.³⁰ So when the Diocese of Brooklyn’s newspaper, *The Tablet*, turned strongly pro-Fascist, it did so in full cooperation with its readers.

In spite of their conservatism and middle-class lives, Catholics, too, were often viewed with hostility and suspicion. Until the presidency of John F. Kennedy, many Americans saw them as irrevocably outside the mainstream owing allegiance, much like the Communists themselves, to a foreign power.³¹ In 1938, the philosopher Sidney Hook (CCNY ’23) dubbed the Catholic Church “the oldest and greatest totalitarian movement in history,”³² and after his appointment was annulled Russell accused the city government of being a virtual “satellite of the Vatican.”

Given these notably ugly associations, it’s not surprising that the city’s new Catholic archbishop, Francis Spellman, who many credit with orchestrating the campaign against Russell, would choose to keep the Church in the background of any assault on “The Cheder on the Hill,” a shining symbol of Jewish intellectualism, mobility and liberal thought.³³ But the Catholic hierarchy also had ample reasons to oppose Russell’s appointment and to take advantage of the controversy to advance its larger agenda. Russell was against organized religion and top-down social structures, and his views on birth control and a variety of other hot-button issues conflicted with church doctrine. For the laity, even if Russell himself wasn’t Jewish or a Communist—though he was widely rumored to be the latter—he was a British aristocrat, and as such Irish Catholics especially disliked the idea that he was, in Weidlich’s delicious phrase, “feeding at the

³⁰ “Accountant,” *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 1941, RE14. Adjacent ads require applicants to state their religion and “complete background.”

³¹ Weidlich, 83.

³² Sidney Hook, *Partisan Review*, quoted in Weidlich, 85.

³³ John Cooney, *American Pope: The Life and Times of Francis Cardinal Spellman* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 106-107. Throughout his thirty-year reign as Cardinal, it proved to be Spellman’s style to work behind the scenes.

public trough.” It was because of England’s role in the war that many remained isolationist, after all. The very same month that Russell was appointed, the British government denied two IRA members clemency and hanged them. Several heavily Irish New York assembly districts would vote against FDR later that year, apparently because of his “coziness” with the British.³⁴ Though for different motives perhaps, Hearst’s *Journal and American* was also busy waging an anti-British, isolationist campaign that would have been congenial to his Irish Catholic readers.

Those were some of the more immediate issues on the ground. But where Hearst was smarting over the collapse of his empire and the insolence of the unions and liberal intellectuals, Archbishop Spellman had a century-old score to settle. A graduate of Fordham, a Jesuit university in the Bronx, Spellman was beginning his thirty-year New York career the same way he would end it: with efforts to secure public funding for parochial schools.³⁵ Fordham had been founded just a few years before City College by Spellman’s predecessor Bishop John Hughes, who went on to challenge the Public School Society on its use of the King James Bible in an unsuccessful ruse to leverage taxpayer dollars and underwrite a system of independent Catholic schools.³⁶ Hughes had gone on to build that system anyway and, in a real sense, Spellman was picking up where he left off, both in the expansion of parochial schools and Catholic hospitals and in the use of his moral authority and political power to exact part of the cost.³⁷

THE QUESTION OF JOBS: TAMMANY HALL RAISES ITS UGLY HEAD

The Catholic Church’s efforts to assert control over public institutions and shore up its

³⁴ Weidlich, 82.

³⁵ Cooney, *American Pope*. Spellman was promoted to Cardinal in 1946.

³⁶ Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; repr. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 1-77.

³⁷ One of the most severe series of attacks waged against City College occurred in the 1870s, largely under the auspices of the *New York Sun*. It ended with the admission of graduates of the parochial schools where formerly only public school students had been admitted.

own were part of a larger political crisis in interwar New York City. The Tammany Hall Democratic machine and ward system that had governed New York for more than a century had come apart under two-term Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, and Irish Catholics in particular were feeling the loss, missing out on their customary slice of lucrative New Deal projects and a host of civil service jobs that had been doled out by ward bosses from time immemorial. For the first time in living memory the city now had an independent Board of Higher Education, one bold enough to contravene the mayor's wishes during an election year and appeal Judge McGeehan's arbitrary decision. In the Bertrand Russell case, McGeehan, a Tammany appointee, appeared to many to be doing the bidding of both Spellman and the Democratic Party. "The Catholic church wanted the influence back that they had on education in the Tammany days," said board member Lauson Stone. "There's no doubt that they got after McGeehan to do something. These things always connect behind the scenes."³⁸

Jobs were the key reason for this. The reputedly liberal—if not radical—faculty was exercising its newly won right to do the hiring and shape the curriculum. Were they planning to hire, en masse, foreigners, atheists, and Jews? The country had yet to emerge from the Depression and a huge influx of highly educated European refugees was flooding into the city. Because of the large number of German Jews who were settling there, the neighborhood just north of City College had recently earned the nickname "Frankfurt-on-Hudson," a reference to Frankfurt am Main in Hitler's Germany. And six years earlier the New School for Social Research had set up the "University in Exile," a haven for scholars who had lost their posts in European universities.

Nowhere were conflicts between Catholics and other ascendant groups over jobs more

³⁸ Lauson Stone, quoted in Weidlich, 130.

intense than inside the public school system.³⁹ When Spellman assumed his post in 1939, the economy was still sputtering but gearing up for war. Nationwide private colleges and universities, including Fordham, were hurting because, for a decade, fewer and fewer middle class parents could afford to pay tuition. As a result, many institutions had folded or merged with other colleges in order to stay afloat. New York City's free municipal colleges were expanding, thriving and proliferating, however, thanks to increased demand for affordable higher education from people with few job prospects. Brooklyn College had been founded in 1930 to meet that demand, Queens College in 1937. Hunter and City's enrollments had skyrocketed as well, along with the competitiveness of their applicant pools.

At the same time, other public institutions like Berkeley and the Big Ten schools were expanding their research functions, building new facilities and, with the help of government and industry, hiring additional science and engineering faculty and staff. Almost inevitably, just as in the days of the City College's founding, more than a few saw the expansion of public colleges as unfair, government-subsidized competition.⁴⁰ And it wasn't only the jobs of the faculty and staff that were at issue. According to Stanley Aronowitz,

As the decade of cautious social reform was ended by the imperatives of war preparations, the university's ideological role decisively shifted...Although there were some who shared the vision of liberal educators that higher education should enhance the national culture or serve the state's broad social interests, technical and vocational training, not broad intellectual preparation, was the point of supporting public higher education. So there was no unambiguous democratic purpose in the maintenance of these institutions, especially in terms of any invocation to be 'agents of social change.' Instead, publicly funded colleges were

³⁹ Shuster, 7.

⁴⁰ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 20.

integral to the strategy of economic development. If the business of government is business, so should be the business of public higher education.⁴¹

A 1941 survey of incoming freshman at City found the number of prospective schoolteachers cut in half over just two years and a marked increase in engineering and accounting majors, reflecting a nationwide trend.⁴² That Russell was a public intellectual and professor of abstract logic, mathematics and philosophy made withholding his formidable \$6,000 salary all the more satisfying in this context.

THE STAGE & THE CIPHER NEW YORK HAD BEEN WAITING FOR

In many ways the Bertrand Russell episode fit James W. Carey's portrait of a modern, mediatized excommunication ceremony that produces "dissensus" and degrades public discourse. Like Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork a half century later, Russell was eminently qualified for the post he was assigned and the "magnitude and ignominiousness of his defeat" were disproportionate to his standing in the community of scholars.⁴³ As with the Bork nomination, the principal objections to his appointment were that his personal beliefs lay outside the mainstream of community standards, beyond the pale.

Carey was interested in the symbolic space of the nation, "the system of meanings, values and identities which legitimate membership"—membership not in the polity of the United States, but in the more elusive precincts of American culture. To the extent that this metaphorical space was bounded and undergirded by a framework of laws, democratic procedures, and civil religion, it was the courts, said Carey, that formed its "dramatic center...occupying a place elsewhere

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 26.

⁴² "Engineering Leads Among Freshmen: City College Report Shows Business Also High in Career Choices," *New York Times*, Mar. 2, 1941, D6.

⁴³ Carey, "Political Ritual on Television," 49.

occupied by castles and cathedrals.”⁴⁴ But while the Bertrand Russell drama may have also played out in the courts, in the daily press, in the city’s pulpits and pews, and in meetings of the Board of Higher Education, none of these places were its ultimate focus. In the symbolic space of the city, of New York City anyway, I would like to argue that it is the public school that more often provides Carey’s “dramatic center.” A city, unlike a nation, is in Richard Sennett’s classic definition, “a human settlement where strangers are likely to meet,” and even in 1940 after more than a decade of immigration quotas and isolationism, the school remained the place where strangers were brought together to assimilate the norms of the larger society, to become fully American.⁴⁵ Further heightening the drama, it was also the institution to which citizens entrusted what was most precious to them each and every morning.

Russell’s appointment, like Bork’s, placed a human figure upon this dramatic stage. “A real live nominee,” wrote Carey,

allows abstract issues to be confronted in the form of an actual body. Vague feelings can be collected, crystallized and incarnated in one person who then can be canonized or demonized: made to embody the deepest hopes and expectations or fears and hatreds of the body politic.⁴⁶

And Russell was indeed a live one, as was his most visible antagonist, Bishop Manning. The spectacle mobilized constituencies large and small and ultimately “took the form of a plebiscite and was so monitored” by public officials. Like Bork, whose cause Reagan administration officials abandoned as soon as they registered the passions his nomination had unleashed and ran smack up against what Carey termed “the boundaries of the social,” Russell, too, was gingerly offered up as a ritual sacrifice by Mayor La Guardia, whose reelection campaign for a third term was fast approaching.

⁴⁴ Carey, “Political Ritual on Television,” 60.

⁴⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 39.

⁴⁶ Carey, “Political Ritual on Television,” 51.

While Russell may have differed from Bork in being a foreigner, it was that very characteristic that, in the context of America in 1940, allowed him to become a peculiarly magnetic center of the public imagination. Congress was just months away from passing the Smith Act, the first peacetime anti-sedition law since 1798, which required all resident aliens to register with the government. Russell wasn't a citizen and he wasn't applying to become one. He wasn't even planning to stick around for much more than a year. "[Bork's] personal body," wrote Carey, "was uninscribed by the categorical structure of the culture, so it was available to inscribe the moral and attitudinal boundaries of the social body." Though Russell may not have been, like Bork, "generically American,"⁴⁷ neither was he a Jew or a Catholic, a Fascist or a Communist, a Democrat or a Republican. In this, he, too, defied easy categorization. With one important exception, that is: he was British at a moment when Americans' associations with the British seemed to be dragging the country closer and closer to the brink of a world war. And in 1940 that's precisely what made him an all the more irresistible target.

RUSSELL'S MUTED DEFENDERS: THE CEREMONIAL ROLE OF THE PRESS

But the fact that City College was such a prime location and Russell such an ideal candidate for one of William Randolph Hearst's crusades fails to explain why, in the capital of the American left, a city with a half-dozen daily newspapers that were *not* owned by Mr. Hearst, so very little could have intruded to complicate Russell's ritual excommunication and rouse significant numbers in his defense. The answer has to do with the wretched state of the press in the wake of the Great Depression as well as with the fractured and weakened condition of the left following the previous summer's Hitler-Stalin pact and collapse of Popular Front politics.

For all its competing publications, the newspaper industry was undergoing a

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 61.

transformation more akin to our own era than to that of the penny or yellow press. Radio and newsreels had burst onto the scene in the 1920s at the same time that the spigot of new immigrant readers was abruptly shut off. This helped precipitate a string of newspaper failures, among them the *Globe and Advertiser* and the tabloid *New York Evening Graphic*. Pulitzer's *World* was forced to merge with the Scripps Howard paper the *New York Telegram*. Hearst's *New York Journal* and *New York American* had also consolidated into one, as had the *Herald* and the *Tribune*. Ad revenues continued to decline throughout the depression and, by the late thirties, radio was establishing itself as Americans' dominant source of often-riveting foreign news.⁴⁸

In the face of this crisis, newspaper publishers had circled the wagons and increasingly opposed New Deal programs and organized labor for fear of alienating their beleaguered commercial advertisers. In 1932 Roosevelt had won fifty-seven percent of the popular vote and the endorsements of forty-one percent of the nation's newspapers. Eight years later, when FDR ran against Wendell Wilkie, his popular support remained more or less steady but only a quarter of the newspapers now backed him, a reflection—albeit an imperfect one given the multiple anomalies of an unprecedented third term, a Nazi blitzkrieg, and an unusually skittish electorate—of just how out-of-touch they had grown.⁴⁹ In New York City, the recipient of one in every seven New Deal dollars, where the president enjoyed far greater support, only two of the nine metropolitan dailies—the smallest ones—endorsed him.⁵⁰

The *New York Post* was, in fact, the city's *only* liberal daily during the Russell affair.

⁴⁸ James Rorty, "Radio Comes Through," *The Nation*, Oct. 15, 1938, 374; see also David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976).

⁴⁹ Betty Houchin Winfeld, *FDR and the News Media* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 127-128; See also Lynn D. Gordon, "Why Dorothy Thompson Lost Her Job: Political Columnists and the Press Wars of the 1930s and 1940s" *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 292.

⁵⁰ Roosevelt won by nearly 750,000 votes, ten percent of the city's total population. "City Vote Spotty," *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1940, 26. The nine papers were the *New York Times*, *Post*, *Daily News*, *Journal and American*, *Sun*, *World Telegraph*, *Mirror*, *Herald Tribune*, *PM*, as well as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. The pro-labor daily, *PM*, sprang up to fill the liberal vacuum during the summer before the election, too late to do Russell any good.

Banking heiress Dorothy Schiff had “bought” the paper for one dollar the previous year, taking its assets and earning potential off the previous owner’s hands in exchange for paying off its sizeable debts. Schiff had no experience in the newspaper business and hired her husband as publisher. The oldest continuously published daily newspaper in the country was still in disarray and fighting for its life, and its defense of Russell’s appointment thus had limited force or impact.⁵¹

There was no shortage of support for City College among organizations like the ACLU and AFT, intellectuals, publishers, and others in the business of crafting language and ideas, but with rare exceptions they were given precious little voice in the popular press. Charlie Chaplin spoke up for Russell, as did philosophers of the stature of John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead. At a mass rally in the Great Hall, the legendary City College professor Morris Raphael Cohen, whose retirement had made Russell’s appointment possible, warned that if it were now rescinded, “the fair name of our city will suffer as did Athens for condemning Socrates as a corrupter of its youth or Tennessee for finding Scopes guilty of teaching evolution.”⁵² And Alfred Einstein famously remarked that, “Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities.”⁵³

If anyone beyond the scrappy little *New York Post* was going to put up a significant fight, it should probably have been the city’s other Jewish-owned daily, the venerable *New York Times*, but that paper’s defense of Russell was lukewarm at best. Only after months of silence did a

⁵¹ More surprising and significant was the support of the staunchly Republican *New York Herald Tribune*, perhaps because its publishers didn’t care to align themselves with Tammany Hall on this particular issue or to engage in Hearst’s hysteria and risk alienating their more liberal readers. The *Trib* published a letter by Sidney Hook (CCNY ’23) of the Committee for Cultural Freedom condemning “the hue and cry” over Russell as a flagrant contravention of the American Association of University Professors policy on academic freedom, but it had also reprinted Manning’s letter on its front page. See Sidney Hook, “An Attack on Freedom” Letter to the Editor, *New York Herald Tribune*, Mar. 9, 1940.

⁵² Morris Raphael Cohen, quoted in Edwards, 216.

⁵³ Alfred Einstein, quoted in Edwards, 215.

forceful letter from NYU Chancellor Harry Woodburn Chase finally compel the *Times* to take an editorial stand.⁵⁴ Chase pointed out that, thanks to the court ruling, “the real question” in the Russell case now transcended his individual appointment or personal views. The issue, he wrote, was one that had never before arisen in the history of American higher education: “whether, in an institution supported in whole or in part by public funds, a court, given a taxpayers’ suit, has the power to void a faculty appointment on account of the individual’s opinion.” If allowed to stand, he argued, the granting of such jurisdiction would constitute “the most serious blow struck at the dignity and independence of the teaching profession in my time.”⁵⁵

On the same page where it printed Chase’s letter, the *Times* now took pains to lament the “bitterness” and “great harm” occasioned by Russell’s appointment. And in what would later become a standard approach to trial-by-press at City College, the editors laid the blame on the bad judgment of numerous parties but tacitly reserved their fiercest condemnation for the victim. Regardless of his impressive qualifications, hiring Russell had been “impolitic” to begin with, the *Times* said, and was only asking for trouble. The judge’s decision, too, was “dangerously broad” and must be overruled lest it set a precedent. But above all Russell, the philosopher, had lacked the “wisdom” to withdraw his appointment in order to spare “this community” deep divisions “it can ill afford when the democracy of which we are all a part is threatened on so many sides.”⁵⁶

Russell responded that had there been only his own reputation and position at City College to consider, this would certainly have been the “more prudent” and “pleasanter” course, but

A great many people who realized that their own interests and the principles of toleration and free speech were at stake were anxious from the first to continue the controversy. If I had retired, I should have robbed them of their *casus belli*

⁵⁴ Edwards, 252.

⁵⁵ Harry Woodburn Chase, “Academic Freedom Withheld: Court Action in Russell Case is Viewed as Inimical to Education,” Letter to the editor (Apr. 16, 1940), *New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1940, 10.

⁵⁶ “The Russell Case,” Editorial, *New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1940, 10.

and tacitly assented to the proposition of the opposition that substantial groups shall be allowed to drive out of public office individuals whose opinions, race, or nationality they find repugnant. This to me would appear immoral...If it is once admitted that there are opinions to which such tolerance need not extend, then the whole basis of toleration is destroyed.⁵⁷

He closed by bringing his point closer to home for the *Times*'s cowardly publishers and his Irish Catholic adversaries: "Jews have been driven out of Germany," he wrote, "and Catholics most cruelly persecuted because they were repugnant to a substantial part of the community which happened to be in power."⁵⁸

Though instigated by the clergy and political class and fed by the virulence of William Randolph Hearst, the attack on Bertrand Russell was ultimately successful only due to the failure of the *Times* and other papers to stand up for basic fairness and democratic principles. "The newspapers seem to regard attacks from theological quarters as news," Sidney Hook wrote to Russell at the height of the conflict, "but not replies to them."⁵⁹ Their weak-kneed posture that placed discretion and the shunning of controversy above free speech and the separation of church and state not only abetted Russell's opponents in driving him, quite ceremoniously, from the community but also allowed the cancer that ceremony implanted in the body politic to metastasize.

⁵⁷ Bertrand Russell, "Bertrand Russell Explains: Gives His Reasons for Not Withdrawing and Ending the Controversy," Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, Apr. 26, 1940, 18.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Sidney Hook, letter to Bertrand Russell, Mar. 11, 1940, quoted in Weidlich, 35.

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2. HEARST & COUDERT BRING THE STIGMA HOME TO CITY COLLEGE

Instead of healing or catharsis, Russell's public repudiation succeeded in dividing the polity ever more deeply and led, in short order, to the Rapp-Coudert hearings, an excommunication ritual of an entirely different order. Where Bishop Manning and his cohorts had used the press, the pulpit, and the courts to wage a relentless campaign against Bertrand Russell and the Board of Higher Education, "lost in the turmoil," as Weidlich later put it, "were the people with whom the opposition was supposedly so concerned: the CCNY students themselves."⁶⁰ As a spectacle, Rapp-Coudert would do two things: put Communist subversion front and center and shift the focus of blame onto City College. For Carey, "quasi judicial" excommunication ceremonies like the Army-McCarthy, Watergate, and Iran-Contra hearings as well as those focusing on Judge Bork's abortive confirmation had another feature in common: "the individuals were relatively unimportant compared to the discovery process of the hearings themselves."⁶¹ After Bertrand Russell, no longer would a single, celebrity transgressor dominate the discussion. In his absence, the individuals would cease to matter and the institutions of City College, the College Teachers Union, the American Student Union, and the legislative committee itself would emerge as characters and excommunicates in their own right. At the center of it all, though rarely targeted or discussed in ethnic terms, was New York's thriving Jewish community and the dubiously deserving poor students it sent to the public's college.

While the debate about Russell's appointment was still going on, cries went up everywhere from the City Council to the New York State Senate for a thoroughgoing investigation of subversive activities in the New York City school system. One senator from

⁶⁰ Weidlich, 51.

⁶¹ Carey, "Political Ritual on Television," 45.

Staten Island asserted that longtime public servants were being forced to retire early because of their failure to conform to the pervasive leftist ideology among the college staffs. Within weeks of Judge McGeehan's ruling, the legislature voted to expand the mandate of a joint committee already set up to "study" the funding formulas for public higher education statewide and establish a special subcommittee to focus on this new question. These kinds of "investigations" were not without precedent. In late January the House of Representatives had voted 353 to 6 to re-fund Martin Dies's Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) for a second time. Its mandate, according to the *Times*, was limited to "[exposing] to the glare of publicity subversive organizations and activities which manage to keep technically within the law."⁶² After that, its chairman ominously predicted, "We can trust public sentiment in this country to do the rest."⁶³

New York was one of twenty-one states that were already demanding that teachers take loyalty oaths and had only recently instituted a law excluding Communists from civil service jobs, and it now set up its own investigative body modeled after the Dies Committee. Much as we've seen with the clergy, historian Ellen Schrecker has noted that, at the regional level,

Education was one of the traditional areas over which local and state politicians had some power, and doing something about eliminating Communist subversion in the state's colleges and universities was a congenial task for many of the conservative and mostly small-town and rural lawmakers who dominated these legislative bodies.⁶⁴

The new probe was placed under the direction of Frederick C. Coudert, New York City's only Republican state senator and co-sponsor of a bill the previous year that won the right of students

⁶² "The Dies Committee," Editorial, *New York Times*, Feb., 13, 1941, 18.

⁶³ Martin Dies, Jr., quoted in "The Dies Committee," 18.

⁶⁴ Schrecker, 68. In 1919, during the original Red Scare, the New York State Legislature established the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate Seditious Activities ("Lusk Committee") under the leadership of Senator Clayton R. Lusk of Cortland County. In 1936 the McNaboe-Devany Bill prohibiting radicals from teaching in the public schools had been followed by another joint legislative committee: "to Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of Law," ("McNaboe Committee").

to be released from public school for daytime religious instruction. Coudert was also Catholic, as was his subcommittee's star witness.

Only after an inquiry in the fall of 1940 failed to produce a witness to corroborate allegations of widespread Communist activity among the faculty and staff of Brooklyn College did Coudert's committee turn its attention to City College. Hundreds of students and faculty were interviewed behind closed doors with their more explosive allegations then leaked to the press. Finally, on March 6 and 7, 1941 assistant professor of history William M. Canning implicated fifty-four professors and administrators in Communist activity and, in public testimony, described their plans to recruit party members, infiltrate the college's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) with Communist students, and rewrite American history texts in a manner emphasizing class struggle. For some editors, that made the story front-page news.⁶⁵

Hearst's *Journal and American* took credit for having precipitated the entire investigation. "Quite alone among the newspapers of the metropolis," the editors wrote, their paper had denounced the way city colleges were being used as "recruiting stations," "soapboxes," and "breeding grounds" of Bolshevism. In an effort to reclaim the schools from sinister "red cells," they had waged a lonely, five-year battle against abusive "Communists," "their Fellow Travelers" and the "deluded 'liberals'" who made it possible for them to flourish.⁶⁶ The *Journal and American* published six more editorials during March alone—more than any other paper—decrying efforts to "pollute" what they called "the sources of education" with

⁶⁵ Competing for public attention with these developments were a major blizzard, a Manhattan bus strike, a strike at Bethlehem Steel (a major defense contractor), the passage of the controversial Lend Lease Act authorizing federal aid to British forces, and the overthrow of the pro-Nazi government of Yugoslavia and looming threat of further invasion throughout the Balkans and North Africa.

⁶⁶ "Campus Reds," Editorial, *New York Journal and American*, Mar. 10, 1941, 18.

disloyalty and un-Americanism.⁶⁷ Invoking the rhetoric of the “public interest” popularized over the previous decade, the editors suggested that institutions commandeered by narrow, murky interests were, through their own good offices and the force of public opinion, finally being brought back into the American mainstream. The colleges were “public property,” after all, and must be made to serve the cause of “Americanism” rather than “radicalism,” to “educate” rather than “indoctrinate.”⁶⁸

Editorial cartoons showed Uncle Sam leading a pair of schoolchildren through the “dangerous crossing” at “Subversive Avenue”⁶⁹ and the disembodied hand of the “investigation” pulling the lid off a classroom desk labeled “American Free Education System” sending the “subversive teaching” vermin scurrying for cover.⁷⁰ The *Journal and American* and other papers at times sought to enshrine the very things about City College they had been working to dismantle. City was a very rare exemplar of this suddenly “American system” of tuition-free education that had been under intense scrutiny—by Hearst and others—since the onset of the Great Depression. The Taxpayers Union immediately issued a call to cut off the ten-million-dollar budget of the municipal colleges until every last subversive had been smoked out. “A majority of the students [at CCNY] are Communists,” declared its president, Joseph Goldsmith, “and we are in favor of closing down the college until the situation is cleaned up.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Open Sessions! City’s College Board Should Meet in Public,” Editorial, *New York Journal and American*, Mar. 26, 1941, 18; “Bring Out the Facts,” Editorial, *New York Journal and American*, Mar. 20, 1941, 16; “Campus Reds,” 18.

⁶⁹ “Safe Conduct Needed,” Cartoon, *New York Journal and American*, Mar. 12, 1941, 18.

⁷⁰ Nelson Harding, “Drive Them Out!” Cartoon, *New York Journal and American*, Mar. 15, 1941, 18.

⁷¹ Joseph Goldsmith, quoted in Stephen Leberstein, “Purging the Profs: The Rapp-Coudert Committee in New York, 1940-42” in Michael E. Brown, ed. *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 95-96.

‘THE GAY LITTLE CAMPUS’: THE *POST* RISES TO THE COLLEGE’S DEFENSE

On Friday, March 14, one week after Canning made his allegations, Annette Sherman, a clerk in City’s registrar’s office, corroborated much of his testimony and said Morris Schappes and another instructor had encouraged her to lie to the committee. Over the next week Schappes, the only one of the accused to acknowledge having belonged to the party, was then fired by the College and indicted for perjuring himself by naming only three fellow Communists (none of whom could possibly be injured by his testimony). He was taken away in handcuffs and released on \$5,000 bail.⁷² The Board of Higher Education instituted a policy barring Communists and Nazis from teaching positions, and City’s new president announced his intention to cooperate fully with the committee, supplying it with a list of likely informers and shutting down a student-organized event at which Schappes was scheduled to speak. Thirty-three of the accused and their supporters gathered at a Harlem temple to denounce the inquiry and demand the right to face their accusers. More instructors and college officials were called to testify, denied belonging to the party and declined to inform on others and, in the months that followed, were fired for “conduct unbecoming” a city employee in separate administrative proceedings. Critics, including students and parents picketing the courthouse where the committee hearings took place, insisted they were nothing more than a veiled effort to eviscerate funding for public education.

For many, another key concern was the way the City College itself was being stigmatized in the press. From the outset Mayor La Guardia protested that the hardworking students and faculty oughtn’t be punished for the acts of a tiny handful of “undesirables,” and even committee co-chairman Frederick Coudert echoed those sentiments. The first Rapp-Coudert related item to

⁷² Those called before the committee were not permitted to have lawyers present, or parents in the case of students.

appear in the *New York Post* during March was not a leak from the committee but a letter from a student objecting to the way students had been “branded as Reds and the source of possible fifth column elements.” The author, Kenneth Glemby, argued that, “A militant group, a very small part of the student body has succeeded in giving City College this bad Reputation” and announced the formation of the Lincoln Society, “to confront the public with the true situation and restore the good name of C.C.N.Y.”⁷³

In an apparent effort to avoid stoking the fire, the liberal *Post* kept its coverage on the inside pages for more than a week after most other papers, its March 6 story noting not only Canning’s testimony that City College had “the banner section” of the New York Communist Party, but also committee counsel Paul Windels’s opening statement at the public hearings that his investigation had brought him “increased respect for the great majority of the faculty and students,”⁷⁴ and “he did not want to present a ‘distorted’ picture of the situation [there].”⁷⁵ A letter from another student complained that the “inconsequential” number of Communist teachers was being presented in such a “sensational manner” that it “has served to inculcate a feeling of distrust in the public for any and all graduates of CCNY,” including those, like its author, seeking employment. He concluded that,

It is only fair to the students of City College that The *Post* and other newspapers should emphasize the fact that the Communists at the institution are small in number and influence and that a vast majority of the student body and faculty is as American in thought and action as you will find anywhere in the United States.⁷⁶

The *Post* took up this challenge by launching a five-part series that stressed the

⁷³ Kenneth Glemby, “City College Group Forms to Wipe Record Clean,” Letter to the editor, *New York Post*, Mar. 3, 1941, 12.

⁷⁴ Paul Windels, quoted in “Witness Links 29 at CCNY to Red Party,” *New York Post*, Mar. 6, 1941, 6.

⁷⁵ “Witness Links 29,” 6.

⁷⁶ Maurice Maxwell, “City College Student Deplores Publicity, It Hurts Graduates,” Letter to the editor, *New York Post*, Mar. 12, 1941, 14.

ordinariness and wholesome qualities of students at each of the municipal colleges in turn. An editorial introducing the series assured readers that whatever validity the “startling testimony” might have had,

there is a far brighter and more admirable side to the picture...the great currents of campus life...flow on healthily untouched by comrade Stalin. More than that, the current of campus life is unique and exciting beyond the imagination of a city which has paid the bill but remained indifferent to the educational process for years on end.⁷⁷

The editors concluded that communism had been in “rapid decline” for years and “the campuses are pulsing with eager intellectualism, are doing serious work and have a college spirit no less loyal and fervent than tradition gives to the Ivy League. New York,” they said, “would do well to get acquainted with its own colleges.”⁷⁸

The story that inaugurated the series and first landed City on the *Post*'s front page offers a window onto the delicacy of sticking up for City College without appearing to condone Communist subversion. Because of this and the careful way the paper tried to reposition the institution in the public mind, it deserves to be studied in some detail. “The sun was shining,” it began, “and the wind hinted of spring on the gay little campus of City College,” thus complicating images of shadowy, Communist cells that had been proliferating in the metropolitan press.⁷⁹ It painted a portrait of students “swarming for lunch” amidst the neo-gothic architecture and “groups gathered in the great stadium, where thousands have thrilled to concerts and operas...” images of solidarity rather than division.

The authors went on to describe a campus “crowded” and “humming with a thousand and one affairs, just as hum the campuses at dear old Siwash and under the ancient elms of

⁷⁷ “Worthy of Our Pride,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Mar. 17, 1941, 14.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Maureen McKernan and Johnston DKerkhoff, “The Truth About New York City’s Collegians: CCNY’s Issues Are Library and Lunchroom,” *New York Post*, Mar. 17, 1941, 1. The several pages that follow discuss this article.

Cambridge.” In this way they trained their attention on the mass of college students rather than any one subculture, on a multiplicity of concerns rather than any single event or weighty preoccupation. They also announced their assessment that City held more in common with the fictional, provincial and American liberal arts college, Siwash, and with that bastion of classical learning, Cambridge University, than it differed from either of them. The buzz about an upcoming baseball game and a recent basketball victory over NYU further connected City to what would have been the prototypical image of college life for the *Post*’s working-class readers, few of whom had ever even visited a college campus. The navy blue lapels of students’ ROTC uniforms and the “hole in the ground” that was to be a library but would now serve as an armory showed a college community making the same sacrifices as other Americans.

Taken together, all this and the talk of movie stars and Hunter college girls, “of examination and credits and themes and lab experiments,” constituted a “typical day” and reminded readers of everything unexceptional about the college. Rather than announce that the institution was “tax-supported” or “free,” as the Hearst press was fond of doing, The *Post* noted that students actually paid anywhere from \$50 to \$200 a year in student fees. Only in the fifth paragraph did the authors hint at what made City unique: students brought their lunches from home in brown paper bags, worked during the day, studied at night, and relied on loans to see them through. But for all of that, they had their pride, “a fierce school pride” in spite of their proximity to “the sidewalks of New York,” where public pride was apparently a scarce commodity. And this “surprising” fact seemed to be the one on which the entire story hinged. When the reporters tried to steer the conversation towards the leftist American Student Union (ASU), they were promptly rebuffed. “To hell with that,” they were told. “Let’s talk about how we licked NYU 47 to 43. That’s what we’re excited about up here.”

City College students were portrayed as good soldiers, “trooping” to class and preparing for the common defense. The first of two photographs of the school showed a line of people approaching Shepard Hall’s neo-gothic entrance. “City College students *troop* toward the main doorway,” read the caption, which also helpfully pointed out the indecipherable bust of Abraham Lincoln at the edge of the frame. Next to that appeared a photo of four young men, one clearly in uniform aiming a rifle while an instructor knelt beside him and adjusted the position of his right arm. “ROTC is CCNY’s most popular activity,” it said underneath.

In an apparent paeon to scholastic traditions, missing was any hint of modern life. The two photographs could have easily passed for being WWI-era, in fact. To further accentuate this absence, *Post* editors included an entire photo essay about Hunter College student Shirley Roset’s day, in which the attractive coed was alternately portrayed against the backdrop of her school’s new skyscraper, examining a strip of newly developed film outside her school’s photo lab with her instructor peering over her shoulder, and back home serving coffee to her mother, who worked in a hat shop. “Like most City College students,” one caption noted in an awkward attempt merge City into the larger, seamless complex of more benign institutions that were to be profiled over the coming days, “[Shirley] is the first member of her immediate family to attend college.” The tension between the traditional and the modern is evidenced by Shirley at once fulfilling her role in the kitchen and discovering new technologies and quasi professional relationships, preparing to live a very different life than that of her mother. Perhaps because a portrait of a female student was deemed less threatening than that of one of her male counterparts, Shirley’s image both dominated the front page and overwhelmed the two small

pictures of City College mentioned earlier.⁸⁰ Taken together, the images painted a picture of the old and the new, of students, male and female, deferring to authority figures, meeting their traditional responsibilities and, at the same time, engaging in journeys of self-discovery.

'WE'RE AS GOOD AMERICANS AS ANYONE'

Mention of the Rapp-Coudert committee or the word “communism” came fairly late in the piece, but school pride inevitably manifested itself as righteous indignation. Students expressed “resentment... based on a fear that the people of New York will get the impression that the colleges are hotbeds of radicalism and the students are going to be made to suffer—the innocent along with the Reds.” The authors did the math and reported that the accused teachers represented four percent of the teaching staff. They then juxtaposed the ASU’s measly 224 votes in the recent student council elections and the Student Communist Party’s additional 126 with the more than two thousand garnered by the Independent Party, which had no political platform at all.

They described the scene as ASU president Joe Krevesky, “a youth with flaming red, bushy hair haughtily refused to tell a *Post* reporter how many members his organization claimed,” and was “jeered” by a group of fellow students. “We’re as good Americans as anyone,” one of them told the *Post*. “Look at our ROTC.” The article reported that City’s 2,200 ROTC members, including “virtually the entire freshmen class” represented the largest such group in the nation. It went on to discuss the lunchroom: “a mighty dingy affair” to which the student paper had devoted as much space in a recent issue as it had to the Rapp-Coudert Committee. Meanwhile, the Dramatic Society, a much bigger deal on campus than the ASU, was preparing a satire on the Rapp-Coudert Committee. New organizations were springing up to

⁸⁰ The emerging figure of the co-ed also introduced a hint of sex. Images show Shirley 1) disrobing, 2) apparently alone with an older man, and 3) in a roomful of young women with Venetian blinds “for privacy.”

get “publicity for non-radical activities at the college” and to challenge the ASU, which the authors located inside “a cubbyhole in the basement of Great Hall,” across the way from the Zionists and the Officers Club in a “subterranean Hyde Park ...[where] you may listen to all manner of talk.”

The abundance of student talk was what most distinguished the *Post*'s coverage from everyone else's. Not only were more students quoted there than in all the other papers combined, but the quotes made it clear that students were busy defining their own issues, engaging in debate, and responding creatively to the crisis. Much of the competing coverage assumed that students were vulnerable to the machinations of any professor with a sinister ideology. But the *Post* reported that it was chiefly the students who decided which professors held sway over their ideas. Economics professor John Hastings, for instance, was “the hero of the hour.” Students said he always stood up for them and was “not a Communist, not by a long shot.” For every Communist cell there was another subculture like the six “girls” who cleverly found a loophole through which to worm their way into the engineering division.

The *Post* dutifully listed the names of prominent alumni and City's place in the rankings for civil service and intelligence tests—still other sources of pride. It reminded readers that the college was opened in 1849 over and against the opposition of the Whigs, for whom “free education...was just so much nonsense,” and ended with an appeal to its readers' class allegiances:

There are few gleaming sports roadsters at City College; it is different that way. It also is different from Harvard and Yale in that a majority of the students are the first in their families to attain higher education.

As they come from the farms and villages to root for dear old Siwash, so they come from the sidewalks of New York to City College. And their spirit is deep

and long lasting because if there had been no Siwash and City College they probably would never have entered college.⁸¹

The initial sketch of City College drawn by the *Post*, then, began with a spring like day on a “gay little campus,” not far removed from “dear old Siwash” or “the ancient elms of Cambridge.” It turned on the pride and indignation of students caught up in a giant misunderstanding, and came to rest, finally, on another comparison, this time with Harvard and Yale where students grew up surrounded by expensive things, expecting to go to college like their parents before them. City represented a simpler, almost pastoral vision of community and individual promise. That vision was anchored by the photographs of young men in uniform and young women serving their elders coffee at the kitchen table. It was forward looking, but guardedly so. And lurking in the shadows always were the Whigs, the nay-sayers.

Over the next several days, the *Post* ran articles about Hunter, Brooklyn, and Queens colleges in which the brown paper lunch bag also stood as both a defining feature and a potential source of shame, but the bitterness engulfing “the other city college” was reported to be far from common on other campuses.⁸² Queens College, where no one at all had been accused, was described as “a country club... suburbia at its best.”⁸³ Central to this narrative was a group of popular young men from Manhattan’s Lower East Side who called themselves, facetiously, “the Dead End Boys.” “I didn’t want our students to think they were any different because they were nonpaying,” said College President Paul Klapper explaining his rationale for the “luxuriously outfitted” student lounge rooms. “I didn’t want them to believe their own school was just an educational factory.” Klapper also told the *Post* something that could easily have applied to City,

⁸¹ Maureen McKernan and Johnston D. Kerkhoff, “The Truth ... CCNY’s Issues,” 1.

⁸² Maureen McKernan and Johnston D. Kerkhoff, “Hunter College Girls Are Hardworking, Serious, Tolerant,” *New York Post*, Mar. 18, 1941, 1.

⁸³ Maureen McKernan and Johnston D. Kerkhoff, “‘A Big Happy Family’ Fits Queens College,” *New York Post*, Mar. 19, 1941, 1.

positioned as it is on a high hill overlooking the metropolis, something that might have been said about it, that is, but never was: “On a clear day, the students can see the skyscrapers of Manhattan...They get the spiritual significance of studying here for life over there.”⁸⁴ Queens was understood to be devoid of sidewalks, detached from the city in both space and consciousness, above the fray in a way a school like City College could never aspire to.

The final story in the series celebrated the achievements of alumni, offering a laundry list of Supreme Court justices, master builders, and other towering figures to have graduated from the school and recounting the “legend” of philosophy professor Morris Rafael Cohen.⁸⁵ In the same day’s paper, the editors published eleven letters of appreciation from members of the college community. “We are the stuff of which America is made,” proclaimed one student.⁸⁶ Another, a senior, bemoaned the way “the city colleges of New York have played second fiddle to the more glamorous schools.” “Your articles,” he wrote, “have done a great deal to help the New York public take their own students to their hearts.”⁸⁷

Finally, as if it hadn’t already made its own affections clear, on March 26 the *Post* published an odd little item of no more than three column inches about how the City College business students had declined to participate in a collegiate poll to choose “the young lady with whom [students] would ‘most like to be stranded for a year on a desert island.’” Editors of the school yearbook told reporters that it was a “juvenile” exercise. “It may be all right for fellows at Columbia or Princeton or Dartmouth to plan spending a year on a desert island,” they said, “but we hope to be much too busy for such frivolities.” The article contained no reference to

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Maureen McKernan and Johnston D. Kerkhoff, “CCNY Graduates Are Leaders in Their Fields: Roster of Alumni Reads Like Pages of ‘Who’s Who’,” *New York Post*, Mar. 21, 1941, Section 2, 1.

⁸⁶ Edward Miller, Letter to the Editor, *New York Post*, Mar. 21, 1941, 14.

⁸⁷ M. Diamond, Letter to the Editor, *New York Post*, Mar. 21, 1941, 14.

Communism or the college's current troubles, but it ran on the front page and was headlined "Sound Like Reds to Us."⁸⁸

THE 'J' WORD: EXCAVATING THE SILENCES

To a modern observer, what is most remarkable about the outcry over how students were being unfairly "branded" was that, while they were aggressively interviewed in closed session, neither the committee nor even the most rabidly anti-Communist newspapers actually targeted any for public exposure or opprobrium. Though widely acknowledged, the aspersions cast in their direction went, with rare exceptions like those of the extremist Taxpayers Union President Joseph Goldsmith, almost entirely unspoken. This begs the question of why and of what else was going unsaid.

Rapp Coudert Committee counsel Paul Windels later said, somewhat unconvincingly, that it was public pressure arising out of growing anxiety over student unrest and strikes that forced him and his colleagues to take what he claimed was their unexpected and unfortunate turn in the direction of the witch hunt that it quickly became.⁸⁹ Those disorders were rumored to have been orchestrated by Communists, he said, and committee sources cited unspecified "compelling evidence" that the party had taken an active interest in the city's school system.⁹⁰ They nevertheless deemed it to be in the best interest of the students to keep their involvement secret:

Evidence concerning the actual operations of the Communist Youth movement in the city's schools and colleges has been obtained through the testimony of student [informers] who were not afraid to tell the truth. Although no promises were made to withhold their names from public disclosure, we are of the opinion that

⁸⁸ "Sounds Like Reds to Us," *New York Post*, Mar. 26, 1941, 1.

⁸⁹ Paul Windels, interviewed by Owen Bombard, 1950, transcript, Columbia University Oral History Research Office, 145, quoted in Leberstein, 97.

⁹⁰ Lawrence H. Chamberlain, *Loyalty and Legislative Action: A Survey of Activity by the New York State Legislature 1919-1949* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1951), 80. Although Chamberlain does not name the "high-ranking" member of the committee staff to which he attributes the quote about "compelling evidence" nor describe the evidence, Leberstein argues persuasively that it was likely Windels; see Leberstein, 97.

their identities should be shielded. Revealing them would serve no useful purpose.⁹¹

The political scientist Lawrence H. Chamberlain, who later studied the practices of Rapp-Coudert and similar committees, noted that under this not-necessarily-false pretense of protecting the innocent and of themselves appearing above partisan rancor, the bulk of the committee's work was conducted beyond "the full glare of publicity" and with an almost willful reluctance to explain itself or be held accountable.⁹²

In the course of interrogating hundreds of students, teachers and college staff members, the investigation revealed not a single piece of evidence that a faculty or staff member had imposed his views on students or otherwise coordinated their activities. Indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that influence may actually have been exerted in the other direction, and it was, in fact, the student Communists who recruited professors into their ranks.⁹³ Such a scenario threatened to upend the whole *in loco parentis* framework, however, as well as the committee members' image as avenging angels and protectors of vulnerable young minds. A focus on students as autonomous political actors would not only have undermined the fundamental premise that the College Teachers Union was a primary font of conspiracy and propaganda making, it inevitably would also have targeted a group that, in background if not belief, was unambiguously Jewish.⁹⁴

Raining the full wrath of the state legislature, the metropolitan press and the institutions

⁹¹ "Interim Report of the Subcommittee Relative to the Public Educational System of the City of New York," 4, quoted in Chamberlain, 84.

⁹² Chamberlain, 83.

⁹³ Robert W. Iversen, *Communists in the Schools* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1959), 142, in Leberstein, 107.

⁹⁴ By some accounts as many as ninety per cent of all the students at City were Jews at the time, and the few Italian-Americans and fewer still African Americans were far less likely to come from families of socialists or trade unionists or to involve themselves in leftist politics, nor did they enjoy sufficient strength in numbers that would have fostered such activism.

of civil society down upon poor Jewish youth would only have called attention to the ethnic dimension of the conflict as well as to the bullying nature of the committee's work and brought up unsavory associations with what was happening in Europe. And it would have done precious little to contribute to what historian Stephen Leberstein has argued was, from the outset, the committee's dual intent: that of dramatically cutting public spending on education and discrediting the teachers unions that were its staunchest defenders.⁹⁵ Punishing Schappes and the other union activists who had so successfully fought back against Frederick "Umbrella" Robinson and saved the jobs of thirteen tutors and instructors he tried to get rid of in 1936 (every one of whom would be dismissed from City College in the wake of the Rapp Coudert "investigation" five years later) was an effective way of advancing these twin goals and vindicating the enemies of labor and public funding for higher education. Questions about how deserving or dangerous the recipients of that education might be was left largely to innuendo.

But accepting Leberstein's persuasive argument that the committee was gunning for budgets and organized labor does not dispense with the Jewish question. Though the majority of the faculty weren't Jewish, the bulk of the underpaid tutors and instructors involved in the labor and anti-Fascist movements certainly were. Schappes was not unusual in this regard. A Ukrainian Jewish immigrant, he graduated from City in 1928 and almost immediately started teaching there while doing graduate work at Columbia. The brothers Philip and Jack Foner, whose Russian Jewish father delivered seltzer bottles for a living, had grown up in Brooklyn and followed an almost identical trajectory, both of them teaching American history a crushing fifteen hours a week for as little as half what instructors had been earning for the same work

⁹⁵ Leberstein, 97-98.

before the start of the Depression and with no job security whatsoever.⁹⁶ Canning had once been a boarder in the home of the Foner brothers, who were apparently still living with their parents. So close in age and background and circumstance were these teachers to their students, in fact, that it must have occasionally been hard to tell them apart.

Radicalized by events in Spain and the rise of Fascism, by 1941, then, the troublesome Jewish student leaders of a few years earlier had managed to become teachers with job protections and collective clout in the budgeting process. As early as November 1939, after a thousand unionized teachers had marched on Albany and restored \$33 million of education cuts, some were making that connection explicit: Under the headline “Are Reds in Control of New York Schools?” Father Coughlin’s national weekly *Social Justice* ran lists of union leaders identifying all but a tiny fraction as “Jew” and “Jewess.”⁹⁷

The embattled teachers themselves were not shy about calling attention to the committee’s anti-Semitic pedigree and agenda. By their own accounting, of the forty-nine City College employees named before the committee, forty-one were Jewish.⁹⁸ Their literature pointed out how the venerable firm of Coudert & Coudert had once represented the Russian czar and included the Vichy regime among its list of clients.⁹⁹ It traced explicit ties between the “Coughlinites” and the “Christian Fronters” and the more staid members of the legislative committee. “Some will ask,” they conjectured, “Why do we raise this question? Anti-Semitism

⁹⁶ The Foners’ other two brothers Moe and Henry worked, respectively, in the college registrar’s office and as a substitute teacher in the public schools and also lost their jobs and were blacklisted as a result of the investigation.

⁹⁷ “Behind the Red Front: Are Reds in Control of New York Schools?” *Social Justice*, Nov. 6, 1939.

⁹⁸ “New York Schools Are Invaded: The Coudert Committee, A Spur to Anti-Semitism, A Shield for Pro-Fascists,” Pamphlet, (New York: Committee for the Defense of Public Education, June 1941), 11.

⁹⁹ Louis Lerman, *Winter Soldiers: The Story of a Conspiracy Against the Schools* (New York: Committee for the Defense of Public Education, 1941); Lerman was one of the suspended City College instructors, as was Lewis Balamuth, who conceived of this richly illustrated publication.

they will tell us, is a delicate subject; by calling attention to it you are really stirring it up.”¹⁰⁰

THE AMBIVALENCE OF GERMAN-JEWISH NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS

This was certainly the attitude of the more assimilated German Jewish owners of the *New York Times* and *Post*, who by tradition and outlook were deeply circumspect about doing anything that might make them appear to be championing Jewish causes. When Adolph Ochs, the son of German Jewish peddler, bought the *Times* in 1896, he declined to take a position on the Dreyfus Affair unfolding in France on the grounds that “the campaign would be at once attributed to a Jewish Interest.”¹⁰¹ Ochs had worked hard to both join the establishment and to transform the *Times* into the establishment newspaper, and though he served on the Executive Board of the Anti-Defamation League and rallied fellow publishers to refrain from printing some of the most hateful stereotypes of Jews, he was loath to do anything that might make his own paper stand out. In 1932 Ochs declined to attend a dinner honoring a prominent Jewish civic leader working to help the persecuted in Germany because, he said, “a strictly Jewish crusade may do more harm than good.”¹⁰² When he died in three years later, the paper had a policy against printing any letters about Hitler because Ochs couldn’t bear to represent all sides.¹⁰³ Such was the *Times*’s conflicted approach to taking a stand when it came to Jewish matters.

Ochs’s well born, German Jewish son-in-law, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, had attended Columbia College in the years just before the ethnic quota system began in the wake of WWI, when the perceived invasion by local Eastern European Jews was perhaps most intense, and it

¹⁰⁰ “New York Schools Are Invaded,” 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Adolph Ochs, Jr., quoted in Susan E. Tiftt and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1999), 95-96.

¹⁰² Arthur Hays Sulzberger, quoted in Gary Klein, “When the News Doesn’t Fit: The *New York Times* and Hitler’s First Two Months in Office, February/March 1933,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 142.

¹⁰³ Tiftt and Jones, 155.

was only there that he had first faced Anti-Semitism. After being rejected by several fraternities because he was a Jew, he refused to join the Jewish one because he opposed what he called “ghetto living or thinking or acting.”¹⁰⁴ Six years after becoming publisher, Sulzberger still hadn’t fully grown into his new role when the Rapp Coudert scandal struck. During those years he expressed fears that too many Jews in top jobs would become a further source of division and on that basis opposed a Jewish candidate for mayor and privately counseled FDR against nominating Felix Frankfurter (CCNY ’02) to Benjamin Cardozo’s seat on the Supreme Court, arguing that, regardless of his qualifications, the appointment would inevitably be perceived as filling another kind of quota.¹⁰⁵

Inside his own newsroom it was the largely Catholic makeup of Sulzberger’s “bullpen” of influential night editors that, during this period, gave rise to the oft-quoted joke that the *Times* was a paper owned by Jews, edited by Catholics, and written for Protestants.¹⁰⁶ Before the late thirties the paper had few bylines, but as they were introduced, Jewish reporters often made names for themselves only in abbreviated form. Both A. H. Raskin and A. M. Rosenthal began their lifelong careers at the *Times* as City College campus stringers in the thirties and forties, for instance, and both had the given name of Abraham, though for reasons that aren’t entirely clear, it never appeared that way in the pages of the *New York Times*.

This ambivalence was not unique to the publishers of the *Times*, however. In 1937 at the suggestion of one of his editors and much to his later regret, *New York Post* reporter Isidor

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰⁵ The assessment of Sulzberger’s slowness to take charge comes from Gay Talese, *The Kingdom and the Power: Behind the Scenes at the New York Times* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 12; On his positions regarding Jewish leaders see Tift and Jones, 216-217.

¹⁰⁶ Tift and Jones, 218; Talese, 58.

Feinstein changed his name, too, first to Geoffrey and then I.F. Stone.¹⁰⁷ Unlike the *Times*, the *Post* had a predominately Jewish readership, but it was nonetheless felt that Feinstein's political writings would be better received uninflected by race. Too many Americans bought the Nazi line that Communism was an ideology peddled primarily by Semites and that the Jews of Germany had somehow brought their persecution upon themselves. Attacks on Jews were often disguised as anti-Communist crusades. Perhaps for that reason Felix Frankfurter had argued in 1935 that

any effort to counteract imported or indigenous anti-Semitism must be conceived not as a defensive movement by a minority against the self-regarding efforts of others, but as the vindication of the very foundations of the government and the society of the United States. In other words, it is a truly patriotic effort resisting unpatriotic assaults.¹⁰⁸

In later years, the *Post's* new owner, Dorothy Schiff, would show the same wariness of appearing too Jewish or "self-regarding" and if her paper now seemed to take a proprietary interest in sticking up for the city colleges and their reputations it could only be accused of defending "old Siwash," and the fondest traditions of American college life.

The *Times*, for its part, was far fairer to the City College teachers and students than this tortured background might have led one to expect. As the newspaper of record, it included stories on a far wider range of events at the school than the other papers and in this way may have tempered the hysteria, at least among its own readers, without resorting to anything so self-conscious as a campaign. During the month the scandal broke, in addition to the names of the accused, the paper also listed those of thirty-five students elected to the student council, 133 ROTC cadets designated as officers, and 1,045 recent graduates. It reported on trends in college

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Patner, *I.F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 13.

¹⁰⁸ Zosa Szajkowski, "A Note on the American-Jewish Struggle Against Nazism and Communism in the 1930's" *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (1970): 279.

majors and job placement, the progress of the basketball, chess and fencing teams, and research going on in the education school and psychology department. In part due to the greater length of its stories, the *Times* quoted sources more directly and liberally than most other papers: Schappes proclaiming that he'd never used the classroom "as an agency for conversion," for example, and the history department chair declaring, "It's all news to me."¹⁰⁹ Prominent photographs of dozens of protesters picketing the courthouse where the hearings were taking place and extensive coverage of rallies for the accused teachers made it abundantly clear that the students and faculty weren't taking this lying down. "Mr. Canning's testimony," they quoted accused college registrar Kenneth Ackley telling a crowd of supporters, "and its further exaggeration in the press with headlines of 'Communist Ogpu Charged at City College' and 'Red Spy System' is a direct attack upon free higher education in New York aimed at undermining public confidence in the City College."¹¹⁰

Both of Ackley's references were to the *Times*'s most direct competitor, the *New York Herald Tribune*, which took a far more strident and sensational approach to the scandal. In the face of charges of "war hysteria" and "trial by press," the *Times*'s efforts to maintain its customary sense of balance and proportion and present an ordered, unspectacular worldview more congenial to the sensibilities of its middle-class readers can perhaps best be seen in an item among a Sunday roundup of the week's events that begins

High on a rocky bluff above Manhattan's St. Nicholas Park rise the buildings of City College, one of New York City's four free colleges. The buildings, erected from 1903 to 1907, were built of Manhattan schist obtained from a subway

¹⁰⁹ "City College Teacher an Active Red for 5 Years, He Admits Voluntarily: Called as Coudert Witness for Today, He 'Tells All' at Union Press Meeting—Denies Any Subversive Acts," *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 1941, 23; "40 Reds in City College Staff, Teaching 'Slanted,' Witness Says: Instructor Names 34, Including Registrar, and Lists 'Aliases'—Communist Youths 'Infiltrated' Into R.O.T.C.," *New York Times*, Mar. 7, 1941, 12.

¹¹⁰ "Accused Teachers Denounce Inquiry: Attacks on Two Locals as Red Linked to Drive to Plunge U.S. Into 'Imperialist' War," *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1941, 10.

excavation... some 30,000 students gather in day and evening sessions. Members of the instructional and administrative staffs number about 1,400.

Last week, before a crowded court room in New York's Supreme Court Building, fifty members of the City College faculty were accused of being Communist or of having at one time belonged to the campus units of the Communist party.¹¹¹

These numbers put the tainted few into perspective, and the *Times's* curious attempt at geodating marks the college as a quintessentially bedrock institution with a vintage linking it to the Subway, the city's circulatory system and most fluid, communal, and democratic space.

But for all their efforts to offer a more complete picture of life at City College and to counter some of the most sweeping and vicious attacks being leveled against it, even the *Times* and the *Post* were unflinching in their condemnation of Morris Schappes and the other accused teachers. "As the witnesses recited their glib, well-rehearsed stories," wrote accused professor Louis Lerman, expressing his colleagues' sense of utter abandonment, "the press went on a drunken spree...The 'respectable' *Times*, the 'liberal' *Post*, the rest of the 'free' press, all joined in a sickening orgy of red-baiting."¹¹²

In this respect they were only following the lead of Board of Higher Education Chairman Ordway Tead, who not long before had told the press that he was unconcerned about the presence of a few Communists on the faculty of Brooklyn College and saw it as a testament to that school's "vitality" but now did a 180 degree about-face. When the Board's newly appointed acting president, Harry N. Wright, endorsed the investigation and cancelled classes in order to urge students to petition the legislature for the appropriation of more funds for the committee's to continue its important work routing out the subversives and clearing the college's otherwise good name, both the *Post* and the *Times* fell in behind him, the former exalting the due process

¹¹¹ "The Nation: At C.C.N.Y.," *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 1941.

¹¹² Lerman.

by which the accused would eventually be allowed to answer any charges against them and the latter advocating not only a more thorough inquiry but the teachers' swift dismissal.¹¹³ In what would become an all too familiar pattern during the postwar era, a moment of budgetary crisis coupled with changing ethnic constituencies would precipitate a public scandal and necessitate the ritual sacrifice of a handful of social pariahs so that the college, or what was left of it, might live on.

THE NEW KID IN TOWN: *PM*'S SUBDUED CRY FOR JUSTICE

Alone among the New York dailies, only the fledgling *PM* treated the investigation as the highly suspicious and fundamentally anti-democratic piece of political theatre that it was. The paper had been created less than a year earlier, just as Bertrand Russell was forced to make alternative plans, by the visionary magazine editor Ralph Ingersoll. An imaginative, pro-union, pro-New Deal, anti-racist publication designed to fill the void of progressive newspapers in the city, *PM* was the sole paper in town to refuse, as a matter of policy, to engage in anti-Communism and the only one that neither accepted nor relied on advertising. In spite—or perhaps because—of the paper's reputation as a voice of labor and the fact that all of the accused were members of Local 537 of the AFT, *PM* was the only New York daily that never ran a single Rapp-Coudert story on its front page. Its news coverage was similarly measured and muted as if the editors were unwilling to play into the hype and lend credence or weight to the charges.

PM emphasized the coercive dynamics of the investigation itself and the lack of due process rather than the scandalous allegations. Headlines called attention to teachers' demands to tell their side of the story and face their accusers, to their being jailed, suspended, or fired, and frequently referred to the committee probe as a "Red hunt." Where Hearst's *Journal and*

¹¹³ "The Schappes Case," Editorial, *New York Post*, Mar. 18, 1941, 10; "Communist Teachers," Editorial, *New York Times*, Mar. 14, 1941, 20.

American took four paragraphs before awkwardly mentioning the committee's star witness/informer and failed to offer any conflicting accounts, *PM* took the opposite approach: "William Martin Canning, an instructor in history at City College," it began, "testified yesterday ...that he had been a member of the Communist Party for two years. Then he named 34 other members of the faculty..."¹¹⁴ The article placed Morris Schappes's testimony right alongside Canning's, giving no more weight to one than the other.

Though it did nothing to inflate the scandal's importance, no paper did more to foster public discussion. *PM*, which had broken new ground by printing radio and movie listings, sponsored a radio "news forum" on "The Rapp-Coudert Committee: Honest Inquiry or Witch Hunt?" with a panel of discussants from across the political spectrum.¹¹⁵ The investigation had become "something of a cause celebre" among multiple constituencies, the paper told its readers, and it received 183 letters on the subject, only "10 of which favored the activities of the committee."¹¹⁶ A former student insisted that accused history professor Jack Foner had "never, in any way, injected any Red propaganda into his lectures," one of the very rare references to anyone's actual teaching to appear in the popular press.¹¹⁷ Another identified only as "M.C." from the Bronx, assured readers that students like him were well aware that "nowhere else in the world can an education of the type offered by CCNY be obtained at the public's expense."¹¹⁸

Only after ample public discussion and the jailing, suspension and dismissal of several of the accused did editor Ralph Ingersoll finally weigh in to address what he saw as the key question: By what right could a community which didn't want its children taught by suspected

¹¹⁴ *PM*, Mar. 7, 1941.

¹¹⁵ In his study of *PM*, Paul Milkman discusses the social meaning of acknowledging the leisure habits of middle- and working-class New Yorkers and addressing them as consumers. See Milkman, 45.

¹¹⁶ *PM*, Mar. 28, 1941.

¹¹⁷ Anne Abramowitz, Letter to the Editor, *PM*, Mar. 21, 1941. The same letter also ran in the *Post*.

¹¹⁸ M.C., Letter to the Editor, *PM*, Mar. 21, 1941.

Communists rightfully deprive them of their livelihood without defiling the Constitution? Not until the very end of his argument did Ingersoll even mention City College by name. “Storming the halls of CCNY differs only in quantity and not in quality from the lynch-hunt storming of a little southern jail,” he concluded, thus locating his argument in a specific physical space and making clear that it wasn’t only the rights of individuals that were being violated but communal structures as well.¹¹⁹ The analogy to a peculiarly American form of *racial* injustice would scarcely have been lost on *PM*’s intensely ideological readers either.¹²⁰

Ingersoll later went on to examine the moral calculus justifying a suspension of civil liberties of the type represented by the interrogation, public shaming, and firing of the teachers. Only when there was a clear and overwhelming threat to the larger edifice of American democracy, he argued, were such extreme measures ever warranted. He had done the math, however, and determined that these putative “revolutionists” would have access to “Sally and Joe” for all of 1/40th of the 1/4th of the time they spent in school and still be up against a lifetime of “free capitalist democratic” indoctrination. Even at its worst, the ideological influence of a handful of subversive teachers and perhaps of schooling generally simply couldn’t be taken seriously as a threat to republic.¹²¹ “The halls of CCNY” were neither an all-important locus of American virtue nor the sole place where democratic values were passed down to future generations.

Though *PM* was unique in taking a principled position against the whole investigation, Ingersoll had ample reasons for choosing not to make Rapp-Coudert a personal cause the way he had with the city butchers who were injecting meat with water, the Bronx “slave market” where

¹¹⁹ Ralph Ingersoll, “Subversion in the Schools,” Signed Editorial, *PM*, Mar. 31, 1941.

¹²⁰ Though visually more interesting and better written than many of the other papers, at five cents a copy, the ad-free *PM* cost nearly double what they did and required a marked commitment on that score.

¹²¹ Ralph Ingersoll, Signed Editorial, *PM*, Apr. 1, 1941.

negro women were hired out as domestics for between ten and twenty-five cents an hour, or, the ongoing crusade in which his paper reproduced ads from the *New York Times* seeking white, Christian job applicants and juxtaposed them with photos of “Juden Verboten” signs in occupied Vienna.¹²² During its first weeks of publication rumors had circulated that *PM* was staffed by Communists, and without so much as warning his colleagues, Ingersoll had impulsively reproduced an anonymous flyer that identified twenty-two of them by name and with photographs in a full page house-ad that glibly dared the federal authorities to come and get them. “We are sending a copy of this slanderous document to the FBI,” the ad read, “asking that as soon as they have hunted down all the fifth columnists and have some time, they come and investigate us.”¹²³ Ingersoll’s staff had raked him over the coals for potentially putting them in danger, circulating the anonymous screed without even bothering to determine its veracity, source, or the motives behind it, not to speak of failing to give the men and women it branded as Communists a chance to respond to the charges.¹²⁴ It is likely that after such a wrenching episode at the delicate beginnings of his enterprise—one that cost him a writer of the caliber of Dashiell Hammet and a considerable amount of good will in his newsroom—the chastised Ingersoll would have lost his appetite for anti-anti-Communist crusades.

For reasons of bad timing, then, as well as a lack of resources, readers, and force of will, the new paper in town was poorly positioned to counter Hearst’s mass hysteria or mount an effective challenge to the committee and its work. Though there’s no evidence to suggest that Ingersoll shared the reticence of the Sulzbergers or the Schiffs when it came to espousing causes identified with immigrant Jews or the even more pervasive need to demonstrate one’s anti-

¹²² Milkman, 149-150.

¹²³ “Volunteer Gestapo,” In-house advertisement, *PM*, July 12, 1940.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Stewart, *News Is What We Make It: A Running Story of the Working Press* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 242.

Communist bona fides, the Connecticut Yankee had his own reasons to lay low on this particular issue. If Spain had been the place to defeat Fascism and put Hitler and Mussolini in their place, *PM* was probably the last best hope for standing up to the gathering forces of repression and anti-Semitism in the public schools and colleges of New York City. Sadly, it was not to be.

IN THE KLINKUS: STUDENTS & FACULTY SPEAK UP FOR THEMSELVES

For all the good it did them, students and faculty were neither cowed nor restrained in their response to the scandal, however, and they found a variety of imaginative ways to express their disapproval of the committee, President Wright, and the Board of Higher Education and to support their embattled teachers and colleagues. It took nearly two weeks for reality to sink in at *The Campus*, City's official undergraduate newspaper, but when it did the editors were unequivocal in their denunciation of what they saw as outright persecution, an attempt "to destroy our school by blackening our name and dragging us through the mud without a shred of reliable and open evidence."¹²⁵

"SCHAPPES JAILED!" read the giant banner headline that relegated the Beavers' recent victory in the National Invitational basketball Tournament (NIT) to the margins of the front page:

Last night Morris U. Schappes, a tutor in this college, was held in the Tombs, an indicted criminal, charged with perjury on four counts.

Today, as another day breaks, we, students at this institution of free higher education, have come to the sudden and shocking realization of the manner in which the attack on City College, conducted for these many months, has finally come to a head.¹²⁶

The Campus's coverage focused on the much-admired professor's actions and fate as well as

¹²⁵ Simon Alpert, "This is Persecution!" Signed Editorial, *The Campus*, Mar. 19, 1941, 2; Other regular student publications included the *Ticker*, the newspaper of the downtown business division; *Main Events*, the publication of the evening session; *Mercury*, the humor magazine, and *MICROCOSM*, the yearbook.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 1.

those of other individuals and the varied efforts of student groups to respond to the assault on the college's honor. The accused were not abstractions to these writers; they were familiar figures, mentors, and friends. "Strange thing about the Rapp-Coudert smearings," noted a student reviewing a new book by one of the Foner brothers, "So many of the instructors being vilified turn out to be among the most popular teachers, the most able scholars we have."¹²⁷

From the very beginning, when a *Times* reporter overheard one student say, "Well I guess I'll go to class now and get infiltrated with some Red propaganda," students had approached the crisis with a wry sense of humor, and as events unfolded they found that parody became their most effective weapon.¹²⁸ A column in *The Campus* described an imaginary brawl between Morris Schappes and former president Robinson, and a tongue-in-cheek letter to the editor condemned the "libelous and slanderous attacks" made against the college lunchroom, a perennial object of derision. "These attacks have been made by the Bolsheviks in the school who are peeved because vodka and borscht are not on the menu," it said.¹²⁹ The editors implored Senator Coudert to call off his crusade and focus on the committee's original mandate: "We invite you to eat 'lunch' in the student lunchroom," they wrote. "And we will be glad to have you inspect the cracks in our ceilings and our dangerously overcrowded Chemistry laboratories."¹³⁰

The Drama Society developed a Rapp-Coudert-themed "Skitsophrenia" production, and perhaps the most creative and biting response of all came in the form of *The Campus*'s own, one-page April Fools edition, "*The Klinkus*." Its banner headline read, "CCNY Now a Prison." The lead story, "25,000 'Red' Students Jailed by Board of Higher Parole; '*Klinkus*' Prints Secretly,"

¹²⁷ "Accused History Teacher Writes Study of Civil War," Review of *Business and Slavery* by Philip S. Foner, *The Campus*, Mar. 25, 1941, 2.

¹²⁸ "Canning is Called a Red 'Imposter'," *New York Times*, Mar. 8, 1941, 8; The source for this is likely a "stringer," himself a City College student. The *Times* routinely used campus correspondents during this period.

¹²⁹ Arnold Rosen, Letter to the Editor, *The Campus*, Mar. 25, 1941, 2.

¹³⁰ "Dear Senator Coudert," Editorial, *The Campus*, Mar. 25, 1941, 2.

reported that in response to calls from the Taxpayers Federation, Father Coughlin, and Bishop Manning, the Board had “transformed the City College into the City City Penitentiary for incorrigibles, traitors, conspirators, and other undesirables.”¹³¹ Here, again lingered the unspoken, but ever-present specter of the guttersnipe. And in a between-the-lines nod to the institution’s evangelizing role, a letter home from one of the City City convicts discussed Thursday night’s liturgical music concert, “part of the campaign to culturize us.” “It was beautiful, Mom,” the inmate wrote, “all us boys marching in, two at a time, like they taught us.”¹³² Still another item described the six-hour interrogation of a fictional student until he finally caved: “‘OK, boys,’ he stammered breathlessly, ‘Ok, so I did it! So what! You can’t do anything to me. I *did* sign that petition against the Rapp-Coudert Committee.’”¹³³

In the months that followed, as the focus of activity shifted from the investigative committee to proceedings of the Board of Higher Education to suspend and ultimately dismiss those “exposed” teachers who declined to resign of their own accord, the faculty, too, drew on its creative resources for combating the smear campaign. They produced heavily researched pamphlets documenting the committee’s ties to anti-Semitic and proto-Fascist organizations and the hidden agenda of the Catholic Church, published a book that drew on the talents of the greatest American illustrators of their generation, a collection of Morris Schappes’s *Letters From the Tombs*, and even composed and performed musical comedy. In the wake of their suspension without pay, the Foner brothers mischievously renamed their band “Suspended Swing” and performed songs at benefit rallies in their support and Borscht Belt summer resorts. “If Wright is Right,” went one of their songs, referring to the red-baiting, censorious City College president,

¹³¹ “CCNY Now a Prison,” The lead story, “25,000 ‘Red’ Students Jailed by Board of Higher Parole; ‘Klinkus’ Prints Secretly,” *The Campus*, Apr. 1, 1941, 2.

¹³² Aloysius, “City City Con Pens ‘Brieffele der Momma’,” *The Campus*, Apr. 1, 1941, 2.

¹³³ “Gonif, Grilled Sings,” *The Campus*, Apr. 1, 1941, 2.

Then wrong is right
And dark is bright
And day is night.
If Wright is right, no need to fight for logic or for knowledge.

But if Wright is wrong,
Then wrong's still wrong.
Reason triumphs in life and song.
If Wright is wrong, our guys belong back in City College.¹³⁴

Along with public figures like Richard Wright and Theodore Dreiser, hundreds of professors and college presidents from around the country spoke out in defense of academic freedom. Students refused to return to the suspended teachers' classrooms until they had been reinstated, walked out of classes en masse, picketed the Board of Higher Education, and circulated petitions. But the broad public support they sought never coalesced. Schappes had been a "test case" to see what would happen if one teacher admitted having belonged to the Party but declined to name names.¹³⁵ In the face of the certain joblessness they knew awaited them if they followed his lead or refused to testify altogether, the others had made a corporate decision to deny, often untruthfully, the allegations. Though their approach was completely understandable given the pressures they were under, the cloak of anonymity and pseudonyms under which Schappes and others had operated as editor of the union newspaper, members of study groups, and political activists, as well as the apparent lockstep duplicity with which they now answered the charges against them only reinforced the public's impression that something conspiratorial, totalitarian, and unworthy of truth seekers and tellers was indeed at work. All this militated against any broader sympathy they might otherwise have drawn upon.

¹³⁴ Norman Franklin, "If Wright Is Right," *Play It Again, Sam: Songs of the Labor and Progressive Movement of the 1940's*, Labor Arts, <http://www.laborarts.org/exhibits/playsam/exhibit.cfm?id=12> (accessed Mar. 30, 2011).

¹³⁵ Moe Foner, Interview, 71.

CONCLUSION & AFTERMATH

The repudiation of Bertrand Russell and investigation and purge of dozens of suspected radicals from the faculty and staff of City College and the failure of New Yorkers to stand up for the institution and the principles of free speech and association in both instances must finally be understood as an expression of shifting power relationships between the city's Catholics and Jews, a cultural and political backlash set against the backdrop of a looming World War. City's thoroughly Jewish student body and increasingly Jewish faculty, together with their burgeoning independence and ability to organize and resist efforts to rein in public spending represented a much broader threat to the interests that had traditionally controlled such institutions and the jobs that went along with them. To those disenfranchised groups, Russell, Morris Schappes and the other accused teachers, and City College itself were symbolically useful in their attempt to reassert that control. In the face of a relentless onslaught by the clergy, the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst, embattled Tammany Hall politicians, and the collective forces of reaction, the working-class *New York Post*, still in the process of reinventing itself and its natural constituency; the slow-footed, establishment *New York Times*; and even the fiercely independent upstart, *PM*, were willing to go but so far in sticking up for the institution or the Jews. In the end, the college's president, the Board of Higher Education, and many of these, the city's more progressive voices, all of whom might have been expected to speak on the accused teachers' behalf, instead offered them up, not once but twice, as a kind of human sacrifice in the hopes of forestalling more serious institutional damage and social division, affirming shared values, and preserving City College's reputation.

Why the college appeared, to some, to be such a crucible of moral corruption and political subversion and, to others, to be the focus of such cruel misunderstanding and attack has

never been fully explained. That it was “tax supported” “public property” made it fair game. And whether one considered the predominant threat to be coming from Communist cells or red baiters, the fact that the institution was rooted in people’s minds in the bedrock of the city, symbolically tied with the streets, sidewalks, and subways of New York all seemed to give the damage to both its soul and its honor a particularly universal and alarming quality. The committee’s “storming the halls of CCNY” was, depending on how one viewed it, an unwarranted violation of a sacred civic space or a commando operation to rescue the students taken hostage inside. Either way, it was as if for many City College represented the polity itself.

Underneath all the rhetoric, lay the question of whether City was involved in “lavish spending” that served a narrow agenda at odds with that of the proverbial American public and whether its guttersnipe student body constituted the truly deserving poor. Not everyone seemed to believe that the school occupied a particularly special place in the constellation of institutions of higher learning, but there was widespread consensus that if something was indeed “rotten in the state of the largest of the four free colleges which the city’s taxpayers support” it was the special duty of citizens, politicians, and newspaper editors alike to rout it out once and for all.

Though too late for the accused teachers, three events during the latter half of 1941 would ensure that the growing anti-Semitism and anti-Communist hysteria and persecution that had gone hand-in-hand would soon abate, the first was Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, which suddenly cast the Communists in a new light in the world historical struggle against aggression and intolerance. The second was the Brooklyn Dodgers’ capture of the National League pennant for the first time in twenty-one years and the resulting “subway series” against the Bronx Bombers. The third, of course, was the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Together those events would largely eclipse New Yorkers’ petty differences and draw them closer together.

Had the committee waited just a little longer to do its work, it is likely that far fewer lives and reputations would have been destroyed.

As it was, it would take forty years for the college to formally apologize to the professors and staff members it fired, whose contracts it failed to renew, or who were forced to resign in the midst of a no-win situation.¹³⁶ Blacklisted, many had seen promising academic futures aborted and never taught again. Others were forced to change their names in order to build distinguished careers, often far from New York City.¹³⁷ Unlike the victims of the Feinberg Law in the 1950s, none received any retroactive pensions or compensation. In its 1981 resolution, the CUNY Board of Trustees pledged “diligently to safeguard the constitutional rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association and open intellectual inquiry of the faculty, staff and students of the University,” but by that time, more than one fresh new scandal would have already played out across the front pages of New York’s newspapers, many of the same kinds of symbols and racially coded rhetoric would have again been marshaled, and many more scapegoats would have been offered up to appease an uneasy public and restore to the college its good name.¹³⁸ And there would be still more tabloid scandals and public excommunications to come.

¹³⁶ The numbers of victims vary. At the close of 1941 the Board of Higher Education committee set up to act on the Rapp-Coudert findings had formally dismissed seventeen City College teachers for having perjured themselves by denying their party affiliations, eighteen more were still under suspension, six had been denied reappointment, and seven had resigned while facing charges, a total of 48. *Minutes of the Board of Higher Education*, 1941, 415-417; In Rudy, 452; Others put the number who lost their jobs at “over fifty.” See Carol Smith, et al., “Rapp-Coudert Committee,” in *The Struggle for Free Speech at CCNY, 1931-42*, panel 22, City College Libraries, <http://www.vny.cuny.edu/gutter/panels/panel20.html> (accessed Mar. 27, 2011); Stephen Leberstein further points out that those named but not fired by 1942 were subsequently investigated by the Pat McCarran’s Senate Committee on Internal Security, which took on, Robert Morris, one of the Rapp-Coudert committee’s investigators, and “presumably his unfinished business as well.” See Leberstein, 119.

¹³⁷ The Rapp-Coudert episode had all kinds of other fallout as well. In addition to its chilling effect and the damage to the lives of the informers themselves, Max Yergan, the first negro professor ever to teach in the city colleges and a colleague of Paul Robeson was not reappointed in the shadow of the investigation. His inaugural course in African American history was staffed by another negro instructor and, in what may have been an effort to appease the Harlem community, Kenneth B. Clark was also hired the same summer, the first negro to teach in the sciences.

¹³⁸ Board Of Trustees of the City University of New York, “Minutes of the Meeting of Oct. 26, 1981,” 105.

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II. EJECTED FROM THE GARDEN

*Allagaroo, garoo, gara
Allagaroo, garoo, gara
Ee-yah, Ee-yah, Sis Boom Bah
Team! Team! Team!*¹

—Traditional City College cheer

*When they hit that base drum with Allagaroo, garoo, gara, there weren't eighteen thousand City College alumni in the audience, but they were all screaming. So they belonged; they drummed their way into the mainstream.*²

—Sportswriter Jerry Izenberg, 2010

*I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here!*³

—Police Captain Louis Renault just before collecting his winnings from the croupier of Rick's Café Americain in the film *Casablanca*, 1942

*Basketball's latest—and most revolting—scandal, the fixing of three City College hoop stars, has kicked the whole town in the stomach. It hurt New York where it lives because City College is New York.*⁴

—New York World Telegram & Sun, 1951

¹ Traditional City College cheer, quoted in Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

² Jerry Izenberg, Interview with author, Oct., 4, 2010. Beginning in 1951, Izenberg was a sportswriter for the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the *New York Herald Tribune* and a lifelong friend of many of the Championship City College basketball players.

³ Captain Renault (Claude Rains) in *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1942.

⁴ Robert H. Prall, "Campus Darkens as CCNY Stars Go Into Eclipse," *New York World Telegram & Sun*. Feb. 19, 1951, 3.

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In 1947, City College celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its founding amidst the greatest expansion of higher education in history. With the example of German soldiers from the First World War still fresh in their minds, America's postwar planners had faced the grim prospect of hundreds of thousands of veterans coming home to jobless futures. Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, in 1944, guaranteeing returning vets full tuition at any American college or university that would have them. Factory and dockworkers like Henry Kissinger and Daniel Patrick Moynihan who had started out studying nights at City College used their military service and the provisions of the G.I. Bill to transfer to expensive New England universities, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had never dreamed of going to college at all also started signing up. The G.I. Bill radically transformed the popular image of college as the exclusive preserve of elites and gave a new character and urgency to the impulse to provide young people from all social strata access to higher education.

It was in this context that President Truman proclaimed City College a model of "real democracy in action." "As long as there are institutions like the City College," he wrote on the occasion of the centennial celebrations, "where a boy or girl without means can receive an education without regard to race or creed, the nation will be the richer."⁵ Two days later at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, Jackie Robinson crossed Major League baseball's color line. In the wake of WWII and the Nuremberg trials, Jews, women, and Negroes were redoubling their claims of full participation in public life. And with the Cold War and the American Civil Rights

⁵ Harry S. Truman, quoted in "City College Week Will Start Today," *New York Times*, Apr. 13, 1947, 20. "Girls" were still barred from studying in the day session of the college's Liberal Arts division, however, and the student body remained eighty-five percent Jewish.

Movement beginning to take shape, nowhere would they assert those claims more forcefully than in the arenas of public education and sports.⁶

This section examines City College's historic 1949-'50 championship basketball season and the point-shaving scandals that rocked the college, the city, and the nation the following year in the context of these epochal transformations. On the one hand, the multiple triumphs of the "Cinderella team," made up entirely of players who were Jewish or Negro, signaled the arrival into the mainstream of a multi-ethnic, urban working class, what the *New York Times* would later call "a vindication of the democratic process."⁷ By the same token, however, revelations of rampant cheating unleashed a tremendous backlash and raised questions about who constituted the deserving poor. The same sportswriters, coaches, college and public officials who first held them up as archetypes of rough-and-tumble, city-style competition and boundless American opportunity were just as quick to scapegoat the accused basketball players for the good of the institution, the greater polity, and the status quo.

Though they were not alone in fixing games, the seven City College players convicted of consorting with gamblers to manipulate scores bore a disproportionate amount of both the symbolic weight and the real-world consequences. Players from other teams, coaches, local sportswriters, college officials, law enforcement, not to mention every bookmaker and fan who ever laid down a bet, were all deeply implicated in the scandal. And yet, for all the finger pointing and righteous indignation about the general state of public morals, it was the players who bore its brunt and, by extension, students of a particular class and ethnic cast whose

⁶ It was the day after Robinson's Major League debut that City College alumnus and benefactor Bernard Baruch coined the term "Cold War" in a speech before the South Carolina House of Representatives. 1947 was also the beginning of *Briggs v. Elliot*, one of the cases that came to be bundled under the name *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, the case that first called for equal educational opportunities for Negro students and that famously marshaled the doll studies of City College psychology professor Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie Phipps Clark.

⁷ "The Cancer of Sports," Editorial, *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1951, 24.

worthiness was called into question.

GRACE, TEAMWORK, & THE QUESTION OF WHOSE FLAG TO SPIT ON

The consequences for City College were more ambiguous than those of other scandals. No one lost his job this time, nor did anyone challenge the institution's core mission or right to exist as they so often had—and would continue to—at other critical junctures. The city's Board of Estimate had only recently approved the purchase of the adjacent Manhattanville College campus, which would soon nearly double the size of City's physical plant. And on the eve of the revelations of cheating, the Board of Higher Education succumbed to organized pressure from women to at long last allow them to enroll in the prestigious uptown, liberal arts division. Apart from no longer remaining a national phenomenon on the basketball court, everything seemed to point to City enjoying the same kinds of growth and prosperity affecting colleges and universities nationwide.

At the same time, however, Manhattanville's very flight to the suburbs presaged a larger postwar cultural shift among middle class whites away from America's cities and the people who lived in them, a shift that was by then already well underway. The basketball scandals of 1951 and the den of iniquity that was then Madison Square Garden gave a dramatic focus to the suspicions that underlay this tendency and revived lingering doubts about the extent to which Jews and Negroes could ever be fully assimilated into the American mainstream. That the trial, conviction, and sentencing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (CCNY '39) and of the latter's City College classmate Morton Sobell for selling nuclear secrets to the Soviets coincided with the steady stream of arrests of City's seven star basketball players only served to reinforce longstanding perceptions of the school as a breeding ground for disloyal, self-dealing guttersnipes. At the same time thirty million Americans tuned in on their very first television sets

to watch, live from New York City, the grand finale of a year's worth of traveling Senate hearings on organized crime and a hitherto unknown entity called the Mafia. In the popular imagination a scandal over college kids "dumping" a few basketball games—most of which they won anyway—was forever tied to deep-seated fears about Communist conspiracies, mobsters and racketeers, rising juvenile delinquency, and the overall deterioration of urban life.

This had been one key reason why it was so important to so many people for New York to win something big and why it was so crushing to see that victory tainted by the very thing it had sought to vindicate. For students, meanwhile, the double championships had thrust not just their city but also their school into the national spotlight and added a key dimension that had been missing from their college experience. No matter how solid the training City provided, for at least a generation few students had come there by choice. Always there hung over them the stigma of being both unable to afford the tuition at other, more prestigious schools and being unwelcome there in any case. For all the high rhetoric that surrounded the college and all the illustrious alumni it produced, until recently even its brightest students had few other options than to attend what was, after all, a dingy, overcrowded, commuter school with a second-rate faculty and an almost total absence of traditional American college life. Unlike its tiny handful of Negro students, the Jews who made up the vast majority of City's student body had long been excluded elsewhere not for any perceived want of intelligence, but rather because they lacked the requisite "character," collegiality, and well-roundedness ascribed above all to college athletes.

Suddenly they had shown the rest of the country that they could compete in more than just math, science, and accounting courses and could do so with preternatural teamwork and grace. Even without the customary athletic scholarships, well appointed field houses, alumni donors, and fawning, one-newspaper towns, these grubby children of immigrants and

descendants of slaves had managed to defeat the scions of the prairie and the American South. They were on track to represent the United States in the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki when every single one of them was publicly disgraced.

Mort Sheinman (CCNY '54), a freshman sports reporter for *The Campus* at the time, later compared learning of the first three players' arrests to receiving word of John F. Kennedy's assassination, a defining moment for his generation. Sheinman was in Madison Square Garden a few days later when an as-yet-unindicted Floyd Layne led what was left of the City College team to an improbable victory over Lafayette. He recalled the unprecedented thousands of students who turned out in a massive show of solidarity and the sense of bitterness among a group of them who drifted over to Times Square after the game and found that the final score wasn't up in lights on the news ticker. "When we got arrested it was up there," they complained. "Why isn't it up there now?" Sheinman remembered, too, how bereft he felt when, less than a week later, detectives pulled Floyd Layne out of class, as well as the sense of his own personal misfortune upon realizing that he would probably never sit in the Garden press box again. "I'm back in the goddamn gym like I was when I covered the basketball games for Roosevelt High School," he said. "It was no big deal to go to the gym and cover a game with players who [were] no longer in the headlines all over the country."⁸ This was the common mix of reaction among the students: a sense of having been disappointed and betrayed by the players, but not *only* or even principally by the players, a feeling of being misrepresented and misunderstood and, finally, of no longer sharing in something of national importance or being part of that "team of destiny."

Of the New York college teams that called Madison Square Garden home, only City's, the reigning national champions, would lose its entire starting lineup to the scandal, and only the

⁸ Mort Sheinman, interview with author, Feb. 25, 2010.

Catholic St. John's University would emerge entirely unscathed. That it was a Tammany-Hall-backed, Irish Catholic district attorney who led the investigation and the *New York Journal-American* that, once again, broke the story was no coincidence. New Yorkers of every variety were so wrapped up in college basketball, that for a politically ambitious district attorney and a Cardinal bent on protecting and shoring up Catholic institutions at the public's expense, the investigation's focus became, in the words of sportswriter and a lifelong friend of several of the accused players, Jerry Izenberg, a question of "whose flag are you going to spit on?"⁹

The *New York Post* had by this time come into its own as a great liberal metropolitan newspaper and voice of working class Jews, but even the *Post* was too deeply involved with the coaches and the larger enterprise of Garden basketball, not to mention too committed to preserving City College's reputation, to risk standing up for a handful of morally compromised young men and fully acknowledging its own and other's complicity and deep contradictions. On the contrary, *Post* reporters, editors, and the upwardly mobile readers they spoke for felt betrayed by the underdogs they had so assiduously championed and, like the college's own officials, chose to hang them out to dry and circle the wagons rather than to examine their youthful transgressions as symptomatic of more pervasive, systemic forces. In later years alumni and documentary filmmakers would continue to distort and memorialize the same events as triumphs and betrayals of biblical proportions and steadfastly refuse to acknowledge any broader responsibility for the human consequences of a city's and a tribe's desperate quest for status and acclaim.

SPORTS, ASSIMILATION, & GROUP LOYALTY

With its mythmaking, iconography, statistics, and folklore, media scholar Donald Parente

⁹ Izenberg interview.

has called the institution of sport “perhaps the most stylized and widely participant ritual of contemporary life and therefore a major vehicle through which meanings are developed and communicated.”¹⁰ Seen in this way, it is at once a great stage upon which social dramas are enacted and “little more than a derivative of the structures and policies of the entertainment and communications industries.”¹¹ What was being communicated from within the maw of the smoke-filled Madison Square Garden arena in the 1950s, in other words, were a series of narratives about the ascendancy of particular groups of Americans as well as a ritual affirmation of the values of the larger society. As early as 1907, as City was preparing to move into its new campus on Hamilton Heights, reviewers for the *Architectural Record* sneered at unrealized plans for athletic fields just south of the college buildings: “The all work and no play which makes Jack a dull boy does not seem to have the same effect on Abraham,” they wrote and speculated that sports facilities might ultimately prove “too purely a luxury for the city to afford to even these pampered minions of the public school system.”¹²

The antecedents for the outpouring of civic pride and outrage that accompanied the triumphs and disgraces of 1950 and ‘51 can be traced at least as far back as 1917, when City College beat a Yale team that included the sons and grandsons of two former American presidents. The *American Hebrew* called it “a striking example of real American democracy...[in which] victory, ever in league with the most powerful battalions, finally rested with the immigrant boys, the red-blooded aristocrats of America’s future.”¹³ Such victories held special meaning because it was precisely on the pretext that the children of Eastern European

¹⁰ Donald Edwin Parente, “A History of Television in Sports,” PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1974, 6.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 5.

¹² “The College of the City of New York,” *Architectural Record* XXI, no. 3 (Mar. 1907): 179.

¹³ *American Hebrew*, Jan. 15, 1917, quoted in Levine, Ellis Island to Ebbets Field, 75.

Jews lacked interest and ability in athletics, one of the cornerstones of what was then known as “college life,” that blue-blooded institutions like Columbia and Yale were fast devising new methods of excluding them.¹⁴ No one could deny Jewish students’ ability to hold their own against other groups academically, yet they remained stigmatized by what a group of Harvard students argued was “their poor hygiene, competitiveness, and ‘disdain for athletics.’”¹⁵

American Jews had a vested interest in combating this stereotype, what the Jewish sports historian Peter Levine later described as the widespread belief that they

were unassimilable because they belonged to a weak and alien race whose people historically rejected physical pursuit in favor of religious and intellectual study. Mixing both apology and explanation, celebration of Jewish athletic accomplishment and encouragement [of] participation [was] aimed at eliminating doubts about the potential of Jews to become normal, productive Americans.¹⁶

This kind of Anti-Semitism is best understood not merely as a set of assertions about the negative characteristics of Jewish people, however, but rather, in Anthony Julius’s formulation, as “a way of imagining Jews, a pernicious, elaborate fiction.”¹⁷ Such fictions nonetheless become constitutive of new realities that in turn spawn the construction of still other fictions, as in the opening lines of Ernest Hemingway’s 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*:

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton.¹⁸

¹⁴ By 1919 Columbia’s Jewish student population had exceeded 40 percent. See “May Jews Go to College?” Editorial, *The Nation*, June 14, 1922, 708.

¹⁵ William T. Ham, “Harvard Students on the Jewish Question,” *American Hebrew*, Sept. 15, 1922, 402, quoted in George Eisen, “Jewish History and the Ideology of Modern Sport,” *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 514.

¹⁶ Levine, *From Ellis Island to Ebbets Field*, 15.

¹⁷ Anthony Julius, quoted in Eisen, 497.

¹⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner’s, 1926), 3.

Before basketball supplanted it in the 1930s, boxing had been a principal vehicle through which Jews proved themselves athletically and an alternate route into the universities. “Jewish boxers used their fists during a certain evolutionary phase of the Jewish community,” wrote historian George Eisen. “Their children moved on to basketball, tennis, golf, swimming and gymnastics.”¹⁹ But the goal was rarely glory or monetary reward. “Involvement in sports in a society where sport as a social institution is held in high esteem, in many ways is a form of belonging to and being accepted by the ‘great tribe.’”²⁰ Hemingway’s character never feels like a Jew or an outsider until he arrives at Princeton and it is there that he takes up boxing—as a means, not an end in itself.²¹ He emerges both a champion and with his nose permanently flattened—an improvement, we’re assured, but in Eisen’s interpretation at least he remains, by virtue of his bad faith, “the ultimate outsider”²² In spite of his prowess in the ring, Robert Cohn is an “interloper” who refuses to live by the “code.” He knocks his rival, the bullfighter, down but not out; his heart just isn’t in it. He declines to go fishing with the boys, too, thus repudiating “the traditional frontier values that made America great.” He even gets sick at the sight of blood.²³

These kinds of questionable motives and divided loyalties were often suspected of Jewish athletes in the early part of the century. In 1929, fresh out of Monroe High School in the Bronx, Hank Greenberg, who would become the country’s first Jewish sports superstar, actually turned down a contract to play for the New York Yankees so he could attend NYU. Later, as a first baseman for the Detroit Tigers he publically wrestled with whether or not sit out a crucial post-

¹⁹ Eisen, 521.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 514.

²¹ For more on this see Pierre Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class,” *Social Science Information* 17, no. 6 (1978): 838.

²² Hemingway, 3; Eisen, 514.

²³ Eisen, 493.

season game that fell on Rosh Hashanah. By then, basketball had become the Jewish sport and for the first time the International Olympic Committee had included it in the 1936 summer games in Berlin. The undefeated Long Island University (LIU) team was two-thirds Jewish and widely believed to be a shoo-in to represent the U.S., but the players decided not to play in the qualifying trials in protest of Nazi policies.²⁴

Though they were more reluctant to bow out of competition for reasons of faith or principle, Negro athletes had followed a similar trajectory in using sport to achieve greater social acceptance. Jesse Owens's four gold medals in Berlin and Joe Louis's first-round knockout of the German fighter Max Schmeling in 1938 were widely seen as a repudiation of the Nazi theories of racial superiority. After Pearl Harbor the diversion of manpower to the war effort, created a vacuum that previously ignored and reviled Negro athletes rushed to fill.²⁵ As players and fans rallied around the flag and raised money for war bonds, longstanding taboos about interracial contests and teams were severely tested. Satchel Paige's Negro Baseball All-Star Team got the chance to play exhibition games against Major League champions and similar boundaries were transgressed in other sports. By the end of the war, when Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to play in the Major Leagues, nearly all the major college teams outside of the South already had at least one Negro player.²⁶ Robinson's Ebbets Field debut was the climactic event in this taboo-shattering process.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION & CITY'S OTHER 'DISMAL APPURTENANCES'

But even if figures like Greenberg and Robinson helped bring people together and express their shared aspirations, they were still larger than life. Like Joe DiMaggio, Robinson

²⁴ Rafael Medoff, "A basketball team that stood up for the Jews," *The Jewish Standard*, Aug. 7, 2008.

²⁵ Donald Spivey, "The Black Athlete in Big-Time Intercollegiate Sports, 1941-1968," *Phylon* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 121.

²⁶ *ibid.*, n20.

was an import from California with little connection to the city or its neighborhoods. Brooklyn-born Jack Newfield described how years later he felt compelled to fact-check some boyhood friends' story about going to meet Robinson's train from Philadelphia and following him into the subway; he simply couldn't believe that Jackie Robinson ever rode the subway.²⁷ While New York had no shortage of its own local heroes, one of the things that made the City College team unique was that, by definition, every single player had to be a hometown kid, a product of the city's high schools and neighborhood courts. "You saw them at the candy store drinking malteds," recalled sports announcer Marty Glickman. "They were the boys. You could talk to them. They were part of the group." "They had played stickball," said *New York Post* sports columnist Maury Allen (CCNY '53). "They had played punchball. They had played basketball when there was snow on the ground in the New York City parks, and now they were the best in the world, so the reflected glory meant so much to each of us." "The Yankees were from another planet," explained Sheinman. "These guys were from my neighborhood."²⁸

Although the college was something with which people could both identify powerfully and admire from afar, it was nevertheless devoid of glamour and suffered from a chronic inferiority complex. "Why go to Podunk College when the government will send you to Yale?" said *Time* magazine referring to the new opportunities afforded by the G.I. Bill.²⁹ For many of its students and faculty City College was worse than Podunk. An article in the *Saturday Evening Post* by Stanley Frank (CCNY '30)—one of dozens of similar pieces timed to coincide with the college's 1947 centennial—described a "cheerless campus" full of "grave intellectuals" less than

²⁷ Jack Newfield, *Somebody's Gotta Tell It: The Upbeat Memoir of a Working Class Journalist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 36.

²⁸ Marty Glickman, Maury Allen, and Mort Sheinman, quoted in *City Dump, The Story of the 1951 CCNY Basketball Scandal*, directed by George Roy and Stephen Hilliard Stern, HBO, 1998.

²⁹ "S.R.O.," *Time*, Mar. 18, 1946.

happy about their situations.³⁰ “This isn’t what we imagined college would be,” the senior class president told him. “Almost all the fellows are here because they can’t afford to go anywhere else. They come with a let-down feeling, and conditions are so disappointing that they just don’t care about anything the college can give them outside the classroom.”³¹ A newly enrolled Navy veteran added,

You expect to have broader experiences when you go to college, but you see the same kind of guys in the same sort of buildings. Going to college is like being in the service. You know, free education, like defending your country in a time of war, is a fine thing for somebody else, but nobody likes it for himself.”³²

Nor was the famously democratic college always viewed as above the fray when it came to racial prejudice and petty discrimination, yet another reason for students, faculty and alumni to feel bad about themselves. Although City had an ostensibly non-discriminatory admissions policy and, with LIU shared a tradition of recruiting Jewish and Negro athletes for its teams, the college had nonetheless found itself in the headlines for a variety of questionable practices throughout the 1940s.³³ City Councilman and Harlem pastor Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the only Negro on that body, built his 1941 campaign in part around the college’s failure to employ a single Negro faculty member in spite of its being situated in Harlem.³⁴ Such criticisms gained both scope and force in 1946 when the newspaper *PM* published evidence that anti-Jewish quotas were being widely enforced in local dental and medical schools and that City College was

³⁰ Stanley Frank, “College Without Frills or Fun,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Apr. 26, 1947, 34-5.

³¹ Ray Kaufman, quoted in Frank, “College Without Frills,” 35.

³² Milton Ettinger, quoted in Frank, “College Without Frills,” 35.

³³ Rosen, 54.

³⁴ The Council formally asked City College President Wright to respond to the charges. Dr. Kenneth Clark, later of *Brown v. Board of Education* fame, was appointed to the psychology department that same year, the first Negro full-time faculty member in the college’s nearly one-hundred-year history. Powell himself had spent three academically troubled semesters at City in the 1920s before flunking out and transferring to Colgate University.

itself discriminating against Jews in hiring, tenure, and promotions.³⁵ New York was the only remaining state without a public university and charges of discriminatory admissions and hiring practices on many campuses, including City's, were the primary impetus for creating one.³⁶

Then, just as the college was gearing up for its centennial celebrations, two City College officials were accused of discriminating against Negroes and Jews. William C. Davis, director of Army Hall, the makeshift dormitory on Amsterdam Ave. for former soldiers studying at City and other area colleges, was charged with peremptorily assigning Negro students rooms with others of the same race. After an investigation, Davis, who was already under a cloud for allegedly anti-union and anti-Negro practices, was removed from his post and reassigned to teach in the economics department, where he had recently been granted tenure.³⁷

Meanwhile, William E. Knickerbocker, chair of the romance languages department, was being investigated for a variety of anti-Semitic practices involving hiring, promotion, and the awarding of student honors. Years of protests and investigations, including one demonstration at a Garden basketball game and conflicting reports from a faculty committee, the City Council, the American Jewish Congress and the Board of Higher Education, culminated in April of 1949 with a student referendum and five-day general strike, the first in the college's history, calling for the immediate suspension and public trial of both Knickerbocker and Davis. Seventeen students were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct and the story made the front page of the *Times* and several other papers, complete with photos of students being hauled away in a paddy wagon. "The city at large has reacted to the Knickerbocker mess with a certain discomfort," wrote

³⁵ Much of this, it was widely argued, had to do with a policy against "academic inbreeding" or hiring one's own graduates. Since the vast majority of Jewish PhD's and other prospective faculty hires were, by virtue of decades-old quotas in force at other schools, City College graduates, such a policy had the unintended consequence of compounding those injuries. See, for example, Morris Freedman, "The Knickerbocker Case: A Report on the Current Crusade," *Commentary* 8 (1949): 124.

³⁶ Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism*. The State University of New York was founded in 1948.

³⁷ The faculty committee that investigated and censured Davis included both Clark and coach Nat Holman.

Professor Morris Freedman (CCNY '41), “both because of the issue of anti-Semitism and because the College was once again in the news.”

It was perhaps natural that an accusation of anti-Semitism should turn out to be explosive—at this time, at this place. If Jews in America may be said to have a secular college, that institution is City College...Before the war the Knickerbocker case, or any controversy involving anti-Semitism at the College, could never have achieved such virulence...Jewish students accepted the existence of anti-Semitism as another of the dismal appurtenances of the College that had to be contended with, like the dirty cellar lunchroom and the filthy washrooms. It is only today, against the background of the newsreels of Buchenwald, that many have come to feel that anti-Semitism is something one must automatically “crush” whenever the opportunity offers...³⁸

For Freedman, Knickerbocker “became a symbolic victim who had to be destroyed,” a victim of the mass desire to take a belated stand against Hitler, of “mob spirit” and “ritual scapegoating.” He further suggested that William Davis had, unlike Knickerbocker, willingly played the role of the “fall guy.” Whether or not one agrees with these conclusions, it seems clear that “Such ‘cases’ [do] provide a thrilling drama in which participants and spectators can purge themselves of conflicting emotions.”³⁹

³⁸ Freedman, “The Knickerbocker Case,” 123, 120, 128.

³⁹ The drama at City College reverberated with other dramas playing out in the newspapers, the state legislature, and popular culture. *Gentleman's Agreement* topped the bestseller list in 1947, for example, and its film adaptation swept the Academy Awards the following year; the hugely popular *Jackie Robinson Story* was released in 1950. See Russell E. Crawford, “Consensus All-American: Sport and the Promotion of the American Way of Life During the Cold War, 1946-1965,” PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 2004, 228, n72.

1. ALLAGAROO! THE DOUBLE CHAMPIONSHIP & THE CRY OF THE CITY

College basketball would soon provide another opportunity for spectacle and catharsis. From the sport's very beginnings in the 1890s Jews had excelled at basketball, a game played in cramped, urban spaces with relatively little equipment and even less of the cultural baggage of sports like baseball and football. So accomplished were they, in fact, that when, after its 1917 defeat by City College, the Yale team continued losing, a faculty committee determined that it was due to the absence of Jewish players. A new coach was appointed for the 1922-23 season who recruited some and Yale went on to capture the national title.⁴⁰

Basketball's transformation into a national spectator sport can be dated to 1931 when Ned Irish, a sportswriter for the *New York World-Telegram*, helped organize an evening of local college basketball in the old Madison Square Garden to raise relief funds for the unemployed.⁴¹ From that experience and the earlier, possibly apocryphal one of the game Irish had been assigned to cover that was so crowded he had to climb through an open window of the college gym in order to attend, he began to see that the traditional venues for collegiate basketball could no longer accommodate the rising demand. In 1934 he organized a second, for-profit double header between Notre Dame and NYU in the first game and Westminster and St. John's in the second that drew over 16,000 paying customers. Irish soon quit his newspaper job to become a full-time promoter of Garden basketball, pitting local, largely Jewish talent against teams from the American heartland and guaranteeing the schools, as well as himself, a percentage of the gate

⁴⁰ Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 85-86. 1922 was also the year that Harvard's President Lowell openly announced a policy of ethnic quotas limiting the number of Jews, a policy that had been operating under the radar at Columbia and other schools for several years. See Stephen Steinberg, *The Academic Melting Pot: Catholics and Jews in American Higher Education* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1977).

⁴¹ The *World* and the *Telegram* had only recently succumbed to declining depression-era ad revenues and the competitive pressures of radio and newsreels, shedding hundreds of newspaper jobs in the process.

receipts.

Irish's early genius as a promoter is evidenced by the fact that until the scandals drove the colleges from the Garden and ended New York's reign as the national center of basketball culture nearly two decades later, the only games that didn't require scheduling a double-header in order to sell out all 18,496 seats were the contests between Notre Dame—"the fighting Irish"—and the Jewish NYU teams.⁴² Garden basketball flourished both as a showcase for different styles of play and as an elaborate forum for the city to enter into dialogue with the country, the Catholic with the Jew, the Negro with the Southern white.

Though rarely achieving national standing, under the leadership of the legendary coach Nat Holman, the City College team became the exception to the school's notably undistinguished record in intercollegiate football and baseball. Through the 1930s "the busy Izzies" as the team was then known won several league championships and in 1941 even advanced to the semi-finals of college basketball's most prestigious competition, the National Invitation Tournament (NIT), a Garden-based event, which a group of New York sportswriters created in 1938 before turning control over to a consortium of metropolitan colleges.⁴³ After 1941, their record was considerably more spotty, however, and by the end of the 1949-50 regular season a national AP poll ranked the Beavers, with their starting lineup of not-very-tall sophomores, as tied for twenty-seventh place, a seven-to-one long shot against top teams like Bradley and Kentucky.⁴⁴ They had made it through the season with an uneven but impressive seventeen wins to four losses and were the last of twelve teams chosen to compete in the tournament. But after they handily beat San Francisco State, the reigning champions, according to author Charles Rosen,

⁴² Izenberg interview.

⁴³ Izenberg interview. City's star player in 1941 was Red Holzman, who went on to play professionally for the New York Knicks and later coach them through their own championship seasons in the early 1970s.

⁴⁴ Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 15.

the sportswriters screamed their acclaim. Marriages were canceled, vacations were postponed, and honeymoons were spent at the Garden. An entire city suspended its disbelief and scratched the rash of anticipation. The Beavers were launched on a crusade. It was the ninety-seven-pound weaklings against a universe full of Black Barts. It was Snow White against Oil Can Harry. It was the poor against the rich.⁴⁵

Not until the second game, against the University of Kentucky, did what Marvin Kalb (CCNY '51) would later describe as “a cultural war” come into focus, however.⁴⁶ The City College team didn't just have a token Negro player or a pair of Jews, the two groups accounted for its entire roster, every one of them a product of the city's public schools and neighborhood basketball courts. Kentucky's team, widely considered the best in the history of the game, was recruited from across the United States using such instruments as lucrative basketball scholarships and campus “jobs.” What it lacked were ethnic or racial minorities of any kind. “The Kentucky team looked so all-American,” remembered Kalb, “like Aryan Gods.” Hannan Wexler (CCNY '52) called Kentucky's pre-game warmup “the closest thing to a Roman legion I had ever seen,” and compared its “perfection” to the “anarchy” at the opposite end of the court, where “you had chaos. You had a bunch of guys freelancing, bouncing it, no fancy drill, nothing to impress you... I said to myself, ‘We're gonna get killed.’”⁴⁷

Kentucky's coach, Adolph Rupp—a name whose echoes were not lost on the Garden crowd—was a well-known bigot. Holman suggested that his players make a “sportsmanlike” gesture before the game and shake their opponents' hands. “I watched as Floyd Layne [a black point guard] put his hand out,” Kalb recalled. “And this tall, blonde, gorgeous giant turned away from Floyd, which is exactly what Holman wanted: to get Floyd very upset, to get all of the other

⁴⁵ Rosen, *The Scandals of '51*, 82-83.

⁴⁶ Marvin Kalb, in *City Dump*.

⁴⁷ Marvin Kalb and Hannan Wexler, in *City Dump*.

players upset. And Floyd hissed out at the guy, ‘You gonna be picking cotton in the morning, man.’”⁴⁸ “It never happened,” Layne demurred. “They weren’t over friendly,” he said, “but we just played the game.”⁴⁹ Asked why Kalb would make up something like that, he declined to speculate, citing all kinds of different “agendas.”

But whatever was or wasn’t whispered between the players, City College defeated Kentucky by thirty-nine points, its worst loss in forty-six years of intercollegiate basketball. For Kalb this was a way of a saying, “Screw you, Aldolph Rupp. We are also part of this country. It’s not just yours, it’s ours, too.”⁵⁰ The next day the Kentucky legislature ordered the flag on the State Capitol flown at half-mast.⁵¹ After that the attitude of Stanley Cohen, then a Bronx high school senior, became, “Who cares what the odds are? The odds are for suckers. What you felt then was [that] five street kids from New York—three Jews and two blacks—were about to whale the shit out of Middle America.”⁵²

And that was what appeared to many to have happened. City’s “Cinderella team” went on to sweep the NIT and, after only four days’ rest, returned to the Garden to play in the NCAA. No team in history had ever won both tournaments. But for the second time in 10 days, they defeated top-ranked Bradley University from Peoria, Illinois, with all that city’s associations of Middle American wholesomeness (“Will it play in Peoria?”), to complete the unprecedented—and still unmatched—“grand-slam.”

⁴⁸ *ibid.* Holman also put in Negro center Leroy Watkins, who had never started a game before, for the initial jump ball. See Maury Allen, “I’ll Never Forget that CCNY Basketball Victory,” *theColumnists.com*, Mar. 20, 2006. <http://thecolumnists.com/allen/allen91.html> (accessed July 6, 2009).

⁴⁹ Floyd Layne, interview with author, Mar. 2, 2010. I had several telephone conversations with Layne, who has never spoken publicly about his role in the scandal, and met with him once in the lobby of his building near Yankee Stadium on Sept., 21, 2010, where for personal reasons he again declined to go through with our scheduled interview but chatted with me informally for several minutes.

⁵⁰ Marvin Kalb, in *City Dump*.

⁵¹ Rosen, *The Scandals of ’51*, 87.

⁵² Stanley Cohen, in *City Dump*.

In the pages of the *New York Times* the City College Beavers progressed from being a “basketball miracle” and “legend” that had “stirred the imagination of the sporting world” to become “a team of destiny.”⁵³ That destiny having now been realized, over 6,000 students amassed on the campus quad for a celebration with a 40-piece band. The *Times* described how cries of “Allagaroo!”, City College’s distinctive cheer, had echoed through the canyons of Manhattan into the night and quoted an unnamed, pipe-smoking professor saying that this was “the greatest thing that ever happened in the 102-year-old history of this venerable institution.”⁵⁴ As Norm Mager, who had to have his scalp stitched up in the locker room after an on-court collision with one of the Bradley players, sat taking a midterm exam—something the press made much of—President Wright piously told the crowd, “This team came here to study, not to play basketball...I want to point out that the players are given no financial assistance from the school and no scholarships to play ball, and they have not been imported to play ball. I am particularly proud of their high scholastic rating.”⁵⁵ At another rally the following day, St. John’s coach Frank McGuire proclaimed that “For years we have had to sit here and listen to out-of-towners tell us how good their teams were. But City showed them all this time. They upheld the city’s banner against the rest of the country and believe me, they did the town proud.”⁵⁶

These were the two most common notes sounded throughout the celebrations: (1) that these were students given none of the usual advantages, purely local talent, and (2) that their victory, all the more sweet for being authentically New York’s, not only belonged to the entire

⁵³ “Basketball Miracle,” Editorial, *New York Times*, Mar. 18, 1950, 12; Louis Effrat, “City College Now Favored for N.C.A.A. Title and Basketball Grand Slam,” *New York Times*, Mar. 27, 1950, 28. The latter term also appeared in other papers. See, for example, “City ‘Destiny Five’ Even Bet Tonight,” *Daily Compass*, Mar. 16, 1950, 25; and Sid Friedlander, “City, Bradley Picked Tonight,” *New York Post*, Mar. 16, 1950, 56.

⁵⁴ Irving Spiegel, “C.C.N.Y. Rallies, Parades Hail Basketball Feat,” *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1950, 43.

⁵⁵ Stan Isaacs, “6,000 Hail City Team at Victory Fete,” *Daily Compass*, Mar. 30, 1950, 24; Spiegel, “C.C.N.Y. Rallies, Parades Hail Basketball Feat,” 43. Noon classes had already been unofficially suspended once two weeks earlier for a rally celebrating the NIT championship.

⁵⁶ Stan Isaacs, “2,000 at Rally Hail CCNY’s Heroes Anew,” *Daily Compass*, Mar. 31, 1950, 24.

community, but was also a vindication of its relentless critics. A *New York Post* editorial, for example, took issue with Fordy Anderson, coach of twice beaten Bradley University, and his odd assertion that “I still think we have the No. 1 team in the country.” “Did he mean that New York is out of the country?” the editors asked before turning to “a greater question”:

How will future historians explain why in the year 1950 A.D. grown men and small children in this metropolis were heard murmuring and mumbling with strange ecstasy a word that appears in no dictionaries. Its origins are shrouded in mystery and its meaning no commentator can fully define. Yet it became the cry of the city and there is a weird gleam in our eye as we type it for perhaps the last time until 1951. Allegaroo!⁵⁷

THE POST CELEBRATES THE LOYALTY OF NEW YORK’S ‘WHIZ KIDS’

The *Post* was the most comprehensive in its coverage of the championship team, perhaps because it was so thoroughly a city paper—appealing to a lower middle-class readership that was roughly seventy percent Jewish and fifteen percent Negro, all but a tiny handful of whom lived in the five boroughs of New York City.⁵⁸ That the ownership and staff was also largely Jewish and it had been among the first mainstream papers to hire a Negro staff writer may also have had something to do with it. Still more important, however, sportswriter Sid Friedlander, a City College alumnus, had been alone in predicting the NIT outcome when the team was still seven-to-one long shot. Over as many days the *Post* now published extensive profiles of six “CCNY Whiz Kids,” each with photos of the player at home with his mother, wife or aunt.

The first in the series profiled Norm Mager, a substitute who had clinched the double-championship by scoring the winning basket in the final ten seconds against Bradley. It led with his mother’s ambivalence about his playing basketball at all and the nasty head wound he

⁵⁷ “Sis-Boom-Bah,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Mar. 30, 1950, 31.

⁵⁸ Bernard Lefkowitz, “Good-bye to Dolly’s *New York Post*: Did Mother Really Know Best?” *Present Tense* 4, no. 4. (Summer 1977): 54. Whereas more than a third of the readers of other metropolitan dailies were commuters, fewer than ten percent of *Post* readers lived in the suburbs.

received during that final game. Mrs. Mager's initial reluctance to let the skinny boy play in high school and her desire to see him go right into accounting after graduation, his newfound fame and prospects notwithstanding, further suggest a world in which young men still faced real physical danger. Mager was older than his teammates and had served in the Air Corps during WWII before resuming his college career at City. As the tournaments were heating up debates were raging in Washington about the sudden "loss" of China and the renewal of the Selective Service Act. Cold War hysteria was reaching a fevered pitch and the showdown in Korea lay only a few months off. Mager, *Post* readers would have readily understood, was the bench warmer called up to shed blood for the home team. He was also the typical City College mama's boy, living at home in Brooklyn, commuting an hour and a half each way on the subway every day and falling asleep over his books.⁵⁹

Rather than a call to service, the next day's story emphasized the many seductions of a world beyond drab City College and another kind of loyalty altogether:

"Pssst," said the guy in the Garden. "Wanna go out of town? Southern Conference? Big School. Duke maybe?"

"No thanks," said All-Scholastic Al Roth, the shot-maker who'd just led Erasmus Hall High School to the city championship. "I think I'd rather stick around."

The article went on to catalogue propositions from the corner druggist to play for a Mid-Western school and a letter from George Washington University offering free tuition, a job, and other perks. Over and over, Roth resisted temptation and opted to stick with his friends and family.

Came the big bid from Convent Avenue:

A meal ticket with a West Side hash house for a training table. A huge school with a cramped campus. An entrance exam, a stiff schedule, and basketball's toughest taskmaster as a coach.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sid Friedlander, "Mager...From Sub to Star," *New York Post*, Mar. 31, 1950, 56.

⁶⁰ Alvin Davis, "Roth... 'Fatso, the Brain,'" *New York Post*, Apr. 2, 1950, 29.

Roth told the *Post* that he considered himself “lucky” to have grown up across the street from P.S. 161 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and to have been able to practice on a full-size court. Now that the grand slam was behind him, readers were told, he would be playing for Union Temple, the Jewish War Veterans, and over the summer for one of the resort hotel teams up in the Catskills. The choice of City College was here used a sign not of membership in “the great tribe,” but rather loyalty to one’s own roots.

The third in the series emphasized both the diligence and ecumenical instincts of Ed Roman, “not a natural athlete,” who practiced in the neighborhood even during his downtime between tournament games. In the opening paragraphs Roman is described as being known for shoveling a circle from the snow on the pavement, lighting a fire in a nearby trashcan to warm his hands by and shooting hoops into the wee hours. He’s also a “better than B” student whose older brother is pursuing a doctorate in psychology. But perhaps the most resonant thing about the story is Roman’s acknowledgement that he didn’t appreciate being displaced from his hard won place in the “pivot” under the basket by Ed Warner. “I really resented it at first,” said Roman, who, unlike Warner, was white:

That was my spot—I played it all the time. And there I was on the outside looking in. During the tournaments, though, I actually came to enjoy playing outside. I think it’s made me a better all-around player and even improved my game.⁶¹

Though Roman never refers to Warner’s race, it’s hard to imagine that this wouldn’t have resonated with the *Post* readership’s fears of competition from and displacement by Negroes who were flooding into northern cities competing for increasingly scarce manufacturing jobs. At the same time, however, it spoke to their overwhelmingly liberal and pro-integration sentiments.

⁶¹ Leonard Schecter, “On a Roman Holiday—He Practices,” *New York Post*, Apr. 3, 1950, 50. The headline refers to the blockbuster movie of the same title starring Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck, a fairy tale about crossing class boundaries in reverse and life’s simple pleasures.

Roman's acknowledgment of how ceding territory to Warner enriched not only the team but his own style of play is reinforced by an anecdote about his getting into trouble for giving pointers to a Catholic St. John's player, "a friend," right before a game between the two teams, further illustrating not only his "good nature" but the long-term benefits of his multi-tribal instincts.

Such themes are harder to detect in the next day's profile of Floyd Layne. In fact, it's hard to imagine anyone but his mother reading it all the way through. Except for the lead paragraph and a separate little box that describes the young Negro athlete's enormous "grin," and how "articulate" he is, there is no exposition, just a jumble of unprocessed direct quotations rendered in suspiciously vernacular transcriptions ("I'll tell ya." "There were lots of 'em.>"). Taken together, they have the effect of making him seem anything but articulate. Layne appears to have had a bad experience at the Bronx's DeWitt Clinton High School: "I kept getting 'that feeling,' you know what I mean, like they didn't want me." He transferred to Benjamin Franklin: "That's in East Harlem and all the guys on the team were colored except Zeke Sinicola, give him a plug, too and I felt a little better." When the scholarship offers started rolling in Layne didn't feel comfortable with any of them.

So I tried City and was lucky to get in. Boy, that's a school, now! I can walk down Convent Av any time and maybe I don't know a soul. I can find a friend in half a minute, snap, just like that. I'm telling you that's a great school.

And that diploma! Sure I wanted to play ball, baseball, too—but I didn't want any old phoney degree. I wanted to work and they sure got me doing it. I almost got a B average. I NEEDED a little pushing.⁶²

Irwin Dambrot's profile features an oversized photo of him helping his wife, Pearl, wash dishes and describes their young marriage: how she abandoned college to support him and he chose City to be with her, his plans to go to dental school and their hopes of moving to a three-

⁶² Alvin Davis, "Floyd Layne's Solution—'We Just Grew Up,'" *New York Post*, Apr. 4, 1950, 64.

room apartment.

The series concluded with top scorer Ed Warner, the orphaned “Harlem kid” who came up through the church team and the Harlem Y. Warner was all set to attend LIU when he was approached by Layne, who’d played with him in high school and at the Y and told him about the great “setup” at City “and that the kids were really friendly.” Warner followed up with conversations with Ed Roman and assistant coach Bobby Sand, who told Warner that, with him on board, they’d have a “dream team” and “might even get to represent the United States in the 1952 Olympics. How about that?” This was the *Post*’s last word on the “CCNY Whiz Kids” and hinted at what they had to look forward to and at the transnational implications of their triumph.⁶³

‘SUCKER BAIT,’ THE CORRUPTION OF SPORTS, & EARLY WARNINGS

Ever since basketball began its transformation in the 1930s there had been rumblings about commercialization and unsavory influences. In the early 40s a high school math teacher perfected the point spread, a system of predicting not just who would win a game but by how much. Soon most newspapers were featuring the predictions (“Kentucky a four-point favorite over City”) of gambling syndicates (“the pricemakers”) in the leads of their stories and fans routinely went wild during the final seconds of games whose outcomes could not possibly remain in doubt. In 1944 a Madison Square Garden gambler approached a University of Utah coach before a game and proposed that he keep certain players on the bench at critical times.

The answer he got was a knuckle sandwich. According to author Murray Sperber, the incident attracted almost no press attention. It so violated the classical sports ideals promulgated by the media that even New York’s tabloid newspapers, then as now

⁶³ The basketball team representing the U.S. at the 1948 London Olympic Games, which captured the gold medal, included five players from the University of Kentucky and only one from a New York City team.

fascinated by underworld activities, did not mention it—even though sports reporters quickly learned about it.⁶⁴

But for Stanley Cohen it was *because* the coach’s dog-bites-man response conformed so completely to the archetype of the coach that the incident received so little coverage:

Peterson simply had done what any red-blooded college coach would have done under the circumstances. For it was, after all, 1944, a time when all of our heroes were cut to mythological dimensions...and who among us then would be the first to doubt the silent strength that beat in the great good heart of America?⁶⁵

That person would prove to be Forrest “Phog” Allen, coach of the University of Kansas basketball team, who the next year began publicly warning about the gamblers congregating in the Garden and other big-city arenas and of an impending scandal that would “stink to high heaven.”⁶⁶ Months later, police staking out an underworld figure suspected of fencing stolen goods observed two Brooklyn College players at his home. They confessed to fixing games, four players were expelled (a fifth, it turned out, wasn’t even a registered student), and a story nobody knew what to make of quickly died.⁶⁷

What criticisms there were of the seedy, racetrack-like climate at places like the Garden came from the margins. *The Campus*, for example, published an editorial in early 1948 noting a series of “incidents” including the one at Brooklyn College and others involving ticket scalping and “name calling brawls” with out-of-town teams. The editors called on college officials to seize control of an untenable situation brought on by the sport’s new “big-money” character: “College basketball has gone as far as it can go in Madison Square Garden,” they said, “without

⁶⁴ Murray Sperber, *Onward to Victory: The Crises That Shaped College Sports* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 287.

⁶⁵ Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 60.

⁶⁶ Forrest “Phog” Allen, quoted in Sperber, 288.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

resulting in complete disintegration of the players and the sport itself.”⁶⁸

The Negro paper the *Amsterdam News* printed a column the very week of the grand slam victory calling the Garden “the symbol, if not a cause, of the utter corruption of professional sports” and a major contributor to “the professionalizing of basketball, which is truly our national game.” The writer, Lester Granger, compared the putative national pastime to a sport he considered more innocent: “The kids play [basketball] because they love the game, not because they hope to be Robinsons or DiMaggios when they grow up,” he said. But that game, too, was being commercialized, “ruined.” He called the college teams “sucker bait for promoters” and decried “fake tournaments and heavy publicity bought from sports editors and reporters, phony press agent devices and headlined arguments between coaches” with “pot-bellied, cigar-smoking gamblers sitting on the sidelines.”⁶⁹

Still another paper on the fringes, Ted O. Thackrey and I.F. Stone’s *New York Daily Compass*, by far the most left of the daily papers, was even more forthright than that about what was going on.⁷⁰ One week before the first tremor in a basketball scandal that would soon reach a nine on the Richter Scale, the paper reported that bookies had stopped taking bets whenever “a certain local team” played in the Garden. Without naming names the story was dripping with

⁶⁸ Editorial, *The Campus*, quoted in “Garden Basketball Hit: City College Editorial Declares Game Out of School Control,” *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1948, 34. That same year the *Saturday Evening Post* reported that the Minneapolis Syndicate that provided gamblers nationwide with point spreads and odds “refused to quote figures for all New York [college] games.” See Stanley Frank, “Basketball’s Big Wheel,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Jan. 15, 1949, quoted in Sperber, 298. The following year Brooklyn born Dave Shapiro, co-captain of George Washington University’s team reported a bribe attempt before a Garden game and several fixers went to jail, but that, too, failed to capture people’s attention the way subsequent scandals would.

⁶⁹ Lester B. Granger, “Corruption of Sports,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 1, 1950, 14. It’s somewhat ambiguous what he means by “our” national game.

⁷⁰ *Compass* editor Ted Thackrey had been forced out of the *Post* in Apr. 1949 after he and Dorothy Schiff had an extended public disagreement over his support of Progressive party candidate Henry Wallace in the 1948 presidential election. The two divorced not long afterwards. See Marilyn Nissenson, *The Lady Upstairs: Dorothy Schiff and the New York Post* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 91-102.

innuendo.⁷¹

But the *Compass* was far from the only paper making these veiled, sarcastic references to something illicit that nearly everybody, it seemed, knew was going on. The same day that story appeared, *New York Journal-American* sports editor Max Kase paid a visit to Manhattan District Attorney Frank S. Hogan with a tip about a former LIU player named Eddie Gard who was rumored to be working as a go-between for gamblers and local players. Kase had been noticing the same kinds of oblique references in the stories his own reporters had been giving him. He had begun making discreet inquiries among his sources in the gambling world and then assigned his best crime reporters to investigate—independent of the sports desk. In exchange for an exclusive when the time came, Kase agreed to sit on the story and risk being scooped in order to allow Hogan and his investigators time to build a case against players from City College and other teams. The resulting exposé would later win Kase a special citation from the Pulitzer Prize board.⁷²

The day after Kase went to the district attorney with his suspicions, Hank Poppe, a recent graduate of Manhattan College, a small Catholic school improbably located in the Bronx, picked the wrong former teammate to approach and offer \$1,000 to help his team “dump” an upcoming game against DePaul University. Junius Kellogg, an Army veteran who’d grown up in the segregated South, was Manhattan’s first Negro player. He said no to Poppe, a star player who

⁷¹ Stanley Isaacs, *Daily Compass*, Jan. 10, 1951. Cohen says that Isaacs later wrote that “the coach of that ‘certain team’ (presumably Clair Bee) had shown him the [Jan. 10] column and advised that he shouldn’t be writing ‘stuff like that,’ that it was not good for the game,” quoted in Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 78.

⁷² Scholars have insisted that Kase’s outsider status to college basketball contributed to his breaking the story. What they fail to consider, however, is the possibility that Kase’s motives may have been less than pure. While he had limited interest in the game itself, Kase would certainly have been familiar with the way his sportswriter predecessor Ned Irish had managed to build an empire upon it. Kase was an entrepreneur who owned two restaurants. He was involved in the formation of the National Basketball Association and was apparently denied his piece of the action by Ned Irish. The year before breaking the story, he hatched a secret plan with NBA Chairman Maurice Podoloff to start a new franchise built around the City College sophomores once they graduated in 1952.

during a year's worth of scrimmages had never offered him so much as a "hello." And because he knew his scholarship was at stake if he didn't, Kellogg decided to report the attempted bribe to his coach.⁷³ Days later he was summoned to a meeting with Bronx detectives and agreed to name Poppe, wear a wire, and play along. When Poppe and his former co-captain were arrested the following week along with three professional gamblers, they admitted to having fixed games the previous season as well and lamented that they were the ones among so many to be singled out. Although the developments at Manhattan College were unrelated to his own investigation, Max Kase's relationship with the Manhattan district attorney enabled him to scoop the other papers, and not for the last time.

Coverage of the mini-scandal at Manhattan College quickly focused on Junius Kellogg and his singular heroism.⁷⁴ Arthur Daley of the *Times* lauded his "inherent decency," "high moral fiber," and "deep religious scruples." Daley, a Catholic, was shocked that Manhattan of all schools should fall prey to such corruption:

Everywhere you went yesterday the reaction was the same. 'No, not Manhattan College,' everyone gasped. The breath of suspicion had never as much as touched the Jaspers before. Vicious rumors and malicious aspersions had been carelessly cast in many other directions. But Manhattan, like Caesar's wife, had been beyond reproach...All scandals are ugly and this is a particularly vicious one because it touched the presumably untouchable.⁷⁵

But rather than explore the larger implications of such improbable revelations, Daley and other

⁷³ Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 84. Coming from the South, Kellogg had a sense of his own prospects that was necessarily more proscribed and with the Korean War having broken out the previous summer losing one's scholarship now had even more serious implications.

⁷⁴ In spite of being greeted by roaring crowds and receiving numerous official commendations, Kellogg never appeared flanked by his teammates or linked to any type of larger community. Even his surprise at what everyone else seemed to know was going on reflects his marginalization. Entman and Rojecki discuss this paradox in the context of late-century primetime network dramas where African American characters are given ostensibly stereotype-busting leadership positions that nonetheless distance them from the team and result in their coming off as taciturn and aloof. See Robert M. Entman & Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152-155.

⁷⁵ Arthur Daley, "Say It Ain't So, Joe," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1951, 34.

journalists opted to look the other way. Kellogg's canonization worked to reinforce the perception that whatever might be rotten in the state of college basketball could be kept in check by paragons of virtue within the ranks of players, coaches, and sportswriters.

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2. THE BASKETBALL SCANDAL BREAKS

If the sportswriters chose to sweep it under the rug, however, the confluence of the Manhattan College scandal and Max Kase's unrelated tip made it impossible for District Attorney Hogan to do the same. Thanks to Kase's information, Hogan's investigators decided to watch Eddie Gard and later to place wiretaps on the phones of several City College players as well as that of a gambler named Salvatore Sollazo. And because the Junius Kellogg episode had put the players and fixers on alert, investigators opted to move in quickly.

On Saturday, February 17, the team was returning from a game in Philadelphia when a New York City detective approached Holman on the train and asked him to gather several of his players on the platform when it arrived in Penn Station so he and his fellow detectives could quietly take them downtown for questioning without making a scene. Holman obliged. Then he apparently went home to bed. "I asked if I could go along," he told the *Post*, "but the detectives suggested that the District Attorney would prefer that I didn't. So I took the boys into a corner and told them to tell the truth. I told them that if their conscience was clear they had nothing to fear. Then I told Roman to call me when he got home. But Roman never called."⁷⁶ According to Jerry Izenberg, City was the only school that didn't immediately find lawyers for its players, and at 2:00 in the morning it had fallen to Holman to do that.⁷⁷ Most of them were in their teens, and even if they had murdered somebody it was incumbent on Holman and the institution to stand by them and ensure that their rights were protected.

In classic gangster fashion, photographs of Al Roth, Ed Roman, and Ed Warner being led

⁷⁶ Nat Holman, quoted in Sid Friedlander, "Holman Waited in Vain for Ed Roman's Call," *New York Post*, Feb. 19, 1951, 52. See also Zander Hollander, "Double Title Hollow Now to Holman," *New York World-Telegram & Sun*, Feb. 19, 1951, 22; and "Holman Shocked," *New York Journal-American*, Feb. 19, 1951, 18.

⁷⁷ Izenberg interview.

through the stationhouse with their heads bowed and collars turned up appeared in all the papers Monday morning. After more than ten hours of questioning without lawyers, all three had confessed to fixing the scores of three games earlier in the season—though not during the previous season or two national championships—and to collectively accepting over \$12,000 in bribes. In spite of the presence of LIU’s Eddie Gard, NYU forward Harvey (Connie) Schaff, and Salvatore Sollazo, the focus was clear: “The college with the concrete campus was in mourning today,” wrote the *World-Telegram & Sun*’s Robert Prall.

A great faith, a great trust had died overnight at the College of the City of New York.

Basketball’s latest—and most revolting—scandal, the fixing of three City College hoop stars, has kicked the whole town in the stomach. It hurt New York where it lives because City College is New York.

This is the subway college where grim earnest young men and women rise from the sidewalks to get a free, liberal education and some day pay back the city in good citizenship. But today the whole school was crushed. The lavender had changed to black.⁷⁸

The *Post* announced that it would no longer make predictions and publish point spreads, arguing that even if the information was readily available elsewhere, its publication sent a powerful message.⁷⁹ “We knew about point spreads,” Sheinman recalled. “and we knew it wasn’t just to give the reader of a newspaper an idea of who the favorite team was.”⁸⁰ Students like Sheinman had also noticed that they sometimes couldn’t even get tickets for the cheap seats while scalpers sold the prime Garden real estate to high rollers at many times their face value. They had an inkling of the kind of money the coaches were making with their many ancillary

⁷⁸ Prall, “Campus Darkens,” 3.

⁷⁹ “Dead End Kids,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Feb. 19, 1951, 27. Sports editor Ike Gellis protested the decision in a prominently placed dissenting opinion that such information served merely as “a guide and a convenience,” with no deleterious effects whatsoever. See Ike Gellis, “An Editorial,” *New York Post*, Feb. 19, 1951, 52.

⁸⁰ Mort Sheinman, in *City Dump*.

business ventures and could only begin to calculate what the promoters and colleges were raking in from the gate receipts while the players were given ninety-five-cent meal tickets and a subway token for the trip home to the Bronx.

Not that there weren't any perks, of course. To one college official's disbelief that "our boys" could do such a thing, *Collier's* reporter Howard Hobson responded that they'd been given no-show campus jobs and passing grades for classes they didn't show up for. "You bribed them to play for you," he concluded. "The gamblers paid them not to play too well. What's the difference?"⁸¹ A front-page editorial in the *Daily Compass* declared that college stars were already paid—only peanuts—and that the best thing to do would be to make it official once and for all.⁸² With their colleges' blessing, several of them found bogus summer jobs as waiters at Catskill resorts where their only real duty was to play exhibition games for the hotel teams. It was there that a number of them first came into contact with Eddie Gard, Salvatore Sollazo, recreational betting, and the more-than-occasional manipulation of a game's final score.

The initial arrests were only a prelude, as it turned out. Within days three LIU starters confessed under interrogation, and by the end of March so would four more top City College players—this time to shaving points in games during the previous, championship season, though not in any of the tournament games and never with the intention to "dump" or lose the game outright, only to stay within the point spread.

THE GARDEN, THE BORSCHT BELT, & THE GEOGRAPHY OF BLAME

One disaffected City College professor on leave in the Midwest used the front page of the *Kansas City Times* to say that he was not at all surprised to learn that "boys who were taken from

⁸¹ Howard Hobson, "How to Stop Those Basketball Fixes," *Collier's*, Dec. 29, 1951.

⁸² Ted O. Thackrey, "Basketball, Bribery, Hypocrisy: All College Stars Are Paid; Why Not Make it Official," Editorial, *Daily Compass*, Feb. 21, 1951, 1.

the streets and slums of New York” had taken bribes, and that such behavior was to be expected in an institution where “cheating is permitted.”⁸³ “Nothing lifts the heart of an editor west of the Hudson quicker than a story of the Big Town’s political corruption and moral decay,” one observer had remarked in 1949. “[He] knows that his readers want regular confirmation of their sturdily held faith, a part of the American heritage, that New York City is a stinking cesspool of corruption.”⁸⁴ Now they were getting just that.

University of Kansas Coach Phog Allen told the AP that “In the East, the boys, particularly those who participate in the resort hotel leagues during the summer months are thrown into an environment which cannot help but breed the evil which more and more is coming to light. Out here in the Mid-West, of course, this condition doesn’t prevail.” Bradley’s president was quick to withdraw his already embittered school from future Garden competition, citing the “unsavory atmosphere” there. And Kentucky’s Adolph Rupp, proclaimed that the gamblers “couldn’t reach my boys with a ten-foot pole.”⁸⁵ If west of the Hudson Madison Square Garden embodied longstanding suspicions about New York and urban life, elsewhere it implicated not merely a single city but the entire American way of life. The Garden was owned by a large corporation, one Soviet paper observed at the height of the scandal. “For a long time it has been know that these competitions are flagrantly faked, that their results were foregone conclusions for the athletes as well as for the heads of the underworld gambling syndicate.”⁸⁶

But City College was not owned. More fully than any area institution, it belonged to the

⁸³ James E. Carver, *Kansas City Times*, Feb. 22, 1951, 1, quoted in “The Betrayal,” Editorial, *The Campus*, Mar. 20, 1951, 2.

⁸⁴ Mcalister Coleman, “The Big Town,” *The Nation*, Apr. 16, 1949, 450-51. Review of Julius Isaacs, *Oath of Devotion* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949).

⁸⁵ Forrest “Phog” Allen, David Blair Owen, and Adolph Rupp, quoted in Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 173.

⁸⁶ O. Shvetsov, “Controlled by Shady Dealers,” *Komomolskya pravda*, Mar. 2, 1951, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 12 (Apr. 21, 1951): 32, quoted in Crawford, 127.

citizens of New York and represented their collective aspirations and ideals.⁸⁷ It was, however, every bit as Jewish as the police force was Irish or the sanitation workers were Italian—the presence of Negroes on its basketball team notwithstanding. And at the school where fifty “Communist” professors, most of them Jews, had been smoked out a decade earlier and where Julius Rosenberg, who was currently on trial, had studied and met some of his alleged co-conspirators, the exposure of clandestine meetings, of payoffs and deception had a particular resonance. The stigma of physical difference was thus accompanied by the persistent taint of moral pathology.

The image of remote “Borscht Belt” resorts where players and gamblers hatched their plans only reinforced such perceptions. Though Jews had made significant inroads in boxing, baseball, basketball and other sports, their full acceptance in the recreational sphere was still a long way off. While the barring of Jews from European swimming pools, gymnasiums and sporting organizations stopped abruptly with the end of WWII, anti-Jewish statutes in the constitutions of most American country clubs remained in force well into the 1960s.⁸⁸ Middle class Jews created parallel institutions instead, which, like the Y’s and settlement houses of an earlier time, corresponded to their newfound status. The Borscht Belt hotels figured prominently among them. At the same time, Nat Holman started a summer camp in the Catskills from which he derived much of his income. And when Julius Rosenberg allegedly gave David Greenglass and his wife \$5,000 to flee to Mexico they went to the Catskills and hired a lawyer instead. The

⁸⁷ The first three LIU players indicted were all from New Jersey.

⁸⁸ Eisen, 500. Eisen cites a 1962 study by the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith that found more than half of 803 clubs surveyed banned Jews completely and another twelve percent used restrictive quotas.

Borscht Belt was a recognizable outpost of Jewish New York.⁸⁹

If much of the vice appeared to be located in New York, its arenas, and weekend getaways, however, there were reasons to think that the problem extended far beyond. In the heart of the incorruptible Midwest, lay Leo Hirschfield's Athletic Publications, Inc., for example, which supplied bookmakers and news organizations—not to speak of college athletic departments—with the “Minneapolis line” on dozens of contests nationwide. Hirschfield's outfit employed a staff of fulltime handicappers and statisticians who studied the sports sections of hundreds of local and campus newspapers, maintained extensive files on every college basketball team in the country, gathered “a steady flow of information about player injuries and illnesses, hot and cold streaks, weather conditions—anything that might conceivably affect the outcome of a game,” from their sources on individual campuses. They then reviewed and analyzed the data and determined the odds and point spreads on upwards of 60 games a week. For a \$15 weekly fee, subscribers got the information wired to them. (Coaches and other suppliers of valuable information got theirs free.)⁹⁰ Far from the Garden or the resort hotels, Minneapolis was not only the information clearinghouse and the engine of sports betting nationwide, it was the contradiction at the heart of the myth of heartland purity.

As far as basketball was concerned, the heartland had two poles in 1951: Lexington, Kentucky and Peoria, Illinois. Kentucky was the team whose players had represented the U.S. in the London Olympic Games in 1948 and the stuff of legend. It was also lily-white and had a notoriously bigoted coach. When the *Times* looked back nostalgically on a season that had “brought glory on the college and the city and was a vindication of the democratic process” it

⁸⁹ For more on the role of the Catskill resorts in the scandals see Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York, Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1989), 209-219.

⁹⁰ David G. Schwartz, *Cutting the Wire: Gaming Prohibition and the Internet* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 121. Hirschfield used to pay airplane pilots and cleanup crews to collect newspapers for his staff.

was undoubtedly with the Kentucky game in mind.⁹¹ The less refined author of a letter to the *Daily Compass* complaining about local bettors rooting for out-of-town teams at Garden games shared the *Times*'s sentiments: "If a person lives in the city he should root for a city team," he insisted. "Especially so when some out-of-town teams don't practice democracy. There is such a thing as true sportsmanship..." But the writer saved much of his wrath for the out-of-towners: "Go back to North Carolina, Kaintucky [sic] and Oklahoma, you bums."⁹²

Peoria, on the other hand, was not a part of the segregated South and conjured up a different, subtler clash of cultures. Stanley Cohen defined the "particular kinship" working class New Yorkers like him had felt for the City College players in terms that were largely oppositional and not without a hint of "reverse bigotry":

You shared not only their aspirations but their roots. You came from the same streets and went to the same schools and you both knew the good sweet taste of a Mission orange drunk from the bottle at the corner candy store. You could not know for sure, but you suspected that they did not drink Mission orange in Peoria, Illinois.

And for certain they did not have a City College in Peoria, a college that was open to every resident of the city who could qualify, where one could get a four year education without its costing a dime, where one's own father, who ten years earlier did not have a word of English on his tongue, could gain admission without a dollar in his pocket. City College was something special in New York. We had no need here of Harvard or Yale, for we had a school that had produced its full share of Supreme Court Justices and scientists and writers, and they were all our own, they were our neighbors, and we had paid for their education with our tax money. So long as there was a City College every kid in New York knew that he had a chance. It did not matter whether his father had gone there before him or where his ancestors came from, or how much money he could muster. There were no quotas and no restrictions and no phony scholarships. If you were a New Yorker and you could pass the test, City College would be glad to have you.

⁹¹ "The Cancer of Sports," 24.

⁹² Morris Brill, "Home Team Loyalty," Letter to the editor, *Daily Compass*, Mar. 6, 1951, 8. Such an overt reference to gambling and the appeal to civic pride over the call of the "pocketbook" were scarcely something that would have been discussed openly before the scandal broke.

You could not believe that they had a college like that in Peoria because, it seemed to you, only New York understood that kind of thing, only New York chose to offer free education to son's of immigrants and grandsons of slaves.⁹³

As later turned out, in important ways New York was not so special after all. Slowly the scandal spread beyond the City and the Catskills to Toledo, Peoria, and finally Kentucky, with dozens of players pleading guilty to fixing eighty-six games in twenty-three different cities over a period of three seasons and Adolph Rupp forced to eat his words. Then, in August ninety cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point, many of them varsity football players, were caught cheating on final examinations, passing information between them about what was going to be on the test (or failing to report the practice), thus violating the sacred West Point Honor Code. This was the City College bombshell all over again on a national scale. “Not only was college football at the center of American popular culture,” wrote sports historian Murray Sperber, “and the Black Knights among the elite of the sport, but their school—the United States Military Academy—had produced the country’s most celebrated living warriors, including Generals Eisenhower, McArthur, and Patton.”⁹⁴ Like City College, West Point was also tuition free and, in addition to a tough entrance exam, required the personal sponsorship of a member of Congress to enroll. Much as would later emerge at City, investigators discovered that for years the football coach had operated a “cram school” to prep under-qualified athletes for the exam and managed to routinely skirt the sponsorship requirement. West Point did not belong to any particular geographical region or set of immigrant experiences and myths; at the height of the Cold War it stood for the nation as a whole.⁹⁵

⁹³ Cohen, *The Game They Played*, 44-45.

⁹⁴ Sperber, 345.

⁹⁵ It was by an order of Harry Truman, the commander in chief, that the cadets were summarily expelled, thus precluding any messy appeals process. The Academy declined to release their names.

THE EVER ELUSIVE 'COLLEGIATE ATMOSPHERE'

If, from the perspective of New York City, City College seemed an eminently fairer institution than a Peoria, Lexington, or even a West Point could ever produce, there was also one thing that its students felt they sorely lacked. In spite of a vibrant public sphere scarcely imaginable today—with five official student publications (not to speak of underground publications and literary journals), laughter societies and general strikes, leaflets, petitions, polls, public debates, resolutions of the Student Council, and rallies in the Great Hall involving thousands of screaming undergraduates, many students curiously felt that big time basketball had been their last best hope for infusing the college with school spirit. “Until now,” wrote an unforgiving and pessimistic sports columnist for *The Campus*, “I have felt that this institution some day could overcome the obstacles and become a college in every sense of the word, a place with collegiate atmosphere. I now feel that there is no hope for this mere conglomerate of classrooms, for this excuse for a college where only money talks...”⁹⁶ The following day, the paper’s former sports editor wrote, “As for the sportswriters, cheerleaders, Allagarooters, those who have vainly attempted to instill a collegiate atmosphere at CCNY, we must painfully realize that an educational institution we are, and an educational institution we shall always be.”⁹⁷

Restoring or preserving what was left of the school’s spirit hinged on making sense of the motivations of the accused players as well as determining their fates. A letter to the newspaper of the evening session calling for their reinstatement, for example, implored college officials “to prove that CCNY is not a factory, turning out degrees, but that it has an excellent repair shop as well...that the high academic standing doesn’t prevent it from having a heart.”⁹⁸ Students had

⁹⁶ Jerry Jacobson, “Sports Slants,” *The Campus*, Feb. 27, 1951, 4.

⁹⁷ David Futornick '51, Letter to the editor, *The Campus*, Feb. 28, 1951, 2.

⁹⁸ Morris Hopkins, Letter to the editor, *Main Events*, Mar. 5, 1951, 2.

reacted to the initial revelations of cheating with an outpouring of support for their diminished and demoralized team. In the Great Hall the Monday after the first arrests the as yet untainted players were met with thunderous applause and “the most rousing Allagaroo ever heard at the college.”⁹⁹ To show their undying support more than 3,000 students had attended the game against Lafayette at the Garden few days later, followed by a spontaneous, midnight victory march to the *New York Times* building after the game. But once Floyd Layne, the new captain, confessed and the rest of the season was abruptly cancelled, students no longer had anywhere to pin their hopes and shifted their attention to debates already underway over blame, punishment, and forgiveness.

With a few notable exceptions, students, faculty, and the community at large favored the players’ reinstatement at the college, if not the team. Their transgressions represented a fall from grace, but only by accepting collective responsibility, it was widely felt, and offering them a second chance to complete their educations could the college and the larger community hope to redeem themselves and reaffirm their core values. “[CCNY is] not simply a series of Gothic buildings stuck together by some wet Allagaros,” wrote one student in response to an uncharacteristic call for vengeance. “It’s a prep school for practical living. It’s...a dynamic and vital community. We don’t resolve our crises by getting hysterical nor by accumulating tar and feathers.”¹⁰⁰

WHY THEY DID IT

The big question on everyone’s mind was what made so many young men cave in to temptation. Al Roth was the only City College player to offer an explanation:

⁹⁹ Avrum Hyman, “Fix Stuns Faculty, Students: Rally Urges Team Support,” *The Campus*, Feb. 20, 1951, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Ted Zinneman ’51, Letter to the editor, *The Campus*. 8 Mar. 1951, 2. This was in response to Jacobson.

Why did I do it? I did it because I wanted to be grown up. Sounds funny, doesn't it? I mean I was sick and tired of asking my father for money all the time.

Whenever I needed a suit or something I had to go to him. I wanted to be able to do things myself—you know, like a grown-up. My father works hard. He has been driving a soda truck for the last twenty-five years and I knew he didn't have too much money to give me.¹⁰¹

The *Post* encouraged readers to try to imagine “the thoughts of a 20-year-old on the long subway ride to his tenement home after an evening in which he has entertained 18,000 paying customers. He may begin to wonder what's in it for him; at this moment the prospect of imminent induction into the armed services may make the risks of a bribe seem even less hazardous.”¹⁰²

The newspapers expressed endless fascination with what the players did—and didn't—do with the money. One wrapped it in a handkerchief and buried it in a flowerpot. Another hid it inside a shoe in his basement; a third taped the envelopes to the back of a dresser drawer. Roth put his in a safe deposit box and planned to someday start his own business. What virtually none of them did was spend it. Max Lerner of the *Post* at first postulated that in spite of their renown, or perhaps because of it, the “boys” had been corrupted by “the false values the culture as a whole, which holds up the ‘sure thing’ and the big money as the real objects of devotion.” They'd sold out their fans for a wad of spending money, he said. “The idols of the crowd were licked by even more powerful idols of the crowd.”¹⁰³ But soon Lerner found his own formulation too facile and decided that the “boys” really did it for another false value: “security.” They represented a cross section of classes, races and religions, he was careful to point out, indicating a widespread moral breakdown not limited to any one or two groups. What they shared was the desire to put something aside for a rainy day:

¹⁰¹ “Roth Regretful, Cautions Others,” *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1951, 19.

¹⁰² “Dead End Kids,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Feb. 19, 1951, 27.

¹⁰³ Max Lerner, “CCNY Tragedy,” *New York Post*, Feb. 19, 1951, 26.

They didn't want to be doomed to doing what their fathers had done—peddling from trucks, running little stores, wearing their lives away in labor. They had tasted education and the heady wine of success. They had been fed on the idea that smart people have a nest-egg...¹⁰⁴

Between Al Roth's desire to be a "grown-up" and this longing for security, the players' motivations were explained largely in terms of their poverty and their ambition. Writing from Phoenix, Arizona, *Daily Compass* columnist Jack Orr said that sentiment across the American West was with the bribed players. "People argue that these kids come from poor families and needed the dough," he wrote, noting that the players in the earlier Manhattan College scandal had in fact come from "fairly well-to-do homes in Queens."¹⁰⁵

Students, too, struggled with these kinds of explanations. A front page story in the extra edition of *The Campus* when the scandal broke, contrasted the "dirty, dark walkup" in Harlem where Ed Warner lived with his two aunts in a "dingy one-room hole...one dull bulb hanging from the ceiling" with the "beautiful section of Brooklyn," replete with "private homes" and "a clean atmosphere," where Al Roth and his family lived¹⁰⁶ The NAACP quickly condemned this juxtaposition for implying "that you can understand why Warner could succumb to a graft-ridden atmosphere but how in the world can Roth do the same?"¹⁰⁷ This was the subtext of much of the broader discussion of the players' actions: On the one hand they had been unfairly thrown into Madison Square Garden, exploited, sent mixed messages, and left to fend for themselves. On the other, their backgrounds must have had more than a little to do with how they responded to

¹⁰⁴ Max Lerner, "Why Do They Do It?" *New York Post*, Feb. 22, 1951, 20. See also Morris Freedman, "The Jewish College Student: 1951 Model," *Commentary* 12 (1951), 312.

¹⁰⁵ Jack Orr, "People More Interested in Bribe Cash than Scruples Involved," *Daily Compass*, Feb. 23, 1951, Back page.

¹⁰⁶ Ellin Rader, "Aunts Say 'Pray for Pops'," *The Campus*, Feb. 20, 1951, 1.

¹⁰⁷ NAACP Executive Committee, Letter to the Editors, *The Campus*, Feb. 27, 1951, 2. The editors apologized only for the unfortunate use of "so-called Negro dialect" but countered with a criticism of the insincere "cries of professional pleaders."

temptation. “It would have been different if Sherman was raised on the streets,” protested the father of LIU’s Sherman White—a Negro and arguably the best basketball player in the history of the game. “But Sherman had to go to college to learn something he was never taught at home.”¹⁰⁸ By the time Floyd Layne, another Negro player, was pulled out of class by detectives and confessed to being in on the fix, the student written *Observation Post* was ready to promise “no tear-jerkers this time” and “no slum stories either, they wouldn’t be true.”¹⁰⁹

VENGEANCE, ABSOLUTION, & ‘THE QUALITY OF MERCY’

This struggle over how best to tell the story of the “fallen idols” ran concurrently with the very public debate over what should be done with them now. Within the college, loyalty was often measured not so much in terms of anti-communism, nationhood, or school spirit as in the extent to which one was or wasn’t willing to turn one’s back on one’s immigrant parents, neighbors, and high school buddies—a question that had gnawed at generations of ambitious City College students. Ed Warner’s aunts broached it with brutal clarity when they told a student reporter, “Let him go back to his college friends. We don’t know what happened to Ed. Do you think he ever brought any of his College friends here?...What is the College going to do for him? We can’t do nothin’ for him.”¹¹⁰ The players’ disloyalty was overshadowed by the awareness that a college community which had thrown them to the wolves, shamelessly cashed in on their success, and basked in their glory might now owe them something in the way of friendship and support.

Nearly everyone trumpeted their wish to see the bribed players reinstated and allowed to complete their educations. Before the first week was out the Student Council voted twenty-five

¹⁰⁸ Rosen, *Scandals of '51*, 127. White was from a middle class home in Englewood, N.J.

¹⁰⁹ Kantin, “Layne’s Neighborhood Calmly Surprised by Fix,” *Observation Post*, Mar. 2, 1951, 1.

¹¹⁰ Rader, 1. The quote is attributed to both aunts

to one to bring the suspended players back to the classroom as soon as possible, saying the college had a responsibility to aid in their rehabilitation.¹¹¹ A leaflet of the City College chapter of the Young Progressives Association called for a mass demonstration “to help remind the judge and the school administration that Roman, Warner, and Roth are not criminals and to show the players how we feel about them when they need it most, before, not after the trial.”¹¹²

Both the college president and the chair of the Board of Higher Education let it be known that they personally favored reinstatement (after a period of one year), as well, in the spirit of “the *Christian* attribute of forgiveness [that] should continue to be a part of our civilization.”¹¹³ (“Shall we crucify all of them?” wrote a student named Weinstein, “We, who have placed them in the house of prostitution and are so amazed that they have sinned?”¹¹⁴) Judge Jacob Grumet (CCNY ’19), who served on the boards of the Anti-Defamation League and the New York State Committee on Discrimination in Housing, came out of retirement to defend the players in court. Grumet felt “[the] boys were victims of the sordid atmosphere in which the games were played.”¹¹⁵ The consensus was that there was more than enough blame to go around, that they had suffered enough, and that the stigma would follow them to the end of their days anyway.

Many of those who were more circumspect about readmitting the players into the community of scholars seemed more concerned with the insincerity and self-righteousness of the forgivers than with meting out justice. On the occasion of Floyd Layne’s confession, Larry Gralla, one of two *Campus* sports editors to participate in a public debate on the side of the

¹¹¹ Arnold Workman, “SC Votes Reinstatement of Suspended Trio, 25-1,” *The Campus*, Feb. 27, 1951, 1.

¹¹² Young Progressives Association, City College chapter, leaflet, quoted in “College Groups Desire Reinstatement for Trio,” *The Campus*, Feb. 27, 1951, 3.

¹¹³ Ordway Tead, quoted in Rosen, *Scandals of ’51*, 134; emphasis mine. See also Melvin Stein, “Cagers Favor Gym Play Despite Garden’s ‘Glory,’” *The Campus*, Mar. 8, 1951, 1.

¹¹⁴ Dave Weinstein, “Justice With Mercy,” *Observation Post*, Feb. 21, 1951, 4.

¹¹⁵ Erwin Laibman, “Ex-DA Grumet to Defend Dumping Three,” *Observation Post*, Mar. 2, 1951, 1.

players' permanent expulsion, called on readers to confess their own complicity once and for all:

Will you still refuse to admit your guilt? Will you still act like paper mache saints by forgiving and boasting when you should condemn and confess?

You're as guilty as the men who double crossed you, City College. Why not admit it?¹¹⁶

Daily Compass editor Ted O. Thackrey, who had argued that the amateur rule was a ruse to deprive athletes of their livelihood, said they should be suspended from the team for the rest of the semester but allowed to continue their educations and even qualify to play basketball in the future. They certainly should not go to jail. The *Post* conducted a poll asking readers to weigh in on these questions, and thousands responded. But at the request of the district attorney who had concerns about the poll's potential impact on jury selection and deliberations, the *Post* put off and ultimately cancelled publication of the results.¹¹⁷ At City College it was only a handful of those most directly affected—the head of publicity, the sports editors, and the athletic director—who were reluctant to see the players ever let back into the school. Even Nat Holman, who blamed individual actors and insisted that the system needn't be changed nor the sport deemphasized, advocated showing “the quality of mercy.”¹¹⁸

WILFULL IGNORANCE: WHITEWASHING THE COACHES

These depictions of the “fallen idols” and debates over their fates can only be properly understood in contrast to the careful handling of the public images of the coaches involved—chiefly Nat Holman and LIU's Clair Bee—each in his own right a figure of national stature and part of a cultural tradition of hero worship that extended back more than a quarter century to legendary Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne and the fictional Frank Merriwell. During

¹¹⁶ Larry Gralla, “Still Proud City College?” *Sports Slants, The Campus*, Feb. 28, 1951, 3. This is one of the rare occasions when the players are referred to as men not boys.

¹¹⁷ “Poll Ends; Hogan Asks Post to Delay Results,” *New York Post*, Feb. 28, 1951, 96.

¹¹⁸ “Holman for Players,” *Observation Post*, Mar. 2, 1951, 1.

the 1950s this archetype of the charismatic college coach came to serve as a powerfully consoling antidote to disturbing images of swarthy mobsters and corrupt city officials being grilled by the Kefauver Committee on the new medium of television, to the Rosenberg trial, HUAC hearings, and countless stories of wayward juvenile delinquents.

In the face of the ongoing revelations, sportswriters, too, clung to stale myths in order to protect the franchise of big-time college sports—and sportswriters—in the midst of its greatest crisis ever. The *Times*'s Arthur Daley used his column following the arrests of four more City College players and others from schools across the country to memorialize Knute Rockne on the eve of the anniversary of his death in a plane crash. “As if overwhelmed by the magnitude of the scandal,” wrote Murray Sperber, “the most important sportswriter in America retreated into the world that he knew and loved best, the classic sports past with its mythic heroes.”¹¹⁹ Other writers played a more active role in buttressing the coaches' tenuous-at-best claims of ignorance and victimization. At Holman's invitation, Milton Gross of the *New York Post*, described the scene in Holman's office while he faced his remaining players for the first time since the initial arrests and told them:

Believe me, boys, I have no sympathy for [the accused players] if they are guilty because they did as fine a doublecrossing job on me and you as has ever been done...I talked to you so much about mistakes leaving your feet, slapping at the ball, bad defense. Imagine how they doublecrossed us!¹²⁰

Gross explained that Holman had originally planned to address the team in the gymnasium before practice, but “For this he wanted privacy.” Curiously, he never explained what reporters were doing there on such a solemn occasion. A week later, after Floyd Layne confessed,

¹¹⁹ Sperber, 303. See also, Arthur Daley, “Twenty Years After,” Sports of the Times, *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1951, 38.

¹²⁰ Nat Holman, quoted in Milton Gross, “Speaking Out: City's Answer... ‘We'll Play!’” *New York Post*, Feb. 20, 1951, 54.

Charley Rosen placed a *Post* reporter in the adjoining bathroom with his “ear at the keyhole” as Holman delivered a pious I-told-you-so. “Nat’s virtue,” he wrote, “was rinsed and drip-dried in the next day’s newspapers.”¹²¹

Whether the reporters were in the room or hiding in the toilet (or both), their presence speaks volumes not only about Holman’s relationship with the *Post* but also with his players. Even the most sycophantic coverage revealed what Stanley Frank described as “an aloof, sometimes arbitrary bloke,” with a “natural assumption of superiority” and “what appears to be a presumptuous, even pompous attitude...Holman does not discuss basketball with coaches, players or officials. He lectures them.”¹²² His double breasted suits, pretentious language and penchant for referring to himself in the third person as “the Master” all help explain why it was New York City detectives and not one of his own students who came to him with the news that his starting lineup was suspected of dumping. “Holman was never one to mix with his charges beyond the usual contact in games and practice sessions,” noted the student-run *Observation Post* after the scandal broke. Some felt that “a warmer Holman, a more fatherly coach would have averted the entire disaster,” it added with a candor missing from the metropolitan press.¹²³

For all his mannerisms and polish, Holman was a street kid who’d been around. Frank’s *Collier’s* profile on the eve of the championship the year before, had gingerly brought up rumors that Holman’s Original Celtics had regularly dumped games back in the day—something he dismissed as “nonsense.” But he did acknowledge that the professional team of his youth didn’t merely “go stale” from time to time: “When we had a game safely won [we] put on a fancy

¹²¹ Rosen, *Scandals of '51*, 133.

¹²² Stanley Frank, “Basketball’s Nat Holman: Easy Doesn’t Do It,” *Collier’s*, Feb. 18, 1950, 19, 65.

¹²³ Hank Wexler, “Say It Ain’t So, Joe!” *Observation Post* Feb. 20, 1951, 2. Rosen describes how on the night they captured the double championship no special ceremony had been planned, and Holman was one of the first to leave the arena. “The players were perfunctorily handed their meal money and sent on their way.” Holman’s deputies then invited those who remained to dinner at Mamma Leone’s. “But the dinner was a heavy, sullen affair. All of them knew it was an afterthought.” Rosen, *Scandals of '51*, 90.

exhibition of passing to keep down the score,” he said. “We didn’t want to embarrass anyone, because we wanted to be invited back for other games.”¹²⁴ Clearly, then, Holman had firsthand experience playing beneath his ability in a coordinated effort to shave points. As Murray Sperber has pointed out, Holman studied game footage of his players on the court and the particular kind of disciplined teamwork he enforced did not easily lend itself to undetected cheating. But Sperber argues that coaches like Holman and Bee had a vested interest in looking the other way, given their iconic stature in American culture, their summer camps, off-season basketball clinics, speaking engagements, newspaper columns, how-to books, novels, and their lucrative roles as “ambassadors” of Basketball abroad. They read the same newspapers and frequented the same Catskill resorts as everyone else. But acting on any suspicions would have meant damaging far more than just the composition of their starting lineups.

The coaches’ ignorance, in other words, was at best willful ignorance. In 1949, when Holman’s assistant Bobby Sand had confronted him with suspicions about a particular player’s poor performance, he was told to “quiet down” and forget the whole thing. Sand continued to raise concerns and finally, upon learning that bookies were refusing to take bets on City College games, brought the matter to college administrators who decided that without hard evidence there was nothing they could do.¹²⁵ If winning in Madison Square Garden meant fame and fortune to Nat Holman personally, for the college it had been “practically unbeatable as a public relations medium,” wrote the *Daily Compass*’s Milt Schapiro. “The grand-slam crowns ...did more for the name of City College than three Bernard Baruchs,” and no bureaucrat was prepared

¹²⁴ Nat Holman, quoted in Frank, “Basketball’s Nat Holman,” 67. This was precisely the pattern of the LIU dumpers. They’d play hard and win when up against a tough competitor with a narrow point spread, but artificially keep down the points when matched against a weak opponent. And the bookies were quick to pick up on this. See Sperber, 323.

¹²⁵ Rosen, *Scandals of ’51*, 72, 105.

to pull the plug.¹²⁶

With college officials playing along, Holman and Bee cast themselves as victims. “I had seven of them against me,” Holman said, emphasizing the chasm between him and his players as if it were something they had unilaterally created and maintained. “My first seven men were all in on the fix. I was strapped.”¹²⁷ Clair Bee, whose bestselling young adult novels featured a coach intimately involved in his multiethnic players’ lives, offered a somewhat different excuse:

Sure I was a naïve chump. But I was so sure of my boys because I was so close to them. I had to trust Adolph Bigos, my captain, a combat veteran decorated with the Bronze Star and five battle ribbons. I had visited Bigos in his home, gone to church with him, cried with him at his father’s funeral. I had so much faith in Eddie Gard that I told the boys to look to him for leadership on the court. They did, unfortunately...I had so much confidence in Jack Goldsmith that he was the only player ever given permission to shoot whenever he pleased.

Sherman White and LeRoy Smith had spent considerable time at my farm in Manorton, New York. When a restaurant in Oklahoma refused to serve Negroes, I ate with them in the kitchen. I threatened to cancel a game one year when a hotel in Missouri wanted to put them in an annex. I went down to the street to fight a flannel-mouthed bum—he didn’t show up—who blasted me over the phone for bringing Negroes into the hotel.¹²⁸

Bee’s half-hearted mea culpa for being a “win-‘em-all coach” who helped create “the emotional climate that led to the worst scandal in the history of sports” and at the same time for being blinded by his singular devotion to his players closes with the image of him waiting helpless by the telephone at four in the morning while his “boys” were downtown signing their confessions.¹²⁹

When New York State Court of General Sessions Judge and City College alumnus Saul

¹²⁶ Milt Shapiro, “Garden May Keep Big-Time Games,” *Daily Compass*, Feb. 21, 1951.

¹²⁷ Nat Holman, “How We Can Save Basketball,” *Sport*, Dec. 1951.

¹²⁸ Clair Bee as told to Stanley Frank, “I Know Why They Sold Out to the Gamblers,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb. 2, 1952, 78.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 26, 80.

S. Streit issued his withering statement prior to sentencing Sollazo, Gard, and the players from City College, LIU, and NYU, he wasn't buying any this, however. Point shaving aside, Streit reported that Layne, Warner, Roth, and Herb Cohen all appeared to have been ineligible to attend City College in the first place, for example, and that they and their counterparts at LIU were offered improper inducements to do so by the coaching staffs and, in some cases, had their academic records doctored by indeterminate parties. "The naïveté, the equivocation and the denials of the coaches and their assistants concerning their knowledge of gambling, recruiting and subsidizing," he wrote, "would be comical were they not so despicable."¹³⁰

Except for Judge Streit, few contemporary commentators took aim at the coaches' complicity in the scandal. At the bottom of a column with the fairly typical headline, "Everybody Was Remiss in the Basketball Mess," columnist Joe Williams condemned them only for their "dreamy hopes", "sublime optimism" and refusal to believe their own eyes.¹³¹ From the margins of the industry that sports journalism had become, The *Daily Compass's* editor and publisher Ted O. Thackrey noted more forcefully that "neither Hogan nor anyone else remarked on the fact that [LIU's Sherman] White noticed deliberately bad playing but that no city basketball coach has yet admitted anything but surprise at the betting scandal."¹³² When City suspended its players and pulled out of Garden play and LIU discontinued all intercollegiate

¹³⁰ Saul Streit, quoted in "Excerpts from Judge Streit's Comments on College Basketball Fixing Scandal," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1951. In contrast, Streit commended the college presidents for accepting responsibility and taking precipitous action to return to the gyms and adopting "a policy of athletics for all rather than sports for the few." Both Holman's and Bee's first person magazine articles were published in the weeks and months following Streit's statement. Subsequent investigations showed that at least fourteen City College athletes had their academic records falsified to make them eligible for admission. Over a period of years, Holman and others were suspended pending investigation, charged with conduct unbecoming a teacher, and, in Holman's case, ultimately reinstated. with back pay. Holman's and his colleagues' attempts to salvage their careers and protect their good names is documented by, among others, Rosen, *Scandals of '51*, 210-218.

¹³¹ Joe Williams, "Everybody Was Remiss Basketball Mess," *World-Telegram & Sun*, Feb. 27, 1951, 28.

¹³² Ted O. Thackrey, "All College Stars Are Paid," 3. Much later White discussed his involvement and Bee's complicity. See Dave Anderson, "When Sherman White Threw It All Away," *New York Times*, Mar. 22, 1998, S1.

sports, Thackrey railed against “the smug gestures of the school trustees and faculties seeking to escape public censure by smugly expelling the players, dropping all sports, fleeing from the specter of their own guilt.”¹³³

THE CATHOLICS GET A PASS

The coaches were not the only participants to come through the scandal with their legacies, careers, and reputations largely intact. No one currently playing for any Catholic school, including Manhattan College, was ever indicted. Why that was and why the District Attorney chose to lead with the arrests of the City College players is a difficult question. The simplest explanation is that that’s where the most solid evidence lay. Focusing on national champions, the most accomplished college team in the history of the sport, offered the additional advantage of massive publicity and a cautionary tale guaranteed to be heard throughout the nation. It’s also important to recall, however, that in both the Manhattan College episode and the ensuing scandal, college and law enforcement officials had their hands forced at every turn. Confronted with Junius Kellogg’s information, the Manhattan College coach had little choice but to report the matter. And arrests or no arrests, *Journal-American* editor Max Kase seemed poised to break the Sollazo-Gard story. With something so pervasive underway and the cat already out of the bag, the best the District Attorney could hope to accomplish would be to control the damage, send a powerful message, and perhaps force institutions to start policing themselves.

That he focused his efforts on the three schools most clearly associated with Jews, however, and spared the Catholics could hardly have been a coincidence. Hogan was a deeply religious Catholic; his deputy was named O’Connor. Amidst the massive police corruption

¹³³ Ted O. Thackrey, “Basketball Scandals III: ‘A Stench in the Nostrils’,” Editorial, *The Daily Compass*, Feb. 23, 1951, 1.

scandals that had recently brought down Tammany Mayor O'Dwyer and driven him into exile, there would be three different police commissioners—O'Brien, Murphy, and Monaghan—in the space of two years. Rank and file officers were also overwhelmingly Irish Catholic. The first St. John's player to be interviewed had attended a New Year's Eve party at Sollazo's Manhattan apartment, but he was also the son of an officer killed in the line of duty just a few years earlier. And unlike the City College, LIU, and NYU players, those from St. John's were questioned with lawyers and priests present. At the same time, word surfaced that the previous year police had suppressed wiretap evidence of dumping on *all* the metropolitan college teams but an internal investigation failed to unearth the tapes. Over the years there has been much speculation that not only the police but also the Madison Avenue "Powerhouse," Cardinal Francis Spellman himself, intervened on the Catholic players' behalf. Hogan was widely rumored to be planning a run for governor, and the theory was that Spellman had offered to help him raise campaign funds from wealthy Catholics but didn't want St. John's touched.¹³⁴ Between Spellman and the lack of enthusiasm on the part of police officials, Hogan, who owed his position to Tammany Hall, had little incentive to harm a prominent Catholic.

Within New York City then, similar polarities of virtue and corruption, of insider and outsider status existed as did on a national scale. The Jewish teams were summarily removed from the Garden and put back into the college gymnasiums—or, in the case of LIU, disbanded altogether—while St. John's alone remained above the fray and alone has carried on the tradition of nationally ranked, big-time New York City college basketball to this very day.

The perceived incorruptibility of both the coaches and Catholic institutions threw the accused players' transgressions into a particular kind of relief. During the classical age of

¹³⁴Izenberg interview. See also Rosen, Cohen, and Sperber.

American sport Notre Dame football helped establish Catholics as morally grounded, championship material (“Win one for the Gipper.”). The story of *Knute Rockne All American* hinges on the “fighting Irish” ethnic underdogs beating undefeated Army at Yankee Stadium in 1928 and a decent immigrant coach determined to keep football clean of the influence of gamblers.¹³⁵ In the postwar atmosphere of virulent anti-communism, Catholics as a group came to be seen as largely benign and trustworthy, with divided loyalties and papal influence on youth and public institutions a relatively minor concern in the face of a common enemy.¹³⁶

ANTI-SEMITISM: THE DOG THAT DIDN'T HAVE TO BARK

For all their growing economic and political power, Jews remained a minority in New York City and did not inspire the same kinds of trust. In a 2007 essay on the scandals, Jewish historian Edward Shapiro noted that more than half of the New York City players caught up in the scandal were Jews and that the names of the fixers and gamblers, lawyers and judges were similarly populated with names like Nathan and Saul, Rubenstein and Schwartzberg. He nonetheless concluded, erroneously I believe, that

the anti-Semitic dog did not bark either during the Rosenberg trial or during the basketball scandal. The press did not delve into the Jewish aspect of the scandal, just as it had not dwelled on the Jewish dimension of CCNY’s miraculous season of 1949-50.¹³⁷

Only in the narrowest of terms can this be said to be the case. The fact that Jewishness didn’t need to be overtly discussed did not mean it wasn’t always in the room. A familiar “City

¹³⁵ *Knute Rockne All American*, directed by Lloyd Bacon, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1940. In one version, the term “fighting Irish” has been attributed to the 1924 clash between students and faculty and the anti-Catholic KKK. More recently, the team had captured three national championships in the late 1940s.

¹³⁶ The 1953 film *Trouble Along the Way*, an outgrowth of the basketball and West Point scandals, stars John Wayne as a disgraced big-ten football coach looking to get back into the game who comes to the aid of a sleepy little Catholic college on the outskirts of New York City that is threatened with closing if it can’t raise alumni donations. It is the Catholic brothers’ faith and goodness that ultimately redeem the coach, the sport, and the institution. *Trouble Along the Way*, directed by Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1953.

¹³⁷ Edward Shapiro, “The Shame of the City: CCNY Basketball, 1950-51,” in *Jews, Sports, and the Rites of Citizenship*, Jack Kugelmass, ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 175, 189.

College type” still populated other Northeastern colleges and universities, a figure often struggling to escape the “stigma” that association carried.¹³⁸ In attempting to gather statistics for his article on “The Jewish College Student: 1951 Model,” Morris Freedman found that “the college officials I consulted made a great show of not knowing or caring whether or not their students were Jewish,” though they polled them on virtually every other detail of their lives.¹³⁹ This, according to Freedman, was in part a legacy of the Communists of the 30s who had insisted that “Jews should never be distinguished in any way from other Americans.”¹⁴⁰

Jewish-owned newspapers like the *Times* and the *Post* also remained wary of appearing “too Jewish.” Though local power was indeed shifting from the Catholic hierarchy and its Tammany Hall allies to Jewish business and cultural leaders, at the same time, a deep-seated anxiety persisted.¹⁴¹ “You worried if Jewish issues were too prominent,” said one of *Post* publisher Dorothy Schiff’s contemporaries from another affluent German Jewish family. “You didn’t want to be associated with anything that made Jews look bad, or even just foreign. You were taught never to let your head get above the parapet.”¹⁴²

In the wake of the Holocaust, even overt anti-Semites saw fit not to trumpet their views too loudly. It was enough to signal Jewishness with a marker, and “City College,” “NYU,” or “LIU” would all do nicely. During the HUAC hearings on what would come to be known as the Hollywood Ten, Rep. John Rankin of Mississippi held up a petition against the inquiry and pointed out that several of the signatories had spent summers in the Catskills:

¹³⁸ Freedman. “The Jewish College Student: 1951 Model,” 306. Freedman also says that people routinely confused CCNY with NYU and LIU.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 307.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 310.

¹⁴¹ Nissenson, 234.

¹⁴² Unnamed member of one of New York’s old German Jewish families, quoted in Nissenson, 232.

One of the names is June Havoc. We found out from the *Motion Picture Almanac* that her real name is June Hovick. Another one was Danny Kaye, and we found out that his real name is David Daniel Kaminsky...Another one is Eddie Cantor, whose real name is Edward Iskowitz...They are attacking the Committee for doing its duty to protect this country and save the American people from the horrible fate the Communists have meted out to the unfortunate Christian people of Europe.¹⁴³

Even in the context of an overtly racist screed seeking to conflate Jewishness with Communist subversion, in other words, it was neither necessary nor desirable to call a Jew a Jew. The further irony is that, as evidenced by the Congressman's own example, Jewish people were often complicit in such rhetorical gentlemen's agreements. According to Victor Navasky's masterful study of another set of naming rituals associated with the Hollywood Ten,

Hollywood was engaged in the manufacture of myths and dreams, and its inhabitants, stars and writers alike had come to confuse their self-created images with their selves. One function of a community is to preserve the myths that people create about themselves and to give comfort when outsiders attack them.¹⁴⁴

This same process was at work at City College as Jews increasingly defined themselves in secular terms and sought, through instruments like the college, to blend into the mainstream. In the twenties and thirties changing one's name prior to graduating from City was common, in fact.¹⁴⁵ Whether they wore a Star of David on their sleeves or not, in other words, the City College and LIU players were available when the moment came to lance the boil that intercollegiate sports had become. Their availability and their Jewishness served to spare their coaches and Catholic counterparts, if not their colleges, the same humiliation.

As soon as the Jewish teams disbanded and retreated into tiny college gyms and the teams from Peoria and Lexington stopped coming to visit, New York basketball instantly lost its

¹⁴³ John Rankin, quoted in Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (1980; repr. New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 369.

¹⁴⁴ Navasky, 369.

¹⁴⁵ Freedman, "The Jewish College Student: 1951 Model," 312.

national prominence. Prior to the scandals of '51 the NCAA championships had been held in Madison Square Garden in seven of the previous eight seasons; they never came back to New York City again. And with the attendant eclipse of Jewish athleticism in the popular imagination, the trope of the brainiac reasserted itself. In 1955, the vaccine that would soon eradicate polio made its inventor Dr. Jonas Salk (CCNY '34) an international celebrity. The following year, a pudgy, twenty-nine-year-old Jewish City College senior and army veteran from Queens with an outsized IQ and photographic memory named Herb Stempel signed on to the nationally broadcast, prime time quiz show *Twenty-One*. Stempel was secretly coached to wear a cheap, ill-fitting suit and get a bad haircut. The air conditioning in his isolation booth was shut off so he would sweat profusely and he was instructed to dab his forehead with a handkerchief and bite his lip when asked certain questions. He was also given the questions and the answers in advance and his entire performance was scripted. After winning over \$40,000 in a period of several months, Stempel was told that the audience wanted a change and he was instructed to lose to the dashing, cultivated young Charles Van Doren, an instructor at Columbia University and son of a famous Shakespearean scholar. If he played along, Stempel was offered a permanent job in the show's research department. In a last-ditch effort to salvage the situation, he appealed to the show's producers to let him play Van Doren "straight." It was, after all "a college fight—CCNY against Columbia."¹⁴⁶ The producers refused and Stempel took the dive.

Eventually, he and others revealed the whole sordid system behind the shows and a scandal unfolded on a scale beyond even what had occurred at City College or West Point a few years earlier. Like the basketball scandals before them, the TV quiz show scandal had—without ever an explicit word being spoken about it—all the earmarks of a contest between two

¹⁴⁶ Herb Stempel, quoted in Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950's TV Quiz Show Scandals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 32.

Americas. In this case the spectacle was even more stage-managed, however, and designed from the outset to reinforce Americans' worst stereotypes about New York Jews. City College did little to either to celebrate Herb Stempel's triumphs or mourn his waywardness. In the new medium of television, the institution played a bit part, that of the victim rather than the cheater.¹⁴⁷

CONCLUSION & AFTERMATH

The rapid, give-and-go style of basketball that City College was famous for developing is an apt metaphor for the moving target that was New York's Jewish community in the early 1950s, and whatever else the double championship and scandal may have stood for, they became, finally, a celebration and repudiation of Jewish mobility in the New World. By 1955 half of all college-educated New Yorkers were Jewish, as were half the city's public school teachers, lawyers, and doctors.¹⁴⁸ If City College had been one of the principal engines driving that ascent, then the *New York Post* had served as its chief chronicler. In her biography of *Post* publisher Dorothy Schiff, Marilyn Nissenson, described a typical *Post* advice column in which

Although the word 'kosher' is never mentioned, a distraught mother is incensed that her son's household does not observe food rituals that are 'meaningful to her,' [and] a sullen wife laments her lack of standing in the family constellation because—unlike his brother, the doctor—her husband, though he makes a good living, is a salesman for a dress manufacturer."¹⁴⁹

This readership helps explain why the paper was so enamored of the "CCNY Whiz Kids" and why it took such pains to picture them at home with their mothers. To such readers, a Jewish icon like Nat Holman, "Mr. Basketball," "The Professor," with his fancy suits and fake Oxford accent, a man who'd risen from schoolyards and settlement houses of the Lower East Side to help usher a shunned and stigmatized population into the big time of American sport, was a

¹⁴⁷ For more on the quiz show scandals, the naïveté of 1950s television audiences, and their relationship to the basketball fixing, see Sperber, 313-14.

¹⁴⁸ Nissenson, *The Lady Upstairs*, 229.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 231.

sacred cow. And this was no less true of the sportswriters and editors whose salaries—not to mention whose craft—depended on him. Or, for that matter, of the officials at the dingy, overcrowded municipal college, whose entire athletic program had been financed by the gate receipts at Madison Square Garden during basketball season and whose pipe-smoking professors could declare with a straight face that a winning ball game was “the greatest thing that ever happened in the 102-year-old history of this venerable institution.”¹⁵⁰

But someone had to pay a price for the debacle, and blaming a bunch of 20-year-old guttersnipes who’d fallen in with a bad element for the excesses of what had become a multi-million dollar industry run amuck was neither intellectually nor emotionally satisfying, especially when it clearly hadn’t been a matter of a few bad apples but rather the team’s entire starting lineup and then some. After the scandal had spread to dozens of other players and cities across the country and Judge Streit had issued his damning sixty-four-page report and sentenced several players and fixers to hard time, college officials made a few cursory efforts to suspend, investigate, and reassign members of the coaching staffs for alleged “conduct unbecoming a teacher,” but no one was ever fired as a result of the scandal. Upon reaching mandatory retirement age President Harry N. Wright stepped down in 1952. Holman refused an invitation to retire early and was investigated, cleared of any wrongdoing, and reinstated, his legend largely intact. If ever there was an occasion for individuals to be ritually offered up, this had been it.

Most of the accused plead guilty meanwhile, received suspended sentences, and went off to fight in Korea. Al Roth, Ed Roman, and Herb Cohen were all allowed to serve their time in the Army. Ed Warner was one of only two active players ever to see the inside of a prison cell.

¹⁵⁰ Spiegel, “C.C.N.Y. Rallies,” 43.

The other was also a Negro.¹⁵¹ Warner's juvenile record worked against him in this respect and got him sentenced to six months among hardened criminals on Riker's Island and to an even longer, more difficult adjustment after he got out. After twenty-one months in the army, Floyd Layne spent some time playing for the Harlem Globetrotters and then returned to City College to finish his degree and enjoy a stellar career as a collegiate basketball coach. Ed Roman also went to work in New York City's public schools and eventually earned a PhD in psychology. The others became successful dentists and businessmen.

Though it was not always reciprocated, the fierce loyalty that the *Post* had picked up on in its 1950 "Whiz Kid" series—loyalty to their teammates, to their families, and to their communities—was something that stayed with many of them throughout their lives. Banned from ever playing in the NBA, they would drive together to Pennsylvania to play in another, semi-professional league. When Warner went back to prison for a drug conviction, Layne, Roman, and a cheerleader from their City College days would visit him upstate at Greenhaven Penitentiary and after he was released helped get him work as a referee and turn his life around. After Warner's car was rear-ended and he was left paralyzed they stayed with him in the hospital and wouldn't let him give up. Years later when Ed Roman was diagnosed with blood cancer Layne and Warner were the ones to go to the hospital every night. "You didn't quit on me when you really could have," Warner told him, "Fuck you. You're going to come out of this. We're not quitting on you. We'll be here, and you will eat, and that's the way it'll be. And you'll take the fucking chemo."¹⁵²

Floyd Layne earned his City College degree in 1957 and after almost two decades

¹⁵¹ The lawyer for another Negro player, LIU's Sherman White failed to show up at the sentencing, and standing alone with his head bowed amidst racial slurs coming from the bench he was sentenced to one year. See Rosen, *Scandals of '51*, 194.

¹⁵² Ed Warner, quoted by Jerry Izenberg, interview with author. Roman died in 1988.

coaching and counseling young people, in 1974 was invited back as the head coach of City's now Division III basketball team leading them to four league championships. Even today, at age eighty, he continues to coach the George Washington High School varsity team and to work with neighborhood youth. In all this time he has never spoken publicly about the scandals, however. "We have never cried to anybody for anything," he told the *New York Times* after Ed Roman died in 1988. "We did exactly what the American way is supposed to be. We told the truth and we took our medicine. I'm sorry we told the truth."¹⁵³

Robert Gurland was a freshman at City in 1951 and remembers sitting through the anti-Semitic Professor Knickerbocker's 9:00 a.m. Spanish class and standing next to Eddie Roman cutting up a fetal pig in biology. "I think all these guys got the shaft in a way," he said:

They were young kids, easily seduced. They didn't get major money. Was it a great moral failing? Well the exploitation of these kids was a moral failing. City College got a lot of exposure...I mean [you're] a poor kid, and if I tell you to win the game by three points instead of five is that a bad thing? You didn't lose the fucking game. So [you] throw a ball into the stands. [So what?]¹⁵⁴

If people got so bent out of shape about shaving a few points off the score, Gurland said it was probably because

sport represents for some people the last bastion of a certain kind of purity. It stands apart. People try to put it in a realm that sets it apart from the flow of ordinary life. But it's tough to maintain the boundaries. It insinuates itself. When I was younger I didn't know who made money and who didn't... You thought of the athlete as somehow enjoying an extended childhood, it's play. It's not business. The rules are there, and people play by the rules.

For many people in the 1950s City College also stood apart. It represented something pure and democratic. But it would be equally hard to maintain those boundaries. Today, when Floyd Layne looks out his living-room window over Yankee Stadium and the Harlem River to

¹⁵³ "Sports of the Times: 3 'Blessed' by Their Adversity," *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 1988.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Gurland, interview with author, May 4, 2010.

Coogan's Bluff and, just a few blocks to the south, to the gothic bell tower of Shepard Hall rising over the housing projects, what must he see? Is it the place where he first found acceptance, friendship, and popularity among a sea of Jews? Does he remember the glory, the rallies, and the Allagarroos? Or is it the headlines that came later and the detectives who showed up to fish him out of class? Layne had still other experiences of City College, of course: as an older, returning student who didn't play on any teams at all and as a coach during the tumultuous era of Open Admissions when, as a Black man, he was suddenly no longer a minority there, and the college was once again front-page news. We may never know what that image conjures up for Floyd Layne, but the next chapter deals with people who, like him, saw City College when they looked out their windows during the 1960s and felt alternately forsaken by and drawn to the place.

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III. 'THE UNIVERSITY OF HARLEM'

*Open the doors to all. Let the children of the rich and poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect.*¹

—Townsend Harris, 1847

*Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.*²

—Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965

*And so the Black student enters the gates. Choice of entry is delusional. He must go inside, or perish through dependency. But he rejects the university as it panders to his potential for neither/nor anonymity, or for dysfunctional amnesia. He enters the university and, snatching at the shred reality of freedom-at-last, or first choice, he chooses his family. The black student clutches at family precisely at the moment when he enters the ultimate glorification of a society that has rejected him. Why is anyone amazed?*³

—June Jordan, 1969

*Our understanding was that someone had cracked open the door, we had slipped through and that our job was to open that door even wider. That was our job.*⁴

—Louis Reyes Rivera, 2005

¹ Plain Truth, Letter to the editor, New York Courier and Enquirer, Mar. 22, 1847, quoted in Mario Emilio Cosenza, *The Establishment of The College Of The City Of New York as the Free Academy in 1847*, Townsend Harris Founder: A Chapter in the History of Education (New York: Associate Alumni of the College of the City of New York, 1925), 81. Though signed with a pseudonym, the author was almost certainly Townsend Harris. See p. 79.

² Lyndon B. Johnson, "To Fulfill These Rights," Commencement address, Howard University, June 4, 1965, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), 636.

³ June Jordan, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," *Evergreen Review*, Oct. 1969. Emphasis in original. Jordan was an instructor in City College's SEEK program beginning in 1967.

⁴ Louis Reyes Rivera, in "The Struggle for Access at CUNY: SEEK, Open Admissions, and Black and Puerto Rican Studies," Videorecording of undated panel discussion at Baruch College circa 2005, iTunes U, Baruch Community (accessed Oct. 22, 2009). Reyes was a student in City College's SEEK program beginning in 1968, one of the students who occupied the South Campus the following year, and co-founder of *The Paper*, City College's first student newspaper by and for students of African descent.

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In the 1960s it was no longer possible for a high school dropout to go to work in a New York City shipyard or factory and rise up into the middle class; hundreds of thousands of those jobs were gone. But for the first time in history vast numbers of ordinary Americans had also gone to college, the best colleges, and the nation as a whole was enjoying unprecedented prosperity. City, the public's college, perched on the hill above what had long since become Negro Harlem, remained ninety per cent white, however.⁵ Somehow, the legendary engine of social mobility, racial comity, and citizen formation had become an exclusive ethnic enclave, a gated community.

After years of patiently pleading their cause, in 1969 frustrated black and Puerto Rican students seized control of City College's South Campus and demanded that the institution radically expand access for their younger brothers and sisters and address the entrenched contradictions that had long made the institution so inhospitable to minority youth. This section explores how those dramatic events came about and the communities and conversations that took shape in and around the college as it came to represent the antithesis of everything it had once stood for and began to feel its way toward a new role in a changing city.

During the postwar era Negro writers from Langston Hughes to James Baldwin and neighborhood residents alike increasingly looked upon City College as a remote citadel of whiteness and were deeply skeptical of its willingness to even acknowledge them, much less to transform itself in order to meet their needs. The dismal condition of the city's largely segregated schools militated against most of their children ever meeting the College's

⁵ Roughly two thirds of New York City's college-age population was White.

unforgiving entrance requirements or following a trajectory similar to that of earlier generations of immigrants. But thanks to an experimental affirmative action program—the first of its kind—after 1965 a trickle of black and Puerto Rican students did begin arriving on campus, though their token presence seemed at times almost calculated to forestall broader minority participation. The new students were appalled by the stark contrast between their own paltry numbers and the complexion of the surrounding population as well as by the often-chilly reception they got. Together, they resolved to do something about it.

At the same time, middle-class intellectuals began to see City College as the place to repair their own sense of estrangement, in the poet Adrienne Rich's words, "to involve myself in the real life of the City." Faced with the specter of change, still others invested the school with newfound nostalgia, anointing City the beleaguered "Harvard of the proletariat"—a term first applied to it by the press in 1965 just as new constituencies began to claim a piece of the school for themselves and long after it had ceased to attract the intellectual cream of the crop or to serve the children of peddlers and garment workers. Except in people's imaginations, City College could not be all these things at once, of course, and during the late 1960s the institution and the community that surrounded it were forced to grapple with that paradox.

In the Negro press questions began to surface about who really benefited from City's cherished status and historic policies of selective admission and free tuition, signs of a larger fissure forming in the traditional coalition of the city's blacks and working-class Jews. A governor bent on reining in spending and wresting control of the municipal colleges from City Hall began squeezing them even tighter, sowing further division and making it more impossible than ever for the college to meet the burgeoning demand. Officials set high-minded long-range goals to deal with the problem and bought some time with compensatory programs, but then a

bitter, citywide teachers strike shattered what remained of New York's black-Jewish alliance. Other cities and college campuses across America were overtaken with violent discord, and the stage was set for a heated contest over City College's destiny. This struggle became a major focus of the mayoral election, and the school's special meaning for upwardly mobile Jews and location at the symbolic heart of black America made for a particularly wrenching series of battles and conversations.

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1. THE VIEW FROM DOWN BELOW

The notion of a rupture or an unbridgeable distance is something that appears again and again in memoirs, novels, and poetry dealing with the City College experience in the postwar era. To Harlemites in the 1950s, the College did not stand so much for basketball as yet another dream deferred. Whether Negroes were really welcome at City College at all and on what terms were still very much open questions, and Vivian Gornick's "stifled seclusion" took on a different meaning in this context.

MIGRATION NARRATIVES: HUGHES, BALDWIN, & THE FORTRESS ON THE HILL

The poet Langston Hughes had come to New York in 1921 to attend Columbia College where he excelled academically but was miserable because of the hostile reception he received, so miserable that he dropped out. In 1951, the year of the basketball scandal, Hughes wrote about a "colored" City College student roughly the same age as he was when he first came to New York three decades earlier, part of the same great migration that by then had thoroughly transformed northern cities. The poem is called "Theme for English B":

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you---
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
 through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
 Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
 the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
 up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
 at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
 I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
 hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.
 (I hear New York too.) Me---who?
 Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
 I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
 I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
 or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.
 I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
 the same things other folks like who are other races.
 So will my page be colored that I write?
 Being me, it will not be white.
 But it will be
 a part of you, instructor.
 You are white---
 yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
 That's American.
 Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
 Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
 But we are, that's true!
 As I learn from you,
 I guess you learn from me---
 although you're older---and white---
 and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.⁶

In much the same way that W.E.B. DuBois had asked, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the

⁶ Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B," *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York, Vintage Classics, 1995), 409.

question, “What are we as a nation going to do with all these freed slaves and their descendants?” and the GI Bill anticipated the question, “What are we going to do with all these returning soldiers?” Hughes’s seemed to be saying that City College was now going to have to *deal* with the speaker of the poem and his like.⁷ He meticulously traced the student’s path not upward, toward City College, but down the hill, away from it, to a safe distance from which he was free to issue a kind of challenge. *You’ll deal with me*, he said in a tone that was equal parts mischief, resignation, and resolve, *and the transaction will necessarily transform us both*. I’d like to argue that the poem is a prophecy of what would later become Open Admissions.

But first I want to turn to a then unknown Negro writer, this one a native son of Harlem who graduated from a magnet high school in the Bronx in 1941 and considered attending City College, where he might well have been admitted but almost certainly would have been the only black student in many of his classes. James Baldwin chose to go to work in the defense industry instead, however, and later joined the merchant marine before becoming a writer. Early in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published just a year after the basketball scandals and Hughes’s poem, Baldwin described an exchange between the protagonist’s mother and older brother:

“Your father,” she said, watching him, “knows best. You listen to your father, I guarantee you you won’t end up in no jail.”

Roy sucked his teeth in fury. “I ain’t looking to go to no jail. You think that’s all that’s in the world is jails and churches? You ought to know better than that, Ma.”⁸

A dozen or so pages later Baldwin’s character took us downtown to see an altogether different kind of edifice and revealed his ambivalent feelings about it:

⁷ He never gives the college a name, though the geography makes it perfectly clear.

⁸ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952; repr. New York: Dial Press, 1963), 25.

Here on 42nd Street it was less elegant but no less strange. He loved this street, not for the people or the shops but for the stone lions that guarded the great main building of the Public Library, a building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which he had never yet dared to enter. He might, he knew, for he was a member of the branch in Harlem and was entitled to take books from any library in the city. But he had never gone in because the building was so big that it must be full of corridors and marble steps, in the maze of which he would be lost and never find the book he wanted. And then everyone, all the white people inside, would know that he was not used to great buildings, or to many books, and they would look at him with pity. He would enter on another day, when he had read all the books uptown, an achievement that would, he felt, lend him the poise to enter any building in the world.⁹

That was Baldwin writing in 1952. His character was a kindred spirit of the speaker of the Langston Hughes poem. Though not nearly as self-assured, Baldwin's protagonist showed us yet another instance where the mere fact of membership or eligibility did not in itself confer unfettered access, where an institution's publicness was problematized. And it was that contradiction, that fraught relationship with a less deferential Harlem, one that would no longer allow itself to be kept at arms length, that would become the salient fact of City College's existence during the 1960s.

The invisible barriers that prevented Baldwin's character from even walking into the public library and the contradictions looming at the heart of Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B" had, by 1968, only become more entrenched. In that year Baldwin described the iconic structure of Shepard Hall through the eyes of another character for whom the landscape was dominated by prisons and churches:

When Caleb, my older brother, was taken from me and sent to prison, I watched, from the fire escape of our East Harlem tenement, the walls of an old and massive building, far, far away and set on a hill, and with green vines running up and down the walls, and with windows flashing like signals in the sunlight. I watched that building, I say, with a child's helpless and stricken attention, waiting for my

⁹ *ibid.*, 39-40.

brother to come out of there. I did not know how to get to the building. If I had I would have slept in the shadow of those walls, and I told no one of my vigil or of my certain knowledge that my brother was imprisoned in that place. I watched that building for many years. Sometimes, when the sunlight flashed on the windows, I was certain that my brother was signaling to me and I waved back. When we moved from that particular tenement (into another one) I screamed and cried because I was certain that now my brother would no longer be able to find me. Alas, he was not there; the building turned out to be City College; my brother was on a prison farm in the Deep South, working the fields.¹⁰

Born of the postwar African American literary imagination, both this text and the earlier Langston Hughes poem played with the physical and psychological distance between Harlem, City College, and the segregated South. In Hughes's case the College represented part of a seamless, if problematic, migration narrative.¹¹ In Baldwin's—and this was perhaps a result of the seventeen years of failed integration efforts that had intervened—the College turned out to be a chimera, a cruel stand-in for what was, in fact, mobility in reverse.¹²

PAGET HENRY'S TWO RUDE AWAKENINGS

Paget Henry (CCNY '70) grew up on the island of Antigua in the 1950s, raised by his aunt and uncle while his father toiled in the kitchen of a Manhattan automat and his mother worked as seamstress. As a child he remembered coming home from school and finding his yard covered with leaflets dropped from planes belonging to the nearby American naval base. They showed pictures of American flags, a white hand shaking a Negro hand, as well as celebrities

¹⁰ James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 9.

¹¹ The protagonist of John A. Williams's novel of the same year, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, is an ex-G.I. who also contemplates the college from below—from a room at the Harlem Y, in fact, where, like the speaker of the "Theme for English B," he lives a marginal, writerly existence. Looking out the window he can only barely make out a sliver of sidewalk across 135th Street. "But looking to the West he could see the white and gray buildings of City College," we're told. Like both Hughes's and Baldwin's characters what he most wants to know is whether anyone up there can see him. "Then one day, when he was pleased with his work, he hurled a silent challenge at the City College buildings: I will walk to where you are and see if I can see my room from there. He never made it..."

¹² In 1942 Baldwin was one of the rare Negroes to graduate with an academic diploma from a magnet high school. City College was certainly on his horizon, though its not clear that his grades were good enough to get in had he decided to go that route. See David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 37.

like Nat King Cole, Marian Anderson, and Floyd Patterson standing outside their opulent suburban homes. The black soldiers from the base all seemed intelligent and well educated; there was no hint of what was in store for him and his sister when they arrived in New York in 1964. “I knew America was segregated,” he said, but it was still America. People lived decently, he was sure. “But I had never seen pictures of a Harlem tenement building.” Nor did he even know what Heroin was.

Henry was a good student, but the local university only took one hundred students a year, and he didn’t get in. At five dollars a semester, City looked very appealing. “But, man, I’ll tell you, when I landed in Harlem I could not believe what I was seeing,” he said. “It was a real shocker. I mean a real shocker. My sister just broke down and cried. I’ll never forget that: Elaine cried.”¹³ They had a younger, American-born brother who was raised in New York and Henry had always assumed he was getting a better education. “Of course, physically the school looked a lot better than [my] Antigua grammar school,” he said, “but the teaching. Oh, jeez, big difference...I’m from a third world country and my education was infinitely better.”

Even with Henry’s advanced placement college credit, because of his thick West Indian accent, he was placed at Bronx Community College in the white, working-class neighborhood of University Heights. Life there was just as he’d imagined it would be. “I was in heaven,” he said. “the atmosphere...the freedom, the exchange of ideas.” That the students were predominately white made total sense to him at the time: many seemed to come from the surrounding neighborhoods, and the place had what he described as “a community feel.” When he graduated in 1967, all of his friends transferred to City College and so did he. But Henry was in for a second shocker:

¹³ Paget Henry, interview with author, New York, Feb. 20, 2010.

The first time I arrived on the campus it was like arriving in Harlem all over again. Here's City College in the heart of Harlem, 137th Street and Broadway, a predominately black community. I walk on the campus and it's like ninety-five percent white...That was the first thing that struck me as being a little odd. You know: "This isn't right." Then, to make matters worse, among the tiny black population I would say that when I was there at least half [were] from the Caribbean.

The only black professors in Henry's decidedly non-remedial orbit were also West Indian:

Kenneth Clark, Wilfred Cartey, and a Trinidadian named Murray. "So, again, that just struck me as odd, weird," he said, as though he had enrolled at the University of the West Indies and found all the professors were from South Carolina.

And then when I stopped to think about the cost of City College, five dollars a term, I said, "Something's up here. This is not right." So I felt very uncomfortable at City. I felt more uncomfortable at City than I did at Bronx Community College because I felt more of the black community should have been a part of the student body. I knew something was amiss and I couldn't live it down. That's really what radicalized me. This was when I became an activist.

The Civil Rights Movement was all around me, and I'm sure it impacted me...but the thing that really, really triggered it was the sense of injustice coming from Bronx Community College where the community was so fully represented to City College and feeling the *exclusion* of a community.¹⁴

CROWD CONTROL & FREE TUITION IN A CHANGING CITY

The exclusion Henry picked up on was all too real and unrelenting. In the years leading up to the 1969 uprising, City College was being squeezed in a number of different ways. In spite of the 1952 purchase of the adjacent Manhattanville College campus that nearly doubled the size of its physical plant, massive postwar migrations and the advent of mass higher education had increased the number of applications by more than sixty percent in the six years following the basketball scandals alone.¹⁵ Space and budgets were so tight that entrance requirements had to

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Benjamin Fine, "Rejections Climb at City Colleges," *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1957, 8.

be steadily raised in order to control the explosive growth. By 1957 an applicant to the uptown day session needed a high school grade point average of eighty-four to get in—a more than eight percent increase over five years earlier—and thousands of qualified candidates were being turned away, including many from underrepresented groups.¹⁶ At the same time the Soviet launch of Sputnik sparked widespread concern about the sorry state of America's schools and their inability to equip a modern workforce for a new, technological era.

The following year, a mixed constituency of New York City moderates and upstate conservatives elected liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller governor, whose goals included the expansion of New York's fledgling state university. Upon assuming office, Rockefeller appointed the three-member Heald Commission whose far-reaching recommendations included merging the city's colleges with those of the State University system (SUNY) in order to better meet the challenges posed by global communism and prepare workers for technical careers.¹⁷ The commission also proposed a uniform tuition of \$300 for New York residents at public colleges statewide. It was in response to this frontal attack on its sovereignty and on the century-old tradition of free education that the New York City Board of Higher Education scrambled to consolidate its own colleges into a new City University of New York. The vocal support of Mayor Wagner, City College alumni, and labor and civic organizations demonstrated the intensely proprietary feelings a broad spectrum of New Yorkers harbored for City, its sister

¹⁶ *ibid.* By the end of the 50s nearly a million whites had left the city and been replaced by an equal number of blacks and Puerto Ricans from the rural south and Caribbean. Yet as late as 1967 fully matriculated, daytime non-white enrollment at the senior colleges remained about 8.3 per cent, only a few percentage points above where it had been in 1950. See New York City Board of Higher Education, *A Long-Range Plan for the City University of New York, 1961-1975*, 1962, 99. Also: The City University of New York, *Report of the Fall 1967 Undergraduate Ethnic Census*, 5.

¹⁷ Henry T Heald, Marion Folsom, and John W. Gardner, "Meeting the Increasing Demand for Higher Education in New York State: A Report to the Governor and the Board of Regents," 1960, quoted in Newt Davidson Collective, *Crisis at CUNY*, 1974, 56-57.

colleges and their shared traditions, and Albany was forced, to back off.¹⁸

But as the sixties wore on and the city lost more manufacturing jobs and middle class residents, it became increasingly apparent that, just to stay afloat, not to speak of accommodating the burgeoning demand, CUNY would need a lot more support than the state's customary half of its \$100 million budget¹⁹ In exchange for increased state funding, Rockefeller wanted to place his own representatives on the Board of Higher Education and he wanted to revisit the issue of tuition. SUNY trustees, meanwhile, adopted a \$400 tuition rate on their campuses, and Albany began funding scholarships exclusively for students at tuition-charging institutions. SUNY trustee and former National Urban League head Lester Granger and Assembly Speaker Joseph P. Carlino were among those advancing the argument that as long as CUNY refused to charge tuition it would be able to afford to educate only the few relatively well-off (read "white") students at the top of their high school classes. "The free tuition policy adopted by the City of New York and urged upon the State tends to discriminate unfairly against those very groups who are supposed to be aided," Granger contended:

If one, or possibly two, of the City University's Senior Colleges were designated as having special concern for the ablest and most original students, this would be understandable, but to organize the whole system into a higher education preserve for a 'talented tenth'—or fifth—of the City's high school graduates seeking college degrees smacks of a kind of "educational colonialism" that is far removed from the socio-educational problems of an urban democracy.²⁰

As other minority leaders began to chew on the contradictions embodied in the widespread fixation on free tuition—and to use their support for it as a bargaining chip—Governor

¹⁸ While the legislature went along with the creation of CUNY in 1961, the enabling legislation also removed the 125-year statutory requirement of free tuition and empowered the BHE to charge tuition should it see fit. See Newt Davidson Collective, *Crisis at CUNY*, 58, 61.

¹⁹ "\$115 Million Asked for City University," *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 1965, 34.

²⁰ Lester B. Granger, Letter to John J. Marchi, Chairman, Senate Committee on the Affairs of the City of New York, Nov. 19, 1964, quoted in Sheila C. Gordon, "The Transformation of the City University of New York, 1945-1970," PhD diss., Columbia University, 1975, 173-174.

Rockefeller threatened to build new SUNY campuses within the five boroughs.²¹

²¹ Gordon, "The Transformation of the City University," 62.

2. MAKING ROOM AT THE TOP: THE CREATION OF SEEK

At City College, meanwhile, space had become so tight that students were being forced to line up to use the toilets.²² And in 1964 the editor of the *Negro New York Amsterdam News* wrote a series of columns accusing City College of “becoming as lily-white as the campus of Ole Miss University was the day after James Meredith graduated” and the “Great White Father[s]” on the Board of Higher Education of “bemoaning the bad luck and poverty of the Negro, on the one hand, while prostituting it to [their] own advantage, on the other.”²³ The series explained how, in an effort to stave off charges of “highway robbery” by Negro taxpayers and a pique of white guilt, the board had secured \$500,000 from the state legislature “to help 500 new Negroes get into Hunter and City College,” then promptly cut their number in half and shunted them off to two outer-borough “junior” colleges. “The differences between the two [sets of institutions] are just like chalk and cheese,” the paper said. Two-year colleges were “a dumping ground for qualified Negroes who are shut out at City College” by ever stiffening admission requirements. All the talk about intensive integration efforts was “garbage” and “a smokescreen,” it argued. “By hook or crook, Negro students are being systematically excluded from these schools, particularly the top ones such as City College.”²⁴

The stratification of public higher education was fast becoming a lightning rod. The G.I. bill and Sputnik had increased Americans’ appetite for college degrees, as had the precipitous

²² Leonard Kreigel, *Working Through: A Teacher’s Journey in the Urban University* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 166.

²³ James L. Hicks, “Education’s Higher Board,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 11, 1964, 11; “To the Rescue?” *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 18, 1964, 11. Allen Ballard cites these editorials as a prime “impetus” for the compensatory programs that led to Open Admissions. See Allen B. Ballard, *The Education of Black Folk: The Afro-American Struggle for Knowledge in White America* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974), 121.

²⁴ James L. Hicks, “Education Gets Higher!” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 1964, 9; “Change in Plans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Dec. 5, 1964, 11.

drop in blue-collar jobs and rising demand for low-level technical workers. Almost overnight, a college education had ceased to serve as one of several ladders out of poverty and become a nearly inescapable hurdle.²⁵ But rather than extending the G.I. bill to non-veterans, government planners had instead shifted the burden onto public colleges and universities and created two-year “community” colleges, which permitted private colleges to remain exclusive and pricey. Although City and its sister colleges had fought to remain tuition free—or perhaps, as some would argue, *because* of that fact—as demand grew and space ran short, they, too, were becoming steadily harder to get into.

The city dutifully expanded its newer two-year colleges, which, though billed as proving grounds and conduits to further study, were in practice geared toward vocational training and “cooling out” the misplaced ambitions of poorly prepared, working class students.²⁶ University of California Chancellor Clark Kerr had only recently pioneered this solution to the problem of providing expanded access while at the same time preserving the traditionally selective function of higher education. In its 1960 master plan, California established a tiered system of skills centers, two- and four-year colleges, and research universities that together would, in theory, accommodate every high school graduate but, depending on the tier, be progressively more difficult to qualify for. New York was fast moving in the same direction. During the 1960s, the percentage of its students enrolled in two-year rather than four-year public institutions jumped from six percent to fifty and the state dropped precipitously, to forty-eighth in the nation, in the

²⁵ Martin Mayer, “Higher Education for All? The Case of Open Admissions,” *Commentary* 51, no. 2 (Feb. 1973): 38.

²⁶ For more on this phenomenon and the insidious role of two-year colleges in proscribing students’ sense of their own potential see Burton Clark, “The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education,” *American Journal of Sociology* 65 (1960): 569-576.

proportion of its students enrolled in four-year degree programs.²⁷

For Paget Henry, who experienced life at both a two- and four-year CUNY college, the difference was one of scope and ambition. Before his political awakening Henry had been studying physics, and recalled that

at City you met guys who were really thinking about the big issues here, the origins of the cosmos. At Bronx Community the guys were thinking there's this problem with the Ford Mustang. How can we fix that? Physics was always related to industry. I didn't mind it; you just knew it was bigger than that.²⁸

In noting that Manhattan Community College's forty-two percent Negro enrollment masked stubborn resistance on the part of City and other older, more prestigious institutions like Hunter where the same figure was closer to five per cent, the *Amsterdam News* was thus calling attention to a disturbing trend.²⁹ Negro and Puerto Rican students who'd been cheated out of an education by inferior slum schools were tired of being consigned to institutions widely perceived as educational ghettos like the new community colleges or City College's evening division, where through arduous effort—and, in the latter case, the payment of tuition—they might eventually prove themselves worthy to transfer to the day session and benefit from the superior education their tax dollars had been supporting all along.

To help address this grievance, Dean Allen Ballard wrote up a plan for an experimental “pre-baccalaureate program” that would enroll students from high poverty areas who showed academic potential in spite of otherwise deficient high school grades and test scores. Ballard, a Harvard trained political scientist, had been the first Negro ever to graduate from Kenyon College. His grandfather had put eleven children through Negro colleges, and upon earning his

²⁷ David Nasaw, *Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 214, 229.

²⁸ Paget Henry interview.

²⁹ James L. Hicks, “Change in Plans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Dec. 5, 1964, 11.

PhD in 1961, he had hoped to teach in one, but City College's was the only job offer he received.³⁰ In 1965 the pre-Bacc program admitted 110 students —virtually all of them non-white—to a day-session that had produced 17,316 graduates over the previous five years, a figure that included only 196 Negroes.³¹ They were given intensive skills training, tutoring, and counseling and were paid a stipend to help them with the cost of books, transportation, and living. Over the course of six months to a year they were introduced into the mainstream of the college. That same year President Johnson told an audience at Howard University that equality of opportunity was no longer enough, society must now seek equality of outcomes and find new ways to help citizens hobbled by centuries of discrimination to actually compete. The program at City, which in 1966 was expanded to include 1,500 students at all four of the senior colleges and rechristened SEEK (Search for Enlightenment, Education, and Knowledge), was the nation's very first affirmative action program for minority students.

CUNY Chancellor Albert H. Bowker had, by then, already set an official target 1975 of when every New York City high school graduate would be guaranteed admission to one of the system's colleges, and anyone in the top quartile of her class could attend City or another four-year institution.³² Among other things, Bowker hoped such a policy measure would once and for all “remove admissions as a political issue in New York City.”³³ But given the annual budget battles in Albany it was hard to see how even by 1975 such a goal could be met. The SEEK

³⁰ Allen B. Ballard, Interview with author, May 21, 2010.

³¹ Conrad M. Dyer, “Protest and the Politics of Open Admissions: The Impact of the Black and Puerto Rican Students' Community (of City College),” PhD diss., City University of New York, 1990, 64. Non-white students made up somewhere between three and five percent of the total, but as much as twenty-five percent in the Evening Session.

³² New York City Board of Higher Education, “1964 Master Plan for the City University of York: Second Interim Revision,” New York, 1966, viii.

³³ Albert G. Bowker, interviewed by Jerome Karabel, June 5, 1978, in Jerome Karabel, “The Politics of Structural Change in American Higher Education: The Case of Open Admissions at the City University of New York,” in H. Hermanns, U. Teichler, and H. Wasser, eds., *The Compleat University: Break from Tradition in Germany, Sweden and the U.S.A.* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Press, 1983), 20.

program was to be both the “pilot” or “wedge” for what would later become Open Admissions, and its politicized students the agents who would broaden, deepen, and speed up Bowker’s plans.

THE THREAT TO COLLEGE TRADITIONS & PRESTIGE

At about the same time that the SEEK program got off the ground, the college announced a \$40 million capital expansion project that would, after a period of “more than five years” using funds that had yet to be secured, enable it to increase its enrollment by one third, or 4,000 more students, including some from the surrounding neighborhood. For the *New York Times* the two paramount worries were not so much where the funds would come from or how the work would be completed but rather the demolition of Lewisohn Stadium, which lay in between the North and South campuses, to make room for three new academic buildings as well as the possible deleterious effects on the college’s entrance requirements. Few *Times* readers were thinking about sending their children to college in Harlem in 1965. But generations of them had enjoyed summer evenings there listening to George Gershwin, Ella Fitzgerald, Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. For decades the Stadium Concerts had begun with the series’ cheerful promoter and emcee Minnie Guggenheimer saying “Hello, everyone!” and crowds of 25,000 roaring back, “Hello, Minnie!” It was a ritual that involved huge swaths of the population, and the site of a unified urban community. Now that appeared to be threatened by a new, more localized set of needs. The show would go on the following summer, readers were assured in the third paragraph of a front page story. The tenth paragraph—on page thirty-four—consisted of a single sentence: “There have been complaints that it is difficult for Negroes and Puerto Ricans to get into City College,” that helped explain why the party was coming to an end:³⁴

³⁴ Murray Schumach, “City College Plans \$40 Million Expansion: Lewisohn Stadium to be Razed—Student Body to Add 4,000,” *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1965, 1, 34. Eight paragraphs further down the article mentions the planned demolition of seven “tenement houses,” home to some 200 families.

And in the same way that many readers had fond memories of hearing their first live symphony orchestras and of cheap dates during the Great Depression, they were equally attached to the intellectual status associated with City College, which reflected on them as citizens if not parents or alumni. With the expansion complete, entrance requirements—currently an 87 GPA—were to be lowered, the article noted, but remain higher than they had been 10 years earlier.³⁵ Already there were powerful countervailing forces were driving admissions criteria and the corresponding prestige in a downward direction: The top private colleges and universities had long since dispensed with their anti-Jewish quotas and were even offering scholarships to the most talented among what had, for a time, been City’s exclusive human resource. Many more of the same kinds of people who had benefited from the municipal college system during the previous era now found themselves in a position to send their children away to school, as well, and to pay the tuition, if not at Harvard then certainly at the moderately priced colleges of the fledgling State University system. Sending one’s kids away to school was increasingly becoming a status symbol, and City’s location in the midst of what had become a vast and dangerous urban ghetto only made such a choice that much more attractive. The “flagship” school’s prestige faced being even further eroded by the creation of a downtown Graduate School and University Center within the newly formed City University where many of its most distinguished faculty were expected to gravitate.³⁶

By 1967, then, City College was all at once bursting at the seams and excluding more qualified candidates from the surrounding community than ever before (and increasingly taking heat for it) even as it struggled to attract the kinds of top-flight students it had become famous for

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ City had fought for its own doctoral programs, but lost out to the more centralized Graduate Center model in the face of Rockefeller’s threats and the opposition of the presidents of the other CUNY colleges. See Gordon, “The Transformation of the City University,” 124-135.

and to accommodate at least a token number of promising blacks and Puerto Ricans for whom City would otherwise have been out of reach. Added to all that it was fighting, along with other CUNY colleges, a relentless battle with the state government to preserve its independence and tradition of free tuition and to secure the funding it needed to meet the triple crises of overcrowding, rising ethnic demands, and waning prestige.

SITE 6: THE LINES ARE DRAWN

Perhaps the event that most helped presage the way the uprising and negotiations of 1969 would later play out was a protest over a half dozen trees. In the fall of 1967 the college was scrambling to exploit every inch of unused space and had committed \$1.5 million to the construction of “temporary” prefabricated huts on the South Campus in order to make room in the college buildings for more classrooms and a thousand additional students, increasing the full-time student body to ten thousand. This involved paving over what Professor Leonard Kriegel described as “one of the last grassy areas left” on a campus where students already felt “physically constricted”³⁷ as well as cutting down a handful of oak, chestnut, and maple trees some of which were as old as City College itself. The previous fall students and faculty opposed the project because it amounted to what *The Campus* argued was “a crash construction program, accompanied by a crash enrollment program, [that] would lower the college’s academic standards”³⁸ and because the administration had failed to adequately consult them in formulating its plans. Opponents held up construction on what was known as “Site 6” for several months during which time a new radical group of white students coalesced primarily around the issue of green space and “lifestyle.” They were egged on by conservative faculty, one of whom radical

³⁷ Leonard Kriegel, *Working Through: A Teacher’s Journey in the Urban University* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 166.

³⁸ *The Campus*, Jan. 4, 1967, quoted in Dyer, 51.

student leader Ron McGuire remembered telling them that ““there are some people who want to destroy City College and replace it with Harlem Community College.’...He managed to persuade us that in our stand for aesthetics we were also striking a blow for the preservation of the standards of the College.”³⁹ When the workers appeared at the site, McGuire and his fellow protesters climbed into the trees to prevent them from being cut down. President Gallagher told the police to remove them and nine were hauled off to the Twenty-sixth Precinct for processing on charges of criminal trespass and resisting arrest. A similar, much larger protest a month later resulted in forty-nine more arrests.⁴⁰

Paul Milkman, a white middle-class student from the sleepy Douglaston neighborhood in the far reaches of Queens, was one of those arrested. He’d arrived on campus the year before with ambitions to be where the action was, and he found plenty of it in the Progressive Labor Party, the anti-war movement, and the battle over the huts. But “what happened on the campus had nothing to do with Harlem,” he said. “We might as well have been in Kansas...The best thing were the Chinese restaurants. That’s when I went into the neighborhood.”⁴¹

Milkman agreed that on its surface the Site 6 episode was trivial, even absurd. Everyone agreed that the college needed the new buildings, after all. But it threw a number of issues into relief, widened rifts between liberals and radicals, blacks and whites, faculty and administration and strengthened the bonds within those same groups, all of which would bear directly on the events of April 1969. Chief among these concerns was the cavalier and autocratic way the college president called the police onto campus and what that suggested about the voice of faculty and students in college affairs. Even more salient, however, was the reaction of Harlem

³⁹ Ron McGuire, quoted in Dyer, 53.

⁴⁰ Maurice Carroll, “49 Students Seized In C.C.N.Y. Protest Over New Building,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1967, 1.

⁴¹ Milkman interview.

residents and the nascent black student organizations on campus, who considered white students blocking the construction to save a few trees insensitive to the community's needs. According to Kriegel,

The students' objections ... made no sense to people desperately seeking to send their children to college. The administration, eager to use whatever ammunition it had, began to play up the theme of how the student activists were interfering with the possibilities for expansion and for accommodating the S.E.E.K. program. This was the first conflict at the college where white and black had been played off against one another...Quite abruptly the problem on campus shifted from the question of facilities to the question of who was and wasn't a racist.⁴²

But the battle over Site 6 represented more than a clash between the interests of two demographic groups. Put in broader terms, the contested pedagogical terrain it prefigured was what Kenneth Libo and Edward Stewart would later call

the last jousting ground where...those who believe learning is a treasure to be shared confront those who believe it is a treasure to be safeguarded, where those who worry about what is happening to people confront those who worry about what is happening to institutions."⁴³

OCEAN-HILL BROWNSVILLE & THE END OF THE LIBERAL ALLIANCE

Nowhere was this tension more fully dramatized than in Brooklyn's Ocean-Hill Brownsville community control experiment and in the citywide teacher's strikes that followed in the spring and fall of 1968. Faced with more than a decade of declining jobs and the influx of hundreds of thousands of unskilled migrants displaced by the mechanization of farm labor and racial violence in the rural South and Puerto Rico, middle class whites who hadn't fled the city altogether (and taken their tax dollars with them) had, for the most part, retreated deeper into ethnic enclaves. Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods had become increasingly isolated and

⁴² Kriegel, *Working Through*, 167-168.

⁴³ Kenneth Libo and Edward Stewart, "Open Admissions: An Open-and-Shut Case?" *Saturday Review*, Sept. 9, 1972, 58.

impoverished and the public schools in such neighborhoods consistently got the worst of everything. By the mid sixties blacks, while making up nearly a third of the student population, earned only 2.5 percent of the academic diplomas required for admission to the college (There were thirteen such diplomas granted in all of Harlem one year). According to urban historian Jerald Podair, eighty-five percent of Harlem sixth graders were two years behind grade level, and the IQs of elementary schoolchildren in the neighborhood actually declined between third and sixth grades. “The more time black pupils spent in the city’s public education system, the more they appeared to regress.”⁴⁴

Across the city desperate black parents began applying pressure to create school integration programs. Their pleas were met with official delays, massive protest from their white counterparts, meager consolation prizes in the form of “compensatory programs” (like SEEK), and a slew of broken promises. Weary of the lack of progress blacks, Puerto Ricans, and liberal politicians alike began to turn to the idea of “community control” of schools—first advanced by whites to resist busing—as a possible alternative, an idea not unlike “community” colleges. In time they embraced the idea of granting local parents greater autonomy over their children’s education. As the historian of New York’s public schools Diane Ravitch put it, even conservatives “recognized that black control of black schools meant white control of white schools, which they could comfortably support, for it guaranteed that black problems, black dissidence, and black pupils would be safely contained in the ghetto.”⁴⁵

With funding from the Ford Foundation and broad support from everyone from the *Wall Street Journal* to the State Commissioner of Education, the city set up three “demonstration

⁴⁴ Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, & the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 154.

⁴⁵ Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; repr. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 305.

districts” to study how such a decentralized school system would function on the ground. On May 9, 1968, less than a year before the climactic confrontation at City College, the black superintendent of one such district in Brooklyn’s Ocean-Hill Brownsville, sent a letter to nineteen of its more than 350 teachers ordering them to report to the central administration for reassignment to other parts of the city. The teacher’s union, whose membership was over ninety percent white and mostly Jewish (in a school system where the majority of the students were neither) cried foul and initiated a series of citywide strikes that would keep nearly a million children out of school well into November and constitute one of the nastiest episodes of racial and ethnic strife in the city’s 350-year history.

In the wake of the King and Kennedy assassinations, other cities suffered traumas that were unquestionably more dramatic, but Ocean-Hill Brownsville was a sustained and pervasive crisis. While remaining largely violence free, it managed to shake the city to its core and shatter the liberal alliance between blacks and Jews that had endured for decades and had ensured that the city’s politics were about more than just black and white. For Podair, the teachers strike was the last straw: “New York’s outer-borough Jews after decades of ambivalence, now viewed themselves as ‘white,’ with more in common with Irish and Italian Catholics than with blacks.”⁴⁶ The warring parties in Ocean Hill Brownsville were ultimately able to forge an uneasy compromise that preserved both the union’s power and the illusion of community control. The city, many felt, had escaped urban riots by the skin of its teeth. But one of the key factors that had arguably permitted it to avoid such riots, the city’s faith in itself, had been broken: “Until Ocean Hill-Brownsville,” wrote Podair, “New Yorkers, particularly white New Yorkers, had always seen their city as an exercise in cosmopolitan humanism, a pluralistic city broadly

⁴⁶ Podair, 125

integrated along racial, ethnic, and political lines.”⁴⁷ Not anymore.

MERITOCRACY CHALLENGED

City College, arguably the most visible symbol of that cosmopolitan vision, was now deeply suspect as well. Alfred Kazin and other New York Intellectuals had *grown up* in Brownsville, after all, gone to public schools there, and continued on to City College. Like them, many (if not most) of the striking teachers, themselves the children of new arrivals, were graduates of ghetto schools who went on to Hunter, City, Brooklyn, and Queens Colleges. At the back of the students’ demands was their perception that those very teachers’ low expectations coupled with arbitrary admissions requirements, and other faceless, institutional forces now militated against the possibility of their darker skinned counterparts ever following a similar trajectory.

The specter of Ocean Hill-Brownsville—not to mention that of recent student uprisings at Columbia and in Paris and Mexico City as well as riots in Newark and Detroit—hung over the events on the campus. So, too, did a powerful critique of meritocratic institutions like City College that was rapidly gaining currency in the culture at large. The standard “functionalist” argument held that what had worked to enable other groups to gain a foothold in the middle class still worked, provided one had the right attitude and did a little hard work. If black and Puerto Rican children were failing to make the grade it must be because something was wrong at home. Others rejected this notion of a “culture of poverty” advanced in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial 1965 report on the “tangle of pathology” embedded in the structure of Negro families.⁴⁸ “Poverty is less the result of individual pathology than structural barriers,” argued

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁸ This concept was popularized by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in his 1959 study of Mexico City slum dwellers, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*.

sociologists Jewel Bellush and Stephen David, “of institutions that are involved in the lives, yet unresponsive to the needs of the poor.”⁴⁹ The attitudes of white teachers, City College professor Kenneth Clark asserted, were far more significant factors in students’ failure than were their home environments.⁵⁰ And lest we imagine that these were arcane debates among social scientists, here is what one Harlem parent told the *New York Times* in 1966:

I don’t want any more teachers who make excuses for not teaching, who act as if they’re afraid of a seven-year old child because his color is different. I don’t want to be told that my daughter can’t learn because she comes from a fatherless home or because she had corn flakes for breakfast instead of eggs.⁵¹

At the same time that these diverse critics were challenging the subjective interactions between teacher and student, the meager expectations and the hidden messages that discouraged children from learning, education critics were taking aim at the putatively objective criteria governing traditional meritocracies like City College, which they contended were more like handicappers at a racetrack “picking winners,” further consolidating the comparative advantages their charges came in with, and widening the gap between rich and poor.⁵² “What America most needs is not more mobility,” wrote sociologists Jencks and Reisman, “but more equality.”⁵³

MARGINALIZED, SEEK STUDENTS BUILD THEIR OWN INSTITUTIONS

Even the Black and Puerto Rican students who’d made it onto the City College campus through traditional means were far from equals. Professor Kriegel could not recall seeing more than a single black face in any day session class he taught in the six years before 1967, and those

⁴⁹ Jewel Bellush and Stephen M. David, *Race and politics in New York City: Five Studies in Policy-making* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 26. In Podair, 59

⁵⁰ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 132.

⁵¹ Leonard Buder, “Showcase School Sets Off Dispute; Parents in East Harlem Call for Bused Integration or Right to Run It,” *New York Times*, Sept. 2, 1966, 38.

⁵² Alexander W. Astin, “The Folklore of Selectivity,” *Saturday Review* 20 (Dec. 1969), 69.

⁵³ Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (1968; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 150. See also Traub, *City on A Hill*, 55-56.

few he did remember

seemed to be torn between two worlds and to feel apparently that they could not make lasting connections with either of them. They were veritable caricatures of what white college students were still expected to be in the early sixties, interested in house plans and fraternities and in little else. It was this, more than their color, that made them conspicuous at City.⁵⁴

In 1966 a group of such students “felt the need to relate to each other socially,” wrote Dean Ballard, “and to do service to the community,” and they formed the all-black Onyx Society. Within a year its leadership had passed to more militant students—still regularly admitted—who began to draw for membership on the students specially recruited under City’s SEEK program.⁵⁵ If the regularly admitted minority students were struggling to make a home for themselves, the SEEK students and the black faculty specially recruited to teach them clearly understood themselves to be “unwelcome guests,” said Ballard, who were expected to fail.⁵⁶ Like many such compensatory programs, the SEEK offices at City College were located in the basement of the Administration Building, away from the pulse of changing classes and student life, and the program had its own, contingent teaching staff. Only months before seizing the campus, a group of student leaders came to see Ballard. For a full year they had had their intellectual potential nurtured by dedicated teachers in special, remedial classes and remained largely sheltered from the larger college community. “Now thrust into the mainstream of the college’s curriculum, they found themselves almost daily insulted, ignored, and generally denigrated in their regular courses.”⁵⁷ According to SEEK counselor Fran Geteles:

⁵⁴ Kriegel, *Working Through*, 133.

⁵⁵ Allen B. Ballard, *The Education of Black Folk: The Afro-American Struggle for Knowledge in White America* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974), 67.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 72

We were very careful not to put more than two to three [SEEK] students in any section of a [regular] class so the teachers would not be angry and up in arms and feel you loaded them all down in my class. You had to be cautious. We had a Registrar who was a genius at balancing it out.⁵⁸

The new students' second-class citizenship was not merely a matter of perception. For their first semester or two SEEK students were not officially matriculated at the college and as such were barred from many classes, participating in varsity sports, voting, or serving in any official capacity in student government. A group of SEEK students did practice with the basketball team in the college gym, however. "We'd go out there every week on the court and whip 'em," said the future poet Sekou Sundiata. "But we couldn't play on the team."⁵⁹

The Board of Higher Education finally voted to grant SEEK students full membership in the college community and beginning in the 1968-69 academic year the growing contingent of 725 students were also permitted to enroll in a limited number of regular classes while they made up for their deficiencies, but by then their physical isolation and largely hostile reception had spurred them to build their own institutions, including a SEEK student government, an All City Wide SEEK Coalition, several publications, and a championship intramural basketball team called the "Eights."⁶⁰ SEEK faculty reacted in much the same way, though with a greater emphasis on curriculum. Addison Gayle, a black instructor in the program who'd completed his bachelor's at the college in the early sixties and spent a year at UCLA, noted that, "Negroes are non-beings here...expunged from the history books, denied admission in the sociological texts, and banned from the archives of the English departments."⁶¹ Gayle proposed to his colleagues supplementing the standard anthology of essays for a freshman composition course with

⁵⁸ Fran Geteles, interview by Conrad Dyer, Feb. 27, 1989, quoted in Dyer, 72.

⁵⁹ Robert Feaster (Sekou Sundiata), interview by Conrad Dyer, July 13, 1988 quoted in Dyer, 73.

⁶⁰ Dyer, 73-74, 78.

⁶¹ Addison Gayle, Jr., "Perhaps Not So Soon One Morning," *Phylon* 29: no. 4 (Fall 1968): 401.

selections from Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and a collection of works by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and other Negro writers.

When I announced the text, *Soon One Morning*, the [remedial unit] director began hastily to scribble the title in his notebook. However, after my subsequent description of the text (an anthology of Negro writings), the moving hand ceased to move, other staff members shuffled uneasily in their seats, and the battle commenced.

No one else had read the book in question, but they expressed concerns that it lay outside “the mainstream of American literature,” that non-Negro students would feel “insulted” if assigned to read it for a required course, and that “Negro students, themselves, might be embarrassed if forced to study from such a text.”⁶² After extended negotiations, Gayle was permitted to use the text in his composition classes during the spring of 1967, at the end of which he surveyed the students. Thirty-six of forty-one reported being “totally at ease, having no feelings of embarrassment or uncomfortableness” with the textbook. Most were exceedingly positive about the experience.⁶³ The discomfort appeared to lie elsewhere.

Another Negro instructor, Toni Cade, who had been hired to teach remedial English directly out of City's graduate program and was one of the original cadre of pre-baccalaureate faculty, argued that “The drift toward mass education was just that—a drifting. It grew out of some sloppily defined egoistic devotion to the myth of democracy. It was not a planned experiment, nothing programmatic about it at all.” As such, no one anticipated how “the universities would have to shift their focus to accommodate a mass studentry...how the traditional premises might be challenged when the doors opened.” After more than five years studying and teaching on the City College campus it had become clear to Cade that, “To obtain a

⁶² *ibid.*, 398.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 399. There were 27 Negros, 11 Puerto Ricans, two whites and one Chinese student in the classes.

relevant, real education, we shall have to either topple the university or set up our own.”⁶⁴

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TEACHER & STUDENT

Cade’s “Dream of a Black University” had yet to be realized. But a corps of dedicated and imaginative teachers from a variety of backgrounds was coalescing at the faculty’s margins. Their shared sense of discovery and purpose was only heightened by their own and their students’ marginalization and the resistance they were increasingly meeting among their more reticent colleagues. The writer Calvin Trillin, whose wife Alice Trillin joined the SEEK faculty in 1967 along with her friend and colleague Mina Shaughnessy, the soon-to-be pioneer in the nascent field of Basic Writing, later wrote that

From the start, some senior professors had been muttering about the decline of standards. As academic jobs began to dry up, some younger faculty members—people who had looked forward to a life of dropping graceful aperçus about “The Waste Land” to enthralled students on ivy-covered campuses—were dispirited or even enraged at finding themselves instead in gritty urban universities, correcting seemingly endless errors in grammar and syntax. Alice and Mina, who were there because they wanted to be, had a completely different response.⁶⁵

Like them, Leonard Kriegel, an established professor of Melville and Shakespeare, had, with some trepidation, volunteered for the job. He began his first semester teaching “pre-bacs” with an assignment to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and write about a newly acquired neoclassical sculpture based on Greek mythology. He was astounded to discover that many of the native New Yorkers in the class didn’t know where the museum was. Some were “frightened” to make the trip and concocted “ornate” excuses for not making it there. Those who did invariably described the sculpture, “Perseus Holding the Head of Medusa,” abstractly and unconvincingly in terms of contemporary racial oppression. Their main problem, wrote Kriegel,

⁶⁴ Toni Cade, “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” *Observation Post*, Feb. 14, 1969, 5. Cade had completed her undergraduate degree at CUNY’s Queens College.

⁶⁵ Calvin Trillin, *About Alice* (New York: Random House, 2006), 35.

“was not grammar or syntax, formidable as such problems were; it was rather to permit themselves opinions.” After that first paper he expected eight of the fourteen to fail.⁶⁶

Observing the SEEK students in this and other contexts Kriegel found that, in spite of the role that he and many of their other professors might envision for them, they were not, for the most part, interested in remaking American society. They simply wanted what many of their white counterparts already had (and were increasingly turning their backs on): they “wanted in.”⁶⁷

But too often they were being treated, as one student put it, as “specimens rather than students.”⁶⁸ One of them, a Vietnam veteran who failed to intuit what was expected of him, described to Kriegel an assignment for his speech class involving an oral presentation on a controversial topic. He chose to discuss the causes of the war and later told Kriegel,

When I’m finished, I can see her staring at me like I’ve done something wrong. Then she says, ‘What about the black soldier in Vietnam?’ And I know she hadn’t been listening to one word I’d said...All she knew was that I was black and that there’s a war on in Vietnam. Put two and two together and I’ve got to speak on the black soldier. It’s such crap. I read four books before I made that speech. I went to the library and I went through I don’t know how many articles. For the first time in my life, I can understand why maybe this country’s going to hell. I lived in that library for a week and I got to like it. I’m learning something about power, about international politics. And all she can say to me when I’ve finished is ‘What about the black soldier?’ You hear that, you don’t know what the hell to do. I’m not a student to a teacher like that. I’m a *black* student. ‘What about the black soldier?’ Jesus Christ.”⁶⁹

For all these disconnects and mutual frustrations, remedial English teachers like Trillin and Shaughnessy, Addison Gayle, and Toni Cade (later Bambara), or the poets Adrienne Rich, Audre Lord, Paul Blackburn, and June Jordan—though they may not have succeeded in toppling

⁶⁶ Leonard Kriegel, “Headstart for College,” *The Nation*, Feb. 26, 1968, 271. In the end, twelve students successfully completed the course. See p. 274.

⁶⁷ For Kriegel, the role of “bridging worlds not necessarily meant to be bridged” is what had always made City College unique and he returns again and again to this delicate negotiation on the part of students.

⁶⁸ Kriegel, “Headstart for College,” 272-3.

⁶⁹ Leonard Kriegel, *Working Through*, 180-181.

the university nor in setting up their own—were stunningly ambitious about reworking its structures and idioms to serve a new and foreign population, about introducing innovative texts, perspectives, and approaches and creating what, in time, became a new paradigm for remedial education. “In [our] discovery of a previously submerged culture,” wrote Rich:

we were learning from and with our students as rarely happens in the university... We were not merely exploring a literature and a history which had gone virtually unmentioned in our white educations (particularly true for those over thirty); we were not merely having to confront in talk with our students and in their writings, as well as the books we read, the bitter reality of Western racism; we also found ourselves reading almost any piece of Western literature through our students’ eyes, imagining how this voice, these assumptions, would sound to us if we were they. ‘We learned from the students’ —banal cliché, one that sounds pious and patronizing by now; yet the fact remains that our white liberal assumptions *were* shaken, our vision of both the city and the university changed, our relationship to language itself made both deeper and more painful.⁷⁰

Ed Quinn, another tenured English professor who volunteered for the challenging assignment, described the “warmth and wit and genuine insight that four or five welfare mothers contributed” to a SEEK class discussion of the Freudian theory of Hamlet:

They had never heard of the Oedipus complex before, but their experience as mothers had confirmed for them its general validity... receptive as they were to the idea in general, they refused to buy it as an explanation of Hamlet’s behavior. As one of them put it, ‘Hamlet’s problems are *real*—they’re not just in his head.’ Regular college students hardly ever see this fact about the character. They tend to be carried away by the psychology of Hamlet and forget the objective world of the play he inhabits, a world that threatens and limits him. People on welfare, on the other hand, have a healthy respect for the objective world.⁷¹

When the SEEK students seized the South Campus in the spring of 1969, faculty negotiators who’d had less contact with their like were surprised by their “articulateness, reasoning power, and skill in handling statistics,” but Rich and her colleagues in the trenches

⁷⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” in *The Uses of Literacy*, ed. Monroe Engel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 262.

⁷¹ Edward Quinn, “The Case for Open Admissions: We’re Holding Our Own,” *Change*, Summer 1973, 34

“felt that we had known their strengths all along:

an impatient cutting through of the phony, a capacity for tenacious struggle with language and syntax and difficult ideas, a growing capacity for political analysis which helped counter the low expectations their teachers had always had of them and which many had had of themselves; and more, their knowledge of the naked facts of society, which academia has always, even in its most public urban form, managed to veil in ivory or fantasy. Some were indeed chronologically older than the average college student; many, though eighteen to twenty years old, had had responsibility for themselves and their families for years. They came to college with a greater insight into the actual workings of the city and of American racial oppression than their teachers or their elite contemporaries. They had held dirt jobs, borne children, negotiated for Spanish-speaking parents with an English-speaking world of clinics, agencies, lawyers, and landlords, had their sixth senses nurtured in the streets, or had made the transition from southern sharehold or Puerto Rican countryside to Bedford-Stuyvesant or the *barrio* and knew the ways of two worlds.⁷²

THE ALAMAC HOTEL & THE DAWNING OF A CONSCIOUSNESS

However seamlessly the new Negro and Puerto Rican arrivals may have wanted to meld into the general student population, circumstances often militated against it. To begin with, the SEEK offices were located in a basement on the North Campus, where the mostly conservative (and white) engineering students were. They were further isolated from their peers—including the regularly admitted minority students—by their modes of speech and style of dress. “It was clear that those people who dressed ‘ivy league’ hung out on the South Campus and belonged to the Onyx Society, and on the North Campus we had all these people dressed in this ‘Italian hustler’ style, a clear stratification,” recalled former SEEK student Robert Feaster.⁷³ According to Serge Mullery, one of the “traditional Blacks” on campus:

⁷² Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” 263.

⁷³ Robert Feaster (Sekou Sundiata) interview, in Dyer, 69. Feaster describes the Ivy League look as “preppy,” reflecting “middle-class values” and the “Italian hustler” as “street,” consisting of “casual sweaters, silk and mohair pants, wingtip shoes made of alligator or lizard-skin.”

When the kids from SEEK came in, the ghetto, as it were, had invaded. And from one day to the next there were more of them than all of us in Onyx...[They] had an attitude also because they came in saying, 'These niggers are bourgeois!' There was a great deal of classism here, a real fear by Onyx of being swamped.⁷⁴

Fears of being swamped on the part of university officials precipitated the further marginalization of SEEK and, quite inadvertently, created the communications-rich environment that would foster the awareness, group solidarity, leadership, and logistical platform from which to launch perhaps the most significant challenge the institution would ever face. With SEEK expanding all the time and growing resistance from the colleges, in 1967 CUNY officials leased several floors of a seedy hotel on Manhattan's West 71st Street and created a "University Center and Dormitory" where the students would live in an environment more conducive to study, it was thought, than the slums and culture of poverty from which they had been drawn. Registration, remedial classes, and psychological and academic counseling were all offered on site in what became, with the exception of Army Hall after WWII, the first residential facility in the College's 120-year history and yet another way to keep what many perceived as problem children at arm's length.

"You could never mistake [room] 408 for a dorm at N.Y.U.," *The Campus* reported the following year. "The walls blast you with Afro-American culture posters proclaiming, 'Why I Won't Serve Whitey' and 'How Do You Become a Black Revolutionary?'" A Dionne Warwick record plays on the stereo and a floating "bull session" passes through. On the girl's floor, "[Black sorority] sisters read James Baldwin and organize projects to aid ghetto children. 'We wear our dashikis...and not Greek letters,' [said one]. 'I see these white chicks wearing a dashiki and I feel like ripping it off them.'" ⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Serge Mullery, interview by Conrad Dyer, Apr. 12, 1989, quoted in Dyer, 69.

⁷⁵ George Murrell, "SEEK Dorms: Black Culture and Red Carpet," *The Campus*, Oct. 16, 1968, 5.

The SEEK students weren't all militants when they arrived at the Alamac Hotel. Henry Arce, one of the first residents there, even did a brief stint in ROTC. "I had this thing in my head that John Wayne and me were going to win the war," he said. "Then I started checking out things like Vietnam and I forgot about the movies."⁷⁶ Arce went on to organize the Puerto Rican Students Association (PRISA) and by the spring of 1969 had become the Third World Coalition candidate for Student Senate Council President.⁷⁷ The radicalization and mobilization of minority students like Arce as well as their ability to overcome their own differences was a dynamic process influenced by, among other things, the teacher's strike, the draft, the Black Power movement and, most notably, the assassination of Dr. King. But none of these things were unique to City College.

The Alamac was. A highly self-selected group of young people who had survived—but not thrived in nor been domesticated by—ghetto schools and neighborhoods was placed in a new environment where they lived and studied and were encouraged by a similarly marginalized and cohesive team of faculty and staff. Together they pondered where they were coming from, where they fit in, and what they most wanted to accomplish. Except perhaps for an anomalous moment in the 1930s, in which a similarly motivated, lower class, and ethnically homogenous group of students with deep ties to trade unions and soapbox orators were thrown together in the college's underground alcoves without jobs to rush off to, no cohort of students had ever experienced anything like this kind of camaraderie. City College was a commuter school, and as one young instructor explained, "It's very hard to be a radical if your mother says each morning, 'Have you

⁷⁶ Ackerman, Tom. "Profiles of Presidential Candidates: The Militant." *The Campus*. Feb. 20, 1969, 5.

⁷⁷ Felipe Luciano and Iris Morales, future cofounders of the New York chapter of the Young Lords Party, were SEEK students and Alamac residents during this crucial period.

put your gloves on?’”⁷⁸ In many ways the school had always been a profoundly conservative place.

At the Alamac, however, residents were reading Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Che Guevara, and Franz Fanon and viewing the film *The Battle of Algiers* multiple times. And they invited SNCC leaders Carmichael and H. Rapp Brown to speak on the City College campus. Serge Mullery, who did not live at the Alamac, remembered

From Che Guevara they adopted the maxim: ‘don’t charge a tank with rocks’; and resolved never to engage in confrontations with the police. ‘We were very impressed by *The Strawberry Statement* [about the Columbia uprising],’ recalled Mullery, ‘we thought that if the police was willing to bust the heads of rich white kids at Columbia, what would they do to us!’⁷⁹

They also determined never to get themselves pinned down in a single place. In the fall of ’68, a “Committee of Ten” modeled on the revolutionary cells in *The Battle of Algiers*, began planning a series of escalating actions: “the petition stage, temporary occupation of the Administration Building; an activity called ‘hit and run’; a ‘lock-up’ activity; and finally the takeover of the South Campus.”⁸⁰

THE STUDENT RIGHT

Meanwhile another series of events was unfolding independently uptown that would color how many of the white students would later respond to the Committee’s work. On Halloween the mostly white Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and City College Commune that had emerged out of the Site 6 controversy the previous year offered 20-year-old Army deserter Pvt. William Brakefield “sanctuary” in the ballroom of the Finley Student Center. Brakefield was absent without leave and the students occupied the ballroom determined to

⁷⁸ Bernard Weinraub, “Student Radicals Losing Ground at City College,” *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1968, 76. Weinraub is a 1959 graduate of the College.

⁷⁹ Serge Mullery interview, in Dyer, 86-87.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

protect him from arrest with their bodies and thus call attention to their campaigns against ROTC and military contractors. They camped out there along with their supporters for eight days before President Gallagher, citing the destruction of college property, again ordered the police to clear the premises. One hundred seventy students and sympathizers were arrested, the largest number in the college's history.

Even as the faculty united against the college administration's repeated use of police power without seeking their input, however, many students were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with their radical peers' confrontational tactics and lack of respect for civility and public property. Perhaps most of all, they objected to the arrogance of seeking to limit other students' career opportunities whether in the military or in industry. Later the same month, when Commune members sought to obstruct job interviews scheduled for graduating engineering majors with military contractors like General Dynamics and Hughes Aeronautics, an equal force of angry engineering students met them at the door. The resulting melee caused the recruiters to evacuate and reschedule their interviews off campus. But the student right had made itself heard. "You can't tell people not to take jobs," said S.D.S member Robert Gogel, who apparently regretted provoking the conservative backlash. "The fact that their parents have no money, that the system will draft them, that you have to work for a corporation engaged in worthless or war things—they [the engineers] don't realize that this is what we're getting at."⁸¹

Although the conservative incumbent student government president had been soundly voted out of office only months earlier, a slate of right-wing candidates for student council swept the elections of mid-November 1968.⁸² A decisive factor, according to *The Campus*, came on the day after the mass arrests of the sanctuary when the bulk of two hundred anti-SDS protesters on

⁸¹ Robert Gogel, quoted in Weinraub, "Student Radicals Losing Ground," 76.

⁸² Dyer, 57-58.

the North Campus marched directly to the polls. Turnout on the left leaning South Campus was reported to have been light.⁸³

⁸³ Livia Goldring, "The Campus Right: A New-Found Militancy," *The Campus*, Nov. 26, 1968, 4.

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3. THE FIVE DEMANDS

In the midst of all this activity: police raids and massive arrests, fistfights and shouting matches in the hallways, and the emergence of a unified student right, the Dubois Club, a comparatively moderate and mostly white organization, a holdover from the leftist organizations of the 1930s, was busy circulating a petition to “End Racism at CCNY” on which they collected more than 1600 signatures which they presented to President Gallagher on November 19. Their demands included dramatically increasing black and Puerto Rican enrollment at the college, quadrupling the size of the SEEK program, building more senior colleges and revamping the curriculum, the basis for what would later become the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community’s (BPRSC) “Five Demands.”⁸⁴

Hired in 1953, Gallagher was a fervent anti-Communist who had thrown several faculty members to the wolves during the McCarthy era, had a reputation for red-baiting and little patience for SDS and The City College Commune. But he was also a Congregational minister and former President of a Negro college in Alabama who’d marched with Dr. King at Selma only four years earlier. Along with CUNY Chancellor Albert Bowker, he’d shown courage in challenging traditionalists over free tuition and pursued a familiar liberal strategy that, according to the scholar Sheila Gordon,

on the one hand... represented a bold attempt to rectify historic inequities at the expense of short-term political considerations. But on the other...reflected a certain elitist arrogance, and disdain for the depth of feeling among the by-passed, taxpaying middle classes and the political institutions which represented them.⁸⁵

Gallagher’s own arrogance had extended, at times, to his own faculty and even to the impatient

⁸⁴ W.E.B. Dubois Club of City College, “End Racism at CCNY,” Advertisement, *The Campus*, Nov. 14, 1968, 8.

⁸⁵ Gordon, 186.

black and Puerto Rican student leaders to whom he was so sympathetic—so convinced was he that he was on the right side of history. His initial response to the students' petition noted its misplaced criticism and demands with respect to curriculum, which he claimed lay in the hands of the faculty. There was simply no money with which to increase stipends or expand SEEK, he added. But new power sharing arrangements with students and faculty were already in the process of being worked out and the college was making tremendous strides in increasing its minority enrollment. "The petition 'demands' that the City University do something it is already seriously working upon," he concluded, "thus falsely implying that no such effort is being made because of alleged institutional racism."⁸⁶

If the matter of race threatened to get lost amidst the hullabaloo about Gallagher's having called the police on campus yet again, the fracas over military contractors, the suspension of any number of student radicals, by the first day of the spring semester it was back on the table. This time the more militant and disciplined Committee of Ten had taken in all that had transpired and put together their own five demands:

1. the creation of a separate, degree-granting school of black and Puerto Rican studies
2. the development of a separate orientation program for black and Puerto Rican freshman
3. a student voice in running the SEEK program, including hiring and firing decisions and assurances that both students and instructors would enjoy the same status as their counterparts in other college programs
4. a racial composition of future freshmen classes that mirrored the *entire* black and Puerto Rican populations of the public high schools (roughly 50 percent), not just the graduates.
5. black and Puerto Rican history and Spanish language classes as requirements for all education

⁸⁶ Tom Ackerman, "The South Campus Seizure," *City College Alumnus* 65, no. 1 (Oct. 1969): 5-6.

majors

On the one hand, it is easy to locate in these demands a powerful current of the militant separatism and ethnocentrism that characterized many contemporary struggles for civil rights and community control. Though it was in step with what was happening on other campuses across the country, the students were nevertheless proposing a radical departure for a college that had never been known for its Yiddish or Holocaust studies nor explicitly included race and ethnicity in its admissions criteria. But whatever one makes of their specific proposals, the students' demands are informed by a cohesive and cogent analysis of the status quo: *We face a distinct set of problems and suffer disadvantages occasioned by our minority status on this campus* they were clearly saying (demand 2). *Neither our communities nor our backgrounds and interests are sufficiently represented within the ranks of entering freshmen or within the college curriculum* (demands 1 and 4). *The professional decisions about what is best for us are rarely informed by our own educational priorities. Our marginalization and low status as well as that of our teachers are manifestations of the institution's reduced expectations and commitment where we are concerned* (demand 3). Finally, *our difficulties achieving our goals and excelling in competition stem largely from having grown up with teachers who failed to understand anything about where we were coming from and who rarely even spoke the same language. As a historic training ground for successive generations of such public school teachers, the college is thus contributing to the number of obstacles students like us are forced to overcome and to our frequent lack of preparedness even before we set foot on the campus* (demand 5).

The SEEK program has been called the "Trojan Horse" of Open Admissions and both the content and the order of the students' demands, I would argue, follow a kind of military logic.

The first objective after getting inside the gates is to secure and fortify positions within what is essentially enemy territory (i.e. an autonomous school of black and Puerto Rican studies). The next order of business is to create a mechanism to train, equip, and bring in reinforcements (tailored orientation programs). One then has to set up some kind of governance structure or “provisional authority” to serve one’s interests (a student voice in decision making). Only then can one afford to throw open the gates and let one’s compatriots inside (proportional representation). Finally, one must establish a foreign policy and diplomatic corps to attend to matters beyond the borders which, over time, will advance one’s long term interests (training teachers).

Gallagher’s response was more of the same. The university had already admitted non-white students “in full proportion to their ratio among all high school graduates,” he reiterated, dodging the crucial distinction between junior and senior colleges and failing to acknowledge the demand that admissions reflect not the proportion of graduates but students (given the wildly disproportional dropout rates). The College had just hired a prominent scholar of Afro-Caribbean literature to work with students and faculty to develop “proposals” and curricula, he said. Deans would be instructed to “re-examine” the freshman orientation program and SEEK and the Education school were already “revising and perfecting” their programs and welcomed greater student participation in these ongoing processes “On not one of the demands,” he told students gathered outside the Administration Building on February 13, “can anyone leave here and say they’ve gotten a ‘no’ answer.”⁸⁷

But the students didn’t leave. Jeering the president’s double-talk they stormed into the lobby and occupied the entire building for four hours. The following Monday morning classes

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 7.

were disrupted with stink bombs, wastebasket fires, spilled milk, and slogans painted on blackboards followed by dozens of bomb threats the following day.⁸⁸ The petition and hit-and-run phases were thus complete. All that remained were the “lock up” and “campus takeover.”

FACING CATASTROPHIC CUTS, THE PRESIDENT FALLS ON HIS SWORD

In March the drama shifted to Albany where draconian budget cuts threatened to cut spending on all social services and derail what little progress had been made. After five years the Republicans had regained control of both houses of the legislature, due to disaffection of upstate voters over rising welfare costs and entitlement programs like SEEK as well as the rightward shift of the city’s outer borough Jews and other working-class whites in the wake of the previous year’s teachers strike. In this climate, Rockefeller, now in his third term as Governor and approaching a fourth, renewed his campaign to create a new revenue stream at CUNY and bring its several institutions under state control. CUNY Chancellor Albert Bowker warned that the Governor’s proposed cutbacks could mean no SEEK admissions at all the following year and an entering class in the senior colleges as much as twenty percent smaller. Thirteen thousand university students marched on the Capitol in Albany to protest the cuts, while a campaign in the weekly *Jewish Press* flooded Bowker’s office with hundreds of letters and calls from parents urging the sacrifice of SEEK and other compensatory programs before limiting regular admissions—a zero sum game. The chancellor publicly compared the crisis to Ocean-Hill Brownsville, warning that relations between Blacks and Jews could “explode” as a result. “Whatever we do, both sides will feel that the other is being favored,” said Bowker. “No matter what you do it will exacerbate tensions...This may be as destructive to ethnic relations in the city

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 8.

as anything that's happened in the last decade."⁸⁹

A few days later Governor Rockefeller went ahead and signed the budget as written anyway. Then the city announced plans to cut some \$45 million from its allocation. Calling this the "*coup de grace*," President Gallagher submitted his resignation. The *Times* ran the story on its front page and included the full text of Gallagher's letter to the Board. Under such intolerable conditions, he explained, if the university were to even try to open its doors in September it would necessarily mean admitting no freshman class whatsoever and no new SEEK students, shuttering the evening and summer sessions and all graduate programs, and scrapping plans for Black and Puerto Rican studies: "The gains of 50 years would be wiped out. Twenty thousand embittered high school graduates would be shut out."⁹⁰

Citing his sixteen years of service "holding wide the door of opportunity," Gallagher said he would not now accede to demands that he "stand in the door"—an explicit reference to Alabama Governor George Wallace's defiant stand against integration six years earlier that was featured prominently in the press. "I will not turn my back on the poor of all races," Gallagher went on to say, or serve as "the lackey of political expediency"⁹¹ The *Times* and other papers applauded Gallagher's "personal sacrifice" and urged the politicians to relent.⁹² By the following day, all but four of City College's twenty-seven department heads resigned their chairmanships in solidarity with their president.

Gallagher's resignation and the picture he painted of no freshman class in the nation's

⁸⁹ Albert Bowker, quoted in "Bowker Cautions on City U. Funds: Proposed Cuts Called Threat to Ethnic Peace Here," *New York Times*, Mar. 25, 1969, 38. Bowker was severely criticized for raising "the specter of race riots" to "frighten Albany" and making a "self fulfilling prophecy." See Leonard Buder, "Bowker Scored by Jewish Unit for Predicting Racial Tension," *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 1969, 58.

⁹⁰ Buell G. Gallagher, "Text of C.C.N.Y. President's Letter of Resignation," *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 1969, 35.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² "Budget Sacrifice," Editorial, *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 1969, 46.

third largest university system helped focus public attention on just what might be at stake in the battle with Albany and City Hall (if not with the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community).

The decision to withhold acceptance letters—normally mailed in April—from the more than 20,000 anxious, if not yet embittered high school seniors awaiting them, added yet another layer to the crisis and served to further turn up the temperature.

‘UNIVERSITIES UNDER THE GUN’

A week after Gallagher’s grand gesture, thirty Harvard SDS members protesting ROTC occupied University Hall, a 150-year-old structure at the heart of Harvard Yard, the historic center of the country’s oldest and most iconic university and forced administrators from the building. By nightfall there were more than 500 demonstrators, counterdemonstrators, reporters and photographers in and around the building and university police had padlocked the gates to Harvard Yard. At 3:00 a.m., on instructions from the university president, 400 police in riot gear stormed the building with mace and billy clubs and newspaper readers around the country were once again treated to images of helmeted police dragging protesters out by their hair, students leaping from windows, and lying bleeding next to the bronze statue of John Harvard. Outrage at the administration’s heavy-handedness was nearly unanimous and over 10,000 students and faculty embarked on a mass boycott of classes.

The Harvard boycott was still underway and in the national spotlight on April 16, when back at City College Buell Gallagher called a meeting with the BPRSC apparently to try to head off a general strike they were organizing for the following Monday. Three hundred students showed up and were given copies of his resignation letter. “I put my whole career on the line,” he told them and assured them that he was “committed to the whole thrust of these demands.” and making significant progress toward meeting them. But minority students questioned why it

had taken him so long to call the meeting and objected to what they called “the barrage of administrative bullshit.”⁹³

Plans for Monday’s boycott, in collaboration with SDS and other campus groups, went forward, but the signs were not at all auspicious. On Friday a mass demonstration at City Hall organized by the Ad Hoc Committee for the City University, a coalition of labor unions, civic and student organizations failed to materialize. Wrote the *Times*: “A tiny band of demonstrators, 134 as counted by one bored policeman, marched past massive police guards at City Hall yesterday in a rally that sponsors had said might draw 100,000.”⁹⁴ Police outnumbered demonstrators nearly twenty to one. But yet another university story was already brewing, and whatever its outcome, Monday’s boycott was about to be upstaged.

In response to a cross burning early Friday morning on the lawn outside a housing cooperative for black women students at Cornell University in Upstate New York, outraged members of the school’s Afro-American Society occupied Willard Straight Hall protesting widespread racism on the campus and demanding amnesty for black students undergoing disciplinary proceedings and an expedited black studies program. White members of the Delta Upsilon fraternity immediately attempted to retake the building by force and scuffled with the occupiers, who then smuggled guns and ammunition into the building for self-defense as SDS members ringed the building to show their support and protect those inside.⁹⁵ On Sunday, after a tense standoff with police standing by, Cornell officials negotiated the students’ peaceful withdrawal.

⁹³ Paul B. Simms, “Four Demands Approved by Gallagher; Strike Called for Monday Still Planned,” *Tech News*, Apr. 18, 1969. The quote is attributed only to “the Black and Puerto Rican student community.”

⁹⁴ “Rally for City U Draws Only 134: 100,000 Had Been Sought—2,500 Police Stand By,” *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1969, 25.

⁹⁵ George Lowery, “40 Years Ago A Campus Takeover That Symbolized an Era of Change,” *EZRA: Cornell’s Quarterly Magazine* I, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 16.

The next morning, April 21, the day of the planned City College boycott, the front page of virtually every newspaper in America bore the image of young, bespectacled black men with Afros wearing bandoliers and carrying rifles walking, heads held high, out of Willard Straight Hall as a policeman stood with his hands literally behind his back and university officials stared at the ground and off into the middle distance.⁹⁶ All at once, the crisis in higher education seemed to be entering a new, more dangerous phase, with, as the cover of *Newsweek* put it later that week, “Universities Under the Gun.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Steve Starr, “Campus Protest,” Apr. 20, 1969, AP Photo Archive #690420037.

⁹⁷ “Universities Under the Gun,” *Newsweek*, May 5, 1969, cover.

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4. INSURRECTION

The strike at City College scheduled for 11:00 a.m. garnered some thirty percent participation and drew hundreds of students from the neighboring High School for Music and Art. One thousand, more than half of them white according to *The Campus*, gathered for a noontime rally in support of the Five Demands as well as three other events added by SDS and other groups. Speaking for the BPRSC, Rick Reed rejected the Board of Higher Education's conservative and gradualist efforts of to placate them and soften their demands. An emergency, "100 Scholars Program," authorized in February, for instance, that was to guarantee admission to *some unit* of the university to the top ranking one hundred students from any high school, regardless of their grades, amounted, according to Reed, to little more than a system of tokenism and rewards akin to that of the slave South. "[House] niggers is groovy people," he said. "But we want all the field niggers. We got no hang-up about you [whites] being here so long as we're all here." At 2:00 p.m. Reed declared an end to the proceedings. "School is out," he said. "We made our point for today...see you tomorrow."⁹⁸

A COMMUNITY SEIZES CONTROL

The next morning Reed and several dozen other black and Puerto Rican students were at the South Campus before seven armed with chains and padlocks and tools for removing the existing locks. In spite of a tense exchange with security guards, by 8:00 they had gotten inside the South Campus, secured all the gates and posted sentries along the perimeter.⁹⁹ "The moment that 33 students snuck into City College," one participant later recalled, "they immediately called

⁹⁸ Ken Sasmor, "1,000 Rally in Support of 8 Demands; Boycott of Classes is 30% Effective," *The Campus*, Apr. 22, 1969, 2. For more about gradualism in the Board's approach and its implications for interpreting the timing and impact of the student uprising, see Dyer, 179-183.

⁹⁹ In his interview with Conrad Dyer, Serge Mullery asserts that without the sympathetic acquiescence of the Burns security guards the operation would certainly have failed. See Dyer, 117.

the dorm and by eleven o'clock that morning there were more than 400 [SEEK] students behind them gates."¹⁰⁰ A few white students, including sympathetic radicals, managed to scale the fences, but were escorted out.¹⁰¹ According to Conrad Dyer's study of the uprising, the "lock up" phase was supposed to last anywhere from a half to a full day, disrupting classes and helping the committee "gauge reaction" in anticipation of a full-scale "takeover" at the end of the semester. With no food, blankets, or other supplies, the students "had arrived quite unprepared for an extended stay" and all expected to slip quietly out the back (as they had on numerous other occasions) as soon as a confrontation appeared imminent. But events soon took on a life of their own.¹⁰²

Amidst heavy downpours, a group of some one hundred angry white students began amassing at the main gate, where police had cut the chains, and were demanding entry. "Go home!" the students inside shouted and blocked their way.¹⁰³ At 3:00 p.m. President Gallagher ordered the college closed pending negotiations. Once it dawned on the students inside the South Campus that the police weren't, in fact, coming, they met and voted to remain there and implement the fourth and final stage of their strategy: the takeover. At that point the insurgents were largely making it up as they went along as well as struggling to give a name to what they were doing. "We'll call it 'Howard'," shouted one student on the barricades during the early hours of the occupation, invoking a five-day sit-in at the all-black Howard University in March of the previous year.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Louis Reyes Rivera, in "The Struggle for Access." Most contemporary accounts put the core number around 200, though it fluctuated widely between day and nighttime.

¹⁰¹ This account comes from Dyer, 116-121 and Ackerman, "The South Campus Seizure," 12-14.

¹⁰² Dyer, 116-17.

¹⁰³ Paul B. Simms, "Strike Still On; South Campus Shut Down," *Tech News*, Apr. 23, 1969, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* Led by Negro students, the Howard uprising took place before the King assassination or Columbia strike. The reference suggests an understanding of being part of a larger student movement.

The *Daily News*, the paper of choice for white, working-class and largely Catholic New Yorkers, led with the disruption of classes and the image of black and Puerto Rican students who “refused to let white students and professors in.”¹⁰⁵ This sharp opposition, though more muted in other press accounts, helped establish the zero-sum-game frame through which the students and their five demands were widely perceived as well as to shape the Open Admissions policies that would later emerge from their actions. If blacks and Puerto Ricans were to finally claim their rightful place on the campus, it was felt, some other group or groups would surely suffer as a result. From the outset, the dramatic occupation of the South Campus with attendant photos of white students milling around in the rain outside locked gates served to reinforce that perception.

HARLEM UNIVERSITY

From the perspective of those inside, however, the takeover was less about who got left out than who was invited in and how. Once the decision to remain inside the gates had been reached, there were many logistics to be worked out: security, food, etc. But one of the first decisions was to rename the South Campus. By the following morning the students had posted a makeshift sign on the gate that read “University of Harlem.” Unlike the occupations at Columbia, Harvard, Cornell—or Howard or San Francisco State, for that matter—The University of Harlem was a self-conscious effort to open the college to the surrounding community and to marshal intellectual and material resources on behalf of that community in its hour of need. During the occupation people who’d lived across the street their entire lives and had never set foot on the campus suddenly felt emboldened to venture inside.¹⁰⁶ The rebel students set up classes and tutoring, community health screening clinics, and community meetings. Leaders like Malcolm X’s widow Betty Shabazz, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the Black

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Pugh and Judson Hand, “Protesters Block Gates, CCNY Shut.” *Daily News*. Apr. 23, 1969, 3.

¹⁰⁶ SEEK instructor Barbara Christian, quoted in Dyer, 119.

Panther Party's Kathleen Cleaver and H. Rapp Brown all came to visit and express their support. Everyone—except whites and undercover police it seemed—was welcome.

The BPRSC also set up shop off campus, in a storefront on Amsterdam Avenue, and sent a car topped with loudspeakers through the streets to fill people in on what was going on and enlist their support. According to Tom Ackerman, editor of *The Campus* at the time, such activities represented one of two conflicting sets of priorities within the South Campus gates, one that saw City College as only one of many key sites in the fight for community control of local institutions.¹⁰⁷ These students' principle point of identification was with the neighborhood. On the other side of Ackerman's "schism" stood the more militant "black cultural nationalists" whose allegiance lay with the African Diaspora broadly defined. The latter were more focused on winning a black and Puerto Rican student majority and securing an independent School of Third World Studies than in effecting immediate change beyond the campus walls.¹⁰⁸

Other than differences over the extent to which white radicals could be trusted as allies, however, there remains some question as to why these two emphases should have been at odds with one another. Indeed, for poet June Jordan, an English instructor in the SEEK program, the apparent inward turn of the black nationalists was nothing less than a plea for community in the face of a cult of "competence" and "efficiency" and "the mainly successful blackout of Black life."¹⁰⁹

We look for community. We have already suffered the alternatives to community, to human commitment. We have borne the whiplash of 'white studies' unmitigated by the stranger ingredient of humane dedication. Therefore, we

¹⁰⁷ Ackerman, "The South Campus Seizure," 29. Others included the public schools, the proposed Harlem State Office Building, and the administration of Harlem Hospital.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Jordan, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person."

cannot, in sanity, pass by the potentiality of Black studies: studies of the person consecrated to the preservation of that person.¹¹⁰

For Jordan, Harlem was both a neighborhood and a metaphor for the cultural community of Black America, and the two were scarcely distinguishable from one another. Black studies were every bit as integral to opening the campus in any meaningful sense as was minority enrollment. More than a decade later she would look back on the experience of the 1969 uprising and remember “when the students raised the red and green and black nationalist flag on the campus flagpole and closed the campus until our demands were met, we opened what we called A Free University at Harlem’s I.S. 201. It was exhilarating...”¹¹¹ The lofty, symbolic act, in other words, had its direct counterpart on the ground.

Leonard Kriegel, too, had written as early as 1967 of the college’s unique “opportunity to make its presence in Harlem an asset.” If only it were properly funded and “if a way could be found for the college to serve Harlem without destroying it, the whole community could utilize a dynamic tradition that goes back one hundred years.”¹¹² Although the school functioned as a “self-contained entity” through much of the sixties, Kriegel believed that, “The relationship between teacher, student and material was inevitably affected by the prison-like Manhattanville housing project that we stared at outside the window” and that the future of the College was “inextricably bound up with the future of the Harlem community.”¹¹³ In 1968 he wrote:

The City College of New York, which built its reputation as one of the country’s finest undergraduate institutions by serving residents of other ghettos, stands in the heart of Harlem. But it protects itself from Harlem with a wall built out of

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ June Jordan, *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 46. See also the epigraph to this section.

¹¹² Leonard Kriegel, “Education Up a Tree: The Plight of City College,” *Commonweal*, Nov. 3, 1967, 138.

¹¹³ Kriegel, *Working Through*, 147.

‘academic standards.’ What is so hopeful about the Pre-Bacc Program is that it has already dented that wall. And it promises to break it down.¹¹⁴

FALSE CHOICES

Though prophetic in this regard, Kriegel nonetheless rejected the idea of what he called “black education” as so much “nonsense” in favor of the 100-year tradition “students in the ghetto desperately need.”¹¹⁵ Based on his own experience at Hunter College as a poor child of immigrants, he insisted that when it came to what he viewed as the inherent “conflict between their aspirations and their backgrounds” students simply couldn’t have it both ways:

I can still remember how desperately I wanted to retain the shrill Jewish street life of Jerome Avenue *and* Keats’s sonnets.

Unfortunately, the day comes when one has to choose, and it seems to me a lie to pretend otherwise. You can afford to be nostalgic about a ghetto only when you have left it.¹¹⁶

This notion of City College forcing a choice between family or community and a larger world is one that crops up throughout the school’s history, of course, but in the context of the Five Demands and the so-called University of Harlem it is important to note that what the students were rejecting was not so much the larger City or even the white man’s world as the choice itself. More so even than in Kriegel’s day, a university education now represented nearly the *only* way out of the ghetto, but at the same time and for that very reason it had emerged as *the* key structural component of the system of opportunities and rewards that had consigned them and their families to impoverished lives in the first place, what June Jordan called “the ultimate glorification of a society that has rejected [the Black student].” Is it really any wonder, she

¹¹⁴ Kriegel, “Headstart for College,” 270, 273.

¹¹⁵ Kriegel, “Education Up a Tree,” 138.

¹¹⁶ Kriegel, “Headstart for College,” 273.

asked, that he should choose to hew close to his family and traditions?¹¹⁷

Nevertheless though the Black and Puerto Rican students demanded to be more fully taken into account rather than merely tolerated and insisted on holding the door open for their younger brothers and sisters, they did not seem to want to flout authority either, or like their counterparts in SDS, to trash the entire institution—at least that was a distinction sympathetic administrators and commentators were fond of making. Asked why he'd chosen to call the police on the anti-Vietnam war occupants of Finley Hall in November but not this time around, President Gallagher told the *Post*, “There was fornication going on there [in November]. They were destroying university property and they were smoking pot.” Pressed about the potentially graver implications of the current crisis, Gallagher testily reiterated to the reporter that, “There was public fornication going on down there. Did you hear me? Did you take down what I said? That is my statement.”¹¹⁸

Gallagher's distaste for the white radicals of the City College Commune and SDS was no doubt real and was shared by a broad swath of other administrators, faculty and students, many of whom were drawn to the Blacks' and Puerto Ricans' cause. Their perception was that the “militants,” as they were widely referred to, unlike the undisciplined, somewhat freakish white “radicals,” were fighting to avail themselves of the college's gifts and become a part of the system, not to tear it down. Prof. Ed Quinn recalled a member of the BPRSC negotiating team breaking away from his peers at the end of a belligerent confrontation with faculty in the Great Hall on the first day of the occupation to quietly let him know that “That paper I owe you, I'll send it to you next week.” Put simply, the professor said, the militants were “likable, intelligent

¹¹⁷ Jordan, “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person.”

¹¹⁸ Buell G. Gallagher, quoted in Steven Marcus, “Gallagher Quits CCNY: A ‘Man of Peace’ Sadly Gives Up the CCNY Fight,” *New York Post*, May 9, 1969, 76.

young people who for one reason or another have not been reached by the educational system we have now.”¹¹⁹

THE SPECTER OF URBAN RIOTS

But however kindly the insurgents may or may not have been looked upon, however genuinely administrators like Gallagher might have supported their goals, it was also becoming an increasingly popular strategy for college administrators to exploit tensions within the movement and “divide the factions further,” as the *Post* reporters Karen DeWitt and Ron Hollander characterized Columbia’s approach, “by praising the black students and scoffing at the whites.”¹²⁰ While sympathetic whites from the Commune and SDS who had not been allowed to join the occupation were sitting-in at nearby Klapper Hall and battling counterdemonstrators in the liminal space between the South Campus and the conservative stronghold of the engineering students to the north, Gallagher and his team began earnestly negotiating with the BPRSC. According to *Campus* editor Tom Ackerman, to the latter the “sexual promiscuity and narcotics” on display in Klapper Hall were perceived as being “anathema.”¹²¹ Louis Reyes Rivera, one of the Puerto Rican militants, later described what he called the white radical’s “flower power mentality. Fucking everything that moved and acid dropping. We weren’t into that,” he said. “When you go to bed a woman that’s a private matter... So their radicalness was not the same as ours.”¹²² Compared to their white counterparts, these were people and demands many college officials felt they could comfortably deal with.

Real or imagined, Gallagher had other, compelling reasons for holding off the police as

¹¹⁹ Edward Quinn, “The Case for Open Admissions,” 32.

¹²⁰ Karen DeWitt and Ron Hollander, “City College Peace Talks Underway,” *New York Post*, Apr. 24, 1969, 3. This characterization was used to describe tactics employed by Columbia University officials.

¹²¹ Ackerman, “The South Campus Seizure,” 15

¹²² Louis Reyes Rivera, interview with author, New York, Feb. 18, 2010.

well. In an apparent reference to the surrounding neighborhood, his like-minded Dean of Students, Nicholas Paster, told the faculty that City's position was far worse than Cornell's, Harvard's, or any other U.S. university's had been, "because we are right in the center of a big body of an American revolution."¹²³ Gallagher himself was reluctant to say anything publically that might become a self-fulfilling prophecy, but was reported to have told the Executive Committee of the Board of Higher Education, "that there was reason to believe that if the forces on the South Campus were let loose, [the urban riots in] Watts and Newark would pale by comparison."¹²⁴ With the occupiers planning to retreat at the first sign of police, there may not have been quite that much at stake, in fact, but as the university's lobbyist in Albany put it some years later, "Maybe we didn't see good, concrete scientific evidence that the shit was gonna hit the fan, but boy, we smelled an awful strong odor."¹²⁵ Given how closely aligned the students' demands were with the University's stated goal of an "open enrollment" policy to begin in 1975 anyway and given that even Harvard had already announced plans to introduce Black Studies into its curriculum, any differences administrators had with the insurgents did not appear to be insurmountable. The din of press coverage, however, and the approach of two hotly contested primaries to determine the major party candidates for mayor in a city whose political map had in the space of a single year been almost entirely redrawn, meant that powerful outside forces were about to intrude on the negotiations.

POLITICAL FORCES INTRUDE

As the occupation entered its second week, some 700 engineering students were now defying Gallagher's closing order, meeting with their instructors for informal "seminars" on the

¹²³ Ackerman, "The South Campus Seizure," 13.

¹²⁴ Buell Gallagher, quoted by Prof. Samuel Henderson in Ackerman, "The South Campus Seizure," 14.

¹²⁵ Henry Paley, interviewed by Jerome Karabel, Oct. 30, 1978, in "The Politics of Structural Change," 42.

North Campus as their dean gingerly revived talk of the Engineering School seceding from the College. Amid a national outcry over Cornell officials' capitulation to gun-toting campus militants, the press, which had only recently lauded Gallagher as the opposite of college presidents like Columbia's Grayson Kirk and others who'd called police onto their campuses to quell peaceful disruptions and precipitated violence, now became increasingly critical of his measured response. New York's Mayor John V. Lindsay, whose first term had been marred from day one with strikes—the teachers' strike being only the most bitter and protracted of many—was facing an uphill battle for reelection in the face of a conservative backlash. And with both the Republican and Democratic primaries only weeks away, a number of key figures seized on the crisis at City College to raise the stakes and gain political advantage.

Playing to the resentment of working class Catholics and outer borough Jews who had defected from the liberal coalition over the teachers' strike and to middle class Queens residents who'd gone more than a week after a violent February snowstorm with their streets unplowed, mayoral candidates like Staten Island's State Senator John Marchi—long an advocate of tuition at the City University and strategic divider of its traditional base of support—and City Comptroller Mario Procaccino, a 1935 City College graduate and occasional lecturer, who coined the term “limousine liberals” to characterize Lindsay and his clueless supporters, demanded the Mayor and Board of Higher Education show some backbone in the face of the unlawful occupation and reopen the College by any means necessary. Angry letters from alumni poured in.

Then, on May 1, amidst reports that the negotiators had reached a tentative agreement on three of the five demands, President Gallagher, Chancellor Bowker, and the Board were served with two court orders at the behest a group of liberal arts students and the Jewish Defense

League to show cause why the college should not be reopened. A third order, requested by Mario Procaccino and his running mate, required the college to reopen first thing Monday morning pending an administrative hearing. Under such a threat, the entire settlement began to unravel. What faculty could be assembled suggested that they would never go along with it anyway, and then the Board of Higher Education voted both to obey the court order, reopening the college immediately, and—only after the BPRSC insurgents had peaceably withdrawn from the college buildings—to replace Gallagher’s negotiating team with a committee reconstituted by the Board and the protestors, and go back to the drawing board—invalidating all agreements reached thus far. Gallagher took this discouraging news back to the South Campus and reiterated his vow not to call in the police. The following day, as classes formally resumed on the North Campus, the occupiers were served with additional court orders to vacate the premises and at 9:30 that night, two weeks after they first chained the gates shut and now facing imminent arrest, they evacuated the campus and marched down Convent Ave. chanting “Power to the People.”¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Ackerman, “The South Campus Seizure,” 18-21.

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5. VIOLENCE GRIPS THE CAMPUS & A PRESIDENT IS FORCED OUT

The *New York Times* and others hailed the injunctive procedure as a sound way to get protestors' attention without the immediate use of force.¹²⁷ But the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community and their allies did not leave happy and the opening of the campus under duress and with so many issues unresolved inevitably led to a breakdown of public order that, by comparison, made the two-week occupation seem like a model of rational, disciplined behavior on the part of all. Tuesday, May 6, the first full day of classes was marked with white radicals setting off fire alarms breaking door glass and marching through the halls shouting "On strike! Shut it down!" Elsewhere, small fires were set and fistfights erupted between blacks and whites. Though large swaths of the campus were calm, more than one white student was reportedly assaulted by blacks, some of whom appeared to be of high school age.¹²⁸ The following morning protestors called students emerging from the subway "scabs."¹²⁹ Several white students and faculty were attacked by what the *Post* described as "roving bands of black and Puerto Rican students" armed with golf clubs and "wooden truncheons."¹³⁰ One such group entered the plaza outside the engineering building warning white students to leave at once and a scuffle ensued involving improvised weapons on both sides. By 10:00 a.m. President Gallagher had called the police onto campus to deter further violence, he said. He then ordered the school closed for the

¹²⁷ "Lifting the C.C.N.Y. Siege," Editorial, *New York Times*, May 7, 1969, 46.

¹²⁸ The *Times* cites unnamed college officials attributing the attacks to "students" but Ackerman (1969) subsequently raised questions about what type of students—college or high school and the *Post* quoted "instructors" saying some looked like outsiders. See Sylvan Fox, "C.C.N.Y. Open but Tense," *New York Times*, May 7, 1969, 1.

¹²⁹ Arthur Greenspan, "CCNY Riot: Hour-by-Hour Report," *New York Post*, May 8, 1969, 14.

¹³⁰ Timothy Lee, "Bloody Race Cash Rips CCNY," *New York Post*, May 7, 1969, 3. It should be noted that this article is riddled with inaccuracies, from the location of the campus gates to the spelling of names of injured students. The details quoted here are substantiated by other accounts, however, and the article is somewhat better at capturing the tone of newspaper coverage than more professional and thorough treatments including many in the same publication.

rest of the day. At 10:30, reported the *Post*:

About a half dozen police cars appeared on Convent Ave., North Campus, as hundreds of students surged onto the street. ‘Is it true that Gallagher closed down the campus?’ one asked. ‘I hear that they’re taking over the South Campus again,’ said another.

The crush of the hundreds of students—almost all white—jammed the intersection [at 140th Street] and among them resentment began to smolder.¹³¹

‘OPEN THE GATES!’: PITCHED BATTLES

Meanwhile, on the South Campus dissidents were entering classes, spraying students and faculty with fire extinguishers, scattering their lecture notes, pulling chairs out from under them, and forcing everyone out of the college buildings. Between those being ejected by insurgents and those by campus security guards and helmeted police charged with evacuating the College grounds, thousands of students were now pouring out into the streets, where a *Times* reporter captured this exchange.

“So you lose a day, a week, a semester,” a tall, heavy-set Negro youth shouted to a white student. “We’ve lost generations and damn it, this is what we intend to stop.”

“But it’s not the way to do it,” the white student said. “This will only turn people against you.”

The black youth swore.

Nearby, another black student, pointing an accusing finger, said: “You people like to *talk* about these things because you don’t intend to *do* anything. You control everything. We could talk forever and nothing would change.”¹³²

At 11:00 hundreds of students were milling around in front of the 135th Street gate, the

¹³¹ Greenspan, 14.

¹³² “Seeds of C.C.N.Y. Strife: Frustration on 2 Sides,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1969, 42. Note that the Negro is identified as a physically imposing “youth” while the white is a “student.” There appears to be little doubt as to the former’s identity in the mind of the writer, who goes on to quote “another black student.” The *Daily News*, in reporting the subsequent violence described the Blacks and Puerto Ricans who came back over the campus gates as “the outsiders.” See Edward Benes and Joseph McNamara, “CCNY to Open Under Police Guard,” *Daily News*, May 8, 1969, 2.

hub of activity since the original insurgency began. “The university of Harlem is closed,” a black student shouted at them. “Go home or you’re going to get hurt.”¹³³ Many did, many did not. When a Negro security guard attempted to lock the gate, however, several white students challenged him. “This is our school,” one shouted. “We want it open.” And between 300 and 500 surged past chanting, “Open the Gates! Open the Gates!”¹³⁴ Apparently under the false impression that Cohen Library—the moniker “Malcolm X Hall” still painted on its white stone façade—had been reoccupied, the white students then sought to “get them the hell out of there.”¹³⁵ They charged a group of radical whites wearing red armbands and attempting to shield Black and Puerto Rican protestors behind them. The counter protestors ripped signs out of their hands and tore them up, prompting cheers and a growing sense of their own power. They then moved on to “reclaim” the student center and Wagner Hall and finally, with some 200 of them remaining, decided to make one last symbolic gesture and unlock the East Gate at St. Nicholas Terrace and 133rd Street.

Accounts vary about what happened next. One report suggests that the mob spotted a black dissident perched on top of the stone wall abutting the gate and holding a red flag and that one of their number scrambled up to wrest it from him. Then a handful of the fifty or so dissidents outside the gate climbed back up carrying tree branches and bottles, and shouted for the white students inside to “Go Home, the campus is closed.”¹³⁶ Other accounts suggest that some of the dissident women had gotten stuck on their way over the locked gate and the students outside perceived a threat to their women from the approaching mob and vaulted back over to

¹³³ Unnamed black student, quoted in Fox, 42.

¹³⁴ Greenspan, 15.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *ibid.* Three had to be admitted. Four were treated and released.

defend them.¹³⁷ Whatever the spark, some twenty-five Blacks and Puerto Ricans came back over the wall armed with tree branches, two-by-fours and other makeshift weapons and confronted a vastly larger force of white counter-demonstrators some of whom were similarly arming themselves and standing their ground. The police arrived ten minutes later and took seven students, all of them white—the blacks having withdrawn at the sound of the sirens—to Knickerbocker Hospital. The *Times*, not given to hyperbole, called it, “one of the ugliest [battles] in the history of the nation’s recent campus violence.”¹³⁸

An hour later, 500 white students gathered outside the administration building on the North Campus and cheered the announcement that the College would be open for business tomorrow with “adequate police protection.” But the police would spend much of that next day separating opposing groups, breaking up rallies, and getting pelted with rocks and eggs as “guerilla bands swept through various buildings” disrupting classes and setting fires. By 2 p.m. the College was once again being shut down by the authorities. Images of the shattered stained-glass windows of the college auditorium belching smoke and of helmeted police clubbing students were broadcast around the globe.¹³⁹

GALLAGHER RESIGNS

On Thursday morning, President Gallagher announced that his pending resignation would become effective Monday morning at the very latest. Woefully inadequate state and city support remained the reason, he said, but he would nonetheless have preferred to have seen out the

¹³⁷ Fred Miller and Gil Friend, “The Week That Was,” *Observation Post*, May 12, 1969, 4; Ackerman, “The South Campus Seizure,” and Sara Slack, “Schools Continue to Boil: CCNY Students, Cops Maintain an Uneasy Calm,” *Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1969, 35.

¹³⁸ Fox, 1.

¹³⁹ *NBC News*, May 8, 1969, Vanderbilt University Television News Archive, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/tvn-video-clip.pl?RC=445949> (accessed Jan. 12, 2010). Leonard Kriegel saw the events on a newscast in the Netherlands, where he was on sabbatical. Kriegel, *Working Through*, 189.

academic year and continued playing the role of “reconciler” were it not for a toxic mixture of “institutional inertia,” “rising expectations born of the successes of the civil rights movement,” and finally “the intrusion of politically motivated forces in recent days.”¹⁴⁰ In the face of mounting criticism that he was spineless and capitulating to thuggery,¹⁴¹ Gallagher had maintained that it required moral courage to exercise such restraint. “We have chosen a unique and somewhat unpopular path,” he had told a group of faculty midway through the occupation. “It takes a bit of guts to try to resolve [this crisis] through reason and civility.”¹⁴² While recognizing the need “to draw the line against the putsch methods that converted German universities into a playground for Nazism,” the *Post* had commended Gallagher for being one of only a handful of prescient college presidents who recognized a “no less serious” challenge:

to keep the lines of communication open, to refuse to panic under fire and to differentiate the authentic roots of student unrest from terrorist escapades. The decisions will be hard, as we learn anew each day amid rising public clamor for primitive solutions. But these are not simple times and the young did not create the war in Vietnam or the crisis of our cities.¹⁴³

Gallagher now concluded that “When the forces of angry rebellion and stern repression clash...A man of peace... must stand aside.”¹⁴⁴

No sooner had he delivered the news of his departure than his longtime ally CUNY Chancellor Albert Bowker began to distance himself and the Board of Higher Education from Gallagher and his team’s negotiating posture, telling a group of students that the negotiations

¹⁴⁰ Buell Gallagher, “Statement by Gallagher on Resignation,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1969, 15.

¹⁴¹ A *Daily News* editorial, for example, accused Gallagher of aiding and abetting 200 students “in depriving 17,800 for an indefinite time” and menacingly told him and another beleaguered college president, “Surely you gentlemen wouldn’t want to be arrested and prosecuted for obstructing justice and acting as accessories to crime on your campuses.” See “Notes on Campus Crimes,” *Daily News*, Apr. 30, 1969.

¹⁴² Murray Kempton, “City College Revisited,” *New York Post*, May 1, 1969, 49.

¹⁴³ “The Campus Battlegrounds,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Apr. 25, 1969, 48. James A. Perkins of Cornell was among the other presidents cited.

¹⁴⁴ Gallagher, “Statement...”

with the president “had reached the point of being counter productive. He had already agreed to all their demands. It was like they were negotiating with themselves.”¹⁴⁵ Bowker, the architect of the open enrollment scheme in the 1966 Master Plan, is widely credited with being the prime mover behind Open Admissions and happily riding the current wave of student unrest to accomplish his own ends.¹⁴⁶ But the abrupt change in leadership offered the him and the board an irresistible opportunity to at once reassert control and to appease critics who said Gallagher had “hesitated and shilly-shallied” in calling in the police. “A new breed of college executive, is needed” said the *Daily News*, which recommended recruiting San Francisco State’s President S.I. Hayakawa, who had personally cut the wires on the loudspeakers at a student rally and called over 700 police onto campus the previous spring, or at least someone of Hayakawa’s ilk.¹⁴⁷ The Board chose Joseph Copeland, a senior biology professor with conservative views who had served on Gallagher’s negotiating team. Copeland pledged to restore order and deal decisively with lawbreakers as minority students and faculty voiced their profound sense of betrayal as more details of the now compromised negotiations began to leak out in the press.

CONCLUSION: HARLEM ON EVERYBODY’S MIND

The Committee of Ten may not have known how Gallagher or the police would respond, but according to student activist Louis Reyes Rivera, “We were gambling on something else: [That] the community that surrounded us... would be out there in huge numbers” to support them, sneak in supplies, and at least raise the stakes. Nearly everyone dreaded the widespread conflagration that might erupt if riot police stormed into the South Campus the way they had at

¹⁴⁵ Albert H. Bowker, quoted in “the persecution and resignation of buell gordon gallagher as performed by the inmates of the board of higher education under the direction of would-be-mayor mario proaccino,” *Observation Post*, May 12, 1969, 2.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Jerome Karabel, “Open Admissions: Toward Meritocracy or Democracy,” *Change*, May 1972, 38-43, and Gordon, “The Transformation of the City University.”

¹⁴⁷ “Exit Dr. Gallagher,” Editorial, *Daily News*, May 10, 1969.

Columbia. The city had managed to dodge that bullet in Ocean-Hill Brownsville the previous fall but officials were none too cocky about achieving a similar result while clubbing unarmed youths who were fighting for a decent education in the middle of America's most famous urban ghetto. "We were lucky we had Buell G. Gallagher, who marched across the bridge at Selma with Martin Luther King on that second go-around," said Rivera. "This guy couldn't order the cops to come in and empty the campus of us."¹⁴⁸ Not everyone felt so lucky, however. For many Gallagher would forever be seen as the weak leader who capitulated to terrorists and precipitated the fall of a once-great institution of higher learning. But unlike so many others, the saga of Harlem University was not, finally, about who got kicked out, but about a group of imaginative interlopers who, in the bowels of a seedy West Side hotel, had hatched a plan to open the gates and invite people in.

And in the final analysis, it was not so much City College's iconic stature or cultural baggage that gave rise to SEEK, higher education's first experiment with affirmative action, or that determined that this was where the battle for open access was to be joined, but rather City's proximity to an even larger and more potent symbol. More than any other single factor, it was the college's physical location in Harlem, the cultural capital of black America, that created the conditions for the student uprising of 1969 and ensured its ultimate success. From the Harlem City Councilman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s campaign to integrate the faculty in the early 1940s to the 1964 series in the Harlem-based *Amsterdam News* comparing the "lily-white" school to "Ole Miss" and questioning efforts to shunt Negro students off to the "dumping grounds" of the new "junior" colleges as well as the efficacy of taxpayer subsidized free tuition, it was the Harlem community that created the pressure and urgency that made the SEEK program possible.

¹⁴⁸ Rivera interview.

Harlem did not have its own community college, and even if it had it would have been forced to settle for an embarrassingly lower spot, City College having long since occupied the neighborhood's single highest elevation.

Students like Rivera and Paget Henry were at once attracted to City because of its location and repelled by the stark contrasts they found when they got there. As a teenager growing up in a public housing project in Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant, a neighborhood with an even larger black population, Rivera had been an admirer of Malcolm X. He had come close—as close as he ever came to joining anything—to enlisting in the civil rights leader's Harlem based organization before he was assassinated. That Malcolm had spoken at City College may have added a certain appeal, but in any case, Rivera knew

I didn't want to go to Brooklyn. They were too racist. I didn't want to go to Queens College because its reputation in the streets was, 'They didn't want your behind there.' Hunter College always had the image of being too elite...City, on the other hand, appealed to me because (1) it was on the border of Harlem and (2) because there was a substantial—not comparatively—but a substantial number of students of color [in the SEEK program]."¹⁴⁹

For Rivera, Paget Henry, and other minority students, their presence in Harlem also invested them with a special responsibility. The unrest at Columbia the previous year had come as “a blessing,” Rivera said. “It made us look bad. Because we hadn't done anything here...the whole country is up in arms doing things and we're up here in Harlem and we ain't doing nothing.”¹⁵⁰

Poet June Jordan's exhilaration at seeing the black nationalist flag flying over City College, her sojourns into neighborhood schools during the occupation to create a “Free University” there, and Toni Cade's “Dream of a Black University” had everything to do with the

¹⁴⁹ Rivera interview. This wasn't entirely true, before manning the barricades, Paget Henry and others tutored high school students in a Lenox Avenue church basement to help them improve their grades so they could qualify for admission.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

people they passed on the street every day on their way to class and the notion that they were at the center of history. Liberal white professors, too, perceived their surroundings and world historical roles through a filter that told them what “Harlem” was. Adrienne Rich joined the SEEK faculty not to redeem an institution but to “involve myself in the *real* life of the city.”¹⁵¹ Her evocation of young, streetcorner prostitutes as embodying her students’ alternative fates, Leonard Kriegel’s strange description of the neighboring Manhattanville Houses as “prisonlike,” or theirs and others’ frequent juxtapositions of City College’s gritty milieu with bucolic, suburban campuses showed how their imaginations had been similarly captured, even if the novelty and danger they projected onto the college and its students would, in Mary Soliday’s view, have the perverse effect of locating them both “irrevocably outside the mainstream.”¹⁵²

ENTER THE FACULTY

It was only after Gallagher’s ouster that City College’s core faculty began, albeit somewhat tentatively, to emerge as a player in the crisis. From the first day of the occupation professors on their way to class had driven up to the locked gates and not even gotten out of their cars. Though they did make recommendations regarding the use of police force and other key questions, meetings of concerned faculty and the newly constituted Faculty Senate had been dominated by untenured and part-time teachers and consistently failed to generate anything close to a quorum. Columnist Murray Kempton attended one such meeting on the second day of the occupation and noted that scarcely 200 of an instructional staff of nearly 1700 had even bothered to show up and virtually none of those who did—be they on the side of the “oppressed” or the need to “stand up to terror”—seemed to know the particular students involved: “There is cause

¹⁵¹ Rich, “Teaching Writing;” emphasis mine.

¹⁵² Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation*, 133. Rich’s reference to prostitution did not appear in the original essay but in a short preface she wrote when it was reprinted seven years later. See, Adrienne Rich, *On Secrets, Lies, and Silence: Selected Poems, 1966-1978*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, 51-52.

for the suspicion that these teachers do not know the *Negro* students,” he wrote, “because, in the main they are not *their* students.” Of the 10,000 regularly admitted day students at City only about 200 were black or Puerto Rican. Another 800 minority students were there under the auspices of the SEEK program, an “educational ghetto” with its own teaching staff that garnered no faculty discussion whatsoever. “There seemed to be an entire absence of functional interest in it,” said Kempton. “There seemed, indeed, among these persons of great intelligence, a general absence of functional interest in anything outside their own disciplines.”¹⁵³

It is notable...that even persons otherwise affronted by the demands of the Negro students accept black studies. A physics professor said yesterday that ‘it is their funeral; they will suffer or they will prosper; it will have very little effect on the rest of us.’ He was, I’m sure, being facetious; but some of that feeling has to be a part of the readiness so many academics have to accept a program for which they have so little respect.¹⁵⁴

Dean Allen Ballard, the one-time head of the college’s SEEK program, described a longstanding “snobbism among the senior college faculty about the question of standards even when 90 per cent of the community college students transferring [in] were white.”¹⁵⁵ After the King assassination Ballard had convened a group of ten of the most radical white professors on campus—those known to have been active in demonstrations against DOW Chemical and ROTC and taking strong positions against releasing class rankings to draft boards or calling police onto the campus. He asked them to support a proposal that would have mandated drawing twenty-five per cent of the fall 1968 freshman class from the black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods of

¹⁵³ Murray Kempton, “CCNY and the Blacks,” *New York Post*, Apr. 24, 1969, 49. History professor Lloyd P. Gartner, one of an organized group of faculty in favor of using police force to reopen the campus and opposed to all five of the demands, put the initial number at as many as 600 full-time faculty and 200 untenured faculty, but acknowledges being one of some 50 professors to walk out in protest almost immediately as it became apparent to him that “an essentially self-constituted Arrangements Committee” made up of former Eugene McCarthy supporters had rigged the whole proceeding in advance and a contingent of student occupiers marched into the hall and began speaking in a manner many present found insulting. See, Lloyd Gartner, “Five Demands at City College of New York,” *Midstream* 15, no. 8 (Oct. 1969), 19.

¹⁵⁴ Murray Kempton, “CCNY and the Blacks,” 49.

¹⁵⁵ Ballard, *The Education of Black Folk*, 120.

Harlem and East Harlem, but only one of the ten took him up on it. “Their social conscience,” he concluded, “did not extend to Black matters.”¹⁵⁶

Writing of a contest for the chairmanship of the English department, where much of the most outspoken support for the students and their demands was to be concentrated, Leonard Kriegel said that “Neither candidate seemed able or willing to view City College in relation to Harlem or New York or even America,” nor did any of their colleagues expect them to.¹⁵⁷ When asked to design and administer special courses for the brand new SEEK program, Edmond Volpe, the department chairman at the time, said he had been “disturbed” by the proposition, though he also admitted “my social sympathies were aroused.” His real motivation for taking on the challenge, however, was “the old fashioned principle of eminent domain: I did not want anyone else on campus doing any teaching of English.”¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as the program progressed Volpe and his colleagues had begun to take a certain pride in their cooperation:

The College was going out of its way to accommodate non-qualified students, giving them a great opportunity, and we enjoyed the smug self-gratification of the do-gooder, a feeling similar, I am sure, to that being enjoyed in many colleges throughout the nation making similar, limited concessions to social necessity. The SEEK students should have been grateful, but they were instead, those [faculty] who were listening discovered, resentful.¹⁵⁹

Not many had been listening, of course, much less involving themselves directly in the hard work of bringing the new students up to speed. Thus, they were all the more befuddled to suddenly find the campus under siege by the ungrateful beneficiaries of their grudging largesse.

But among these same teachers was also growing a not altogether unpleasant awareness

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 123

¹⁵⁷ Kriegel, *Working Through*, 150.

¹⁵⁸ Edmond L. Volpe, “The Confessions of a Fallen Man: Ascent to the D.A.,” *College English* 33, no. 7 (Apr. 1972), 766.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 768.

that they had been thrust, willy-nilly, onto history's stage and a pressing need to find some place to stand. According to one professor on the right, many of his colleagues "apparently feel bored and are restless with academic life. They would like the university to become the base for their involvement (*cum* academic tenure) with the great social forces of our day."¹⁶⁰ Like it or not they were about to get their wish.

¹⁶⁰ Gartner, "Five Demands at City College," 35.

IV. 'THE HARVARD OF THE POOR'

*The City College of New York was created not by a distinguished faculty, or lavish resources, or prestige based on class and connections but by only one thing: a student body selected on the basis of academic qualifications alone. Destroy that, and City College would mean no more for those who attended it than a hundred community colleges around the country.*¹

—Nathan Glazer & D. P. Moynihan, 1970

*Since a brilliant, poor boy... might today get a full scholarship to Harvard (especially, perhaps, if he were black), the best function for City may now be a new one.*²

—Peter Sourian, 1973

*As he put it: "You'll learn by hanging around and watching. You show talent." ... I knew I lacked the basic college skills; I was a man reporting to work without his tools.*³

—Peter Rondinone, 1977

*I can't fault the faculty... If I'd been a professor at CCNY for ten or fifteen years, I'd wonder whether all this was worth it. If you start at some teacher's college in western Pennsylvania and work your way up to Yale it's very different from starting at Yale and winding up at a teacher's college in western Pennsylvania—even if you get a bigger title and salary.*⁴

—CUNY Chancellor Robert Kibbee, 1972

*Probably at no school in the country is there such an accumulation of wisdom and know-how in the field of compensatory education... I cannot imagine a group of teachers who have ever had more to say to one another. It is a special fraternity joined not only by our common purposes and problems as teachers but by our having come to know, through our students, what it means to be an outsider in academia. Whatever our individual political persuasions, we have been pedagogically radicalized by our experience. We reject in our bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college. We reject it not only on principle; we would simply be bored teaching in such a college.*⁵

—Mina Shaughnessy, 1972

¹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Introduction to the 1970 Edition," *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), liv.

² Peter Sourian, "A Pilgrim's Progress," *The Nation*, Feb. 12, 1973, 209.

³ Peter J. Rondinone, "Open Admissions and the Inward 'I,'" *Change* 9, no. 5 (May 1977), 46.

⁴ Robert Kibbee, quoted in Martin Mayer, "Higher Education for All? The Case of Open Admissions," *Commentary* 51, no. 2 (Feb. 1973), 46.

⁵ Mina P. Shaughnessy. "The Miserable Truth." Address to the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. New York, Apr. 26, 1976, quoted in *Congressional Record*. Sep. 9, 1976, 29617.

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In the tumultuous weeks of the South Campus occupation and the violence that followed it, public outrage centered on the demonstrators' confrontational tactics and what many perceived to be President Gallagher's and Mayor Lindsay's spineless capitulation. But with the reopening of the campus, attention soon turned to the substance of proposals for addressing the dissidents' specific demands and to City College's future. Coming at such a contentious moment in the history of the institution, New York City, and the nation, debates over admissions requirements, academic standards, City's storied past, and its continuing relevance to a changing urban community could not help but rouse extraordinary passions. Longtime friends and colleagues fell out over perceived betrayals. Students found themselves assuming roles to fulfill – or challenge – public perceptions. The city's media underwent their own crises in deciding how to cover it. And then, before the new "Open Admissions" program could get off the ground, the worst fiscal crisis in living memory struck the city and the noble experiment collapsed under its own weight.

Nevertheless, for the half dozen years that it lasted Open Admissions was what the sociologists David Lavin and David Hyllegard later described as, "arguably the most ambitious effort to create educational opportunity ever attempted in American higher education." In one fell swoop it transformed City College from being one of the most exclusive colleges in America to one of the most accessible.⁶ New York, a city with huge concentrations poverty sent seventy-six percent of its high school graduates on to college in the program's first year, compared to only fifty-five to sixty percent nationwide, and as Nathan Glazer noted at the time, came "as

⁶ Lavin and Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds*, 17, 195.

close to universal higher education as any community [had] ever come.”⁷

Besides tens of thousands of undergraduates—most of them white and Catholic, as it turned out, and not terribly poor—who had never imagined that they would go to college, Open Admissions also ushered in an intense and radical reassessment of what a college education was for—and for whom. And it precipitated the most withering and sustained criticism that City College had ever withstood. In this section I consider the ways New Yorkers both within and outside the college responded to and attempted to forge a consensus over the student uprising and subsequent policy of Open Admissions, and the extent to which those debates alternately challenged and reaffirmed their faith in the fabled meritocracy, worked out shifting racial, ethnic, and class antagonisms and allegiances, and redefined various actors’ relationships to the postwar city. Viewed in this way, verbal battles over burgeoning enrollments, declining standards, the politics of remediation, and finally the imposition of tuition were enacted as a way for the community to attempt to resolve a larger crisis of American liberalism.

⁷ Nathan Glazer, “City College,” in *Academic Transformation: Seventeen Institutions Under Pressure*, ed. by David Riesman and Verne A. Stadtman (New York: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973), 93.

1. OPEN ADMISSIONS

The “dual-admissions” scheme that emerged from the negotiations would have reserved half the seats in future freshman classes for students from high schools with high concentrations of poverty, but for many on the faculty as well as in the broader Jewish community who understood City College to have stood historically against quotas that were designed to artificially achieve a particular ethnic mix and to have grounded itself instead purely on merit, this was asking too much. All but one of the crowded field of mayoral hopefuls, the Board of Higher Education, and, somewhat gratuitously, the Faculty Council shot down the proposal on the grounds that it represented a thinly veiled system of racial quotas which would unfairly deprive some of the best qualified candidates of the benefits of a free college education.

THE SHIBBOLETH OF ‘ETHNIC QUOTAS’

Conservative Democrat Mario Procaccino (CCNY ’35), who had led the effort to force the reopening of the college and precipitated Gallagher’s ouster, if not the campus violence itself, continued to make the college a signature issue in his campaign and to appeal to ethnic, working-class whites who felt unappreciated and abandoned by the Lindsay administration. After capturing the June 17th Democratic primary, Procaccino told a gathering of fellow graduates of the class of 1935:

City College is what New York is all about. City College has always had more heart than Harvard. It has always been more real than Yale [where his opponent, Lindsay, had gone]. It has always had more purpose than Princeton...It was built on the sacrifices of our mothers and fathers and ourselves. The sacrifices of our mothers who walked for blocks to save a few cents for groceries.⁸

It soon became clear that any measured effort to admit more black and Puerto Rican

⁸ Mario Procaccino, quoted in Richard Reeves, “Procaccino, the Little Guy,” *New York Times*, Aug. 31, 1969, E12.

students necessarily implied excluding others who would have been admitted under the traditional system. This was unacceptable to a number of constituencies including City College alumni and faculty and working-class Jews who felt they had an almost proprietary stake the institution and were firmly attached to “merit” rather than “potential” or “equity” as a controlling idea. At the same time, union leader Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., a Procaccino supporter, and power broker in the largely Catholic labor movement began to push for more lenient entrance requirements across the board. Chancellor Albert Bowker had already championed the idea of open enrollment, broadly defined, and by 1966, it had become enshrined in CUNY’s Master Plan. The uprising of 1969 gave the matter a new urgency, however. Robert Birnbaum chaired the task force charged with altering the timetable and determining the particulars of who would get into which colleges, why, and when, and he later recalled a closed-door meeting with members of the Board and the Chancellor’s staff in which Van Arsdale, president of the AFL-CIO’s New York City Central Labor & Trades Council, announced that the game had changed with regard to programs like SEEK: “I know you folks have spent a lot of money on these special programs,” he essentially told them, “and in the past I have not opposed them. But I just want you to know that I will oppose any future programs of this nature unless they also contain provisions for my people.”⁹ Birnbaum remembered him making it crystal clear “that any admissions scheme that emphasized only the disadvantaged would no longer be a politically viable way of moving more gradually towards open admissions. I never met with him personally, but I know that we took his words very seriously.”¹⁰

Van Arsdale also mobilized his Irish and Italian American rank-and-file to speak out in

⁹ Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., quoted by Robert Birnbaum, email to author, May 15, 2010. Birnbaum cautioned that he could not remember Van Arsdale’s exact words. For more on this meeting, see David E. Lavin and David Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), scratch notes tk.

¹⁰ Robert Birnbaum, email to author, May 15, 2010.

public hearings about how unfair it was that their children should be ineligible, by virtue of their family incomes, for the SEEK and College Discovery programs, while at the same time disqualified, on the basis of their high school grades, for regular admission to the public's university. Their message reverberated through the pages of the *Daily News* and resonated with longstanding feelings of neglect that outer-borough Catholics in particular harbored toward the embattled Lindsay administration.¹¹ After a contentious process Birnbaum's diverse task force, whose members ran the gamut from academic traditionalists to Black Power advocates, arrived at a consensus—with the important and portentous exception, that is, of what he described as “a contingent of City College alums who remembered CCNY's Golden Age (or at least thought they did).”¹²

THE BIRTH OF A RADICAL, DOOMED EXPERIMENT

The result was an “Open Admissions” policy that guaranteed a seat somewhere in the university to every future New York City high school graduate and admitted to City or another senior college anyone with either an eighty average or a ranking in the top half of her high school class (as opposed to the top twenty-five percent ranking originally envisioned in the 1966 Master Plan) regardless of the courses she took or category of high school diploma. The SEEK program at City College was also to be expanded from 600 to over 2000 students. Finally, with the prospect of more student unrest looming—perhaps even urban riots—instead of a start date of 1975, the policy would be put into effect the following year, leaving virtually no time to plan or prepare.

Open—as opposed to dual—admissions eliminated the prospect that a highly qualified candidate would be turned away from City College in favor of one less academically prepared

¹¹ Karabel, “The Politics of Structural Change,” 36.

¹² Robert Birnbaum, email to author, May 15, 2010.

and with it the public perception of a zero-sum-game. It did away with the possibility that individual whites could be denied an opportunity for which both they and their parents had indeed sacrificed a great deal, so that their black and Puerto Rican counterparts, who might never have really been given the chance to compete at all, would get their turn, too. The sweeping policy was also designed to preserve City College's relative competitiveness, however: With the exception of hand-picked SEEK students, only those with high averages or class rankings would be eligible to attend a senior college. The rest would have to begin their college educations at a two-year institution and eventually transfer. Like the University of California and the Midwestern land grant colleges, this guaranteed every graduate of the city's high schools a seat somewhere in the City University system.

But unlike California's highly stratified system, Open Admissions went out of its way to ensure dramatically increased access to City College, the university's flagship campus, and to other, similar four-year institutions. And mere access would not be enough. Most of the Big Ten Midwestern universities had had open doors for generations, but they were "revolving" doors. Freshmen were expected to "sink or swim" (and usually sank). For years special trains were even scheduled to take students home after the first midterm exams were graded. At City College, a newly energized cadre of student activists, professors, and college officials, along with their liberal well wishers were determined to implement innovative remedial programs on a massive scale, mobilize an army of tutors and counselors, and strive to make it possible for students who'd been cheated their entire academic lives to this time have a fighting chance. From the very outset, however, other, more recalcitrant professors, nostalgic alumni, and politicians unwilling to underwrite such a massive expansion and dedicate scarce resources to down-market remedial programs would labor to undermine public confidence in the notably

ambitious and problematic enterprise.

THE WILDCARD: CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS IN CRISIS

To understand the forces that occasioned the Open Admissions policy, that shaped how it played out, and that later ensured its downfall, it is necessary to grasp why someone like Harry Van Arsdale, a supporter of Mario Procaccino and a representative of elements who by all rights should have been hostile to the very idea of reaching what amounted to an accommodation with the campus militants, would end up endorsing such a deal. New York City Catholics had suffered an epochal and in many ways catastrophic shift in their collective fortunes over the previous decade and had terribly little left to lose.¹³ On the one hand the election and of a popular Catholic president, America's first, and the near universal grief over his assassination signaled broad social acceptance—even transcendence—for Catholics, but they also heralded the waning of their distinctiveness and group cohesion.¹⁴ Vatican II would further dilute many of the rituals and beliefs that had defined what it meant to be Catholic for millennia, as would the birth control pill and the mellowing of the Cold War.¹⁵ In New York though Catholics still formed a slim majority, white flight had diminished their numbers, most notably among the more affluent. And after decades in decline, the Tammany Hall machine that had reigned over New York politics for the better part of two centuries finally broke down for good, with Jews making substantial inroads toward controlling the Democratic Party.¹⁶ By the end of the decade two

¹³ I am indebted to Eric Foner for encouraging me to think about the importance of Catholics in this chapter of City College's history.

¹⁴ The 1965 Immigration Act did away with quotas targeting countries like Italy and Poland and even privileged "family reunification" visas, evidence of the same paradox.

¹⁵ It should be noted that Vatican II was itself the response to a crisis, namely a mass exodus of the faithful from the church, its dogmas, and traditions. As such it constituted a salvage operation, an effort to reconcile with modernity erect a kind of big tent.

¹⁶ In many ways the Jews underwent the opposite process. The Nazi persecution and fledgling state of Israel, to name just two factors, fostered a more intense identity and group solidarity even as Jews should have been blending

important symbols of Catholic power, one secular (Carmine DeSapio) and one religious (Cardinal Spellman), had either been indicted, in the case of the former, or interred, in that of the latter.

With Tammany Hall down for the count, the last redoubt of Catholic power lay in the unions and they, too, were being severely tested. Early on, one of the key concessions demanded of them by the newer immigrants had been the opening up of the building trades to minority workers. It was in response to this very demand, in fact, that the 1965 legislation enabling the SEEK program had come about. Members of the fledgling Black Legislative Caucus in Albany had withheld their support for capital funds for the New York State Dormitory Authority unless construction jobs, the exclusive turf of Irish and Italian construction workers, went to their constituents. The unions balked but offered, as a compromise, to throw their support behind a measure that would give hundreds of otherwise ineligible minority students access to senior CUNY colleges.¹⁷ A similar threat of black competition for lower-middle-class Jewish teaching jobs in Ocean-Hill Brownsville had prompted the citywide strike in 1968 and resulted in a far less elegant compromise. In each case, however, a conflict had been set up between working class whites and blacks such that, whoever won, white workers fearing for their jobs came out looking like bigots.¹⁸

If the unions were hurting, so, too, were other Catholic institutions. After years of flagging enrollments and financial struggle Fordham, the 125-year-old Jesuit university, got rid

into the white middle class at a time when religion was losing its salience. For a fuller discussion of transformations of Catholic and Jewish New York during this period see Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, lvii-lviii.

¹⁷ Louis Reyes Rivera, in "The Struggle for Access," As a SEEK student, Rivera was a protégé of CUNY Vice Chancellor and veteran Albany operator Julius C. C. Edelstein who helped broker the SEEK legislation and from whom Rivera got this account. Louis Reyes Rivera, interview with author.

¹⁸ Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, lxv. The citywide transit and garbage strikes, the latter with mountains of trash burning in the streets, were also widely seen in this light. The authors further note that there were few demands to open up the protestant-dominated Wall Street brokerage houses and white-shoe law firms to blacks, and that any such demands could have been far more easily accommodated or resisted.

of most of the clergy on its board of trustees and in 1969 became non-sectarian, “in the Jesuit tradition,” thereby qualifying for millions of dollars in government aid. Fordham’s woes were emblematic of the entire parochial school system. In 1968 alone 637 Catholic schools nationwide were forced to close up shop. Among other things, enrollments had plummeted by over 600,000 students in four-years time, much of the attrition due to more affluent families moving out of the cities and placing their children in suburban public schools. Although some New York parents also chose to move their public school children into parochial schools, white flight still left only poorer families behind to support them.¹⁹ In the days before and during the South Campus uprising this crisis was national news. At stake, said the *Washington Post*’s front page, was the very “existence” of the schools that educated one out of every eleven American children.²⁰ A *Daily News* editorial warned of an estimated two million displaced Catholic school students potentially forced to look elsewhere for an education over the coming six years. “The load thrown onto the public schools, colleges, and universities would be enormous,” it said. “The easiest way to avert such an emergency would be to amend sundry laws so as to permit financial help for church schools from public funds.”²¹

THE DAILY NEWS GATHERS THE FLOCK

For generations the *News* had faithfully represented the interests and often reinforced the prejudices of working-class Catholic New Yorkers, and according to a December 1969 special issue of *New York Magazine* devoted to the city’s changing “Power Game,” the tabloid’s

¹⁹ In New York, State Senator John Marchi, long an advocate of charging tuition at the City University, an opponent of community control, and the mayoral candidate soon to snatch the Republican nomination from the liberal incumbent, introduced a bill to give vouchers to Catholic school students. See Bernard Bard, “Parochial Schools in Crisis,” *New York Post*, Apr. 19, 1969, 13. Under the threat of having their public schools flooded with new students, legislatures in four states were considering similar bills.

²⁰ See e.g. Ellen Hoffman, “Financial Crisis Threatening Survival of Catholic Schools,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 24, 1969, A1. A version of the same story was reprinted in the *New York Post* on April 22.

²¹ “Money for Church Schools,” Editorial, *Daily News*, 11tk

editorial writer Rueben Morey “[could] still bring many blue-collar, low-income, debt-ridden Americans to their feet against social security, do-gooders, jaywalking and crime in the streets.” Along with editors like the *Post’s* James Wechsler and the *National Review’s* William F. Buckley, Jr., Morey represented a new breed of independent journalist who had, for all intents and purposes “replaced the city’s clerics as the moral power base in New York.”²² The real clerics, however, had a pontiff and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to offer them guidance. The publishers of New York’s newspapers didn’t tell people what to write. They didn’t have to. “But it’s obvious, for heavens sake,” explained one rewrite man. “I mean if I’m writing for the *Daily News* I’m not going to do seven or eight takes on a poverty program story unless I’ve found someone’s hand in the till. You know what your newspaper prints and you either buy it and work there or quit and go into public relations.”²³

During the City College uprising, nowhere were the biases and preoccupations of New York Catholics more evident than on the *Daily News’s* front page. As if to reassure its largely Catholic readership, the country’s largest-circulation daily—and one of the few institutions they relied on that was still thriving—juxtaposed headlines about the insurrection with reassuring images of traditional authority. On the front page reporting the South Campus takeover, for instance, the headline read “Protesters Shut Down CCNY” above a photograph of neat rows of helmeted sheriff’s deputies at Cornell and another headline about Albany legislators’ move to ban guns on campus.²⁴ Days later, in the midst of the occupation, the headline screamed “FACULTY BACKS CCNY SHUTDOWN,” this time over a photograph of Cardinal Spellman’s successor, Archbishop Terence J. Cooke, in Rome where he was being elevated to

²² Nicholas Pileggi, “Rules of the Power Game,” *New York*, Dec. 23, 1968, 41-42.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *Daily News*, April 23, 1969, 1.

cardinal. (“Bronx Boy Made Prince of Church,” read the caption.)²⁵ The following day’s front page showed Cooke again, kneeling before the pontiff himself. The headline: “NO SURRENDER TO REBS: NIXON/Asks Colleges Show Backbone.”²⁶ The only time black or Puerto Rican students or community leaders ever appeared on the front page as protagonists, in fact, was in a photograph of the insurgents emerging from the south campus gates under a court order, fists raised but heads slightly bowed. The caption: “Rebels Finally Drop Out.”

Two days after the occupation ended the *News* featured the new Cardinal yet again, this time with Ethel Kennedy kneeling to kiss his ring as her brother, Senator Edward Kennedy, stood solemnly behind her. The photograph was bracketed by the somewhat more reassuring “POLICE GUARD CCNY CAMPUS” and, at the bottom of the page, “Ethel Pays Her Respects.”²⁷ The subsequent two covers showed images of white police in riot gear with their batons raised in the air and frantic black demonstrators scattering before them (“REBS BURN HALL; MELEE AT CCNY”) and of President Gallagher alone at his desk looking out over a rainy city (“BOARD SEEKING NEW CCNY CHIEF/Gallagher Quits, Raps Politicos”).²⁸ The *Daily News*’s final front page of the South Campus saga showed a white, “mini-skirted coed on her way to classes” and a line of admiring male police officers lined up in the sunlight, noticeably at ease—even smiling. The caption, headlined “Tour de Force,” announced, a changing of the guard and promised a “return to normal.” Across the top of the page the main headline read, “EXPECT FORTAS TO QUIT COURT.”²⁹

In the space of less than three weeks, then, with all hell breaking loose in Harlem, the

²⁵ *Daily News*, April 29, 1969, 1.

²⁶ *Daily News*, April 30, 1969, 1

²⁷ *Daily News*, May 8, 1969, 1.

²⁸ *Daily News*, May 9, 1969, 1; *Daily News*, May 10, 1969, 1.

²⁹ *Daily News*, May 8, 1969, 1.

Cardinal and other traditional symbols of Irish Catholic authority appeared on the front page of the *Daily News* no fewer than six times cheek by jowl with the City College crisis. Each time they were surrounded by churchmen, family members, and fellow officers. Each was facing major challenges (not least the Kennedys), but continuity, order, and solidarity reigned. The failed authority figures who were *not* Catholic appeared lonely and discredited, however: Gallagher, the “gutless” Protestant enabler of student radicals, or Fortas, the ethically compromised liberal Jewish U.S. Supreme Court justice famous for championing student rights. The only images of blacks, student protesters or their sympathizers readers were exposed to were studies in disarray and defeat; as with Gallagher and Fortas, they got a glimpse of them only on their way out the door. Finally, the storm having subsided and the sun shining again on a beautiful spring day, a white student—in a skirt that wasn’t really so “mini” even for the time—emerged, schoolbooks in hand, on her way back inside under the watchful eye of the predominately Irish Catholic cops. A “return to normal” was promised.

All by themselves these front pages constituted a coherent narrative congenial to the worldview of a particular community of readers undergoing a tremendous crisis of identity and faith. Highlighting figures like popes, cardinals, Kennedy’s, and Irish cops, they represent, in a congruence perhaps more literal than he had in mind, James Carey’s ritual communication working overtime: the newspaper as a surrogate for attending mass, “a sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” with an emphasis on sharing not so much information as belief and on fostering readers’ fragile sense of belonging:³⁰

News reading is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information—but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. Moreover, as readers make their way through the paper, they engage in a continual shift of roles or of dramatic focus. A story on the monetary crisis salutes

³⁰ Carey, “A Cultural Approach,” 18. That many of these readers actually *did* attend mass is incidental here.

them as American patriots fighting those ancient enemies Germany and Japan; a story on the meeting of the women's political caucus casts them into the liberation movement as supporter or opponent; *a tale of violence on the campus evokes their class antagonisms and resentments.*³¹

But if the *Daily News* addressed its readers alternately as believers, citizens, working stiff, and guardians of good manners, the story it told was a morality tale, a tale mostly about respecting one's elders, law and order, and what was fair. What it never explicitly laid out—certainly not on its front page—is what was at stake for those readers and their children's education or future careers. Van Arsdale and his fellow labor leaders soon recognized that at a moment when a college degree was coming to mean what a union card had meant for previous generations—an indispensable passport to the middle class—Catholic colleges and universities were fighting for their very existences.³² Meanwhile, a special task force was on the cusp of forging a consensus to expand access not just to City College but to tuition-free colleges throughout the City University, colleges that collectively enrolled hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, a consensus that, were it to hinge on residence in specific neighborhoods, racial categories, or membership in the urban underclass, threatened to sideline the underprepared children of their white, blue-collar constituents for another generation. In the midst of this struggle over quotas, formulas, and which income groups, ghetto neighborhoods or high schools would get special dispensations, Van Arsdale declined to stand on ceremony and instead seized a unique opportunity and threw his members' considerable weight behind the notion of letting every high school graduate into college—including colleges in the white outer-borough neighborhoods where most of them lived. Either these institutions would begin to serve his constituents or the impending deluge would force government to subsidize Fordham, St. John's,

³¹ *ibid.*, 20; Emphasis mine.

³² Van Arsdale attended City College's Townsend Harris High School but dropped out at the age of 16. He formally joined Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers a few years later.

and other Catholic colleges. Either way they would come out ahead.

2. BACKLASH

During an election year, then, the Open Admissions policy at once mollified New York's Catholics and the working-class Jews who stood the most to lose—both materially and symbolically—and it ensured that the new breed of students would not only be invited in but also encouraged to thrive. The new plan nonetheless left wide open not only the door but also the troubling question of how to uphold the rigorous academic standards at City and its sister colleges. Newly eligible students had not even had a chance to fill out their applications, in fact, when this question was seized upon everywhere from the faculty dining rooms and the editorial pages to the White House.

'DOUBLESPEAKING OF STANDARDS'

The problem of competitiveness was neither a novel nor, given the suddenness of the change, a far-fetched concern. Faculty and alumni had always invoked declining standards when they perceived a threat to their status or institution's prestige. When Allen Ballard joined the faculty in the early sixties he noted marked "snobbism" among his colleagues towards students transferring from community colleges even though ninety percent of them were still white. It was "inevitable," he felt, that the admission of large numbers of poorly prepared minority students and the concomitant lowering of entrance requirements would precipitate "a faculty backlash... even before the number of such students on their campuses became substantial."³³

The backlash extended well beyond CUNY or its faculty, however. In March 1970, six months before the first Open Admissions students even showed up to classes, Columbia University sociologist Amitai Etzioni published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* warning of

³³ Ballard, *Education of Black Folk*, 120, 83.

the creeping effects wrought by the creation of so many new, public “open-door” campuses, mostly two-year institutions that either took virtually anyone who applied or, like Washington D.C.’s four-year Federal City College, rejected entrance requirements in favor of a lottery system. Etzioni argued that the massification of higher education was rapidly “crowding out” individualized instruction even at elite institutions and that the sheer numbers of unexceptional students would, in time, demand that college become more like high school where many dropped out but “few were dropped.” Their collective insistence on “easy promotion and guaranteed graduation” was certain to prevail, he said; there was no turning back. “Simply trying to uphold the old standards” would never work. Nor would the “vain” hope represented by experimental compensatory programs like SEEK. The money just wasn’t there to bring them up to scale. “If we can no longer keep the floodgates closed at the admissions office,” he concluded, “it at least seems wise to steer the general flow away from four-year colleges and toward two-year extensions of high school in the junior and community colleges.”³⁴

In two widely publicized speeches that all at once conflated ethnic quotas with open enrollment and admissions requirements with graduation requirements, Vice President Spiro Agnew blasted the “supercilious sophisticates” advocating broader access policies and defended Jefferson’s “natural aristocracy of talent” against the “unqualified students being swept into college on the wave of the new socialism.”

I do not accept the proposition that every American boy and girl should go to a four-year college...There are tens of thousands [on college campuses] who did not come for the learning experience and who are restless, purposeless, bored and

³⁴ Amitai Etzioni, “The High-Schoolization of College,” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 17, 1970, 18. With its senior college entrance requirements, to some extent, this was what CUNY’s policy was designed to do.

rebellious... concentrations of disoriented students create an immense potential for disorder.³⁵

Agnew further predicted that by admitting students “who do not meet the standards and requirements of higher education,” New York “will have traded away one of the intellectual assets of the Western world for a four-year community college and 100,000 devalued diplomas.”³⁶

The Vice President went even further than that, however: He posed the question of whether one wanted to be treated by a physician admitted to medical school on the basis of “quota” or “aptitude” or to rely on sketchily selected and trained engineers, raising the specter of an erosion of standards on a societal scale.³⁷ And if standards did by some chance manage to withstand the downward pressure, administrators would only be perpetrating a kind of tease, tempting ambitious young people who could never really be college material to get in way over their heads and then forcing them to drop out dispirited and disgraced. Thus, before the program had even gotten started, the public debate over Open Admissions had been framed, as Lavin and Hyllegard have described it, as a choice between graduation standards going “down the tubes” in the event the new students were to make it through and the whole policy failing in its essential mission to “eradicate disadvantage” if they flunked out.³⁸

In fact, by every conventional yardstick, academic rigor had already gone into rapid decline on virtually all college campuses well before Open Admissions was ever enacted.

³⁵ Spiro Agnew, quoted in Robert J. Donovan, “Michigan U.’s Plan for 10% Black Quota Assailed by Agnew,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 14, 1970, 16.

³⁶ Spiro Agnew, quoted in “Gambling on Open Admissions,” *Time*, Sep. 28, 1970. In their introduction to their new edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Moynihan echoed—or more likely shaped—these sentiments. Moynihan was a top urban policy advisor in the Nixon administration as well as an advocate of specific kinds of political rhetoric. See, for example, the epigraph to this section. See also Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Memorandum for the President,” quoted in “Text of the Moynihan Memorandum on the Status of Negroes,” *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 1970, 69.

³⁷ Leonard Buder, “Agnew Called Confused on Admissions,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1970, 11.

³⁸ Lavin and Hyllegard, 17.

Between the mid 1960s and mid 1970s, cumulative student grade point averages at American colleges and universities leapt from a C+ to a B or B-, for example, their sharpest rise on record.³⁹ One chief reasons for this was the requirement that one maintain a certain average in order to remain eligible for a student deferment from the Vietnam draft. This precipitated a tremendous moral dilemma for the students and faculty alike. Undergraduates felt both guilty about their privileged status and resentful that their first duty as college students was to keep their grades up so they wouldn't be drafted. At the same time, few professors were willing to "pour napalm on a boy," which, as Buell Gallagher later remembered it, "meant they gave him at least a C no matter what his grade should have been."⁴⁰ After the 1968 *Tet* Offensive the government advanced proposals to call up students based on their class rankings, and women were forced to contemplate whether they might have to deliberately flunk courses in order to keep their male classmates out of harm's way. Rather than provide the data and risk being complicit were such a policy ever enacted, a handful of City College instructors solved their dilemma by preemptively awarding everyone in their classes A's and became "minor folk heroes" in the process.⁴¹

Glaring racial inequities and the profusion of powerful critiques of the less-than-democratic testing and sorting functions of higher education served only to further undermine teachers' resolve to penalize lesser performing students.⁴² "Colleges have traditionally felt it their responsibility to identify students at the upper end of [the competence] scale and extend *their* education by four more years," Mina Shaughnessy reminded her basic writing colleagues.

³⁹ "Variability in Grading, U.S. Colleges, 1920-2006," <http://www.gradeinflation.com> (accessed May 2, 2010). Increases were smaller at public universities.

⁴⁰ Buell G. Gallagher, *Campus in Crisis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 121.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 122.

⁴² For further discussion see Nathan Glazer, "Are Academic Standards Obsolete?" *Change* 2, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1971): 38-44.

Rather than erecting or policing a wall of standards, however, “the open admissions college...makes a commitment to involve itself in the education of young men and women all along the continuum.”⁴³ This was admittedly “new territory” for many, suggesting “new responsibilities...not simply to *identify* those who [could] write competently but to *produce* competent writers” on the shared premises that (1) students could, indeed, grow and improve their relative positions, (2) that there were inestimable social benefits in advancing as many of them as possible, and (3) that, properly executed, broadening this base would, Shaughnessy contended, “further the education of *all* students on the continuum.”

To speak of standards without remembering these larger goals, is *not* to speak but to *doublespeak* of standards, forgetting that if we are serious about standards we must set them for ourselves as teachers and administrators as well as for our students.⁴⁴

Increased teacher accountability was not a purely moral imperative either. The use of anonymous student evaluations of professors had also just caught on on college campuses, where they were sometimes tied to promotion and tenure. Many felt this provided yet another disincentive to apply tough grading practices. Finally, on many campuses the faculty had eliminated longstanding core curricular requirements, and CUNY Deputy Chancellor Seymour Hyman was forced to remind a 1971 national symposium on Open Admissions that other than completing a major and accumulating, willy-nilly, 128 credits, members of what he sarcastically referred to as “the great, highly selected [City College] student body” of the late-1960s “could get a bachelor’s degree without ever exposing themselves to college physics or calculus or one year of French or of philosophy or a year of psychology. They could do without any or all of

⁴³ Mina P. Shaughnessy, “Speaking and Doublespeaking about Standards,” Address to the California State University and Colleges Conference on Improvement of Student Writing Skills, June 3, 1976, Appendix D in Jane Maher, *Mina Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1997), 278; Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 277, 278; Emphases in original.

those things.”⁴⁵

However much they may have disapproved of such broader tendencies in higher education, critics of the university’s “capitulation” to the Five Demands, Open Admissions, and “soul courses” like City College professor of Jewish history and 1948 Brooklyn College graduate Lloyd Gartner rarely noted such unpleasant truths. Instead he warned readers of the Jewish quarterly *Midstream* that the belligerent newcomers would transform City into

a slum college producing scratchily educated B.A.’s full of resentment against the ‘white power structure’ which kept them out of the American mainstream, against those, such as Jews, who have found a niche in that structure, and against—one can not help adding—Uncle Toms who scorned [their five demands] and became adequately educated and found a fair place in the general society.⁴⁶

Easy access would also degrade the motivation of high school students everywhere. Once in college they would, University of California sociologist Robert Nisbet predicted, “flock to the soft disciplines,” in search of someplace to hide. Well-intentioned remedial courses, once introduced, would worm their way into the colleges’ very structure, he said, establishing a permanent place for themselves at the expense of more advanced material and sowing division—even “hatred”—among the faculty. All of this would undercut the university’s fragile prestige, foster “*invidious* distinctions between the ‘good’ places where you get in only on achievement and the ‘poor’ places that *anyone* can go to,” and weaken alumni and taxpayer support.⁴⁷

INVOKING AN ILLUSTRIOUS PAST

At the same time that such naysayers were predicting this apocalyptic future for City College, its Jewish alumni and older faculty increasingly invoked memories of its glorious past.

⁴⁵ Seymour Hyman, quoted in Council for Basic Education, “Open Admissions: The Pros & Cons,” Symposium, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C., Oct. 29, 1971, 31.

⁴⁶ Lloyd P. Gartner, “The Five Demands at the City College of New York,” *Midstream* 15, no. 8 (October 1969): 18. Gartner soon left City College and, in 1973, emigrated to Israel.

⁴⁷ Robert Nisbet, quoted in Council on Basic Education, Symposium, 51-56; Emphasis in original.

The term “Proletarian Harvard” had first appeared in print in connection with City College in the *New York Times Magazine* in March of 1965 after the school had lost its ability to attract the top students.⁴⁸ City College students were by then the children of unionized plumbers and electricians, not of sweatshop workers or street peddlers.⁴⁹ The real proletarians had been frozen out and were stuck in dead-end vocational programs, dropping out or, if they were lucky, attending two-year community colleges. Comparisons with Harvard were not completely unheard of. In 1947 Stanley Frank (CCNY ’30) had noted that in recent decades the occasional rumor had circulated that “the college had been rated first or second—behind Harvard or Columbia—in a nationwide survey of scholastic achievement,” but, in reality, that no such study had ever been conducted.⁵⁰ City College’s academic stature was then still largely taken for granted, however. People called it “democracy in action,” “the subway college,” and, of course, “the little red schoolhouse.” Those were the things—along with the fact that it was free—that had made City College special.

But 1965, when it was first anointed the beleaguered “Harvard of the Poor,” was the same year the school took higher education’s first stab at affirmative action, the little noticed “pre-baccalaureate” program. As that program morphed into SEEK, and grew larger, more successful, and more threatening to entrenched interests, so too did the re-remembering of a proletarian Harvard. The process was analogous to what happened to the old “Lower East Side,” which didn’t even get its name or geographical boundaries until the postwar era, well after European Jewry had been wiped out and most of the neighborhood’s celebrated residents had

⁴⁸ David Boroff, “A Kind of Proletarian Harvard,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 28, 1965, 29. Boroff was a Brooklyn College graduate and a professor at NYU. The term “poor man’s Harvard” had already been used to describe Indiana’s Valparaiso University during the progressive era and was available, though I suspect that a quote from an unnamed student in the article saying he hadn’t gotten into Harvard and decided he’d rather go to City than some “middling” school may have been an impetus for the *Times* headline.

⁴⁹ Kriegel, 72, 122.

⁵⁰ Stanley Frank, “College Without Frills,” 35.

died off or moved to the Long Island suburbs.⁵¹ Like the Lower East Side, the storied Harvard of the Poor was an invention of the 1960s, a vain attempt to recapture and sacralize something which, if it ever existed at all, had long since passed City College by. As one City College professor put it, albeit in a somewhat different context, “You can afford to be nostalgic about a ghetto only after you have left it.”⁵² The analogy ends, however, where the memories of City College’s illustrious past, unlike those of the old neighborhood, became freighted with policy implications and were strategically deployed.

In the midst of Open Admissions’ very first semester, with nearly two thousand more freshman suddenly clogging City College’s hallways and an atmosphere of utter chaos, a chorus of voices joined in to lament its rapidly accelerating fall from grace. Nationally syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak described the plight of one unnamed student “utterly baffled” by his freshman history textbook because, “too many words are just too long.” “Such a heartrending incident,” they assured their readers “could not have occurred in years past.”⁵³

Champions of open enrollment like longtime City College psychology professor Kenneth Clark, author of the famous doll study upon which the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision turned and, more recently, a leader in the struggle to integrate Harlem’s public schools, responded with memories of their own. Clark told colleagues gathered for the 1971 national symposium on Open Admissions’ first year that the college he remembered:

⁵¹ Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), *passim*.

⁵² Kreigel, “Headstart for College,” 273. Herbert Gans has written that only the successful immigrants get remembered, which is one reason “we can indulge in a romantic view of the old Lower East side and other historic slums,” ignoring what terrible places they really were. See his preface to Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend*.

⁵³ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Crisis at CUNY,” *New York Post*, Dec. 29, 1970, 9. The identical column ran on p. 11 of the *Washington Post* on Christmas Eve under the headline “The Wrecking of a College.” One wonders whether the liberal editors in New York didn’t use their discretion to minimize the attention it would draw.

was a sort of academic examination mill...We had students who were taught, trained, maybe even Skinnerianly trained to make grades. We had tremendous competition. At one time the problem of cheating was so pervasive that we, on the faculty, were required to turn our eyes away and to try to deny that it existed. Potentially bright studs admitted that they subordinated any fundamental concern with meaning, depth of understanding or interpretation to the need to get higher and higher scores on the Graduate Record Exams or the aptitude tests for admission to law and medical schools. This was the basis on which we were defining education at the City College in the forties, the fifties, and the early sixties.⁵⁴

Rather than insisting that Open Admissions students would favorably measure up to those who came before them, Clark lamented the “inbreeding,” corruption of educational values, and paucity of truly outstanding students he’d encountered during his thirty-odd years at the college. The only way to remedy that, he argued, was “by broadening the pool.”⁵⁵

For Clark academic standards were not immutable, not to be fixed in some distant past.

He rejected the tyranny of memory where standards were concerned:

There is no such thing, as far as I can see, as absolute educational standards, and even if there were, this would seem to me to be undesirable... Standards are not things to be maintained but things to be improved upon. Standards...should not be permitted to regress but neither should they be permitted to rigidify...Standards are things that should emerge, evolve, be refined and polished.⁵⁶

Clark contested the memory of universal preparedness by further asserting that, for all their ability on multiple choice tests, fully seventy-five percent of his introductory level students back in the day had required basic remediation with their writing.⁵⁷ And he challenged the characterization of City College’s golden era as having been populated with “highly motivated students all destined to be Jonas Salks, all thoroughly prepared.” Higher education had “always

⁵⁴ Kenneth B. Clark, quoted in Council for Basic Education, Symposium, 46-47.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷ In 1963 an internal memo of the English department reported that twenty-five percent of CCNY undergraduates required such instruction. See Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation*, 54.

been a gamble,” in his book. For “so-called privileged people” the norm had “always been the gentleman’s C.”⁵⁸

The freshman class that entered City College in the fall of 1970 was one thousand students larger than the previous year’s—a fifty-seven percent increase—not even counting a SEEK student population that had tripled in size. The new class was populated with types of students which, with the exception of the tiny SEEK program, the college had never before encountered, and there ensued a mad scramble on the part of administrators, faculty, and—not least of all—students to adapt and rise to the occasion. Those efforts took place amid an atmosphere of chaos and a cacophony of laments and prophecies of doom both within and outside the campus walls.

Largely lost in the din of controversy and recriminations was the unforeseen arrival of far more newly eligible white and heavily Catholic students than blacks and Puerto Ricans—over 10,000 of them system-wide in the first two years alone. While the *proportion* of white students declined, there were more now than ever before and they continued to outnumber minorities everywhere within the university. The number of Jews held steady as well. Far from benefiting one or two groups at the expense of others, Open Admissions turned out to be a boon to nearly everyone. There were even “hidden beneficiaries,” minority students who would have qualified under the old system but only enrolled because they now felt that the university was truly open to them.⁵⁹ For the first time all incoming students were being asked to take standardized tests in reading and math for diagnostic and placement purposes and the results of those tests revealed further ironies, among them that several hundred of the students admitted under the new, relaxed criteria didn’t require any remedial work after all, while over 6,000 regularly admitted students

⁵⁸ Council for Basic Education, Symposium, 26

⁵⁹ Lavin and Hyllegard, 34, 110.

*did.*⁶⁰

'TAKING SLUM YOUTH OFF THE STREET': THE PRESS GETS GOING

For Robert Marshak, the president brought in to replace Gallagher and implement the new admissions policy, the Evans & Novak column of December 1970 that began with the “baffled freshman” and invoked the college’s glorious past was only the first volley in “an incessant barrage of uninformed and in many cases, carping criticism” that dominated his entire nine-year tenure.⁶¹ Focusing exclusively on City College, Evans and Novak had described Open Admissions as a policy whereby anybody with a high school diploma could enter the City University.⁶² While technically accurate, the description conflated the individual college with the entire university system and fomented a misconception prevalent to this day that City College itself was now open to everyone. “Open Admissions for City College was a misnomer from its very inception,” Marshak later wrote, “and [such] widespread and persistent misconceptions..., in and of themselves, produced some of the unfortunate consequences to which its original opponents could point in later years with satisfied vindication.”⁶³

Evans and Novak quoted history professor Howard Adelson, the source of the anecdote about the baffled freshman, to the effect that the college was likely “finished as a learned institution.”⁶⁴ Propagated by the mass media, such predictions had the potential, according to Marshak, to become self-fulfilling prophecies and to encourage other dangerous misconceptions, among them “that CCNY had become the exclusive haven of the poorly prepared student and

⁶⁰ Martin Mayer, “Higher Education for All?” 41. “It is a sobering thought,” writes Mayer, “that in 1970 one-quarter of the entrants to City University who had earned grades of 80 or better in the city’s high schools scored below the national average for twelfth graders on a standardized reading test.”

⁶¹ Robert E. Marshak, *Academic Renewal in the 1970’s: Memoirs of a City College President* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 79-80

⁶² Evans & Novak, “Crisis at CUNY,” 9.

⁶³ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 45.

⁶⁴ Howard Adelson, quoted in Evans & Novak, “Crisis at CUNY,” 9.

was no longer hospitable to the highly qualified one.”⁶⁵ The column hit several notes that would be echoed and reinforced again and again in the coming years: that the policy had been precipitated by “student radicals” who otherwise would have “blown the lid off” the college. It made no mention of plans already approved in Albany to dramatically expand access to the college or of the interventions of Mario Procaccino, Harry Van Arsdale, and a host of other unlikely political actors. And even before professors had handed in their first set of grades under the new policy, the authors questioned whether the goal of “taking slum youth off the street” was worth the cost of “drastically lowered academic standards” as well as millions of tax dollars. They quoted approvingly classics professor Louis Heller’s definition of Open Admissions as “a political device for conferring a college degree without giving a college education.”⁶⁶

By failing to foresee how contentious the whole issue of remediation would become, college officials had inadvertently exacerbated the perception of a great sea change from liberal arts to basic skills. Their decision to count English as a Second Language and the first semester of regular freshman composition as remedial programs, for example, provided critics “unnecessary ammunition.” Forty percent of second-semester remedial students were above the national average, after all, so there was no compelling reason to stigmatize them—though remediation hadn’t carried nearly the same stigma until after the critics got going. In this sense it was, ironically, the college’s high standards that were fueling some of the criticism.⁶⁷

Remediation, the future site of endless contention (as well as the source of cutting edge pedagogy), was portrayed as a gift to students. The grace period, which prevented students from flunking out in their first year, amounted to a “two year free ride.” And the main flaw in the

⁶⁵ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 50.

⁶⁶ Louis G. Heller, quoted in Evans & Novak, “Crisis at CUNY,” 9.

⁶⁷ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 57.

remedial program, Evans & Novak argued, was that it failed to serve an internal gatekeeping function and allowed students to take regular college courses before they were ready, dragging other, more deserving students down with them in the process. Finally, anonymous faculty members cited anonymous death threats and professors beaten up in their classrooms during the “violent spring of 1969” as reasons why more people weren’t speaking out against this exercise in “egalitarianism run wild.”⁶⁸

THE *POST*'S RETICENCE, ETHNIC & IDEOLOGICAL CONFUSION

Washington-based Evans & Novak, two of the country’s most widely read political columnists cultivated what one of their anonymous sources called “an aura of inside information” and subsisted on leaks like Adelson’s and Heller’s, often at the expense of their own credibility.⁶⁹ Since it first appeared in 1963, their column had drifted steadily rightward in its orientation. In New York, Evans & Novak appeared weekly in the famously liberal *Post*, which was undergoing a similar transformation. A paper once parodied with the headline “Cold Wave Hits NY: Jews, Negroes Suffer Most,” a bleeding-heart, liberal tabloid known for its quintessential Jewishness now seemed oddly content to sit back and let a couple of conservative, Washington-based reporters frame the discussion of Open Admissions for a readership that was itself redefining its allegiances to the labor movement, the working poor, ethnic minorities, and the city itself.⁷⁰

In the 1930s the paper had hired Ted Poston, one of the only black staff writers on any mainstream newspaper in the country, and later sent both him and Murray Kempton to the South

⁶⁸ Evans & Novak, “Crisis at CUNY,” 9.

⁶⁹ Jeb Magruder, quoted in Robert D. Novak, *Prince of Darkness: 50 Years of Reporting in Washington* (New York, Crown Publishing Group, 2008), 220.

⁷⁰ Nora Ephron. “Nora Ephron and Pete Hamill reminisce about their days at the *New York Post*.” Video. Online: http://nyuprimarysources.org/library.php?id=8&video_id=505 (accessed Oct. 10, 2010). Ephron says this headline did not ultimately run in the parody published by *Monacle* during the 114-day newspaper strike of 1962-63 because publisher Victor Navasky lost his nerve.

to cover the fledgling Civil Rights Movement before any other New York paper had taken notice of it.⁷¹ The *Post* had stood up to Joseph McCarthy, exposed the “slush fund” that prompted Richard Nixon’s “Checkers Speech,” and more than any other paper in town was unafraid to challenge Robert Moses and Cardinal Spellman’s New York “Powerhouse.” With a team of the some of the most imaginative writers of their generation, during the fifties the *Post* chronicled the transfer of power from New York’s Catholic hierarchy and its allies in Tammany Hall to Jewish business and cultural leaders and the growing affluence of its majority-Jewish readership. It offered what publisher Dorothy Schiff’s biographer Marilyn Nissenson called an updated version of the old Jewish *Forward*’s “Bintel Briefs” to the upwardly mobile children of that publication’s early-twentieth-century immigrant readers.⁷² In 1961 Schiff was facing flagging circulation and “the image of the *Post* as too pro-Negro,” according to former reporter Jack Newfield, a perception “which, she felt, deterred the classier department stores from advertising.”⁷³ Schiff demoted her long-time editor-in-chief James Wechsler and handed day-to-day operations over to the more practical, old-school tabloid journalist, Paul Sann, who had little tolerance for college graduates or big causes.

That move, many say, began the paper’s long slide into blandness and no small amount of ideological confusion. Both the *Post* and its publisher became tentative, reticent about seeming too Jewish, even “prudish.”⁷⁴ After hiring Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan to write a series of articles profiling the city’s different ethnic groups—what would later become

⁷¹ Kempton wore Bermuda shorts at the Emmett Till trial and had to be schooled in Southern etiquette by fellow reporters. Poston profiled the Little Rock Nine and revealed, for example, that 15-year-old Gloria Ray aspired to become an atomic scientist. He later led a team of seven *Post* reporters on a 12-part investigation of what they called Jim Crow in the North. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007, 91, 174, 213-14.

⁷² Marilyn Nissenson, *The Lady Upstairs: Dorothy Schiff and the New York Post* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008) 230-31.

⁷³ Jack Newfield, “Goodbye Dolly: A Reminiscence of the *New York Post*,” *Harper’s*, Sept. 1969, 94.

⁷⁴ Recall the advice column cited earlier about “food rituals” that never mentioned the word “kosher,” for example.

the book *Beyond the Melting Pot*—Schiff backed out of her contract. She also banned the word “abortion” from ever appearing in the paper’s pages; a powerful ten-part series on the subject never mentioned it by name. “Often it seemed that whenever the *Post* came close to the truth it shrank from it,” former reporter Bernard Lefkowitz later wrote. After an advertiser complained about a story discussing how poorly some big businesses were treating their customers, he said, that reporter was “silenced.” “When I covered the black rioting in Philadelphia and reported that the streets were plastered with anti-Jewish graffiti, the story was killed. ‘I don’t want to create antagonism between Jews and blacks,’ Mrs. Schiff told me.”⁷⁵

The newspaper strike of 1962-63 probably should have marked the beginning of the end for the ailing *Post*. It had never achieved the circulation or financial strength of a *Times* or *Daily News* and wasn’t part of a national chain like the *World-Telegram* or two Hearst papers, nor did it belong to a patrician dynasty like the *Herald Tribune*.⁷⁶ Many of its loyal readers were abandoning the city, their interests shifting from the *Post*’s consistently local coverage to suburban employment and shopping hubs in Westchester, northern New Jersey, Southern Connecticut and Long Island, where papers like *Newsday* and the *Bergen Record* were thriving. And many of the Jews and Italians who had been the *Post*’s core readers were leaving the Northeast altogether and resettling in south, especially Florida.⁷⁷

But the paper was doing precious little to cultivate readers who would take their places. In a city with 700,000 Puerto Ricans, the *Post* only had one Spanish-speaking reporter and no one at all based in Queens or the Bronx.⁷⁸ When the liberal mayor put a referendum on the ballot

⁷⁵ Bernard Lefkowitz, “Good-bye to Dolly’s *New York Post*: Did Mother Really Know Best?” *Present Tense* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 58-59.

⁷⁶ A.J. Liebling, “Back,” *New Yorker*, Mar. 16, 1963, 173.

⁷⁷ Nissenson, 390.

⁷⁸ Newfield, “Goodbye Dolly,” 98.

for a Civilian Complaint Review Board to assess claims of police brutality then plaguing minority communities, according to Nissenson,

Nearly ninety percent of Italian Americans in Canarsie, a Democratic stronghold in Brooklyn, rejected Lindsay's board. In Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens, the board got less than one-half the vote. Working and lower-middle-class Jews—many of them loyal readers of the *New York Post*—separated themselves from the liberal gentry in Manhattan. The racial fears that they shared with their mostly Catholic neighbors were stronger than their traditional sense of support for the underdog and concern that prejudice expressed against any group in society would soon be turned against the Jews.

The *Post* supported Lindsay's proposal. Nothing in the paper's subsequent analysis of the vote suggested the Dorothy Schiff or James Weschler recognized that a gulf was emerging between the paper's editorial policy and the political sensibilities of its core readers.⁷⁹

What had bought Schiff time was that after her strike insurance ran out early in 1963, she decided to resign from the publishers association and cut a private deal with the unions. All at once the *Post* was the only daily newspaper on the newsstands in a town used to having seven, a town literally starved for both news and advertising. That won her a 50,000 jump in circulation, a fraction of what it should have been but enough to keep the paper alive. In 1967 the *Post* improbably became the city's only afternoon paper, with nearly triple the circulation it had at the beginning of the decade but remarkably little energy or prospects for renewal.

Like so many other things in New York City, the *Post*'s response to the teachers' strikes over Ocean Hill-Brownsville powerfully shaped everything that was to come after. Initially the paper had sided with its "natural constituency," the mostly Jewish unionized civil servants. Then, with the big strike in '68 the *Post* approached community control, somewhat ambiguously, as "an idea whose time had come" torpedoed be damned. Columnist Murray Kempton forcefully supported the local school board, but education reporter Bernard Bard, who would later cover

⁷⁹ Nissenson, 326.

much of the uprising, negotiations, and changes at City College, favored the union and told Schiff he “believed that the Jewish liberals were being suckered by the black militants” who he felt were anti-Semitic and anti-labor, and he subsequently wrote a letter to the editor opposing Kempton that the paper actually printed.⁸⁰ The *Post* itself declined to take a position on the single most important conflict of the era, something Nissenson points to as a crucial sign of their “failure to engage the outer boroughs and the crisis of liberalism...

While Dorothy Schiff and James Weschler and Paul Sann had been willing to wrestle with the complexities of postwar anticommunist liberalism and to formulate a coherent response to them, they were unable to face the challenges posed by the late sixties and come up with the same zeal.⁸¹

By the decade’s end, in spite of soaring profits the great sportswriter Jimmy Cannon, columnists Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, and Murray Kempton and cartoonist Jules Fieffer had all abandoned what Lefkowitz called “a ghost ship, living on its reputation, without identity or direction.”⁸² In their places appeared the syndicated columns of Drew Pearson, Evans and Novak, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Clayton Fritchey.⁸³ Evan’s and Novak’s 1970 column on “The Wrecking of a College”—its headline softened in the pages of the *New York Post*—was what Robert Marshak later referred to as the first volley in “an incessant barrage of uninformed and in many cases, carping criticism” that came later.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Nissenson, 331-2.

⁸¹ Nissenson, 336-7.

⁸² Lefkowitz, 58.

⁸³ Newfield. “Goodbye Dolly,” 98. Hamill would later return for a time.

⁸⁴ Marshak. *Academic Renewal*, 79-80. The week after it published Evans’s & Novak’s column, the *New York Post* reported that 79.4 percent of the new City College students had a B average or better, compared to 63.4 percent for four-year colleges nationwide. And only 1.6 percent had a C average or below, compared to 7.2 percent nationally. It also cited a new chemistry course as anecdotal evidence that “‘without changing the content, but by changing the packaging,’ the work can be made more understandable to all students—not merely ‘the disadvantaged.’” See Bernard Bard, “CUNY Defends Open Plan,” *New York Post*, Jan. 6, 1971, 2.

‘THE IRRECONCILABLES’: FACULTY BALK IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

Adelson and Heller, two of the professors quoted by Evans & Novak, constituted one half of what Marshak came to call the “quartet of irreconcilables,” a bitter and vocal minority of the faculty critics who, in his view, worked to undermine the Open Admissions experiment from its very outset.⁸⁵ In the space of five years Heller and an English professor named Geoffrey Wagner would both publish book-length works as part of what Marshak described as the “open warfare” that ensued in the wake of the Evans & Novak piece. The books were entitled *The End of Education* and *The Death of the American University: With Special Reference to the City College of New York*. In the latter, Heller wrote in his own defense that he had told Novak that he actually endorsed some form of Open Admissions:

but only if it represented a genuine, properly implemented program, not a fraudulent labeling of a political act...There is nothing wrong or improper in an attempt by an educational institution to educate students who require additional help. What is improper, however, is the fraud implicit in overt and covert attempts to suggest that the level of work at the institution is as high as (or higher than) before.”⁸⁶

Early on, Heller had warned that if Open Admissions were enacted without the appropriation of adequate funds to accommodate the increased demand, “the *lack* of money could be—and probably would be—used as a pretext for abolishing both the *free* Open Admissions policy itself and, worse yet, the [century-old] free-tuition policy of the City University.”⁸⁷ Both of these outcomes did indeed come to pass, but they were almost certainly hastened—if not occasioned—by critics like Heller himself.

⁸⁵ The other two were English professor Geoffrey Wagner and history professor Stanley Page. See Robert E. Marshak, *Academic Renewal in the Seventies: Memoirs of a City College President*, (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1980), 143. This earlier, unpublished edition of Marshak’s memoir includes the names of adversaries removed from subsequent articles and editions.

⁸⁶ Louis G. Heller, *The Death of the American University: With Special Reference to the Collapse of the City College of New York* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973), 87, 194.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 94.

What he and other members of the quartet objected to most and what seemed to have colored their ongoing assessments was Gallagher's failure to bring in the police during the campus takeover, which they felt stemmed from a misplaced notion—shared by student radicals and administrators alike—of the college as some kind of sanctuary, “a holdover from a medieval struggle between university and secular authorities...Unless one saw City College as a religion or a church, however, the application of the sanctuary hardly applied here.”⁸⁸ The administration's hands-off attitude had emboldened elements hell bent on destroying the institution and everything it stood for and made possible a wave of violence and a pattern of obscenity and uncivil discourse that destroyed “centuries of tradition” and rendered sound educational policymaking impossible.

Heller's declension narrative began with a recap of dramatic images of the worst violence of 1969: a lone professor going to the aid of a colleague being wrestled to the ground by “seven black militants” who “kicked and stomped him evidently with every intention of killing him,” the “brave young Greek student who leaped in” to save him; another professor, “a slender, pleasant woman teaching German to a few girls” who together with her students was mercilessly sprayed with a fire extinguisher and forced to cower behind an iron door; and a survivor of Nazi Germany pitched headfirst down the subway stairs by “bearded hippie-clad SDS whites.”⁸⁹

The violence was not only physical, however. Heller described how, during the takeover, “revolutionists” silenced Gallagher before hundreds of stunned faculty members—“many scholars of international reputation”—: “Go fuck yourself,” their leader allegedly told him as he moved to speak. “You cock sucking mother fucking bastard.”

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 21, 29.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 17-19

This was the Great Hall, pressed into service in recent years for registration, but oft times the scene of solemn academic ceremony or scholarly activity. From the very same podium senators, governors, mayors, Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners, philosophers, physicists—distinguished men of every type—had spoken. Now a very belligerent “student” stood there—mouthing obscenities...The Great Hall had abruptly ceased being part of civilization.⁹⁰

For Heller and his fellow irreconcilables, the university was also a sanctuary, the site of a particular set of sacred ceremonies and rituals, as well as the particular type of discourse they embodied. As far as they were concerned, Open Admissions had been discredited from its inception because it was the ransom paid to resolve a hostage crisis. “The justness, the humane spirit, and the lofty ideals” that various administrators hailed about the policy had largely eluded them, he pointed out, “until buildings were burned and the individual board members, not to mention administrators and faculty, had been threatened with death.” Heller also had a strong attachment to the City College of his own undergraduate days, he’d met his wife in a classroom there and that’s where they sent their oldest son.⁹¹ “Heller loves his college,” the critic Peter Sourian observed, “and the change hurts.”⁹²

Like Heller, many professors were deeply attached to the college as they remembered it and to the particular promise that it had offered, and they had trouble getting past what they saw as a demonstration of profound disrespect for academic traditions and norms. But far more were apprehensive—resentful even—about the lack of planning. Rather than implementing the policy in stages over a period of five years as originally proposed, they felt the whole thing had been foisted on them all at once—“shoved down their throats,” as Nathan Glazer put it—virtually

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 100-101. Prof. Geoffrey Wagner would later recount a joke that circulated at the time: “What does a venerable senior Full Professor call a Black Freshperson who insists on addressing him, ‘You motherfucker’?” “He calls him Sir.” See Geoffrey Wagner, *The End of Education* (South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1976), 246.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 50, 88

⁹² Peter Sourian, “A Pilgrim’s Progress,” *The Nation*, Feb. 12, 1973, 209.

guaranteeing a disaster if not a complete failure.⁹³ Other, more mundane factors discouraged faculty members from embracing change as well. Few of them had ever been trained or were remotely suited to take something like this on, for instance. And academic culture nationwide was increasingly emphasizing research, with allegiances shifting from one's institution to one's field of investigation, even as City College seemed to be asking them to suddenly redefine themselves as teachers in the trenches, doing some of the most grueling and often thankless work imaginable.

⁹³ Glazer, "City College," 91.

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3. ROLE-PLAYING

If faculty members were being called upon to remake their professional identities and administrators were forced to rethink the college's core mission, Open Admissions students were themselves taking on unfamiliar roles. In the crucible of New York City's fiscal crisis and growing attacks on program budgets, staffing, and the college's new constituencies, the new students felt increasing pressure to justify their presence on the campus, to establish their own worthiness, and defend their tenuous franchise. Throughout the early 1970s they heard bad things being said about them in the media, watched the programs recently set up to help them succeed progressively scaled back and their teachers and counselors laid off. Finally, in 1976, they had tuition charges imposed on them for the first time in the college's 129-year history. Some responded by defying popular stereotypes, others by acting the part of the poverty-stricken slum youth miraculously transformed by their experiences in the academy. Professors, too, alternately trumpeted the changes that were taking place around them and tried to play them down. They sought out a variety of audiences and adopted different personas and strategies that often said more about how they thought they were being perceived than who they actually were or what the *real* experience of Open Admissions—if such a thing even existed—was like.

'I KNOW YOU. MY MOTHER PUT WAX ON YOUR FLOORS'

Even before 1970, when the new policy took effect, a kind of role-playing and spokespersonship for the non-traditional student had already begun to take shape at City College. More than a year before the uprising, in fact, Leonard Kriegel described a 1967 weekend retreat for SEEK students, faculty, and staff in which one student panelist looked out over an audience of mostly white teachers and administrators. "I know you," she proclaimed. "My mother put wax

on your floors.”

“Listening to these students,” wrote Kriegel, “I had the very uncomfortable feeling that, however unconsciously, they were beginning to perform a collective role that had somehow been mapped out for them.”⁹⁴ That role was shaped, at least in part, by the expectations and desires of the audience. “Educating blacks could always be looked at as revolutionary,” Kriegel later observed. “There was little glamour, however, in educating the sons and daughters of [white] brick layers and construction workers—those bastions of middle-class paranoia. That was simply busy work.”⁹⁵ What he declined to mention was his conversation with the same student after the panel in which she privately acknowledged that her mother was a teacher and her father a supervisor in the post office. “My father sliced lox in the supermarket,” said Kriegel:

And we didn’t have anybody to wash the...floors; my mother washed the floors. And I’m listening to this bullshit, and yet I understood. I mean it was very profitable for this girl to do this and it was a very natural role. And I think if I were in her shoes I probably would have done that, too. It was her version of having polio and fantasizing about being a baseball player and it made a certain amount of sense to me. I didn’t like it but all of these kids were playing roles and some of them were playing roles out of terror...We all functioned in terms of the myths that had been passed on to us.⁹⁶

That student had likely learned to function in the bosom of the SEEK program, the Onyx Society, or perhaps during late-night rap sessions in a “dorm room” on one of the City College floors of the drug-infested Alamac Hotel. Just as the SEEK instructors and counselors had come to see themselves as an educational vanguard, so, too, would the students of the Open Admissions era continue to forge their own institutions and modes of discourse and to make use

⁹⁴ Kriegel, “Headstart for College,” 272-3.

⁹⁵ Kriegel, *Working Through*, 116.

⁹⁶ Leonard Kriegel, interview with author, Feb. 22, 2010. Kriegel was permanently crippled with polio at the age of eleven and lived for many years under the childhood delusion that he would someday grow up to play in the Major Leagues. See Leonard Kriegel, *Notes for the Two-dollar Window* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1976).

of newly created platforms to try on different personas and make larger points about the meaning of City College in their own lives.

THE STUDENT NEWSPAPER AS A VEHICLE FOR SELF-REINVENTION

Louis Reyes Rivera (CCNY '73) had been an Alamac resident and bit player in the 1969 uprising. By the fall many of the student leaders had graduated, burned out, or moved on to other struggles. Rivera, who had come there to teach himself how to be a writer, decided it was high time to focus in on that goal. He had met Paul Simms, a writer for the weekly newspaper of the engineering students, *Tech News*, during the previous spring's takeover of the Finley Student Center when he had drifted into the open door of the newspaper's offices and found Simms, the paper's only black reporter, working there. He introduced himself and the two had engaged in a series of conversations. Now Rivera went into those same offices and, though a sociology and English major, asked to join the staff. They welcomed him aboard and invited him to the weekly editorial meeting the following Thursday. From there he went down to the cafeteria where he saw Simms having coffee and proudly announced that he had just joined the staff.

[Simms] says, 'Well then you sit your behind down.' And there we began conspiring: Between the two of us we could get enough black students—and some Puerto Rican students—to want to join the newspaper. He could attract the moderate to progressive. I can attract the radicals.⁹⁷

By December the two had already recruited thirty new staff members of color and were “on the verge...of becoming the dominant force in *Tech News*.”⁹⁸

At first the whites resisted, but they soon gave ground because many were interested in starting a paper of their own dedicated to the beleaguered state of Israel. According to Rivera,

They had enough honor about them that they didn't want to turn *Tech News* into a Zionist newspaper, but they knew they needed one, so they took their skills and

⁹⁷ Louis Reyes Rivera, Interview with author, Feb. 18, 2010.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

left. The ones who were not interested in that kind of stuff stayed with us until they graduated and they didn't object.⁹⁹

Rivera described *Tech News* as “a dying newspaper that knows it's dying.” None of the other student publications at City College could have sustained such a rapid influx, he felt. The radical whites who controlled *The Observation Post* “were part of that flower power mentality,” he said, “fucking everything that moved and acid dropping. We weren't into that... Their radicalness was not the same as ours.” At the other extreme, the student journalists at the mainstream paper *The Campus*, also financed by student fees, were “starched and stiff-necked:

You couldn't even talk to them about joining nothing. They would take your name on a card 'cause it's the law—no discrimination—and ‘We'll get in touch with you.’ Whatever you hand them as a story they're not going to run it. They're not even going to read it. They'll say, “It's unacceptable. Doesn't meet our standards.”... [But] them folks in *Tech News*, they ain't got no beef with you. You want to join? They're right there. You want to do something? They'll help you. But you've got to go through their process. You accept an assignment. You cover the assignment. You file your story. It gets edited. Was there photography attached to it? You've got to produce that, too.¹⁰⁰

At twenty-five, Rivera was older than many of his fellow staffers and before college had already worked as a copy boy for the Jewish News Service and Associated Press. As editor of a publication redesigned to serve students of African descent and re-christened *The Paper*, he took special pride in playing a leadership role and passing his skills on to other minority students. For Rivera, college was “where the secrets are.” He had come there to avail himself of those secrets, which he saw as his “inheritance,” and to equip himself for his chosen profession, and he had no interest in being relegated to the role of the acolyte or the passive beneficiary of some entitlement program. When the young poet Robert Feaster, who'd been on the South Campus barricades alongside him, came with a sixteen-page article he'd written for the paper's centerfold

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

section about the approaches and philosophies of different drug rehabilitation programs, Rivera told him, “No problem, but we’ve got to go through this process.”

“I already wrote it. I already edited it,” said Feaster who knew firsthand about heroin addiction and rehabilitation, if not journalism.

“No you didn’t,” Rivera told him.

“I worked that bad boy from past sixteen [pages] to barely twelve,” said Rivera. “He was not at all dissatisfied. And from then on every time he had an article that he wanted me to publish he’d bring it directly to me first and we’d sit down and go over it together.”¹⁰¹ Rivera showed Feaster, who later changed his name to Sekou Sundiata and became a well-known poet and performer, as well as many others what he called the “peculiarities” of journalism. He defined himself and his peers as their professors’ equals, people independently using the college’s resources to educate themselves and one another. The year before he graduated, on City College’s 125th anniversary, the administration validated this new identity, awarding him a special medal, the citation for which read, “for recognized efforts to train a whole new cadre of student journalists.”¹⁰²

P.J. RONDINONE’S JOURNEY FROM ‘GUTTER RAT’ TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

Rivera was not alone in seeking out a platform from which to project a particular image of himself and his Open Admissions compatriots and to engage in debates over remediation, third world studies, and other issues occasioned by their arrival on the campus. Peter Rondinone (CCNY ’77) came from a poor white family in the Bronx to City College in 1972—part of the third cohort of Open Admissions students—with a history of childhood abuse and gang violence and the vague ambition of becoming a dentist. He later signed up for a course called “The

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

Writer and the City” and decided to switch majors from dentistry to creative writing. Rondinone joined the staff of *The Campus* where the editors passed his first story around until one of them finally said, “This isn’t even English,” and handed it to someone to rewrite before publishing it—albeit under Rondinone’s byline. When he discovered the New Journalism and first person, however, *The Campus* drew the line and refused to publish his stuff any longer.

But in spite of his bad grammar, Rondinone was able to join *The Observation Post*, a competing paper created by returning WWII veterans that had since morphed into a free-form, sixties counterculture publication, and to get his first story on a proposed beer hall printed on page one. He was at once promoted to assistant editor. “What they didn’t know,” Rondinone wrote:

was that the article had been completely rewritten by the features editor. And the features editor had faith in me so he never told. He did my share of the work and I kept the title. As he put it, ‘You’ll learn by hanging around and watching. You show talent. You might even get published professionally in 25 years!’ Another thing they didn’t know—I still hadn’t passed my basic English proficiency exam.¹⁰³

While Rondinone was still struggling with his basic skills, in other words, he was also being permitted to pursue the interests of a sophisticated young adult, taking literature courses and writing for campus publications. His peers and professors were, at times, picking up the slack and even looking the other way, but a rich learning process was underway nonetheless. “I knew I lacked basic college skills,” Rondinone freely conceded. “I was handicapped. I was a man reporting for work without his tools.”¹⁰⁴

Rondinone’s experience as a student journalist was remarkably similar to that of Louis Reyes Rivera’s. He met Tony, a younger writer for *The Campus* also from an Italian American

¹⁰³ Rondinone, “Open Admissions and the Inward ‘I,’” 46.

¹⁰⁴ Peter J. Rondinone, “Getting Up and Out,” *New York Times*. Nov. 20, 1976, 19.

family in the Bronx, but its tonier Riverdale section. Tony had strong opinions about why what Rondinone was doing wasn't really journalism. At eighteen, he was already a stringer for the *New York Times* with ambitions of becoming the next A.M. Rosenthal. The two first encountered each other in a class on Canadian literature (which Tony was auditing for no credit) and like Rivera and *Tech News* editor Paul Simms before them, they began plotting a coup in the cafeteria. Tony elaborated a plan whereby Rondinone would quietly promise *Observation Post* staffers perks and advancement in exchange for their votes in an upcoming election for editor-in-chief. Together the two of them would then make the radical hippie newspaper respectable again, "something to be proud of" and pave the way to futures in the mainstream media. Rondinone could be editor, so long as he let the younger Tony have his turn. In exchange he'd do what he could to pass on to him his slot as a *New York Times* stringer. "Now that put a big buzz in my head," Rondinone later remembered:

Me, the gutter rat, working for the *New York Times*? And there was a bonus, Tony said. He promised to act as my personal tutor. He'd show me how to write regular news features, in case I wanted his job. He had nothing against my creativity, he just wanted me to be more reasonable, more intelligent, and tackle some real issues.¹⁰⁵

With Tony's guidance, Rondinone held out similar promises to many of his potential supporters. At times he dangled the prospect of paying work for the *Times*, at others he asked whether they really wanted to have their names associated with a paper that printed "Kill the Pig" writing contests. The plan worked, at least insofar as they succeeded in wresting control of the paper from the current regime, tearing down all the acid rock posters and painting over the

¹⁰⁵ Peter Rondinone, "Autobiography of a Learner: A Memoir and Metatext," Section II, "The Memoir," PhD diss., New York University, 2002, 218-220.

graffiti in the office with a “cool green.”¹⁰⁶

Besides self-interest and peer support, Rondinone and his *Observation Post* colleagues also had the camaraderie and sense of purpose that came with fighting for a cause. College resources and staff had been declining for some time before a one-two punch effectively put an end to the Open Admissions experiment. In December 1975, with the State threatening to seize control of the entire system, CUNY officials had cut \$54.6 million from their budget and instituted an entrance exam anticipated to bar some 10,000 previously eligible freshman from enrolling in the fall. Then in May they had been forced to shut down the entire university for lack of funds and to impose tuition beginning in the September. Several thousand students failed to show up for fall classes at City College alone. Budgets continued to be slashed and faculty laid off, and as one of their first official acts Rondinone and his newspaper colleagues drafted a front-page editorial supporting the University Senate’s call for a three-day general strike. “It felt good to see that our words would lead to political action,” he later wrote:

It felt good to use words to inspire others to such a lofty endeavor, the struggle to preserve the education that made it possible for many of us to find such words inside us, to understand how these words worked, and how to organize them. Our writing skills would help us mobilize hundreds of young people to take to the Harlem streets with bullhorns and placards, whites and Blacks, arm in arm with various political coalitions...¹⁰⁷

At the prompting of a drama professor and mentor, Rondinone then went to work writing a personal account of his own experiences with Open Admissions. Tony helped him work through several drafts and develop a regular column chronicling the death of Open Admissions. He also put Rondinone in touch with a *Times* editor who needed students to work the phones for a series of polls about the 1976 presidential election. Rondinone would regularly leave copies of

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* Rondinone himself graduated from “writing essays and term papers for cheating students” for cash to pursuing a journalism minor and working part time as a copy editor at an encyclopedia company.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 222.

Observation Post on his supervisor's desk, and that was how he came to write about being "a man reporting to work without his tools" on the Op-Ed page of arguably the most powerful newspaper in the world.

OPEN ADMISSIONS GETS A POSTER BOY

"Getting Up and Out" appeared in the *New York Times* on November 20, 1976, and though it did little to salvage the program, Rondinone's was the first article to show up in a mainstream publication in which an actual Open Admissions student stood up to those who questioned his right to be there. In it he juxtaposed his own ghetto upbringing, gang activity, and empty future with the second chance City College afforded him. He described how he had frittered his adolescence away "smoking grass" on the steps of his high school, took the CUNY placement exam stoned on barbiturates, and then, once admitted, took advantage of the intensive remediation offered him and started requesting extra assignments to help him catch up. "Now that Open Admissions is all but eliminated," he wrote, "I realize how fortunate I was."¹⁰⁸

If there is one thing that distinguished Rondinone's narrative, however, and that defined him as an Open Admissions student it was his desperate struggle to find a new language, to communicate. He kicked off the article discussing his limited, wise-guy vocabulary. His hapless beginnings and the fluke of history that landed him in college only led to his spending weeks at a time writing papers that were then handed back to him with the cryptic and dispiriting admonition, "Try to say what you really mean." The social opprobrium he experienced later became manifest when a TV journalist visited the campus with a camera crew and, speaking to some student editors, announced that "I was down at the Writing Center today. Those kids are

¹⁰⁸ Rondinone, "Getting Up and Out," 19.

animals. They can't write."¹⁰⁹

In Rondonone's account, as the students nodded in disgust, he emerged from the shadows and erupted in anger. "Hey, you! Do I look like an animal to you?" he yelled. "Who do you think you are? Those kids you're talking about are not only willing to learn but they are capable. I've seen a number of them go on to write some beautiful essays and stories, you stupid jerk!" It was only in the act of confronting those who would deny him a voice that Rondonone's cowed working class hero finally found one. He ended the article by acknowledging that the party was now over: "I was one of those few individuals given a chance during a unique period in the history of American education to get a college education," he wrote. "And I did." Only by a new generation of students speaking similar truths to power, he asserted, could that proud history ever hope to be repeated.

Rondonone's *New York Times* piece was notable for the way it incorporated so many of the key elements of the pro-Open Admissions testimonials that preceded it: the underclass imagery, the contemptuous outsider critic, the self-satisfied, privileged students and faculty—throwbacks to an earlier era, the preoccupation with language, its conquest and use as a weapon, and finally the revenge fantasy. I say fantasy, because, though a *60 Minutes* crew did, indeed, visit City College in 1975 and produce a harsh and simplistic account of semi-literate students there that aired on national television,¹¹⁰ the encounter Rondonone described never actually took place, as he himself would later admit.¹¹¹ In his *New York Times* article, he, too, was playing the role he thought he'd been assigned, pandering to a certain set of perceived expectations, if not

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *60 Minutes*, "College for Everyone," prod. by Philip Scheffler, (transcript) vol. 7: no. 14 (originally aired Apr. 20, 1975) CBS News.

¹¹¹ Rondonone. "Autobiography of a Learner," Section III "Metatext," 71-72. If he wasn't called on it at the time, perhaps it was because the *Times* piece neglected to identify CBS New reporter Safer or *Sixty Minutes* by name, though an expanded version published in *Change* magazine six months later did. See Rondonone, "Open Admissions and the Inward I," 47.

out of terror then certainly out of insecurity.

USEFUL FICTIONS: ASSAILING THE ESTABLISHMENT CRITICS

The image of Rondinone and City College that emerged from the string of articles he wrote for the student press, the *New York Times*, professional higher education journals—even an unpublished, book-length memoir twenty-five years after his fifteen minutes of fame expired—was as revealing for what it embellished and left out as for any of its individual claims.¹¹² For all his Hunter S. Thompson-like bravado, from the beginning Rondinone was obsessed with the legitimacy and scorn alternately conferred on City College by pillars of the establishment from Columbia University and *The Campus* to *CBS News* and the *New York Times*. Again and again his stories came back to the question of what other people were saying about him and his fellow Open Admissions students.

Less than three weeks after the *Times* story appeared, Rondinone published a longer piece on the cover of *The Observation Post*'s new magazine section entitled “Open Admission Students are Not Dummies.” Illustrated with a huge photograph of Columbia University’s Low Library, the story was equal parts travel writing, book review, and dream journal, a Gonzo journalist’s drug-addled odyssey through the watering holes of the Ivy League and the academic literature on Open Admissions to find out what *they* really thought of us.¹¹³ Rondinone’s multiple trips to Columbia were presented as though it were he who had gone slumming: students with “curly blond” hair and “rosy cheeks” dressed in “penny loafers” and “sport jackets” looked on while a black girl danced on the table “sweat dripping from her [exposed] nipples.” “It’s bizarre,” Rondinone’s friend told him. “This never happens at City.” At the next

¹¹² Rondinone’s first endeavor was a piece in *The Observation Post* entitled “On Being an Open Admissions Student.”

¹¹³ Rondinone credits the influence of Hunter S. Thompson tk

table eight guys in tuxedos were smoking cigars and playing seven-card stud. “This can’t be real,” Rondinone quoted himself says, and one strongly suspects it wasn’t. He appeared to be treating his readers to a literary projection of how the collegiate other half lived so as to discredit their views of him and his City College classmates before they could even open their mouths.

In the same account a female psychology major met with Rondinone some days later to trash the other Columbia girls who she said were only there to spend their parents’ money at Bonwit Teller and snag husbands in the medical library. “I don’t think much about your school,” a student in the cafeteria volunteered when he learned that Rondinone was from City College. “Except that any moron can get in. And people take remedial courses at the doctoral level...When your (sic) at Columbia, you’re on (sic) the major leagues—CCNY is the sandlots.”¹¹⁴

This attitude toward City’s establishment critics wasn’t confined to the Ivy League. In a subsequent piece, Rondinone let loose on City’s own Professor Geoffrey Wagner, who had just published his jeremiad, *The End of Education*, a noxious book that characterized Open Admissions students as “dunces,” “sleeping beauties,” and “Joe Blows” yawning in the back row of the classroom, a book that Rondinone said “will surely give people in Peoria Indiana (sic) a warped view of who we are.”¹¹⁵ Wagner responded by dispatching a positive review of his book (by a fellow member of his own department) published in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* with the following handwritten note: “*Dick*. Perhaps you would be so kind as to pass this one on to the

¹¹⁴ P.J. Rondinone. “Open Admission Students Are Not Dummies,” *The Observation Post Magazine* 1, no. 4 (Dec. 10, 1976):1A, 4A.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 4A.

ineffable (& unlovely) RONDINONE, with my compliments—*if he can read!* Best, *Geoffrey*”¹¹⁶

Rondinone, in turn, pointed out that Wagner ought to have been familiar with his reading level since he had given him an ‘A’ in his Writing for the Humanities course. He questioned the need of a senior professor to sink to such depths.¹¹⁷

Even some of the City College students were apparently not above such low blows. In yet another article Rondinone described arriving on the campus for his very first class with a map and asking a student directions. “Can’t you read?” the student replied, pointing to the sign over the door. As he walked away Rondinone heard one of the students’ friends say, “What do you expect from Open Admissions?”¹¹⁸ Leaving aside the too-perfect-by-half narrative elegance of such a thing happening to him upon arrival, based on my knowledge of the period and on my firsthand experience of City College students of a later era, I do not find the latter incident the least bit credible. Nor do I consider it a coincidence that he used it only in a publication for professional educators but omitted it from pieces in both the student and mainstream press.

Rondinone was, after all, a budding playwright and creative writing major bound for the Master of Fine Arts program. His *New York Times* piece had catapulted him briefly into the role of crusader and national spokesman. All at once, he was being invited not just to write for the student press but also to appear on William F. Buckley, Jr.’s *Firing Line*, to publish extended versions of his essay in higher education journals, and to accompany administrators downtown on fundraising expeditions. Many years later, in an extended “literacy narrative” he would acknowledge how deeply he was affected by the use of his South Bronx neighborhood as a

¹¹⁶ Geoffrey Wagner, Handwritten note and newspaper clipping, reprinted in *The Observation Post*, Feb. 26, 1977, 7; Emphasis in original. See also Robert K. Morris, “When everybody’s somebody...” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Jan. 29-30, 1977, 7.

¹¹⁷ P.J. Rondinone, “EXTRA! Student to duel Professor,” *The Observation Post*, Feb. 26, 1977, 7.

¹¹⁸ Rondinone, “Open Admissions and the Inward ‘I’,” 45.

national symbol of urban decay and lawlessness and the ruthless way the Open Admissions experiment in which he participated at City College had been caricatured and undermined. In the face of all that, Rondinone felt constrained to all at once play into and defy those stereotypes. He underlined the brief periods when his family was on welfare and couldn't afford to buy him shoes, for example, and foregrounded his poor grades in high school even as he obscured the fact that he had once spent two years in a magnet program for intellectually gifted junior high school students and was playing the violin and reading at the college level by the sixth grade. That his immigrant father, in spite of being a high-school dropout, had a career in a hospital laboratory testing urine samples never made it into any of his contemporaneous accounts either. But his father selling Christmas lights door to door and operating a hot dog stand did. "I wanted my story to represent the average, underprepared college student," Rondinone later explained:

I felt that my story would be more powerful and politically effective if it suggested that all under prepared students could succeed in CUNY if only open admissions were available. At this time (1977), after a very brief trial, open admissions at four-year schools were already being phased out. When I was 23 years old, that's what I wanted my story to be—the story of the generic open admissions student...back then, I really thought I could speak for others.¹¹⁹

This notion of speaking for others is one he employed—many years later—to justify fabricating his confrontation with the *60 Minutes* crew. A group of students he knew claimed to have witnessed such comments being made and seemed to Rondinone to have been profoundly upset by the incident. He was merely assuming a collective voice, he said, to express the experiences and grievances of an entire class of people to which he belonged, a time-honored strategy employed by oppressed luminaries from Richard Wright to Rigoberta Menchú.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Rondinone 2002. Section III "Metatext," 70.

¹²⁰ Rondinone cites Wright's *Black Boy* as evidence of both lies of commission and omission. (ibid., 72) The Guatemalan Nobel Prizewinner Rigoberta Menchú would compose, in collaboration with a professional writer, her testimonial novel in the early 1980s, and when it emerged, many years later, that several key incidents had not, in

Rondinone felt a compulsion to embody the hardships and the ideal of a particular kind of archetype as well as to mask key things about himself and his own experience. His fixation on the slights and recognition—both real and imagined—of people and institutions he perceived to be critical of City College only served to fuel that compulsion.¹²¹

‘THE WORST THING WE DID WAS TO LIE ABOUT IT’

Students like Rondinone were scarcely the only ones to stretch the truth. Because of the relentless assaults on the college and its reputation, and because of its vulnerability to the vicissitudes of public opinion and the budget ax, defenders of Open Admissions had to walk a fine line between asserting that the institution was not changing in its essential contours and hinting that perhaps it was high time that it did. Prof. Leonard Kriegel was “enraged” at the press coverage and critics like Evans and Novak—not the least because on some level he felt they may have had a point. But like Rondinone he didn’t feel he could afford to give them any more ammunition:

I knew, having taught in SEEK, I knew that these kids weren’t going to be the same kind of City College kids we were used to and they weren’t going to be as good. They weren’t going to be as intellectually curious. They were going to be different. And that it was going to be a lot tougher. I knew that. I knew in some ways [the critics] were right and that angered me even more. It was necessary that the college do this. I was necessary that New York do it. And yet probably the

fact, happened to her it prompted a fervent international debate over the ethics of and cultural assumptions about using composite characters, events, and recreating dialogue in non-fiction. The New Journalism was itself famous for leaps of imagination and employing the tools of fiction. Curiously, Rondinone seems never to have come terms with this. Though he justifies the practice, he claims to have preserved the account of the *60 Minutes* incident in his memoir, when, in fact, he has mysteriously excised it even from the putatively reprinted *New York Times* article, as though at times one hand doesn’t know what the other is doing. See Rondinone, “Memoir of a Learner,” Section III, “The Metatext,” 71 and Section II, “The Memoir,” 226-27.

¹²¹ There is much else of value in Rondinone’s 2002 memoir about his City College speech classes and fencing lessons, for instance, about the different professors who took him under their wings and paid for him to get glasses and have his teeth fixed (and occasionally patronized him), not to mention about the complex interplay between his home and academic cultures and his magical encounter with Mina Shaughnessy.

worst thing we did was to lie about it and pretend that nothing had changed, and it had changed.¹²²

Kriegel and his English department colleague Ed Quinn had emerged as minor spokesmen for Open Admissions themselves publishing articles and books and appearing on television with Rondinone and debating “irreconcilable” Geoffrey Wagner. Asked whether he had lied to himself, Kriegel said he had not: “I knew it was politically necessary,” he said. “And I knew what side I was on.”¹²³

¹²² Kriegel, interview with author.

¹²³ *ibid.*

4. MINA SHAUGHNESSY: THE CLASSROOM V. THE SOAPBOX

Another figure who spoke loudly and eloquently on behalf of the Open Admissions students and their “remedial” teachers—albeit in a somewhat different register—was Mina Shaughnessy. A stunningly beautiful woman and an appealing and effective speaker with a moral authority that was legend, Shaughnessy was almost universally revered by her colleagues.¹²⁴ And yet her public appearances and published work was confined to scholarly journals, professional conferences, and the internal debates within the university itself. Though addresses she made to gatherings of colleagues were widely reprinted and even, on one occasion, entered into the *Congressional Record*, Shaughnessy never published so much as a letter to the editor in any mainstream publication. Nor did she give interviews or appear on television. Nonetheless, Leslie Berger, who shepherded the SEEK program into being a decade earlier, called her “the most successful advocate Open Admissions ever had.”¹²⁵ By Berger’s as well as other accounts, Shaughnessy remained largely above the ideological fray.

She would never get into a struggle or an argument. Even the elitists on campus didn’t tangle with Mina directly—she somehow managed, with her appearance and her demeanor, to rise above the petty behavior that so many people were engaging in at that time.¹²⁶

It was Shaughnessy’s single-minded interest in her students that seemed to allow her to do this:

During our staff meetings she would force us to concentrate on the problems of teaching these students. From her point of view, they were the beginning and the end of academic responsibility and purpose. Whenever any of us turned away from these problems to speculate on the meaning of the program, she would gently but forcibly bring us back to our students... She had little patience with

¹²⁴ Allen Ballard, interview with author, May 21, 2010.

¹²⁵ Leslie Berger, quoted in Maher, 95.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 103.

political rhetoric but she had great tolerance and an enormous feeling for the SEEK students.¹²⁷

In the midst of the 1969 uprising Shaughnessy refused to cancel classes unless her students literally couldn't get onto the campus. "Mina had decided that she would practice her 'politics' in the classroom," one of those students later recalled, "not on a soapbox."

She told us that she was providing the SEEK students with the tools to think, to write and that was the greatest contribution she could make. From anyone else perhaps that would have been hard to take, maybe even impossible, but there wasn't a black or Puerto Rican student on that campus who didn't know that it was Mina Shaughnessy who fought hardest for the SEEK students. In fact, when some of the buildings were occupied the students did a lot of damage in some offices, but not in Mina's. She was the best thing that ever happened to us, and everyone of us knew it.¹²⁸

It would scarcely be accurate, however, to suggest that Shaughnessy was burying herself in her work and turning a blind eye to the harsh political realities that increasingly engulfed her and her staff and students as soon as the Open Admissions policy was implemented. Rather, her choices of audience, message, and tone were entirely strategic. As early as January 1972 she wrote in the English Department newsletter of "the soothsayers within and outside the college [who] continue to invent statistics to fit their cataclysms.

To answer them is pointless. There are no dependable statistics on Open Admissions yet. Even the end-of-semester body counts are meaningless, for they make no distinction among students who transfer, drop out for personal reasons, or actually fail the work itself. Furthermore, no one has decided what success should look like under Open Admissions. What indicators can we devise that will measure self-esteem? How will we chart the routes these young men and women take as they begin to experience the luxury of making choices?¹²⁹

The following year, in the article that would launch her onto the national stage, she

¹²⁷ Leonard Kriegel, *Working Through*, 172.

¹²⁸ Jean Campbell, quoted in Maher, 114.

¹²⁹ Mina Shaughnessy, "Second Report on Open Admissions," *English Department Newsletter*, New York: City College of New York, Jan. 1972, 5-8, quoted in Maher, 138.

conceded that Open Admissions appeared to be “doomed” by a “literature of pessimism” and “theology of despair,” the debate surrounding it having been framed “in the language of those who oppose it: in the alphabet of numbers, the syntax of print-outs, the transformations of graphs and tables...messages [then] proliferated through the media and made available to the policy makers, who dip into the reservoir for the numbers they need.” In the face of this tyranny of cynical bean counters and impoverished social science, she called upon her colleagues to formulate new criteria—a whole new language really—for assessing their students’ fitful progress through wholly uncharted educational territory.

‘A SPECIAL FRATERNITY’

This was not a matter of putting a positive spin on her students’ dire prospects for quantifiable short-term success and academic competitiveness—quite the contrary. For Shaughnessy, “the first stage of Open Admissions involves *openly admitting* that education has failed for too many students.”¹³⁰ Her next step was to immerse herself in the minutiae of over 4,000 student essays, placement exams, and writing samples and to tease out patterns in the errors made by beginning writers from similar educational and language backgrounds. Almost as an archaeologist might, she began to dig for the often-sophisticated meanings that lurked just beneath the surface. From there she was able to propose groundbreaking methods of both diagnosing students’ difficulties with formal written language and critical thought processes and for helping them to overcome those difficulties.

Shaughnessy’s 1977 book, *Errors and Expectations*, modestly subtitled *A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, instantly became a classic of modern composition theory. Underlying its technical analyses and strategies, noted *The Nation*’s reviewer, Benjamin DeMott, were a set

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, 137. Emphasis in original.

of assumptions, among them: “that a body of experience about how [poorly educated urban] students learn is being assembled; [and] that men and women of mind and imagination remain involved and fascinated with a challenge hitherto unimaginable in educational history.”¹³¹ For City’s President Robert Marshak too few such men and women were there when the college most needed them, men and women who could look at the new students and see “that all was not mere chaos and ignorance,” who had “the creativity and intelligence to adapt their old methods and devise new ones, thus exchanging one form of professional gratification for another, certainly a more hard-earned one.”¹³²

Errors and Expectations reflected not just the doggedness and scholarly imagination of its author, but also the formation of an entire community of committed practitioners who insisted on making “more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation” to the poorly prepared student.¹³³ The book’s acknowledgments and footnotes were a testament to what one colleague described as “a sort of floating craps game” that had been meeting for years in coffee shops around New York City to compare notes and pool information.¹³⁴ Eventually they had organized a formal study group, and in 1975 published their first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*. By evoking her CUNY and *Journal of Basic Writing* colleagues throughout *Errors & Expectations*, Donald Bartholmae later observed, “Shaughnessy invites all readers into the ongoing conversation...[and] helps to create an [even broader] interpretive community.”¹³⁵

¹³¹ DeMott, Benjamin. “Mina Shaughnessy: Meeting Challenges,” Review of *Errors & Expectations*, *The Nation*, December 9, 1978, 646.

¹³² Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 53, 80.

¹³³ Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 296.

¹³⁴ Kenneth Bruffee, quoted in Maher, 119.

¹³⁵ David Bartholmae, “Released into Language: Errors, Expectations and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy,” in *The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*, ed. by Dennis McQuade (Carbondale, IL.: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1986), 92.

SPOKESPERSON & TRUTHTELLER

All the time she was writing the book Shaughnessy continued poring over placement exams, addressing professional conferences, and publishing in journals, with City College serving as the Mother Ship of the nascent field. Although New York City's fiscal crisis cost her virtually her entire staff, class sizes exploded, and support services dwindled, none of this seemed to take much of a toll on her. "Mina may have been depressed, disgusted, overwhelmed—who knows what emotions she felt during those tumultuous years—," Berger recalled, "but she never showed them in the 'arena.' She 'performed' for one the toughest academic audiences in the country at that time, and the performance was always flawless."¹³⁶

In her role as the spokesperson for Open Admissions and basic writing, "it wasn't possible for her to express her concerns and fears aloud," her confidant Janet Emig recalled. "Too many people looked to her for guidance and inspiration."¹³⁷ Speaking to the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors at the very moment when the entire university was being shut down for lack of funds and tuition imposed—arguably the lowest point in its 129-year history—Shaughnessy celebrated the unique and indestructible bond they had formed:

Probably at no school in the country is there such an accumulation of wisdom and know-how in the field of compensatory education as there is within this university at this moment. I cannot imagine a group of teachers who have ever had more to say to one another. It is a special fraternity joined not only by our common purposes and problems as teachers but by our having come to know, through our students, what it means to be an outsider in academia. Whatever our individual political persuasions, we have been pedagogically radicalized by our experience. We reject in our bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college. We reject it not only on principle; we would simply be bored teaching in such a college.¹³⁸

Shaughnessy's peculiar blend of optimism with the naked truth of systemic failure and

¹³⁶ Leslie Berger, quoted in Maher, 103.

¹³⁷ Janet Emig qtd. in Maher 1997, 130.

¹³⁸ Shaughnessy, "The Miserable Truth," 29617.

neglect constituted a form of alchemy. “She gave the work we were doing a dignity,” one of her staff remembered, “a humanity, and a complexity that made it seem the proper focus of a professional life.”¹³⁹ Whether it died an ignominious death or lived to fight another day was no longer the point, she asserted. Open Admissions had created “a massive feedback system” that revealed and documented once and for all the educational plight of the city’s poor and dark-skinned such that it could no longer be denied.¹⁴⁰ Given her stature and how much was at stake, it was striking the way she laid out, in *Errors & Expectations*, hundreds of vivid examples of student error. In such a charged atmosphere she was potentially exposing what many considered:

the dirty little secret of basic skills courses, classified information, because if it leaked out it was sure to appear as part of some professor’s demonstration that such students were on the face of it uneducable. This was not a matter of paranoia. It was clear from several essays on Open Admissions and from several letters to the *Times* that examples of unskillful writing by non-traditional students was considered a powerful weapon by those opposed to the broadening of higher education. From this point of view, Mina had great courage in choosing to examine publically such quantities of error-laden student writing.¹⁴¹

Errors & Expectations, another critic wrote, was “perhaps the first book to emerge from the crucible of the Open Admissions classroom which doesn’t minimize the challenge and yet reaffirms the possibilities of genuine progress toward a more literate student body.”¹⁴²

A QUIET EXCOMMUNICATION

For all the force of her message, however, Shaughnessy’s platform also had notable limits. While she was preparing *Errors & Expectations* (on a grant from the Carnegie

¹³⁹ Bartholomae, “Released Into Language,” 67.

¹⁴⁰ Shaughnessy, “The Miserable Truth,” 29616.

¹⁴¹ Robert R. Lyons, “Mina Shaughnessy and the Teaching of Writing,” *Journal of Basic Writing* 3, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1980): 4.

¹⁴² Alison Bernstein, Review of *Errors & Expectations*, *School Review* 86, no. 2 (Feb. 1978): 294.

Foundation) and all at once building a community, a conceptual framework, and a communications infrastructure for the field of Basic Writing, she was passed over for an important post as dean of basic education—both writing and math—at City College. “She was the logical choice,” said Dean of Humanities Theodore Gross—himself a soon-to-be casualty of the Open Admissions controversy—“There was no one in the country, much less at City, more qualified for the job.”¹⁴³ For Gross and others, Shaughnessy was passed over “precisely because of her qualifications.” The city and nation weren’t just hurting economically. A wave of conservatism and racial backlash was sweeping over them. To many, City College and Open Admissions represented the kinds of late 1960s excesses that had gotten the country into such a mess. For all his admiration of her, wrote Shaughnessy’s biographer, Jane Maher,

[President] Marshak knew that as dean of basic skills, Mina Shaughnessy would have drawn even greater national attention to the needs of Open Admissions students, forcing not only educational administrators but other powerful and influential people—politicians, writers, intellectuals—to come to terms with the fact that it was not the students who needed remediation, but the system itself. Giving someone like Mina a position from which she could espouse the rights of Open Admissions students would have made it even more difficult for administrators to mollify those who did not believe that City College should use its resources to level the educational playing field in New York City. These minority students were not going to go away, that was clear to everyone, but administrators (who were being forced to make difficult budget decisions) most certainly were not going to provide a forum for a spokesperson and advocate who would use her intelligence, expertise, and charisma to argue—convincingly and eloquently—for the rights of these students.¹⁴⁴

Another instance in which Shaughnessy was denied the same platform offered to Rondinone, Kriegel, and other advocates of Open Admissions was an Op-ed she submitted to *The New York Times* entitled “The Other Side of Literacy.” Though a thoughtful and engaging

¹⁴³ Theodore Gross, quoted in Maher, 148.

¹⁴⁴ Maher, 151-2.

essay on the value to democracy of ordinary citizens learning to write, the piece was devoid of Shaughnessy's usual vivid examples from the trenches as well as uncharacteristically tone deaf to the particular audience she was writing for: Whereas reading on the part of masses of ordinary people benefited the state by making it cheap and efficient to distribute "directions and information and propaganda," she wrote, "writing is essentially a class-distributed skill," an "exclusive country club" at the heart of American public education.

The children of the poor...leave school believing that they were in some way natively unqualified to learn to write and must now find ways of evading the various big tasks that are certain to be posed for them in their work and in their lives as parents and citizens....The fact that [writing] is not taught to the students who need it most constitutes a true crisis of literacy in this country, where being able to *initiate* messages is as important as being able to receive them and where the most fruitful and necessary activity is arguing rather than agreeing.¹⁴⁵

Shaughnessy received a short rejection from the *Times* saying the piece was "charming" but they had a "space crunch."¹⁴⁶ The decisions to deny her the deanship and other academic prerogatives were not much more difficult to justify: Shaughnessy had no PhD and, in the eyes of some, her work wasn't sufficiently "literary" or "scholarly."¹⁴⁷ For her part, Shaughnessy, often deferred to such judgments, so respectful was she of institutions like the academy and the *New York Times*. When the CUNY Graduate Center resisted her offering a graduate-level class she wasn't particularly offended, as her colleague Robert Lyons remembered it:

Despite the fact that there were professors who foolishly tried to prevent her from doing meaningful work, she was one of the few people who did not turn away from the tradition of academics and the canon, while at the same time she was fighting for the rights of people who were supposed to be kept out—it was quite amazing really—the idea for her was to get them inside. That's one of the great

¹⁴⁵ Mina Shaughnessy, "The Other Side of Literacy," Unpublished article, In Maher, 1997, 204-5.

¹⁴⁶ Charlotte Curtis, quoted in Maher, 205. Curtis, a veteran of the fashion and society pages, and editorial page editor was the first woman in history to see her name grace the *Times* masthead.

¹⁴⁷ Ed Quinn, quoted in Maher, 224.

puzzles of Mina: she never trashed the world of academics and she never trashed the Graduate Center for all the foot dragging they engaged in.¹⁴⁸

In this respect, at least, Shaughnessy fit in squarely—PhD or no—with other towering figures in City College’s history like Morris Raphael Cohen and Kenneth B. Clark.

It was only once she realized that there was “no future for her” at City College, her longtime secretary recalled, that Shaughnessy accepted a university-wide position created for her by her former SEEK colleagues Leslie Berger and Allen Ballard at CUNY Central.¹⁴⁹ As associate dean and director of the new Instructional Resource Center she began to develop curriculum and placement exams. Though it never took away from her stature, it did represent a kind of internal exile—Shaughnessy remained formally on the City College faculty and was eventually promoted to full professor (over the objections of some of her colleagues). A month before her death after a long battle with kidney cancer, President Jimmy Carter signed a proclamation honoring her for her outstanding work in the field of adult literacy. It was awarded in her 80th Street office by the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.¹⁵⁰ Too sick to travel uptown for a more public ceremony she remarked,

I’m very sorry that I couldn’t make it up to City College because that is where I did all my work, and that is where I learned all that I learned from my students. It was, I would say, a grand experiment, one that I hope will continue in some form.”¹⁵¹

The quiet excommunication of Mina Shaughnessy was far less public or dramatic than the serial repudiations of Bertrand Russell, the Communist professors, Knickerbocker and Davis, the crooked basketball players, or Buell G. Gallagher—many would question whether it constituted an excommunication at all—but it was, perhaps, all the more signal for being

¹⁴⁸ Robert Lyons, quoted in Maher, 175.

¹⁴⁹ Marilyn Maiz, quoted in Maher, 152.

¹⁵⁰ “Literacy,” *New Yorker*, Nov. 6, 1978, 36.

¹⁵¹ Mina Shaughnessy, quoted in Maher, 231-2.

preemptive in nature and orchestrated from within. CUNY as a whole may have been eager to consolidate its gains as a national leader in compensatory education, but City College wanted little to do with the potential stigma that came with it. Authority in the area of remediation necessarily reminded disaffected alumni and others that there was something substantial there to be remediated and the College was, by now, in full damage control mode.

V. 'ELITERATES'

At first feudalism may have worked to the Kings advantages but as generations passed the new lourds or vasseles may have saw now reason to obay a king they never saw. When the Duck of Normandy (William) in 1066 took England the King of France not only had a powerful lord breathing down his neck but now a country to deal with.

The French king dealt with by not dealing with it. They just sat and took the crumbs from the Ducks. Then came a man named Phillip II. He did something. He attacked. Crucked all the resistance in the north and drove his Norman vassal and now King of England into the sea.¹

—A City College student's answer on a history test, as reproduced in the *New York Post*, 1978

I aject to the New York Post saying that City College student don no no inglis, reedin or writin. Tha's ridiculis. Each and every students mus no how to reed and write. Udderwise, how they gon grajuate, you no? And that test also strikly for the burds, too. Justa nudderway herass the student. They work hard to get nejukasion. And you can cawl this letter a cheep shot but admit it: it pretty akurit.

A reeder²

—Letter to the editor of *The Campus*, 1978

I Am a City College Eliterate³

—T-Shirt worn by students, 1978

¹ "A Test Answer," *New York Post*, Feb. 28, 1978, 5.

² "For the Post," Letter to the editor, *The Campus*, Mar. 17, 1978, 2.

³ Edward B. Fiske, "City College Quality Still Debated after 8 Years of Open Admissions," *New York Times*, June 19, 1978, A1.

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1. 'HOW TO KILL A COLLEGE'

For all its symbolic freight, the gutting of Mina Shaughnessy's innovative program and staff and the thwarting of her tremendous leadership potential were only part of a much larger process of starvation that had begun with the Open Admissions era itself. Few of the services provided to SEEK students—the stipends, tutors, and counselors—were ever made available to the mass of similarly needy students who arrived after 1970. From the beginning there had been little money and everyone was left scrambling to make do. But in the midst of what the English instructor Ann Petrie described as “a gallant improvisation, put together against heavy odds,” a college that had indisputably lost some of its magic also experienced, however briefly, “the rejuvenation of a spirit.”⁴

This section explores the way three events in the latter part of the 1970s served to all but extinguish that renewed spirit. The fiscal crisis in New York City government precipitated a standoff between the governor and mayor and the CUNY trustees over further cost cutting that ended with a shutdown of all eighteen campuses, the imposition of tuition for the first time in 129 years, and the loss of the university's independence from Albany. Then, in 1978, City College suffered its most public and dramatic excommunication of the post-1969 era after Dean of Humanities Theodore Gross published a dispirited “confession” of lost faith in a national magazine, inauspiciously titled “How to Kill a College.” Gross's manifesto coincided with a sensational exposé in the *New York Post*, now in the hands of the conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch, of what it called “CCNY's Illiterate Thousands.” President Marshak, students, and others tried to rally in the face of these attacks, but like so many other things the campus's

⁴ M. Ann Petrie, “Up the Down Campus—Notes From a Teacher on Open Admissions,” *New York*, May 17, 1971, 40, 38.

once-robust public sphere had been ravaged by scarcity and infighting. At the end of the decade little remained to be said about City College, it seemed, except what exactly had gone wrong.

'FORD TO CITY': END FREE TUITION

Beginning in 1972 there had been annual campaigns in Albany to cut the budget, impose tuition, and absorb all eighteen CUNY campuses into the state university system. California Governor Ronald Reagan had recently imposed tuition at that state's university, leaving CUNY the last public university standing that still gave its undergraduates a free ride. In the summer of 1975, just after New York ran out of money with which to service its debt and pay its bills and was forced to rely on emergency outside assistance, former Governor and now U.S. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller finally prevailed upon the mayor to cut \$32 million from CUNY's budget, the equivalent of the revenues the university would receive if it were charging tuition at the same rate as SUNY. But still the Board of Higher Education would not relent.

That fall, when asked to bail the city out of its crisis, Rockefeller's boss, Gerald R. Ford, attacked free tuition, rent control, and the generous benefits of city workers as symbols of New York's fiscal irresponsibility run amok. Defending the administration's decision not to help, Ford's press secretary compared the city to "a wayward daughter hooked on heroin... You don't give her \$100 a day to support her habit" he said. "You make her go cold turkey to break her habit."⁵ Then, in a nationally televised speech, the president himself sandwiched CUNY in between the twin scandals of municipal hospitals full of empty beds and the putatively high incidence of welfare cheats. "New York City operates one of the largest universities in the world," he said, "free of tuition for any high school graduate, rich or poor, who wants to attend."⁶

⁵ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 127.

⁶ Gerald R. Ford, Speech to the National Press Club, Oct. 29, 1975, *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 1975, 46.

The next morning's *Daily News* was emblazoned with the now-famous headline "Ford to City: Drop Dead!"⁷

In a desperate cost-cutting measure to stave off the inevitable, the Board of Higher Education then voted at year's end to raise the entrance requirements and dramatically restrict access City and other four-year colleges. But the following spring, with still not enough cash to get through the summer, city officials gave the Board an ultimatum either to end the 129-year-old policy of free tuition immediately, dramatically limit the number of students it admitted, or find some other workable, albeit painful, solution. When the members still refused to inflict tuition or further cuts the mayor turned off the spigot, denying all funding requests including those for payroll and other basic operating expenses. CUNY's chancellor had no choice but to shut down the entire system, canceling final exams and graduation ceremonies for hundreds of thousands of students on eighteen different campuses and leaving tens of thousands of employees without pay.

With no way out, the Board of Higher Education finally voted to impose tuition, but not before several members—including the chairman—resigned in protest, the latter saying he could not bring himself to serve as "the instrument" with which to "deprive others of a low-cost college education which the city gave me years ago and which I have sought to repay."⁸ Hundreds of junior faculty hired to teach remedial courses and implement the Open Admissions model were laid off, among them almost all of Mina Shaughnessy's staff. Twenty-eight percent of the teaching staff—5,000 professors system wide —were downsized and enrollment dropped

⁷ Frank Van Riper, "Ford to City: Drop Dead!" *Daily News*, Oct. 30, 1975, 1.

⁸ Alfred Giardino, quoted in Judith Cummings, "Giardino, 3 Others Quit City U. Board Over Carey Plan: They Say Imposing of Tuition Is Too High a Price With Not Enough in Return," *New York Times*, May 26, 1976, 1. Giardino was a Brooklyn College graduate. His position on the board was unpaid. Votes on entrance requirements and tuition were split largely along racial lines, the white members holding a fierce attachment to free tuition and the blacks refusing to renege on their commitment to open enrollment.

seventeen per cent, by 32,000 students.⁹ Within four years the university would have half the number of black and Hispanic freshmen. And still the bloodletting continued. All capital construction was halted, for instance, leaving City College's massive new North Academic Center and Aaron Davis Hall to languish for years as little more than collections of exposed steel girders on the former site of Lewisohn Stadium and the South Campus.

Students paid more and got significantly less of everything, most notably respect.

According to the New York historian Joshua Freedman,

The damage caused by the fiscal crisis to the idea and reality of an expansive, democratic, state sector was immediate, strong, and irreversible. The ideological attacks on the city and the massive cuts in spending had the effect of repositioning the city's schools, hospitals, and university as second-rate entities. Deprived of resources, they found themselves constantly on the defensive, in difficult, demoralizing fights to maintain even inadequate levels of funding and service. Things considered essentials elsewhere—gym classes and gym teachers in public schools, offices and office supplies in colleges, modern hospital buildings—came to be considered unattainable and unnecessary luxuries in New York.

As public-sector institutions were increasingly attacked, damaged, and discredited, those who could afford to buy their way out increasingly did so—by sending their children to private or parochial schools, by going to NYU or St. Johns or Hofstra instead of CUNY, by seeking treatment at a private hospital rather than a public one. Public institutions once attractive to all sorts of New Yorkers became subnormal institutions of last resort. Starved of needed funds, and then attacked for failing to accomplish their mission, many never fully recovered.¹⁰

Before long, a bachelor's degree also came to be seen as a luxury item. A committee consisting of the presidents of Columbia, Fordham, Pace, and New York universities as well as Pratt Institute and a representative of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund—but no unionists or public-sector educators—recommended that, in the interest of greater efficiency, CUNY “concentrate

⁹ Shirley Gorelick, “City College: The Rise and Fall of the Free Academy,” *Radical America* 14 (1980): 33.

¹⁰ Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since WWII* (New York: New Press, 2000), 272.

on education at the junior college level, allowing the 33 private colleges and universities...to concentrate on full undergraduate and graduate level education.” They also advocated “contracting public sector educational services to independent schools where feasible and when the costs are lower.”¹¹ Labor leaders like Harry Van Arsdale and Peter Brennan of the building trades, who had earlier been supportive of CUNY and Open Admissions, now sought to safeguard their members’ jobs by hewing closer to the agenda of big business.¹² And, given the city’s massive unemployment, that agenda no longer included educating large numbers of skilled workers for new kinds of jobs as it had a decade earlier.¹³

THEODORE GROSS: ‘FALSE PROPHET IN HIS OWN LAND’

When the university failed to make its payroll in late May 1976 the entire faculty and staff found themselves—many for the first time in their lives—on the unemployment lines. It was at this low moment, with the gates of all the system’s colleges padlocked shut, final exams and graduation postponed indefinitely, and the imminent prospect of an end to City’s century-old tradition of free tuition, that the exhausted and dispirited City College Dean of Humanities Theodore L. Gross began work on an essay that would lead to what was arguably the Open Admissions era’s most high profile and damaging excommunication of all. Gross’s 1978 manifesto in the popular *Saturday Review*, complete with sensational headlines and graphics and hyperbolic language he would come to regret, was the highest-level and most public defection ever from the ranks of the Open Admissions faithful. It gave voice to the disconsolate misgivings of many of his colleagues and ammunition to those eager to deliver the program its

¹¹ Business and Labor Working Group, education committee, quoted in Freeman, *Working Class New York*, 278.

¹² Freeman, *Working Class New York*, 278.

¹³ Freeman points out elsewhere that Badillo, a recent immigrant from Puerto Rico, had worked his way through City College and law school as a pin boy in a bowling alley, an elevator operator and a dishwasher, “all jobs soon automated out of existence.” *Working Class New York*, 181.

coup de grâce. Its author at once became the righteous whistleblower and the living embodiment of the deep and pervasive sense of betrayal occasioned by New York's wholesale retreat from Open Admissions's expansive goals.

Unlike President Marshak's notorious "quartet of unreconcilables," Gross belonged to his inner circle. At various times a dean, vice president, and chair of the English department that spearheaded the college's efforts at providing remediation to Open Admissions students, Gross had been among the program's fiercest and most longstanding defenders. So, when his "confessional meditation" appeared without warning—even to its author—on the magazine's cover under the new title "How To Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean," it felt to many like nothing less than an act of treason.¹⁴

Gross had grown up in Brooklyn in the twenties and thirties, the son of a public high school teacher whose academic ambitions, he at least felt, had been curbed by the anti-Semitism of the day. Trained in English and American literature at the particularly stuffy Columbia University of the 1950s, the younger Gross had written his dissertation on the little remembered nineteenth-century novelist and civil rights lawyer who defended Homer Plessy in the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* and coined the term "color blind" with reference to race in American jurisprudence. With a black City College colleague, Gross went on to edit a collection of African-American literature just in time for the explosion in Black Studies courses and programs. As a department chair and dean he'd championed the work of Mina Shaughnessy and her "minions." And when Marshak enlisted him to raise money from wealthy alumni, something neither the college nor he had ever done before, Gross reluctantly embraced that challenge, too,

¹⁴ Theodore L. Gross, "How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean," *Saturday Review*, Feb. 4, 1978, 12. The article itself begins with a full-page illustration of hordes of headless students streaming through a set of open doors. Of the hundreds represented only seven have heads on their shoulders and all of these have noticeably Caucasian features.

and found himself routinely confronted with successful alumni who'd concluded that the college had sold out its reputation and historic mission of fostering academic excellence. "Look, I owe CCNY something—as a poor boy it was my Harvard," George Heyman, an investment banker who'd helped raise millions for NYU, where he'd later done his MBA, told Gross. "I think you guys are destroying [CCNY] with open admissions, but that's your business. I do owe a debt to the place. I'll call a few friends this morning. At noon my secretary will phone in their names and you'll have fifty thousand dollars in scholarship support."¹⁵

Of course not all of his potential donors were as gracious—or forthright about their misgivings. And gradually Gross had begun to develop misgivings of his own. Or, perhaps, the misgivings were there from the beginning and had only begun to fester amidst the stew of budget crises, educational malaise, and public opprobrium. "Like a religious man losing his faith even as I tried to sell it," Gross wrote in a memoir four decades later, "I had begun to doubt the dream of open admissions." The city and state simply couldn't afford it, he soon realized:

It hadn't worked, it couldn't work—at least not with the severely underprepared and certainly not in the brief time that we had given it. Ultimately, I had concluded, it was unfair to the very students we promised we would help. We had transferred our own unrealistic expectations to them and then told too many that they had failed when they never really had a chance to succeed. We had been false prophets in our own land.¹⁶

Gross's *Saturday Review* article, coming as it did on the heels of massive retrenchment, the tightening of entrance requirements, and the imposition of tuition and state control, and illustrated on the cover with the image of a bloody knife thrust into the heart of a classic college building underneath the wildly inflammatory headline "How to Kill a College" served not only to shatter the illusion of solidarity among the ranks of Open Admissions advocates but also to

¹⁵ George Heyman, quoted in Theodore L. Gross, *The Rise of Roosevelt University: Presidential Reflections* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 22.

¹⁶ Gross, *The Rise of Roosevelt University*, 23.

express a widespread and profound weariness, even surrender, among some of its most devoted practitioners. The article's first paragraphs were an object lesson in an emerging discourse that would reach its apogee over the coming two decades, a vivid juxtaposition of civilization and barbarism:

My office is in Lincoln Corridor, on the ground floor of an old Gothic building called Shepard Hall, at the City College of New York, 138th Street and Convent Avenue, Harlem. Outside this office, on makeshift benches, students congregate—black, Puerto Rican, Asian, and varieties of ethnic white—playing radios, simulating sex, languidly moving back and forth to classes, dancing and singing, eating and studying and sleeping and drinking from soda cans or from beer bottles wrapped in brown paper bags.

As the dean of humanities, I move among these students unnoticed and conduct my business in adjacent rooms that feature telephones and filing cabinets, typewriters, a copying machine, a Dictaphone, and a wall of books that from the Anglo-Saxon point of view represent the best that has been thought and said.¹⁷

By situating himself in “an old Gothic building” where even the corridors have illustrious names, Gross was clearly aligning himself with a tradition. But the building was also located, finally, in Harlem, a name as likely to conjure up images of danger and moral ambiguity for a national audience as any of vibrant churches, jazz musicians or a literary past. There, students “congregate,” they were told. In ordinary usage, people rarely “congregated” in churches or synagogues, of course; they were more likely to do so on street corners, in stairwells or perhaps church *basements*, and there was usually something mildly illicit or subversive at work when that happened. The students' races notwithstanding, something named “Lincoln Corridor” had surely been intended to serve as some kind of grand passageway not as a “makeshift” squatters camp. Before he even got to the radios and lewd gestures, the eating, singing and dancing, then, Gross had alerted his readers that there was something wrong with this picture. Any studying

¹⁷ Gross, “How to Kill a College,” 13.

that may have gone on there is incidental. The qualified way students “languidly” drifted back and forth to classes only served to accentuate the purposefulness with which they “congregated.” Against this carnival atmosphere Gross contrasted the solidity of his office full of telephones, filing cabinets and the Western literary and philosophical canon. The tools of his trade were the Dictaphone and an entire wall of great books. The tools of theirs were the beer bottle and the brown paper bag.

In the days and weeks following the *Saturday Review* article’s publication many people would challenge what they saw as a caricature of Open Admissions students with little basis in what typically went on in the Lincoln Corridor. But perhaps the most revealing detail went virtually unmentioned: “I move among these students *unnoticed*,” Gross had written. And this anonymity, it seems, was one of the things eating him. Years later he would acknowledge harboring a burning ambition: “I wanted to become someone larger than myself,” he wrote, “a public figure, a vice president, a president, a leader.” The *Saturday Review* piece, which he had tried to frame as a “confessional meditation” reflecting a personal crisis of faith, was instead both packaged and received as a political manifesto and succeeded in catapulting him, almost overnight, into the national spotlight.

In preparing to write the essay, Gross had pored over the beginning of James Baldwin’s seminal work of urban American prophecy, *The Fire Next Time*, “holding the music of the language in my head, the intricate syntax, trying to capture it in my own description, especially in those first few sentences that had [subsequently] caused the greatest reaction.”¹⁸ He was trying to engage—perhaps without realizing it—in a type of prophetic witness popularized during the

¹⁸ Theodore L. Gross, *Academic Turmoil: The Reality and Promise of Open Education* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 113.

previous decade by, among others, Baldwin, Michael Harrington, and Jonathan Kozol.¹⁹ Baldwin and Kozol had also written first person accounts of exile—both internal and external. In Gross’s case, however, the exile was anticipated, self-imposed by the act of writing itself, and his transgression flew in the face of liberal orthodoxy. Almost as soon as the article was published, there was little else he could do but leave City College for good.

‘A PASSING PURPOSE...IN MIDDLE AGE WE NO LONGER HAD A PROFESSION’

Once readers got through the colorful Lincoln Corridor passage, what they learned was that in pursuing a noble, necessary, and ultimately unattainable social mission, City College had forsworn all but the last vestiges of its liberal arts tradition. Gross’s article was more about the older professors than the new students, an elegy for professional lives shorn of meaning. It explained how, within a year of his becoming chair of the English department in 1970, a curriculum made up of seventy percent literature courses and thirty percent basic composition saw those figures suddenly reversed. Fully two thirds of the basic writing students were absorbed in the “deeply remedial” project of attaining mere “literacy” or “competence” rather than anything vaguely approaching the “college level.” Gross described how during the 1970s open faculty revolt gave way to “lethargy [that] invades the teachers’ spirits and they come not to care,” a condition from which he himself was apparently not immune:

Anyone who had ever passed through the City College [in the years before Open Admissions] knew that the physical conditions there were as bad as almost anywhere else in urban America. But once a student had entered the classroom, the peeling walls and encrusted windowpanes vanished—the electricity of mind compensated for everything. I remember having taught “Tintern Abbey” to the

¹⁹ In addition to *The Fire Next Time*, first published in the *New Yorker* in 1962, see also James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Michael Harrington. *The Other America* (New York: Macmillian, 1962); and Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967). Gross calls Baldwin “Jonathan Edwards in Harlem” (*Academic Turmoil*, 113).

belching music of a city bus, and it worked. Now everything seemed plebeian—particularly the minds of the students...

Where were the old liberal arts students who simply wanted to study philosophy or literature or history? Where were those who could not be programmed, who weren't so absolutely certain of their careers, who weren't so utterly nervous about job security, and who came to us with a literacy we took for granted? Gone. Gone to colleges of the State University. Gone to Queens and to Hunter. Gone to the suburbs and the exurbs and the hinterlands. And with their flight something faded from our own lives—a passing purpose, a pointed passion.

What really gnawed away at our innards and left us hollow, what began to create a sad yet anxious look in our eyes and a dreadful listlessness in the way we moved through our classes or sat at committee meetings, what dulled our lunchroom conversations and made us depend more on each other than on the students—who had always been the great reward for teaching at City College—what coursed in our bodies like an incurable illness was our growing realization and fear that in middle age we no longer had a profession.²⁰

This, I'd like to argue, is the emotional core of Gross's article. For him, City College had not merely been "perched" on a hill overlooking Harlem, but "enthroned" there and while Open Admissions may have appealed to his and others' liberal instincts, it had all come too fast, too furious, and at a cost neither he nor his colleagues nor the larger society were willing to bear.²¹

It was not only the new underprepared students who threatened Gross's sense of professional identity, however, but also the new teacher's union and affirmative action policies, a term he placed in ironic quotation marks and credited as yet another font of "mediocrity."

Minorities, including now impatient women, used affirmative action to leap in to positions of power or to retain their jobs...One could scarcely contemplate dismissing a black, a Puerto Rican, or a woman unless he or she was utterly incompetent. One knew that not only the union but also special interest groups, in and out of the university, would apply pressure...the history of open

²⁰ Gross, "How to Kill a College," 15, 19.

²¹ *ibid.*, 13.

admissions—from this angle of vision—is a history of political, educational, and moral compromises.²²

“How to Kill a College” was published midway between the day that Allan Bakke’s lawyers argued his “reverse discrimination” suit before the Supreme Court and the Court’s split decision in that case. *Saturday Review* editors invoked Bakke in the teaser they used to introduce an article they framed as addressing the very same question of “Who should be admitted to America’s college and universities?” Gross’s antipathy to affirmative action and the union was far from uncommon among middle class whites who made up a good portion of *Saturday Review* readers (Gross had moved to the Long Island suburbs years earlier). Such readers, many of whom had worked so hard to erase their own immigrant pasts in urban ghettos, now balked at what Gross called “the sudden primacy of ethnicity and race” that had taken hold of college campuses and, by implication, the nation. His confession consisted not so much in having lost his liberal faith as having been all along a “squirming white liberal” unwilling to express his real views in the face of “cultural intimidation” or “to be associated with academic reactionaries.”²³

For Gross the hastily planned creation of Black and other ethnic studies departments was an “intellectual disgrace” that only served to segregate students and faculty by race, foster “insular tendencies,” and otherwise “ghettoize” poorly prepared students, an outcome congenial to the “overt bigots” on the faculty and one to which “well-intentioned liberals” like he cynically acquiesced as well. “[We] accepted it because to do so was easy. And like the society the college became fragmented and divided.”²⁴

²² *ibid.*, 15.

²³ *ibid.*, 13, 17.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 18.

CAMPUS PARIAH

With the publication of Gross's article, those divisions became more pronounced than ever. Conservatives applauded him for belatedly blowing the whistle on misguided open access policies and the tyranny of race consciousness which they claimed had spawned them. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, Andrew Greeley said Gross's article explained why City College had become "a shell, a devastated institution from which all academic excellence of former years has been swept away." The school's ignominious death was a result of "the crazy notion" that it could somehow become "the central reform institution of the society...

...that college professors and college students had the skill, insight, ability, persistence, responsibility and tenacity to remake America—or even to remake New York City. City College died not only of stupidity but also of arrogant academic imperialism.²⁵

"One blessing of New York's financial crisis," noted George Will in the *Washington Post*, "is that open admissions has been scrapped. That policy, promising a real college education for everyone, was not just a dream born out of season. It was a dream for which there can be no season."²⁶

Within the campus, however, Gross became an instant pariah and his betrayal was denounced from nearly every quarter, with President Marshak, his boss and close associate of many years leading the pack. Marshak circulated an "open letter" throughout the college community calling the article "self-serving" and "crudely insulting."²⁷

Your use of code words and stereotyping language about women and minorities constitutes a dangerous appeal to the forces of unreason and bigotry in our society. I am profoundly troubled that your anger is so intense and your

²⁵ Andrew Greeley, "Arrogance Killed a College," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 28, 1978, B3.

²⁶ George F. Will, "Open Admissions About Open Admissions," *Washington Post*, Feb. 5, 1978, B7.

²⁷ Robert Marshak, "Open Letter to Dean Gross," Feb. 21, 1978, quoted in Michael Arena, "Marshak Critiques Gross' Critique," *The Campus*, Mar. 3, 1978, 1.

frustrations so great that you knowingly publish an article that is so destructive of the atmosphere of harmony and tolerance on the campus.²⁸

A breathless *Daily News* reporter who was also a City College student called Gross for a reaction but was rebuffed. His story, “Rap at Open Admissions Puts CCNY Dean in Soup,” mistakenly attributed to Gross the assertion that a normal black child, reared in a normal family “will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world,” something Gross had, in fact, taken from a black studies course description and cited as an example of what he called “apocalyptic prose,” evidence for his claim that ethnic studies programs, as currently constituted, were an “intellectual disgrace” that fostered militant separatism. The *Daily News* article went on to quote Black Studies Chairman Leonard Jeffries’s calling Gross’s essay “spurious, vicious, almost pathological” and demanding that he resign.²⁹

Ostensibly to promote a campus wide debate, *Observation Post* reprinted the entire *Saturday Review* piece. Student Senate President Raymond Jack wrote that Gross’s “petty showmanship” and “tainted prejudice” rendered him a “cancerous element” in the body politic and publicly called upon Marshak to relieve him of all administrative and policy-making responsibilities.³⁰ *The Paper* called both the article and its author patently racist and took particular issue with Gross’s critique of ethnic studies programs and contention that American education and culture was essentially “integrative.”

The only integrative aspect was when millions of European ethnics came here to escape the barrenness of Europe and integrated into white America. The Native Americans, Blacks and Chicano/Mexican peoples **on whose backs they climbed up into the middle class** have remained unassimilated. These same whites, like

²⁸ *ibid.*, quoted in Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 153.

²⁹ *Daily News*, tk, quoted in Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 90. The error was corrected in a subsequent edition but was nonetheless picked up by the *News*’s TV station. See p. 91

³⁰ Raymond Jack, “Open Letter to President Marshak,” *The Campus*, Mar. 8, 1978.

Theodore Gross, will step on our faces before they loose their **white skinned privileges**.³¹

The editorial concluded by citing Gross's article as evidence that for nearly a decade white faculty and administrators' main priority had been "how to get rid of the 'niggers'" and pointed to rising entrance requirements, tuition, the whittling away of SEEK, and a new "skills test" as parts of a concerted effort toward that end.³²

Gross's colleagues were not as hyperbolic but scarcely less damning. History Professor James Watts challenged his "characterizations of natural Asian mathematicians [and] blacks and Puerto Ricans with 'real feeling' for literature" as "*reductio* at its worst. Do I hear Rhythm?"³³ Vice Provost for Student Affairs Ann Rees questioned the veracity of his depictions of student behavior in the Lincoln Corridor and directly accused him of sexism and racism. "You set before the public eye the picture of a college with a core of besieged faculty fighting a losing battle to preserve the good, true and beautiful against onslaughts from usurpers who would champion mediocrity and students unworthy of the name," she wrote. "For such a situation there could be no salvation." In Rees's view, Gross's feelings made him unfit to continue to serve as dean lest his grim take become a self-fulfilling prophecy.³⁴

Both Watts and Rees also took Gross to task for his blindness to history and for blaming the victim: "Open Admissions was given under intolerable conditions, taken back when the streets were clear and the job market empty," wrote Watts, "...Nowhere do I read of absentee owners who manipulate us all. Nowhere is the finger pointed at the two-headed devil of race and class." The makeup of the pre-Open Admissions student body, he added, was "largely a function

³¹ "The White Citadel on the Hill In Harlem," Editorial, *The Paper*, Mar. 9, 1978, 4; Emphasis in original.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Jim Watts, "Identify incompetence & keep truckin'," Letter to the editor, *Observation Post*, Mar. 31, 1978, 3.

³⁴ Ann Rees, "Rees: A racist, sexist article," *Observation Post*, Mar. 31, 1978, 3.

of anti-Semitic quotas” at Columbia and other elite schools.³⁵ Rees, for her part, said that while recent changes at their College may have been more extreme than at most, budget cuts, curricular transformations, increases in “non-traditional” student populations, a growing pre-professional emphasis, and poor communication skills all represented significant trends throughout higher education: “We hardly suffer these alone.”³⁶

Those faculty and students who stood up for Gross tended to do so in defense not of what he was saying but of his right to say it and to shore up the rapidly deteriorating level of discourse at the college. Noting in passing the gulf between his own beliefs and those of Dean Gross, English department colleague Leonard Kriegel chose instead to take aim at the “intellectual intolerance,” “self-serving hypocrisy,” and “banal pomposity” of politically correct colleagues who felt it incumbent on them not merely to disagree with Gross but “to publicly flay him as if he, and he alone, were the source of the college’s problems.” More than anything Gross had written, Kriegel felt, their “rhetorical nonsense” and “deadly platitudes” were insulting to the students in their “contempt for language” and the intellectual climate at the college.³⁷

Another English professor, Brooks Wright, wrote that Gross had “merely stated publicly what many of the faculty, less courageous than he, have been saying in private for some time.” Like Kriegel, Wright objected to the tone of the various responses “from obscene graffiti on toilet walls to the claim, made by those who should know better, that nothing is wrong with the school except a few soreheads and incompetents in the humanities who do not want to teach.”

Right or wrong, Dean Gross has made a thoughtful and constructive statement. He is one of us, he cannot be ignored and he deserves a civil hearing. If we shout him down, we shall be forced in the end to listen to far more hostile criticism from

³⁵ Watts, “Identify incompetence,” 3.

³⁶ Rees, 3.

³⁷ Leonard Kriegel, “Campus Comment: Nothing But Rhetorical Nonsense,” *The Campus*, Mar. 17, 1978, 2.

voices less responsible and informed than his, voices from outside the college which cannot be intimidated or silenced.³⁸

THE *NEW YORK POST* & ‘CCNY’S ILLITERATE THOUSANDS’

Wright’s warning was far from idle speculation. By the time his letter was published, a growing chorus of such voices had already been raised. In the midst of the initial furor over Gross’s article, the *New York Post*—recently acquired by Australian media baron Rupert Murdoch—ran a three-part, front-page “exposé” of what it called “CCNY’s Illiterate Thousands.” The series purported to expose a “cruel hoax” perpetrated on the very students Open Admissions was created to help and highlighted allegations that “borderline literate” students were being passed along in an effort to keep up enrollments, that standards were dropping across the board, and that scholars of international reputation were being forced to teach remedial courses.

Until Rupert Murdoch bought the *Post* in 1976, the newspaper and the City College of New York were kindred spirits in many, many ways. Besides their liberal politics, both institutions were characterized by their predominately Jewish, working-class readership and student body. In spite of their essential grubbiness, they both gave generations of writers and public intellectuals their starts. Both experienced a kind of golden age of intellectual ferment and rough-hewn prestige as well as a series of defections, excommunications, and bitter declension narratives that ironically coincided with periods of explosive growth in circulation and enrollment. And by 1978 both had been utterly transformed.

In the course of these transformations, the *Post* went from being the college’s lone champion to becoming its nemesis. Selling the great newspaper of postwar American liberalism, the newspaper founded by Alexander Hamilton—America’s oldest—to the right wing media

³⁸ Brooks Wright, “A courageous public statement,” Letter to the editor, *Observation Post*, Mar. 31, 1978, 3.

mogul Rupert Murdoch, was, depending on who you talked to, akin to imposing tuition at City College or to letting poorly prepared students in there. It was almost unthinkable. But, as we have seen, unlike City College, in the case of the *New York Post*, by 1976 there hadn't been much of an institution left to save.

Nor was the *Post* the only publication undergoing a crisis of identity and struggling to stay afloat. The *Saturday Review*, once part of a quartet of highbrow liberal weeklies that included the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, had not weathered the turbulent decade as well as its brethren, most of whom had been shored up by wealthy patrons or foundations. It had been taken apart, put back together, and passed around among various buyers, most recently in 1977.³⁹ A magazine that had once crusaded for Hiroshima victims, nuclear disarmament, and an end to the war in Vietnam was, by the time it published Theodore Gross's article with its sensational headline and graphics, fighting for its own survival.

The *Post*'s "CCNY's Illiterate Thousands" quoted the usual suspects: Howard Adelson, Geoffrey Wagner, Stanley Page, and offered no evidence of declining standards or rampant illiteracy other than a handful of tenuous anecdotes. There was an account of a "lovely young man" who never learned to read beyond the fourth grade level, for example, but graduated nonetheless and was subsequently rejected from every law school he applied to. "He was completely devastated," his former economics professor told the *Post*. "He had been turned into a failure with a college degree."⁴⁰ And one anonymous student's surprisingly cogent and concise explanation of the geopolitics of the Norman Conquest on a history exam was riddled with embarrassing misspellings ("Duck of Normandy," "lourds," "vasseles") and appeared as a

³⁹ Greg Lindsay, "A Great One Remembered...Saturday Review," *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*, Feb. 1, 2003.

⁴⁰ William Heffernan, "City College Scandal: The Failures Who Graduate," *New York Post*, Mar. 1, 1978, 19.

sidebar, a sort of Exhibit A.⁴¹

President Marshak bore the brunt of the allegations that professors were being encouraged to pass underperforming students along in order to bolster low enrollments and reduce failure rates. He denied any institutional pressure to let needy students slip through the cracks and defended his decision to assign senior professors lower level classes by arguing that there had been a decline in interest in the humanities and he “simply had to find work for underused faculty.”⁴²

Oddly, the *Post's* “month long investigation,” which would have begun shortly after the publication of Theodore Gross’s article and specifically alleged intense administrative efforts to stifle dissent, made no mention of the embattled Dean or his controversial essay. But on the campus at least, the two vastly different attacks on Open Admissions were easily conflated in people’s minds, and Gross became the resident lightning rod for all the further anguish engendered by the *Post* series as well as by a hotly debated university wide skills test. On March 8, five days after the conclusion of the *Post* series, the Revolutionary Student Brigade stormed Gross’s office while he was out and demanded his resignation. “The students have been taking a lot of clobbering lately,” the newly appointed acting dean for community relations told *The Campus*. “I think the rally is terrific as long as it remains peaceful.”⁴³ The following Monday dozens of students crowded back into his office for a showdown. Gross later described the confrontation as involving not more than a half dozen real “demonstrators,” some of whom were not even students and fifty or more “onlookers, uncertain of why they were even here.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ “A Test Answer,” 5. See the epigraph to this section.

⁴² Heffernan, “City College Scandal,” 5.

⁴³ Gerald Kauvar, quoted in Emily Wolf, “Gross’ Office Swarmed by Protesting Students,” *The Campus*, Mar. 10, 1978, 1.

⁴⁴ Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 102.

“I’m not stupid, you know,” one Puerto Rican student told him. “I may be from another country and can’t speak English good, but I’m not stupid. You embarrassed me.” While trying not to appear overly defensive or combative, Gross assured the gathering that they had chosen “the wrong scapegoat,” that he was their friend. “Do you believe in the Skills test?” one of them demanded, referring to the soon to be implemented two-year skills assessment which was to become an unavoidable hurdle for all CUNY students advancing beyond 64 credits. “Yes,” said Gross.⁴⁵

As the meeting dragged on, it emerged that some students blamed him for saying they were illiterates who didn’t belong in college. “That’s the *New York Post* article,” someone corrected them. And gradually a few students began to openly disagree with the organizers “out of a sense of fairness,” in Gross’s telling, “and the chemistry in the room altered perceptibly until my office became a different kind of space—a more familiar kind of space—a classroom.”

Then, as the energy and crowd began to dissipate, a thirty-year-old graduate student from Gross’s American Literature seminar stepped forward. “Have you read the essay?” she challenged the Puerto Rican woman.

“No—but *he* told me it was no good. *He* told me”

She turned to the leader of the Revolutionary Brigade.

“Have you read this?”

“Part of it. But I’m gonna read the rest—”⁴⁶

No sooner had the crowd dispersed, than the phone rang. According to Gross, it was William Heffernan, the author of the recent *Post* series inquiring about the student

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 102-103. Gross’s account of the meeting is the fullest and its details, if not its conclusions, are consistent with independent accounts. See, for example, Emily Wolf, “Gross Office Swarmed,” 1.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 105.

“demonstration,” whether there had been violence, whether the Brigade had shown up. Gross told him that the students and he had had a “meeting” and declined to comment further. The story never ran. The *New York Post* had, for the moment anyway, had its fill.

MARSHAK: ‘STUPID, UNTEACHABLE, UNWORTHY’ OR ‘THE NATIONAL NORM’?

When the *Post* denied the college an opportunity to respond to Heffernan’s original series, Marshak took out a full-page ad, an “open letter to students, faculty, and the citizens of New York.” As one of the rare documents that attempted to historicize an individual attack on the college, it is worth quoting at length:

Once again our college has been attacked. This time by the *New York Post*. I would like to put the attack, and the true facts, in perspective for you and for the people of this city who support us.

Even while the creation of the college was being debated in 1847, another newspaper, the *Courier and Enquirer* fought it on the grounds that it would be ‘the fruitful source of strife among different classes and religious sects, and almost useless for all purposes of good.’

In the McCarthy era, it was attacked by the *Journal American*, another now-defunct newspaper, as a hotbed of radicalism.

The present attack by the *Post* is a similarly bigoted one, this time against the policy of Open Admissions and the ethnic groups it helps.

The fact is that each generation of City College students has suffered from such attacks. The first to face it were the Irish and northern Europeans who comprised the bulk of the student population in the late 1800’s. The Jewish immigrants of the first half of this century encountered it next. Today it is directed against the Blacks, Hispanics and Asians. Each group, in turn, has been accused of being illiterate, unteachable, stupid or unworthy of public education.⁴⁷

The truth, as those of you who are students, and those who are dedicated faculty members, know very well is that it is no easier today to meet our twin goals of access and excellence than it ever was. But students and faculty, past and present, have much to be proud of in their efforts to meet those goals.

Marshak then cited the Nobel laureates, the numbers of PhD’s and top business executives

⁴⁷ In fact, no one ever accused the Jews of being stupid or unteachable. “Unworthy” yes. Illiterate, no.

among the college's alumni, and the formidable amount of outside sponsorship for faculty research. Achieving the twin goals was tougher than ever, he acknowledged:

We have accepted the obligations of remedial teaching to correct the failures of today's high schools and grade schools. We require courses in remedial writing of those who are only as good as the national average, for we do not believe that such students are fully prepared for the rigors of our curriculum.

The letter catalogued the graduation requirements and high rankings of graduates in pre-med, engineering, nursing, architecture, and other top programs and an overall student performance “at or above the national norm.”

Our self imposed high standards also inevitably mean that many of our present students will not graduate. Fully 50% of those who enter will not achieve a degree, and this is the same as the national average. Many, some of the best, will drop out or fail because of external pressures of financial need or the sort of unthinking bigotry exhibited in these *Post* articles that try to tell them they ‘don’t belong’ or are ‘too far behind.’ Neither they nor their teachers have anything more to be ashamed of for this than did previous generations. Only 15% of the class of 1911 graduated, yet their children and grandchildren became the remarkably able generations of the 30’s and 40’s at City College.⁴⁸ Our present students will do as well. Their desire for an education and their willingness to work hard for it against great odds will serve them and our society very well in the years to come. They—and those dedicated faculty members who work equally hard against equal odds—deserve something better than the prejudice and hostility exhibited by these *Post* articles. They deserve our praise and our support...⁴⁹

‘SURROUNDED BY MYTHS,’ THE *TIMES* STEPS INTO THE FRAY

Marshak’s letter counted as one of the most eloquent statements ever made in defense of City College, its students, and faculty and helped situate one particular media scandal within a larger historical frame. In his efforts to offer a broader perspective on events at the college he was joined by the venerable *New York Times*. A.M. Rosenthal, the paper’s executive editor, and

⁴⁸ As ever, students of the 1930s and ‘40s were, in fact, the first in their families to attend college. Few City College graduates ever sent their children there.

⁴⁹ Robert Marshak, “An Open Letter to the Students and Faculty of City College and to the People of New York,” Advertisement, *New York Post*, Mar. 15, 1978, 29.

Arthur Gelb, the editor in charge of its city desk, had both been City College students during the “golden” 1940s. Rosenthal had been the editor-in-chief of *The Campus* and gotten his first job in journalism as the *Times*’s City College correspondent, a time-honored stepping-stone to a career in the newsroom.⁵⁰ Like much of the liberal Manhattan establishment and in contrast to the other metropolitan dailies, the *Times* had supported community control of public schools and largely stood with the city’s minorities in their struggle for broader access policies.

Rosenthal and Gelb now gave Education Editor Edward B. Fiske, who had already profiled the school’s emerging role as a leader in remedial education the previous spring, more time and space to devote to the ailing City College than they would to the Supreme Court’s historic Bakke decision later that summer.⁵¹ Just a week after the *Post* “Illiterates” series, he wrote a glowing feature on Marshak’s signature Biomedical Education Program set up to train primary care physicians for work in underserved urban neighborhoods. “Quietly, but effectively,” the article said, the program was “charting some new paths in American medical education.” It quoted an admissions officer at a prominent medical school saying the quality of the CCNY graduates “has dispelled the myth that poor kids aren’t that bright.”⁵²

In June, the *Times* followed up with a two-part series of on the legacy of Open Admissions and the college’s ongoing struggles. Fiske now turned to a more sweeping assessment of the ravages of a turbulent era that seemed to be drawing to a close and to search for signs of hope amidst the wreckage. Some of the worst damage, he found, was the bad publicity itself. “You struggle to get an education,” one education major told him, “and then all

⁵⁰ It is probably no coincidence either that the editorial page editors, who were WASP’s and Ivy League graduates and functioned independently of Rosenthal and Gelb’s authority, were less coy about City’s former Jewish character.

⁵¹ Edward B. Fiske, “City U. Earning Reputation in Remedial Writing Field,” *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1977, 1.

⁵² Edward B. Fiske, “City College Trains Inner City Doctors,” *New York Times*, Mar. 12, 1978, 1.

of a sudden people are talking about how the diploma doesn't mean anything."⁵³ The *Times* seemed to be offering at once a rebuttal to all that idle talk and an in-depth look at the data and situation on the ground. They acknowledged, in a somewhat backhanded way, that the college had turned "willy-nilly into a national leader in developing new approaches to the growing field of college-level remedial teaching" and that at the same time, students—albeit in far smaller numbers—continued to go on to compete in the most elite graduate programs and professions. Unlike many of the most vocal and bitter faculty critics, Fiske also acknowledged a national drift away from the humanities and toward professional training. In the final paragraph, he pointed out the little noted fact that the liberal arts students of the storied 1930s were themselves on a vocational track; they were being trained to teach high school English and History and feed a market for PhD's that had long since dried up.⁵⁴

Faculty were involved in a project of "balancing remedial teaching and scholarship" that represented by turns a kind of "academic schizophrenia" and a deeply rewarding "intellectual challenge." "It's pathetic to see people not be able to practice what they were trained to do and not be able to adapt," Gross told the *Times*. But the articles also included ample evidence that some were adapting with imagination and aplomb. One physics professor described "the forced interaction" between the two disparate worlds. Struggling undergraduates would sometimes come to find her in her lab, she said. "There we are with all that liquid helium spouting out. We'll talk about their problems and then they'll look around and ask questions." "In the past," said a German professor redeployed to teach English as a Second Language, "I always thought I knew where the students were; nowadays I have to listen to every kid. It's a positive

⁵³ Edward B. Fiske, "City College Quality Still Debated After Eight Years of Open Admissions," *New York Times*, June 19, 1978, A1.

⁵⁴ Edward B. Fiske, "How Open Admissions Has Changed City College," *New York Times*, June 20, 1978, B11.

experience—no longer being able to take young adults and treat them like sheep. It makes teaching alive and fun.”⁵⁵

Four days later, the *Times* ran an editorial entitled, “City College Lives.” As had the Fiske articles, it predictably lead with “the good old days...when City College was known as ‘The Harvard of the Proletariat.’” but suggested that that era was, in fact, a part of much larger and more complex story. After “a painful period of adjustment” and change, the editors wrote, there were ample signs of life still left in the old girl—“a new stability.” The College continued to set its sights high and to serve “an ever changing city” as a “path out of poverty.”⁵⁶

Save your eulogies, the *Times* seemed to be saying in both its news and editorial pages, rumors of City College’s death have been greatly exaggerated. But though the newspaper provided badly needed context, data, and perspective on the scandal, it insistently kept alive one myth of its own invention: City College had not come to be known as “The Harvard of the Proletariat” in the years after World War I, as Fiske’s article asserted. Nor was it known by that moniker during “the good old days,” as the editorial writers intoned. “The Harvard of the Proletariat,” as we have seen, was a civil-rights-era invention of none other than the *New York Times* itself—though if they hadn’t come up with it someone else no doubt would have had to.⁵⁷ By reifying something that never in fact had a name, the *Times* had unwittingly helped to prepare the ground for the same apocalyptic narratives it was now endeavoring to temper and refute. In addition to the observation that the liberal arts students of the thirties were training for civil service careers, buried in Fiske’s second story was one administrator’s comment that, “We are

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ “City College Lives,” Editorial, *New York Times*, 24 June 1978.

⁵⁷ Even today the alternate terms “Harvard of New York” and “our [Jewish] Harvard” continue to be erroneously telegraphed backward in time in the memoirs of any number of *Times* editors. See, for example, Arthur Gelb, *City Room* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 2003), 41; Max Frankel, *Times of My Life* (New York: Random House, 1999), 94.

surrounded by myths. If you look at the writing of graduates of City College from the 1930's, you realize that the students were never all bloody geniuses."⁵⁸

Students and faculty, too, were eager to put to rest not only the reports of the college's death but also the tired myths that served as fuel for the machines that were digging its grave. "This is not the Harvard of the Proletariat," the editors of *The Campus* had proclaimed back in February after Theodore Gross's article appeared, "nor the Berkeley of the East, but the City College of New York—with all the hopes and frustrations that name implies."⁵⁹

A BLEAK LANDSCAPE, A 'RESIGNATION,' & AN ERODING PUBLIC SPHERE

By then the frustrations vastly outnumbered the hopes, however, and no newspaper could begin to convey the devastation that years of starvation and unrelenting pummeling by disaffected faculty, alumni, political opportunists, and the mass media had already wrought upon the campus. Even as the college community was reeling from Dean Gross's article and the *Post* series, students and faculty also learned that enrollment had dropped for the seventh semester in a row, that a woman had been raped in the iconic bell tower of Shepard Hall, only one of a string of sexual assaults, that the snack bar in the Science building had closed after the fifth stickup in two years, and the college vice president for communications had resigned facing indictment for embezzling tens of thousands of dollars from a professional association (a somewhat inopportune moment for the college to find itself without a seasoned spokesperson). A *Campus* editorial that *preceded* the *Post* series lamented a "decaying spirit" at the college and a student body "unperturbed" by "the decrepit Finley [Student Center] bathrooms, the pack of wild dogs that roam the South Campus, or the three-year-old athletic field whose track is partially submerged

⁵⁸ Assistant Dean Phillip Baumel, quoted in Fiske, "How Open Admissions," B11.

⁵⁹ "The Heights of Decay," Editorial, *The Campus*, February 17, 1978, 2.

underwater.”⁶⁰

At the end of March, Deputy Mayor Herman Badillo (CCNY '51), who had until recently served as New York's first Puerto Rican congressman, returned to his alma mater and told a gathering of fifty students that he favored scrapping the SEEK program altogether and using the funds to instead help students “at the age of seven instead of waiting until they're seventeen.” And he cheered them on saying,

It won't help you if you get a diploma magna cum laude or summa cum laude. What counts is what is the public's perception of the value of the diploma.

Now there is a feeling that the standards have not been enforced, and that feeling comes across as a result of the articles that have appeared and a lot of the professors who have been quoted and because of the fact that the performance of the students and professors is not such that it used to be.⁶¹

The Campus called Badillo's remarks “a third attack on our dignity” and suggested that he and others stop kicking the college while it was down and start coming up with a few constructive solutions.⁶²

Towards the close of the spring 1978 semester, after a long, uncomfortable and apparently strategic silence, President Marshak finally summoned Dean Gross to his office, told him how hurtful his article had been to him—both personally and professionally—and gingerly suggested that he take a semester-long paid sabbatical leave to finish the book of which the *Saturday Review* piece had been intended as the first installment. Gross agreed. Marshak then wrote to him formally accepting his “resignation” as dean. A front page story in the *Times*, quoted Gross as saying that, on the one hand, the decision followed their “mutual recognition”

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, It bears mentioning that during this period the basketball team also sailed to its third all-CUNY championship coached, by none other than the once disgraced 1951 point guard Floyd Lane, and that James Baldwin chose City College's Great Hall to make his homecoming appearance in America after many years living abroad.

⁶¹ Michael Arena, “Diploma's Credibility Knocked by Badillo,” *The Campus*, Mar. 31, 1978, 5. The new mayor, Edward I. Koch, was also a City College alumnus.

⁶² Editorial, *The Campus*, Mar. 31, 1978, 2.

that resigning was the “wise” thing to do, but also that, the tradition of deans serving at the pleasure of the president notwithstanding, Marshak’s decision raised troubling questions about academic freedom.⁶³ Gross then appeared on several TV news programs, in suburban newspapers, and in national magazines discussing his critique and the potentially chilling effects of his dismissal. But as the invitations poured in he resolved not to become “the star witness, the star victim” for the ongoing narratives about City College’s decline and fall. “I refused to become the Timon of the University,” he later wrote.⁶⁴

Reacting to Gross’s dismissal, Leonard Jeffries, the chairman of the Black Studies department who would later emerge as a polarizing figure and the focus of the next great media scandal to rock the College, told *Newsweek* magazine that it had taken courage for Gross to speak out as he had. And if there were a silver lining to the whole affair it was that, “the myths of the ‘40s and ‘50s are gone. The concept of the college as a pseudo Harvard should have been killed long ago. Now we can restructure the college to serve the community.”⁶⁵

Had Gross and his supporters chosen to make his academic freedom an ongoing crusade, there wouldn’t have been much of a student press left to cover it. In spite of the surfeit of news, the college’s several underfunded and understaffed campus newspapers were appearing more and more sporadically. As Gross himself noted soon after,

The number of communications on that campus seemed uncontrollable so that genuine communication was inevitably fragmented, the victim of limited financial support. All attempts at bringing out one solid, well-financed newspaper had

⁶³ Judith Cummings, “Critic of Policies at City College Asked to Resign From Deanship,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1978, 1.

⁶⁴ Gross. *Academic Turmoil*, 137-38.

⁶⁵ Lynn Langway with Elsie B. Washington, “A Scholar’s Lament,” *Newsweek*, May 22, 1978, 87. Jeffries did not report to Gross it should be noted. In a peculiar arrangement, both Black and Puerto Rican studies departments reported to the dean of social sciences, while Asian and Jewish studies were under the umbrella of the humanities.

collapsed before political pressures and you never knew when any single paper would appear. Communications everywhere but no communication.⁶⁶

While counterculture, third world, Zionist, and night students—all of whom had their own publications—were indeed competing with more traditional student journalists for slices of an ever shrinking pie, it was also true that by 1977, largely as a result of the imposition of tuition and runaway inflation, well over half of CUNY’s fulltime students held down jobs during the school year and the majority of them were putting in more than thirty-five hours a week.⁶⁷ That left precious little time for extracurricular activities like news reporting, typesetting, and selling ads, not to speak of the tutoring, counseling, and other dwindling supportive services that had once been at the heart of the Open Admissions experiment.

After more than three decades, *Observation Post*, a newspaper founded by returning World War II veterans, was sputtering and would cease publication altogether within a year. So, too, would *City PM* (née *Main Events*), the official paper of the evening session, after half a century.⁶⁸ As for the relatively new organ for students of African descent: “The rumours of the Paper’s demise have been grossly exaggerated,” reported a little box on that publication’s editorial page—underneath its one brief mention of the Gross article and subsequent controversies—“Actually this has been a test, one design (sic) to establish whether or not people are reading us. To all our admirers, you can put our eulogies away for another time. P.S. we’ll let you know when.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 112-113.

⁶⁷ Sherry Gorelick, “Open Admissions: Design for Failure?” *Politics & Education* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 11.

⁶⁸ The *Zionist Source*, founded in 1973 would hang on a bit longer, till 1981.

⁶⁹ B.R. Brown, Editor’s Note, *The Paper*, Mar. 9, 1978, 4.

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2. POSTMORTEMS

The season for eulogies and postmortems was only just beginning, however. In June 1978 the Rockefeller Foundation sponsored a conference to assess the lessons learned from the “very important educational experiment” that “was” Open Admissions.⁷⁰ The critic Benjamin DeMott used the occasion to give a soaring tribute to the ailing Mina Shaughnessy and her work and to comment on how disheartening the public discourse surrounding the whole topic had become. Among education writers, he noted, “the right line” was no longer “cynically dismissive but piously mournful.”⁷¹ Shaughnessy died that November, and *The Nation* reprinted DeMott’s tribute. “Shaughnessy’s work,” wrote the editors, “may be the most significant advance in years toward what DeMott rightly calls ‘the grand project of this society, that of democratic realization.’”⁷²

But any efforts to put a happy spin on things did little to diminish the period’s distinctly funereal tones. After his sabbatical leave, Theodore Gross never returned, and with his most trusted deputy now gone and growing stasis and resistance among the humanities faculty, Robert Marshak, too, left City College the following spring, a year ahead of schedule. Both men then published book-length memoirs attempting to defend their legacies and come to terms with a tumultuous era and tragic turn of events. As the 1980s dawned journalists and politicians pushed CUNY to the back of their agendas and it was the dramatists who instead took up the largely exhausted debates of the 1960s and 70s. Broadway audiences would find themselves confronted with a vision of the redemptive powers of universal higher education that was at best a mass

⁷⁰ Unnamed Rockefeller Foundation official, quoted in Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 138.

⁷¹ Benjamin DeMott, “As Yet we Lack...Notes on Open Admissions As ‘A New York Tragedy,’” Paper presented at the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, June 13, 1978, Excerpted in *The Nation*, December 9, 1978, 645.

⁷² Editor’s Note. *The Nation*, Dec. 9, 1978, 645.

delusion and at worst a scam, an article of mutual bad faith.

‘ACADEMIC TURMOIL’: MEMOIRS OF AN EXPERIMENT GONE WRONG

The dust jacket of Theodore Gross’s book, *Academic Turmoil: The Reality and Promise of Open Education*, featured a traditional mortarboard with a burning fuse in place of the tassel.⁷³ The ambiguity between an academy that was itself a ticking time bomb and the self-immolation of an individual scholar suited the book that Gross had ultimately written more than he probably knew. Its first chapter was a kinder gentler version of the original article. Without any explanation, students “playing radios, simulating sex, languidly moving back and forth to classes, dancing and singing, eating and studying and sleeping and drinking from beer bottles wrapped in brown paper bags” were now innocuously, “studying texts, preparing papers, playing the radio, moving back and forth to classes, lingering in a space that had come to serve as a temporary lounge.”⁷⁴

The sentence “Now everything seemed plebeian—particularly the minds of the students” had morphed into “Now the students seemed so poorly prepared, one wondered how that poetry could survive in the classroom. Was all our time to be spent in shaping passable prose?”⁷⁵ *Commentary*’s reviewer took Gross to task for quietly “[taking] back much of what he said in his article...without either defending or repudiating it.”⁷⁶ Though the book discussed the original article and its reception at length, gone without explanation were the references to the “cultural intimidation of white faculty,” and women and minorities “using affirmative action to leap into positions of power.” Gone, too, was the characterization of Gross as “unnoticed” by the students

⁷³ One would assume that after his experience with the *Saturday Review*, Gross would have been exceedingly careful about any graphics that accompanied his monograph.

⁷⁴ Gross, “How to Kill a College,” 13; Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 1.

⁷⁵ Gross, “How to Kill a College,” 15; Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 12.

⁷⁶ Peter Shaw, “Open Admissions Revised,” Review of Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, in *Commentary*, May 1980.

outside his office.

The next third of Gross's book, "Publish and Perish," chronicles the fallout from his *Saturday Review* piece and his ultimate resignation and attempts to justify his actions. Most striking was Gross's sense of martyrdom—particularly at the hands of an overheated media—that, and his profound loneliness as he waits for some word from his estranged President: "Each day I would walk through the Lincoln Corridor," he wrote, "like Dr. Stockman in *An Enemy of the People*, leaving my office only to attend an obligatory meeting."⁷⁷

The book's emotional climax came not when the mob of students confronted Gross in his office nor when he finally faced Marshak in his, but just after what easily could have been one of the high points of his career: James Baldwin's "homecoming" reception in the Great Hall after twenty years of exile in Europe, an event he had helped arrange and for which he drafted the President's introductory remarks and an event he reluctantly decided he could no longer attend. Though Baldwin was one of Gross's heroes, Gross had had "ideological differences" with the Black Studies professor coordinating the event, differences the *Saturday Review* article brought to a head. "I was in no mood for a public flagellation," Gross explained in the memoir. "I had seen, in the 1960s, white liberals drawn and quartered for social inequities they could never have resolved, and I had seen too many cower before the epithets of militants who scarcely knew their names. I had no interest in being anyone's academic martyr."⁷⁸

One imagines Gross alone somewhere on the Long Island Expressway as the president began reading his prepared remarks: "James Baldwin has had a lover's quarrel with America..." When Marshak's first private communication finally did arrive, tersely thanking him for drafting

⁷⁷ Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 108. Ibsen's Dr. Stockman is a man of science and uncompromising truth-teller dedicated to saving the townspeople of a Norwegian village from a hidden threat. They are blinded by greed and conformity from Stockman's uncongenial truth, and he and his family must ultimately flee to America.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 114.

the introduction and commenting on the excellent turnout, there is no mention of his being sorry to have missed seeing Gross at the Baldwin lecture. The effect on the reader is devastating. Gross had been irrevocably cast out of a community he had, in the idiom of the English professor, loved not wisely but too well. The Othello allusion is not too much of a stretch here. Had Gross not already been so intemperate and self-aggrandizing, he might well have made it himself. Together Marshak and City College—Gross’s Desdemona—appeared to have betrayed him and in his rage (perplex’d in the extreme) he had lashed out at them, if not killing the college then losing it forever and winding up banished, forlorn.⁷⁹

The other striking thing about the book was how Gross counterposed his own courage and plainspokenness against a cowed faculty (“I can’t sign that petition. I have a leave coming up to France and I need it.”), a debased representational public sphere (you never knew when the student newspapers were going to come out; the faculty council was a mouthpiece for the president...), and finally, an academic culture that was increasingly enslaved to the imperatives of public relations. “From the outset,” wrote Gross. “Open Admissions had been so attacked by reactionary forces that the institution had become more and more addicted to public relations.” The problem of cultivating a positive public image in the face of declining enrollments and budgets was not unique to City College, of course. Programs were often designed more to attract students than to educate them. Vice presidents of development and communications often commanded heftier salaries than esteemed scholars, and few faculty spoke up about it for fear of committing “professional suicide.” But like so many other things, these effects seemed to be more pronounced at City College. “How can a college criticize a culture,” asked Gross, “if it

⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, act 5, scene 2.

can't criticize itself?"⁸⁰

After reading Dean Gross's compelling account, the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* reviewer nonetheless concluded that his actions had been "wrong up and down the line." Either he should have used his influence to persuade Marshak and others of his views and "fought his battle in the college's own media rather than in the public press" or do what he ultimately did: make what amounted to "a political choice...a blatantly adversarial power gamble" beyond the provenance of academic freedom.⁸¹

Over the years, Gross himself came to regret several of his own choices. Already in *Academic Turmoil*, he acknowledged having "forced the scene [in the Lincoln Corridor description] too much, gone literary when I should have been more restrained, drawn contrasts ... that were too dramatic and therefore open to misinterpretation. The subject was so sensitive, caring was not enough—caution was essential, too."⁸² Swept into the national debate on open admissions, he wrote in another memoir—twenty-five years and a successful career as a college president later—still somewhat ambiguously, "[I] glimpsed how one might exploit a controversy in our age of shameless sensationalism." And then with greater contrition:

I lectured at different colleges; I responded to intense letters that celebrated or condemned the article. I began to realize how deeply people felt about this issue, which is so uniquely American. It seemed to call into question core feelings about their own education and then the most conflicted attitudes toward those less privileged and less prepared than themselves. I [had] attributed the heated response of people to the graphic presentation of the piece, but as I review my words twenty-five years later, I realize and recall how disturbing they were to those who had committed themselves ideologically to open admissions.

Now I think of my words as provocative but honest and true—and insensitive to my colleagues who were also trapped and helpless before the impossible demands

⁸⁰ Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 127-8.

⁸¹ John Farago, Review of Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 25, 1980.

⁸² Gross, *Academic Turmoil*, 114.

of open admissions— words born out of a frustrated liberal trapped in the midst of uncontrollable academic turmoil. A *cri de coeur*.⁸³

By writing the essay, Gross knew he had “willed [his] own destruction.” As dean he “should have resigned, left the college quietly, and then written this troubling account, if it still made any sense to write it at all. I see that now.” *Academic Turmoil*, he also realized, was really “an apologia...I had converted a *cri de coeur* into something academic and proper. I had softened the edges.”⁸⁴

‘ACADEMIC RENEWAL’ & THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Three years after the publication of *Academic Turmoil*, Robert Marshak published his own post-mortem and its title, *Academic Renewal*, seemed a direct rejoinder to Gross. The title, at least, had also been softened when compared to a first installment that appeared the year before in the pages of *Change* magazine under the headline “Open Access, Open Admissions, Open Warfare.” For Marshak, Gross’s *Saturday Review* article and the scandal it precipitated was merely symptomatic of the most serious challenge he and the college had faced from the very beginning: disaffected faculty with a pipeline to the mass media invoking a golden age and undermining and overshadowing everyone else’s best efforts. He had devoted too much of his time, he wrote, to countering misperceptions and attending to the college’s suffering image.

Marshak was the Bronx-born child of poor Eastern European Jewish immigrants who rose to become a prominent theoretical physicist. In a near caricature of the stereotype of City College in the thirties, where he studied for just one semester, Marshak’s father was *both* a garment cutter *and* a fruit peddler. (His mother was merely a seamstress.) He’d gone on to the Ivy League and the Manhattan Project. A Nobel-caliber leader in his field and “Distinguished

⁸³ Gross, *The Rise of Roosevelt University*, 24-25

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 26, 28.

University Professor” at a well-funded private institution with no teaching duties, Marshak was an improbable choice to steer the desperate college through its next, uncertain chapter after police occupied the campus and Buell Gallagher resigned in 1969. Nonetheless, he was handed the herculean task of implementing the controversial and wildly ambitious new admissions policy and, in the face of unprecedented internal strife and relentless assaults on the school’s budget, personnel, and student body, somehow he managed to keep the College moving forward. Marshak would be the last twentieth century City College president one could say that about.

Marshak’s memoir confirms Gross’s basic intuition that public perception became, if not an addiction, then an all-consuming preoccupation during the Open Admissions era.⁸⁵ In order to understand that process, it’s useful to first grasp how Marshak himself saw the college when he made what he describes as an “irrational” decision to accept the post. As a poor Jewish boy from the Bronx, he had graduated from James Monroe High School at the height of the Great Depression and proceeded, along with the other top students, to City College. (Jonas Salk was a sophomore there at the time.) After only a semester, however, Marshak was awarded one of ten Pulitzer Scholarships for New York City public high school graduates to attend Columbia just down the street. (He was suspiciously the only Jewish student to be awarded a scholarship that year.) At Columbia, he started out as a philosophy major and once invited City College’s famous Morris Raphael Cohen to come down and give a talk. In 1940, Marshak had also taught a summer physics course at City, so he was certainly acquainted with the “perfidious” intellectual atmosphere there as well as with its squalid but nurturing working-class Jewish milieu.

After the war he was propelled, “by a grateful and frightened nation” into a comfortable life devoted to pure science at a major research university. But Marshak wrestled with an uneasy

⁸⁵ Marshak’s very selection raises related questions: He had no experience as an academic administrator nor had he apparently applied for the job. Was it his world-class prestige that attracted the search committee, then?

conscience over his seminal contributions to a world replete with atomic weaponry, and the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, and campus upheavals of the 1960s seem to have further reawakened the young philosopher in him. He became, by his telling, increasingly sensitive to how bereft his own university was of a humanistic mission, how cut off it was from its community. Much as it had for Adrienne Rich, the City College seems to be offering Marshak a way to, in this case, re-involve himself in the real life of the city. It offered the prospect of reconnecting to a community and set of possibilities, which—by virtue of his own brilliance, dumb luck, and a world war—had been foreclosed to him while still a teenager.

If the prospect of serving as the first Jewish president of the College of the City of New York had a particular resonance for a garment worker's son of Marshak's generation, he nevertheless harbored few illusions about current conditions at the College. Returning to the "cavernous" Great Hall after nearly forty years, he found peeling paint, row upon row of chairs covered with dust and a half-dozen drunks nodding off in the rear. Outside the president's office was posted a full time security guard and one student journalist warned him heroin dealing was "rampant" on campus.

These obvious signs of deterioration, when added to the anticipated problems of Open Admissions, ethnic sensitivity, alumni disaffection and community hostility persuaded me that the new City College president would be confronted with all the difficulties, suspicions and conflicting pressures that one could possibly imagine... that it would constitute a genuinely challenging experiment in crisis resolution and human relations. I decided to accept the offer.⁸⁶

'CONSTANTLY ON THE DEFENSIVE'

The Evans and Novak column that appeared in the *New York Post* just a few months after Marshak's tenure began figured prominently in his account. City College had been "born in controversy," and its "total dependence" on the city and state for funding made it "vulnerable to

⁸⁶ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 3.

political suggestion and innuendo.”⁸⁷ During Open Admissions’s and Marshak’s first year the college had attracted roughly the same number of high performing freshmen as before—along with a massive influx of students of widely varying abilities. Only during later years did the numbers of academically strong freshman begin to decline. Marshak attributed this trend to “popular misconceptions,” an alternately hostile and indifferent “mass media,” and an “emboldened” cadre of disaffected faculty with “ready access” to it. Together they kept the college constantly on the defensive.

The institution’s position in the cultural capital of black America and media capital of the world made the problem of ready access all the more acute. Its location at the nexus of several of New York City’s poorest ghettos coupled with CUNY’s policy of giving incoming freshmen their first choice of a school also had the deleterious effect of concentrating the least prepared and neediest students on the Harlem campus and creating largely white, middle-class Meccas at Queens and Hunter’s campus on Park Avenue—yet another process fed by the problem of reputation. When the college began charging tuition in 1976, he wrote, middle-class families began sending their children to SUNY colleges with better facilities for the same price, “further undermining the academic, ethnic, and class mix at the heart of the school’s mission.”⁸⁸

Marshak struggled to counter these and other, broader trends like declining interest in the humanities by seeking private funds—mostly from wealthy alumni—to create a host of comparatively small, elite programs that would continue to attract highly qualified students, shore up the City College’s reputation, and embody a new vision of the institution’s role in the community. Early on, he had studied Clark Kerr’s 1967 proposal for an “Urban Grant University” that would direct the intellectual and material resources of schools like City College

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 2, 8.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 66.

toward solving the problems of the modern American city, “where the city itself and its problems would become the animating focus, as agriculture once was and to some extent still is of the land-grant university.”⁸⁹ Kerr had reviewed the speeches given on the occasion of City College’s centennial and noted that though they had much to say about

the new science, the new international order, liberalizing the liberal arts college, the problems of organized labor and of the business, there was no mention of the ghetto. There was no mention of equality of opportunity. There was no mention of urban blight. There was no mention of the inadequacies of the school system at the primary and secondary levels. But these are precisely what the concerns of the urban-grant university, I think, should be. It should come in with its shirt sleeves rolled up.⁹⁰

Using this model, in the course of his nine-year tenure Robert Marshak developed a School of Biomedical Education that trained students to work as primary care physicians in urban areas and fast tracked them into top medical schools and other, similar programs in Urban Legal Studies and Architecture. He also built the multi-million dollar Leonard Davis Center for the Performing Arts on the South Campus and upgraded the college’s physical plant. Many of these projects got off the ground with the \$25 million in donations Marshak and his deputies secured from reticent alumni. But one of his greatest challenges became grappling with what he described as their profound alienation from “their romance with the ideal of the disadvantaged, a romance dominated by the ‘Brilliant Student Superachiever’ who for the short period of three decades made City College a national phenomenon.”⁹¹

In its glowing assessment of the Marshak legacy, the *New York Times* editorial marking his departure captured his essential role as a communicator. Marshak, the editors wrote, had

⁸⁹ Clark Kerr, “The Urban Grant University: A Model for the Future,” Lecture given to the Centennial Meeting of the City College Chapter of the Society of Phi Beta Kappa, New York, Oct. 18, 1967, *The City College Papers* 8 (1968): 6.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 10.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 55.

come to a college “in shambles” where “the prevailing mood was to eulogize a glorious past and write off the future.” But he “understood there was no going back” and immediately set out “not to bury the college but *to demonstrate its value* to a troubled city.” If nothing else, the \$25 million in donations “suggests he struck a responsive chord.”⁹² Perhaps the greatest irony would be that the fourth center—after medicine, law, and performing arts—the final piece in Marshak’s urban grant model, the one he was—thanks, he says, to the fallout from the Gross debacle and an increasingly recalcitrant liberal arts faculty— never able to build was a school of communications and public policy.⁹³

Change magazine, whose readers were among the most passionate followers of the Open Admissions saga, did not even see fit to review Marshak’s workmanlike but enlightening memoir when it came out—nor did virtually any other American journal.⁹⁴ Though *Change* published the book’s most dramatic chapter, “Open Warfare,” in two installments in 1982, it did not print any reader letters—if there were any. For better or worse, the debate on Open Admissions was now closed. Outside the precincts of the academy itself, what little discussion remained had entered the realm of popular culture.

SUBWAY FANTASIES: DRAMATIZING OPEN ADMISSIONS’ BIG LIE

In 1977, Peter Rondinone had co-written a notably wooden screenplay for a fictional twenty-minute film, a morality tale in which George, a character very much like he was, a young, unpaid writing tutor at City College, tries to encourage and befriend students struggling with problems that range from bad grammar and lack of confidence to violent home lives. George’s

⁹² “The Marshak Vision of City College,” Editorial, *New York Times*, June 16, 1979, 20. Emphasis mine.

⁹³ Part Two: Robert E. Marshak and Gladys Wurtemberg, “Open Access, Open Admissions, Open Warfare,” Part 2, *Change* 14, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1982): 41-2

⁹⁴ Unlike Gross’s memoir, Marshak’s was a low-budget affair, printed in typescript, published by a scholarly press, and marketed very differently, if at all.

parasitic childhood friend connects him to a sleazy, money-hungry movie producer who proposes they do a feature-length documentary on literacy in America using George's students as subjects. "I see," said George, "a sort of [character] study of each of them, exploring their family histories [and] educational backgrounds to show that they're the victims of an imperfect public school system, right?"

"Not exactly," the producer tells him. "The people behind this project want to use your students as an example of the *decline* of literacy in America. You know, to show that it's reached epidemic proportions...I understand what your trying to do with them kids, trying to make 'em into something. But when you get right down to it, them kids in your class, they're just a bunch of animals." That gives Rondinone's character entrée to launch into a more perfect version of the fabricated dressing down he claimed to have given *60 Minutes*'s Morley Safer two years earlier and to throw the money the producer is dangling in front of him back in his face: "I'm sorry, Mister," he tells him, "but the kids in my class are not illiterate and I refuse to allow you to film them as if they were."⁹⁵

Subway Fantasy was a student film that never had a commercial release, but in 1977 it was still possible to imagine someone wanting to make a feature length film about *Open Admissions* with an idealistic character like George at its center. In the world of Shirley Lauro's play *Open Admissions*, which opened three years later at the off-off Broadway Ensemble Studio Theater, there is no suggestion that anyone, much less a movie producer, would ever be interested in such characters' lives. Its tone is an admixture of DeMott's cynically dismissive and no-longer-so-piously mournful.

The play's protagonist, Calvin Jefferson, a dirt-poor, borderline-literate black orphan

⁹⁵ *The Subway Fantasy*, Dir. by Jeffrey Wisotsky, 1977, Part II, videorecording: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFfCllyrFY> (accessed Oct. 14, 2010).

from the rural South and former drug dealer studying at an unnamed CUNY college, repeatedly corners his professor, the “peppy,” white Midwesterner Ginny Carlsen, a low-level instructor of 172 Speech Communication students, to demand extra help on his assignments. Ginny continually blows him off until, after giving a disastrous class presentation on a scene from Othello (a character she has assigned to all the black males in the class), he confronts her and demands to know “How come *all* I ever git is ‘B’?”

I stood up there, didn’t give no dictionary definition or say no emotion I could ‘identify’ with or nothing! *Nothin!* I didn’t hardly know the sense a anything I read! Couldn’t *hardly* even *read!* Only *you* didn’t notice! Wasn’t even listenin, sittin there thumbn through your stuff. An then you give me a ‘B’!⁹⁶

College was supposed to be Calvin’s “big break” his “turn.” Instead, he says he hasn’t learned anything and is increasingly confused about how to improve. Ginny tries to calm him down:

Look—last year I heard they got 10 black students into Ivy League Graduate Programs—and I bet they were no better than you—they were just perceived as better! Now that’s the key for you Calvin. To be perceived as better—so *you* can get recommendations and do well on *your* interviews too and... You’re good looking and ambitious and have a fine native intelligence—and you can make it! I promise you! All we have to do is build your Image!

Calvin gradually recognizes what’s going on: “You tryin to make some kinda *deal* with me?” he asks, becoming increasingly agitated. “You sellin? You is, ain’t you?!?! AIN’T YOU?!? YOU *SELLIN!!* YOU AIN’T *TEACHIN!*”

During the second act, Calvin’s sister warns him to keep his mouth shut and stay focused on getting his diploma, their “ticket out.” “Diploma piece of toilet paper shit!” he tells her. Ginny, too, is forced to face reality: “I’m a ghetto teacher, “ she tells her boyfriend, “HEAR ME? A GHETTO TEACHER! For the rest of *my life.*”

In the play’s climactic scene, Calvin finds Ginny alone in her classroom and menacingly

⁹⁶ Shirley Lauro, *Open Admissions* (New York: Samuel French, 1984), 8.

insists on doing his Othello project over to improve his grade. He has finally found the “emotion” he can “identify” with, he says: “BETRAY.” The scene that Calvin haltingly performs is the one where the Moor demands that Desdemona tell him “What art thou?” and “Swear thou art honest.” He then accuses her of being “false as hell.”⁹⁷ Here, as in the Shakespeare, of course, both characters have been duped. They are victims of an elaborate hoax.

Ginny breaks down and confesses that Calvin’s “college readiness” exam showed that he reads at a fifth-grade level and will “never” be able to compete for a job “not in an open market.” She confesses that she hasn’t been able to face the truth til now either: “I didn’t want to look at anything like failure ‘cause if you were F then so was I.” Calvin says even if she’s powerless to change the system she can still make a difference in his life. “I’m one person in one job,” she replies. “You need a tutor.” “I’m your job!” he tells her. “They outta tutors!” In the end, Lauro’s play tenders both characters the possibility of communion and transcendence through the grueling work of no-nonsense, one-on-one teaching and learning.

Open Admissions was expanded and taken to Broadway in 1984 where it closed after only 19 performances.⁹⁸ Among other paraphernalia, the “PROP LIST” indicated a copy of the *New York Post* in the office of the cynical, jaded tenured professor and the *New York Times* spread all over Ginny’s apartment. *Open Admissions*, the play, incorporated many of the tropes that make up the grand narrative of *Open Admissions*, the project: the underclass imagery, the urban illiterate, the well meaning but clueless teacher, the cruel hoax, the worthless diploma... It portrayed a system made up of teachers and students cynically colluding to produce the *appearance* of educational processes and outcomes without having the basic intellectual or material equipment or, in many cases, the wherewithal to get the job done. In many ways it

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 4, scene 2.

⁹⁸ A TV version starring Jane Alexander in the role of Ginny aired nationally four years later.

provided the perfect coda to a radical experiment that, in the course of the 1970s, became ever more diminished and fraught with contradictions. Lauro attempted to dramatize the plight of teachers who found themselves confronted with a challenge very different from the one they had signed up for early in their careers and who were forced to choose whether to embrace that challenge or fight tooth and nail.

By the same token the play was notable for the personal agency it gave an admittedly overdrawn Open Admissions student to demand that both the institution and the larger society own up to and make good on their promise of a college education. Like the history student cited by the *New York Post* in the epigraph to this section, Calvin, for all his scholastic deficits, struggled with a difficult text and showed that he was able to grasp important things about Iago, Othello, and their dramatic situations and to apply those lessons to his own life in ways that might well elude an otherwise more capable student.

For Robert Marshak, the key challenge of Open Admissions was “to redefine traditional concepts of the educable,”⁹⁹ a necessarily collaborative process among not only college presidents and spokespeople and the press but also teachers and students. Unlike the journalists and memoirists and playwrights, the tone struck by City College students at the close of the decade was neither cynical nor dismissive; nor was it pious or mournful. Some sported T-shirts proclaiming, “I am a City College Eliterate.” Others, like the black student quoted in the *Post* series, took all the dysfunction and withering criticism in stride and kept their eyes on the prize:

This whole idea [of Open Admissions] was started by [Mayor] Lindsay in 1969 to keep everything cool up here in Harlem. But some of us are going to get something out of it anyway. Others won't, but there isn't very much anybody can

⁹⁹ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 42.

do about that. This is a racist place we're at. Most of the people here don't care about us. They just want our bodies here because it makes them look good.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Hefernan, "The Failures Who Graduate," 19.

VII. 'THE GORGEOUS MOSAIC'

[Professor Leonard] Jeffries was Evans' and Novak's dream. He was the dream of everybody who hated the idea of democratic higher education. Jeffries embodied—they loved Jeffries because he hadn't written a f-----g word. You know "publish or perish"? He did neither. He went through the college like a gangster; he used to walk around with bodyguards. Because he wore some kind of f-----g dashiki. Because he looked like a prick, because he behaved like a prick, and because he was a prick. He was their dream. He was kind of like the Stepin Fetchit of the academic world.¹

—Professor Leonard Kriegel, 2010.

Jeffries is as much a performer as he is an ideologue... His collection of lackeys, his bond with his black students, the middle-aged man who videotapes his lecture every day: these are his personal signature elements contributing to his "performative" style of instruction, persona as pedagogy ... A Jeffries' lecture owes much of its energy to the audience's constant participation—its interruptions, encouragement, laughter. Here, the academy meets the talk show.²

—Richard Benjamin, 1994.

I called the New York Times after they attacked me last year and I told them, "Thank you, for making me a folk hero among my people." ... When the New York Times put it in the paper that Jeffries says that rich Jews were involved in the enslavement process, they put that in there to paint me as an anti-Semitic (sic). An anti-Semitic does not stay at City College for twenty years as chairman of a department, and have friends [and] even... his enemies respect him at City College. And the head Jew at City College, Dr. Bernard Sohmer, saw me after the article in the Times and said, "Len, everybody knows rich Jews helped finance the slave trade." If everybody knows it then lets put it in the classroom.³

—Professor Leonard Jeffries, 1991.

[Journalist] Jim Traub was a tourist among the working classes. There is a morbid fascination in this man with the exotic poor and with the Jeffries-ites, a fascination which middle-class people have often had for the lower orders... Just as some members of his class in the sixties thought blacks could do no wrong, now they see them all as these pathetic incompetents and crazies.⁴

—Professor Judith Stein, 1994

¹ Leonard Kriegel, Interview with author, New York, Feb. 22, 2010.

² "The Bizarre Classroom of Dr. Leonard Jeffries," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Winter 1994, 96

³ Leonard Jeffries, Address to the Empire State Black Arts Festival, Albany, NY, July 20, 1991.

⁴ Quoted in Jon Wiener, "School Daze," *The Nation*, Nov. 7, 1994, 528.

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By the early 1990s City College had, in the popular imagination at least, taken on the persona of an angry black man. The number of black male students had actually dwindled since Open Admissions' high-water mark in the mid-1970s and the complexion of the faculty remained largely unchanged. But the two events that most defined City College in the public eye at that time, an incendiary, racially charged speech by a prominent black professor and a poorly planned basketball/rap event in the college gym that triggered the worst disaster in the College's 145-year history, both had reckless black men at their centers. Both seemed to confirm that the school had become a madhouse, seething with marginal, exotic people and ideas and rife with physical danger. More than that, the college embodied widespread fears about a new, violent urban underclass and youth culture that seemed to be coming unhinged. "There was a sense that the city was unraveling," said then *New York Post* columnist Pete Hamill, "That young people fueled by crack and rage, and armed with guns, were out of control."⁵ In the course of the decade City College would serve as a recurring symbol of this great unraveling and a key site of struggle for those eager to rein in government spending and reassert control over a variety of public institutions. And in that effort the press, once again, colluded with longtime professors and political figures to reinforce the public's worst stereotypes and fears, sharpen divisions among New York's ethnic communities, and further undermine City's waning public support.

THE PROFESSOR, THE JOURNALIST, & THE POLITICIAN

First, in a speech delivered at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival in Albany on July 20, 1991, the longtime chairman of the school's Black Studies department, Dr.

⁵ Pete Hamill, quoted in LynNell Hancock, "Wolf Pack: The Press and the Central Park Jogger," *Columbia Journalism Review* 38 (Jan. 2003).

Leonard Jeffries, Jr., denounced white people and especially “rich Jews” for financing the Atlantic slave trade, plotting to degrade generations of American blacks in Hollywood films and willfully perpetuating a public school curriculum rooted in “racial pathology.”⁶ A *New York Post* reporter happened upon a rebroadcast of the speech two weeks later, and catapulted both Professor Jeffries and City College onto the front pages of the dailies and into the national spotlight. Jeffries’s tenured professorship and departmental chair were funded by taxpayer dollars and seemed to confer on him a legitimacy and authority inconsistent with this brand of demagoguery. Almost overnight, Leonard Jeffries came to stand for the larger debasement of public discourse and institutions, not to speak of the extremes of violence and paranoia that seemed to have become the norm in America’s largest city. Certainly he was every tabloid journalist’s dream.

Then, five months after Jeffries’s controversial speech, as New Yorkers were alternately defending him and calling for his head and college officials were still trying to figure out what to do about him, City College again garnered national notoriety when a celebrity basketball game and rap concert in the college’s Nat Holman Gymnasium attended by everyone from former World Heavyweight boxing champion, Mike Tyson, to leaders of the hip-hop revolution Run DMC, LL Cool J, Puff-Daddy and Heavy-D was so oversold and undermanaged that hundreds of desperate fans pressed their way into stairwell leading to the basement venue, crushing nine young people to death and injuring dozens more. The “gym tragedy,” as it would come to be known, was the deadliest event on an American college campus in the more than two decades since the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four Kent State University students during an anti-war protest and, like those events, seemed to have a much deeper resonance in the culture at

⁶ Leonard Jeffries, Speech to the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival, Albany, NY, July 20, 1991, transcript, http://www.africawithin.com/jeffries/our_sacred_mission.htm (accessed Nov. 19, 2010).

large. For many, it confirmed the impression that Leonard Jeffries was not merely one irrepressible, mad professor but also that the entire campus was out of control.

It was the deaths of those nine youths in the stairwell that first brought journalist James Traub uptown to the City College campus in the early days of 1992. The gym tragedy had occurred during winter break, however, and not only were there few City College students in attendance that night, he discovered, but few had much of anything to say to him about it.⁷

Something about the place captured Traub's interest, however, and he decided to have a look around. Before he was done he would spend hundreds of hours over more than a year hanging out with students in the cafeteria, sitting in on classes, and interviewing professors and deans.

Traub had gotten his start in journalism during the late 1970s as a reporter for arch-conservative Rupert Murdoch's newly acquired *New York Post* and as an editor for the ailing *Saturday Review* that had published Theodore Gross's 1978 essay under the provocative headline "How to Kill a College." Like Gross, Traub was someone whose sixties liberalism was "giving way around the edges."⁸ Published in 1994, the book he ended up writing, full of dramatic contrasts between remedial backwaters, advanced seminars on Wittgenstein and Derrida, and ideological circuses like Leonard Jeffries's classroom, is still the only monograph about City College ever to be published by a commercial press. Its title, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*, spoke as much to the way Traub's own liberal faith was put to the test as to that of the hardy immigrant students and beleaguered faculty he encountered. After much hand wringing, Traub concluded that in trying to be all things to all people and to take on problems far beyond what any single institution could be expected to manage, City College had become tragically ineffectual, an organization at odds with itself, a college in name only.

⁷ Traub, *City on a Hill*, 5.

⁸ *ibid.*, 18.

In concert with other neoliberal critiques, Traub's book was to have a profound influence on the direction of education policy in the latter half of the 1990s. The hard charging, prosecutorial Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and his education advisor Herman Badillo—a City College alumnus and, for a quarter century, mayoral aspirant—began a campaign to wrest control of the failing public schools and senior CUNY colleges from the community boards and militant forces they claimed had commandeered them back in the late 1960s. *City on a Hill* was one piece of evidence among many of the disastrous consequences of those developments which Badillo and others would marshal in their efforts to once and for all purge City and the other four-year colleges of their remedial hoi polloi and, ultimately, of disreputable characters like Leonard Jeffries. Above all, they sought to class up the joint and to make the college and the city that surrounded it appear once again hospitable to the well-prepared, white, middle class student.

The almost cartoonlike figure of Leonard Jeffries coupled with the highly evocative image of unruly hordes of ghetto youths bum-rushing the college's open doors and trampling one another to death in the ensuing mayhem was simply too appetizing for a hungry press and political class to pass up. Publications like the *New York Post* and *Daily News*—both of which declared bankruptcy and nearly sank during this period—and even the venerable *New Yorker* magazine, where portions of *City on a Hill* originally appeared, would seize on such imagery to boost their flagging circulation. After Traub, there emerged other, more scholarly and nuanced accounts of the varied gains of Open Admissions students at City and elsewhere—careful, longitudinal studies that could scarcely compete with the immediacy and narrative force of the Leonard Jeffries tabloid saga, with Traub's woeful tale, or with a debate the terms of which had

been framed decades earlier.⁹ Politicians like Herman Badillo, in turn, exploited the more sensationalistic aspects of these narratives to further their own ambitions, ushering in a new, get-tough era throughout New York's public education system and the wholesale abandonment of the lofty goals of Open Admissions and community control.

This section examines the question of how the culture produced a Leonard Jeffries, a James Traub, and a Herman Badillo, how each of them was able to use the City College of New York to construct a public persona and have a shaping influence on the institution and its image. It is the story of a professor, a journalist, and a politician who, each in his own way, appealed to reactionary currents in an American city at the end of the Twentieth Century in an effort to resolve their own ideological confusion and advance their personal agendas. Leonard Jeffries's portrayal as an academic charlatan and his drawn-out excommunication ceremony and internal exile hold important lessons about how popular perceptions are mobilized to erode support for public institutions like City College. Not only did it redefine City College in the public mind, it set off a chain reaction of ensuing scandals over English language proficiency at nearby Hostos Community College, failure rates of City College education majors on statewide teacher certification exams, and a four-year graduation rate below fifteen percent that occasioned the formal end to remediation at the four-year colleges and rendered not merely one professor but an entire of class of students the true excommunicants of the 1990s budget battles and culture wars.

⁹ See, for example, Sternglass, *A Time to Know Them*; Lavin and Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds*.

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1. A SORRY SPECTACLE: THE *POST*'S MAD PROFESSOR

One cannot begin to fathom Leonard Jeffries or the various responses to him without first grasping the devastation visited upon urban America and black people in particular beginning in the mid-1980s. The multiple scourges of crack cocaine, AIDS, homelessness, and gun violence emerged so suddenly, with such devastating and mutually reinforcing effects and they were met with such extremes of official indifference and moral panic that for those living in the hardest-hit urban communities it was often hard to believe they had not been carefully planned. In New York City alone, by the time Jeffries made his infamous speech more than 25,000 people had already died of AIDS—a syndrome that a decade earlier had barely been known to exist—and their numbers continued to climb sharply. Over 2,500 New Yorkers were murdered that year, twice the 1969 number, though the city's overall population had declined significantly since then. In less than a decade, new drugs, diseases, waves of violent death and an exploding prison population had increased the number of children living in foster care more than threefold to over 48,000.¹⁰

APOCALYPSE NOW: THE ASSAULT ON BLACK AMERICA

The black and Latino communities not only bore the brunt of these trends but were being reminded from a number of different quarters and with increasing frequency that their lives had less value and potential. By 1987, rising street crime and racial insensitivity had made it possible for City College professor Michael Levin to write in the *Times* that, given the heightened incidence of criminality among young black men, Madison Avenue shopkeepers were morally justified in keeping their doors closed to them, something he qualified as “a discriminatory

¹⁰ Timothy Ross, “A System in Transition: New York’s Foster Care System in the Year 2000,” (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, June 2001), 8.

inconvenience” rather than the outright discrimination represented by affirmative action programs.¹¹ Six months later a Manhattan jury had acquitted “subway vigilante” and folk hero Bernhard Goetz of all criminal charges except illegal gun possession after he shot four unarmed black teenagers who were allegedly harassing him on the subway, leaving one paralyzed for life.¹²

The late 1980s and early 90s were both the best and worst of times for the black man in America. In 1989 alone Virginia’s Douglas Wilder became the nation’s first black governor since Reconstruction, and in their first electoral match-up David Dinkins narrowly defeated Rudolph Giuliani to become New York City’s first black mayor. That same year Colin Powell (CCNY ‘58) was appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest military post ever held by an African American, and went on to oversee the successful invasions of Panama and Iraq. When Nelson Mandela, recently released from a South African prison, appeared at a nationally televised “town meeting” at City College in 1990, he was welcomed by the school’s first black president.¹³

But an unprecedented crisis in black male leadership also seemed to be developing. Just during the few months that news of Leonard Jeffries burst in and out of the headlines, a disgraced former Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry began serving a six-month prison term after being caught on surveillance video smoking crack in a hotel room with a former girlfriend; Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas was publicly humiliated during his nationally televised confirmation hearings by charges that he sexually harassed his deputy, Anita Hill;

¹¹ Michael Levin & Margarita Levin, “Howard Beach Turns a Beam on Racial Tensions,” Letter, *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 1987, E30.

¹² The most seriously injured was later awarded civil damages.

¹³ On television Bill Cosby had already popularized the image of the professional black father in a stable, two-parent home, and emerging African American filmmakers Spike Lee and John Singleton were both nominated for Academy Awards for their commercially successful depictions of ghetto life.

former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson was awaiting trial on charges of raping the eighteen-year-old Miss Black Rhode Island; and three-time NBA Most Valuable Player Earvin “Magic” Johnson called a press conference to announce that he was leaving basketball at the height of his career after contracting the virus that causes AIDS—then thought to be a death sentence.¹⁴ More than three quarters of black New Yorkers believed that it either was true or “might possibly be true” that the government “singles out and investigates black elected officials in order to discredit them in a way it doesn’t do with white officials,” which made them all the more inclined to stand by black leaders whom they might not otherwise have supported.¹⁵

This growing mistrust of white officialdom was more than a matter of perception. Even as crime continued to escalate in black and Latino neighborhoods like the one surrounding City College organized criminal gangs of mostly-white police officers, many in uniform, openly shook down drug dealers, conducted illegal raids, sold confiscated narcotics to competing dealers, and randomly roughed up residents of public housing projects.¹⁶ And New Yorkers watched on their TVs homemade video footage of four Los Angeles police officers taking turns clubbing a black man named Rodney King as he lay face down by the roadside.

But the event that most seemed to embody the fears, mistrust, and deep racial divisions among New Yorkers in the lead-up to the Leonard Jeffries controversy was the rape and savage beating of a white, female investment banker in Central Park in April 1989, allegedly at the hands of a gang of six black and Latino teenagers, none older than sixteen. Though they were

¹⁴ Although he never specified where he thought he became infected, Johnson later acknowledged having the kind of promiscuous sex life typical of many professional athletes.

¹⁵ Jason DeParle, “Talk of Government Being Out to Get Blacks Falls on More Attentive Ears,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1990, B7.

¹⁶ The Mollen Commission’s investigation of Upper Manhattan’s “Dirty 30th” precinct adjacent to City College, alone resulted in the criminal indictments of twenty-nine officers, one of the worst documented cases of police corruption in New York City history. See: The City of New York Commission to Investigate Allegations of Police Corruption and the Anti-Corruption Procedures of the Police Department, “Commission Report,” July 7, 1994.

admittedly up to no good in the park that night, none of the accused teenagers had criminal records nor did any physical evidence link them to the crime. Nonetheless, after up to thirty sleepless hours in police custody five confessed to attacking the jogger and on that basis alone were convicted of rape, attempted murder, and other charges and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Like the two juries, no one in the mainstream press questioned the likelihood that five somewhat ordinary black boys would not only gang-rape but also beat a white woman into a coma and leave her in the woods to die, eighty percent of the blood draining from her body. Black-owned newspapers and radio stations contended that the defendants were being “railroaded,” however, and compared the case to that of the Scottsboro Boys.¹⁷ Not until more than a decade later, after all of them had completed their sentences, did DNA evidence confirm the longstanding suspicion that the youths had not attacked the jogger at all and that their flawed, conflicting, false confessions were, in fact, coerced.¹⁸

LEONARD JEFFRIES & THE CURRICULUM OF EXCLUSION

Leonard Jeffries was neither a criminal justice advocate nor a media critic, however. He was a Columbia-trained PhD in West African politics and history whose career had taken off two decades earlier on the sudden wave of interest in black studies and the African past. And by 1991, when he delivered his infamous Albany speech, Jeffries had become a polarizing figure in New York State’s efforts to reform another of the social institutions that were widely seen to be failing black students: the public schools. His involvement had ended up persuading him that education for black children would not be reformed, however, even as it persuaded many others of his extreme Afrocentric views and ahistorical approach to teaching and learning.

¹⁷ Black-owned news outlets were also the only ones to defy the ethical conventions of their profession by repeatedly naming the rape victim. In part this was out of spite: The police released the names of the underage suspects “because of the seriousness of the incident,” and all the mainstream papers printed them.

¹⁸ Susan Saulny, “Convictions and Charges Voided in ‘89 Central Park Jogger Attack,” *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2002, 1.

In 1988 Jeffries had been hired as a consultant to a State Education Department task force charged with determining the extent to which state curriculum guidelines “adequately reflect the pluralistic nature of society” and with identifying opportunities for improving them.¹⁹ With Jeffries’s intervention, the task force produced a report which concluded that the state curriculum—even recently revamped segments thereof—was entirely inadequate in this respect and was plagued with “systematic bias” toward European cultures, with “stereotyping” and “misinformation,” and that it “systematically distorted, marginalized, or omitted” the contributions of other groups and needed to be radically revised in order to foster greater self-esteem among children of color and “a less arrogant perspective” among whites.²⁰

In the face of these damning and politically volatile conclusions, State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol brought in four of his own consultants, one of whom, education historian Diane Ravitch, a principal architect of the recently revised California history and social studies curricula, expressed nothing but scorn for the “Curriculum of Inclusion.” Far from being multicultural, it was, she said, an affirmation of “multiple ethnocentrism” that failed to address “the importance of being sensitive to all kinds of different groups.”²¹ With yet another panel of experts still studying the curriculum question one year later, Ravitch and CUNY historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published an Op-ed in *Newsday* noting that the original task force had failed to include a single historian and had produced a “polemical” report bereft of any understanding of the historian’s craft or standards of evidence. The task force understood history as little more than “a form of social and psychological therapy whose function is to raise the self-esteem of

¹⁹ New York State Education Department, “A Curriculum of Inclusion: Report of the Commissioner's Task Force on Minorities: Equity and Excellence,” 1989. See also, Thomas Sobol, quoted in Edward B. Fiske, “Education; Lessons,” *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1990.

²⁰ *ibid.*, iii-iv.

²¹ Diane Ravitch, quoted in Binder, 89.

children from minority groups,” they said, and they decried what they saw as the report’s reduction of their discipline to “ethnic cheerleading on the demand of pressure groups,” its undisguised contempt for the entire Western tradition, and

use of the school system to promote the division of our people into antagonistic racial groups. We are after all a nation—as Walt Whitman said, “a teeming Nation of nations”—and history enables us to understand the bonds of cohesion that make for nationhood and a sense of the common good: *unum e pluribus*.²²

Perhaps in hope of diffusing the situation, the second panel’s kinder, gentler conclusions did not come out until full year after that, in June 1991, under the title “One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence,” and it was in response to its release and to Jeffries’s recent and prominent mention in Arthur Schlesinger’s new book, *The Disuniting of America* that he delivered his infamous Albany speech.²³ Jeffries had by then spent nearly two decades as a tenured professor in the same cloistered black studies department. Though he’d appeared on radio and television, his work had not been subjected to anything remotely resembling peer review since his defense of his doctoral dissertation in 1972. Then for a brief moment in 1988-89 he was, perhaps for the first time in his life, incongruously sought out and invited to sit at the table where it appeared that the future shape of American education was being hammered out. What happened next was that his own “contributions” —to borrow from the language of the report he helped write—however deficient or off-base they may have been, were “systematically distorted, marginalized [and] omitted.” That his name did not even come up in subsequent discussions or reports, only in press accounts seeking to discredit the task force and its work, must have stung all the more.

²² Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “NY Should Teach History, Not Ethnic Cheerleading,” *Newsday*, June 29, 1990, 77.

²³ “One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence.” Report of the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee. June 1991.

THE ALBANY SPEECH: 'MY CITY COLLEGE JEWS' & PATH TO MARTYRDOM

Jeffries's Albany speech was nominally about "the storm around the curriculum" and a group of "nice" people with PhD's who nonetheless "operate in much the same way" as the Ku Klux Klan. On closer inspection, however, it was really a chivalrous romance, uninflected with irony, in which a courageous City College professor armed only with the Truth rode forth to confront a wily and deceitful enemy and emerged "a folk hero to [his] people." He began his narrative with a description of his consternation over the way the state curriculum had stripped the ancient civilization of the Nile valley of its achievements and severed it from the African continent itself. After literally going over the document ten times, he had concluded that its failure to mention the fact that "long before the ancient Hebrews," Africans had developed the concept of the oneness of God, "was not an accident. This was by design, by people who knew what they were doing... nice white folks—your neighbors—and their achieving Negro partners."

He explained how the country's white supremacist "cultural system" mirrored its equally corrupt legal and economic systems, starting with a conspiracy to denigrate black people "planned and plotted and programmed out of Hollywood [by] people called Greenberg and Weisberg and Trigliani and whatnot... Russian Jewry had a particular control over the movies with their financial partners, the Mafia." From there he lit into "devilish" "smiling" Diane Ravitch, "the ultimate supreme sophisticated debonair racist" who claimed to be "trying to do the right thing," a "Miss Daisy" representing a new standard for dominating the textbook industry: the "rural, bible-belt Texan family" supplanted by the "sophisticated Texas Jew."²⁴ Ravitch was just one of many, however, all of them part of a "systematic, unrelenting [attack] coming from the Jewish community."

²⁴ Leonard Jeffries, Albany speech, Videorecording, Part III, 0:55, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qwta1dqDHs> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010).

But the bulk of Jeffries's speech was devoted to recounting his version of a May 1990 showdown with these people's "leading emissary," former New York Mayor and *Post* columnist Ed Koch.²⁵ In this David-and-Goliath story, Koch arrogantly summoned him to his Rockefeller Plaza offices for a conversation and Jeffries, though warned that it was too dangerous, went downtown anyway, accompanied by his little brother and armed only with "documentation." He then proceeded to cow the notoriously loud-mouthed Koch with his erudition ("Where do you want to start, Mayor?"). This device allowed Jeffries to frame his story as an epic struggle to speak truth to power. He schooled the former mayor about everything from the black inspiration for the Statue of Liberty, which he assured him had nothing to do with Koch's immigrant forbears, to the "rich Jews" who he strongly implied were the prime movers of the Atlantic slave trade. Using Koch as a foil also allowed Jeffries to set his audience straight about how he had been willfully misunderstood and vilified in the press, how he never said *all* Jews were involved in slavery, for instance, only the rich ones.²⁶ "If Schlesinger had left me alone," Jeffries insisted, he never would have had to dig up and confront people with such unpleasant truths: "I had not touched the Jewish question for the past year," he explained. "*I had made an agreement with my Jews at City College that I would not deal with it.*"²⁷

Jeffries took his long tenure at City College and survival of several official inquiries into his conduct as conclusive evidence that he couldn't really be the anti-Semite that the *New York Times*, Koch, and so many others had tried to paint him as:

²⁵ For a recording of their original conversation see: Leonard Jeffries dialogue with Edward I. Koch, May 1990, Audiorecording, Part VI: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzOie6sTDtk> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010).

²⁶ The speech was peppered with similar disclaimers, but Jeffries used the words "Jew," "Jewish," and "Jewry" forty-eight times, to the extent that one could reasonably conclude that the behavior of Jews was his main complaint.

²⁷ Leonard Jeffries, Albany speech, Part IV, 4:20, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U-DnH7uuqY> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010); Emphasis mine.

An anti-Semitic does not stay at City College for twenty years as chairman of a department, and have friends [and] even those who do not like him and his enemies respect him at City College. And the head Jew at City College, Dr. Bernard Sohmer, saw me after the article in the *Times* and said “Len, everybody knows rich Jews helped finance the slave trade.”²⁸

In deflecting charges of anti-Semitism, Jeffries consistently invoked his standing at the College and the esteem of many of his both explicitly and implicitly Jewish colleagues. Notwithstanding its “whole tradition of intellectual thought that is racist to the core,”²⁹ the academy was still a fundamentally tolerant place, big enough to accommodate a Leonard Jeffries and his ideas. Diane Ravitch, however, was merely an adjunct professor who, unlike Jeffries did not “pass muster to be a [real] professor and even that only because of the “devilish” Heritage Foundation grants she is able to bring in. Thus, in spite of all the contempt he harbored for wide a range of American institutions, Jeffries was remarkably approving of City College’s professional norms and revealed himself to be collegial enough within such a setting to have been willing to strike “an agreement with my Jews at City College” and lay off “the Jewish question” at least for a while.³⁰ It was the Ravitches and the Shankers and the Schlesingers, the Heritage Foundations and George Wills and mass media—interlopers for the most part—who had pushed him over the edge. Koch, Jeffries asserted, was never seriously interested in his ideas. All along, his real agenda had been “to destroy me, to make a spectacle of me, to ridicule me.” After years of such press attacks and witch-hunts, Jeffries said his “people” were now

²⁸ *ibid.* While Sohmer, the former Chair of the Faculty Senate, may well have acknowledged some grain of truth in Jeffries’s assertion, he would later tell the *Times*, “I think Leonard Jeffries is a terrible person, a seriously flawed, anti-Semitic person.” See Mervyn Rothstein, “CUNY Vote on Jeffries Pleases Few,” *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 1991, B1.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Of course Jeffries’s ability to navigate such a profoundly Jewish milieu grants him greater authority to discuss what the Jews are really up to.

warning him, “Len, they’re targeting you for death.”³¹

PROF. MICHAEL LEVIN & THE DOUBLE STANDARD

Jeffries’s first skewering on the public stage, one he claimed elevated him to folk-hero status, had come a year earlier, in 1990, when *New York Times* reporter Joseph Berger (CCNY ’66) wrote an extensive profile of both him and his similarly impolitic white City College colleague, Professor Michael Levin. As a follow-up act to his 1987 letter in the *Times* countenancing the “discriminatory inconveniencing” of black youth by timid Madison Avenue shopkeepers, Levin had published articles and letters in academic journals questioning the “staggering energies” expended in the wake of the Brown decision “to bring American Negroes into the educational mainstream” and arguing that

[Since] the average black is significantly less intelligent than the average white... if standards are going to be raised, cultural literacy reasserted and college education given its old depth and focus, the American polity will have to reconcile itself to an embarrassing failure rate for blacks.³²

The *Times* focused on the two professors’ “clashing theories of racial superiority” and Jeffries’s teachings about “ice people” of Northern European origin, “sun people” of African ancestry, and the role of the skin pigment melanin in their putatively distinctive characteristics. Because, unlike with Levin, race was the focus of much of Jeffries’s teaching, on his visits to Jeffries’s classroom Berger was able to catalogue his innuendos about rich Jews underwriting the Middle Passage and a conspiracy of silence that framed the Jewish experience in WWII as

³¹ Apparently this was nothing new. When Koch finally did get around to writing about the May 1990 meeting, he reported that Jeffries declined to accept coffee or a Danish for reasons of personal safety, even after Koch offered to serve as his personal food taster. See Ed Koch, “When Racism Is Practiced by Blacks,” *New York Post*, Aug. 16, 1991, 16.

³² Michael Levin, “The Trouble With American Education,” Review of Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* and E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, *Quadrant* 32 (Jan. 1988): 23; Levin later absolved his fellow philosophers of “any discriminatory guilt” for the underrepresentation of blacks in their field, explaining that the racial disparities in IQ’s more than accounted for their current two percent showing. See Michael Levin, Letter to the Editor, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 63, no. 5 (Jan. 1990): 64–65.

history's "only Holocaust." "[Jeffries's] voice cracked," wrote Berger, "and his emotions were often raw. 'If they will come at me to kill me, I am ready to die,' he said, referring to those who disagree with his views."³³

The fact that the campus was eighty three percent non-white may help explain why the two professors' comparable transgressions had not met with equal measures of opprobrium. Levin had been "rebuked" by the Faculty Senate, had his class disrupted by angry protesters led by the student government president, and was temporarily "barred" by the administration from teaching an introductory level course. Jeffries's comments about whites, by contrast, continued to draw applause from his mostly black students, and even the white student reporter who had first brought his classroom antics to light in a series for *The Campus* three years earlier was quoted as saying that he had "fun" and learned more from Jeffries than any other professor.

Outside the black studies department, however, Jeffries's colleagues resented what they saw as a double standard that appeared to many to have been at work as far back as 1972 when, as a newly minted PhD, he was hired at the rank of a full professor with tenure despite no record of scholarly publication. Though it was not widely reported until after his Albany speech, Jeffries, while serving on a faculty search committee in 1984, had asked a leading candidate for the job, Mitchell Seligson, "Why does a Jew like you want to come and teach at a college like this?"³⁴ Seligson withdrew his application in response to this and other comments and, in a strongly worded letter to President Harleston, alleged that Jeffries had impugned Harleston himself as "a 'tool' of white Jewish power brokers" and harped on paranoid delusions about

³³ Joseph Berger, "Professors' Theories on Race Stir Turmoil at City College," *New York Times*, April 20, 1990, B1. The article described Levin as "a bespectacled, slightly built man" who biked to work and Jeffries as "thickset" in African garb.

³⁴ Philosophy Professor Martin Tamny, quoted in Joseph Berger, "College Chief Calls Jeffries 'Racist' but Defends Keeping Him," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1991. See also: Robert M. O'Neil, *Free Speech in the College Community* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 107.

government spies, concluding finally that:

Colleges and universities in this country are places where we strive to dispel the darkness, not propagate it. City College historically has been one of our great institutions of higher learning. If forces of darkness are allowed to go unchallenged at City, then the institution will suffer irreparable damage.³⁵

The political science department formally apologized to Seligson; Harleston sent Jeffries a written reprimand, and the matter was apparently forgotten. Three years later, following the first-person account of Jeffries's class that appeared in *The Campus*, in which, asked what—given his concerns—he thought ought to be done about white people Jeffries reportedly said, “If it were up to me they’d be wiped off the face of the Earth,”³⁶ an official inquiry into his professional conduct stalled when the student reporter declined to testify. Jeffries got another slap on the wrist for repeatedly arriving to class late and failing to turn in his grades on time and it was back to business as usual.

Jeffries's Albany speech came only after at least three separate incidents—the 1984 Seligson debacle, *The Campus* series in 1988, and the 1990 *Times* article about his and Levin's “racial theories”—that each raised serious questions about the performance of his official duties among people outside his own circle of students and departmental colleagues and that threatened to damage the college and its reputation. Ironically, the *Times* piece came only after the faculty senate had rebuffed President Harleston's entreaty that it investigate Levin's conduct, arguing that such an inquiry could have a “chilling effect.” Harleston, in turn, had announced the formation of his own committee to clarify when faculty speech on and off campus might rise to the level of “conduct unbecoming,” with particular attention to the cases of Levin and Jeffries.³⁷

³⁵ Mitchell A. Seligson, Letter to Bernard Harleston, quoted in Philip Gourevitch, “The Jeffries Affair,” *Commentary* 93, no. 3 (March 1992): 37.

³⁶ Fred Rueckher., tk

³⁷ Berger, “Professors' Theories,” B4-5

It was not either of the two professors' well-documented provocations that garnered unwanted media attention, in other words, but rather the effort on the part of college officials to confront them more forcefully.³⁸ In Jeffries's case there had been no serious consequences for his troubling behavior either in the classroom or on faculty hiring committees, so within the college gates it would later seem a stretch to suddenly call him onto the carpet for speaking out of turn at an unaffiliated event 150 miles away during his summer vacation.

THE LEGACY OF OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSE & INSTITUTIONAL DYSFUNCTION

By the 1990s many City College faculty and staff had taken refuge in ideological camps, entrenched discourses, and inviolable silences, all of which made it increasingly difficult if not impossible for the College either to ignore or to effectively address even the worst transgressions of a Michael Levin or a Leonard Jeffries. Patricia Mann, who began teaching philosophy at City in 1982, argued that when confronted with a "radically foreign" mass of unprepared students, faculty members had long ago arrayed themselves along racial and political lines into two "counter-publics." Predominately white "Traditionalists" squared off with professors of color and their allies, "the Cultural Pluralists." Students were largely sidelined by this "Oppositional Discourse."³⁹

A sustained 20-year rhetorical effort by both the Traditionalists and the Cultural Pluralists to articulate and assert their opposing interests in a vast number of daily situations, be it an administrative committee, or the Faculty Senate, has resulted in a highly polarized institutional situation. Today, most important problems and decisions, whether of an educational or an administrative content, have come to be understood in oppositional terms of, to put it crudely, race-related politics.

³⁸ Prior to that, Jeffries had appeared once in full West African regalia on *ABC Nightly News* debating the comparative merits of the terms "black" and "African American" and received a few mentions as a result of the "Curriculum of Inclusion" controversy. And Levin's name had come up a handful of times mostly in the letters to the editor on affirmative action questions.

³⁹ Patricia S. Mann, "Unifying Discourse: City College as a Post-modern Public Sphere," *Social Text* 25/6 (1990): 81-102. Mann published her essay in response to an early draft of Nancy Fraser's celebrated challenge to Jurgen Habermas, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," which appeared in the same issue with some of the same language.

There is no longer very much pretense of a common view of The Good for City College. After so many years of “taking-sides” on every issue, there is no longer a sense of community available to anyone.⁴⁰

Mann cited numerous examples from a narrowly averted physical fight on the floor of the Faculty Senate to a secretary who, having felt culturally disrespected when a professor from a neighboring unit failed to say good morning, exercised the “petty tyranny” of denying him emergency access to her department’s photocopier.

In such an atmosphere of racial paranoia and hostility, she said

Even personal accountability for one’s professional responsibilities gradually wanes, insofar as any shared, institutional sense of good or bad performance becomes subsumed within the Oppositional interpretation of actions. It is for such reasons that I can assert that CCNY has been rendered dysfunctional as an institution, on a variety of levels, after 20 years of vehement Oppositional Discourse.⁴¹

Mann’s analysis was occasioned by her confusion over why Michael Levin was not simply “dismissed as a crank, and ignored, as we ignore people who argue for the ‘flat Earth’ thesis.” She concluded that “It is Levin’s media persona, rather than his voice per se... which became problematical within the CCNY community,” Only after being widely publicized were his racist claims reported in the student press and discussed in classrooms and offices, thereby gaining “a potent secondary existence within the college.” By the same token, however, she attributed Levin’s “media success” to “a complex interplay between the Oppositional public sphere at CCNY and the entertainment-oriented public sphere of the media.” By this way of thinking, Michael Levin and Leonard Jeffries were, in important ways, as much products of “twenty years of discursive war” at City College as they were creations of the mass media.⁴²

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 93

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 95

⁴² *ibid.*, 95-98.

This is not to suggest that the problems of ideological or racial strife and uncivil discourse were solely responsible for what would become the Jeffries Affair or that such problems were unique to City College. We've already discussed the multiple crises confronting black Americans and cities in general during this period. And besides the New York State Education Department, other educational institutions were undergoing their own crises of identity, leadership, and public confidence. The term "political correctness" first entered the popular lexicon in 1990 and '91. Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* and Dinesh D'Souza's bestselling *Illiberal Education*, two influential jeremiads against moral relativism and groupthink in academia argued that leftist ideologues had seized control of our institutions of higher learning, turned their backs on the Western tradition, and undermined rational inquiry and discourse with their cult-like norms.

Such arguments often elided any links between impoverished academic discourse and scarce resources. Between 1989 and 1991, major cuts in Albany and corresponding CUNY tuition hikes accompanied what many viewed as a sharp decline in civility and reasoned discussion. The cuts also met with massive resistance; in 1989, facing the prospect of a nearly twenty-percent tuition increase, student protestors took over City's massive North Academic Center and shut the college down for the first time in twenty years. Students in the 1989 takeover were able to help stave off a tuition hike, but by spring 1991 when they again took over parts of the campus they had been hit with an emergency mid-year increase of \$100 and were facing another proposed \$500 hike as well as hundreds of dollars of reductions in student aid from the state. That budget battle, sparked by the steepest increase since tuition was introduced fifteen years earlier and accompanied by the worst two student uprisings since the days of the Five

Demands, formed the backdrop for Leonard Jeffries's Albany speech and the reporting thereof.⁴³

As was so often the case, much more was at stake than uncivil discourse.

THE *POST* GOES BALLISTIC

By the time the *Post* broke the story of Jeffries's Albany speech on August 5, 1991, FCC restrictions that barred Rupert Murdoch from owning a daily newspaper and TV broadcast license in the same city had long since impelled him to unload the paper. The new owner, real estate developer Peter Kalikow, had turned the *Post* into a morning paper and vowed to tone down the its headless-body-in-a-topless-bar excesses and secure advertising from reluctant department stores.⁴⁴ (It was during this period that the apocryphal story began to circulate that Rupert Murdoch asked Bloomingdale's CEO Marvin Traub why he didn't advertise in the paper and was told, "Your readers are our shoplifters.") Kalikow succeeded in improving the paper's "credibility," as he put it, but in 1989, after only a year, fired his top editor and brought in the grittier, more sensationalist veteran of Murdoch's *Post* and local TV news, Jerry Nachman. One of Nachman's early moves was to print the stolen answers to an upcoming statewide Regent's exam on the front page after a *Post* reporter obtained them from a high school student. Coming together with the awkward release of the "Curriculum of Inclusion," that made Nachman and Jeffries contemporaneous thorns in the side of State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol.

More important than Nachman, however, was the arch conservative and supremely well-connected editorial page editor and columnist Eric Breindel, who had stayed on after Murdoch and, together with Nachman, presided over the paper's coverage of the two Central Park Jogger trials, Leonard Jeffries, and the Crown Heights race riots. Breindel was a child of Holocaust

⁴³ At one point a wave of civil disobedience that both began and ended at City College shut down seven CUNY campuses, cancelling classes for no fewer than 52,000 students. See Carolyn A. Butts, "CUNY protests push problems of education to front burner," *Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1991, 33.

⁴⁴ To this end, Kalikow would later start a Sunday edition.

survivors, fierce defender of Israel and the Jews and a passionate critic of and player within New York City politics.⁴⁵ Owner Peter Kalikow, to whom both he and Nachman reported directly, was only a month away from filing for federal bankruptcy protection when Jeffries made his most controversial speech, so whatever pressure may have remained to tone things down was, by then, decidedly on the wane.

For *Post* readers, Jeffries's speech was not an isolated event but a dramatic twist in an unfolding drama. During the weeks before Albany bureau chief Fredric Dicker broke the story, Breindel was on a crusade to muzzle the "multiculturalists" and "PCers" and their anti-Western bias. Commissioner Sobol had just released the second, milder curriculum report, "One Nation, Many Peoples." The first "Sobol Report," wrote the *Post* in the first of many gross mischaracterizations, had been "drafted by an out-and-out crank—race theorist Leonard Jeffries of CUNY" and had earned New York a national reputation for being "hostile to the European ideals that shaped American institutions and to the common values Americans share." This, second committee's new report, it said, "did nothing to dispel this impression."⁴⁶

Another editorial two days later, entitled "Score one for the PCers" took issue with a U.S. Senate committee's refusal to confirm a conservative nominee to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities. "Left wing standards of 'Political Correctness,'" said the *Post*, "have extended their reach from American campuses all the way to the Democratic side of the aisle in the Senate."⁴⁷ And at least twice the paper lit directly into CUNY, first for relaxing hiring requirements at Baruch College in order to leave the door ajar for minority

⁴⁵ It was Breindel who brought former Mayor Ed Koch to the *Post*'s editorial page and Breindel who would later set up the meeting that persuaded Rupert Murdoch to endorse Rudolph Giuliani in a tightly contested election. See Craig Horowitz, "The Neo-Con Artist," *New York*, May 22, 1999.

⁴⁶ "Cuomo and 'multiculturalism'," Editorial, *New York Post*, July 17, 1991, 28.

⁴⁷ "Score one for the PCers." Editorial, *New York Post*, July 19, 1991, 26.

faculty who hadn't completed their PhD's and later for "whining" about the university's still "bargain basement" tuition.⁴⁸ Breindel's editorial page also called upon the State Senate to investigate an individual SUNY Binghamton professor who had served on the second curriculum panel, pointing out that he was also a citizen of Kenya:

Academic freedom may protect [Ali] Mazrui's right to make such [anti-Western and anti-Israel] remarks. But there's no reason why foreign citizens animated by an obscene hatred of all things Western should play a role in deciding what New York's children should be taught about their history and society."⁴⁹

As the Board of Regents voted on what to do about the committee's recommendations, the paper kept up the pressure with reporting, still more editorials and letters from approving readers and public officials attacking "Sobol and his coven of ivory-tower arch-liberals."⁵⁰ On the very day the Jeffries story ran, the *Post* prophesied that should "Sobol & Co." and their "miniscule following" of noisy ideologues ever progress beyond the "academic" phase of curricular reforms and dare to actually "bring this nonsense into the classroom, parents—we predict—will have legislators defunding the schools."⁵¹

It was in the midst of this onslaught that Albany Editor Fred Dicker was home channel surfing one night when he stumbled upon a rebroadcast of Jeffries's recent speech on NY-SCAN, the state's publicly funded version of C-SPAN.⁵² Dickers's piece, which ran on page seven, focused on the state sponsorship provided to the Jeffries event, Jeffries's exaggerated link

⁴⁸ "Eroding the standards," Editorial, *New York Post*, July 8, 1991, 22; And "The Whiners at John Jay," Editorial, *New York Post*, July 20, 1991.

⁴⁹ "Resisting the multiculturalists," Editorial, *New York Post*, July 23, 1991, 26.

⁵⁰ Guy Vellella, "Multiculturalism and the short-end of the curriculum stick," Letter to the editor, *New York Post*, July 30, 1991, 22.

⁵¹ "Sobol's agenda advances," Editorial, *New York Post*, Aug. 5, 1991, 22. Nathan Glazer's argued that parents had more important things on their minds: "Professional historians and philosophers of education will get a great deal of media attention for their views, but in the end they will not, I think, win on the ground." See Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 77.

⁵² Steve Cuzzo, *It's Alive!: How America's Oldest Newspaper Cheated Death and Why It Matters* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 221. Cuzzo was then assistant managing editor and had been with the paper since 1983.

to Commissioner Sobol, the speech's "wide and free distribution" on a state-run cable TV channel, and its ad-hominem attacks on Diane Ravitch, who was now an assistant secretary of education in Washington. Jeffries, too, was identified as an "official" at City College, though his affiliation was largely beside the point.⁵³

HAVING CREATED AN UPROAR, THE *POST* PROCEEDS TO COVER IT

Post headline writers branded Jeffries a "CUNY" rather than CCNY phenomenon, a detail that underscores how the ground had shifted under the "flagship" college since the days of Evans & Novak and "CCNY's Illiterate Thousands." With fewer and fewer readers even knowing the difference between "CCNY" and "CUNY" efforts like Leonard Kriegel's a year earlier to invoke the ghost of Morris Raphael Cohen and the name of Professor Emeritus Kenneth B. Clark were fast becoming the exception.⁵⁴ Though it was still a rallying point for student movements and an occasional object of fascination for the metropolitan press, few people without a personal connection to it seemed to be pointing to City College's specialness or exalted status anymore. Baruch or Queens Colleges—where the numbers of white students were far higher—were more likely to be referred to as "jewels" in the CUNY system and the notion of an embattled flagship campus seemed to have become almost quaint. Indeed, the next day's *Post* editorial, "Subsidizing hatred," didn't even mention City College: Jeffries was a "CUNY Professor" who misused his "CUNY classroom." The writer—presumably Breindel—even misquoted Jeffries's remark about "the head Jew at *CUNY*" before calling on Governor Cuomo

⁵³ Fredric Dicker, "CUNY Lecturer in Anti-Semite Uproar," *New York Post*, Aug. 5, 1991, 7. Former *Newsday* Albany Bureau Chief Jordan Rau later described Dicker as "a bully's bully" in a town full of bullies, quoted in Ben Smith, "Undisputed King of Albany Press Is Fred U. Dicker," *New York Observer*, Jan. 9, 2005.

⁵⁴ In the midst of the Jeffries uproar, Murray Kempton wrote of "the once great educational establishment" that employed him and Levin. "If there is a Heaven," he concluded. "Morris Cohen can only look down on Michael Levin and weep with the angels," *Newsday*, Sept. 8, 1991.

to take a stand.⁵⁵

Having created the “uproar,” Dicker and a team of *Post* reporters dutifully proceeded to cover it, quoting State Assemblymen comparing Jeffries to Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan and challenging his right “to yell ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theater.”⁵⁶ The Governor and Attorney General chimed in next, saying the *university* “ought to take action or explain why they don’t.”⁵⁷ Along with a headshot of Jeffries, the page was illustrated with a large photo of four helmeted white police officers dragging a screaming black man out of Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park. Columnist Pete Hamill, never a shill for Murdoch or the right, wrote somewhat ominously:

If CUNY is allowing its classrooms to perpetuate the culture of victims then it’s time to examine its mandate. This isn’t an issue of academic freedom; it’s about academic integrity. The muddled rantings of Leonard Jeffries belong on a soapbox on a streetcorner, not in a great university. Its time to show him the door.⁵⁸

Gradually the focus of the story was shifting, first from Albany to CUNY and then to City College itself. On August 9th, four days after Dicker’s original piece, the front page featured a photo of Jeffries under the headline “LESSON IN HATE: Supporters of anti-Semitic prof threaten Jews and Post.” Plastered alongside him was the “NOTICE” found on fliers in the black studies department promising in block letters that “the black community” would hold responsible the *Post* and “the Jewish people,” in that order, for any abusive acts, verbal or otherwise.⁵⁹ In a column running down the right side of the same page was the pained, emaciated visage of Terry Anderson, the American hostage in Beirut, further hinting at the human consequences of

⁵⁵ “Subsidizing hatred,” Editorial, *New York Post*, Aug. 6, 1991, 18.

⁵⁶ Frederic Dicker, Chris McKenna, and David Seifman, “Lawmakers Want CUNY Prof Fired for Anti-Semitic Speech,” *New York Post*, Aug. 7, 1991.

⁵⁷ Mario Cuomo, quoted in Frederic Dicker, Chris McKenna, and Miguel Garcilazo, “Heats On CUNY: Cuomo & Abrams join in cry for Jeffries’ ouster,” *New York Post*, Aug. 8, 1991, 2.

⁵⁸ Pete Hamill, “Issue is subsidized stupidity, not free speech,” *New York Post*, Aug. 8, 1991, 2.

⁵⁹ “LESSON IN HATE: Supporters of anti-Semitic prof threaten Jews and Post,” *New York Post*, Aug. 9, 1991, 1.

coddling anti-Semites and terrorists.

That week's *Amsterdam News* featured a display ad headlined "The Committee to Defend Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Jr." and claiming to speak for "the African people of Africa, America and around the World." Its authors "stand behind" Jeffries's speech and his right to make it and invited Cuomo, Ravitch, Schlesinger "and all major media" to an "open forum" where they would be given the opportunity to "disprove" his exhaustively researched "scholarship." Echoing the flier found by the *Post*, the ad concluded, "The Black Community is holding all responsible ethnic groups and media accountable for any threats, slander, and mis-quotes attributed to Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Jr.," and gave the address and phone of the black studies department for further information.⁶⁰

The *Post* made much of this apparently inappropriate use of public employees' time and resources. It quoted people who answered the phone in the department refusing to give their names and referring them to attorney C. Vernon Mason (whose campaign posters for City Council festooned the department offices) and *Amsterdam News* publisher Wilbert Tatum saying that the ad had been placed by "people in the Black Studies department" only to quickly add "Black people in the university community."⁶¹ In a clear illustration of Mann's dysfunctional institutional discourse, the college's own spokesman complained to the *Post* reporter that the department secretary was "defensive and belligerent" when he called to look into the question further.⁶²

Once again, the *Post* reminded readers that CCNY and its departments were "taxpayer

⁶⁰ "The Committee to Defend Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Jr," Advertisement, *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 10, 1991, 8. (The *Amsterdam News* typically goes on newstands Thursdays, which would have meant August 8.) Oddly, the ad gives the location of the September 15 forum only as "the City College of New York, 1st floor," as though the college only had one building.

⁶¹ Frederic Dicker, Chris McKenna & Don Broderick, "Unsigned Fliers Rip Jews & Post," *New York Post*, Aug. 9, 1991, 8.

⁶² Frederic Dicker, "CUNY Big Vows Action on Flier Threatening Jews," *New York Post*, Aug. 10, 1991, 4.

supported,” and New Yorkers “pay the salaries of CUNY and CCNY officials” who, it insisted, were well within their rights to rein Jeffries in. Citing the case of Professor William Shockley, an aging Nobel physics laureate who had argued that blacks were genetically inferior to whites, the *Post* wrote, “Stanford made it plain to Shockley that he was not to use his classroom or department to advocate his crank race theories...[and] Shockley—notwithstanding the principle of free speech—was barred from lecturing at many major universities.”⁶³

In his Op-ed column in the *Times* former executive editor and City College alumnus A.M. Rosenthal took a more poetic tack, invoking his numerous encounters with ethnic hatreds growing up in the Depression era Bronx and as a foreign correspondent in colonial India and Apartheid South Africa. Jeffries, he wrote, was “just one more windy bigot,” but

It is a matter of special pain, anger and some danger that he teaches at City College of New York (sic), which has had a great and unique role in the history of American education and in the intellectual and cultural enrichment of New York. For generations this has been the only road to the future for young New Yorkers of small means—or in my case, none—but large hope and energy.

Rosenthal recalled the Nobel laureates and prominent alumni from his era and insisted that back then “A Jeffries would have been laughed out of his classroom the first day. We had too much respect for intellectual endeavor, and for ourselves.”

Alone, the racism and bigotry of a Jeffries could not destroy City College. Alone he would be just one more unpleasant piece of urban nastiness to step over. He can only permanently damage the reputation of the college if its student body and its faculty apologize for him, or rationalize his bigotry in the name of the First Amendment, which is not involved, or say, well, prove he is wrong... Professor Jeffries will continue to preach hate. But now let a great college speak in its own voice and turn its back on this person, this ugly echo.⁶⁴

Rosenthal was not alone in calling for forceful denunciations of Jeffries. On the same

⁶³ “The Jeffries affair (cont.),” Editorial., *New York Post*, August 9, 1991, 20.

⁶⁴ A.M. Rosenthal, “This Ugly Echo,” *New York Times*, Aug. 13, 1991, A17.

day's editorial page the *Post* urged readers to

take careful note in the days and weeks ahead ...how public personalities and public institutions respond to Jeffries—who remains silent, who produces apologia and who rises in protest—will likely tell us a good deal about the men and women who inhabit New York public life.⁶⁵

Few blacks were willing to accommodate the demand that they publicly repudiate him, however. Forty state assemblymen signed an “open letter” condemning Jeffries’s remarks and calling for strong disciplinary action, but not one of the sixteen black Democrats in the Assembly did so. The insistence that they distance themselves from the views of another member of their race was all too familiar in the African American community and the expectation that they perform a ritual dance of denunciation for the white man in order to enjoy the privilege of participating in public life stuck in the African American craw. When A.M. Rosenthal later wrote of the Jeffries affair that it wasn’t incumbent on Jews to “prove that they did not kill Christ or run the slave trade,” he did not seem to anticipate that many blacks would have a similar problem with being pushed to demonstrate their own bona fides.⁶⁶

KILLING THE MESSENGER? THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE *POST*

The belief that Jeffries was being unfairly persecuted and having his remarks blown out of all proportion, chiefly by the *New York Post*, was nearly universal in black communities. The front page of the second issue of the *Amsterdam News* to hit the stands since Jeffries became news reproduced a flier advertising another September 15 rally, this one “against anti-Semite Leonard Jeffries” with a machine gun framed by the star of David. Next to the flier appeared a reproduction of an unsigned warning in block letters calling Jeffries a “Jungle Bunny” and “Nigger Boy” and speaking of a “contract out” on his life and the imminent firebombing of

⁶⁵ “Jeffries and his apologists.” Editorial, *New York Post*, Aug. 13, 1991, 26.

⁶⁶ A.M. Rosenthal, “This Ugly Echo,” A17.

black-owned “establishments” including, possibly, the *Amsterdam News*. An editor’s note explained that the letter “was mailed from Brooklyn at a time when the climate of hate is being fanned by the *New York Post* and other major media which purport to be responsible.”⁶⁷

On the surface, it would seem that little more than a battle of egos between the two newspapers was underway, with each reproducing more menacing fliers on its front page. But that week’s *Amsterdam News* was full of similar statements directed at the white media, not all of them about Leonard Jeffries and not all by black journalists. A story about a rally protesting the recent acquittal of three white St. John’s University lacrosse players charged with sexually assaulting a twenty-two-year-old fellow student who was black, for example, focused less on the verdict than on the deafening silence that surrounded it. “[The victim] was failed by the media,” *Ms.* editor Gloria Steinem told the crowd. “She was failed by the jury. We must not fail her.” Other speakers at the rally placed a similar emphasis, asking where was the archbishop of New York, “These were practicing Catholics,” after all. And where was real estate magnate Donald Trump, asked another, who’d taken out vengeful, full-page newspaper ads “against the ‘wolfpack’” after the Central Park jogger was raped, but had nothing to say now, when the accused were white? “There is more commotion around Dr. Jeffries’ verbiage than the livelihood of this woman,” noted still another speaker. “When a black person gets busted in Canarsie,” he added, referring to a wave of racially motivated attacks in that Brooklyn neighborhood over the summer, “no one speaks out.” Activist Esmeralda Brown seemed to sum up what many protesters were feeling when she said that notwithstanding the terrible miscarriage

⁶⁷ “The face of bigotry,” *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 17, 1991, 1. In the facing column the headline read, “Support grows for Dr. Jeffries: Concern about his safety following death threats.”

of justice in the St. John's case, "the crime of the white press is even more vicious."⁶⁸

On page three of that same edition yet another article announced the Aug. 19th resumption of a "Postbusting" campaign on the part of CEMOTAP, the Queens-based Committee to Eliminate Media Offensive to African People. It called the attack on Jeffries "typical of the *Post*" citing the way it had "led the pack in convicting the [Central Park Jogger] defendants before trial," an "inflammatory posture," notably missing in the St. John's case.⁶⁹

THE CONFLAGRATION IN CROWN HEIGHTS

August 19 would, indeed, kick off a dramatic campaign, though not, as it happened, by CEMOTAP and not against the media. *Amsterdam News* Editor Wilbert A. Tatum was eerily prophetic about the form and focus that campaign would take if not about its precipitating event.

Sick and tired of being "Blackbashed," "dissed," ridiculed and humiliated by almost every daily newspaper, their editors, columnists and commentators, New York's Black community was delivered an issue not of its own making around which it has organized in order to save itself and the people of this city from *the conflagration that will surely come should any kind of incident occur, by accident or design*, that threatens the well-being of Professor Leonard Jeffries upon his return from Africa.⁷⁰

Tatum accused the *Post* of trying to overcome its dire financial situation by cynically and relentlessly "playing into the fears" of blacks and Jews that dated back to the 1960s and of bringing "every 'crazy' in the city out of the woodwork lusting for confrontation. Blood will be on the hands of the *Post* should violence occur."⁷¹

And so it did. The following Monday, August 19, as darkness descended over Brooklyn

⁶⁸ Vinette K. Pryce, "Hundreds demonstrate in support of St. John's University Rape Victim," *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 17, 1991, 5.

⁶⁹ "CEMOTAP Renews Its 'Bust the N.Y Post' Campaign," *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 17, 1991, 3.

⁷⁰ "New York Post-inspired hate produces a Black and Jewish dilemma," Editorial, *Amsterdam News*, *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 17, 1991, 12; Emphasis mine.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

the Grand Rebbe of the Hasidic Lubavitcher sect, Menachem Schneerson, was returning home to his to Crown Heights headquarters after a routine visit to the cemetery when the last car in his motorcade ran a red light, struck another vehicle, jumped the curb, and crushed two seven-year-old black children. There is some disagreement about what happened next, but apparently angry witnesses began beating the Jewish driver of the car as a large crowd gathered. Police arrived and instructed the driver of a private Hasidic ambulance to take the driver and his fellow passengers away for their own safety, leaving a dying child and his critically injured cousin behind to be freed from beneath the car and tended by city paramedics then arriving on the scene. This removal of the only slightly injured driver by a private, Jewish ambulance in advance of the children activated long simmering suspicions about official indifference to the value of black lives, preferential treatment for the Lubavitchers—the Rebbe’s motorcade had a police escort, for example—not to speak of millennial tropes of Jews murdering Christian children.

After two weeks of hearing Leonard Jeffries’s angry words looping on local and national newscasts and seeing his face on the front page of the city’s tabloids, the framework had been re-emphasized pitting blacks and Jews against one another. Seven-year-old Gavin Cato’s death and someone in the crowd yelling “Jews, Jews, Jews!” sent bands of poor black teenagers streaming through the streets of Crown Heights breaking windows and looking for payback. Within hours a group of fifteen to twenty black youths set upon Yankel Rosenbaum, a bearded Jewish graduate student dressed in orthodox garb who was visiting from Australia, shouting “Get the Jew!”⁷² They beat and stabbed him repeatedly and, after identifying one of his assailants, seventeen-year-old Lemrick Nelson, Rosenbaum bled to death.⁷³

⁷² Philip Gourevitch, “The Crown Heights Riot and Its Aftermath,” *Forward*, Jan. tk, 1993.

⁷³ Nelson was acquitted of homicide charges but later convicted in a federal trial of depriving Rosenbaum of his civil rights. He later admitted to the stabbing.

Three days of rioting followed, with scores of residents and police injured, Jewish homes and businesses attacked and burned and families cowering inside their apartments in what the scholar Edward Shapiro has called, “the most lethal anti-Semitic event in American History.”⁷⁴ People were calling it a “pogrom” and Rosenbaum’s murder a “lynching,” and comparing the whole thing to *Kristalnacht*. The spectacle of “blacks shouting anti-Semitic slogans, and explicitly proclaiming themselves the proud reincarnations of Hitler, [seeking] to destroy and/or drive out their Jewish neighbors by force,” was so unprecedented, argued Philip Gourevitch, and Americans were so conditioned to seeing blacks as the victims of racism, “that we lack even a vocabulary to describe it.”⁷⁵

The front page of the August 21st *Post* showed a bloodied twelve-year-old Jewish boy crouching in fear next to the fallen figure of his father who appears to be either unconscious or dead, his iconic black Fedora upended on the pavement at his feet, an image straight out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Inside, pictures showed another Hasidic man trying to shield his son from flying rocks as watchful police in riot gear appeared to be struggling to hold the line against an unseen enemy. Crowds of young black men were pictured turning over police cruisers and running shirtless through the streets. The same day’s paper announced the bankruptcy filing of *Post* owner Peter Kalikow, who nonetheless predicted a “rosy” future for the 190-year-old paper.

THE STORY THAT WOULD NOT DIE

Rocks and bottles and epithets were still flying when the *Amsterdam News* went to press with its August 24th issue, but incredibly, Tatum’s editorial focused once again on the media assault on Jeffries (who remained holed up in his New Jersey home facing death threats). Other

⁷⁴ Edward S. Shapiro, *Crown Heights: Blacks, Jews and the 1991 Brooklyn Riot* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 4; “Interpretations of the Crown Heights Riot,” *American Jewish History* 90, no. 2 (June 2002): 101.

⁷⁵ Gourevitch, “The Crown Heights Riot.”

than laying the blame for the events in Crown Heights at the feet of the *New York Post*, which it said had falsely characterized them as a “race riot,” the editorial scarcely mentioned those events at all. Through a campaign of “lies,” “misquotes,” and “half-truths” about Jeffries, it argued that the *Post* had fostered a “climate of hate” and caused irreparable harm—including, inexplicably, the death of little Gavin Cato himself.⁷⁶

Most readers of the editorial would already have seen the cartoon prominently placed on page three that elegantly summed up many of the preoccupations of the city’s black press in the midst of the riots (See Fig. 1). It featured three white men, one unshaven, missing teeth, and with his tongue hanging out. He wore an eyepatch and an “I ♥ Amato” button, an apparent reference to Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato. Under his arm was tucked a copy of the *New York Post* with the infamous headline “WOLFPACK!” Next to this evil twin stood a superficially kinder soul whose button read “I ♥ CORE”, a reference to the former civil rights organization that had long since been co-opted by neo-conservatives seeking to demonstrate their appeal among blacks. Under his arm this one carried a copy of the “Multi-cultural Curriculum.” In the foreground a grinning, bespectacled professorial type held up a scroll that read “We the ~~slaveholders~~” with the latter word crossed out and replaced with “people.” Supported by his brethren, this one was making an appeal:

Join Us! I am a citizen of New York City...Me and my friends deplore this outlandish display of **racism!** We are calling on our fellow citizens to fight this nig--...**Prof. Jeffries**...Please sign this letter in support of our fight for racial superior--..**equality!**⁷⁷

⁷⁶ “Black-Jewish dilemma: Reaping what institutional racism, corporate greed and media cowardice sows,” Editorial, *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 24, 1991, 12.

⁷⁷ “Join Us!” Cartoon, *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 24, 1991, 3.

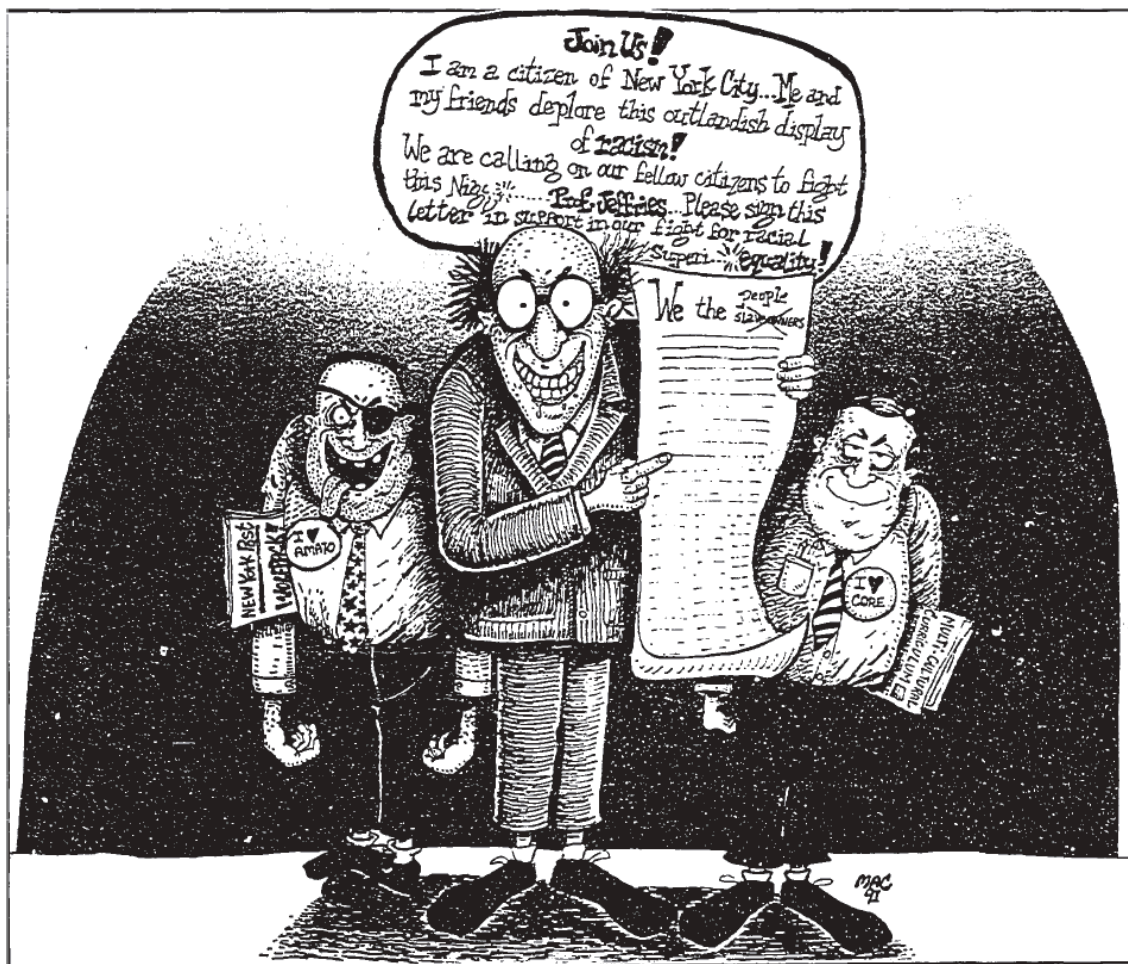


Figure 1: Cartoon, *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 24, 1991.

By the following week, 2,000 police officers had long since flooded the Crown Heights neighborhood and put an end to the violence. The front page of the *Amsterdam News* now reported that Brooklyn's Caribbean parade would go on as scheduled among calls for peace. Across the top, the paper announced a full reprinting of what it called "The speech that started it all—Jeffries in Albany."⁷⁸ For many blacks as well as a range of whites, some combination of Jeffries's rhetoric and his portrayal in the mass media had indeed given form and focus to the rage in Crown Heights. Though the brokers of blacks' proscribed opportunities and countless indignities had too often been a Jewish landlord, teacher, social worker, or judge, the *Voice's*

⁷⁸ *Newsday* had earlier reprinted the full transcript.

Richard Goldstein was also correct to point out that blacks were no more anti-Semitic than any other group. “Fear and loathing of Jews is a pervasive force in Western consciousness,” he wrote, “ready to be shaped and directed whenever the time is right.”⁷⁹ “By locating anti-Semitism exclusively in the black community,” what Goldstein called “the *Post/Commentary* axis hopes to convince Jews that their interests lie in an alliance with other white ethnics under the neocon umbrella,” a scenario later born out in the 1993 electoral defeat of Mayor Dinkins by Rudolph W. Giuliani.⁸⁰

Considerable doubt remains, of course, about how impoverished and reviled blacks might have reacted had a car with an ethnically non-descript white driver plowed into two children playing on a sidewalk and a private ambulance service taken the white passengers away first—without Jeffries or the Jewish question ever coming into play. The sociologist Jonathan Rieder argued that “there was little evidence of coherent, formal anti-Semitic belief systems at work in Crown Heights” and the same vengeful black rage had found other targets, most notably in the boycott of Korean grocers during the late 1980s.⁸¹

For many blacks, said Reider, “this was a fight not about facts but about preferred narratives: how to construe history, how to explain affliction, how long to hold a grudge.”⁸² And no one seemed to understand that better than Dr. Leonard Jeffries. Whatever one may believe about the impetus for the violence in Crown Heights, the swastikas and epithets and vile threats only served to ensure that the controversial figure of Leonard Jeffries would remain the public

⁷⁹ Richard Goldstein, “The New Anti-Semitism: A *Geshrei*,” *Village Voice*, Oct. 1, 1991, 34.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 36.

⁸¹ Jonathan Rieder, “The Tribes of Brooklyn: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the Crown Heights Riots,” in Murray Friedman and Nancy Isserman, eds., *The Tribal Basis of American Life: Racial, Religious, and Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 63-66; See also Jonathan Rieder, “Reflections on Crown Heights: Interpretive Dilemmas and Black-Jewish Conflict,” in Jerome A. Chanes, ed., *Antisemitism in America Today: Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths* (New York, 1995), 358-69. A synthesis of Rieder’s argument appears in Shapiro, “Crown Heights,” 111.

⁸² Jonathan Rieder, “Crown of Thorns,” *New Republic*, Oct. 14, 1991, 29.

face of black anti-Semitism in the weeks and months to come. The more vulnerable African American children grew, it seemed, the more desperate the physical and social conditions that engulfed them and the more inscrutable the causes and solutions became, the more black people came to focus their political energies on controlling their own *images*: on Hollywood movies, junior high school history curricula, and double standards in the tabloid press.

And according to *The Nation*'s Jim Sleeper, Jeffries understood one other thing, as well:

that Jews are white folks whose skin you can get under. Baiting them gets a rise out of at least part of the white establishment, no small thing for aggrieved blacks to whom no one listens. Out of their peculiar mix of insecurity and idealism, Jews do listen.⁸³

CITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WEIGH IN, ONLY TO OPT OUT

The Jeffries scandal had been raging for three weeks when on the first day of classes student reporter Omar Moore spotted Channel 2 News's J.J. Gonzalez "perched" on the hill at Amsterdam Ave. and 138th Street. When challenged about what he was doing there, Gonzalez conceded to him that "the media loves to boil it up." But City College students were having little of it. After seeing the same portions of Jeffries's speech on every newscast for weeks on end, wrote Moore, "Students on campus seem tired of hearing about the hoopla...wanting to concentrate on the semester ahead of them."⁸⁴ "Most city college students," one of their number wrote to the *Times*, "like those of generations past, are more concerned with planning for their futures and trying to live peacefully in a multiracial society." She described a weekend jaunt to see Romare Bearden collages at Harlem's Studio Museum. Afterwards she and a friend wandered across the street to listen to some African drumming only to find themselves caught up in a hate-filled pro-Jeffries rally. Their "sobering experience" was intended as a reassuring

⁸³ Jim Sleeper, "Blacks and Jews," *The Nation*, Sept. 9, 1991, 252.

⁸⁴ Omar P.L. Moore, "The Three Ring Circus: Dr. Jeffries, City College, and the Media," *The Paper*, 2.

parable: Bearden, not Jeffries, would “win the day” with her generation of students.⁸⁵

It took weeks for the first editions of the student newspapers to appear—itsself an indication of the missing sense of urgency among students. And even then the editor-in-chief of *The Campus*, who grew up watching Jeffries on the local Sunday afternoon public affairs program, *Like It Is*, and said he was one of the reasons she had chosen to study at City College in the first place, could write:

Never mind what he said. That is not the issue...I mean honestly, if I were to one day start worrying about what everybody had to say about me I'd never get anything done. Personally, I think Dr. Jeffries is a brilliant man and a remarkable educator. As long as he's not calling for WWII to begin, live your lives and let the man speak. If you don't like what he has to say, don't listen!⁸⁶

A subsequent “Talk of the Campus” feature quoted four different students (all male) none of whom thought Jeffries ought to be removed from his post as department chair. One said there was a conspiracy against minorities on campus. Another argued Jeffries was only being criticized because he “irritates certain special interest groups.” “People shouldn't knock him for what he says,” said a third. “The school should back him up.” Only one student, the white one, seemed to have trouble with the content of Jeffries's message to students.⁸⁷ If students objected to Jeffries's views or questioned his right to bring them into his classroom as they had with Prof. Levin, few were prepared to say so. The overwhelming consensus was, “What's the big deal?”⁸⁸

Quietly changing the channels was one, arguably appropriate way to deal with such a situation. In her analysis of the earlier Michael Levin controversy Patricia Mann had noted that “the overriding student response at CCNY has been to dismiss [Prof. Michael] Levin as a low

⁸⁵ Diane Henderson, “Awareness Will Out,” Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1991, A22.

⁸⁶ “Never Mind What He Said!” Editorial, *The Campus*, Sept. 16, 1991, 4; The editorial came with the disclaimer that its views “are solely those of the Editor-in-Chief,” listed on the masthead as Chánt Andréa Funchess.

⁸⁷ Charita Jackson, “Talk of the Campus,” Oct. 15, 1991, 3.

⁸⁸ “Unequal Justice,” Editorial, *The Campus*, Oct. 28, 1991, 6.

level media act,” a reaction she found encouraging: “In ignoring the political meaning of his behavior [students] deprived it of its potential psychological harmfulness to them as individuals.”⁸⁹ But faculty and administrators did not enjoy the same luxury. At a moment of tremendous budgetary peril, they were under intense pressure to clarify their positions. Senator Moynihan had suggested that if Jeffries didn’t resign “everyone else ought to. Certainly the [CUNY] trustees should.” To Moynihan, although Jeffries’s brand of racial paranoia wasn’t so unheard of, “What is new is for such things to be said by a professor at City College.” Recalling his time as student there during WWII and echoing what A.M. Rosenthal had written about that era’s students, Moynihan added that, “In our time the faculty would not have tolerated such inadequacy. They would have tried to help such a person, but they would not have accepted his presence in the company of scholars.”⁹⁰

FOR ALUMNI, STILL ANOTHER ‘UGLY ECHO’

Bernard Harleston was a decade into his tenure as City College president when Jeffries’s public position as a department chairman if not his tenure as a professor finally became to seem untenable. How Harleston would respond as the college’s first black president was a question of tremendous moment. Had the city’s college, the Jewish Harvard become the university of Harlem in the most parochial and reactionary sense of the term? Was it now *ghetto* from top to bottom? Politicians and Jewish groups weren’t the only ones demanding to know. The din emanating from alumni, who had long since come to play a critical role in keeping the college alive, was loud enough to drown out any support Jeffries might have enjoyed among students,

⁸⁹ Mann, 97. I am wary of this argument. A more careful analysis of the Levin controversy might, if nothing else, have prepared them to refine their views on racism and academic freedom and to be more effective advocates for them once Jeffries became an unavoidable topic of conversation. It cannot be psychologically helpful to confront dinner table conversation about one of your professors with a less than fully formed opinion. Ignorance is rarely a positive thing for a college student to aspire to.

⁹⁰ Frederic Dicker, “Sen. Moynihan Calls On Jeffries to Resign,” *New York Post*, Aug. 19, 1991, 20.

faculty, or the surrounding community. In the early months of the controversy the Alumni Association alone received well over a thousand letters from graduates angry about professors Jeffries and Levin, including several dozen who had donated \$10,000 or more in the past and who vowed to stop giving.⁹¹ A.M. Rosenthal had already spoken for many alumni when he called on the “great college” to publicly “turn its back” on Jeffries.

The uproar echoed still another bit of ugliness that Rosenthal neglected to mention: the 1949 student strike against anti-Semitic Spanish Professor William E. Knickerbocker and his segregationist counterpart, William H. Davis. Melvin Cooperman (CCNY ‘51) pointed out that back then it had taken seven years and a major student uprising to finally oust Knickerbocker from his chairmanship of the romance languages department. This time, he wrote:

the perpetrator seems to have the support of the student body rather than its condemnation...[This] thundering absence of outrage is evidence of a moral vacuum, a testimony to the failure of the elementary and secondary education of the present generation of CCNY students.⁹²

Robert Gurland (CCNY ‘55) had come to City College just after the student strike and media frenzy were over and didn’t know who Knickerbocker was when he signed up for his 9:00 a.m. Spanish class, but right away he said he figured out from the professor’s attitude and body language and his exchanges with the other students what a “shitty person” he was. “I used to bait him,” Gurland recalled. “I used to wear a Jewish star and I’d wear it outside [my shirt]. And I’d sit right in front of him and the fucker gave me a D. I had all A’s. I had good grades... He hated my fucking guts.”⁹³

By the time he heard about Leonard Jeffries, Gurland was a tenured Philosophy professor

⁹¹ “Speaking Out on Racism,” *Alumnus* 87, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 3; Denise K. Magner, “Beneath All the Furor Over Leonard Jeffries, City College Tries to Get On With Its Routine,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 18, 1991, A18.

⁹² Melvin I. Cooperman, Letter to the editor, *Alumnus* 87, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 3.

⁹³ Robert Gurland, Interview with author, New York, May 4, 2010.

at NYU, a battle-scarred veteran of the sixties-era urban university and himself a department chair. In that sense he was perhaps uniquely qualified to navigate the moral conundrums presented by a Leonard Jeffries. But Gurland was also a human being and became so enraged that he severed his ties to City College. “It pissed me off,” he said:

I connected him to a kind of intolerance that I thought was disgusting and reminded me of Knickerbocker. It’s probably not a positive analogy there, but I experience a guy who in the end proved to be a--I just don’t think there’s room in academia--It’s not that he can’t believe what he believes. He can even in some ways express some of his anger, but he can’t use the university he can’t use it as a pulpit. I thought that it was not tolerable. But I was unfair in certain ways to the institution, because it ain’t easy to deal with people like that. That is, you know, the notion of academic freedom.

You know Oliver Wendell Holmes said, though, that if you’re in a crowded movie theater and you yell “Fire!” you can’t cite freedom of speech. There are some limits to what you can say in certain contexts that propriety demands that either you don’t say it or you say it in ways that are more appropriate... It’s just not appropriate. And I thought, “Goddamn it, fire his fucking ass!” And they wouldn’t. And I said, “Well, I ain’t gonna give money. You can’t do that. Then I don’t want to fund you.” Fairly or not fairly. It’s very emotional.⁹⁴

For many graduates of Gurland’s generation, who were now at the peak of their earning potential, approaching retirement age and reflecting on the direction and meaning of their lives, the 1949 student strike that forced the college to deal assertively with Knickerbocker was a defining moment. They had come of age in the shadow of the Holocaust and saw their particular role as taking a stand against anti-Semitism—more than McCarthyism and certainly more than Soviet Communism, which was now in the process of collapsing under its own weight.

The alumni magazine attempted to use the Knickerbocker/Davis association to put a positive spin on things. Its editors quoted a *New York Post* editorial entitled “The City College Mess,” about an institution “long admired for its high scholastic attainment...now disrupted and

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

discredited—a sorry spectacle...” only to point out that the date of the editorial was, in fact, 1949.⁹⁵ They warned of the “tendency to panic and see each [controversy] as a terminal crisis,

sounding the death knell for the college.” History, they wrote, told a different story:

“controversy is the lifeblood of academia and a sign that the campus is vibrant and alive.”⁹⁶

Elsewhere they noted that throughout the current crisis, “the students have conducted themselves with dignity and demonstrated mutual respect...a tribute to their maturity and good sense under intense media attention.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ “Editor’s Note,” *Alumnus* 87, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 2.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ “The Debate Goes On,” *Alumnus* 87, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 8.

2. 'WHO'S IN CHARGE AT CITY COLLEGE?'

Bernard Harleston was, in the *Amsterdam News*'s botched metaphor, “caught between the rock of academic freedom and the hard place of the Harlem Community.”⁹⁸ On more than one occasion he had already investigated both Jeffries's and Levin's professional conduct. The most recent inquiry had concluded the previous spring and failed to produce anything conclusive or result in disciplinary action. Just before Jeffries's speech in July, Harleston had written to congratulate him on being chosen by his colleagues for yet another three-year term as department chairman, though, as it happened, the trustees had yet to formally approve the appointment. That meant that any action he now took would necessarily be based exclusively on what Jeffries had done during his summer vacation in Albany, Africa, and elsewhere. While Harleston may have had the authority to unilaterally remove Jeffries from the chairmanship, he could not claim—as had his predecessor in the case of Theodore Gross—that Jeffries was speaking as a senior college official with policymaking authority, thus undermining the college's core mission. Department chairmen were clearly mid-level administrators and were not assumed to speak for anyone but themselves.

HARLESTON'S LONELY PREDICAMENT

Students, when not vocally supportive of him, were largely indifferent to Jeffries's views. The faculty senate was willing only to censure him but not to recommend further sanctions. That left Harleston, a man one longtime faculty member described as “constitutionally incapable of dealing with any kind of conflict,” to act alone.⁹⁹ Nearly two years earlier, in the context of the controversy over Prof. Michael Levin's racially charged extracurricular activities, Patricia Mann

⁹⁸ Herb Boyd, “Jeffries called ‘racist’ by CCNY prez, ‘fraud’ by Black writer,” *Amsterdam News*, Nov. 9, 1991, 1.

⁹⁹ Bernard Sohmer, quoted in James Traub, “The Hearts and Minds of City College,” *New Yorker*, June 7, 1993, 49.

had described Harleston as

generally perceived [on campus] as a figurehead, a racially appropriate prop behind which a traditionally constituted white, male Board of Trustees operates. His rather extreme lack of effective or positive leadership is understood as inevitable by almost everyone concerned, although for quite different reasons. On the one hand, his behavior conforms with, or at least does little to call into question the racial stereotypes of many Traditionalists. On the other hand, the Cultural Pluralists may all too readily attribute his inaction to the fact that a White, conservative Board of Trustees will not empower him to do anything of significance. What is to be done? Nothing.¹⁰⁰

Now the dynamic was reversed: appearing to capitulate to outside pressure from the White power structure would likely anger Mann's "Pluralists," while resisting it would confirm "Traditionalist" fears of a shared black ideology and hostility toward societal and academic norms (not to speak of Jews). Her conclusion remained equally valid, however: Do nothing.

The stakes were at once dangerously high and pathetically low. New York's worst race riot in more than two decades had just erupted in the city's largest black neighborhood.¹⁰¹ Was Harlem, its second largest, to be next? This was perhaps the best argument for not moving too aggressively against Jeffries. On the other hand, the college and its reputation were under massive attack in the press at the very moment when its survival seemed to hinge on waning support from the legislature and alumni. Somehow these elements needed to be reassured that Harleston was taking their concerns to heart. Yet whatever he did, the institution of tenure and tenets of academic freedom and first amendment law coupled with a long paper trail documenting official tolerance of similar remarks on Jeffries's part made it a virtual certainty that he would remain on the City College faculty. The only thing up for grabs was the largely

¹⁰⁰ Mann, 1990, 94.

¹⁰¹ Crown Heights borders Bedford Stuyvesant, the site of New York's oldest settlement of free blacks and the place where, together with neighboring Brownsville and Fort Greene, African Americans flocked after Harlem became too crowded to support them during the Great Migration. Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train," is an homage to the subway line that binds the two communities together. After WWII this complex of neighborhoods became one of the largest African American communities in the United States.

ceremonial title of department chair.

LEVIN V. HARLESTON: BERTRAND RUSSELL'S REVENGE

As he formulated his response, one additional wrinkle emerged, however, that perhaps more than any other would constrain how Harleston now dealt with Jeffries. The college had not, in fact, done *nothing*. In addition to its numerous investigations and what Gourevitch characterized as “mild censures of Jeffries’s language or tone, efforts to assure the public that the school did not necessarily endorse everything its professors said,” it had taken assertive measures to ensure that no student would be obligated to sit in Levin’s classroom, and it had gotten sued for it.¹⁰² When news hit the college of Levin’s journal article arguing that the average American black was intellectually inferior to the average white, Harleston was quoted in *The Campus* saying

The process of removing a tenured professor is a complicated one. Tenure is the life-blood of the College. When it works well it is the life-blood...[But Levin's] views are offensive to the basic values of human equality and decency and simply have no place here at City College.”¹⁰³

Those words would come back to haunt him during the federal trial where Levin testified that, together with Harleston’s appointment of an ad hoc committee to investigate him, they made him fear that he was about be fired and caused him to turn down speaking invitations and publishing opportunities as a result.¹⁰⁴ Levin had also been relieved of his responsibility for teaching a required introduction to philosophy course, and, when he resumed those responsibilities the following semester, the dean alerted students that a special, alternate section of the course had been created in the same time slot to accommodate anyone who might have concerns about

¹⁰² Gourevitch, “The Jeffries Affair,” 37.

¹⁰³ Bernard Harleston, quoted in *Levin v. Harleston*, 770 F. Supp. 895, 920 (S.D. NY, Sept. 4, 1991); See also *The Campus*, Apr. 2, 1990.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 914.

studying under Levin, though none had been expressed. These “shadow” sections, Levin further argued, had a “stigmatizing” effect and their value was “largely symbolic...It sustains the sense that I have been found in some way beyond the normal bounds of academic expression and opinion; that somehow or other I must be quarantined.”¹⁰⁵

Two days after Labor Day, with the semester scarcely a week underway and the city still alive with outrage and speculation over Jeffries’s fate, the federal judge for the Southern District, Kenneth Conboy, declared that Levin’s civil rights had been violated and granted an injunction against the college taking further action against him.¹⁰⁶ Conboy was a lifelong New Yorker and 1961 graduate of Fordham University in the Bronx who had completed a master’s degree in history at Columbia while the Theodore Gross scandal was unfolding. His opinion began by briefly noting the case’s relevance to a national debate about political correctness on college campuses. Then, in the second sentence, Conboy located the dispute “at one of America’s most famous institutions of higher learning, singularly noted for its bracing environment of broad and untrammelled speech.” He included a lengthy footnote praising the “eloquent” early twentieth-century City College philosophy professor Harry Overstreet who fearlessly spoke out against the 1919 Palmer Raids and by recalling “the ferocious public reaction” to Bertrand Russell’s controversial 1940 appointment to the same department, the “astonishing vilification of Russell from newspapers, pulpits and politicians” and “the shameful manipulation of procedural rules” by the state judge in that case in order to deny Russell his post.¹⁰⁷ Conboy apparently had ideas of his own about what was at stake for City College and was determined to right a historical

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 915.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 895. The judge found that administrators, acting in their official capacities in a public university, violated Levin’s First Amendment rights because his protected “speech was the sole motivating factor behind the adverse action” and his Fourteenth Amendment rights because they “damaged his property interest, tenure, based on the threat to his academic freedom.”

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 898.

wrong.

Although he was away on sabbatical that semester, the specter of Michael Levin hovered over every official pronouncement, every cautious move Harleston and the trustees were to make. It was almost as though the ghost of Bertrand Russell himself were calling them to account. After the Levin scandal broke, Harleston had been too unguarded in his remarks during a press conference for student journalists. The dean of humanities had similarly jumped the gun in creating “shadow” sections and writing to Levin’s students before anyone had even complained about him.¹⁰⁸ Now with everyone from the *New York Post* to the governor calling for fresh blood, Harleston had to restrain his every impulse and that reticence would cost him.

Two weeks after the Judge Conboy handed down his decision enjoining the college from further isolating or stigmatizing Prof. Levin, Harleston gingerly crafted a letter to “alumni and friends of City College” about steps he was taking to deal with Prof. Jeffries. In it he acknowledged the deep hurt and exception taken to Jeffries’s words, words that he said, “threaten to undermine the very fabric of collegial life.”

The sense of outrage felt by many has led to calls for actions of every variety, including swift and vengeful punishment. Some of these demands have been withdrawn or modified with the passage of time. Academic procedure and the Bylaws of the University do not authorize us to act out of hurt or vengefulness or by way of reprisal. It is a right, however, to deliberate with our peers and according to our Bylaws on actions that may be appropriate to the issues involved. Accordingly, I have asked the Provost to undertake an administrative review as to whether the Chair of the Black Studies Department can carry out the duties and responsibilities as chair, as defined by the Bylaws of The City University of New York.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For further discussion of Harleston’s handling of the Levin and Jeffries affairs see Robert M. O’Neil, “The Outspoken University Professor,” Chapter 2 in *Free Speech in the College Community* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 97-123.

¹⁰⁹ Bernard Harleston, quoted in *Jeffries v. Harleston*, 828 F. Supp. 1066, 1074, fn. 4 (S.D. NY, Aug. 4, 1993). The provost was specifically advised that Jeffries’s “ideas,” as distinct from “the *impact* of his public statements” were “not germane to this review.”

In hindsight, it is clear that Harleston was throwing up a smokescreen and banking on “the passage of time” and the gradual easing of demands. But if Jeffries’s ideas were not germane to the inquiry, as Harleston had instructed the provost, neither were his duties as department chair—scheduling classes, evaluating faculty, and serving on college-wide committees—germane to the substantive concerns about his professional conduct. The only conceivable response to Jeffries, in other words—other than no response at all—was necessarily vengeful and gratuitous: to take Dr. Jeffries down a peg. As with Prof. Levin, the value was to be largely symbolic and fraught with the potential for litigation and heightened tension.

In a tacit acknowledgement of that reality, the New York State Board of Regents declined to weigh in on the controversy at all and, after giving Jeffries an opportunity to speak on his own behalf, the college’s Faculty Senate would issue only a non-binding resolution to “disavow and reject” Jeffries’s “anti-Semitic and anti-Italian sentiments” and to deplore his use of an “ethnic slur” against its former chair Bernard Sohmer (“the head Jew”).¹¹⁰ Disciplinary action in such a case, the senators argued, was fundamentally incompatible with the principle of academic freedom. The *New York Times* was particularly attuned to the nexus between the college’s symbolic dimension and its bread and butter issues, imploring New Yorkers, alumni in particular,” not to “punish City College” for the sins of two men but instead “come to the college’s aid.”¹¹¹ No strangers to symbolism and the grand gesture themselves, the black studies faculty fired back with an official request that the faculty senate initiate a separate inquiry:

to investigate the role of secret societies among the faculty...It appears that there is a clear pattern of manipulation of decision-making by a small self-selected

¹¹⁰ Alan Finder, “Faculty Senate Assails Jeffries but Resists Censure,” *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1991, B3. The language was identical to the resolution regarding Levin’s 1988 journal article. See “Controversial Professor Says CUNY Pressure to Quit Course Violated Academic Freedom,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 23, 1988, A11.

¹¹¹ “Don’t Punish City College,” Editorial, *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1991, A26. The editors call Levin “less rabid but equally disturbing.”

group of Faculty who have acted in a “concert of mutual interests” under the guise of either a fraternity, a Kabala (sic) or a Cabal.¹¹²

THE ONGOING DEGRADATION OF COLLEGIALLY & CAMPUS DISCOURSE

Two days after that, as Leonard Jeffries addressed a cheering throng of more than one hundred protesters on the sidewalk below their offices, the CUNY trustees voted to follow President Harleston’s recommendation to renew Leonard Jeffries’s chairmanship of the department of black studies for what remained of a one-year, rather than the customary three-year term, giving them more time to examine his ongoing fitness for office. It was a remedy that satisfied virtually no one, but was calculated to diffuse the tension, and preempt further publicity and litigation.¹¹³ Not one of these goals would it ultimately accomplish, however.

Even before the trustees voted, Jeffries was thriving in the media spotlight, appearing on the talk shows and speaking to black reporters. On national television he gently chided host Phil Donahue for speaking to him as an equal, sarcastically addressing him as “Professor Donahue.” During an interview with Eliot Morgan, a student reporter from the *Harvard Crimson*, Jeffries allegedly referred to his Harvard counterpart, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, who had criticized Jeffries’s remarks, as “a faggot and a punk.” “How can you have an interest of African-Americans at heart,” he asked Morgan, “when you sleep with white people?”¹¹⁴ Moments later Jeffries stoically advised Morgan that if he quoted these and similarly inflammatory statements, “I’ll kill you.” Asked if he realized that people feared him, Jeffries responded, “They should.” Upon learning that Morgan’s editors had Jewish last names, Jeffries demanded his interview

¹¹² “The Debate Goes On,” 9.

¹¹³ After the vote, Harleston asked reporters to “Keep in mind [that] at his particular time in the history of the city there’s a lot of tension,” quoted in Gourevitch, “The Jeffries Affair,” 37.

¹¹⁴ J. Eliot Morgan, “The Truth About Jeffries,” *Harvard Crimson*, Nov. 2, 1991.

tapes and watched while “Brother Larry, one of his large bodyguards” collected them.¹¹⁵ Jeffries later denied Morgan’s account of what he characterized as a friendly conversation, but the story was prominently played and Morgan filed a criminal complaint with the Manhattan District Attorney’s office charging Jeffries with threatening his life.

In early November Jeffries appeared at a college wide conference attended by two hundred faculty and students to address “Race and Other Differences,” and, according to the *Times*, derailed a question and answer period when he “repeatedly commanded the microphone.”¹¹⁶ Throughout the semester Jeffries angrily sought out and confronted faculty and administrators whenever they said unflattering things about him on television or he’d heard rumors that they were planning to investigate him. He sent a memorandum to the dean, the provost, and President Harleston warning that “if this faculty wants war it will get it—Enough is enough. We will fight fire with fire.” And at one meeting where top administrators urged him to voluntarily step down as chair for the good of the college and everyone concerned, he became agitated and threatened to turn City College into the next Crown Heights.¹¹⁷ By December, administrators later testified in court after Jeffries sued them for violating his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights, they had privately agreed to remove Jeffries from his post that coming spring. But by that time, Leonard Jeffries would seem to be the least of their problems.

Though a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* visiting the college at semester’s end reported that you’d scarcely notice such an ugly spectacle was going on, the two student papers continued to convey a sense of crisis and to maintain a tone of defiant anti-

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Joseph Berger, “City College Gives a Seminar on Racial Issues, and Jeffries Comes,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 1991, B3.

¹¹⁷ *Jeffries v. Harleston*, 828 F. Supp. 1066, 1076 (S.D. NY, Aug. 4, 1993).

intellectualism.¹¹⁸ *The Campus*'s news editor wrote with no apparent sense of irony that "Fortunately, at the high school I attended, we had a problem keeping history teachers so I didn't receive too much brainwashing. At least now I can start all over again with the real truth."¹¹⁹ In *The Paper* one headline read, "Jeffries KO's Donahue" and a signed editorial by the "Community Affairs Editor" advocated an all-out assault on the *New York Post*:

Not only should we not buy this rag, but at 5:30 am [sic], we as a people should meet their delivery trucks at the threshold of our communities and water-hose or light a match to the whole shipment.¹²⁰

In some respects, they could scarcely be considered "student" papers at all. Both publications often contained more opinion pieces and letters by faculty members, fringe politicians, and writers with names like "Patrice Lumumba" and "Brother Michael 5X," than they did student bylines. One Queens College professor wrote to *The Campus* to object not to Jeffries's speeches but to "his masquerade as a scholar. Scholarship is not oral bibliography, it is not waving books at a chanting crowd during the harangue."¹²¹ Though they made fewer exaggerated claims to be bona fide journalists than Jeffries did to being "the consummate scholar," much the same could be said of what had become of the "student" press. By the following semester three people were sharing the title of *Campus* editor-in-chief, even as the newspaper continued listing the managing, news, and sports editor positions as "vacant," a crisis of leadership and accountability that extended into many other precincts of college life and was soon to have tragic consequences.

THE GYM TRAGEDY: THE URBAN UNDERCLASS STORMS THE GATES

Student newspapers at City and most other colleges were funded by mandatory student

¹¹⁸ Denise K. Magner, "Beneath All the Furor," A17.

¹¹⁹ Charita Jackson, "Fed Up," *The Campus*, Oct. 28, 1991, 10.

¹²⁰ Keith A. Mayes, "The New York Post: Their Agenda, Our Response," Editorial, *The Paper*, Nov. 7, 1991, 2.

¹²¹ Michael Wreszin, Letter to the editor, *The Campus*, Dec. 9, 1991, 2.

activity fees and governed by an independent “media board” or student council with at most cursory fiscal and journalistic oversight from college officials. They typically had budgets, equipment, and office space that far outstripped the size of their staffs or readership. Nowhere else in society did journalists with so little training or sense of their own mission have access to similar resources such that their biggest problem often was not paying the printer or deciding what to articles to cut, but finding material to fill the abundant, empty space in the paper. Much the same could be said about other student organizations, which throughout the university had also been faltering due to lack of staff and increasing demands on the time of the little staff they had. In September the *Times* reported that the University Student Senate, which collected eighty-five cents a semester from each and every one of the more than 200,000 full-time students in CUNY, had racked up tens of thousands of dollars in expenses hiring relatives, organizing junkets to lobby state legislators in Albany and an “African American Summit” in West Africa, and using limousine services to get around town.¹²² There was no evidence suggesting that the students involved were corrupt, but neither did they have the benefit of the training, guidance, supervision, or hours in the day necessary to constitute an effective representational public sphere. Like their constituents, many had full-time jobs and families to support as well as term papers to write.

It was in that context that the City College’s evening student government decided to use the occasion of basketball superstar Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s announcement that he was infected with the virus that causes AIDS to sponsor an event in the college gym that would raise awareness and funds. City College’s “first annual Heavy D-Puff Daddy Celebrity Charity Basketball Game,” was to be a contest between some of the biggest names in hip-hop—Run

¹²² Joseph Berger, “CUNY Student Leaders Run Up Big Tab,” *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1991, B1.

DMC, Boys2Men, Big Daddy Kane... — with live music at halftime and a portion of the proceeds going to an “AIDS Education Outreach Program” that it later turned out didn’t exist.¹²³ Twenty-two-year-old rap impresario Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs and the hip-hop radio station WKRS, KISS-FM promoted the game relentlessly. Together the X-Men, a group of bow tie wearing Fruit of Islam look-alikes, and the college’s Pinkerton guards were to provide security.

On Saturday, December 28, thousands of fans, many holding tickets, waited for hours in the cold outside the building that houses the Nat Holman Gymnasium on the mistaken assumption that there would be room for them inside the packed venue. As game time approached and then passed, members of the crowd became increasingly restive, and the private security force lost control of the lobby area. Students collecting money and frisking people for weapons ran downstairs to hide the ticket receipts, and in the ensuing pandemonium, the one open door to the gym was slammed shut. The crowd surged forward, shattering a set of glass doors and forcing themselves into a narrow stairwell at the bottom of which was a wall of orange metal doors—all locked from the inside. Pressed up against the doors and trapped underneath the pile of bodies cascading down the stairs, eight young people had the breath crushed out of them and died. Dozens more were injured. (A ninth would die in the hospital two days later.) The supervisor of the sixty-three police officers standing oblivious outside on Convent Ave. either misunderstood or disregarded several urgent requests for help from the college athletic director, event promoters, and others, in one instance even contravening a 911 distress call coming from somewhere inside. As in 1969, police were not permitted to enter the campus without a formal request from college officials or clear evidence of an imminent danger to public safety, evidence

¹²³ Cassaundra A. Kirnon, the president of the evening student government, who filled out the forms and allegedly misled college officials about the nature of the event, was elected with 53 out of a total of 70 votes to represent a student body of 1,800. She controlled an annual budget of \$48,000. See Joseph Berger, “CUNY Officials Review City College Leadership,” Jan. 3, 1992, B4.

that apparently came too late. As a result, emergency medical personnel did not arrive for over twenty minutes.

The debacle was international news. Not since the basketball scandals of 1951 had so many different segments of the society been so flagrantly at fault. This time, instead of gamblers and sportswriters and coaches, it was the rap promoters, radio disc jockeys, student organizers, college officials, rowdy elements among the crowd, security staff, and police who all shared the blame, each one pointing a finger in the other direction. At a press conference a few days later, promoter Puff Daddy suggested that the outcome would have been different had the game been held at “some more prestigious college—and not one in Harlem.”¹²⁴

The “gym tragedy” cemented the image of City College as that rare place where neither discourse nor behavior know any boundaries at all, where novel and menacing subcultures run amok with lethal consequences. Leonard Jeffries and Michael Levin and the inability of the institution to deal assertively with them were now clearly understood to be the rule, not the exception.¹²⁵

MANAGING & AVOIDING SOCIAL CONFLICT

Though they had no doubt suffered enough political damage already, the disaster also further cemented the image of New York’s first African American mayor and second black police commissioner as fundamentally unable or unwilling to impose order on a chaotic city. New Yorkers had elected the courtly David Dinkins by only two percentage points over an abrasive, white career prosecutor running on a law-and-order platform. In spite of the relatively small loss of life in Crown Heights and the riot’s failure to spread to other parts of the city,

¹²⁴ Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs, quoted in Andy Logan, “The Unpeaceable Kingdom,” *New Yorker*, Jan. 27, 1992, 65.

¹²⁵ Unlike Jeffries, however, who the *Post* and others were fond of identifying as a *CUNY* professor, a symptom of a system wide problem, the press situated the gym tragedy from the very start in the bowels of CCNY.

Dinkins and his black police commissioner were bitterly criticized for allegedly having held back the police there in deference to black rage while Holocaust survivors huddled in fear in their basements. Dinkins had thus far failed to curb street crime and disorder and had raised serious questions about his ability to be “the mayor of all the people.”¹²⁶

For City College’s first black president, the gym tragedy would prove the decisive factor in sealing his fate. The mother of one City student (who did not attend the fateful game) summed up Bernard Harleston’s and his deputies’ culpability for the gym tragedy thus:

In a public building, operated by a public authority (The City University of New York), innumerable and egregious lapses in the enforcement of university regulations were routine. They were the administration’s way of both managing and avoiding social conflict...Something like the backdraft in a fire, those attempts made over the years to ease the social conflicts that rise from the efforts to compensate for our racist history now blow back on those at work trying to bring the fire under control.¹²⁷

Until the gym tragedy, she wrote, Harleston had successfully maintained a policy of “openness” to the surrounding community and a “hands-off” approach to student activities. He had let the student strike run its course and given Leonard Jeffries the opportunity to consider whether his theatrics were really worth pursuing, and, in so doing, he had avoided confrontation.

But that policy, translated down the administrative ladder, clearly led school officials to ignore the rules, to suspend judgment, and at times, to take leave of common sense. And the student [organizers] followed their lead. Even the police captain on duty outside the gym was probably observing some version of that policy: Don’t start trouble with these kids. Don’t assert police authority unless absolutely necessary. Don’t make your men the angry focus of those not getting

¹²⁶ There were, in fact, no deaths in Crown Heights that could have been prevented. The L.A. riots, which only months later killed fifty-three people, injured thousands more, and caused nearly a billion dollars in property damage in one of the worst incidents of civil unrest in American history—unrest that spread to many other cities—never visited to New York either. But by then, David Dinkins and black leaders generally had already been discredited by incidents like the boycott of Korean grocers in Queens and the violence in Crown Heights. City College was only the icing on the cake.

¹²⁷ Margaret O’Brien Steinfels, “Why They Died: Accountability at City College,” *Commonweal* 119, no. 5 (13 March 1992): 5.

into the gym. Were the police captain and the college president wrong?...The awful truth is that no one, black or white, will “mess” with young blacks, especially young black males.¹²⁸

It would take almost two years, but Republican Rudolph W. Giuliani would defeat Dinkins in the next mayoral election based on the tacit promise to step in and start trouble where others had failed. If the City College tragedy can be said to have played only a minor part in Dinkins’s ouster, the same cannot be said of the black police commissioner, City College president, and chair of black studies, all of whom would be out in a matter of months.

The widespread assumption about the rap fans was that, whatever systemic failures may have come into play, in the words of one police officer’s radio transmission shortly before the deadly crush, “They’re not people, they’re animals.” The *Times*’s second day story was particularly rich with imagery reminiscent of the alleged “wilding” incident in Central Park three years earlier: opportunistic fans without tickets climbing over people and trampling the fallen, people demanding their money back and interrupting rappers trying to administer CPR to ask for autographs. Even the activist Al Sharpton, who so often blamed police and government officials when black people got hurt or into trouble, muted his rhetoric on this occasion and led a march that focused largely on the irresponsible behavior of the fans themselves. While isolated acts of depraved indifference and callousness did indeed occur, the official investigation revealed that there had, in fact, been no stampede. As one traffic engineer put it in a letter to the *Times*, any time you have a stairwell and doorway with those dimensions and a crowd that size, history and “simple arithmetic” tell you that pressure will build. “The young people involved in the City College crowd incident should not be faulted for their behavior,” he wrote:

People in the rear of a crowd have no idea what is going on in front. As crowding density increases, there is an impression of reasonable forward movement even as

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

a critical pileup occurs in front.

Television news broadcasts show that these young people quickly responded to the emergency, pulling others off the pile and opening more doors. Potentially the loss of life could have been greater without these actions.¹²⁹

‘THE FINGER POINTS AT CITY COLLEGE’

Together, the previous spring’s campus takeover, the Albany speech, and now the gym tragedy had, in the farsighted words of *The Paper*, become

intertwined and intermingled and are being used to dragnet Leonard Jeffries, with Harleston carrying out the order...we are well aware that if he doesn’t deliver the head of Leonard Jeffries, it shall be his own head that ultimately will be delivered.¹³⁰

The gym tragedy also tied City College to a gathering awareness that one of the last remaining sanctuaries in a world that had become terrifying to grow up in, the public school, was now yet another site of consummate danger. As *Post* columnist Amy Pagnozzi put it speaking of one of the smothered victims, “It wasn’t as if she’d left her house to go to some deathtrap after-hours dive in The Bronx.”¹³¹ The death of 20-year-old Dirk Swain, in particular, seemed to prove that nowhere was safe anymore for a young black man in America. Swain had graduated from a top Catholic high school in the Bronx two years earlier and was studying architecture at Virginia’s Hampton University when he was shot in the head at a fraternity party early in the semester. He had been home for months recovering from brain surgery. Cabin fever and his love of basketball and rap music led him to City College where he apparently collapsed in the

¹²⁹ John J. Fruin, “Where Blame Lies in the City College Tragedy,” Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1992, A20.

¹³⁰ Keith A. Mayes, “President Bernard Harleston: Saving Face,” Editorial, *The Paper*, March 2, 1992, 3.

¹³¹ Amy Pagnozzi, “Life’s joys in abundance—then in an instant, she’s gone,” *New York Post*, Dec. 30, 1991, 2. The reference was to Happy Land, an unlicensed nightclub that a jealous boyfriend had set on fire two years earlier killing eighty-seven mostly undocumented immigrants inside.

stairwell and was crushed to death by the unruly crowd.¹³² Reading Swain's story one almost had to wonder whether he wouldn't have been safer dealing crack on a street corner than spending so much time on college campuses. A young man his age had been shot dead at a dance at City College the previous summer, and in November a high school student had shot and killed another and wounded a teacher in a hallway of Brooklyn's Thomas Jefferson High School.¹³³

Five days after the City College disaster the *Post* demanded to know "Who's in charge at CCNY?" and accused Harleston of "passing the buck to 'student organizers.'"

This kind of abdication of responsibility has become the hallmark of Bernard Harleston's tenure as CCNY president. He has tried to protect Leonard Jeffries' position as head of the Black Studies Department—saying he fears "conflict" if Jeffries were not retained. He allows student rioters to shut down the college nearly every spring. Now it emerges that he allows inexperienced student groups employing false pretexts to use City College facilities for "fund-raising" events.¹³⁴

If readers didn't already have a sense that blacks across the ideological spectrum were closing ranks, this suggested such a pattern.

Another editorial a few days after that predictably pointed out that, whether or not they chose to come anywhere near the city, "state taxpayers will wind up paying the bill" for the inevitable lawsuits that were sure to follow, and the school itself ought to be forced to pony up:

The next time you hear that insufficient funds are spent on public education in New York, remember this episode...CUNY and CCNY shouldn't simply expect the funds to be replaced. They ought to do some budget slashing to make up the monies...Canceling the annual strikes that shut down most CUNY campuses and ensuring that no buildings get trashed this year might be a start. Eliminating all

¹³² David Gonzalez, "8 Lives That Came Together, Then Were Lost in the Crowd," *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1992, A1.

¹³³ Only after another student at the same school opened fire on one of his classmates killing him and another student in February, just hours before Mayor Dinkins was scheduled to visit the school to speak about teen violence did the city as a whole seem to register the palpable sense that it might no longer be safe even to send your kids to school.

¹³⁴ "Who's in charge at CCNY?" Editorial, *New York Post*, Jan. 2, 1992, 26.

subsidies to “student organizations”—like the one that “planned” the rap event—ought to save a few bucks.¹³⁵

Along with city and university officials, the *New York Times* also piled it on. Following the release of a city report that spread the blame liberally among college officials, police, promoters, and others, the *Times* headlined their editorial, “The Finger Points at City College.”¹³⁶ Harleston fired his deputy in charge of student activities as well as the head of the student center and reassigned the director of security. At the end of the school year he, too, stepped down, but not before announcing the replacement of Leonard Jeffries as department chair with a prominent Yale psychologist named Edmund Gordon. Gordon was charged with reinvigorating the department and attracting scholars with an altogether different kind of national reputation.

JEFFRIES’S PYRRHIC VICTORY & CITY’S PUBLIC SHAME

Jeffries filed suit complaining that Harleston and the larger institution had violated his First Amendment and civil rights, and the following year a jury not only concurred, but awarded him \$400,000 in punitive damages. As a public employee speaking on matters of public concern his speech was protected and the college did not have the right to remove him from his chairmanship as a direct result of it. The same federal magistrate who had personally vindicated Michael Levin (there was no jury in that case) now upheld the verdict, blasting the pitifully shoddy and dishonest claim the college had presented in its own defense that its decision to dethrone Jeffries was not intended to punish him for his remarks or silence future outbursts. Judge Conboy’s opinion went out of its way to characterize those remarks as “hateful, poisonous and reprehensible,” but nonetheless defended the jury’s “justifiable disgust” with the Harleston, Chancellor Reynolds, Herman Badillo, and several other university trustees who first failed to

¹³⁵ “CCNY disaster: Who gets the bill?” Editorial, *New York Post*, Jan. 6, 1992, 18.

¹³⁶ “The Finger Points at City College,” Editorial, *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1992, 22.

take action, then acted for the wrong reasons, and finally lied about those reasons. He called the defense's case "confused and incompetent" and wrote that however distasteful it might be, it was incumbent upon the court to reinstate Jeffries as chair.

This need not have been the case if the University had offered convincing, firsthand proof at trial that either the consequences of the [Albany] speech disrupted the campus, classes, administration, fund-raising or faculty relations, or that the professor had turned his classroom into a forum for bizarre, shallow, racist and incompetent pseudo-thinking and pseudo-teaching. While a few shards of hearsay or self-serving evidence were offered halfheartedly by the University to suggest potentially viable defenses along these lines, the University cannot escape the astonishing picture it painted for the jury: high public and academic officials swearing under oath that they had removed the professor [from his chairmanship] for tardiness in arriving at class and sending in his grades, and for assorted brutish behavior which had been either ignored or condoned by the University.¹³⁷

The punitive damages in this case did not reflect the injury Jeffries had suffered, the judge said, nor did they presume to place a price tag on his constitutional rights. Rather, they were "a measure of the bad faith of the defendants." In an extraordinary move, Conboy all but instructed the university to monitor Jeffries's classes and other on-campus activities going forward and to remove him once it had established a "good cause basis" to do so:

We observe, with reluctance but out of necessity, that if the University decides to pursue such a course, it ought to concern itself with such matters as witnesses, stenographic records, affidavits and the like, and not rely on pious press releases and hearsay-ridden, elliptical, hand-wringing memoranda from academic deans.¹³⁸

FREEDOM OF SPEECH TRUMPS COMMUNITY STANDARDS & STUDENT RIGHTS

The verdict was as devastating to City College's reputation and funding as had been the original scandal and would prove a pyrrhic victory for Jeffries as well. Calling him "probably the most egregious case of affirmative-action abuse in this country," *New York Magazine's* John

¹³⁷ Jeffries v. Harleston, Aug. 4, 1993, 1071-2.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

Taylor reflected on a conversation he'd had with Jeffries two years earlier:

My initial curiosity about his bizarre ideas gave way to boredom, then irritation, then a mild panic at my inability to end the conversation, and finally, when Jeffries was still blathering on an hour later, to the realization that he was quite mad.

Taylor's response mirrored the way everyone from college officials and the press to the black intelligentsia and the larger public would react to Jeffries over the more than five years it took for his public battle with City College to play out. "Jeffries was a monster college officials themselves had created," he wrote, by indulging him at every turn. "Now they were going to have to live with him." And perhaps worse still, "In finally summoning the moral courage to oust Jeffries [from his chairmanship, they] ended up revealing, in vivid detail, just how spineless they had been toward him all along."¹³⁹

As it made its way through the courts, Jeffries's case, together with the Levin debacle, provoked a good deal of soul searching about the contravention of academic values and norms. Leonard Kriegel recalled meeting Jeffries at a reception at President Marshak's home in 1973, shortly after Marshak had recruited him as a full professor with tenure, and innocently inquiring about his publications.

In Jeffries' eyes, asking what he had published was as meaningless as asking the question of Joan of Arc or Mother Teresa. For he saw himself neither as scholar nor teacher, but as a bringer of light to those in bondage to the cultural lies and distortions of the white man. In years to come, Jeffries would find himself ridiculed for his racist theorizing about the mental and physical effects of melanin and his division of mankind into Sun People and Ice People. But it was Jeffries who should have done the laughing. For his achievement was to bring himself into the center of academic life at CCNY, and to do it on his own terms.¹⁴⁰

Kriegel shared Taylor's assessment that "affirmative action abuse" was the precipitating event in

¹³⁹ John Taylor, "He's Back!" *New York*, May 24, 1993, 10-11.

¹⁴⁰ Leonard Kriegel, "A Tale of Two Leonards," *Reconstruction* 1 (1990): 143.

the Jeffries affair: “It is simply inconceivable,” he writes, “that Marshak would have been so lax about a young physicist’s credentials...What the college asked of [Jeffries] was simply that he be black and that he project himself to students as a racial rallying point.”¹⁴¹ By abdicating its own responsibility, the faculty was complicit in what he called “the unpardonable academic sin, the sin against the intellect.”¹⁴² Kriegel later made it clear that he, too, was guilty in that respect. “I should have said this guy was full of s--- long before I did,” he said.¹⁴³

But the greater tragedy may well have been the way the way the peculiar logic of First Amendment law came to subsume the institution’s own internal codes, to distort, even to occlude the conversation that ought to have taken place within a community of scholars. Because Jeffries was a public employee speaking on matters of public concern he was therefore unequivocally entitled to protection under the First Amendment. But Nathan Glazer argued that once that protection became the issue, something precious was lost in the process. Just as the Supreme Court eventually came to regard the exhibition of pornography as subject to “community standards” and Prohibition made way for a new regime controlling the distribution and sale of alcohol out of statehouses and town halls, Glazer believed that, at least to some degree, a college or university forms a similar kind of “community with common standards and goals,” one to which decisions about offensive speech like that of Levin and Jeffries should properly devolve.¹⁴⁴ Supreme Court Justice Anthony Powell’s dictum that under the law, “there is no such thing as a

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴³ Kriegel, Interview with Author.

¹⁴⁴ Nathan Glazer, “How Should We Talk About Intergroup Conflict?” in Murray Friedman and Nancy Isserman, eds., *The Tribal Basis of American Life: Racial, Religious, and Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 157.

false idea” need not apply to every precinct of public life.¹⁴⁵ “In an academic institution,” said Glazer, “truth must be a primary value. In making free speech the primary issue in these cases, truth became irrelevant.”¹⁴⁶

For Glazer the blunt instrument of constitutional law flattened the key difference between Jeffries and Levin: “Levin was engaged in a legitimate act of scholarship, despite the pain that it caused and the strains it introduced into relationships between the races.” The discomfort brought on by Jeffries was, by contrast, purely “irrational.”

It may of course be true that both the scholar and the charlatan are deserving of equal treatment under the law, but they are not deserving of the same treatment by an institution of higher education...If there is a distinction between science, scholarship, and reasoned argument, and non-science and irrational argument...the community of scholars and scientists must make the distinction and act on it.¹⁴⁷

Ironically, also obscured in the discussions of constitutional law and academic freedom was the total absence of dissenting ideas or possibility thereof inside Jeffries’s classroom. This was perhaps most glaring in his little-noted requirement that students draw a triangle at the top of all their assignments. It is one thing to require students to demonstrate their mastery of this conceptual framework, their knowledge of what the three points of the triangle represent to Jeffries and other adherents of the particular theory—a difficult enough task, given the “alphabet soup” scholars have described it as.¹⁴⁸ It is quite another for students to be required to tacitly espouse such theories by simply reproducing the symbol, something that I would argue violates their own academic freedom and constitutional rights and poisons an atmosphere of free inquiry.

¹⁴⁵ Anthony Powell, quoted in Nathan Glazer, “Levin, Jeffries, and the Fate of Academic Autonomy,” *William & Mary Law Review* 36 (1994-95): 709.

¹⁴⁶ Glazer, “Levin, Jeffries, and the Fate,” 708.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 723, 730.

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin, “The Bizarre Classroom,” 92. On any given day the three points stood for “Domination, Destruction, and Death,” for example, or “Communal, Cooperative, and Collective,” but seem also to have had something to do with the pyramid as a mechanism for organizing reality.

In class, Jeffries “treats his students as a chorus,” wrote journalist James Traub. “Dissent is unheard of, and a spurious air of consensus reigns.”¹⁴⁹ An anonymous Haitian student told

Traub that he regretted taking the class:

I’m not learning anything. This man thinks he knows everything, so how can you ask him a question? I don’t speak in class, because I don’t want to get in trouble. If I try to say anything, they will say, “You are black on the outside and white on the inside.”¹⁵⁰

English Professor and City College graduate Michelle Wallace, the author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and not someone known to be intimidated about airing her community’s dirty laundry, said this chilling effect extended well beyond Jeffries’s classroom. “Just knowing he’s down the hall makes discussion of race and ethnicity loaded,” she said, an ancillary effect lost among all the abstractions about freedom of speech.¹⁵¹

‘THE ACADEMY MEETS THE TALK SHOW’

The jury’s verdict in *Jeffries v. Harleston* prompted a new flurry of coverage. Freelance journalist James Traub was the first to visit Jeffries’s classroom since the *Times*’s Joseph Berger profiled him and Levin more than a year before the explosive Albany speech and was ready with an eight thousand word article for the *New Yorker* only weeks after Jeffries prevailed in court. Traub had been making trips up to City College ever since the gym tragedy the previous winter and had approached Jeffries in the hallway before his World Civilizations class the following fall to ask if he could sit in. According to Traub, Jeffries told him he was perfectly aware of the white media conspiracy to destroy him and was certain that Traub was a part of it, but “I’m not afraid of you or the New York *Times* or any of them.”¹⁵² Even though Traub had just spoken to

¹⁴⁹ Traub, 1993, “The Hearts and Minds,” 49.

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous Haitian student, quoted in Traub, “The Hearts and Minds,” 49.

¹⁵¹ Michele Wallace, quoted in Traub, “The Hearts and Minds,” 42.

¹⁵² Leonard Jeffries, quoted in Traub, “The Hearts and Minds,” 44.

him outside in the hallway, Jeffries arrived to class fifteen minutes late. On three subsequent visits, the professor was twenty-five minutes late once and on the two other occasions didn't show up at all. This was to be the experience of the other writers who would follow, both announced and incognito, after the verdict was announced. Indeed, fifteen minutes would prove to be a record of punctuality. In her lead, *Time's* anonymous reporter had fun with the notion that on the City College campus there was

no sign of the uproar...no sign of the outraged editorials...And no sign of Jeffries. Forty-five minutes after class was scheduled to start in a windowless, first-floor lecture hall, he still has not arrived. Several of the 40 or so young students (all black but for one Asian) are sprawled face down on their blue Formica desks. Every few minutes, someone tires of waiting, gets up and leaves.¹⁵³

When Jeffries finally made his entrance an hour late on this, the first meeting of the spring semester after the court's vindication, he apologized, saying that he was trying to get his clothes back from the laundry, which had burned down.

Richard Benjamin, a senior editor for the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, also decided to see for himself what went on in Jeffries's classroom. He, too, described a waiting game: sitting through small talk and rants by "the various people [who] speak on [Jeffries's] behalf"—the three-hundred-pound man who guarded the door and announced what was going to be on the exam, the Nigerian aide with the heavy accent who rambled incoherently about pyramid theory, NAFTA, soap operas and the police—"as if to warm up, mollify, or entertain the antsy students." The classroom, he said, had "the feel of a stage." When Jeffries showed up forty-three minutes late, it was only to announce that "We goofed up in our scheduling. They scheduled me to tape a Sunday talk show. Everybody work on your essays." With that, he

¹⁵³ "Skin Deep 101," *Time*, Feb. 14, 1994, 16.

introduced a guest lecturer and vanished.¹⁵⁴ Though Benjamin, unlike Traub, was not writing a book, he was forced to come back and try to catch Dr. Jeffries again the following week, when Jeffries would arrive only a half an hour late and teach the class himself.

As a scholar, Benjamin was archly critical of what he described as efforts by journalists like Traub to “discredit” Jeffries, in part by conflating his beliefs with his “public persona” and unduly emphasizing the way he dressed and carried himself—Traub wrote that Jeffries “moves across the campus like a heavyweight champion,” for example. The *Times* highlighted his African robes.— “[The] implicit attitude” in the press, wrote Benjamin, “has been ‘not only is Jeffries a menacing Negro on the intellectual fringe, but he doesn’t wear a blue suit!’”¹⁵⁵

Nonetheless, his two classroom visits forced Benjamin to conclude, along with a critical mass of other leading black scholars, that “Jeffries’ pyramid [theory] is a simplistic matrix of alphabet soup,” his teachings “the stuff of speculation and polemic.” Benjamin could scarcely resist the familiar temptation to describe the Adidas jogging suit and tinted aviator sunglasses worn by Jeffries’s “guest lecturer” as well as the professor’s own teaching style. Students “dutifully” responded in unison to his rhetorical questions about “the three Cs...Community, Cooperative, Collective” and Ds: “Domination, Destruction, Death.”

Jeffries is as much a performer as he is an ideologue. He can author his persona just as fluently as he can transcribe his theories on the chalkboard. His collection of lackeys, his bond with his black students, the middle-aged man who videotapes his lecture every day: these are his personal signature elements contributing to his “performative” style of instruction, persona as pedagogy. Like a West African wedding ceremony, or, for that matter, any event where black folks congregate, Jeffries’ lecture owes much of its energy to the audience’s constant

¹⁵⁴ Richard M. Benjamin, “The Bizarre Classroom of Dr. Leonard Jeffries,” 92-3.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

participation—its interruptions, encouragement, laughter. Here, the academy meets the talk show.¹⁵⁶

Though Jeffries's bravado, theatricality, and scorn for the white media were largely intact, Benjamin noted that he also seemed defensive, his hyperbole "tempered," and wondered whether he hadn't been chastened by the judge's admonition that the college could still sack him for teaching material that was "patently absurd, wholly fallacious...bizarre, shallow, racist, or based on pseudothinking."¹⁵⁷

Benjamin and a wide range of scholars of African American studies, including some who Jeffries's replacement had recruited to City College itself, had by then come to acknowledge that Jeffries was a "maniac" who "views history through the idyllic lens of racial pride and narrow nationalist goals" and "has replaced one set of myths and legends for another," someone on the outer "fringe" of their field.¹⁵⁸ But in black popular culture he was still often viewed as a rebel. *Emerge* put him on the cover of its March 1994 issue in his African regalia with the headline "JEFFRIES' REVENGE: The Professor is More Outspoken Than Ever—and \$400,000 Richer," though the latter assessment would prove to be premature. The magazine gave voice to criticisms of Jeffries's, but they were all articulated by politicians and other non-black interested parties like Herman Badillo, Ed Koch, and a spokesman of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith.¹⁵⁹ Overall, it presented a portrait of a "master provocateur" who "refuse[s] to whitewash [his] lesson plans." The article quoted New York State Regent Adelaide Sanford suggesting that Jeffries wasn't the one doing the performing:

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 96.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Michele Wallace, Michael Eric Dyson, Bruce Hare, & Henry Louis Gates, quoted respectively in Benjamin, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Donna Dickerson's comparison of the coverage of Jeffries and Levin is instructive here. She points out the use of "delegitimizing frames," specifically the quoting of elite and non-elite sources and use of paraphrasing. See Donna L. Dickerson, "Framing 'Political Correctness': The *New York Times*' Tale of Two Professors," in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media & Our Understanding of the Social World* (Stephen D. Reese and Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., et al, eds. (Mahwah: NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 163-174.

many Black scholars around the country hold similar beliefs as Jeffries, but are afraid to speak out...Some may wish they could speak out and say a little more but when you have been socialized to be afraid, to shuffle, to grin, you're uncomfortable because everybody is not shuffling. And then one day you find that there is somebody out there who is not compromising, but standing tall.¹⁶⁰

Late in 1994 the United States Supreme Court vacated the district court's judgment in *Jeffries v. Harleston* and sent the case back for reconsideration in light of a recent, related judgment, which found that a university could fire a public employee speaking on matters of public concern if it had a reasonable expectation that his or her speech would disrupt government operations.¹⁶¹ On that basis, the district court overturned its own decision and Jeffries was briefly unseated yet again. In 1996 the Black Studies department was disbanded and Jeffries was forced upon the Political Science faculty. As of this writing, he remains a tenured, full professor at City College, sans fiefdom.

¹⁶⁰ Michael H. Cottman, "The Campus 'Radicals,'" *Emerge*, March 1994, 26-29.

¹⁶¹ *Jeffries v. Harleston*, 513 U.S. 996 (1994).

3. 'CITY ON A HILL'

Republican Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani took office on January 1, 1994 vowing to curb street crime and welfare spending. He had been elected against the backdrop of Leonard Jeffries, the Crown Heights Riot, and Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." The following summer a wide-ranging critique of public institutions reached its crescendo, and City College became an object lesson in the costs of liberal good intentions and the perils of big government. By the end of the year voters would put George Pataki, an even more conservative Republican, in the governor's mansion, and the college would face its most severe budget cuts and tuition hike since the fiscal crisis twenty years earlier.

The landscape of media and political culture in New York had been changing at least since the early 1990s. Several organs of news and opinion had attended to and helped to bring about Giuliani's ascendancy and to shape a new urban agenda. Perhaps the most important single media figure was Eric Breindel of the *New York Post*. The *Post* had been the only one of the four metropolitan dailies to endorse Giuliani's earlier mayoral run, an ideological no-brainer while Peter Kalikow still owned it. But now Rupert Murdoch was back in the head office, the FCC having relaxed its cross-ownership rules, and Murdoch "hated" Giuliani for the way he had prosecuted several of his Wall Street friends back in the go-go eighties. Murdoch wanted to back an obscure, third-party candidate, but Breindel prevailed upon him to at least talk to Giuliani first. Sure enough, their meeting resulted in Giuliani garnering the *Post*'s ardent and crucial support.¹⁶²

The tabloids were in complete disarray throughout the early nineties, however. Two of

¹⁶² Craig Horowitz, "The Neo-Con Artist," *New York*, May 22, 1999.

the three nearly folded during this period: the centuries-old *Post* and the *Daily News*, “New York’s Picture Newspaper,” long the nation’s largest circulation daily. *New York Newsday*, the promising newcomer spun off from the parent *Newsday* edition that had been covering Long Island for decades and that had raised both the quality and tone of metropolitan coverage at all the other dailies—not least the *Times*— would publish its last issue in July of 1995.

But first, a bitter strike at the *News* beginning in October 1990 left that paper staffed with inexperienced, non-union replacement reporters for five months. When the competition broke the Leonard Jeffries story in 1991, circulation was at an all-time low and the *News* was undergoing massive staff reductions. A few months later Robert Maxwell, the new owner, drowned in a mysterious accident and investigators found “over \$1 billion dollars missing from his British pension funds and his media empire riddled with debt.”¹⁶³ Rumor had it that he’d secreted the money away to cover losses at the *Daily News* and so began the lawsuits. It took two years and the firing of more than one hundred reporters and editors before the paper slowly got back on its feet under the ownership of the real estate developer Mortimer Zuckerman. It took several years after that to mend the fissures that had formed among the staff in the process.¹⁶⁴ The *Post*, meanwhile, had begun the decade with an owner who was staving off bankruptcy and doing an elaborate dance with eleven unions to try to outlast his competition. One *Post* editor described the *Post* and the *News* as “two declining but still great newspapers, poised to begin their death duel.”¹⁶⁵

THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE & THE NEOLIBERAL CRESCENDO

To the extent that their troubles created vacuum, new players rushed in to fill it. In 1990,

¹⁶³ “New York Daily News,” *International Director of Company Histories* 32 (Farmington Hills, MI: St. James Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Cuzzo, 1996, 195.

the Manhattan Institute, an erstwhile obscure right-wing think tank, launched *City Journal*, the voice of what was fast becoming an immensely influential cadre of neo-liberal urban policy wonks. They blamed poverty, homelessness, and housing shortages on what they saw as misguided liberal inventions like public assistance, homeless shelters, and rent control—the very policies designed to ameliorate them, in other words. The institute seized on key ideas like welfare reform, school choice, “quality-of-life” crimes, and privatizing public hospitals and developed and marketed each of them as though it were a global pharmaceutical company with a new antibiotic. In a profile for the *New Yorker* just before his book about City College came out journalist James Traub wrote that

The rise of the institute has a great deal to do with the decline of traditional liberalism—a feeling that what was once a consensual faith, almost a civic religion, has degenerated into entrenched interests, on the one hand, and the petty absolutisms of ‘political correctness’ on the other.¹⁶⁶

“[It] changed the terms of the debate,” *Daily News* columnist Jim Sleeper told Traub, “because there is no one on the left-liberal side that has put out anything remotely as fine-grained as they have.”¹⁶⁷

The institute’s leaders made the most of this opportunity, shying away from hot-button issues like abortion rights and welcoming moderates like Nathan Glazer and Parks Commissioner Henry Stern (CCNY ‘54) onto its board and at its various luncheons and forums. The new journal upended the “small-town boosterism of the conservative tradition” by celebrating cities, even as it vigorously attacked the liberal excesses long associated with them.¹⁶⁸ In the process it helped to forge a new political center and urban agenda.

In an article in *City Journal*’s Summer 1994 issue, the conservative social critic Heather

¹⁶⁶ James Traub, “Intellectual Stock Picking,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 7, 1994, 40.

¹⁶⁷ Jim Sleeper, quoted in Traub, “Intellectual Stock Picking,” 37.

¹⁶⁸ Traub, “Intellectual Stock Picking,” 39.

Mac Donald took aim at what she called CUNY's "race to the bottom" since it launched "the nation's first affirmative action program for minority students" at City College in 1966 and then "capitulated" to militant students there three years later. The tropes were familiar enough:

City College, having achieved the greatest prominence, had the greatest distance to fall—and fall it did, shattering its reputation as the "Harvard of the poor" almost overnight. Queens College, on the other hand, has by all accounts been most successful in maintaining its academic caliber, leading, predictably, to charges of "elitism."¹⁶⁹

What was new was an analysis that focused on a new set of functions that she argued were "swallowing up all others," spawning a "vast remedial industry" made up of counselors, tutors, endlessly repeated skills courses, layer upon layer of bureaucracy, and an "unrelenting push" to artificially boost the enrollments against which individual CUNY colleges' government funding was calibrated. Using graduation rates as her key metric and a set of invidious comparisons like the one between City and Queens Colleges cited above, Mac Donald declared the university's "experiment in large-scale remedial education" an abject failure and a tremendous waste of resources.¹⁷⁰ Her shocking juxtaposition of CUNY's *eight-year* graduation rate of twenty-five percent with SUNY's *six-year* rate of fifty-six percent—more than double—failed to acknowledge that the SUNY system was overwhelmingly suburban, middle class and white while more than a third of CUNY freshman lived in poverty. In fact, CUNY's twenty-five percent stacked up quite favorably against similar urban comprehensive universities. As a further sign of decay, Mac Donald cited the suspect practice of allowing students to receive college credit for remedial work and to enroll in more advanced classes before meeting their basic requirements. She quoted an advocate of increasing credits and speeding remedial students

¹⁶⁹ Heather Mac Donald, "Downward Mobility: The Failure of Open Admissions at City University," *City Journal*, Summer 1994, 10-20, <http://www.city-journal.org/article01.php?aid=1425> (accessed Dec. 30, 2010). Mac Donald got the year wrong. It was 1965.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

toward their degrees as follows: “If someone can take Spanish or French for credit, why shouldn’t they earn credit for remedial English?”¹⁷¹

To put these questions in perspective, here is how one graduate of the vaunted class of 1941 earlier described how he accumulated his credits and how he, too, failed to graduate on time:

Perhaps precisely because the college was so good a refuge for so many of us during the Depression, the registrar appeared intent on getting us out fast. Requirements for graduation were constantly being eased. You got rather generous allowance for high school work, and bonus credits for A’s and B’s were added to your record. I managed to remain in college for an additional semester by deliberately neglecting to register for the required introductory courses in art history and economics until my third year. I didn’t want to graduate in the winter, and this arrangement enabled me to finish in June.¹⁷²

In the post-Open-Admissions era, as apparently in other eras as well, individual CUNY colleges exercised broad discretion to make such judgments as well as judgments about when a student qualified to take courses at varying levels.

Mac Donald’s article was, nonetheless, instrumental in what Lavin and Hyllegard described as the framing of Open Admissions—or what was left of it—as little more than “a failed welfare entitlement program left over from the bloated days of the Great Society” and in solidifying the impression in policy circles that too much money was being wasted on those who stood to benefit least.¹⁷³ “While CUNY pours money into remediation,” she wrote,

the rest of the university is being decimated by budget cuts. Students are unable to graduate because the courses they need are oversubscribed. The number of professors has been cut by 17 per cent in recent years. Half of all courses are taught by adjuncts, who have few ties to the institution and sometimes fewer qualifications. In the spring 1994 semester, an adjunct teaching introductory

¹⁷¹ Joseph Pereira, quoted in Mac Donald, “Downward Mobility.”

¹⁷² Morris Freedman. “CCNY Days.” *American Scholar* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 196.

¹⁷³ Lavin and Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds*, 244.

political science at City College had herself graduated from the college just the previous year. Library budgets have been sharply cut, forcing the curtailment of hours and acquisitions.

Mac Donald's concern lay squarely with what she viewed as college officials' bad choices in the face of bleak economic realities, not in transforming that reality. Finally, she called on CUNY to "abandon" broad-based remedial programs and the "sentimental argument" that justified their existence and to "return to the traditional division of functions between community and senior colleges." Now that the great majority of all students were people of color, the SEEK program no longer had a reason for being, she argued, and "should be disbanded entirely." She advocated "an honest vocational approach to learning" that channeled ill prepared students into "practical programs in fields like health care" or, if need be, "air conditioning school."¹⁷⁴

TINA BROWN'S NEW NEW YORKER

Mac Donald's manifesto was picked up by a variety of commentators,¹⁷⁵ was criticized by still others,¹⁷⁶ and was followed in August by the publication of James Traub's book *City on a Hill*, a 12,000-word excerpt of which soon appeared in the *New Yorker*, his second major City College article for the magazine in a little over a year. The book's appearance in a publication with such an elite, New York readership gave it a cachet that is difficult to overstate. The wife of longtime *New Yorker* staff writer Calvin Trillin, Alice Trillin, had taught in the SEEK program during the 1960s and was Mina Shaughnessy's best friend. And yet nothing about the uprising or Open Admissions had ever appeared in its pages save for one tender little vignette about Shaughnessy in the final months of her life.

¹⁷⁴ Mac Donald, 1994.

¹⁷⁵ See, e.g. John Leo, "A University's Sad Decline," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 15, 1994, 20. Leo's article was reprinted in newspapers throughout the country including the *Daily News*. In her own defense Mac Donald published her central argument in a letter to the *New York Times*. See "CUNY's Open Admissions Fail Miserably," Sept. 15, 1994, A22.

¹⁷⁶ See, e.g. Blanche Wiesen Cook and Sandi E. Cooper, "The Trashing of CUNY," *New York Times*, Sept, 8 1994, A25.

How was it possible, then, that the *New Yorker* would suddenly feature two major stories on the subject in the space of a year? The answer had to do with its new leadership. Sy Newhouse's media conglomerate Advance Publications had bought the staid weekly in 1985 and it was still losing money when, in 1992, he installed Tina Brown, who was not yet forty years old, as the fourth editor in its seventy-year history.¹⁷⁷ Brown promptly redesigned it, adding color, photographs, letters, and teasers at the beginning of articles that tended to be shorter, punchier, and more timely. "Suddenly, more stories were pegged to the news," said the *American Journalism Review*, something one of the magazine's critics called an "obsession."¹⁷⁸ Another commentator complained that it had become "too parochial, too New Yorky."¹⁷⁹ There is little doubt that the new *New Yorker* was more lively and attracted younger readers. But its sudden preoccupation with celebrity and "newsiness" led it to sacrifice some of its quirky self-assuredness and even, argued *New Yorker* writer Paul Wilkes, its "moral center."¹⁸⁰ Wilkes, who wrote two pieces about religious leaders under the previous regime met with Brown at the beginning of her tenure to discuss another piece he'd already completed about a Massachusetts rabbi he called "a seeker of truth." She demurred. He was later able to publish something about a pedophile priest, but ultimately concluded that, "My kind of pieces aren't running. She seems to prefer scandals. I like to write about heroes."¹⁸¹

To her credit, Brown also sought to create a new kind of mix and to engage previously neglected parts of the culture. The cover of her second issue was a portrait of Malcolm X, who was soon to be the subject of a major Hollywood biopic, and was accompanied by an in-depth

¹⁷⁷ Tk NYT feb 95

¹⁷⁸ Joanne Weintraub, "Tina Brown's *New Yorker*," *American Journalism Review*, April 1995, <http://ajr.org/Article.asp?id=1692> (accessed Dec. 31, 2010); The latter quote is from Abe Peck.

¹⁷⁹ Evan Reuss, quoted in Weintraub, "Tina Brown's *New Yorker*."

¹⁸⁰ Bill Powers, quoted in Weintraub, "Tina Brown's *New Yorker*."

¹⁸¹ Paul Wilkes, quoted in Weintraub, "Tina Brown's *New Yorker*."

discussion of his legacy. She later co-edited a special issue called “Black in America” with Harvard Professor and *New Yorker* regular Henry Louis Gates, all of which helped to explain why, a few months into her tenure, she would take an interest in James Traub’s portrait of a flamboyant provocateur in flowing African robes on a hardscrabble ghetto campus and his battle with his gentlemanly and reserved nemesis fresh out of Yale.

JAMES TRAUB SHATTERS ‘CUNY’S CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE’

Traub’s book chronicled his almost mythical quest for “the real City College.” It took him through a brief history of what he characterizes as “a great”—and tragic—“experiment” exemplified and presided over by the transcendent spirit of Mina P. Shaughnessy. He then descended into “the remedial underworld” of ESL and “College Skills” classes and “Dr. J’s Theater of Racial Outrage,” where both his demo-liberal faith and patience were ostensibly tested. Finally came his abbreviated jaunt “over the rainbow” to tiny, extant “preserves” of academic excellence like the engineering school and advanced seminars on Derrida and Wittgenstein that formed, sadly, “the shining exception.” *City on a Hill* was populated with earnest professors and deans, stunted young adults, and dogged immigrants most of whom were to stupid or blind to face what they were really up against. Other than Traub, probably the closest thing to a protagonist the book had was Rudy Gedamke, a German immigrant who graduated from City in the late 1950s, had been teaching remedial reading there for almost twenty-five years and was deeply disillusioned. Unlike Shaughnessy who saw her basic writing charges as “beginners,” Gedamke saw his as profoundly damaged before they even arrived on campus, and he now feared that his own, largely futile efforts were exacerbating that damage. “Rudi’s anguish was genuine,” wrote Traub in a revealing observation. “He derived, so far as I

could tell, not the slightest satisfaction from seeing his most dire predictions fulfilled.”¹⁸² Why, one wondered, would anyone imagine otherwise?

Taken at face value *City on a Hill* was a heartbreaking portrait of a noble institution in acute distress and denial, and reviewers, particularly alumni, tended to approach it just that way. Reviewing the book for the *Sunday Times*, A.M. Rosenthal called Traub’s generous attention to open enrollment—by which he meant remediation—“inevitable,” though he didn’t say why. Rather he praised Traub for having the grace to intertwine the minor-key story of “luxuriant...gardens of intellectual endeavor.” One lesson of this “mixture of garden and desert,” said Rosenthal, was that “scuttling or starving out the present City College would be an outrage to all young men and women who have a right to believe that neither money nor pull nor family status will stand between them and higher education,” precisely what the school meant to the young Rosenthal and generations of other alumni, in other words.¹⁸³

David Garrow, a former City College professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, admired “Traub’s quiet courage” in drawing inevitable fire from “loyalists desperately seeking to circle the remaining wagons of an institution that scorns external criticism by clinging to what Traub calls ‘a romanticized self-image.’”¹⁸⁴ Leonard Jeffries, in particular, had sharpened a sweeping moral dilemma, said Garrow:

How can one publicly attack CUNY’s bloated administrative bureaucracy, and its hundreds of indolent, burned-out professors, without harming CUNY’s educationally and economically vulnerable students rather than those whose guaranteed paychecks give them carte blanche to dis-serve a wonderful—but often woefully unprepared—student body?¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Traub, *City on a Hill*, 148.

¹⁸³ A.M. Rosenthal, “An American Promise,” Review of *City on A Hill*, *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1994, BR7, 9.

¹⁸⁴ David J. Garrow, “The School of Hard Knocks,” Review of *City on A Hill*, *Newsday*, Oct. 9, 1994, 38.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*

“*City on a Hill*,” he concluded, “signals that CUNY’s conspiracy of silence is over.”

Writing in the *New Republic*, Nathan Glazer called attention to the fact that Leonard Jeffries’s racial “sideshow” formed a relatively minor part of the book. The real story, he said, was that for the first time in history the majority of City College students were now foreign born, often not native English speakers, and on the whole better and more motivated students than their American-born classmates. These new immigrants represented City College’s best hope of redemption. For Glazer, “the real college” was still unambiguously the engineering school and upper level seminars with professors who “refused to compromise.”¹⁸⁶

One such figure was the philosopher and former Harvard professor Juliet Floyd. Though pleased with Traub’s “complimentary portrait” of her teaching, Floyd was also one of a growing number of sources who disputed both his portrayals and his conclusions. Floyd took issue with his characterization of the students in her Wittgenstein seminar as highly “unrepresentative... constituting a tiny elite...[and] isolated from the rest of the college.”¹⁸⁷ She noted that students in her “core” Philosophy 101 course required of all undergraduates and enrolling nearly a thousand in its various sections routinely demonstrated remarkable critical faculties.

At the very least an accurate assessment of the college’s academic character must take into proper account its successes as well as its failures. In his zeal to compile a readable narrative Mr. Traub paints a too-simple picture with sharp dramatic contrasts. His novelistic method leads him to personify conflicts. The result is an accessible and entertaining account of Mr. Traub’s responses which, however, suffer from significant gaps and inaccuracies.¹⁸⁸

Floyd further disputed Traub’s claim that she saw herself as unrepresentative of the City College

¹⁸⁶ Nathan Glazer, “Unsentimental Education,” Review of *City on A Hill*, *New Republic*, Dec. 19, 1994, 38.

¹⁸⁷ James Traub, quoted in Juliet Floyd, “Educational quality at City College,” Letter to the editor. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 41, no. 14 (Nov. 30, 1994): B3.

¹⁸⁸ Floyd, “Educational quality at City College,” B3.

faculty and “disavow[ed] the quotations he ascribes to me.”¹⁸⁹

RE-REPORTING THE STORY

Not everyone, however, was convinced by Traub’s version, including several others among the people he quoted. The *Nation*’s Jon Wiener found it peculiar that Traub apparently “believes students in the Wittgenstein seminar at Harvard or Columbia *are* representative of the students at those institutions”¹⁹⁰ and noted that “Traub obviously has never read the papers written by middle-class white college kids in freshman comp at the state colleges in California” where Wiener had been teaching history for over twenty years, students whose teachers got every bit as frustrated as their City College counterparts, he said. In the press release for *City on a Hill* Wiener uncovered a clumsy sentence with grammatical errors and suggested that had it surfaced in a student essay, Traub “would have held it up as an example of the writer’s hopeless inability to learn.” The identical phrase about “students ‘who had never read a book,’” he said, had recently appeared in both Heather Mac Donald’s *City Journal* article and another by John Leo of *U.S. News and World Report*.¹⁹¹

Wiener was the rare book reviewer who, when something made him suspicious, got up out of his chair and retraced an author’s steps to check out his claims. He spent several days at City College seeking out the people portrayed in Traub’s book and finding out what he missed. Like Juliet Floyd, they remembered things quite differently. One student, Vernon Ballard, told Wiener that “all the details [in the book] about my father are completely wrong. He says my father ‘lost various government jobs.’ But my father never lost a job in his life. He’s trying to fit

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Jon Wiener, “School Daze,” Review of *City on A Hill*, *The Nation*, Nov. 7, 1994, 524.

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*, 522.

me into some kind of stereotype.”¹⁹² Another student, who Traub said he “admired” told Wiener she found him “incredibly condescending.”

One day he was on the bus that goes from the A train up to school. He sat down next to this big black woman student and tried to strike up a conversation telling her he sat in on Leonard Jeffries’s class the previous day. She doesn’t respond. Then he says to her, “Heavy stuff, real heavy stuff.” She just rolled her eyes. This was the kind of conversation he tried to have with students.¹⁹³

Even Rudi Gedamke, the book’s hero, disputed the impression that he had somehow given up on Open Admissions or the larger remedial project. Though he declined to criticize Traub directly, saying “no comment” when asked whether he agreed with the book’s conclusions, Gedamke did object to being misquoted and mischaracterized elsewhere in the press.¹⁹⁴ He denied telling *U.S. News and World Report* that CUNY was a “ruin” and “a poorly run junior high school” all because “it let protesters define a college degree as a good that whites are withholding from minority groups.”¹⁹⁵ That particularly irked Gedamke, who told Wiener, that the “bitterness” Traub and others ascribed to him notwithstanding, “I’m in favor of City College and open admissions and always have been.”¹⁹⁶

Again and again, people pointed to what Juliet Floyd said was Traub’s tendency to zero in on the negative. Marshall Berman who’d taught political theory since before Open Admissions told Wiener that:

Many of the best kids I have in class come from [remedial] programs. When they arrived at City, they tell me, they couldn’t write an English sentence; now they write excellent ones for me. They read Marx, Nietzsche and Max Weber and say

¹⁹² Vernon Ballard, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 524; See also Vernon Ballard. “‘The Best Education Possible’,” Letter to the editor, *The Nation*, Feb. 6, 1995, 150.

¹⁹³ Victoria Chevalier, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 524.

¹⁹⁴ Jon Weiner, “Weiner Replies,” *The Nation*, Feb. 6, 1995, 181.

¹⁹⁵ John Leo, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 524. See John Leo, “A University’s Sad Decline,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Aug. 15, 1994, 20.

¹⁹⁶ Rudi Gedamke, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 524.

pretty complicated things about them; they talk in paragraphs. Four years ago, they say, they couldn't do any of those things. This suggests that, at least for a fair number, the remedial tunnel leads to light.¹⁹⁷

Wherever Wiener went, professors had spoken to him about the “hunger,” “energy,” “intellectual curiosity,” and rapid improvement they found in abundance. One longtime history professor, Jim Watts, told Wiener he had taken a liking to Traub, but noticed that he had “marinated himself in the lower stratum,” so he recommended that he try sitting in on Professor Lou Masur’s class on the Civil War for a change of pace.

Afterwards he came out and said, ‘That was remarkable, you wouldn’t find a better class than that at Princeton or Harvard.’ I said, ‘So you’re going to meet those students, learn their bios, read their papers, follow their progress?’ He had a choice between Lou’s students and Rudi [Gedamke]’s. He couldn’t be wooed away from his initial thesis.¹⁹⁸

After a few days on campus, Wiener, who no doubt had a thesis of his own, came away with an altogether different impression than Traub’s. A Harvard PhD and tenured professor of history in the University of California system, Wiener found that not only were the teachers and students at City College “immensely talented” and committed, but it was also “the most racially harmonious place I’ve ever been in my life.” For Wiener, City College was “one of the few institutions in New York City that seem to work,” and he lamented that Traub hadn’t adopted that angle instead.¹⁹⁹

TAKING THE LONG VIEW OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Several scholars had already taken up that challenge, in fact, and the publication of *City on a Hill* was soon followed by number of less visible, longitudinal studies that attempted to understand how the institution was working—as opposed to failing—to patiently get inside what

¹⁹⁷ Marshall Berman, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 524.

¹⁹⁸ Jim Watts, quoted in Wiener, “School Daze,” 527.

¹⁹⁹ Wiener, “School Daze,” 528.

poorly prepared students were actually gaining from their college experiences and, in the tradition of Mina Shaughnessy, to understand the specific obstacles they faced. Marilyn Sternglass, one of Traub's naïve true believers, followed a group of her City College students through their academic careers and beyond and found, among other things, that the lessons of remedial classes were internalized only over time, often in more advanced learning environments.²⁰⁰ Sternglass's City College colleague Mary Soliday wrote that the linear, "anteroom" model and artificial barriers between remedial and traditional knowledge "cleaved language from meaning and forced teachers to work fast, abandoning a long term focus on development," but it bore little relation to the way that students actually learned.²⁰¹

By coincidence, Sternglass tracked one of the very same students profiled in Traub's book, a young woman with poor eyesight she called "Joan" who grew up in a family of substance abusers and teen mothers. Traub had called her a "miraculous survivor" who in three and a half years of college had nonetheless failed to develop "intellectual discrimination and she certainly knew virtually nothing of philosophy and history." In his estimation Joan would never become an "educated person."²⁰² Two years after Traub's book was published, Sternglass was still following Joan's progress, however, and although she had barely squeaked through her philosophy requirement, done only so-so in World Civilizations, and had taken reading about herself in Traub's book particularly hard, Joan still managed to graduate with a psychology major. She was now earning \$25,000 a year in a unionized job as a counselor in the methadone clinic at the hospital where she had done a student internship. This was more than anyone in her

²⁰⁰ Marilyn S. Sternglass, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 1997).

²⁰¹ Mary Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 88.

²⁰² Traub, *City on a Hill*, 132.

family had ever earned and with it she was able to move her mother out of the projects into an apartment where, for the first time in her life, she had her own room. Joan's college education, coupled with the empathy she developed growing up surrounded by drug and alcohol abuse had, she understood, prepared her to make a real difference in society.²⁰³

But public officials like Mayor Giuliani and CUNY Trustee, Herman Badillo, insisted that students like Joan were taking far too long to graduate and costing far too much, and their patience was running thin. They were equally unwilling to wait for the qualitative results of studies like Sternglass's before forming harsh conclusions about individual learning or the overall success of Open Admissions. Across the country, the entire burden of open access policies—both symbolically and in terms of curriculum—now rested on transitional programs that Soliday characterized as “poorly funded, staffed by a mobile part-time teaching population, and sustained by a baroque panoply of tests and rules.”²⁰⁴ There was no place that universe for taking the long view.

By the time CUNY sociologists David Lavin and David Hyllegard published their definitive study *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged*, it was too late it to have much of an impact on public opinion; both the budget and the terms of the debate had already been set. But *Changing the Odds* did for Open Admissions what Bowen and Bok did for affirmative action at elite universities, namely to put to rest decades of speculation and hyperbole with reams of hard data about what happens to students given a particular brand of opportunity (not to mention the students sitting next to them

²⁰³ Sternglass, 1997, 242.

²⁰⁴ Soliday, 2002, 62.

in class).²⁰⁵ Lavin and Hyllegarde followed two samples of entering freshmen from 1970 and 1980 to see, among other things, how students admitted under the new policy of Open Admissions fared in college and the world beyond. They found that while those admitted following the old criteria were 2.5 times more likely to graduate in four years, that figure was reduced to 1.8 by adding only one additional year, and 1.5 at the end of year six.²⁰⁶ The comparison wasn't perfect due to shifting contexts like the imposition of tuition, dramatic overcrowding, and reduced course offerings, all of which, they showed, had a major impact on who attended college and how long it took them to get through. Nevertheless, the authors were able to document the ways Open Admissions had benefited large numbers of diverse populations, most notably men and ethnic whites. The policy was "critical," however, in enlarging the pool of professionals in minority communities, they said. While whites may have had other options if CUNY hadn't been open to them, minority students, by and large, because of their poverty and poor preparation wouldn't have gone to college at all.²⁰⁷

City College could scarcely be called a diploma mill either, they argued, with fewer than half the students ever earning any diploma at all. Nor did the substantial number of graduates being admitted to competitive graduate programs support the contention that the degree had lost its value. Meanwhile, they estimated that in a single year, the 1980s cohort earned \$67 million more than they would have without Open Admissions. Assuming a conservative five percent in taxes paid, they calculated a return of at least \$100 million dollars on the public's investment in the years since the students graduated.²⁰⁸ Even if their better-prepared classmates consistently

²⁰⁵William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

²⁰⁶ Lavin & Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds*, 57.

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 70.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 197

outperformed such students, they pointed out, that did nothing to negate the enormous—and often decisive—benefits to both them and their communities. And this was not even to speak of the thousands of students who dropped out before graduating about whom scholars had far less information.

THE ‘TROPE OF THE URBAN ILLITERATE’ & THE RHETORIC OF REMEDIATION

Taken together, studies like Lavin and Hyllegarde’s and Sternglass’s explained away virtually every substantive element of commentators like MacDonald and Traub’s neoliberal critique. What they fail to fully account for, however, was the tenacity of that critique in the popular imagination. Scholars who write on this subject have often noted the way the college is always under a microscope and perpetually on the defensive as well as the many concrete policy outcomes that result from this condition. Sixteen years before Traub, the critic Benjamin DeMott had registered tones alternating between “condescension, irony, muckraking, [and] despair” that influenced the “momentary swings of popular opinion about ‘declining universities’ returns to ‘basics’ and the like.”²⁰⁹ Robert Marshak later remarked about how, through the agency of the mass media, alumni became alienated from their “romance with the ideal of the disadvantaged, a romance dominated by the ‘Brilliant Student Superachiever’ who for the short period of three decades made City College a national phenomenon.”²¹⁰ And Lavin and Hyllegarde discussed how the phenomenon that 100 years ago was termed “the Jewish invasion” was today “packaged in the rhetoric of academic standards.”²¹¹

But only Mary Soliday made a careful study of the structure of the representations themselves and the myths and distortions that predominated on both sides of the debate.

²⁰⁹ Benjamin DeMott, “Mina Shaughnessy: Meeting Challenges,” *The Nation*, Dec. 9, 1978, 648.

²¹⁰ Marshak, *Academic Renewal*, 55.

²¹¹ Lavin and Hyllegarde, *Changing the Odds*, 207.

Manufactured literacy crises were always infused with “the shock of the new,” she said.

Remedial students, much like the “baffled” first-year history student of Evans and Novak’s 1970 *New York Post* column, were perennially rediscovered. And just like their non-traditional students, teachers like Mina Shaughnessy were awarded “pioneer” status, ignoring a centuries-long tradition of expanding access and robust remedial programs that had played central roles in managing growth within the American university. Soliday also identified the trope of “the urban illiterate” upon whom the blame for the most recent literacy crisis was frequently cast.

Regardless of what era or whose story they appeared in, these students shared several common characteristics. For one thing, they were products of the new underclass and had travelled a tremendous distance from cultural wastelands to the Mecca of the university. For Soliday, Adrienne Rich’s juxtaposition of bucolic liberal arts campuses with young prostitutes and pushers and children playing in the spray of fire hydrants unaware of the cruelties that await them exemplified the way a broad spectrum of commentators used underclass imagery grounded in “complexity, novelty, and danger” to situate the students and the college “irrevocably outside the mainstream.”²¹²

Depending on whom you talked to, these students’ underclass status conferred on them varying degrees of apathy, sullenness, anti-intellectualism, parochialism, even militancy—all of which stood in the way of their effective embrace of American opportunity. Many observers ascribed to them a peculiar lack of personal agency and a surprising power to their middle class teachers.²¹³ Indeed, Alfred Kazin contended that the students were “damaged...no wonder they’re apathetic.”²¹⁴ Such imagery was selectively deployed, wrote Soliday. “The popular press

²¹² Soliday, *Politics of Remediation*, 133.

²¹³ *ibid.*, 134.

²¹⁴ Alfred Kazin, quoted in Soliday, *Politics of Remediation*, 148.

doesn't invoke white alienation as an explanation for the relatively low retention rates at [Rutgers]."²¹⁵

In the 1990s, these patterns of discourse had the effect of shifting the debate from the economic to the cultural realm and, as in the case of K-12 schools, of transferring the blame for failure from public institutions onto the students and their families. "What is at stake in the struggle to represent remediation," wrote Soliday, "is a broader effort to imagine the middle class sense of responsibility toward the 'other' classes through the institution that now most defines a middle class identity."²¹⁶ In the case of critics like Mac Donald, Traub, Irving Kristol, and other neoliberal intellectuals, the ghetto student's imagined estrangement from middle class institutions was really a surrogate for working through what she called "their own estrangement from the contemporary city."²¹⁷

THE FISCAL EMERGENCY OF 1995

In his investigative review of *City on a Hill*, Jon Wiener held that like the stereotypes of unworthy pupils, the argument for why middle-class taxpayers should waste their money on kids who don't finish hadn't really changed since the turn-of-the-century debates over funding Midwestern land grant colleges. "Some can thrive in college and some can't," he said. This was not news. "But it's an obligation in a democracy to give everybody a chance."²¹⁸ He worried, however, that *City on a Hill*—particularly the *New Yorker* excerpt on Rudi Gedamke and his fatally unprepared students—"may become a self fulfilling prophecy. The right in New York is eager to defund City, to turn it into the remedial institution that Traub says it has already

²¹⁵ Soliday, *Politics of Remediation*, 136.

²¹⁶ *ibid.*, 109.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, 15, 138.

²¹⁸ Wiener, "School Daze," 526.

become.”²¹⁹

And so it appeared. Only months after a chorus comprised of Heather Mac Donald, James Traub, and others had declared City College a sinkhole, the new governor, George Pataki, following upon two decades of austerity budgets, rising tuition, and declining student aid, proposed to cut yet another \$158 million or twenty-six percent from the CUNY budget. This would mean letting go a thousand full-time faculty members—one in every four— canceling ten thousand class sections, raising tuition one thousand dollars a year—a forty-one percent increase—and eliminating SEEK, College Discovery, and other affirmative action programs that together served eighty thousand low-income students.²²⁰

The trustees declared a fiscal emergency, authorized the chancellor to retrench faculty from under-enrolled programs, lowered the number of credits required for graduation system wide, restricted students’ remedial and ESL work to their first year (forcing them up or out thereafter), and demanded productivity increases and workload concessions from the unions. Mayor Giuliani, meanwhile, declined to allow approximately ten thousand students receiving public assistance the opportunity to complete their new “workfare” assignments on campus, making it virtually impossible for most of them to get to class or meet their manifold obligations.²²¹ Mac Donald, Traub, and others who argued that City’s problem wasn’t a lack of money but the habit of throwing the money it had away on educational lost causes offered what Brooklyn College professor Bart Meyers called “ideological cover” for these proposals.²²²

This time there were no campus takeovers, but several demonstrations and one police riot later, legislators reached a compromise that cut the CUNY budget by \$100 million, limited the

²¹⁹ Wiener, “School Daze,” 528.

²²⁰ Bart Meyers, “The CUNY Wars,” *Social Text* 51 (Summer 1997): 122.

²²¹ *ibid.*

²²² *ibid.*, 123.

tuition hike to \$750, and saved 617 faculty and higher education officers from being axed through early retirement buyouts.²²³ The decade had begun with massive campus unrest, a racially charged media circus, a deadly disaster that snuffed out nine young lives, two humiliating defeats in the courts, a full-bore assault on the part of right wing think tanks and the New York literati, and now mounting fiscal pressures that were threatening to do away with the college altogether. And that decade was scarcely half over.

THE DEATH OF *NEW YORK NEWSDAY*

Around the same time that Governor Pataki's budget went into effect, the Times-Mirror Company that owned the *Los Angeles Times*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, *Newsday* and the latter's freestanding New York City edition, hired a former breakfast cereal executive, Mark H. Willes, as its new CEO. Willes vowed to use the same marketing acumen with which he'd made a success of Hamburger Helper to now "refresh" the company's ailing newspapers. In short order he announced that he was closing both the *Sun* and *New York Newsday*. Back in 1983, *Newsday*, an award-winning suburban paper with brand new color presses had rechristened its Queens edition the "City Edition" and later the same year moved its tiny Manhattan bureau into spacious digs in a new midtown skyscraper. It gave the editor authority to hire his own people and carve out a distinctly urban identity for the paper, and changed the name yet again, to *New York Newsday*.²²⁴ Before long it had become what the *New Yorker* later praised as:

one of the best papers in the country...the most complicated and aggressive of the three [New York] tabloids...[and] the one paper in the city able to keep the stately *Times* on edge...[It] managed to find in its soul a mixture of liberalism, bravado, and civility which embodied the city's own personality.²²⁵

In addition to giving a home to a stable of legendary New York columnists that included

²²³ *ibid.*, 125.

²²⁴ Robert F. Keeler, *Newsday: A Candid History of the Respectable Tabloid* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 598-9.

²²⁵ David Remnick and Hendrik Hertzberg, "Cereal Killing," *New Yorker*, July 24, 1995, 4.

Murray Kempton, Jimmy Breslin, and Sydney Schanberg, *New York Newsday* served as a vital forum for discussion among community leaders and citizens of different stripes precisely when events like the rape of the Central Park jogger, the Crown Heights riot, and the divisive leadership of Rudolph Giuliani threatened to tear the city apart. Wrote the *New Yorker*:

New York Newsday was the best, by far, of the three tabloids, promoting a consistent combination of investigation, accuracy, speed, civility, and humor, and its ownership stayed properly aloof from the news columns and from city politics. There are reporters at the *News* and the *Post* who have broken important stories, but the *Newsday* staff was the one that regularly beat the *Times* or gave it a close run on major stories in the city...In some ways, *New York Newsday* had become the leading city paper.²²⁶

New York Newsday's loss was universally acknowledged to be a blow to public discourse in the city, but for the colleges of the City University of New York it meant that an important voice of moderation would no longer be there to temper the escalating depredations of Giuliani and Pataki, the Manhattan Institute, and especially Herman Badillo.

HERMAN BADILLO'S 'STANDARDS REVOLUTION'

If Herman Badillo was looking for an issue that would help him establish his conservative credentials and prepare the ground for yet another mayoral run at the close of Rudolph Giuliani's second term, he could scarcely have asked for a more perfect occasion than a student boycott at the South Bronx's Hostos Community College and the seeming capitulation on the part of college officials. Ever since it was first instituted as a system-wide graduation requirement in the late 1970s in response to allegations in the press that City College was letting thousands of "illiterates" graduate, the high stakes Writing Assessment Test, had stood in the way of many students' graduation from community college or advancement beyond a certain number credits in the senior colleges. Over the years, as different studies discredited the test's

²²⁶ *ibid.*, 5.

utility in measuring proficiency, it fell out of use, particularly at the junior college level, but the requirement had never been formally eliminated—just one of many things that had fallen through the cracks in a chronically cash-strapped bureaucracy.²²⁷ Hostos, a bilingual school serving primarily Latino immigrant students had struggled mightily with the intimidating exam, which mixed comprehension and expression in English with more advanced critical faculties. With eighty percent of the students from non-English-speaking backgrounds failing the test, Hostos had, like other colleges, created its own variation, which required constructing a simple narrative rather than an argument drawing from multiple sources. But the majority of students still failed and were thus prevented from getting their degrees. After a group of them stormed out of the exam in protest on May 14, the college administration finally scrapped the whole idea of a single test in favor of a required English course for which the test would count as thirty percent of one's grade. This was a source of controversy among the faculty and prompted a story in the *Daily News*, which quoted Herman Badillo calling it a flagrant "lowering of standards." Farther down in the same story, a Hostos faculty member asserted that it was Giuliani and Badillo's attacks on graduation rates that had prompted college officials to abandon the test requirement in the first place. "The administration and students are really under the gun here," the professor complained.²²⁸

Badillo had a long history with CUNY. Orphaned at age eleven, he came from Puerto Rico to be brought up by an aunt, learned English and worked his way through City College's downtown business branch and Brooklyn Law School as a pin setter in a bowling alley, an

²²⁷ Diana Schwinge, "Standards, Exit Exams, and the Politicization of Bilingual Education: The Writing Exit Exam at Hostos College," *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 16: no. 2 (Fall 2000): 49.

²²⁸ Ying Chan, "CUNY Flap as School Lowers Bar on English," *Daily News*, May 21, 1997, 6.

elevator operator, and restaurant dishwasher and short order cook.²²⁹ He went on to serve as Bronx Borough President, where he was instrumental in the creation of Hostos.²³⁰ In a tiny glimmer of what was to come later, in the spring of 1969, Badillo was the only Democratic mayoral candidate to publicly oppose Open Admissions, even though he wasn't entirely clear what that meant at the time.²³¹ He then became the nation's first Puerto Rican congressman and sponsored its first bilingual education law before moving to City Hall under the Koch administration. Badillo was the only member of the CUNY Board of Trustees to publically call for Leonard Jeffries's immediate ouster and one of only four to vote against Harleston's recommendation that he be allowed to continue as department chair on a one-year, probationary basis. He later squared off with Chancellor W. Ann Reynolds by resisting Harleston's replacement, a pro-diversity, black anthropologist named Yolanda Moses who was alleged to be soft on traditional academic standards.²³² By then he was serving as Mayor Giuliani's top education advisor, where he helped orchestrate a campaign of bullying School's Chancellor Ramon Cortines and planted the seeds for a return to mayoral control of the New York City public schools after more than a century.

The day after the *Daily News* story about Hostos appeared, the chancellor affirmed that all future students must pass the system-wide exam before graduating, and Badillo followed up the following week by introducing a strongly worded resolution at the meeting of the trustees to that effect. A few days after that, 104 Hostos students who needed to meet the new requirement to graduate showed up to take it, but in part because they'd been given no warning or opportunity

²²⁹ Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York*, 181.

²³⁰ "Herman Badillo's Finest Hour," Editorial, *Daily News*, July 7, 1997.

²³¹ Jimmy Breslin, "A Hard Schooling," Commencement address to the CUNY Baccalaureate Program, June 7, 1999. Excerpted in *The Nation*, July 5, 1999, 7.

²³² See Jim Sleeper, "Anti-Anti-Racist," *New Republic*, June 28, 1993, 11.

to study, only thirteen of them passed. Badillo, by now the self-appointed spokesperson for the move to toughen standards throughout CUNY, nonetheless insisted the exam was “a nothing test. It couldn’t be any easier” and called the students’ performance “pathetic.” He vowed to “review the whole operation” at Hostos.²³³

By a judge’s order, students who failed were still permitted to march in the graduation ceremonies which included several impassioned speeches by local politicians about there being “no higher standard than when a welfare mother or an immigrant enrolls in college,”²³⁴ and how students were “not afraid of standards, just double standards.” Herman Badillo was the bad guy of the hour: “someone who is one of us and forgot where he came from.”²³⁵ The scandal widened in subsequent days when it was revealed that all but one other community college had also eliminated the testing requirement and several of their presidents had failed to speak up when the matter was discussed at the recent meeting of the trustees. Citing Badillo’s resolution, the trustees announced that the university would withhold the diplomas—which are not mailed until August—of all 514 students citywide who had failed to meet the requirement.

Five Hostos students filed suit and in a matter of weeks the Judge ruled that Badillo’s May 27th resolution “was not based on informed, lucid and cogent deliberative processes. The obvious unfairness in changing the degree requirements immediately before graduation is manifest.” He reasoned that the hasty efforts to impose criteria for evaluating students retroactively were “arbitrary and capricious, and in the present case must be held to be undertaken in bad faith.”²³⁶ After the ruling, the students’ pro-bono lawyer, Ronald McGuire,

²³³ Russ Buettner, “91 Hostos Students Fail English Test,” *Daily News*, June 4, 1997, 7.

²³⁴ Borough President Fernando Ferrer, quoted in “Hot Air at Hostos,” Editorial, *Daily News*, June 1, 1997, 30.

²³⁵ Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez, quoted in “Hot Air at Hostos,” Editorial, *Daily News*, June 1, 1997, 30.

²³⁶ Kenneth L. Thompson, Jr., quoted in Karen W. Arenson, “A Judge Tells CUNY to Give Diplomas to Hostos Students,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1997, B3.

who had been expelled from City College for his militancy during the 1969 uprising, questioned whether CUNY officials “are trying to raise standards or cut costs.”²³⁷

By the time the judge impugned Badillo and the other trustees’ “bad faith,” however, the *Daily News*, which had led the coverage throughout the scandal had already hailed the magnum cum laude City College graduate for being “the sole voice of reform at a once great citadel of learning that has sunk to a second chance high school,” a courageous leader “committed to restoring CUNY to its rightful place at the pinnacle of public higher education.”²³⁸ Badillo’s star was also rising. In September he succeeded in forcing out chancellor Ann Reynolds²³⁹ and, later that fall, the Hostos president, as well, earning him the title “the Grand Inquisitor of the Puerto Rican community” from *Daily News* columnist Juan Gonzalez.²⁴⁰ Democratic mayoral candidate Ruth Messinger said Badillo and other Giuliani allies who attacked CUNY “might best be described as having climbed up the ladder themselves, and when they got to the top, turned around and pulled the ladder up after them.”²⁴¹

‘CCNY’S FALL FROM GRACE’ & THE END OF REMEDIATION

In November Messinger lost the election by a landslide, however, and the Hostos scandal soon became ancient history. But the “standards revolution” was far from over and City College was about to be trotted back out into the spotlight. In the midst of the Hostos brouhaha, it had also emerged that only sixty percent of City’s education majors were passing their state licensing

²³⁷ Ronald McGuire, quoted in Arenson, “A Judge Tells CUNY,” B3. It may not have been a coincidence that nearly two thirds of Hostos students were welfare recipients at a moment when the Giuliani administration had declared a war on welfare and forced students to complete workfare assignments far from their campuses and on schedules that coincided with the courses they needed for graduation, a choice between feeding their families and dropping out of school.

²³⁸ “Herman Badillo’s Finest Hour,” 24.

²³⁹ Reynolds had long since angered the mayor by standing up for students who were receiving welfare benefits.

²⁴⁰ Juan Gonzalez, “Facts Don’t Matter Much in CUNY’s Quest for Hostos Prez’ Head,” Dec. 29, 1997, 22.

²⁴¹ Ruth Messinger, quoted in Schwinge, “Standards, Exit Exams,” 53.

exams. And the other CUNY programs weren't far behind it. City trained more than twice as many prospective teachers than any other college in the state and now as before supplied a sizable chunk of the teaching force of the New York City public schools. Unlike the scandal at Hostos this was an issue that directly impacted the city's more than one million schoolchildren.

A few days before Thanksgiving the *Daily News* reported that CUNY's new interim chancellor was poised:

to launch a Rambo-style on the City University system, and one of the first targets will likely be CUNY's troubled flagship, City College.

The once-proud Harvard on the Hudson has produced eight Nobel Prize winners and titans of literature, politics and business.

But it now stands for everything that CUNY's tough new trustees despise. Graduation rates are low. Remediation rates are high. And its teacher-education program does such a lousy job that its students can't pass a certification test.

“The failure of [City College's] teacher-education program is typical of what I consider to be the fall from grace of the bellwether college of the City University,” said Herman Badillo, vice chairman of the CUNY trustees and a City College alumnus.²⁴²

The *News* went on to catalogue an array of familiar problems: the fact that only seventeen percent of City College students graduated within five years and the proliferation of discrete program offerings—City had the most, at 119, several averaging as few as one graduate a year—a problem of “academic sprawl.” It quoted President Moses advocating “strategic growth...we can't continue to be everything to everybody,” she said. And one of the trustees suggested that “Maybe CCNY should center on engineering and architecture, the schools they really are good at. And if you want to become an English scholar, maybe you go to Brooklyn College.”²⁴³ But the key criticism was that City hadn't kept up with other senior colleges in curtailing remediation: “Baruch, Hunter and Queens colleges which the trustees hold up as model

²⁴² Russ Buettner, “CCNY's Fall From Grace: Seeking New Head of Class for Makeover of University,” *Daily News*, Nov. 23, 1997, 28.

²⁴³ Yolanda Moses and Ronald Marino, Quoted respectively in Buettner, “CCNY's Fall From Grace,” 28.

campuses this year limited students to one semester of remedial courses. Baruch next year plans to eliminate remediation altogether.”²⁴⁴

The latter would move to the center of the agenda as Giuliani began his second term decrying the fact that more than two thirds of entering freshman at the senior colleges failed at least one of the basic skills tests, demanding that competitive entrance exams be instituted, and threatening to withhold the city’s \$111 million allocation to CUNY unless the trustees found a way to curb remediation.²⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the filmmaker Joseph Dorman released his documentary, “Arguing the World,” about four of the New York Intellectuals and their journey from the lunchroom alcoves at City College where they met in the 1930s amid atmosphere of “perfidious, overheated intellectual activity” to their entrée into a kind of national elite of the type Columbia, rather than City College had been programmed create.²⁴⁶ Though few people saw the film, it was widely reviewed and helped to revive memories of the college’s golden age, whose most brilliant minds were now destined to be compared with the weakest of the current generation’s.

In February, the *Daily News* sought to hasten the end of remediation, congratulating Giuliani for focusing on “what he rightly called the ‘disaster’ of the community colleges” and exhorting readers to face facts and confront what the editors deemed “the more urgent and, in some sense, easier problem” of reestablishing “selective admissions and tough standards” at City

²⁴⁴ Buettner, “CCNY’s Fall From Grace,” 28.

²⁴⁵ Rudolph W. Giuliani, “The State of the City Address,” Jan. 14, 1998, Archives of Rudolph W. Giuliani, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/rwg/html/98a/stcitext.html#> (accessed Jan. 7, 2011); Patrick Healy and Peter Schmidt, “In New York, a ‘Standards Revolution’ or the Gutting of Public Colleges?: Rethinking the Budget at SUNY; Attacking Remedial Education at CUNY,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 10, 1998. The mayor appointed five of the CUNY board’s sixteen voting members.

²⁴⁶ Irving Howe, quoted in *Arguing the World*, dir. Joseph Dorman (First Run Features, 1998).

and the other senior colleges.²⁴⁷ It was, indeed, an easier challenge. High school students had long since come to see higher education as a right rather than a privilege and while mechanisms like tuition and workfare might work to control their numbers, it was not politically feasible to simply tell them that they would no longer have a chance to go to college at all. The original impetus for Open Admissions, however, and the thing that most distinguished the policy from the Midwestern land grant colleges and the University of California's more stratified system, had been the desire that Harlem's City College cease to exclude students from the surrounding community and that the upper ranks of the city's high school students not be shunted off to "junior" colleges, where their ambitions were "cooled out" until many gave up and went away. As long as students had somewhere to go the political climate now seemed to favor dramatically closing off access to the baccalaureate granting colleges in just this way.

That May, Mayor Giuliani appointed a task force to examine CUNY and its ongoing mission. In keeping with a trend towards corporate efficiency and privatization, he put Benno Schmidt, the chairman of Edison Schools, a for-profit company that operated public charter schools in a number of cities and a former president of Yale at its helm. Among the seven members were the Manhattan Institute's Heather Mac Donald and Herman Badillo, who after forty years in Democratic politics was about to formally defect to the Republican party. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* used Badillo as representative of:

hard-edged policies and scorched earth rhetoric [being used] to steer two of the nation's largest public-university systems, with a combined 700,000 students, away from a long-time commitment to maximum access. The new priorities: free-market principles of competition, efficiency, and the promise of what the trustees call a "quality product."²⁴⁸

Other's saw him as the hatchet man for a "right wing 'downsizing' agenda." "When you start

²⁴⁷ "First, Save the Senior Colleges," Editorial, *Daily News*, February 22, 1998, 50.

²⁴⁸ Healy and Schmidt, "In New York, a 'Standards Revolution'."

knocking the place down,” said State Assemblyman Edward C. Sullivan, “18-year-olds say, ‘The hell with this,’ and head to North Carolina or Michigan or wherever.’ If you really cared about the university, wouldn’t you try to solve these problems more quietly, rather than in the newspapers?”²⁴⁹

Nathan Glazer, one of the conservative intellectuals featured in *Arguing the World* who had appeared on William F. Buckley’s *Firing Line* with James Traub only a few years earlier, was apparently tired of being used as fodder for a mindless assault. In a lecture rededicating City College’s Great Hall, the Harvard sociologist and professor of education clarified his position on Open Admissions: The senior colleges’ earlier fame was “based on the quality of their [entering] students and the subsequent accomplishments of their graduates,” he noted. “American institutions are rated more by this factor than by anything they actually do for students.”

The City College of the past, the hope seems to run, must be and can be restored. But can it? Should it? Is the College of then, of a glorious past, really a possibility in the city of now? I think not.²⁵⁰

But Glazer insisted that the college still had an important role to play. The 1965 change in immigration laws had made New York a city of immigrants once again. While when he was a student in the late thirties “no foreign languages could be heard in the corridors” today fully half of the students had been born abroad. This alone presented a whole new set of problems and opportunities, he said. Added to that came the precipitous decline in the quality of New York City high schools, something Glazer exaggerated but correctly ascribed in part to the opening of other opportunities for “able women” in law, medicine and business during the 1960s and 70s. The other, larger part he attributed to the rise of “illegitimacy” into which the majority of the

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Nathan Glazer, “The College and the City: Then and Now,” Samuel Rudin Lecture, City College of New York, 1998, repr. in *Public Interest*, Summer 1998, 31.

city's children were now born, to drugs and crime and other social ills. (He neglected to mention that the percentage of students living under the poverty line had risen from five percent to thirty five percent since 1970 alone.) Glazer described a recent visit to his former high school, James Monroe in the East Bronx, once a "model of mass education," where out of 900 entering freshman, the school had produced only three graduates with academic "Regent's" diplomas the year it was finally closed for its abysmal performance. "But it was proud of its facilities for the babies of its students," the very need for which Glazer found nothing less than tragic. "The college," he said, "cannot escape the consequences of this huge social transformation." To make matters worse, unlike Hunter on the "fashionable East Side," Baruch downtown, or Queens College with its solid middle class surroundings, City was "marooned" in what was now considered Harlem.

Nonetheless, said Glazer, "City College and CUNY are far from the basket cases the media, the mayor, and the institution's critics describe." The graduation rates did not look so bad when compared with similar institutions across the country he said. "Even in my days there were working students who took many years to earn a degree at night. We rightly considered them heroes." Nor were the programs in engineering and architecture anything to sneeze at. "Probably City College and its sister senior institutions in the CUNY have been too generous in extending a college opportunity to students who cannot benefit from it," he conceded. "But the United States has always been the country of the second chance... In the world that exists, a college must roll up its sleeves and deal with those who want a college education as best it can. From all I see, this is what the College is doing today."²⁵¹

But the political class had other plans. After a bitter, year-long struggle, in January 1999

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, *passim*.

the CUNY Board of Trustees passed a resolution to eliminate all remedial programs from the four-year colleges. That spring Herman Badillo was named its chairman, and the mayoral task force of which he was a member issued a final report which concluded that remediation of the type enshrined in the work of Mina Shaughnessy was “an unfortunate necessity” and “distraction from the main business of the University” and recommended that it be confined to the community colleges in order “to ensure that CUNY’s senior colleges admit only those students who are prepared to succeed in college-level work.”²⁵² In July Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki announced the appointment of Adelphi University President Matthew Goldstein (CCNY ’63) as the first alumnus ever to serve as CUNY’s chancellor. Goldstein, the former president of Baruch College credited with reining in that school’s low-end programs, told the readers of the *Daily News* that as his first order of business,

I am passionately committed to renewing the university’s academic *luster*. We owe it to our students to offer a public university system where *stature* is applauded, where programs are valued and where graduates are as *respected* as those with credentials from America’s leading colleges and universities.²⁵³

By Thanksgiving the State Board of Regents had delivered the coup de grace. And with a new century dawning and two of its graduates from an earlier era now leading the system, the City University of New York had set off in an unambiguously new direction to overcome the growing stigma of the past forty years and reclaim a legacy Badillo, Goldstein, and others felt it had forsaken. As of September 2001 City College no longer admitted students whose English or math skills failed to meet a minimum standard; Open Admissions had breathed its last.

CONCLUSION

James Traub probably didn’t realize just how apt a title he had chosen for his book, *City*

²⁵² Benno C. Schmidt, Herman Badillo, et al. “The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift: Report of the Mayor’s Task Force on the City University of New York, June 7, 1999,” 99

²⁵³ Matthew Goldstein, “How I Plan to Reform CUNY,” *Daily News*, Aug. 13, 1999, 49; Emphasis mine.

on a Hill. But its biblical source brings together many of the central themes in City College's history that I have sought to illuminate in the present study. The phrase comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and was later adapted by the seventeenth-century Puritan leader John Winthrop, presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, as well as many others to express Americans' special place in the moral and political universe.²⁵⁴

"Ye are the light of the world," Jesus tells his disciples. "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." By virtue of its publicness, its openness, its colorful history, and its location at the hub of so many intersecting worlds, City College is set not only physically on a hill but also exposed to public scrutiny and vulnerable to all manner of social forces, a peculiarly magnetic center of the popular imagination. "The eyes of all people," Winthrop told his fellow Massachusetts settlers, "are upon us."²⁵⁵ During the twentieth century this prominence not only made the school an easy target, it also imbued its students, faculty, and administrators with an almost evangelical sense of mission and self-consciousness, with an exceptionalism that was at once American and New-York-centered: only here had we offered free tuition to all comers; only here had we produced nine Nobel prizewinners; only here did we take people based on test scores alone, only here had we created a form of open enrollment where failure was not an option... Such lofty ambitions and self-conceits at times became straightjackets, however, and prevented educators from getting on with the work at hand and adapting to changing circumstances.

They are going to "revile you," Jesus warns the disciples, "[and] say all manner of evil against you falsely." *Get used to it*. This was the second essential feature of the college's twentieth-century existence: social stigma and gross media distortions. Whether because of

²⁵⁴ Matthew 5:11-16 (King James Version)

²⁵⁵ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," Sermon, 1630, <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html> (accessed May 4, 2011)

ethnic or class bias or the taint of the un-American or because of failures the public schools had wrought upon its charges, City College students—‘guttersnipes’ and ‘eliterates’ alike—were often reminded that just by virtue of their presence there they had something to live down.

“Ye are the salt of the earth,” Jesus also says. But what good is salt if it loses its flavor? “Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick.” Here again we see the futile impulse to hide, to disguise oneself: to blend in. The mandatory speech classes required of generations of City College’s salt-of-the-earth students represented the school’s efforts to smooth out the rough edges of immigrants, the poor, and their children and to integrate them into the social fabric. When students proclaimed, “I am a Guttersnipe. I fight Fascism,” “I am a City College Eliterate,” or, more fancifully, “I know you. My mother washed your floors,” they were creatively resisting that assimilationist project. These lines from the New Testament nicely capture that tension.

And Jesus’s appeal to his disciples to be true to who they are had still other, more specific valences in this context as well. Some scholars have interpreted the hiding of the candle as a reference to the ancient practice of concealing the Hanukkah lamp to prevent its desecration at the hands of anti-Semites, for instance.²⁵⁶ Jews’ ambivalence about asserting their identities and group interests not only at City College but also in the offices of the *New York Post* and *New York Times* have formed an equally important part of its story. The African American Civil Rights anthem “This Little Light of Mine” is, of course, an outgrowth of the same biblical passage. The candle “giveth light unto all that are in the house” and through that song one can read a different emphasis on letting the light shine forth abundantly rather than secreting away its precious resource beneath a bushel, an image that recalls Libo and Stewart’s conflicting

²⁵⁶ David Hill; J. Duncan M. Derrett, tk

paradigms of institutions viewed as treasures to be safeguarded versus treasures to be shared.²⁵⁷

Finally, biblical references aside, with its play on words, the term “city on a hill” also suggests the important cultural work that City College has performed as a metaphor for the city itself and its use by different groups to work out their shifting relationships to that larger city. In her essay “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” the poet Adrienne Rich wrote that after the King assassination she began to hunger for a way not only to assuage her liberal guilt but also “to involve myself in the real life of the city.” Rich saw three principle attitudes a privileged white woman like herself could adopt toward the city in which she lived: “the paranoiac, the solipsistic...” and a third,

which I can only begin by calling love. The city as object of love, a love not unmixed with horror or anger, the city as Baudelaire and Rilke had provisioned it, or William Blake for that matter, death in life, but a death emblematic of the death that is epidemic in modern society, and a life more edged, more costly, more charged with knowledge than life elsewhere. Love as one knows it sometimes with a person with whom one is locked in struggle, energy draining but also energy replenishing, as when one is fighting for life, in oneself or someone else. Here was this damaged, self-destructive organism, preying and preyed upon. The streets were rich with human possibility and vicious with human denial...In order to live in the city, I needed to ally myself, in some concrete, practical, if limited way, with the possibilities. So I went up to Convent Avenue and 133rd Street and was interviewed for teaching job...”²⁵⁸

With this dissertation I have tried to show how, just as young people go to college in part to construct new identities and find a home in the world, poets like Adrienne Rich, reporters like James Traub, demagogues like Leonard Jeffries, politicians like Herman Badillo, and countless others have also gone up to Convent Avenue, each with their own sense of possibility and denial, and there they have struggled together—energy draining and energy replenishing—to reinvent and re-situate themselves and their communities in the midst of wrenching social change.

²⁵⁷ Libo and Stewart, 58.

²⁵⁸ Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” 258-259.

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AFTERWORD: 'DREAM MACHINE'

On the eve of the new millennium's first academic year the cover of *Chronicle of Higher Education* featured a black and white, Depression-era photograph of some two dozen young white men in jackets, neckties, and the occasional ROTC uniform clutching schoolbooks as they made their way purposefully past Wingate Hall. "Can City College Regain Its Luster?" read the headline.¹

This was certainly the question of the moment and one for which the institution was now poised to find an answer. But City's long lost luster was, as we have seen, little more than a mirage, the product of a peculiar amalgam of atmospheric conditions, collective longings and resentments. Notwithstanding enormous political pressures upon the school and the inescapable imperatives of public relations, the question of whether that elusive and, I have sought to argue here, illusory luster could ever be truly restored was, it seems to me, the wrong one to be asking.

The historic mission of City College has been to create an unglamorous space wherein "the children of the rich and poor" could—theoretically at least—"take their seats together" with few distinctions made amongst them, a mission of educating "the whole people." Nevertheless, as the twenty-first century dawned a new CUNY leadership that included Chancellor Mathew Goldstein (CCNY '63) and his senior advisor and University Director of Marketing and Communications Michael Arena (CCNY '80) set out to self-consciously make over the

¹ "Can City College Regain Its Luster?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 7, 2000, 1. Attentive readers will note the subtle discrepancy here between the title of this section and the *Chronicle's* front-page headline. The corresponding article, which began on page A24, was, in fact, headlined "Can City College *Restore* Its Luster by Ending Open Admissions?" (emphasis mine). The regain/restore distinction here lies between, on the one hand, recapturing something that has been inadvertently lost and eludes one's grasp and, on the other, bringing back to life qualities still present within an object that has been otherwise degraded or tarnished so as to obscure those luminous features. An alternative meaning of "restore" is that of restorative justice, of returning stolen property to its rightful owner, for instance. See also Karen W. Arenson, "City College, the Faded Jewel of CUNY, Is Recovering Its Luster," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2002, B1.

university's public image and trumpet City's and the other four-year colleges' "renaissance" to its diverse constituencies. For better or worse, seventy-five years of tabloid scandals, of scrambling to accommodate new populations and to respond to the latest crisis gave way to an era of strategic growth, boutique programs, and massive PR campaigns.

ACADEMIC 'SUPERSTARS' TAKE CENTER STAGE

As with higher education nationally, City College's past decade has been marked by paradoxes: more restrictive entrance requirements coupled with burgeoning enrollments, for example, and a thirty-eight percent rise in tuition that coincided with hundreds of millions of dollars in appropriations for capital construction projects.² Intel Corporation co-founder Andrew Grove (CCNY '60) gave City College's school of engineering \$26 million, the largest gift in its history, and, in an unintended double entendre, declared the school "a veritable American dream machine."³ Financier William E. Macaulay (CCNY '66) donated \$30 million for a university-wide honors college that became the reigning symbol of the senior colleges' renewed ability to attract top academic talent.

For a brief moment during the 1980's City had placed ads in local newspapers proclaiming itself "*Your City College.*"⁴ Now the emphasis shifted decisively onto the notion of taking the institution back from the undistinguished and undeserving poor, on classing up the joint and highlighting its top performing students and teachers. "*Superstars choose CUNY,*"

² Tuition costs spiked in 2003-'04, far outpacing inflation and heightening the perception that four-year colleges would now be out of reach for poorer families. This occurred amidst a speculative atmosphere in which many college's and university's sought to increase their prestige in part by raising their price point and counting on student borrowing and financial aid to keep pace. And the basis for many financial aid awards shifted from "need" to "merit." For more on the bubble in higher education, see William Deresiewicz, "Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education," *The Nation*, May 11, 2011; Schumpeter, "Declining by Degree: Will America's Universities Go the Way of Its Car Companies?" *The Economist*, September 2, 2010; and Schumpeter, "Higher Education: The Latest Bubble," *The Economist*, April 13, 2011, available: http://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2011/04/higher_education.

³ Andrew Grove, quoted in "Higher Education and the Poor: Rebuilding the American Dream Machine," *The Economist*, Jan. 21, 2006, 29-30.

⁴ "Your City College," advertisement, *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1981, EDUC32; emphasis mine.

declared the colorful advertisements that in 2005 began to line subway cars, decorate the sides of city buses, and appear prominently in local papers. “Study with *the Best*,” said others, and later “Look Who’s Teaching at CUNY.” The first of these ads featured David Bauer, then a senior at the elite Hunter College High School and winner of the \$100,000 national Intel Science Talent Search (formerly the Westinghouse Prize). Like the “whiz kids” of an earlier generation, Bauer was clearly in a position to write his own ticket in higher education but opted improbably to enroll in the new honors program at City College. As deal-sweetener, he and the handful of other students in the program had their tuition waived and were each given \$7,500 annual stipends and free laptop computers, this in the wake of the steepest tuition increases in recent memory.⁵

Other “superstars” included the Russian immigrant and Rhodes Scholar Lev Sviridov (CCNY ’05) and African-American Truman Scholar and Harvard Law School-bound Claudio Simkins (CCNY ’06). Given the fact that during these students’ tenure those who had entered requiring remediation had yet to be phased out, it is unlikely that that policy—or any other—could have been a decisive factor in their academic success. As even James Traub had acknowledged, City College always had a cadre of exceptional, ambitious young scholars.

In theatrical training, if not in sports, “superstar” is a dirty word that threatens to undermine the ensemble and dramatic text in the service of one person’s vanity and selfish

⁵ At the same time the four-year colleges had just done away with a decade-old policy of granting free tuition to graduating seniors for their final semester and imposed a \$150 technology fee, measures designed to help hire more full-time professors, whose numbers had diminished by more than fifty percent in many departments. See Karen W. Arenson, “CUNY, Short on Faculty, Is to End Free Term for Seniors,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2002. The “Dream Act” that would have rendered CUNY’s some 3,000 undocumented immigrant students who’d come into the country as children—and countless more like them—eligible for federal and state financial aid was once again stalled in Congress. See Leslie Casimir, “Best & Brightest in Bind: Illegal Immigrants Can Get Degree, But Not a Good Job,” *Daily News*, May 8, 2005.

ambition.⁶ The word bespeaks Raymond Williams's distinction between the ladder, which you can go up only alone, and what he called "the common highway." For different reasons, perhaps, it's difficult to imagine a Harvard or Yale publicly celebrating its "superstars," though both seem to attract and produce more than their share. One wonders whether university officials were, in fact, protesting too much, and furthermore whether a different kind of campaign highlighting the comparatively modest achievements of the average CUNY graduate might not have been more effective at capturing the imaginations of subway riders who, rightly or wrongly, were simply not prepared to think of themselves or their children as future Rhodes Scholars.

Besides the honors program, City College offered other incentives for students who might not have otherwise considered applying there. The year after CUNY launched its Superstars campaign the college opened its first dormitory since Army Hall welcomed veterans returning from WWII a half century before. At \$56 million, "The Towers" was a decidedly more posh affair that would, it was hoped, allow a few hundred of the college's ten thousand undergraduates to enjoy a fuller college experience. Since living at the far end of an all-but-abandoned South Campus cost residents considerably more than the going rate for renting a room in the surrounding neighborhood, the erection of the new dorm seemed calculated to give new meaning to the college's much-celebrated diversity. A *New York Times* article covering the opening day of the "ultramodern complex" mentioned two young women from suburban Long Island and another resident from a small farm town in upstate New York. Only one student quoted in the story came even close to belonging to City's traditional constituency. Though she

⁶ Many years ago I sat in on an acting class given by the late Stella Adler who was annoyed when a student asked her to talk about training Marlon Brando. "I don't drop names," Adler said derisively. "For every one like him there were a dozen who were better."

was not the first in her family to attend college, Serene Rich was at least a Harlem resident and a student in the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education that trained future doctors to work in urban areas. Her father, James Rich, was a Columbia graduate who felt he'd missed out on college life by not residing on campus. "Minus the dorm," he said, "[Serene] would have gone to Vassar."⁷

But if Serene appeared to have more options open to her than did the typical City College freshman, the extra lengths the college had gone to in order to lure her there did help compensate for one dramatic shift in the school's character: In the half dozen years since City had stopped accepting students requiring remediation and jacked up its tuition twenty-five percent, the college's Black population had declined in the very same proportion.⁸

'ACCESS' V. 'EXCELLENCE'

In the opening pages of this study I commented on the many ways "the values and social practices that made up the college and distinguished it from its peers are inscribed in its very architecture." That remains truer than ever today. Beginning in the 1990s City spent over \$200 million to restore the façades of its turn-of-the-century, neo-gothic buildings and replace their failing terra cotta gargoyles and grotesques—some \$84 million on the exterior of Shepard Hall alone.⁹ The repairs were necessary to preserve the buildings' structural integrity and prevent water from seeping through the cracks that had formed—a problem brought about by years of neglect. And in any event, working-class students deserve a beautiful campus, too. Nonetheless, the expenditure of such vast resources on an elaborate facelift points to a larger contradiction.

⁷ Manny Fernandez, "Going to College, and Living There, Too: At CUNY, a Commuter School, Finally a New Dorm to Call Home," *New York Times*, Aug. 26, 2006, B1.

⁸ Karen W. Arenson, "CUNY Reports Fewer Blacks at Top Schools: Enrollment Figures Show Overall Increase," *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 2006, B1. The trend was offset by increased minority enrollments at the community college level.

⁹ Nadine Brozan, "On CUNY's Many Campuses, the Subject Is Change," *New York Times*, Sep. 17, 2000, RE4.

Shepard Hall is a massive structure that rises to eight stories at its highest point. In the 1980s, after Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, college officials scraped together the funds to install a single, tiny elevator that, when it is working, continues to move all deliveries, building services, and many students and faculty on their way to and from class. Somehow the exquisite attention lavished on the building's façade and ornamental features twenty years later was not forthcoming when it came to facilitating access. On January 19, 2006 film student Jayprad Desai temporarily lost the use of his left leg and right arm after being hit by a car. For several weeks a classmate who lived near the campus put Desai up in her apartment so he could continue to attend classes, but the lift on Shepard's fourth floor designed to help wheelchairs negotiate the five steps leading to a classroom specially equipped with projection equipment wasn't working. City's Office of Student Disability Services told him the lift had "never worked and there [was] no chance to fix it." Until his class was relocated to another floor, Desai was forced to slide out of his wheelchair and scoot up the stairs on his behind using his one good hand. "The Office of Student Disability Services," reported *The Campus*, "was not available for comment."¹⁰

"Access and Excellence," the College's new motto is fraught with such contradictions. And for now, the emphasis appears to be on the latter. In 2008, the late blooming Irish-American memoirist Frank McCourt was invited to give the annual Samuel Rudin Lecture in the Great Hall. McCourt had recently published a book about his decades teaching high school English in the New York City public schools. In introducing him, President Gregory H. Williams noted that City College's student body included many graduates of the prestigious

¹⁰ Trinh Nguyen, "Accessibility Problems: A Disabled Students Plight," *The Campus*, Mar. 27, 2006, 1.

Stuyvesant High School, where McCourt had spent much of his teaching career.¹¹ By calling attention to pockets of excellence and features that challenged popular stereotypes of his institution, Williams was only doing what any college president would do on such an occasion. Nevertheless, it can sometimes appear facile, if not disingenuous for officials to sound off about a handful of “superstars” or the school’s remarkable ethnic “diversity” as though these were singular achievements instead of the natural byproducts of offering the most affordable four-year degree in a city with millions of ambitious immigrants from every nation on earth. In the spirit of both access *and* excellence, Williams could have chosen to also highlight the graduates of the school where McCourt had *begun* his teaching career, Staten Island’s McKee Vocational, graduates who had gone on to City College and managed to surpass their own and society’s humble expectations of them.

‘SOME SORTS OF DIRT SERVE TO CLARIFY’

In the end the toughest challenge City College may now face is the struggle to be true to itself. One hundred years ago the critic Montgomery Schuyler echoed the consensus among architects when he declared that “the contrast between the rugged black stone and snow white terra cotta of the wrought work” in City College’s new buildings was “violent and disturbing.” To this problem, he offered a novel solution: “It would not be a bad notion for the city to permit the City College to burn soft coal for a season until the architecture has been properly smoked. It is to be hoped that no vandal will propose the cleaning of this terra cotta so soon as it begins to take ‘the tone of time.’” “Some sorts of dirt,” Schuyler added, quoting George Eliot, “serve to

¹¹ Gregory H. Williams, Introductory remarks to the Samuel P. Rudin Lecture, City College of New York, Oct. 28, 2008.

clarify.”¹²

For some time America’s institutions of higher learning have been engaged in a kind of arms race, codified, if not entirely driven by, the annual rankings of the magazine *U.S. News and World Report*, which assigns nearly every school, no matter how unique its mission or circumstances, a single score. Writing recently in the *New Yorker*, the critic Malcolm Gladwell took the *U.S. News* rankings to task for their bizarre methodology and elitist, consumerist values.¹³ Penn State, a large public land grant university of middling reputation, may in fact be the most effective enterprise in higher education, he argued, but without becoming markedly more discriminating in admissions and attracting billions in private philanthropy—becoming more like Yale, in other words—it could never hope to occupy the top tier in the rankings. “Penn State sees its educational function as serving a wide range of students,” said Gladwell. Nearly a third were the first in their families to attend college. Seventy-six percent received financial aid. Based on predictors like their socioeconomic status and test scores, Penn State freshmen were expected to graduate at a rate of seventy-three percent but far exceeded that with an actual graduation rate of eighty-five percent. On that score, wrote Gladwell, “no other school in the *U.S. News* top fifty comes close.” But the editors of *U.S. News* give twice as much weight to “selectivity” as they do to efficacy and thus Yale comes in at number one on their list and Penn State at number fifty:

To the extent that Penn State succeeds at doing a better job of being Penn State—of attracting a diverse group of students and educating them capably—it will only do worse [in the rankings]. Rankings are not benign. They enshrine very

¹² Montgomery Schuyler, “Architecture of American Colleges,” *Architectural Record*, June 6, 1910, 464. The George Eliot reference is from her novel *Middlemarch*, which turns on the protagonist’s dilemma over whether or not to marry, for love, a character rumored to be descended from a Jewish pawnbroker, thereby sacrificing her fortune and social position.

¹³ Malcolm Gladwell, “The Order of Things: What College Rankings Really Tell Us,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 14, 2011, 68.

particular ideologies, and, at a time when American higher education is facing a crisis of affordability and accessibility, we have adopted a de-facto standard of college quality that is uninterested in both those factors.¹⁴

'THE DECADE OF SCIENCE' & CLIMATE OF SCANDAL

America has always been better at putting men on the moon than executing literacy campaigns, and Chancellor Goldstein has long made it clear that CUNY can't go on trying to be all things to all people and must concentrate on its strengths. For City College that has often meant science, engineering, and later architecture. Last year the trustees appointed a leading microbiologist, Lisa Staiano-Coico, as City College's twelfth president. Early in his tenure Goldstein designated the years 2005-2015 CUNY's "Decade of Science," and as I write this, the first portion of a huge, 390,000 square foot CUNY Advanced Science Research Center is rising along St. Nicholas Terrace in the space between The Towers dormitory and a gleaming-white, brand-new Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture. In the coming years they will be joined on the South Campus by City College's very own science building. Construction costs are projected to exceed \$700 million.¹⁵

Colleges and universities do not, however, thrive solely by adding "value," the focus of CUNY's latest PR campaign. They are also elaborate vessels that contain and express the collective identities and aspirations of the communities that surround them, places where people come together to define and assert what matters most to them. For that reason, as long as it relies on the public purse for its sustenance and as long as it holds such an important place in the life stories of so many New Yorkers as well as in the larger narrative of American opportunity, City

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 74.

¹⁵ Columbia, too, will expand its facilities across 125th Street into neighboring Manhattanville, where it is clearing ground for a seven-billion-dollar, high-tech campus devoted to the study of the brain and other types of scientific research, a campus that will come within a block of City College. On its Lincoln Center campus, Fordham University is building a new twenty-two story building to house its law school and twelve floors of residence halls.

College will continue to be bathed in nostalgia and rancor and buffeted by the winds of scandal.¹⁶

The *Daily News* may have set an all-time record when, in December of 2006, it broke a story on its front page that was no less than seventeen years old. “DISGRACE!” screamed the headline. “Joanne Chesimard is a fugitive cop killer. Why is City College allowing her name to be honored on campus?”¹⁷ The *News*’s “special report” dealt with a student/community center on the third floor of the NAC building that student activists had set up there after the campus takeover of 1989 and prominently named for two City College alumni, Guillermo Morales, a Puerto Rican independence fighter who lost most of his fingers in an explosion, apparently while making a bomb, and Assata Shakur, née Joanne Byron/Chesimard, (CCNY ’70) another student activist from the same era, a former Black Panther and bank robber convicted in the fatal shooting of a New Jersey State Trooper. In separate incidents the two had each escaped from prison and were both living in exile in Cuba. Though their names had hung over the door of the center since 1989, before the scandal broke few students, even inside the center, were sure who Shakur or Morales were. On a more intuitive level, however, they understood them to represent a tenuous link to an era of student radicalism and militancy whose legacy was now being eclipsed.

Other minor scandals involving City College have erupted in recent years and received the attention of the local press, as well they should have. A local congressman allegedly used his official letterhead and meetings to solicit funds for a public policy center to be named after him

¹⁶ My own appointment as an assistant professor there in 2006 garnered a front-page story in the *Amsterdam News* about my sketchy qualifications, the popular African-American professor I was to displace, and student opposition to his ouster. See Tanangachi Mfuni, “Dynamic CUNY Media Prof Replaced by Inexperienced Academic,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22-28, 2006, 1.

¹⁷ “DISGRACE! Joanne Chesimard is a fugitive cop killer. Why is City College allowing her name to be honored on campus?” *Daily News*, Dec. 12, 2006, 1. See also Mike Jaccarino and Karen Angel, “‘Terrorist’ Lauded at CCNY: Trooper’s Fugitive Killer Treated as College Hero,” *Daily News*, Dec. 12, 2006, 5; and “Celebrating Killers at City College,” editorial, *Daily News*, Dec. 12, 2006, 7.

there, for example. A former governor forced from office after he was caught patronizing high-priced, college-age prostitutes, came to teach a course in the political science department, his first foray back into public life. That, too, made the papers, as did the ex-governor's millionaire father, real estate developer Bernard Spitzer's (CCNY '43) \$25-million gift to have the badly tarnished family name emblazoned on City's new school of architecture.

Such efforts, like the public battle over the controversial sign that hung above the student center—it was ultimately removed by order of the CUNY Board of Trustees—and those of the individual alumni who paid to have dozens of small tributes to civil engineers, the class of '48, and the “inventor of the Internet” engraved in the bricks and stones of the plaza outside, all speak to the way so many different constituencies continue to claim their own piece of City College, the way they strive to leave their imprints upon it and to mobilize its fluid meanings in order to advance their agendas, define their legacies, and position themselves within a larger public conversation.

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