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# What a Waste: Segregation and Sanitation in Brooklyn, New York in the post-WWII Era

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What a Waste: Segregation and Sanitation in Brooklyn, New York in the post-WWII Era

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## **Abstract**

Through studying the intersections of sanitation and segregation in Brooklyn, New York in the post-WWII era, this thesis reveals a web of willful white negligence that constructed a narrative that supports continued environmental injustices towards black Americans. As a result of housing discrimination, the lack of sanitation, and the political and social climate of the 1950s, black neighborhoods in Brooklyn became dirtier with abandoned garbage. Institutional anti-black racism not only permitted and supported the degradation of black neighborhoods, but also created an association between black Americans and trash. In the present day, this narrative not only leads to the increased segregation of black Americans into dirty neighborhoods, but also justifies more environmental injustice in these vulnerable communities. Based on a case study of Brooklyn in the 1950s, this thesis asserts that environmental injustices are more than just siting landfills and toxic sites proximate to vulnerable neighborhoods, but rather they are dependent on the creation and preservation of narratives that claim minority communities are naturally predisposed to or deserving of living in dirty and unclean places.

Keywords: Bedford-Stuyvesant, garbage, racism, environmental history, environmental justice

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## **Abbreviations**

AFL	American Federation of Labor
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DS	Department of Sanitation
FHA	Federal Housing Administration
HOLC	Home Owners' Loan Corporation
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NIMBY	Not in My Backyard
OPA	Office of Price Administration (and Civilian Supply)
UPWA	United Packinghouse Workers of America
UNAVA	United Negro and Allied Veterans of America
USHA	United States Housing Authority
VA	Veteran's Administration

## Terminology

At the time of this writing, there is some debate on whether the term “African American” or “black American” is more appropriate to describe those who trace their ethnic origins to the African continent. In 1991, Martin noted that there was a transition from the term “Negro” in the mid-twentieth century to “black” in the 1960s and 1970s to “African-American” in the late 1980s and 1990s as the most acceptable term because of its cultural significance.<sup>1</sup> As Smith writes, the switch to “African American” signified an attempt to “gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior.”<sup>2</sup> However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been a resurgence of the term “black.” As of a 2005 study by Sigelman et al., Americans of African descent were pretty evenly split between those who prefer “black” and those who prefer “African-American,” which was also quite dependent on personal history and the racial composition of their social circles.<sup>3</sup> Waters’ *Black Identities* describes identity in the United States as beyond personal racial and ethnic identity, but also social perception of identity.<sup>4</sup> Based on existing scholarship and the current racially motivated social movement, “Black Lives Matter,” I have elected to use the term “black” to describe this ethnic grouping. Although Agyemang et al. argue that ethnically specific labels such as “African Kenyan” or “African Caribbean” should be used while “black” should be phased out, the term “black” actually better suits my purposes of describing structural racism in the United States against people with darker skin.<sup>5</sup> I elected to use a more all-encompassing term because all ethnicities within the term “black” were and are

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<sup>1</sup> Ben L. Martin, “From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (1991): 83.

<sup>2</sup> Tom W. Smith, “Changing Racial Labels: From ‘Colored’ to ‘Negro’ to ‘Black’ to ‘African American,’” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1992): 496.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Sigelman, Steven A. Tuch, and Jack K. Martin, “What’s in a Name? Preference for ‘Black’ versus ‘African-American’ among Americans of African Descent,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2005): 429.

<sup>4</sup> Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 44-93.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Agyemang, Raj Bhopal, and Marc Bruijnzeels, “Negro, Black, Black African, African Caribbean, African American or What? Labelling African Origin Populations in the Health Arena in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 59, no. 12 (2005): 1014.

subjected to this form of American racism. This is not to understate the heterogeneity of African populations, but rather the term “black” serves to highlight how institutionalized racism in the United States targets a group based on the color of their skin. However, when quoting directly from sources I will use the terminology of the source to preserve the original meaning.

## **Introduction**

*Dirt and other waste matter derive their power not simply through being waste or having a kind of negative value. Rather, as “matter out of place,” things deemed dirty, spoiled, or noxious carry polluting effects, by touching.*<sup>6</sup>

The morning of September 15, 1962 began like every Saturday morning did in New York City. The Department of Sanitation (DS) employees went down the streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn in their truck for the purpose of picking up bulk trash along Gates Avenue, but in reality the sanitation workers left most of the waste on the street. Unlike every other Saturday, however, an interracial group of about twenty members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) lay in wait. As the truck finished its route on Gates Avenue, the CORE members followed with their own cars with U-Haul trailers attached to pick up the trash the workers had neglected. As they continued on their mission, other Bedford-Stuyvesant residents joined in until about fifty people were helping pick up the trash that lay ignored on their streets. With their trailers full, the protesters arrived at the steps of the Brooklyn Borough Hall and dumped all the refuse they had collected. Orange crates, carpets, mattresses, refrigerators, and more piled onto the Borough Hall steps while some of the protestors began to form a picket line

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*, (New York: New York University Press), 2015, 1.



with signboards that read, “Taxation without Sanitation is Tyranny” and “Show us Integration With Better Sanitation.” They named it Operation “Clean Sweep.”<sup>7</sup>

When I first sought to write this thesis, I knew that I wanted to examine waste issues in U.S. history but I did not know in what capacity. My thesis started with a seemingly simple question: why are inner cities and ethnic enclaves where black Americans reside typically littered with trash?<sup>8</sup> My initial reaction was to look at how black communities were zoned to live in industrial corridors with heavy industry and incinerators, but after reading Brian Purnell’s paper “‘Taxation without Sanitation is Tyranny’: Civil Rights Struggles Over Garbage Collection in Brooklyn, New York During the Fall of 1962,” I realized discrimination against black communities was more than these areas simply having more landfills or incinerators nearby. Rather, the quality of sanitation and waste disposal in black communities was significantly lower than white communities in the same borough during the 1960s, making their neighborhoods dirtier from household trash as well as industrial waste. Drawing from a case study of a “garbage protest” in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, Purnell argued that racism, specifically anti-black racism, played a major factor in the lack of waste collection in low-income, black communities in Brooklyn. Therefore, Bedford-Stuyvesant’s “trashed” state was due to “poor policies and inadequate budgets” for sanitation issues, not just a few industrial sites or “dirty people” who did not know how to properly dispose of their trash.<sup>9</sup> Purnell’s study challenged my assumptions about waste and complicated my initial question. I

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Purnell, “‘Taxation without Sanitation is Tyranny’: Civil Rights Struggles over Garbage Collection in Brooklyn, New York during the Fall of 1962,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* (July 2007), 75 - 6.

<sup>8</sup> According to interviews with adolescent boys from a low-income neighborhood in New York City from Nicole Schaefer-McDaniel’s 2007 study “‘They Be Doing Illegal Things’: Early Adolescents Talk About Their Inner-City Neighborhoods,” their neighborhood routinely smelled of garbage and that there was always litter on the streets. Judi Anne Caron’s 2010 study “Environmental Perspectives of Blacks: Acceptance of the ‘New Environmental Paradigm’” details how blacks are positioned as “anti-environmental” because of the littered and dilapidated state of their neighborhoods.

<sup>9</sup> Purnell, 83.

wanted to understand how waste infrastructure, specifically related to policy and budget decisions, could have degraded to such a point that activists could pick up enough neglected garbage that they could dump it onto the Borough Hall steps all morning.

Without learning about such an important narrative in waste history, I would have completely disregarded the significance of the waste left behind in marginalized communities and only focused on the locations of incinerators and landfills. A community does not need to live near an incinerator for waste to adversely affect its residents. Scholars of environmental justice such as Carl Zimring and Dolores Greenberg have studied how the waste industry has stigmatized its workers as well as the structural problems with siting waste facilities near communities of color, but few studies use the amount of litter on the streets to exhibit environmental injustices in marginalized communities. This thesis seeks to expand the scope of race and waste relations through demonstrating that the creation of a marginalized space is more than measuring relative distance to toxic sites. Rather, marginalized spaces form as a result of the dynamic relationships between “political and democratic space; institutional space; [and] spaces of identity, place, and community.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, understanding the lack of sanitation in Brooklyn’s black communities requires a more thorough study of the political climate of the 1950s, the overt and covert methods of racial discrimination, and people’s perception of waste.

Purnell argues there were two main causes for the neglect of waste in black communities. First, World War II permitted people of color to escape established color lines to move to “white neighborhoods,” causing many white residents to flee to suburbs on the outskirts of the city.<sup>11</sup> Second, the reduction of services that resulted from the onset of WWII never changed in the

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon Walker, "Beyond Distribution and Proximity: Exploring the Multiple Spatialities of Environmental Justice," *Antipode* 41, no. 4 (2009), 630.

<sup>11</sup> Purnell, 62.

inner city despite increased population and consumption.<sup>12</sup> Although his paper makes these claims, it does not go into detail of the specific policies or budget cuts, but rather focuses more on the protest as an expression of the grievances that built up over the 1950s. Therefore, through thoroughly exploring the 1950s I want to expand upon the Purnell's research and demonstrate that housing discrimination and white flight as well as inadequate waste management led to poor sanitation in black communities in Brooklyn. However, my research further argues that the political climate of the 1950s increased labor strikes in the private sanitation sector and also led to anti-communist sentiment, which stifled black protests to racial and environmental injustices. I also assert that local government only paid attention to white residents' complaints. Finally, by broadening the United States' conceptualization of waste and applying it to critical race theory, my thesis will explain why black Americans are associated with trash and why their neighborhoods are subjected to so much trash through critically examining the post-WWII years (1945-1960) and the institutions that were put in place during this time that quarantined black people into the areas with the least sanitation.

Today, many black communities are undervalued and under resourced, and I argue that in Brooklyn this was institutionalized in post-WWII America. My thesis seeks to deepen the history of waste in Brooklyn during the 1950s in order to create a better understanding of the lasting impacts post-war societal, political, and economic changes had on sanitation in black communities. I hypothesize that due to the reallocation of federal funding from public services to military spending during WWII, the quality of waste management in Brooklyn was severely impacted during the 1950s. This was further exacerbated by the types of zoning imposed on neighborhoods with high concentrations of people of color, the transition from the Depression economy to the post-war economy, increased consumption, and, interestingly, the labor strikes.

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<sup>12</sup> Purnell, 64.

As a result, waste accumulated in the industrialized inner city where people of color were forced to live. Furthermore, anti-communist fervor silenced black protests against these injustices because activists feared being labeled as communists. However, even after Bedford-Stuyvesant residents protested in 1962, the United States proclaimed segregation illegal, and Brooklyn improved its waste management, the sanitary conditions of Bedford-Stuyvesant did not change. Therefore, I argue that the institutional factors that subjected black communities to poor sanitation in the 1950s are no longer necessary, because they created an association between waste and black Americans, which now justifies the amount of trash that litters the streets of their communities, or as I refer to it the “trashed” or “dirty” state of their spaces.<sup>13</sup>

The first chapter of my thesis will frame my thesis within the larger theoretical conversations about race and waste in both studies of environmental justice and of discard studies. The second and third chapters will then delve into the main factors that led to the sanitation and segregation issues of Brooklyn. Before exploring more direct factors that led to increased sanitation issues in black communities, Chapter 2 will give a brief history of the development of New York City and Brooklyn to contextualize its racial history. It will specifically highlight the racial discrimination in relation to housing that occurred in the post-war period. Finally, my second chapter will examine the transition of the United States’ patterns of consumption after World War II as well as Brooklyn waste management in the post-war years for the sake of contextualizing my argument in space and time. Chapter 3, on the other hand, will analyze more indirect factors of the growth of waste and litter in black neighborhoods in Brooklyn, such as anti-communist sentiment, workers going on strike, and the ways media attention affected protests to sanitation issues. Finally, Chapter 4 will tie together waste theory

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 8.

and environmental justice to the historical evidence I provide to more directly analyze how the conflation of race and waste rhetoric justified segregation of black communities into marginalized spaces perceived as dirty.

## **Chapter One: Constructing the Narrative of Waste**

*Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.<sup>14</sup>*

I began this thesis to learn more about garbage and the role it plays in society in the United States. Particularly, I wanted to expand the study of garbage, also known as discard studies, to intersect more with my interests in environmental justice and history. Accomplishing this requires a firm scholarly grounding in the theories and methodologies used in environmental justice, environmental history, and discard studies. While unpacking the complexities of each field, I realized that there existed common threads between the three disciplines, particularly with regard to the creation of narratives and rhetoric. From my analysis, I began to wonder if there was a connection between the historical and social narratives American society has built around the concepts of “waste” and “race.” My thesis argues that a common rhetoric exists for describing waste and race in the United States and this section not only serves as the scholarly foundation for this claim, but also provides tools to assist in deconstructing the ties between waste and race.

### **Environmental Histories of Justice**

Before I can begin to tease out the connections between waste and race, I must first establish the theoretical understanding I have of environmental racism and injustice as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

environmental history. The two disciplines may seem to operate from different standpoints, as typically the social sciences and humanities have different approaches to research, but within the scope of my paper they are quite aligned. My analysis of historical narratives that make up my research are bolstered and strengthened through my lens of environmental justice.

Simultaneously, my understanding of the roots of environmental injustices is enhanced and deepened through my knowledge of historic events. To further elaborate on my methodology, I will briefly summarize the scholars who have influenced my research frameworks as well as construct my own framework based on a blend of their methodologies.

As an environmental historian, I have often had to question my understanding of the discipline. There is a colloquial mantra that states that those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it, therefore we must study history to prevent the past from repeating. However, I believe this is a false portrayal of why it is important to study history. First of all, while similar patterns may emerge throughout history, events never repeat. Secondly, studying history does not allow us to prevent events from repeating, but rather equips historians with the tools to recognize how certain narratives and institutions came to exist. Michel-Rolph Trouillot is a pioneer in understanding how power comes to shape historical narratives. Instead of falling into the two established “camps” of history, positivism and constructionism, Trouillot ignores the question of *what* history is and instead focuses on *how* history works. *What* history is can change over time depending on who is constructing that history and pursuing it is a rather fruitless rabbit hole, but in studying “the process and conditions of production of such narratives” we can begin to understand how power has made “some narratives possible and silenced others.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, in the study of history it is not the story itself that matters, but rather whose story is being told, how it is being framed, and why it is being told in this manner.

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<sup>15</sup> Trouillot, 25.

Environmental justice theory relies on the understanding of history as a construction. Much of environmental justice rhetoric centers around “space” and how low-income Americans and people of color disproportionately live with and near toxic sites such as landfills, nuclear waste dumps, waste transfer sites, and more. However, as Gordon Walker writes, “space” is more than Cartesian distance, but rather space extends to “those of place identity, community, process and procedure.”<sup>16</sup> Essentially this means environmental injustice is more than just siting a landfill near a predominantly black community, but is also reliant on the intersections of people’s access to different spaces, such as access to a car to escape a flood. For example, although two families might live the same distance from an incinerator, if one of their houses is better insulated than the other, they will have better quality air inside their home than the other. The perpetuation of environmental justice also relies on a constructed sociocultural historical narrative that solidifies the public perception and stigma of a place that permits, justifies, and maintains acts of injustice in a community. That is to say environmental injustices are a product of the historical narratives created by those in power. Therefore, understanding how historical narratives are produced to support environmental injustices does not just reveal “facts about the past,” but an underlying power structure that creates and encourages these narratives.

With these frameworks in mind, we can begin to unpack more of the scholarly work on the relationship between race and the environment. As Carolyn Merchant writes, “The negative connections between wilderness and race, cities and race, toxics and race, and their reversal in environmental justice have been explored by numerous scholars who have analyzed the ideology and practice of environmental racism,” so environmental justice scholars have often tied notions

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, 630.

of waste to larger environmental concepts and have also attempted to deconstruct these ties.<sup>17</sup>

Although environmental scholars have not linked modern environmental justice issues with segregation and sanitation in the 1950s specifically, scholars such as Carl Zimring have made the connection between waste and race before. However, instead of focusing on waste in the living sphere, Zimring concentrates on the working sphere and how U.S. society perceived people who worked with the American Waste Trades as “dirty” because of their “dirty work.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, my proposition that American society conflates people of color, particularly black Americans, with waste does not take a stretch of the imagination, given the scholarly work done on similar topics.

As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, environmentalists had begun to equate the city with the blackness of dirt and moral depravity, while the “sublime” and “pristine” areas of nature were white and pure.<sup>19</sup> To add even more irony to this contrast, white settlers stole these pristine spaces from American Indians and the dirty cities were built upon the forced labor of thousands of black slaves for the sake of white Americans. However, because it is inconvenient for American society to remember their actions, it has been glossed over in U.S. history and in the history of the environmental movement. As Argyrou astutely notes, “In Western intellectual and popular discourse since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ability to ‘master’ nature was a sign of higher civilization. On this basis, those who lack this ability or perceive nature as a sacred domain have been relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy.”<sup>20</sup> However, over time the Western world began to perceive nature as sacred and instead looked down upon those who have taken up the “means of

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<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Merchant, "Shades of Darkness: Race and Environmental History," *Environmental History* 8, no. 3 (2003), 380.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Zimring, "Dirty Work: How Hygiene and Xenophobia Marginalized the American Waste Trades, 1870-1930," *Environmental History* 9, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Merchant, 385.

<sup>20</sup> Vassos Argyrou, "'Keep Cyprus Clean': Littering, Pollution, and Otherness." *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (1997), 159.



mastering nature” or those who disrespect and litter the Earth as “inferior or Other.”<sup>21</sup> Although Argyrou is specifically referring to the Western world’s treatment of the Global South, these notions can be applied to normative white Americans treatment of black Americans in the United States because, “As a score of scholars agree, the two-hundred-year-old practice of slavery left deep marks of institutional racism on social and spatial distribution of power, poverty, and disease.”<sup>22</sup> Through understanding how chattel slavery in the United States had an impact on its historical construction of race, environmental justice can better analyze environmental injustices that specifically target black people in the United States.

As an academic field of study and as a social movement, environmental justice benefits from a deeper historical understanding of the creation of dirty and blighted spaces through analyzing oral narratives and government legislation, which speak to the attitudes and prejudices of people at that time, in order to understand the power structure. It reveals factors of injustice that are not apparent in census data and zoning statistics. Furthermore, environmental justice adds complexity to studies of environmental history through lenses of space and race. Through combining the two sectors of environmental studies, my thesis will gain a more holistic perspective on the ways waste and race have interacted over time.

## **The Dirty Truth**

Similar to environmental justice, discard studies would benefit from deeper historical analysis. Garbologists justify their field of study because of the consequences waste has on human health and the ecological health of our planet.<sup>23</sup> However, this understanding of waste is not nearly critical enough to tackle the complexities of the “waste crisis,” the proliferation of

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<sup>21</sup> Argyrou, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Dolores Greenberg, “Reconstructing Race and Protest: Environmental Justice in New York City,” *Environmental History* 5, no. 2 (2000), 224.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Humes, *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012).

human-produced waste. In order to solve the waste crisis, we must examine the conceptualization of waste. The nature of waste is difficult to define due to its flexible and conceptual nature, because “anything and everything can become waste.”<sup>24</sup> What is trash in one person’s eyes can be treasure in the eyes of another. However, although we live in a society that produces so much waste, we keep our garbage hidden away. No one seems to perceive our garbage as anything other than something to “take out” and bury, not something to examine critically.<sup>25</sup> In bringing issues of waste into the spotlight of academic scholarship, we are studying what society believes is unwanted or unnecessary. In my research, I have found several definitions and interpretations of waste, garbage, and trash. First, Greg Kennedy provides a more philosophical and conceptual understanding of trash. On the other hand, Mira Engler uses waste landscapes to shape not only her understanding of garbage, but also examines how society has been constructed to push waste to its margins. Finally, William Rathje refers to garbage as the “tattle-tale” that sets the historical record straight when historians rely too heavily on documents or other forms of the written word.<sup>26</sup> Through combining the perspectives of these three scholars with environmental justice and environmental history, this thesis will achieve a more holistic comprehension of garbage that will create a deeper understanding of marginalization.

Garbage, waste, trash, rubbish, filth, refuse, or whatever you wish to call it is not something that is often discussed in every day conversation. According to Kennedy, the very nature of disposability means it is not worthy of being thought about or discussed, but of course nothing is truly disposable. There is a finite amount of resources on this planet and even if we attempt to dispose of items and extract resources to make more, we cannot increase or decrease

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<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Engler, 1.

<sup>26</sup> William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage*, (New York City, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 11.

the amount of matter on this Earth. Given that we do have finite resources, how can American society justify throwing away so many of those resources into a landfill? Kennedy differentiates types of waste into waste that is offensive to our senses and waste that is inoffensive. For Kennedy, waste becomes offensive when we feel that we have failed to maintain the durability and usability of an object.<sup>27</sup> For example, when we drop our phone in water or do not finish all the food we bought, we feel shame and remorse for having to throw it away because we are the cause of the damage. On the other hand, if we perceive that things “degrade beyond our control, we think it unfortunate, but do not feel responsible” and therefore we consider it inoffensive waste.<sup>28</sup> We do not feel the same remorse we feel with offensive waste, because the degradation was inevitable and a natural process. Most of the waste we produce today, such as disposable utensils, fall into this category. These products are supposed to be thrown away after a single use, so we are fine with disposing it because its life span is up. Imagine hearing a teenager died in an accident as opposed to hearing a 90 year-old-man died in his sleep. Both are tragic, but the former is more tragic because it was unexpected as opposed to inevitable. Justifying what makes something “disposable” will be integral in understanding how waste and race rhetoric intersect.

Along the same lines, Engler’s scholarly analysis of waste landscapes challenged her to tackle the concept of “margin” and “marginalization.” She notes that the margin is dialectical due to the contradictory feelings of repulsion and attraction that stem from it. Although Engler does not explicitly state it, her findings have significant implications for not only marginal landscapes but also marginalized people. First, to dispose of something, she concludes that the space being used for disposal must be considered as a “rejected landscape,” as it is the only place suitable for rejected objects. Within the lens of environmental justice, this language implies that

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<sup>27</sup> Kennedy, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 5.

neighborhoods with high amounts of landfills, waste transfer sites, incinerators, and Superfund sites are considered “rejected landscapes,” because these are the sites of disposal for our “rejected materials.” Therefore, living near these sites is indicative of also being “marginalized” and “rejected.” Through marginalizing a group of people, the “rejected landscape” provides a convenient scapegoat and sacrificial pawn that is “considered essentially unnecessary at the moment but useful as a *reserve for the future*, a provision for unpredictable contingencies.”<sup>29</sup> Zimring supports this claim in his research of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the industries that were created to deal with the increasing amount of waste were heavily stigmatized. He writes, “Industrialists, politicians, and even progressive reformers... saw scrap handling as dirty work, work that was not just physically dirty, but morally degrading.”<sup>30</sup> Classifying a space as “marginal” in the discard studies sense will tie into issues of racial segregation and environmental injustice within my thesis.

Kennedy and Engler have provided scholarly viewpoint from an environmental justice angle, but Rathje is the key to understanding waste from a historical perspective. Rathje conducted an archaeological and anthropological study of discards through the mining and digging up of landfills named “The Garbage Project,” which operates under the driving principle that garbage cannot be studied abstractly, but rather can only be understood when handled physically.<sup>31</sup> Rathje argues that archeology has always been the study of what humans leave behind, whether these are government documents or children’s toys. Through interpreting the purpose and significance of artifacts, archaeologists can construct narratives from a society or a culture that is thousands of years old. In other words, archeology is the study of garbage with the goal of understanding a society or culture. Garbage, therefore, has the potential to not only be the

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<sup>29</sup> Engler, 30

<sup>30</sup> Zimring, “Dirty Work,” 80.

<sup>31</sup> Rathje and Murphy, 9.

key to understanding societies in the past but also the present.<sup>32</sup> While I will not study the physical aspects of waste, it is useful to think of garbage as a historical indicator of a society. My thesis will incorporate Rathje's perception of waste, but I will focus more on *where* garbage is rather than *what* makes up the garbage.

Since the study of garbage is a fairly new topic, the narrative of the “garbage crisis” has been understudied and underchallenged. The few studies that have been conducted have used diverse methodologies and arrived at various conclusions, but these have yet to be synthesized in a way that lends to a historiographical argument. Furthermore, the studies that have been conducted so far only examine trash from a purely environmental and scientific standpoint. Discard studies has focused on the amount of garbage, types of waste, and where landfills and incinerators are located. Although these are all very important aspects of study, this narrative lacks an analysis of how and why our waste management came to be structured in this way as well as neglects to deeply analyze the effects waste has on more than just human physical health. Waste and the people associated with waste not only have to deal with health issues, but also the heavy institutional stigma that stems from their connection to waste. Through an interdisciplinary study of Brooklyn, I hope to assist in the process of broadening our theoretical and historical understanding of trash and how it affects marginalized people.

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<sup>32</sup> Rathje and Murphy, 11.

## Chapter Two: The Invention of Black Space as “Trashed”

*I'm not a nigger. I'm a man, but if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it... If I'm not the nigger here and you, the white people, invented him, then you've got to find out why.*<sup>33</sup>  
- James Baldwin

The degradation of sanitation in black neighborhoods in the 1950s in Brooklyn stemmed from an intricate web of factors. Through weaving together secondary analysis, newspaper articles, oral histories, government documents, and historic images, I hope to construct a complex narrative of the creation of “dirty black spaces” in the post-WWII era. From the institutional racism that began to take root during Brooklyn’s founding to a letter to the editor in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, each historic event serves to formulate a vivid narrative of the black Brooklynite experience during the 1950s. Through exploring the formation of Brooklyn as a Northern city with a deep history of slavery, I place Brooklyn in the heart of the development of institutional anti-black racism. Building from that history, I inquire more deeply into the creation of racial stigmatization in the 1950s through discriminatory housing practices and white Americans’ collective opposition to integration. Coupled with the increase of waste in the 1950s due to a boom in consumerism that overwhelmed Brooklyn’s waste management, segregation and sanitation issues culminated into the solidification of central Brooklyn’s black enclaves as “dirty” and “trashed.”

### A History of Racism in Brooklyn

First, we must ask, why study New York City and, more specifically, why Brooklyn? For my purposes, New York City, particularly Brooklyn, provides a perfect area for study not only because of the role it played in forming societal constructions of race, but also because of the clearly segregated neighborhoods. For a study such as this that requires samples from both black

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<sup>33</sup> Nat Hentoff *The New Equality*, (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1964), 27.

and white neighborhoods, New York City's borough system provides a stepping-stone into American society. In the future, studies such as this can be applied to other large cities such as San Francisco or Los Angeles. However, beyond the definitive color lines, New York City and Brooklyn have fascinating histories as spaces built on the exploitation of African slave labor. In many ways, New York City is similar to large cities such as Chicago or Detroit, but one thing that separates it from these cities is that "New York's whites enslaved blacks since the first quarter of the seventeenth century" and this "legacy of slavery focuses an inequitable distribution of well-being as old as the ecological transformations occasioned by the city's founding."<sup>34</sup> Unlike other cities that were founded by white settlers and then received an influx of black migrants, not only was New York founded on the labor of enslaved Africans, but also the unequal treatment of blacks runs deep through New York's history even before the "Great Migrations." This makes it a unique and fascinating area to study the effects of segregation and other forms of institutionalized racism, because the structure of the city was founded and relied on a well-established, yet covert racial power structure, which is responsible for many lasting portrayals of race throughout American history. Therefore, teasing out this history will provide much-needed historical context for the political, social, and racial climate of the 1950s in Brooklyn.

New York City is made up of five distinct boroughs and these borders have not changed much since the colonial period. Brooklyn, formerly known as King's County, is one of these boroughs and lies right in the center of New York City, as seen in Figure 1.

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<sup>34</sup> Greenberg, 224.



Figure 1. A map from Wiki Commons of New York City that delineates its boroughs

The Dutch and the English originally colonized New York City, then New Amsterdam, as a trading outpost around the early to mid seventeenth century. On September 4, 1609 the first Dutch colonists landed in what would later become King’s County, also known as Brooklyn, within their larger city of New Amsterdam within their colony of New Netherlands. Enslaved Africans from the existing slave trade from the Dutch West India Company became critical to the agricultural development of New Amsterdam and Long Island. In Brooklyn the reliance of black slaves was particularly strong, not in small part due to its role as a port city where many traders first brought African slaves to New York. The slave trade to New Amsterdam was so prominent that by 1660, it had the “largest numbers of urban blacks—free and slave—outside the



South.”<sup>35</sup> After roughly half a century of Dutch colonial rule, however, English colonial conquest seized New Amsterdam in 1664. Although the Dutch defeat was due to Holland’s disinterest in New Amsterdam because it was a colony that was more of a resource drain than gain, Governor Stuyvesant of New Amsterdam chose to instead claim that they lost because newly imported African slaves had eaten up all of the provisions.<sup>36</sup> This blatant scapegoating reveals how anti-black sentiment had already begun to nestle deep into the history of New York.

Starting in 1664, New Amsterdam became New York under English rule, but more importantly the Duke of York proclaimed immediately after his conquest that, “No Christian shall be kept in bond slavery, villenage, or captivity,” except in the case of people who sold themselves to indentured servitude of their own free will, but even with indentured servitude there was still the promise of freedom. As evidenced by the term “Christian,” religion was initially used to justify the separation of free men and unfree men in New York, but even at the turn of the century, African slaves who had converted to Christianity were still unfree. Thus, although Christianity was technically still used to divide the free from the unfree, situations such as religious conversion complicated and challenged the narratives of what separated freedom and unfreedom. Another example of this was in 1706 when the Legislature decreed that “children with mixed heritage ‘follow the state and condition of the mother.’”<sup>37</sup> Although this was instituted to eliminate white male slave owner’s obligations to their children born out of the rape of their slave women, it would later serve as a platform for the one-drop-rule system in the United States understanding of race. New York’s development of racial understanding and

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<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, 228.

<sup>36</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn 1636-1990*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 5 – 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

racism did not stem from white settler's natural prejudice against Africans, but rather it was born out of necessity to justify the maintenance of slaves.

The American Revolution further solidified the position of African slaves as naturally and racially predisposed to enslavement, because the Founding Fathers had to somehow justify their fight for freedom while simultaneously maintaining their power over slaves. Furthermore, instead of confronting and challenging the contradiction of advocating for freedom while still owning slaves, New York specifically began to put limits on the numbers of African slaves allowed in the state in order to homogenize. Even as New York began to become a more commercial state as opposed to an agricultural one, it did not legally pass initial legislation to emancipate slaves until 1785 and even then this did not put a stop to the practice of slavery. Furthermore, in 1791 Brooklyn only had 46 free blacks, which was “proportionately the smallest free black community in the state.”<sup>38</sup> In 1799 New York gave itself the target year of 1827 to achieve universal freedom, but once again even in 1830, 75 black Americans still remained enslaved in the state of New York. According to Robert Trent Vinson, from 1857 to 1862, a few years before the American Civil War, New York City was “one of the world's leading slave ports,” because the city turned a blind eye to slave smugglers who docked at its wharves in exchange for bribes.<sup>39</sup> White Brooklynites were particularly invested in slavery because, as a port borough, Brooklyn not only benefited from the bribes from slave smuggling, but also profited from the plantation cash crops from the South. For example, by the Civil War “Brooklyn's Empire Stores handled 90 percent of the tobacco that entered the city” and Brooklyn was home to the largest sugar refinery in the world.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, despite emancipating slaves and legally granting universal freedom, New York City, especially Brooklyn, still relied heavily on

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<sup>38</sup> Wilder, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 55.

slave labor. Wilder writes, “In Brooklyn, as in Virginia, slavery was a function of political economy, not social psychology. As [whites] came to experience mastery over countless human beings, they surely did come to assume their own natural superiority; that was not, however, the product of a predisposition, but rather the result of social relationships.”<sup>41</sup> However, although this was the case, slavery was not directly essential within New York City itself, therefore the reluctance of New Yorkers to grant and enforce universal freedom *within the state* speaks to the solidification of their understanding of blacks as inferior to whites and therefore undeserving of freedom. New York City is critical to understanding race in the United States not only because it was founded on the unpaid labor of slaves, but also because, as a result of the nature of its founding, it was one of the forefathers of the racial ideologies that built the basis for American institutionalized anti-black racism.

It was not until the Civil War that Brooklyn finally “severed” its relationship to slavery, but this was simply an end to a *method* of discrimination, not the end of the exploitation and persecution itself.<sup>42</sup> If anything, the Civil War inspired new ways to enforce anti-black racism without the use of chattel slavery in New York. Without slavery to subjugate blacks, “In both the North and South, substantial attempts to reshape American society between 1865 and 1920 included attempts to rationalize the space and race of the nation across regions using race as the basis for creating order.”<sup>43</sup> However, despite this, in the decades following the Civil War many young Southern emancipated slaves viewed New York as a “refuge” from the persecution of the South. They escaped to the North, particularly New York, because black newspapers, letters from relatives, and job advertisements portrayed New York as a city of universal freedom. However, “they did not imagine what an older generation foresaw—job competition from

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<sup>41</sup> Wilder, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Zimring, “Dirty Work,” 83.

growing foreign immigration, deteriorating living conditions, and deprivation of civil and political rights.”<sup>44</sup> The older generation knew that New York City was not all it seemed to be, because they had lived through a time when New York was once just as bad as the South and also understood that white Americans were not so willing to give up their sense of superiority over blacks.

As waves of the black migration hit New York after the Civil War, the older generation’s fears were confirmed. Not only were freedmen who migrated to New York underpaid, underappreciated, and given unsafe jobs, but also “they were huddled in ghettos, which quickly became overcrowded slums.”<sup>45</sup> Their poor living conditions made current New Yorkers perceive black migrants as “unclean.” As a result, well-established black New Yorkers actually resented black migrants for degrading their image. Before, black New Yorkers could achieve some form of financial independence and stability, but as a result of the influx of black migrants, New Yorkers began to think all blacks were impoverished and unclean, therefore closing off many opportunities that were once open to blacks. Whites feared the entry of black migrants into their neighborhoods because they feared property value decline and “race-mixing,” so along with race-restrictive zoning ordinances, they also used violence and intimidation tactics to prevent black migrants from moving into their neighborhoods. However, these actions were not solely directed at black residents as white residents also felt this way about the millions of migrants who moved to New York City from 1870 to 1890. The population of New York City quintupled during this time period so although there was a high amount of black migration from the South, black migrants only made up 3% of the population. Therefore, while whites targeted black Americans in smaller cities such as Baltimore, New York City was actually able to absorb most

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<sup>44</sup> Greenberg, 229.

<sup>45</sup> Meyer 13.

of the black migrants into pre-existing “black sectors” before 1915. Other smaller cities, such as Baltimore, did not have the capacity to handle the influx of migrants and so the first “real slum” named Pigtown was created as a result.<sup>46</sup> New York City would not have to deal with this particular issue until the First World War.

During the First Great Migration during and after World War I, black migration increased while immigration from other countries decreased, thereby increasing the total percentage of blacks in Northern cities across the country. Before the First Great Migration, Harlem was the “accepted black enclave,” but from 1910 to 1930 the black population of New York increased by two and a half times, making New York City the city with the largest black population in the nation. Although Harlem was “the heart of black America,” it could not house all the black migrants that arrived in New York, nor did all black Americans want to stay in Harlem. Unsurprisingly, when black migrants attempted to move to Brooklyn they were met with heavy resistance from white residents, but unlike cases of KKK violence in Staten Island, resistance in Brooklyn never culminated in actual white violence thanks to the efforts of the NAACP and the police department.<sup>47</sup> As a result of the control of white violence in Brooklyn, First Great Migration increased the population of black Brooklynites from 22,708 in 1910 to 68,921 in 1930, which increased the percentage of black Brooklynites from 1.4 percent to 2.7 percent.<sup>48</sup> At this time, the black population of the neighborhood of Bedford was also increasing and by 1920 8.7 percent of its population was black. In one particular district in the south of Bedford, the black population of 2,341 almost equaled the population of native white Americans at 2,376.<sup>49</sup> This created some tension between the white and black residents, such as when a

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<sup>46</sup> Meyer, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 30-33.

<sup>48</sup> Wilder, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 128.

white minister of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church told black congregates to worship elsewhere, but because of the NAACP was committed to protecting blacks in Brooklyn, Bedford was on its way to becoming the largest black neighborhood in Brooklyn.

All the work black families had put in to buy their houses, have their own businesses, and increase their wages was shattered during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Companies slashed black wages before white wages and fired black workers over white workers. Furthermore, many black workers lost their jobs to white workers who took on the "traditional Negro jobs" of domestic or janitorial work when they were in dire straits for work. No matter the economic successes black workers achieved, the Great Depression revealed that black Americans were still not valued on the same level as white Americans. In a time of crisis, the United States was willing to sacrifice its black Americans for the sake of its white Americans.<sup>50</sup>

The housing market during the Depression was "frustrating for advocates of better housing for blacks" because while the advocates won some victories, they also met with disappointment.<sup>51</sup> At the very least, the decline of economic incentives slowed down black migration to the North from the South, which was a relief to the black New Yorkers who already struggled to find adequate housing. The Depression also sparked more government intervention in housing, but this turned out to be a double-edged sword for many black residents. The New Deal of 1933 promised to clear slums and build new housing, but often the government failed to provide adequate housing after clearing a slum, forcing its mostly black residents to find housing elsewhere, which often meant attempting to move into a white neighborhood. White residents firmly resisted any black families moving into their communities, but black Americans did not stay complacent. Not only did the NAACP fight against race restrictive covenants and win case

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<sup>50</sup> Meyer, 48

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 49.

after case in the South, but also for the first time ever blacks held positions on the federal housing bureau.<sup>52</sup> However, despite these victories the New Deal also led to the creation of organizations such as the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 and the Federal Housing Association (FHA) in 1934 that promoted and financially supported nationwide segregation. The HOLC "provided advances to lenders and extended credit to home-owners in default on mortgages" and the FHA was designed "to coordinate the government's housing programs and insure mortgage loans,"<sup>53</sup> but while they did help stabilize the housing market for white homeowners, it absolutely decimated housing opportunities for black homeowners.

Firstly, the HOLC established a rating system to "guide the investment decisions of underwriters."<sup>54</sup> Private realtors and terrible neighbors could only do so much, but when the HOLC began rating and evaluating the "risks" of neighborhoods it incentivized people to avoid racially or ethnically mixed neighborhoods.<sup>55</sup> HOLC categorized neighborhoods into four groups and the communities that were too high-risk for loans due to "undesirable elements," such as low-income or black communities, were qualified as "red," thus the creation of the term "redlining." Communities that were redlined could not even be considered for loans, basically barring communities of color from purchasing property with the ease of white Americans. HOLC's status as a government-sponsored program gave it even more legitimacy in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of many banks and realtors, giving them all the more reason not to loan to black Americans.

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<sup>52</sup> Meyer, 48-49.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>54</sup> Henry L. Taylor Jr. and Walter Hill, *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: Blacks in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 33.

<sup>55</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51.

To add insult to injury, HOLC's system influenced the policies of the FHA, which provided millions of dollars to the housing industry after the war.<sup>56</sup> The FHA essentially made it easier and cheaper for people to take out mortgages as a result of smaller down payments and longer repayment periods, so long as the participants were white, middle-class suburban families. The FHA *Underwriting Manual* (1938) included a section on "Protection from Adverse Influences," which stated,

Usually the protection from adverse influences afforded by these means includes prevention of the infiltration of business and industrial uses, lower class occupancy, and inharmonious racial groups... If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally contributes to instability and a decline in values.<sup>57</sup>

With such racist rhetoric solidified in a federal document, it is no wonder that black Americans had such a difficult time obtaining housing. In addition, The FHA encouraged the construction of single-family homes, incentivized families to purchase new homes as opposed to refurbishing old ones, and required the HOLC ratings of a neighborhood before it approved any loans for construction.

However, it was not completely hopeless for black residents because in 1937 the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA) was created within the Department of the Interior, which would give "\$500 million for slum clearance and low-income housing projects."<sup>58</sup> The USHA made a commitment to eliminating racial discrimination in housing, specifically in low-income housing projects. During the Depression, many people, not just black Americans, required low-income housing and were opposed to integrated housing, but despite the opposition the USHA enacted "a more fair and equitable racial policy... than in any other branch of the Federal Government,"

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<sup>56</sup> Massey and Denton, 53.

<sup>57</sup> June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, (California: Sage Publications, Inc, 1997), 283.

<sup>58</sup> Meyer, 54.



much to the relief of the NAACP.<sup>59</sup> Although the USHA did not entirely protect black residents from the effects of the HOLC and FHA, at the very least it did promise them a place to live. The efforts of the NAACP to lobby for better housing also improved conditions slightly, but in the end these efforts could not compete with the federally funded programs and the anti-black sentiment of white residents who sought to “protect” their neighborhoods from “black invasion.”<sup>60</sup> Even by the start of World War II, black residents still remained fenced off into ethnic enclaves.

The on-set of World War II would stimulate the economy enough to spark another Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North in search for industrial jobs that increased New York City’s black population to 10 percent of its total population.<sup>61</sup> The job market that had been closed to black workers during the Depression not only reopened, but there was also the creation of new industrial jobs to supply the war. However, they were still barred from white unions and better paying positions, such as managerial work, as well as paid less than white workers for the same work.<sup>62</sup> The Second Great Migration also began to push the boundaries of the color line once again. The neighborhoods of Brooklyn that saw the highest influx of black migration were Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville. Bedford-Stuyvesant, a neighborhood that emerged from the merging of Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights in 1920, contained the largest black population in all of Brooklyn. HOLC predicted that Bedford-Stuyvesant “probably [would] be the center of [the] colored population in the Borough within the next twenty-five years.”<sup>63</sup> HOLC’s self-fulfilling prophecy pushed blacks into the neighborhood, while pushing whites out until it was

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<sup>59</sup> Robert C. Weaver, “Negroes Need Housing,” *The Crisis* 47 (1940), 139.

<sup>60</sup> Meyer, 57.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> Wilder, 169-171.

<sup>63</sup> “Summary of a Survey of New York,” HOLC Papers

49% white and 51% in the 1940s.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Brownsville, once an enclave for Jewish Americans and immigrants, had its black population nearly double from 7,842 in 1940 to 14,209 in 1950.<sup>65</sup> The increase was concerning to many white New Yorkers, as seen on November 21, 1943 when about 500 white residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant went to the Bedford YMCA to complain about the influx of “sunburned citizens” in their neighborhood.<sup>66</sup> However, as a result of the United States shipping so many men and women to fight in the war, opposition such as this remained minimal until the end of the war.

Findings from Brooklyn may not carry over to the rest of the United States, but because it has served as a model of racial construction for so many years, it is a good place to start further research in tying waste and race rhetoric. New York City, particularly Brooklyn, was built on slavery and benefited from the construction of anti-black racism. Through the oppression and exploitation of black Americans, Brooklyn could prosper as a trading hub, stay afloat during a national depression, and utilize cheap labor. As long as Brooklyn could justify this oppression through racist rhetoric and government ordinances, they could continue to use black Americans to their advantage. Brooklyn accepted black Americans during the war, albeit begrudgingly, because they needed the labor, but when the war ended would this still be the case?

### **Post-World War II Racial Stigma**

Through understanding how Brooklyn was founded and its history of racial oppression, we can better analyze the 1950s as an extension of these pre-existing notions of race. By 1945 Brooklyn had become a hub of diversity, but it had also established its color lines and forced its black residents behind it, particularly in central Brooklyn, which had become the “primary locale

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<sup>64</sup> Purnell, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Wendell E Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>66</sup> Wilder, 197.

of nonwhite residency in the borough.”<sup>67</sup> As white residents took advantage of the post-war GI Bill to escape to suburbia, economic disadvantage forced black residents to stay in the deteriorating inner cities. The 1950s not only solidified existing color lines, but also used these boundaries to delineate areas of neglect. Combined with sanitation issues and the political climate of the 1950s, black communities became dirtier and more undervalued in the eyes of white American society. Therefore, even when segregation was technically abolished in the 1960s, the association between blackness and waste still remained. To explain how this happened, we need to unpack how white flight to suburbia coupled with housing discrimination and redlining exacerbated existing black enclaves in the 1950s.

Scholars disagree about the underlying cause for the severe housing discrimination of the 1950s. For some, white Americans’ unwillingness to have black Americans move into their space helped create and support the government legislation that institutionalized the discrimination and incentivized realtors to avoid selling to black Americans. To others, the government’s backing of redlining gave political weight to a common social practice, which made it something legal and justifiable. Whichever line of argument a scholar takes, however, it is generally agreed that “residential segregation is not a neutral fact; it systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in the United States.”<sup>68</sup> The segregation of black Americans in the 1950s was no accident, but rather the culmination of the mixing of federal mandates, local policies, and white fears.

One scholar in particular, William Fischel, argues, however, that “Rather than attacking motives for zoning, which are typically unobservable and for which many substitute rationales can be advanced, a more effective remedy would address the underlying financial anxieties that

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<sup>67</sup> Wilder, 177.

<sup>68</sup> Massey and Denton, 2.

give rise to exclusionary ordinances,” but this is undeniably an ahistorical argument for two reasons.<sup>69</sup> First, to say that the motives for zoning are “typically unobservable” is to turn a blind eye to the overt racism tied to the advent of zoning laws and redlining. Secondly, to propose solutions without understanding the motivations behind the zoning laws would create ineffective policy, no matter how “economically sound” it was. In unpacking the very much observable motivations of federal housing zoning and redlining practices, I argue that discriminatory zoning practices consolidated the black population of New York into a select few neighborhoods that would serve as “sacrificial zones” that would receive fewer resources and less public funding than the rest of the borough.

The increase in black population in northern cities exacerbated housing discrimination practices. After World War II, many black Americans left the South in search of better work opportunities. The mechanization of fields had eliminated the need for sharecropping and the Jim Crow Laws made it dangerous for black Americans to stay in the South. As a result, the 1940s and the 1950s became a prime time for black migration. For 39% of realtors in Chicago, for example, their first experience dealing with “Negroes attempting to rent property” was sometime between 1951 and 1955.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, as a result of the increase of industrial jobs during the war years as well as veteran checks, “the ability of African Americans to pay for better housing grew after the war. In 1947, according to Thurgood Marshall, veterans in Detroit reported an ability to pay \$6,000 for a home; in Newark and Cleveland, they felt they could afford \$7,000.”<sup>71</sup> With more opportunity and money, black Americans moved to New York in the hopes of a better and brighter future.

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<sup>69</sup> William A. Fischel, "An Economic History of Zoning and a Cure for its Exclusionary Effects." *Urban Studies* 41, no. 2 (2004), 318.

<sup>70</sup> Rose Helper, *Racial Policies and Practices of Real Estate Brokers* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota Press, 1969), 311.

<sup>71</sup> Meyer, 82.

As more black migrants moved in the color lines they lived behind were forced to expand outwards slightly, but more commonly landlords would divide up one-family apartments into three-family apartments to accommodate more renters.<sup>72</sup> Although blacks migrated from the South for work and to escape the Jim Crow laws, they often found themselves sectioned off and segregated into terrible living conditions.<sup>73</sup> Even worse still, these dilapidated apartments were even more expensive for blacks than they would have otherwise been for white residents. For example, despite the fact that homes in Brownsville were decrepit, roach and rat-infested, and prone to fires, black renters were still forced to pay \$55 a month, nearly double the \$30 average for Brooklyn, and had to finance their own repairs without reimbursement.<sup>74</sup> As demonstrated in Figure 2, many homes in Brooklyn were littered with garbage inside and out.



Figure 2. Trash accumulated in a backyard of a house on Moore Street in Brooklyn<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Purnell, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>74</sup> Pritchett, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Irving Cohen, "Garbage Blankets Floor of Empty House in Williamsburg, Spills Out into Rear Yard," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 4, 1949, 6.

The conditions were similar in Bedford-Stuyvesant, as Leon Modeste (See Figure 3), a member of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth Council in 1948, noted when he described their “tenements teeming with people... people who live in the worst houses, pay high rents... people who feel like stepchildren... with garbage all over the place.”<sup>76</sup> Calvin Wedderburn (See Figure 3), another Bedford Youth, lamented “Bedford-Stuyvesant is neglected; it’s lost in the middle.”<sup>77</sup> By the middle, Wedderburn meant “central Brooklyn,” which over the past decades had been designated as the black hub of Brooklyn. Bedford-Stuyvesant was particularly known as “Brooklyn Harlem.”<sup>78</sup>

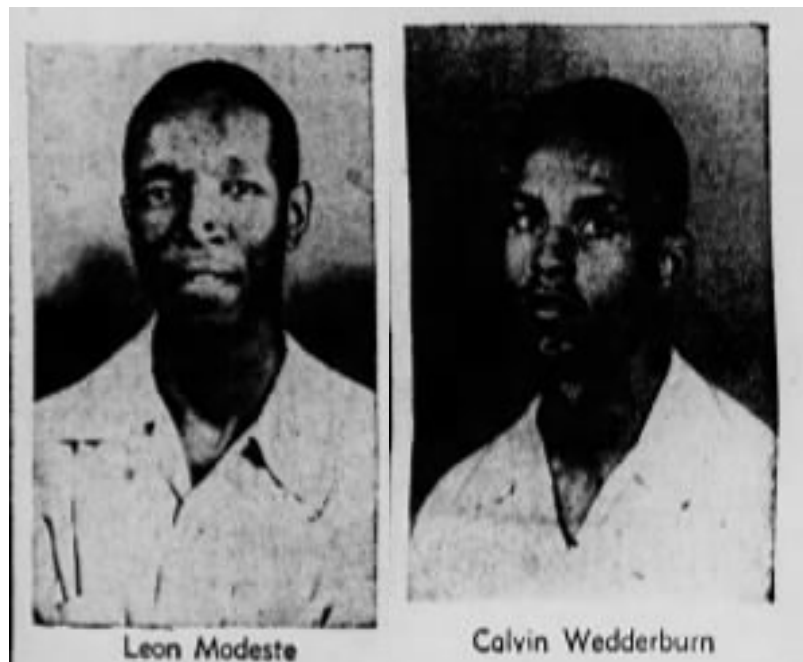


Figure 3. Leon Modeste and Calvin Wedderburn: Two young black men who lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1949 and strove to improve their neighborhood.

The working-class chose to live in Bedford-Stuyvesant because of its proximity to industry and downtown businesses, but many middle-class whites interpreted the increasing population as a cue to leave the city. As Meyer wrote, “the rhetoric of invasion has come to

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<sup>76</sup> Peggy O’Reilly, “Bedford Youths Face Life’s Stark Realities,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Aug 22, 1948, 19.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Wilder, 195.

dominate interpretations of the migration. Most blacks did not intend to lead assaults on white areas; they only sought better housing, but many whites interpreted the rhetoric literally.”<sup>79</sup> Although Bedford-Stuyvesant was racially integrated throughout the 1940s, white flight deeply affected the makeup of its population, causing the town to be the largest black neighborhood in Brooklyn throughout the fifties and sixties. In Peggy O’Reilly’s article in *The Brooklyn Eagle* she writes how severe racial segregation black Americans in Bedford-Stuyvesant created “ugly sores of enforced segregation, ghastly slums, economic insecurity, [and] lack of educational opportunity.”<sup>80</sup> Purnell attributes white flight to “economic and political policies that went into affect [sic] during the New Deal” as well as realtors who practiced “blockbusting,” introducing black families into previously all white neighborhoods to drive down property prices.<sup>81</sup> The economic policies he refers to were the HOLC and the FHA, but after the war a new policy went into effect. After the war, the government encouraged white Americans to buy suburban homes, and leave the inner city, through cheap home loans through the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill, and the Veteran’s Association (VA). The GI Bill was created to buffer servicemen and women against unemployment and economic disruption as well as reinvigorate the economy through expanding purchasing power. The Bill offered a “trio of benefits—unemployment pay while looking for a job, tuition and subsistence allowances for further education or training, and loans to purchase homes or farms or to start a business.”<sup>82</sup> Thanks to the bill, 42 percent of World War II vets were homeowners by 1956.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Meyer, 6.

<sup>80</sup> O’Reilly, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Purnell, 62.

<sup>82</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Communication in Postwar America*, (New York: Random House Inc., 2003), 137.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

However, despite the tremendous impact it had on creating an affluent post-war economy, the G.I. bill was not available to everyone, not even to all veterans. The bill was designed to help veterans reintegrate back into society, as long as they were not women, blacks, or the working class. As a result of deeply entrenched discrimination from federal programs such as the HOLC and the FHA, black Americans were considered a “loan risk.” The VA mortgage program required banks and building and loan corporations, which used the “redlining” system of HOLC, to qualify veterans before they could receive aid. The VA and other well-established veteran organizations barred black vets from membership, forcing them to join extremely segregated and under-resourced veteran organizations. Even if a black veteran did successfully qualify for a mortgage, the banks usually turned down their applications because blacks could only find housing in “high-risk” neighborhoods. Faced with discrimination from every level, black ex-GIs had to watch “the government’s dollars sanction the racial prejudice they routinely experienced whenever they applied for a job or vocational training, admission to college, or a mortgage or bank loan to start a business.”<sup>84</sup> The discrimination of these federally funded programs was so severe that by the 1950s the “per capita FHA lending in Nassau County, New York (i.e., suburban Long Island) was eleven times that in Kings County (Brooklyn) and sixty times that in Bronx County (the Bronx).”<sup>85</sup>

In addition to federal policies and programs, private realtors played an integral role in both discouraging blacks from moving into all-white neighborhoods so they would not contaminate the community as well as encouraging blacks to move into all-white neighborhoods to drive property values down. Although these practices may seem contradictory, both served to benefit the realtor, but the practice he or she chose to use depended on his or her commitment to

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<sup>84</sup> Cohen, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Massey and Denton, 54.



the white community. If they lived in the white community or had family there, for example, they would prevent black residents from moving in, but if they were looking to get rich quick, they would encourage blacks to move into a white community. With regard to blocking blacks from moving into white neighborhoods, as a 1969 survey indicated, realtors during the 1950s in Chicago represented their clients' prejudices through their racialized housing policy. For example, 70% of realtors were not willing to rent property in white areas to Negroes and 66% of realtors believed Negroes' entry into neighborhoods was not as good as whites.<sup>86</sup> 90% of these realtors claimed that they notice a change in property values when Negroes entered an area,<sup>87</sup> but according to Suarez, the black Americans who moved into suburbs usually had a higher income than their white neighbors because they had to pay more than the average white buyer to enter the suburb. Despite this, white residents claimed that they noticed an increase of crime and deterioration of the neighborhood.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, even if the black Americans who attempted to move into white areas were economically successful, the perceived "otherness" of these potential black neighbors was enough to create the perception that the neighborhood had gotten worse. White residents' fear of black entry into their neighborhoods is known as "infiltration theory," because of the use of "invasion" and "infiltration" rhetoric in documents such as *Real Estate Principles* (1955) and *The Review of the Society of Residential Appraisers* (1940).<sup>89</sup>

Other realtors took advantage of "infiltration theory" to practice "blockbusting," which actually encouraged a black family to move into an all-white community. Realtors would then convince the white residents to sell their property and leave the neighborhood quickly before the

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<sup>86</sup> Helper, 329.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>88</sup> Suarez, 251.

<sup>89</sup> Raymond A. Mohl, "The Second Ghetto and the 'Infiltration Theory' in Urban Real Estate, 1940-1960," in *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, ed. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf (California: Sage Publications, Inc, 1997), 58-71.

black family completely drove down the value of their house. Many whites listened to these realtors and sold their houses for much less than they were worth, just so realtors could sell it to other black families for even more than the house was worth. Some realtors would even carve up the houses into smaller apartments to make even more money off of black families looking to buy any housing they could get.<sup>90</sup> White landlords also participated in this deliberate degradation of black housing, because like realtors they also “[figured] they [could] make more money by cutting up apartments” and renting them to multiple black families who were then forced to use the same toilet and sanitation facilities that were only meant for one family.<sup>91</sup> Realtors and landlords carving up apartments for black families meant that an apartment curbside trash bin meant to accommodate the waste of one family was actually holding the garbage of two or three families.<sup>92</sup>

Meyer is correct to assert “neither government nor realty, lending, and construction interests forged racial policies out of thin air”<sup>93</sup> and that “they did not act in a political and economic vacuum,”<sup>94</sup> but I would take this claim one step further and say that both influenced each other. Just as popular opinions about race and segregation served to inspire racially restrictive government policies, so too did these government policies also serve to cater to white Americans and justify racism. Even though the Fair Housing Act of 1948 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 should have prevented segregation, they could not reverse the damaging effects that the federally defined discrimination policies had on the creation of black enclaves. The

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<sup>90</sup> Purnell, 62.

<sup>91</sup> O’Reilly, 19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Meyer, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 7.

combination of “these two devices—zoning and racially restrictive covenants—effectively protected socioeconomic segregation and limited the mobility of people of color.”<sup>95</sup>

Now that we have established how Brooklyn segregated its black populations into certain neighborhoods, we will have to further delve into how the waste built up in these specific neighborhoods. Although there are many reasons, some overt and others more covert, the most obvious reason for an increase of waste is an increase in its production. After World War II, the basis for the American economy shifted from government control and frugality to free markets and individualized consumer responsibility.

### **Reframing Consumption**

Sanitation and waste issues in Brooklyn stem from a multiplicity of reasons, but the most basic of these factors is simply the fact that there was more waste. After the war ended, not only did millions of men and women returned from service, but also after years of poverty people could afford to have more children in what was known as the “Baby Boom” of the 1950s. Beyond just an increase in numbers, however, there was also a shift in consumer mentality in the United States that encouraged people to consume more and thereby produce more waste. For example, in 1950 alone, approximately 5,150,000 tons of waste were sent to the landfill or incinerated.<sup>96</sup> During the Depression and during World War II, people had to sacrifice certain pleasures and comforts in order to survive or support the war effort, but after the war was an opportunity to cut loose and indulge once more. This is not to say that the American public immediately released its inhibitions and began consuming non-stop, because the change to an individualistic consumer culture actually met with quite a bit of resistance from protestors, but rather that once the government enacted the changes, the American public adapted to the new

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas and Ritzdorf, 5-6.

<sup>96</sup> Office of the Public Relations Adviser, “Department of Sanitation: City of New York: Annual Report: 1950,” 19.

social and economic norms of the 1950s. These new norms equated consumption with political power, so suddenly *consumerism* represented loyalty to the United States as opposed to *frugality*. As Lizabeth Cohen writes, the shift from “citizen consumers” who wanted to protect the greater good of the nation to “purchaser consumers” who felt that the power of their dollar contributed more to society than their political voice revolutionized the way and the rate that Americans consumed.<sup>97</sup>

In response to the Depression, the federal government proposed the New Deal, which reached its apex during World War II and “expanded the state’s power to shape the economy by granting it the right to regulate prices, rents, and wages.”<sup>98</sup> The stimulus package of the New Deal was an example of functional Keynesian economics that pulled the United States out of a decade long Depression that it would not soon forget. The general public, made up of groups of workers’ unions, women, and blacks hoped that the government would continue their role as the market regulator to maintain price, rent, and wage controls.<sup>99</sup> Rationing and price controls from the war had not only decreased living expenses, but also ironically improved the standard of living for many low-income families who could now obtain fresh produce and meat with their ration coupons. There were also social theorists, such as Lewis Mumford, who hoped that price controls from war would help the nation “turn away permanently from the chase after materialistic satisfaction.”<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, there were firms and businesses that promoted a free economy without government regulation that would encourage mass consumption instead. They argued that mass consumption would promote economic growth that would increase the standard of living and be beneficial for the United States in the long run.

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<sup>97</sup> Cohen, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 100-103.

<sup>100</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 20.

With the expiration date of the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply (OPA), which was in charge of rationing and price control efforts during the war, rapidly approaching in June 1946, the federal government needed to decide whether or not to renew the price controls. Both sides were incredibly invested in their stance on price control, but the new bill Congress passed was nowhere near strong enough to compare to the OPA's former power. Congress voted on the weaker bill because a majority of the senators feared that price and rent control was a gateway to communism in the United States, so they fought to prevent strong government intervention in the market. However, as a result of the weaker bill, prices skyrocketed with overall living costs going up 6 percent. Although people went on strike to protest the weakening of price and rent control, Congress still did not manage to pass a stronger bill by July, thereby making the changes permanent. The ineffective price and wage ceilings not only doubled the price of meat, but they also led to meat packers decreasing the amount of slaughters by 80% below 1945 levels and withholding meat from the market. With dissatisfaction all around, Truman removed the unenforceable price control measures, but it was too little too late. The death of OPA spelled the end for a type of "collective consumerism," which acknowledged price controls and other market regulations as necessary for protecting consumers, maintaining equity, and for the greater good of the country.<sup>101</sup>

Supporters of eliminating price control argued that governmental price control would destroy competition and make the country complacent as well as start the economy on the path towards communism. They advocated for a different type of price control that relied on individual consumerism where people worked for their own self-interest that would maintain prices at their equilibrium and raise the overall standard of living in the United States. The rise of door-to-door salesmen who would give emotional appeals to suburban housewives to buy

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<sup>101</sup> Cohen, 100-108.

specific products that were guaranteed to dramatically change their lives is an example of the individualized consumerism of the 1950s. Furthermore, George Katana expanded upon the responsibility of individualized consumers who not only consumed for their own happiness, but through capitalism were also responsible for the prosperity of the country. As Horowitz writes, Katana believed “the optimistic and sensible consumer was a hero who would save America from the inflation, instability, and depression that ravaged Europe in the years between the two world wars.”<sup>102</sup> Mass consumption moved accountability from the government and corporations to regulate the market to consumers because as long as the “good citizen” was devoted to “more, newer, and better,” the economy would thrive.<sup>103</sup>

The economic prosperity that followed the war proved to the United States government that it needed to encourage a high level of consumption in order to sustain the economy. However, this belief ignored that by the time the war had ended “the nation was several years into what would turn out to be three decades of sustained economic growth.”<sup>104</sup> Although the results of this growth were not immediately apparent, programs from the New Deal provided the foundation for the economic success of the United States during the 1950s, not consumerism alone. Despite this reality, people believed in what they experienced and began to equate consumerism with success and to heavily buy more and more. More specifically related to waste, efforts to reuse, reduce, and recycle waste to save resources due to the war were effectively stopped.

Although an undeniable factor, the increase of consumption is only a small factor in the overall decrease in sanitation in the inner city. Many inner city residents were working class and/or black and many of them did not subscribe to the mass consumption ideology. For one, the

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<sup>102</sup> Horowitz, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Cohen, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Horowitz, 49.

government did not grant them the same economic means to support consumptive habits as white, middle-class males and their families. The GI Bill provided low-cost loans to servicemen and women through VA home mortgages. However, because of federal programs such as the HOLC and FHA, the working class and black Americans were considered “loan risks” and not granted the same benefits as middle-class white Americans. Without the capacity to buy homes, working class and black Americans had less money to spend on consumer goods, especially with their lower salaries. As we have seen, the segregated inner city of Brooklyn consisted of mostly black and working class residents, so why were the streets still covered in trash despite the fact that central Brooklyn populations should have consumed less? In order to understand this contradiction, we will need to examine the waste management practices of Brooklyn.

### **Waste Mismanagement**

Despite the fact that working class and black communities in Brooklyn did not consume as much as their suburban counterparts, Brooklyn neighborhoods were littered with significantly more trash. While most suburban communities outside New York City received adequate waste disposal services, inner city communities were not so lucky. In Brooklyn, waste lay in exposed heaps on the street for days or weeks, terrorizing the borough with foul odors and vermin. There are three main reasons for this decline in waste management and sanitation quality in Brooklyn during and after World War II. Firstly, urban population increased fivefold in the 1950s alone, which led to not only to a general increase in waste, but also a haphazard patchwork development of cities.<sup>105</sup> Secondly, federal spending cuts during World War II to expand the military budget slashed public works projects and cut waste pickups in half, however, even after the war ended, the government did not reverse the wartime cuts, despite constant promises to

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<sup>105</sup> Melosi, 168.

restore regular waste pickups. Black neighborhoods in Brooklyn such as Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville experienced particularly bad cuts to their sanitation. Finally, as a result of sanitation workers in both the private and public sector going on strike, waste pickups happened even less frequently. Due to the lower capacity of the Sanitation Department and private waste haulers in New York City, Brooklynites not only had to deal with waste from other boroughs flowing into incinerators and dumps that were located in their neighborhoods, but also had to live surrounded by their own garbage.

At the end of World War II, New York City turned its attention away from wartime production and back to its own urban development and improvement. The war had promoted economic prosperity, but the city's sanitation was not able to keep up with the rate of growth and consumption. During the war effort, cities across the United States decreased waste pickups not only because there were fewer people in the country to produce waste, but also the war rations reduced consumption overall. However, when the war ended and the servicemen and women returned with even more consumptive capacity as a result of the extra capital from the G.I. Bill, New York City's Sanitation Department did not restore the waste pickups quickly enough to handle the sudden influx of waste. Furthermore, public infrastructure also could not keep up with the rapid rate of population growth, which created "sprawling decentralized metropolises where compact settlements once stood."<sup>106</sup> Not only did consumption skyrocket in the 1950s, making more garbage than ever before, but the increased sprawl of people made the routes for collection and disposal of waste more difficult as well.

With more waste being produced as a result of the consumer economy, the city turned to building new sites for open dumping, landfilling, and incineration. Despite the increase of landfill and incinerator sites, their capacity for waste was not equivalent to the amount of waste

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<sup>106</sup>Massey and Denton, 42.



produced, so a good percentage of waste lay neglected on the streets. When Edna Ferber came to visit New York City in 1953, she described it as a “scab on the face of the country” due to the literal garbage lying on the streets.<sup>107</sup> As made apparent in Figure 4, the lack of attention to garbage in American cities led to the slow degradation of the quality of neighborhoods, especially cities. According to the Department of Sanitation’s 1950 Annual Report, they staffed over 1,500 men in the Bureau of Waste Disposal, who were able to collect and dispose of over 5 million tons of waste.<sup>108</sup> However, this was only a small portion of the garbage that was actually produced.



Figure 4. Clipping from *The Brooklyn Eagle* article that exposed the filth of Brooklyn streets<sup>109</sup>

How was such a prosperous city unable to restore a service it had provided during a Depression, but not during a post-war economic miracle? For starters, by 1954 New York City

<sup>107</sup> “‘Filthy’ New York Irks Edna Ferber,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, April 22, 1953, 5.

<sup>108</sup> Office of the Public Relations Adviser, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Dan Noonan, “Forced to Pile Filth in Front of Hydrants, Says Sanitation Dept.,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, January 13, 1949, 7.

produced and disposed of the most waste in the country, totaling at “16,402 tons of waste, or nearly four-and-one-half pounds per person each day”<sup>110</sup> in a typical November week. The collection of waste had always been the most expensive part of the waste management due to the unattractive nature of the job and therefore the high cost of labor, but at the time it was especially costly because the spread of the population required more trucks and workers to fully cover the city.<sup>111</sup> According to Corey, the “DS spent more money than any other cleaning agency in the world, though not on a per capita basis.”<sup>112</sup> Melosi also connects the expense of waste to competing land use that resulted from increasing population because no one wanted a waste transfer or disposal site near their neighborhood. As a result, many waste transfer and disposal sites were located near the communities without the political clout to prevent the construction. According to Melosi, cities could not keep up with the cost of the rise of population, so they had to strategically choose what aspects of the city required immediate attention. During the war waste management had taken a back seat, so federal and local governments typically maintained the status quo of infrequent waste pickups for the sake of developing roads or bridges, because these would benefit their community more. Therefore, although the Sanitation Department attempted to improve sanitation services, the amount of waste it had to collect plus the increased costs of labor and disposal technologies, such as sanitary landfills and incinerators, made it difficult for the Sanitation Department to meet the needs of the city with such limited funding.

However, despite knowing very well it was overrun with garbage, the city government still attempted to maintain their public image and portray the Sanitation Department as a successful public service. For example, in spite of the sheer amount of trash, the Department of

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<sup>110</sup> Steven Hunt Corey, "King Garbage: A History of Solid Waste Management in New York City, 1881-1970" (PhD diss., New York University, 1994), 273.

<sup>111</sup> Melosi, 178.

<sup>112</sup> Corey, 273.

Health announced early in 1948 “that the refuse in the streets is not a health hazard and does not cause offensive odors... ‘there is no danger.’”<sup>113</sup> In 1949, Sanitation Commissioner William J. Powell pledged to Brownsville and Williamsburg residents in Brooklyn that their areas would be restored to their pre-war standard of daily garbage collection “as soon as possible.”<sup>114</sup> The specific date for the start of daily collection had not been set because it wanted additional personnel and new equipment, but even nearly a year and a half after this statement the pickups had not been restored. Helen Goldberg wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle* that her community of Williamsburg switched from daily waste pickups to pickups *three* times a week in 1942, but by the time she was writing the letter in 1950 the pre-war services had not been restored.<sup>115</sup> While it is possible that it had taken more than a year and a half to get the daily pickups started, is also interesting to note that there were also firm assertions from Victor Rayfiel, the borough supervisor in charge of Brooklyn East for the Sanitation Department, that Williamsburg already received pickups at least *five* times a week, which was clearly not the experience of the residents.<sup>116</sup> As a result of their negligence Helen Goldberg and many other youths attempted to campaign to regain daily waste pickups at the Board of Estimate meeting, only to be ignored when they went to the meeting.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, it is clear that although the Sanitation Department said it was increasing pickups, their statements were only empty promises that blatantly ignored the experiences of the city’s residents.

The Department of Sanitation attempted to curb the garbage problem, but it only made empty promises to increase waste pickups and clean up the streets. It claimed in 1949 that it wanted to increase daily pickup areas in Brooklyn by 45%, but it did not have the people power

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<sup>113</sup> “Refuse on Streets Not a Hazard?” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Feb 27, 1948, 10.

<sup>114</sup> Dan Noonan, “City Will Step Up Garbage Collection,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jan 14, 1949, 1.

<sup>115</sup> Helen D. Goldberg, letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Apr 21, 1950, 12.

<sup>116</sup> Noonan, “City Will Step Up Garbage Collection,” 11.

<sup>117</sup> Goldberg, 12.

or new materials and equipment this was pretty much impossible.<sup>118</sup> At the start of 1948, Brooklyn was promised fifty new trucks, thirty for East Brooklyn and twenty for West Brooklyn, in the hopes of improving waste pickups, but of course it could not afford to buy this many trucks.<sup>119</sup> So by 1949, 28% of the 1,714 pieces of equipment the Sanitation Department did have were under repair or “totally inoperable” during the post-holiday season.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, the waste pick-up schedule it had was so disorganized that it further magnified the sanitation issues. One reader of *The Brooklyn Eagle* remarked that there seemed to be no system to the collection of trash. Sometimes the collection would be late at night and other times it would be early in the morning. Sometimes the garbage collectors would leave their garbage cans in the middle of the sidewalk, which was not permitted, so residents would get their trashcans stolen unless they got out of bed at 11 PM to retrieve them.<sup>121</sup> Without consistency, the waste collections were even more inefficient and inaccessible to New York City residents.

Surprisingly, the Sanitation Department did eventually achieve six-day-a-week pickups in half the city by 1949. However, the boroughs that needed it most did not receive six-day-a-week pickups. While Manhattan received daily pickups in 1949, 65% of Brooklyn had waste pickups only three days a week.<sup>122</sup> Nowadays, most large cities have waste pickups for recycling, compost, and trash only once a week so picking up waste six days a week might seem like an unnecessary amount, but the structure of New York City’s waste management necessitated a high amount of waste pickups. As described in *The Brooklyn Eagle*’s series on garbage in 1949, the street sweepers consolidated all the trash on the streets to various intervals in their district for Sanitation trucks to pick-up at a later date. Therefore, if a neighborhood only had pickups three

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<sup>118</sup> Irving Cohen, “Plan 45% Hike in Daily Garbage Pickup Here,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 2, 1949, 15.

<sup>119</sup> “5 New Garbage Trucks to Aid Boro,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Feb 27, 1948, 2.

<sup>120</sup> Noonan, “City Will Step Up Garbage Collection,” 11.

<sup>121</sup> “Reader Protests Night Collection of Garbage,” letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Sep 12, 1953, 6.

<sup>122</sup> Irving Cohen, “Plan 45% Hike in Daily Garbage Pickup Here,” 1.

days a week, the rubbish that was piled up on the side of the street could sit there for days, as shown in Figure 5. This not only exposed residents to the waste, but also encouraged rodent activity and allowed garbage to be blown away by the wind.<sup>123</sup>



Figure 5. *The Brooklyn Eagle*'s stark image reveals Brooklynites' urgent need for better waste management.<sup>124</sup>

Although the article did not explicitly state the name of the neighborhood, according to the street names, the district in question was Bedford-Stuyvesant, which had never received adequate waste pickups to begin with. As noted earlier, landlords and realtors carved up apartments in black communities to accommodate more families. Therefore, even though up to four families would live in a house in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the government only counted the house as one to two families. Bedford-Stuyvesant might have been small in physical size, but the dense overpopulation meant it required more pickups than its size suggested. One resident of Bedford-Stuyvesant wryly remarked that she had not seen a street cleaner in months and that her

<sup>123</sup> Irving Cohen, "Garbage Left on Streets for Days," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Noonan, "City Will Step Up Garbage Collection," 1.

fellow residents had to clean the streets and put all the garbage into cans themselves.<sup>125</sup> However, Bedford-Stuyvesant was not the only neighborhood in Brooklyn that had to cope with the absence or incompetence of sanitation workers. Many neighborhoods around Brooklyn believed the sanitation workers actually made their sanitation issues worse. In Brownsville, street cleaners attempted to flush the streets with water, but instead exacerbated the problem because the drains were so clogged with refuse. Instead of dry and scattered litter, some residents had to wade through six inches of wastewater, which exposed their homes and their children to health problems.<sup>126</sup>

In many ways, the state of sanitation was not the workers fault, since the Sanitation Department was only a fraction of its original size. In 1949 the Sanitation Department had a normal working force of 11,000 men, but only an average of 650 people work each day during the winter.<sup>127</sup> The department had a thousand fewer men on its payroll than ten years earlier, making it difficult for the Sanitation Department to reach pre-war standards of sanitation. Not only did it have fewer workers, but also given the increase in population and the increased sprawl, the sanitation workers had to haul even faster than before. The sanitation workers' negligence and carelessness that resulted from their tight schedules created a hostile relationship between them and the residents of Brooklyn. In 1950, L.H.G. complained to the *Brooklyn Eagle* in a letter to the editor saying, "If they take away your garbage, they spill half of it... The Sanitation men make more garbage than the people."<sup>128</sup> Often after a sanitation truck rolled through a neighborhood, it would be dirtier than before, because sanitation workers would knock over trash bins and fail to pick them back up again. Despite the sanitation workers' incompetence

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<sup>125</sup> Irving Cohen, "Garbage Left on Streets for Days," 12.

<sup>126</sup> "Garbage Piles Peril Brownsville Tots," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Feb 24, 1948, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Noonan, "City Will Step Up Garbage Collection," 11.

<sup>128</sup> L.H.G., letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 17, 1950, 22.

in the eyes of the Brooklyn public, however, when the workers went on strike, the residents began to realize that they really did need them.

Before we can examine how the sanitation workers' strikes affected the accumulation of waste in Brooklyn we need to establish a bit of background on sanitation services and labor unions during the 1950s. Within the classification of "sanitation workers," there were two types: the public workers from the Sanitation Department and privately hired sanitation workers from private companies. Due to the responsibilities of the public workers to their city, they were held to a higher standard than private workers. Their position as government workers would affect their tactics in labor protest. Although the Sanitation Department handled most waste pickups, the private waste sector made up a significant portion of waste management. According to a 1953 announcement in *The Brooklyn Eagle* from three presidents of private waste removal companies, private companies removed about 40% of New York City's garbage.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, even when private sanitation workers went on strike, it crippled sanitation services.

Unions had gained more traction during the 1950s as a result of workers looking for protection against the increased mechanization and impersonal nature of jobs.<sup>130</sup> For sanitation, technological advances should have made their job easier, but "despite technological advances in the 1950s and the 1960s, hauling garbage was still dirty and hard work."<sup>131</sup> As shown in Figure 6, Sanitation workers still had to participate in backbreaking and disgusting work, which sparked a lot of dissatisfaction over the low pay they received for doing such difficult work for a total of 48 hours, six days a week, which was more than the standard work week.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Samuel Rosenbaum, Pat D'Avanza, and James Rosetti, "Your City's Health is in Jeopardy," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 4, 1953, 9.

<sup>130</sup> James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 210.

<sup>131</sup> David Pellow, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*, (Cambridge, MA: Mit Press), 2002, 45.

<sup>132</sup> Stanley B. Krasowski, letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 26, 1951, 12.



Sanitation Department men had to force this car off one of several heaps of garbage and trash in 108th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues before they could clear mess.

Figure 6. Sanitation workers push a car off a heap of garbage.<sup>133</sup>

The winter marked an especially difficult time for sanitation workers, as snowstorms would bury the garbage beneath inches of snow that the sanitation workers would then have to dig through in order to get to the waste. In spite of the hardships of their jobs, the sanitation men were severely underappreciated, even by the city. As Stanley Krasowski, President of the Sanitationmen's Local 111-A faction of the A.F.L. union, wrote in a 1951 letter to the editor in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, the city had granted a \$250 a year cost-of-living increase to all of its employees, except the sanitation workers.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, the Mayor ignored the pleas of sanitation workers and threatened to suspend or dismiss them if they went on strike.

Despite these threats, the Sanitation Department workers organized and executed what was referred to as a “slowdown” of garbage collection. On October 1, 1951, nearly a hundred sanitation men called in sick to protest to shorten their hours and work week. Although the

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<sup>133</sup> Peter Kihss, “City Street Refuse Mostly Torn Paper,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1953, 17.

<sup>134</sup> Krasowski, 12.



Sanitation department technically suspended all of the men, suspending them was effectively the same as the sanitation men refusing to work, so the Department ordered all but 47 of the sanitation men to come back to work.<sup>135</sup> By October 4, the Sanitation had suspended 57 men with the threat of more and 100 of the workers went on trial for their hand in the slowdown.<sup>136</sup> Although the strikes did bring attention to the sanitation worker's plight, not many people were sympathetic to their "slowdown." While the public believed that the sanitation workers should receive adequate pay and more reasonable hours like any other public employees, they strongly opposed using a slowdown strike as a means of achieving equity because of the adverse effects it had on the city's cleanliness.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the strike was ultimately ineffective because the Sanitation Department received funding from the city to hire more workers to alleviate some of the build up of garbage. By October 17, the strike came to an end without any decreases in hours and the Sanitation Department reinstated 322 of the suspended workers.

Private sanitation workers had a bit more freedom to strike and were not held accountable to the same degree as public sanitation workers. At midnight on Monday December 7, 1953 1,500 members from Local 813, A.F.L., International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which represented 225,000 commercial establishments in New York City and Long Island, went on strike from their professions as waste collectors.<sup>138</sup> At a meeting held in attempt to stall the strike, the workers demanded an increase in wages from \$55 to \$77 for drivers and \$47 to \$70 for helpers during the 40-hour week, but the companies only offered a \$4 increase.<sup>139</sup> According to three private company presidents, the strikers' demands would total to a 35% increase in costs, even though they already worked less and got paid more than those in the Sanitation

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<sup>135</sup> "Garages Picketed By Sanitation Men," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Oct 2, 1951, 1 - 2.

<sup>136</sup> "100 Sanitation Men Face Trial in Garbage Dispute," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Oct 4, 1951, 6.

<sup>137</sup> "Slowdown of Sanitation Workers All Wrong but They Have a Case," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Oct 7, 1951, 18.

<sup>138</sup> "1,500 Private Garbage Men Go On Strike," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 8, 1953, 1.

<sup>139</sup> "Sea Gate's Garbage Accumulates as City Refuses its Aid in Strike," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 28, 1953, 1.

Department.<sup>140</sup> This disrupted waste collection and left a hazardous amount of waste, about 40% of the garbage in all five boroughs, on the streets that not only bothered the private waste collection companies' presidents, but also the residents of New York City who had to live with even less waste collection than before.<sup>141</sup> Although the strike did not affect most Sanitation Department municipal garbage collections from homes, the amount of waste left uncollected from hotels, restaurants, stores, private apartments and more still clogged up the streets and posed a health menace to residents of New York City. Finally on December 22, 1953, fifteen days after the strike began, the garbage strike came to an end and private sanitation workers resumed their waste pickups, but there was hardly any reason for celebration. The union, Local 812, only gained a wage increase of \$5, half of what they originally asked for, with a \$1 addition to both pension and welfare funds.<sup>142</sup> In addition, some Brooklyn residents had gone fifteen days without garbage collection, further exacerbating existing sanitation issues.

As a result of strikes from both public and private sanitation workers, Brooklynites began to realize, "without [the sanitation workers'] daily labors, the orderly removal of waste breaks down."<sup>143</sup> Even if the sanitation workers had justifiable reasons to go on strike, they still contributed to the degradation of sanitation in many Brooklyn neighborhoods. Furthermore, the increases in sanitation workers' wages, while completely deserved, also served to raise the total cost of sanitation services, thereby making it even more difficult to install daily waste pick-ups for neighborhoods in Brooklyn. The strikes were not "wrong" or "bad," but they are a factor in the decline of sanitation services in Brooklyn during the 1950s.

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<sup>140</sup> Rosenbaum, D'Avanza, and Rosetti, "Your City's Health is in Jeopardy," 9.

<sup>141</sup> "1,500 Private Garbage Men Go On Strike," 1.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>143</sup> Zimring, "Dirty Work," 81.

Due to a lack of funding and an increase of consumption, by the 1950s sanitation in Brooklyn had severely degraded. Dr. Thomas Dublin, executive chairman of the Kings County Medical Society's public health committee and executive director of the National Health Council, was quoted in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1949 remarking "there has been a serious breakdown in the collection of refuse, garbage and other material throughout the borough [Brooklyn]." <sup>144</sup> The disrepair of their cities did not go unnoticed to many residents of Brooklyn and black residents were not complacent about the increase of waste, but it took considerable effort to get their voices heard. According to interviews in *The Brooklyn Eagle* from various black youths who lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant, they noted that "in countless sub-standard dwellings sanitary facilities are of the poorest" quality. <sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the amount of waste in the streets was so severe that when it snowed, children in Brownsville sledded on mounds of garbage left out on the street. <sup>146</sup> If the neighborhood was in such disrepair and if black residents were vocal about these issues in the newspaper, why was it that the most well known waste protest in Bedford-Stuyvesant did not occur until 1962? Chapter Three will detail the factors that silenced black voices in the 1950s, making them seem complacent about the deterioration of their homes.

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<sup>144</sup> Noonan, "City Will Step Up Garbage Collection," 11.

<sup>145</sup> O'Reilly, 1.

<sup>146</sup> "Garbage Piles Peril Brownsville Tots," 1.

## Chapter Three: Silence is Violence

*It was a time when people were just afraid to talk. There were few people who were willing to take a stand on any kind of controversial issue and if you took a stand, you knew darn well you were sticking your neck out and you were gonna get it. And you just waited, not knowing what time it would come, but knowing darn well it would come. That was terrible. It went on up into the fifties, you know, the silent generation of the fifties. You felt so alone because there was no movement. There was no anything. You were just one person by yourself. It was a really rough time.<sup>147</sup>*

Chapter Two explained how black neighborhoods became dirtier with neglected trash, but the institutionalization of many of the reasons for sanitation degradation and housing segregation happened in the early 1950s. So this begs the question, why did Brooklyn CORE wait so long to stage Operation “Clean Sweep”? How did the Bedford-Stuyvesant residents put up with nearly fifteen years of poor sanitation without any large and memorable protests like Operation “Clean Sweep”? And furthermore, how did their sanitation not improve at all during the 1950s? It was not the complacency or the ignorance on the part of the Bedford-Stuyvesant residents that allowed the stagnant state of central Brooklyn’s sanitation, but rather it was a result of the Sanitation Department’s blatant negligence of black communities. Furthermore, during the 1950s Bedford-Stuyvesant residents and other black neighborhoods across the nation could not protest as freely. Anti-communist sentiment had gripped the nation, which stifled a lot of protests aimed at social and economic equality. This chapter will demonstrate how the selective hearing of the Sanitation Department and anti-communist sentiment silenced the voices of black residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville.

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<sup>147</sup> Don West, “When Segregation and the Self-punishment of a Nation Were Called ‘Patriotism,’” (includes an interview with Don West), in *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964*, ed. Eliot Wigginton, (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1991), 216.

## Selective Hearing

This thesis argues that black communities were the most exposed to waste during the 1950s, but this argument does not mean that non-black Americans were not also exposed to the influx of waste post-WWII. In fact, every neighborhood in Brooklyn, black or white, had to deal with a decrease in waste pickups and an increase in waste that littered their streets. Furthermore, Brooklynites did not idle complacently as waste piled up in their streets, but rather they were indignant and frustrated with the Department of Sanitation because their neighboring borough, Manhattan, received daily waste pickups while Brooklyn received five-day-a-week at most. Given this reaction, waste would seem to be a borough-wide issue in the 1950s, not just an issue for black communities. However, although the issue did affect white and black communities alike, the response to their complaints from the city government was completely different. Brooklyn's white communities with waste problems received heavy media attention and were typically rewarded with an increase in pickups within the year. Black communities such as Bedford-Stuyvesant not only started off with fewer pickups than white communities, but also never received adequate responses to their plight. On the surface the post-WWII garbage crisis seems to have affected all Americans, but waste-related protests and newspaper coverage of the lack of waste pickups reveals that the government and the public only responded to the plight of middle-class white communities and hardly at all to black communities.

For this portion of my analysis, I will be relying heavily on the publications from *The Brooklyn Eagle*, a local newspaper that was once known for being pro-slavery but had become more progressive by World War II. *The Brooklyn Eagle* was dedicated to the exposure of sanitation issues that it published a five-part series that focused on garbage removal problems in Brooklyn in 1949. Their promotion of the advertisement asked the public, "Why is Brooklyn a

‘stepchild’ when it comes to garbage collections? Why does Manhattan get daily collections while 65% of Brooklyn has only tri-weekly collections? Are you violating the sanitation laws?”<sup>148</sup> Not only did the Sanitation Department respond to *Eagle* articles, but readers who responded with letters to the editor also expressed their gratitude to the *Eagle* for shedding light on waste issues. For example, B.T. Carroll, a reader of *The Brooklyn Eagle*, wrote a letter to the editor to report that within three and a half hours after the *Eagle* published a story about piles of trash at 56<sup>th</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue a Sanitation Department garbage truck arrived to remove the garbage.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, the *Eagle* serves as a good indication for whose sanitation issues were the most important.

On August 13, 1946, the *Brooklyn Eagle* published a front-page article about residents of Flatbush protesting the discontinuation of waste pickups along a block-long alley on Foster Avenue. The Sanitation Department trucks used to make daily trips to pick up trash along the 80 homes that lined the street, but a week before the protest the Sanitation Department announced they would stop pickups along the alley. Once, the children of Flatbush had played along this alleyway, but with the discontinuation of waste removal it was more suitable for “swarming flies and unpleasant odors.”<sup>150</sup> Ironically, the reason the Sanitation Department stalled the use of the trucks was because other Flatbush residents who lived on the other side of the alley on E. 45<sup>th</sup> Street complained that the sanitation trucks were damaging their property and that it was “unpleasant to see the garbage stacked there at night” for pick-up in the morning.<sup>151</sup> The conflict was a mere petty fight between neighbors, but the next day on April 14<sup>th</sup>, the *Brooklyn Eagle* published another front-page article announcing the victory of the eighty Foster Avenue families.

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<sup>148</sup> “Brooklyn’s Garbage Problem,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov 27, 1949, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Noonan, “City Will Step Up Garbage Collection,” 11.

<sup>150</sup> “Garbage Piles up as City Deserts Alley,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Aug 13, 1946, 1.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

The acting district superintendent at the time, Anthony Spica, cited the *Brooklyn Eagle*'s original article as his reason for continuing the pickups.<sup>152</sup> This is an extremely underwhelming sanitation issue, but it serves to demonstrate my point very clearly. Not only did this small sanitation issue receive media attention, but it was also resolved within a day of the Foster Avenue families' protest. One could argue that because the Flatbush case was a mundane issue, it was easier to resolve because the Sanitation Department did not have to expend much energy or capital to address the complaint. While this is completely possible, the Sanitation Department did not just cater to white communities when the issue was simple and cheap. They also accommodated to white communities with costly sanitation issues, such as in the case of Marine Park-Jamaica Bay.

Starting in January 1948 not only did the Sanitation Department begin disposing of municipal solid waste in the Marine Park-Jamaica Bay and Mill Basin area, a neighborhood that housed 40,000 white residents, but a local sewage disposal plant also started dumping its refuse in the area as well.<sup>153</sup> The garbage and sewage was meant to fill a shallow water inlet in order to create a golf course, but after only a few months, it became clear that the sewage and garbage was affecting the health of residents and the whole debacle was referred to as "The Great Stench." Residents began to complain to local newspapers and government agencies about the stench and pleaded for its discontinuation. In response to these pleas, Harry Mustard, the Commissioner of Health, publicized his report six months later in early July on the cause of the stench coming from the Marine Park-Jamaica Bay area. The report basically repeated what the residents of the Marine Park-Jamaica Bay area had been saying all along—the garbage and sewage was responsible for the smell. However, instead of halting the dumping, the Commissioner recommended actions such as hypochloride chemical treatment, chlorine treatment, and letting

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<sup>152</sup> "Flatbush Families Win Fight to Clean Up Filth," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Aug 14, 1946, 1.

<sup>153</sup> "Act is City's First Move to End Stench," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 28, 1948, 1.

water run through the dumpsite so it was not stagnant water.<sup>154</sup> To justify not halting the dumping, the Commissioner's report stated, "that no health menace exists—that no case of illness so far has been found to result from the garbage or the smell," even though there were reports of people being unable to eat due to the smell.<sup>155</sup> Thanks to this report, the Mayor decided to rescind his promise to stop the dumping because they could not afford to build new incinerators. This decision was not satisfactory for the thousands of complaining residents who organized together to continue to protest the marine dumping, as seen in Figures 7 and 8. They created a human chain across Avenue U to prevent sanitation trucks from passing through to dump in their community. Despite claims that the fill would be used to build a golf course, residents suggested they take their garbage and sludge elsewhere and use sand instead.<sup>156</sup>



Figure 7 and Figure 8.<sup>157</sup> Marine Park-Jamaica Bay residents form a human chain to put an end to waste dumping.

Later that month on July 23, two groups from Marine Park-Jamaica Bay took legal action to protest waste dumping.<sup>158</sup> The first action from a trio of Marine Park-Jamaica Bay residents

<sup>154</sup> "Health Head Maps Garbage Relief," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 16, 1948, 1.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>156</sup> "Says City Should Use Sand Instead of Garbage as Fill," letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 24, 1948, 4.

<sup>157</sup> "Health Head Maps Garbage Relief," 1, 3.



pressured District Attorney McDonald to initiate grand jury action and indictments against those responsible for the dumping, a move that mimicked the work of Queens' residents, who in 1939 achieved indictments against their Sanitations Commissioner and Health Commissioner at the time. Although District Attorney McDonald did not take on their case, he did note that the case was already before the Supreme Court. The second action was much larger and was undertaken by a hundred Marine Park-Jamaica residents who went to Flatbush Magistrate's Court to confront city officials, specifically Assistant Corporation Counsel Saul Moskoff, for their lack of official action to end the dumping. Moskoff attempted to placate the protestors and postpone their legal action "on the grounds that 'city agencies are cognizant of the distressing condition and that now 'they are dumping mainly refuse there with very little organic matter in it,'"<sup>159</sup> but this bald-faced lie only made the protestors laugh. However, the most interesting aspect of the complaints from Flatbush residents was when Mrs. Bertha Schalk threatened Moskoff, saying "unless action to end dumping at Marine Park is forthcoming, she and other residents of the area 'will take boxes and fill them up with that garbage and place them on the steps of Borough Hall and City Hall.'"<sup>160</sup> Her threat is the predecessor and possibly the inspiration of "Operation: Clean Sweep."

After six months of complaints and less than a month of protests, on July 28, 1948 *The Brooklyn Eagle* published a front-page headline that read "Sludge Dumping Halted in Borough."<sup>161</sup> Thanks to the efforts of the Marine Park-Jamaica Bay residents, Richard Gould, engineering director of the New York City Public Works Department, not only ordered the end of the dumping of sludge in Marine Park that had terrorized its residents for six to eight months,

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<sup>158</sup> "Turns Down Plea on Basis Issue is Now in Courts," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 23, 1948, 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>161</sup> "Sludge Dumping Halted in Borough," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Jul 28, 1948, 1.

but it was also decreed that a pile of the accumulated sludge and trash was to be moved about a mile south “where officials hoped—‘it will annoy no one.’”<sup>162</sup> In order to continue with the golf course project, the Board of Estimate had to scrounge up \$175,000 to pay for the sand and rock that would be used for fill instead, which was a considerable cost that they had hoped to avoid through using waste. However, the protests from residents proved to be too strong and even the Borough President, John Cashmore, admitted “that the time for alibis has passed and the time for action has come.”<sup>163</sup> Of course, the dumping was not immediately halted but it was a step in the right direction for many Marine Park-Jamaica Bay residents who were grateful for government action at last. Although the solution was not as immediate as the Flatbush example, for the Sanitation Department to make changes to such a huge project, promise to clean up the waste, *and* pay \$175,000 was remarkable.

Such a direct government action would be unattainable for Bedford-Stuyvesant or Brownsville because the Sanitation Department would not even give them the minimum three-day-a-week waste pick-up. According to two different letters to the editor to *The Brooklyn Eagle*, in 1948 the Sanitation Department only collected garbage once a week in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville. The streets were only cleaned every month and there were only four garbage trucks assigned to cover the entirety of Brownsville and a portion of Bedford-Stuyvesant.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, when Hilda Parnes and her neighbors complained to the Sanitation Department about the one-day-a-week pickups in Bedford-Stuyvesant, “they got very angry that [the residents] had the nerve to complain about the conditions.”<sup>165</sup> However, the Sanitation Department’s hostility did not discourage the Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood Council from

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<sup>162</sup> “Act is City’s First Move to End Stench,” 1.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>164</sup> Hilda Parnes, letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov 24, 1947, 12; Joseph L. Reina, letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Oct 10, 1948, 20.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

launching “an intensive and vigorous campaign” to receive daily waste pickups in December 1949.<sup>166</sup>

In his interview with *The Brooklyn Eagle* in 1948, Leon Modeste said of Bedford residents, ““Low-income people don’t have the drive. They are just too tired to be active in civic organizations. There’s an indifferent attitude. People feel they are in there and stuck... they shrug their shoulders and say: “What’s the use?””<sup>167</sup> Perhaps it is true that low-income Americans work long and hard hours to make ends meet so they can only be focused on survival, but I would have to disagree with Modeste on this point. William Taylor, President of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood Council, said it best in his letter to the editor to *The Brooklyn Eagle* in 1949 when he proclaimed, “We are going to continue our fight until won [sic].”<sup>168</sup> The Neighborhood Council passed around petitions for daily pickups to each block and urged block groups to write to the Board of Estimate, the Sanitation Department, and Borough President Cashmore demanding daily waste collection.<sup>169</sup> Bedford-Stuyvesant residents demanded better sanitation in a civil and peaceful manner, without resorting to protest, but their plea fell on the deaf ears of the Sanitation Department, which only chose to listen to the complaints of white communities.

Although all Brooklynites suffered from the decline in sanitation quality, white communities not only obtained quick responses from the Sanitation Department, but they also received substantial aid. On the other hand, the Sanitation Department treated black residents’ efforts to improve their sanitation with disdain and were appalled that black residents would ever consider complaining about their conditions. Residents from Flatbush and Marine Bay-Jamaica

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<sup>166</sup> Irving Cohen, “Bedford-Stuyvesant Launches Drive for Daily Garbage Pickup,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 1, 1949, 1.

<sup>167</sup> O’Reilly, 19.

<sup>168</sup> William M. Taylor, letter to the editor, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 17, 1949, 4.

<sup>169</sup> Irving Cohen, “Bedford-Stuyvesant Launches Drive for Daily Garbage Pickup,” 15.

Park protested for better sanitation practices, but the Bedford-Stuyvesant residents simply asked for signatures and wrote letters. Why did they only escalate in 1962 with Operation “Clean Sweep” when it was clear the Sanitation Department was ignoring their complaints? As we have seen, Bedford-Stuyvesant residents were not ignorant or complacent about the purposeful deterioration of their neighborhood, but the anti-communist political climate of the 1950s made it difficult for them to protest in the same capacity as white residents.

### **Anti-Communism**

The Cold War was a double-edged sword for black civil rights. On the one hand, white Americans had awakened to more critical racial thought because the Soviet Union criticized the United States for portraying itself as the “paragon of democracy,” while it still “violated the rights of millions of African Americans.”<sup>170</sup> On the other hand, the anti-communist sentiment that stemmed from the Cold War also dissuaded protests for labor rights and housing equity, because McCarthy era politics equated movements for social and economic equity to communism. Anti-communist stigma drove the NAACP to conduct a “purge of all Communists and Communist sympathizers from the organization” in 1950, because it was afraid of “delegitimizing” their movement in the eyes of the American public.<sup>171</sup> Within Brooklyn, this purge isolated many working-class and middle-class blacks from the larger national movement, which in turn decreased Brooklyn NAACP support for local movements in Brownsville and Brooklyn. As a result, although local black activist organizations in Brooklyn wanted to protest against racial injustices, anti-communist sentiment discouraged and inhibited larger organization

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<sup>170</sup> Clarence Taylor, ed., *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>171</sup> Pritchett, 134.

such as the Brooklyn NAACP from supporting them, thereby delaying people of color's responses to legislative injustices.

Anti-communist sentiment began to creep into American politics after the end of World War II. Public perception towards labor protests, for example, shifted from sympathy to suspicion. In an interview in *Refuse to Stand Silently By*, Ralph Helstein joyfully recalls his fight as a lawyer for the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) for higher wages in 1946. Other strikes at General Motors and the United Steel Workers had achieved a seventeen-cent increase, but the Packinghouse Workers had the unfortunate, or perhaps fortunate, situation of President Truman announcing a plan to seize the packing plants as a result of strike threats. Helstein recounts that several of the workers and union leaders were scared to go on strike for fear of people perceiving their strike as challenging the government. As some of the more conservative members said, "We can't tell the government to go to hell."<sup>172</sup>

However, Helstein believed that the packing plants' importance to the government's image that the UPWA would be easily rewarded, if the workers simply *threatened* to strike. To test this theory, Helstein met with Secretary of Agriculture Anderson and threatened to strike unless they gave them the seventeen-cent wage increase. Although Anderson pleaded him not to do so, he quickly conceded when it became clear Helstein was serious. Almost immediately after the meeting, Helstein was greeted with the headline "Packinghouse Workers Defy Government" in the Chicago *Daily News*. In the end, the workers only gained sixteen cents out of the deal, but that did not stop one of Helstein's friends from the OPA from calling him at four in the morning telling him that the packinghouse workers were going to be responsible for inflation. It also did

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<sup>172</sup> Ralph Helstein, "The War That Turned Industry's 'Labor Problems' into Short-Term Solutions," (includes an interview with Don West), in *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964*, ed. Eliot Wigginton, (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1991), 148.

not stop “the stupid people” from believing the workers “did this because [they] were communist.”<sup>173</sup> Laughing, Helstein wryly remarked: “It was just because we weren’t communist that we did it.”<sup>174</sup>

The UPWA had no communist ties whatsoever, but any inklings of defiance towards the government or free market principles could be a sign of communism for those feared communism and the return of the Depression more than anything else. The Second Red Scare of the McCarthy era was a reactionary and emotionally charged response to this fear. As Cecil Branstetter, a respected civil rights lawyer, mused, “people can be built up to hate something—another country, or a race, for example—so much that they are willing to risk the destruction of everything to eliminate it... The McCarthy era sprang out of that capacity for suspicion and hatred.”<sup>175</sup> Due to their own fear of American hatred, the NAACP and CORE bought into the anti-communist narrative of the McCarthy era, which in turn sacrificed their relationship with local grassroots movements in blighted communities such as Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville.

Many Civil Rights activists in the 1950s who identified as communist or socialist, which posed a problem for other black Americans who were consequently implicated as communist as well. Civil Rights activist and advocate of Soviet policies, Paul Robeson, told the Communist-sponsored World Peace Conference in 1949 that “‘it is unthinkable’ that American Negroes would go to war against Russia ‘which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.’”<sup>176</sup> Although Robeson believed the Soviets had helped societally elevate blacks, not every black American agreed with him. Members of the Bedford-Stuyvesant G.O.P. were

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<sup>173</sup> Helstein, 150.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>175</sup> Wigginton, Eliot, ed., *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1991), 210.

<sup>176</sup> “Negroes Here Roast Robeson as Slanderer,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, April 21, 1949, 3.

outraged at such a statement that essentially incriminated all black Americans as Soviet sympathizers. They wrote a resolution that proclaimed their “love of and loyalty to the United States” stating that “Never in the history of the United States has there been a Negro traitor to his country.”<sup>177</sup> Statements from prominent Communist black activists such as these convinced the NAACP to blacklist notable figures such as W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson. In such a politically tense time, the NAACP could not risk subjecting their entire organization to the scrutiny of McCarthyism.

The NAACP’s “hunt for reds” spread to its branches organizations, such as the Brooklyn NAACP, which caused the group to frequently refuse “to participate in local protests because of the political orientation of the organizers.”<sup>178</sup> Even when Brownsville developed its own branch organization of the NAACP, the Brooklyn branch provided them with very little support, making Brownsville ineffective in organizing and rallying black residents. While the NAACP had justifiable reasons to avoid being associated with communism, shutting out local movements of working class residents, such as those in Brownsville, hurt the movement overall. For example, when Officer Samuel Applebaum shot an unarmed Brownsville black resident named Henry Fields for accidentally running into a parked car, Brownsville residents who witnessed the attack protested against police brutality. NAACP leaders quickly moved to silence the Brownsville residents and told them to “allow the legal process to investigate the matter.” However, when the residents decided to hold a rally anyway, the NAACP quickly denounced the group, citing “Communist affiliations” as the reason for its disapproval.<sup>179</sup> Cases such as this demonstrate how the tense political climate of the 1950s prevented civil rights activists from fully challenging and protesting against racial injustices.

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<sup>177</sup> “Negroes Here Roast Robeson as Slanderer,” 3.

<sup>178</sup> Pritchett, 135.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 106.

After years of using anti-communist rhetoric, national black organizations such as the NAACP and CORE had learned how to frame their movement to garner sympathy and appeal to the masses. For example, when the trial of Jimmy Wilson, who was tried and condemned to execution for the theft of \$1.95, thrust the United States into the international spotlight in 1958, the NAACP and CORE used United States' fear of the Soviets to free him. One of the NAACP spokesmen, John Morsell stated, "We think the communists will take this and go to town with it."<sup>180</sup> CORE also warned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stating, "if this execution is carried out, certainly the enemies of the United States will give it world-wide publicity and thus convey a distorted picture of relations between races in our country."<sup>181</sup> While these statements from the NAACP and CORE as well as the international attention helped Wilson gain clemency, it was not without sacrifice for the anti-racism movement. The NAACP and CORE justified saving Wilson not because it was unjust, but rather because the communists and the world would supposedly misconstrue how the United States treated its black citizens if he was executed. However, the world was not misunderstanding anything. The United States did mistreat its black citizens and granting Wilson clemency on this one occasion did not change this fact. This is not to say these organizations should have let Wilson die, but they should have justified his release because his trial was an obvious case of racial discrimination. The NAACP and CORE aligned themselves with the government of the United States because they fought for the case using anti-communist rhetoric instead of challenging and protesting against the underlying institutional racism that allowed Wilson's arrest. In addition, their anti-communist stance condoned the United States' illogical fear and hatred of anti-communism, which further stifled a critical analysis of the United States' institutional racism. To be victorious during such a tumultuous

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<sup>180</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.



time, organizations such as the NAACP and CORE had to sacrifice more radical stances in favor of more conservative rhetoric.

The Civil Rights movement tends to mark the “awakening” of critical racial thought in the United States. However, even in the 1940s and 1950s *The Brooklyn Eagle* contained articles condemning segregation. One article from 1949 writes of Bedford-Stuyvesant youth, “The ugliness of segregation and the evils that flow from it lead intelligent Negro youth to plead for the spirit of humanity. They do this in a democracy founded on the principle that ‘all men are created free and equal.’”<sup>182</sup> Articles such as this are a nod to an increase of public consciousness with regard to institutionalized racism in Brooklyn. Unfortunately, cases of local protests against racism could not be fully capitalized on because local grassroots anti-racism organizations did not have the power and resources of nationally recognized black activism organizations. The NAACP and CORE’s decision to sacrifice local movements in favor of national recognition and success might have preserved their legitimacy in the eyes of the American public, but in doing so it failed in its mission to challenge institutional racism in the United States. As a result, vocal black protests to poor sanitation in Brooklyn could only succeed after the extreme anti-communist fervor of McCarthyism toned down. However, the delay between the creation of the environmental injustices and the protests against them made black Brooklynites seem complacent during the 1950s.

The 1950s simultaneously awakened American race consciousness and suppressed anti-racist action. On the one hand, “national pride in having defeated Nazism opened doors for U.S. opponents of their own country’s racism, as did the Cold War identification of the United States

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<sup>182</sup> O’Reilly, 1.

as the champion of liberty.”<sup>183</sup> International media attention on the inequities black Americans faced thrilled anti-racist activists, but as Pomeranz and Segal write, “the era’s fervent anti-communism also constrained African-American movements, however, since emphasizing economic deprivations risked sounding like a communist.”<sup>184</sup> Although the American public had started to take notice of the racist practices of segregation in schools, work, and at home, they were more afraid of the threat of communism and socialism. Unable to protest for labor rights or housing equity without inciting anger and retaliation from factions of anti-communism, national black activist organizations such as the NAACP and CORE could not hope to succeed on radical platforms that demanded economic as well as social equity. In an environment so hostile to protest and change, the NAACP and CORE adopted the rhetoric of anti-communism to stay nationally relevant, but in doing so they sacrificed the success of budding black activism in neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville. As a result, black Brooklynites’ did not have the capacity to fight against the degradation of their neighborhoods and therefore seemed complacent about their suffering.

## **Chapter Four: On the Margins**

*Waste and margin are inextricably related. The two are alike in many ways and are mutually dependent. Waste is always marginal, and margins almost always include waste; in fact, they invite waste.*<sup>185</sup>

The end of World War II sparked the decline of the quality of sanitation in Brooklyn. Although the lack of sanitation affected all of Brooklyn, the segregation of black Brooklynites into enclaves through federal and local housing practices made them even more vulnerable. Unlike for the white neighborhoods of Marine Park-Jamaica Bay and Flatbush, the Sanitation

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<sup>183</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz and Dan Segal, “Into and During the Cold War.” In *Humanity and Its Histories*. (Boston: St. Martins), forthcoming, 28.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>185</sup> Engler, 29.

Department was not willing to clean up black neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville, which suffered the same, if not worse, sanitation issues. In the case of Brownsville, the borough government was not willing to spend “scarce funds on new schools and services for Brownsville was seen by the city’s bureaucrats as a waste—all the worthy poor were leaving anyway.”<sup>186</sup> The use of such rhetoric in the 1950s represented the solidification of the borough government’s perception of black neighborhoods as unworthy of aid and attention—a perception that white Brooklynites accepted. Through drawing upon environmental justice, environmental history, and discard studies literature, I argue that that similar rhetoric is used to describe waste landscapes and racialized landscapes because they often occupy the same space. I further argue that urban planner Kevin Lynch’s definition of waste as “what is worthless or unused for human purpose” also applies to white Americans’ perception of black Americans as a group without social worth and supports their marginalization.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, black residents’ silence during the 1950s made them seem complacent about the trashed state of their communities, which in turn solidified the narrative of black spaces as naturally predisposed to unsanitary conditions. As a result, the culprit of poor sanitation in black communities in the present day is not blatant discriminatory legislation, but rather the socially constructed ties between race and waste that justify the trashed state of black neighborhoods.

Despite the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation, Brooklyn’s black population still remains heavily segregated, as demonstrated in Dustin Cable’s *Racial Dot Map* (Figure 9).

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<sup>186</sup> Pritchett, 108.

<sup>187</sup> Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 146.

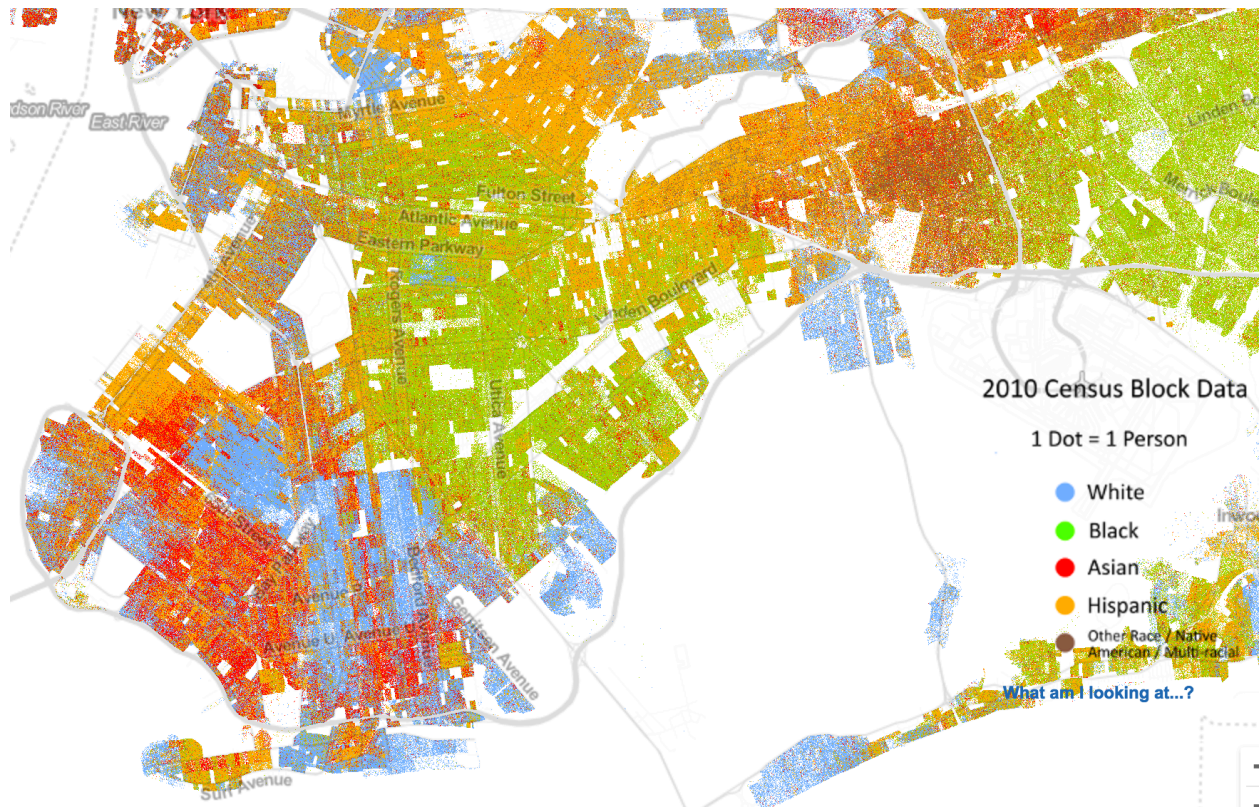


Figure 9. *Racial Dot Map* of Brooklyn based on 2010 Census Data.<sup>188</sup>

In Figure 9, each color represents a different ethnic identity. At a glance, one can see some clearly defined color lines that separate the different ethnic groups, but a closer look reveals a bit more nuance. Although the orange and red dots, which represent Hispanic and Asian populations, respectively, are spread around Brooklyn, the green dots, which represent black populations, are concentrated in the northern half of Brooklyn. Unlike other people of color, black people are located in just one large swath of Brooklyn. There are no small enclaves of black residents in a southern neighborhood of Brooklyn, for example, because black communities gradually pushed outward from central Brooklyn. As blacks moved into neighborhoods that bordered their ethnic enclave, white Americans fled to other white neighborhoods. To this day, as evidenced in Figure 9, white populations separate themselves

<sup>188</sup> Image Copyright, 2013, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia (Dustin A. Cable, creator)

from people of color and keep their neighborhoods very homogeneous. Although segregation is technically illegal today, the effects of policies from Brooklyn's early history so deeply impacted the psyche of its residents that such a clear separation between races seems natural and has lasted for decades. As Zimring writes, "The conflation of dark skin color with dirt had become common sense."<sup>189</sup>

In Bedford-Stuyvesant during the time of Operation "Clean Sweep," the conflation of blackness and waste prevented any real government action. When the residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant protested their lack of sanitation, the Department response blamed the poor conditions on "the human element" rather than on the structural reasons I have analyzed in this thesis.<sup>190</sup> By blaming the "human element" for the state of urban neighborhoods, the Sanitation Department was basically accusing the black residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant of not taking care of their neighborhood. Furthermore, if they blamed the residents, the Sanitation Department could claim the neighborhood would not get any cleaner no matter what actions they took to improve the waste infrastructure. As such, instead of increasing waste pickups, the Sanitation Department suggested that CORE increase public education on littering and organize more community cleaning days where the residents would clean the streets themselves.<sup>191</sup> Robert Moses, an urban planner for New York City during the 1950s, lamented the "urban negro problem" by stating, "The City can't do everything. Individuals, families, churches and social organizations must do their part."<sup>192</sup> These statements demonstrate that the borough government believed, or at least pretended to believe, that Bedford-Stuyvesant residents were at fault for the trashed state of their neighborhood and therefore they were responsible for cleaning it up.

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<sup>189</sup> Zimring, "Dirty Work," 82.

<sup>190</sup> Purnell, 65.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>192</sup> Wilder, 175.

In the eyes of the borough government, the onus of maintaining a clean community was on the residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant. As long as they could maintain this position, the black residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant could stay as “inoffensive waste” in their eyes and they did not feel guilty for not helping their community. As discussed in Chapter One, American society perceives things as “inoffensive waste” when it naturally deteriorates in an inevitable process that is beyond anyone’s control. Just as no one is held responsible for the degradation of “inoffensive waste,” the Sanitation Department did not hold itself responsible for the dilapidated state of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Furthermore, once the borough government had accepted the inevitability of Bedford-Stuyvesant as a dirty space, it could continue to justify segregating black communities away from white communities. If black neighborhoods fell into inevitable decline, then as long as they stayed separate from white communities, the borough hall had nothing to worry about. As a result, segregation not only contained the spread of blacks, but also the spread of waste.

Black Brooklynites were not only marginalized and treated like trash, but they were forced to live with garbage as well. Delegating black populations and waste to occupy the same space pushed them both to the “margins” of society. The margins do not necessarily mean on the outermost part of the city, as demonstrated through central Brooklyn, but it is a space that exists to quarantine the “rejected” away from the rest of society. The conflation of marginal racial landscapes and marginal waste landscapes was not completely deliberate, but as the narrative of “dirty black spaces” solidified in Brooklyn, it became a convenient explanation for the neglect of both race and waste issues. In addition, black residents’ initial “silence” regarding waste in the 1950s was seen as their acceptance of their new position as the marginal space. Even though black Brooklynites became more vocal in the 1960s, it was too late to reverse the construction of

“black spaces” as “waste spaces.” The borough hall’s institutionalization of their perceptions of black Americans into government policies influenced white Americans’ beliefs as well. Therefore, even when the segregation policies became illegal, white Americans still perceived blacks as waste.

Tying conceptualizations of race to waste is not a new topic of discussion in environmental justice literature. In Carl Zimring's *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*, he argues that “increasing scientific definitions of waste as hazard and of racial categories in the immediate antebellum period established a foundation for later racist constructions that posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people. This assumption defined white supremacist thinking.”<sup>193</sup> Zimring traces back the ties between race and waste to the post-Civil War era when notions of white purity from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were growing at the same time as increasing sanitation science and heightened hygienic awareness.<sup>194</sup> From even as early as the mid-nineteenth century to as recently as the late twentieth century, black Americans were “feared as a source of contamination” and “blamed for their neighborhoods’ diseases and deteriorating built environments.”<sup>195</sup> Although “American constructions of race, of waste, and of their interactions have evolved since the nation’s founding,” I argue that the politically charged climate of the 1950s and the increase of litter in Brooklyn as a whole exacerbated existing notions of race and waste on an institutional level.<sup>196</sup> This institutional validation of the perception of black people as waste justified white Americans’ poor treatment of black Americans. Furthermore, as a result of the sudden influx of migration during and after the war coupled with white Americans’ lack of capacity psychologically and

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<sup>193</sup> Zimring, *Clean and White*, 3.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>195</sup> Greenberg, 228.

<sup>196</sup> Zimring, *Clean and White*, 3.

structurally to accommodate so many black Americans moving into their neighborhoods and expanding the boundaries of the ghettos, “African Americans became so visible in many central cities that some scholars defined their predominance and spatial isolation as indications of city decline.”<sup>197</sup> As Merchant so astutely notes, “Black neighborhoods became toxic dumps and black bodies became toxic sites.”<sup>198</sup>

On a final note, when discussing waste and race, it would be negligent to ignore how the construct of whiteness fits into this rhetoric, because “waste informs the construction of our social and cultural values,” specifically with regard to race.<sup>199</sup> This is particularly apparent when it comes to the term “white trash,” which seems to be a stronger connection between race and waste than between people of color and race. According to *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, “Americans love to hate the poor. Lately, it seems there is no group of poor Americans they like to hate more than white trash.”<sup>200</sup> Newitz and Wray categorize it as a harmful stereotype that is born from Americans’ lack of understanding that “white” does not equate wealthy. While it is true that white people can be poor and that “white trash” is a harmful stereotype, it is, as Newitz and Wray describe, another product of anti-black racism.<sup>201</sup> To be “white trash” means to not be up to the standard or the norm of what it means to be white whether this is related to wealth, education, health, or temperament. This standard arose from anti-black racism because whiteness as a concept was born in contrast to blackness in order to justify white supremacy.<sup>202</sup> The fact that the phrase “white trash” exists solely for whites demonstrates how different the expectations are for whites as opposed to other people of color.

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<sup>197</sup> Thomas and Ritzdorf, 3.

<sup>198</sup> Merchant, 381.

<sup>199</sup> Zimring, *Clean and White*, 1.

<sup>200</sup> Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, (New York: Routledge), 1997, 1.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>202</sup> Merchant, 384.



As Zimring writes, “adding the word ‘trash’ to an individual’s racial identity threatened to remove the power and privileges of whiteness,” thereby dragging this group down to the same level as people of color.<sup>203</sup> Failure or poverty is expected of people of color, so there is no separate term for it such as “black trash.” Just as feminism fights the expectation for all men to be strong and unemotional, so too does anti-black racism fight the notion that all whites are wealthy, well educated, and healthy. As Newitz and Wray write, “shifting the diagnostic gaze of critical race theorization from non-whites to whites will better enable whites to focus on the ways in which white racism brings harm not only to people of color, but to themselves as well.”<sup>204</sup> Understanding the socially constructed ties between race and waste not only reveal the ways that people of color have been subjected to unfair and untrue stereotypes, but that whites have as well.

Conflations of waste and race have lasted beyond the 1950s in Brooklyn and future studies on waste and race rhetoric should focus on its applications to Brooklyn in the present day. One direction to take future studies would be in the recent increase of gentrification and urban renewal projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Today Bedford-Stuyvesant is still one of the hubs of Brooklyn’s black populations, but this is gradually beginning to change as more white Americans move into the city in search of cheap housing. From 2000 to 2010 the white population grew by an unbelievable 633 percent, while the black population dropped from 69 percent of the total population to 49 percent.<sup>205</sup> This demonstrates that whites are reversing the flow of migration to re-enter black spaces. However, white migration does not serve to correct the stigma against black Americans, but rather it further proves my claim. As whites move into

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<sup>203</sup> Zimring, *Clean and White*, 80-1.

<sup>204</sup> Newitz and Wray, 3.

<sup>205</sup> Sam Roberts, “Striking Change in Bedford-Stuyvesant as the White Population Soars,” *New York Times*, Aug 4, 2011.

black spaces such as Bedford-Stuyvesant, they “improve” the area with urban renewal projects. The “improvement” of the neighborhood then makes the area unsuitable and unaffordable for the black residents. Instead of improving the neighborhood for everyone, white migrants are reclaiming a neighborhood from black residents who are then forced to find neighborhoods more “suitable” for them, typically cheaper and older housing. To understand how to integrate communities and destigmatize black Americans, future studies on waste and race should focus on the development of racial stigma in gentrification and urban renewal. Although it might not manifest in the same capacity as it did in the 1950s, the stigma of “uncleanliness” has followed blacks to present day Brooklyn.

## **Conclusion**

*Thus, any study of the driving forces behind environmental injustice must include a historical analysis of environmental conflicts.<sup>206</sup>*

The 1950s exacerbated and institutionalized existing notions of “white purity” and “dirty blacks.” Even when the legislation that enforced the stigma was removed, the stigma still remained. Therefore, I conclude with a possible remedy to the stigmatization of black spaces as “trashed” is through a reduction in waste production overall and through purposeful integration. The practical application of these two suggestions would warrant another study, but I end on this note to provide a space for further critical thought on existing stigma. The first point is rather straightforward as a concept, but extremely difficult to apply. In pursuing a zero-waste society to reduce waste production overall, we can eliminate marginalized communities exposure to health and environmental risks. However, this does not get to the source of white Americans’ stigma against black spaces. Alongside waste reduction, we must also begin thoughtful and intentional integration. This concept is different from gentrification where white migrants push out black

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<sup>206</sup> Pellow, 65.

residents because it encourages white Americans to get proximate to black spaces beyond just physical distance. Dismantling stigma requires acknowledgement of its existence and getting close to the issues in order to solve them. Integrating cities will serve to mitigate marginal spaces and encourage critical thought about preconceived notions of race and waste.

Although this study is just a small-scale analysis of a borough in New York City, this does not make it less indicative of current national environmental problems. As Taylor and Hill posit, “one key to understanding the predicament of cities, formulating effective policies, and creating initiatives to solve current problems is knowing the historical roots of the urban crisis.”<sup>207</sup> Not every facet of Brooklyn discussed here will apply to all American cities, but at the very least my research can provide the foundation for further study on other large cities. Through thickening the narrative of the creation of blighted black spaces, we can gain a more holistic understanding of the causes for environmental injustice. Furthermore, in discerning these causes, we can strive towards more effective environmental justice, which Merchant defines as “the righting of the inequities of the past through laws, regulations, compensation, and removal of the causes of eco-injustice.”<sup>208</sup> If we are to right the inequities of the past, we must first understand how the past was constructed.

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<sup>207</sup> Taylor and Hill, xiii.

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