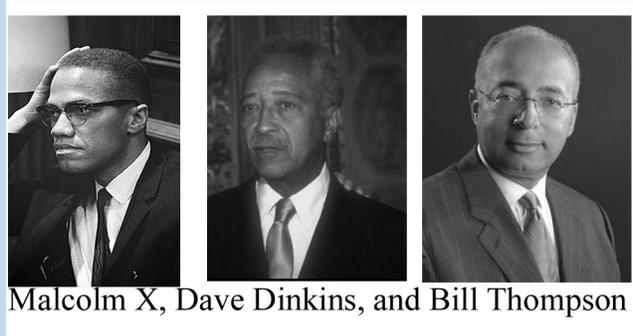


In a fleeting moment, for example in the minutes spent riding a train to work, it is really quite inevitable that one will make subtle **assumptions** about what surrounds one; in a moment when one glances up from the report one is reading, **assumptions** will pleasantly put what one does not know into the narrative of one's life. But these **assumptions** should only last for that fleeting time. In compiling a complete analysis of a neighborhood, of the complex relationships between neighborhoods, **assumptions** simply do not suffice. A poll conducted by the Quinnipiac University during the 2009 mayoral election in NYC revealed that even though 48% of blacks saw incumbent Michael Bloomberg favorably, only 20% of them voted for him, the rest turning to black candidate William Thompson. Such results would beget the **assumption** that blacks from across New York City can coalesce about a black politician. And yet Thompson lost the election due to a record low voter turnout, prognosticated by an **11% turnout in the primary, a statistic which signals maybe that blacks were no longer so interested in this idea of unity**

after seeing one of their own, David Dinkins, in office a decade earlier. Or maybe they needed a more powerful incentive to band together? But when activists such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X had attempted “street vending,” or the active espousing of black nationalist rhetoric on busy avenues, they



Malcolm X, Dave Dinkins, and Bill Thompson

alienated a significant portion of blacks who thought they were too militant. And historian Manning Marable points out that **tensions between economic classes pervade black communities** even now, for as the “black elite” begins to deride the impoverished, the “bonds that connected it to that bulk of African-American majority fragments and in many cases ceases to exist.” Of course, an individual from that so-called *elite* may, based on whatever past experiences, wish to return to aid his poorer counterparts through politics. So let us focus on those who are smaller – but who can be more impactful if they wish – as we compose an image of the largest black community along the G train.

Bedford-Stuyvesant is a vast neighborhood containing over 100,000 residents in central Brooklyn, but the subways that pass through it can reflect and certainly correlate with how it has grown and stayed together.

The overall neighborhood is actually a merger of the individual communities of Stuyvesant Heights and Bedford, which itself contains the historically unique enclaves of Ocean Hills and **Weeksville**. Only the lattermost was **established by a black population – one of the first and largest free black populations in the United States**. After James Weeks bought the first agricultural plot there in 1838, some 400 black freedmen were drawn to the area by 1850. In the twenty-first century the area is still a destination for blacks: those who have attained higher incomes come in hopes of settling there while the majority can take pride in their history at the Weeksville Heritage Center. History is certainly a powerful unifying force between the monetary strata.



The historic farmhouses of Weeksville are now a museum. Projects stand just across the street.



Its true history and name – Weeksville – were not revived until the 1980s, when that higher class of blacks became interested in the aging homes; until then, the area had been a small **extension of Stuyvesant Heights**, which lies to its east. Unfortunately – especially given that the old Dutch New Yorkers were the least friendly of northerners to blacks – Weeksville was situated right between Manhattan to the west and Stuyvesant Heights to the east. **Had it been a more peripheral region, it might have retained its unique black culture, but because it was in the middle, Weeksville was simply absorbed by Stuyvesant Heights when it began developing westward to join New York City.** The Heights had been the oldest Dutch settlement on Long Island, founded by Peter Stuyvesant in 1640, and ancestors of a certain Hendrick Suydam continued to own the entire farming district until the 1830s, when the City of Brooklyn finally bought the land and laid down upon it a grid network of streets that would foster development. By 1860 the Heights were lined with low apartment buildings that attracted the middle class German and Jewish immigrants working in Lower Manhattan. And as immigrants continued to pour into New York City through the late nineteenth century, Weeksville essentially became a part of western Stuyvesant Heights, whereas an enclave of Italians in the eastern Heights differentiated itself as, without splitting off completely, Ocean Hills.

Immediately upon its conception, the subway system penetrated Stuyvesant Heights, but it did not inject change into the neighborhood until the **1930s**. That was when the **Depression** crawled over the land, forcing out many of those middle-class European immigrants who had bought their expensive flats in suburban Brooklyn **on big loans**; that was when **Harlem became an overcrowded slum**; and that was when – as a result of all these factors – the **blacks took the A and C trains down the length of Manhattan and into the suddenly vacant and cheap Stuyvesant Heights**. And if they liked the Heights because they retained access to Harlem via the A, they liked moving northward into the giant span of land known as Bedford along the G train. Such connecting is all that the G does for Bedford, really. At Flushing Avenue, the northernmost stop in Bedford, one can walk to the Woodhull Hospital or the M train to go deeper east into Brooklyn. At Myrtle-Willoughby there are housing projects and a new school, the Brooklyn Charter School, perhaps a beacon for improvement since charter schools are receiving so much acclaim under the Bloomberg administration. Finally the G turns onto Lafayette; many residents will not bother getting onto the train here at Bedford-Nostrand, because many buses run along the large avenue that can take them to the B, D, N, Q, and R trains.



Where neither projects nor the old townhouses have been built, Bedford-Stuyvesant is strewn with decrepit, low-rise apartment buildings. But there is room for development, and there are signs that the modernist towers from Williamsburg may spill over into Bed-Stuy.



Woodhull Hospital, on the left, and Brooklyn Charter School, on the right, represent the more progressive institution of the neighborhood.



The poor condition of the three stops of the G in Bedford is largely attributable to political disregard, yet the G provided that fundamental connection without which the plights of black residents might have been even more ignored. **Stuyvesant Heights was merged with its northern counterpart to form Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1930** by order of the city. Whereas the Stuyvesant section was experiencing an influx of blacks, Bedford was still predominantly Jewish, and so **the merger was most likely an effort to dilute the black population** over a larger area, to **prevent them from becoming an ethnic majority** in any one administrative district. Migrating northward on the G, blacks did attain a majority in Bedford-Stuyvesant by 1944, but even then gerrymanders created by white incumbents prevented the rise of any black public officers who could improve the neighborhood. Black lawyer **Andrew Cooper** discerned the “torturous, artificial, labyrinthine” organization of voting districts in Bedford-Stuyvesant and successfully got them **combined into District 12** in the 1965 decisions *Cooper v. Power*. It was only then that **the first black Congressman – actually, woman – Shirley Crisholm, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives**. Today, Albert Vann serves as City Council Representative of Bedford-Stuyvesant and has worked since 2001 to reduce persistent poverty among his constituents.

By many measures, poverty has fallen in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the median income is approximately \$36,000, but now, blacks constitute 47.6% of the population, not even a strict majority. Although Bedford-Stuyvesant had not been a primary target of the 2004 rezoning policies of the city, new condominium and apartment buildings have been scattered through the neighborhood. They are not glistening towers of glass, but walking between the two exits of the Bedford-Nostrand station of the G train one will encounter several modernist buildings standing out among the low, shingled, monotone remainder. An improvement though it may seem for such an outwardly plain and uniform neighborhood to get an infusion of newer architecture, David Rubin, a resident and community board member, **argues that instead of spending money on schools and recreation facilities to improve the lives of blacks, the city is encouraging developers to spend money on houses that will only displace blacks due to their expensiveness**. He further points out the paradox that blacks attracted developers to their enclaves by **improving the conditions of life** – burglaries fell over 50% between 1980 and 1992 – and **now the developers are forcing the blacks to leave these enclaves**. One ought not to exaggerate the progress of Bedford-Stuyvesant; the decline in burglaries has been matched by a



Examples of the brownstone townhouses that are once again attracting upper-middle class workers to Bed-Stuy.



rise in use of crack, which, city officials explain, addicts must obtain more quickly than they could by robbing houses. And the reputation of the projects north of Myrtle Avenue has certainly not risen as quickly as that of the brownstones in former Stuyvesant Heights. Perhaps a gradual integration of a younger white population with the present communities might actually improve the neighborhood further.

Rezoning may not have affected Bedford-Stuyvesant so much on the visible plane, but it has very profoundly affected its residents' individual

lives by changing their job opportunities. 76.9% of them have white-collar jobs, and therefore many must take the G train to Downtown Brooklyn every morning to their administrative vocations. The silhouette of Downtown Brooklyn was first shaped into one of a **business and political center** in the **1980s**, when the **MetroTech complex was built to house Wall Street back offices, a new campus for the NY Polytechnic Institute was opened, and gilded halls were renovated for the city government and justice department.** After the 2004 rezoning policies, that shape of the neighborhood was to be remade again, in two ways. First, 56 new commercial real estate projects were to be built, including a massive new City Point building subsidized by the city; only 20 of these had broken ground in 2009 due to the financial crisis. And second, residential skyscrapers were to arise atop Cadman Plaza and within existing but unused office buildings; the entire Verizon Building on Willoughby Street is still set to contain only the BellTel Lofts. These two forces – uncompleted commercial projects and expanding residential ones – can make it more difficult for those residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant who work in Downtown Brooklyn to hold onto the jobs that allowed them to rise to middle class status. They must certainly endure a short-term period of monetary constraint as the recession persists in Brooklyn.



Downtown Brooklyn as it appears now in its commercial center and as it may appear in the future if current plans come into fruition. The Brooklyner will be the tallest residential skyscraper in Brooklyn, and it will stand in what was always a business and administrative area.

Some fear that influx of higher income classes will undermine the Fulton Mall, which now primarily caters toward blacks from Bed-Stuy..



Pursuing the long-term growth of this incorporeal concept called the urban economy, policy makers often argue that they must compromise the livelihoods of a few individuals, but the rezoning efforts impinge on certain individual integral to the black culture of both Bedford-Stuyvesant and Downtown Brooklyn. By supporting large corporations, rezoning policies have negatively affected the small businesses that make up Fulton Mall, driving out 57% of them according to the Urban Justice Center. Fulton Street stretches through the center of Bedford-Stuyvesant, along the edges of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill, and terminates near Borough Hall in Downtown Brooklyn. Very conveniently, the G train stop named Fulton Street opens into the heart of the mall, so residents from Bedford-Stuyvesant often take this subway there when they wish to buy something of their past. For since its opening in 1973, Fulton Mall has become a place where all Africa is compacted into a single street; one can buy books in Swahili, Guyanese herbs, and North African clothes. The clothes market instigated unrest in the 1990s, as the Fulton-Nostrand United Merchants Association raised a complaint that only 30% of stores were actually owned by blacks. With the development in Downtown Brooklyn threatening to drive out more businesses, such tensions may escalate.



Houses on Duffield Street in the corner of Downtown Brooklyn said to be remaining stations of the Underground Railroad. A city government panel is investigating.

Reconciling cultural and individual or business interests is often a difficult process. One can find bits of valuable American history in the most unlikely places in Downtown Brooklyn. Just north of the Hoyt-Schemerhorn Station, which many people only know as the transfer from the G to the A into Manhattan, lies a street only two blocks long, Duffield Street, whose houses are speculated to have been crucial transfers on the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century. Several churches in the vicinity may also have aided runaway slaves, but they are already public

property; the property on Duffield is privately owned and many developers would want to see their skyscrapers built on it. It is up to a six member panel of public workers and historians to uncover how deep the history of blacks in Brooklyn goes within these houses and whether it is worth preserving.