Color-Full before Color Blind: The Emergence of Multiracial Neighborhood Politics in Queens, New York City

The United States is undergoing a "majority minority" transition, with the historic European-ancestry white majority projected to fall beneath 50% of the population in the second half of the current century. Elmhurst-Corona, a neighborhood in Queens, New York City, was 98% white in 1960 but by 1990 had become intensely multiracial, multietnic, and multilingual, with neither African Americans, Asians, Latin Americans, nor the remaining whites constituting a majority of the local population. Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 1983 and 1996, in this article I trace the growth of cross-racial political interaction in Elmhurst-Corona, highlighting initial resistance by white residents, entry of newcomers into civic politics, innovation by female civic activists, and acceptance of shared local "quality of life" concerns as representation at the central political arena, the neighborhood's appointed community board, became more inclusive. [political anthropology, race, immigration, New York City, United States]

I

The United States is in the midst of a great transition. In less than one hundred years, Americans of African, Asian, and Latin American ancestry will outnumber those of European origin. According to one demographic projection, by 2080 the proportion of whites will fall from its present 74% to 50%, and the rest of the U.S. population will be 23% Latin American, 15% black, and 12% Asian (Bouvier and Gardner 1986:27). The great transition among America's children will arrive even sooner. By the year 2035, only 49% of children under age 18 will be white (O'Hare 1992:18).

The pace of multiracial change is faster on the nation's coasts and in its cities than in its heartland and suburbs (Frey 1995). New York City crossed the "majority minority" threshold in the early 1980s (Falcón 1985), and by 1990 the city's white population stood at 43%, down from 52% in 1980. It is in New York's diverse, changing neighborhoods like Elmhurst-Corona in northwest Queens, the subject of this paper, that clues about the future of us all may first be glimpsed.

Elmhurst-Corona underwent its "majority minority" transition in the 1970s. The neighborhood's white population fell from 98% in 1960 to 67% in 1970, 34% in 1980, and 18% in 1990. Over these same decades, immigrant and African American newcomers arrived in substantial number, and by 1990 Elmhurst-Corona was 45% Latin American, 26% Asian, and 10% black. Established residents of German, Irish, Polish, Italian, Jewish, and other European ancestries now lived among Africans, African Americans, Chinese, Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Filipinos, Haitians, Indians, Koreans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other new neighbors. In 1992, New York's Department of City Planning called Elmhurst-Corona "perhaps the most ethnically mixed community in the world" (Salvo et al. 1992:4).

My fieldwork in this neighborhood began in 1983, and I followed its changing political life over more than a dozen years. I worked with a team of researchers who mirrored the cultural and linguistic complexity of the Elmhurst-Corona population. Their work focused on Chinese, Korean, African American, Indian, and the diverse Latin American residents (Chen 1992; Danta 1989; Gregory 1998; Khandelwal 1991; Park 1997; Ricourt 1994). My assignment was the white residents (Sanjek 1998).

Our team's overall charge was to assess how far Elmhurst-Corona's diverse population had come in forming what Guinier terms "an integrated body politic in which all perspectives are represented, and in which all people work together to find common ground" (1994:6). I took primary responsibility for this by focusing on what Jacobs defines as the "district-level" political field. In her classic Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs distinguished three levels of urban existence: the city as a whole," in which people find jobs, visit museums, support baseball teams, and vote for mayor; "the street neighborhood" of immediate daily interaction; and "the district," which "mediate[s] between the . . . politically powerless street neighborhoods, and the inherently powerful city as a whole."
remaining by the 1990s from what had been larger, growing households in earlier decades.

African Americans arrived under very different circumstances than the diverse immigrants. Following a federal housing discrimination suit at the 4,600-unit Lefrak City apartment complex in 1970, white flight occurred, and by 1980 Lefrak City was 65% black. Most black newcomers settled here or nearby so that even in 1990 only 3 of the 35 census tracts contained 86% of Elmhurst–Corona’s black population. The historically white local real estate sector, now including large numbers of immigrant-owned firms, had opened up to Latin American, Asian, and even Haitian renters and homebuyers, but not to African Americans.4

I traced the emerging relations among Elmhurst–Corona’s whites, blacks, and immigrants from 1983 to 1996 through participant-observation, and also back to a 1960 baseline with archival sources. My fieldwork centered on Community Board 4 (CB4). The most immediate layer of government in New York City, the 59 local community boards of up to fifty appointed members each were created as part of “the nation’s most ambitious attempt at urban decentralization” (Pecorella 1994:3) in the late 1960s; their purview includes land-use review, city budget recommendations, and the monitoring of municipal service delivery. Their maturation as arenas for local politics coincided with Elmhurst–Corona’s growing ethnic and racial diversity.

I attended 123 meetings and public hearings of CB4 and its district services cabinet. From there I worked outward to 50 meetings of civic associations, small business groups, redistricting bodies, and mayoral commissions and local “town hall” events. I also observed 83 public rituals that ranged from Christmas tree lightings, ethnic festivals, protest rallies, and block cleanups to award ceremonies, park openings, anti-drug marches, and International Day programs in schools. I attended 75 services and social events at three historically white Protestant churches and visited several other white, African American, Asian, and Latin American houses of worship. Moreover, I spent numerous hours in walks throughout the area and in parks, an indoor shopping mall, Elmhurst Hospital, the local police precinct house, libraries, senior centers, and restaurants. I used formal interviewing strategically and sparingly (Sanjek 1996), and in my 1,230 pages of field notes, participant-observation outnumbers interviews by 10 to 1.

III

In 1970 just 9% of Lefrak City’s tenant population was black, and this included many Africans working for the United Nations and other international organizations. Following landlord Samuel Lefrak’s agreement to end discriminatory rental practices, African American lower-middle-class city employees, teachers, and white collar workers who could afford the prevailing rents found they were now treated on a first-come, first-served basis and

(1961:117–121). In contemporary New York City, she noted, districts range from 80,000 to 200,000 residents in size.

Jacobs envisaged district-level political power emerging from “churches, PTA’s, business associations, political clubs, civic groups, [and] block . . . associations.” For a district “to be big and powerful enough to fight City Hall,” political “interweaving” of its groups and associations was required. In a “successful” district, “working relationships [exist] among people, usually leaders, who enlarge their local public life beyond the neighborhoods of streets and specific organizations or institutions, and [who] form relationships with people whose roots and backgrounds are in entirely different constituencies. . . . It takes surprisingly few people to weld a district into a real Thing. A hundred or so . . . do it in a population a thousand times their size” (Jacobs 1961:122–134).

The composition and scale of Elmhurst–Corona’s district-level political field matched Jacobs’s description. Within it I could readily do what an ethnographer does: observe ongoing events and listen to speech-in-action (Sanjek 1990:210–213, 243–247; 1996). Its participants included black and immigrant newcomers, but the majority continued to be long-established white residents. Some local whites were antagonistic or indifferent to their new neighbors. Others sought accommodation and even formed new friendships. All were intensely aware of change going on around them. It was impossible to do otherwise.
sought out Lefrak’s roomy apartments. By 1975, the complex was two-thirds black, and Elmhurst-Corona’s surrounding white residents had noted the change.

When some whites saw black faces, however, they made uninformed assumptions. In January 1975, a rumor that Lefrak City “is being loaded with welfare cases” was reported at Community Board 4 where no Lefrak City tenant, white or black, had yet been appointed. One CB4 leader averred, “People have moved out [of Lefrak City] because of the bad conditions there, due to welfare tenants. As soon as landlords begin to rent to them, the buildings deteriorate and we will have another South Bronx.”

Representatives from the still mainly white Lefrak City Tenants Association were invited to CB4, where they insisted the problem was not “welfare cases” (it turned out that the tiny percentage of these was smaller than the figure for Queens overall) but rather cuts in maintenance and security by Lefrak Management. The complex had been overbuilt in relation to the rental market, and Lefrak had hundreds of vacant apartments, a situation that had persisted ever since the complex opened in 1962.

Slowly, as Elmhurst-Corona whites began to meet black Lefrak leaders, they also began to understand that their own neighborhood’s fate was inextricably linked to that of Lefrak City. By 1979, white Corona civic groups were supporting the now black-led Lefrak City Tenant Association in a rent strike, and Community Board 4 and the LCTA joined forces against Queens politicians maneuvering to move 2,600 Social Security Administration jobs from Lefrak City to another Queens neighborhood.

In economic terms, Lefrak City’s black population in 1979 had a higher mean family income than its white Corona neighbors. This would continue. In 1990, Elmhurst-Corona’s average household incomes by race were closer to each other than anywhere else in Queens. Blacks stood at slightly over $35,000 and whites slightly under that figure; Asian incomes were $36,000 and Latin American ones $33,000.

IV

Much as white Elmhurst-Corona leaders had misdefined Lefrak City’s growing black population as “welfare cases,” they also misdefined Elmhurst-Corona’s immigrant newcomers as “illegal aliens.” Both misdefinitions masked real issues—Lefrak’s overbuilding and maintenance reductions in the first instance, and a population implosion and overcrowded schools and housing in the second. In both cases, progress in facing these issues was made only after misdefinitions were revised, hysteria over newcomers subsided, and leaders began to redefine problems as ones affecting the “quality of life” of all Elmhurst-Corona residents, white and black, American and immigrant, alike.

The phrase “illegal aliens” first appeared in Community Board 4’s minutes in 1971 in connection with the emerging problem of school crowding. Young immigrant families with children were replacing aging whites in Elmhurst-Corona, and School Board 24, which was controlled by members elected from still overwhelmingly white neighborhoods in southwest Queens, was responding with makeshift measures, mainly prefabricated “mini-schools” that occupied former school playgrounds. In addition, white and immigrant landlords, and homeowners were satisfying the growing demand for housing in Elmhurst-Corona by adding illegal room rentals and basement and garage units to the local housing supply. And worse, overzoning under the city’s 1961 ordinance permitted developers to buy and demolish existing one- and two-family homes and replace them with brick-box “infill” that housed six or more units.

One white Elmhurst civic leader insisted, “this is a job for the INS.” As far as he was concerned, if “illegal aliens” were dealt with properly by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, “the housing and neighborhood deterioration problem would solve itself.” In 1974, Community Board 4 held its first public hearing on the “illegal aliens” issue, and panic then set in. An August 25 New York Daily News story headlined “Illegal Aliens, a Flood Tide in Elmhurst” quoted Community Board 4’s white chairman referring to immigrant newcomers as “people pollution.” “My parents were immigrants,” he continued, “and this country was built by immigrants. But . . . our community is being overrun. Our schools, housing, and many jobs are being taken by people who have no legal right to be here.” More public forums were held in 1974 and 1975, and INS and elected officials inflamed the situation with inflated estimates of New York’s undocumented population.

Cooler heads eventually prevailed. The white Community Board 4 district manager pressed for city housing code enforcement, and a female black Democratic district leader who represented Corona reminded the district cabinet of “the legal residents of Hispanic origin who are good working people.” A careful numerical analysis after the 1980 census would have shown that the vast majority of Elmhurst-Corona’s immigrant population consisted of visa and greencard holders, naturalized citizens, and their children, but by the end of the 1970s the “illegal aliens” question had in effect been redefined as a housing and school-crowding issue.

V

The prospect for solutions to housing and school problems, however, worsened after the city’s 1975 fiscal crisis, which now eclipsed the Elmhurst-Corona flare-ups over new black and immigrant neighbors. In 1975 Manhattan’s major banks cut off credit to the city, and ultimate budgetary and policy control passed from public to private hands. Massive cuts in municipal services quickly followed.
Overall, the city budget shrunk 22% between 1975 and 1983, and service cuts affected every aspect of life in neighborhood New York. The transit fare was raised; 129 years of free college education ended with the imposition of tuition; public school layoffs resulted in fewer teachers and paraprofessionals and a 25% increase in class size. Library hours were curtailed. Summer youth jobs and senior citizen, recreational, and cultural programs were scaled back. Five city hospitals closed. Fire Department response time increased. Building inspectors fell from 625 in 1975 to 382 by 1980 (and to only 7 for all of Queens by 1994). Sanitation department staff declined 48% by 1984. Park and playground workers were cut 25% during 1975, 29% more by 1984, and shifted from fixed assignments to mobile teams servicing several locations.

In Elmhurst-Corona, the Newtown Crier, a local civic association publication, reported in March 1976, “Home burglaries and muggings have been on the rise. . . . Our police are trying to do their job, but do not have enough manpower. . . . The sanitation pickups have dwindled to one a week in some sections and overall our streets are filthy. We are informed some of the classes in our schools are so large that teachers are having problems maintaining control.”

The after-effects of the 1975 fiscal crisis have defined the content of neighborhood politics for more than two decades. These assaults on what Elmhurst-Corona residents call “quality of life” have troubled whites, blacks, and immigrants alike.

The phrase “quality of life” resounded in the community board, civic association, and mayoral town hall meetings I attended during the 1980s and 1990s. The most succinct definition I heard was offered at a 1993 CB4 meeting where a member explained: “Quality of life—the problems that are important to us.” These problems included crowding on Elmhurst-Corona’s subway lines, competition for street parking as population grew and commercial vehicles were parked illegally, abandonment of stolen cars on neighborhood streets, increasing numbers of illegal garment factories, side-street dumping of commercial and household garbage, a noticeable rise in prostitution, and placement of homeless families in local motels. But the five “quality of life” issues that mattered most and provoked sustained civic action among Elmhurst-Corona residents were school crowding, lack of youth recreation facilities, housing code violations, drug sales, and dissatisfaction with police response.

VI

A sense of estrangement from “the city” and mayoral power existed among white Elmhurst-Corona civic activists by the 1980s. “We are stepchildren; Manhattan is the favored son.” “Mayor Koch and his goddam hoodlums are against Corona.” These comments at Community Board 4 meetings reflected not only continuing assaults on quality of life but a weakened power of numbers. Elmhurst’s Democratic club folded in the 1970s; Corona’s Democratic club survived, but with less political muscle. And with fewer whites and more immigrants, the total number of votes cast by CD4 residents fell off, and the responsiveness of elected officials and city agencies diminished. “We don’t have no political push,” one white civic activist lamented. “We’re just being plopped on,” said another.

As electoral politics proved less effective, Elmhurst-Corona’s parapolitical civic activism became more important. This began with individuals I call “wardens,” persons who on their own attempted to do something about “problems that are important to us.” Often it was garbage—misplaced, mispackaged, sitting out too long—that provoked the first step. Two white elderly sisters spoke to their new neighbors about garbage and dog litter. A retired hotel worker visited each new household in his co-op building to explain rules for placing garbage in the incinerator room. With more serious problems, or where personal requests proved insufficient, wardens notified the sanitation department, the local police precinct, or the Community Board 4 office. Lefrak City wardens surveyed the avenue in front of their complex and recorded drug-seller descriptions and buyer license-plate numbers to report to the police. Residents throughout Elmhurst-Corona phoned in illegally parked vehicle and prostitution locations.

Wardens formed the leadership of the thirty-five block, tenant, co-op, and civic associations that existed in Elmhurst-Corona by 1985. Tenant and co-op groups had the most diverse memberships as they sought to mobilize all building residents, but their efforts were directed primarily at internal matters, and landlords and management. And the neighborhood’s pattern of housing segregation was also evident in these organizations: most Elmhurst groups were white, Latin America, and Asian, while the Lefrak City Tenants Association was predominantly black.

Four larger-scale, and politically active, Elmhurst and Corona homeowner civic associations were predominantly white, with only a handful of Latin American or Asian members. It was in the smaller block associations, on streets of one- and two-family homes, that the most significant multiracial organizing took place.

VII

The leading civic warden in Elmhurst-Corona today, Lucy Schilero, attended the first meeting of her block association, formed to deal with parking congestion, in 1984. A freelance beautician whose Italian immigrant parents lived on the same street, she sat in the back row. Meeting attendance fell off until 1986, when a rumor circulated that the police precinct house located on this block might be moved elsewhere.

“We bought our homes with a police station here,” Schilero explained as she began circulating a petition to
keep the precinct headquarters where it was. She first went
door-to-door on her block and then to churches, stores,
subway stations, and streets and apartment buildings in the
surrounding area. "All the people on our block helped, 50
people. We had everything in Spanish, Greek, Italian, Chi-
nese, Korean, and [and] French. I met Iranians [and] Turkish
people, to help translate." Schiler also met tenant lead-
ers from several Elmhurst apartment buildings who were
fighting illegal rent increases and evictions and battling
with absentee investors who had purchased occupied units
in buildings converted to co-ops.

As a result of her petition work, Schiler's personal net-
work began to change. "Now, I have new ethnic friends:
Hindu, Spanish—a lot—Chinese. My Ecuadorian neigh-
bor... is a good friend, and in touch with Spanish resi-
dents... [White] friends in Maspeth and Middle Village
[in southwest Queens] say to me, 'How can you live here?
It's like Manhattan.' I tell them we have to live with one
another or we won't survive... The Hindus and Shiites
are the hardest to relate with; the man at the Geeta Temple,
he's been great, but he won't come to meetings. I want to
get Haitians, I want to bring one with me on my rounds... .
The newcomers are people we want to keep here. They are
hardworking people, like the old immigrants."

In 1986 Schiler formed the Coalition of United Resi-
dents for a Safer Community, comprising her block asso-
ciation and the tenant groups she met through petitioning.
She shared information with leaders of these groups on
quality-of-life issues such as drug selling, sanitation, police
response, and illegal occupancy. Through her coalition-
network she was able to circulate petitions rapidly, includ-
ing one to keep open the Elmhurst Hospital clinics facing
proposed budget cuts in 1991. At coalition meetings, Schi-
ero also reported on what she learned at Community Board
4, which she joined in 1990, and on her contacts with other
civic groups and elected officials. Two weeks before each
meeting, Schiler called leaders of the coalition groups;
other members expanded her telephone tree along Chinese,
Spanish, and Greek branches. During meetings, people at
the back of the room translated for non-English speakers,
and by 1990 Korean, Bengali, Urdu, and Vietnamese were
also in use within the coalition network.

In 1996 Lucy Schiler's coalition numbered 2,000
members of 40 block, tenant, co-op, and business associ-
atations in the northern half of Elmhurst Corona. Her meet-
ings drew up to 400 people and now included Mexican and
Russian immigrants, African Americans from Lefrak City,
and whites from neighboring Jackson Heights.

VIII

Latin Americans and Asians together constituted a ma-
jority of Elmhurst Corona's population by 1980, but their
involvement in civic politics did not reflect their numbers.
Enormous organizational energy, however, went into a
vast world of immigrant associations and houses of wor-
ship. There were scores of Colombian, Dominican, Ecu-
dorian, and other Latin American nationality-based asso-
ciations in Queens, focused largely on home country
politics, sports, and cultural activities. Queenswide Chi-
nese organizations drew Elmhurst Corona members, but
most of their activities occurred elsewhere. Associational
lines divided South Asian immigrants by country, region,
language, and religion, mirroring the complexities of their
homelands; some of these groups met in Elmhurst Corona,
but they drew upon a Queens or New York metropolitan-
area membership base. Immigrant churches, temples, and
mosques were well represented, but only the Korean Cen-
tral Presbyterian Church made an impact on Elmhurst-Co-
rona civic life when it began a Sunday afternoon street
cleanup in 1991. Echoing views of many white residents,
one ward said of the new houses of worship, "They are
in Elmhurst, but not of it."

A few Latin Americans and Asians did join civic asso-
ciations headed by whites, but only in the mid-1980s did
two new organizations that addressed issues that mattered
to immigrant residents begin to stake out places in the dis-
trict-level political field.

In 1978 Puerto Rico-born Haydee Zambrana moved to
Elmhurst and soon met other Latin Americans who shared
her concerns about the lack of social services for Spanish-
speakers and the need for a Latin American presence in
Queens politics. In 1980 she formed Ciudadanos Con-
scientes de Queens (Concerned Citizens of Queens), or
CCQ. From a small Elmhurst office, she referred people to
appropriate government agencies, sometimes providing
advocacy and English translation herself. She also pro-
cessed citizenship applications which by 1984 totaled 1,000
a year. By 1986 CCQ's volunteer and paid staff provided
counseling on entitlement eligibility and vocational train-
ing programs, held English classes and seminars for busi-
ness proprietors, and ran a New York State-funded hotline
to inform undocumented immigrants of their rights. The
following year CCQ received a federal grant to process le-
galization applications, and in 1989 it was funded to run
citizenship and English classes for newly legalized immi-
grants now eligible for naturalization.

Zambrana was impatient with the many nationality-
based Latin American organizations in Queens and felt lit-
tle of their energies went to local issues. In 1986 she told
the Mayor's Commission on Hispanic Concerns, "My pri-

ority is to help the Hispanic community become part of
the American political process." She went about this by regis-
tering voters, backing Latin American candidates for
Elm-
hurst Corona's district school board, and lobbying the bor-
ough president to appoint more Latin Americans to Queens
community boards. In 1985 she joined CB4, and its Latin
American membership that year doubled from three to six.
IX

That same year the Korean American Association of Mid-Queens was founded by Sung Jin Chun and Seung Ha Hong. Chun, a chemist and teacher in Korea, had arrived in Elmhurst in 1970 and established a real estate business. Hong immigrated in 1971, worked for an American baker, and in 1984 bought a bakery in Elmhurst. On the day his bakery opened, he received a $50 sanitation fine. Although the law only required merchants to sweep their sidewalk within one hour of opening, which he did, when he complained about the fine to a sanitation department supervisor he was told, “You want another?” Hong decided he had to create personal relationships with local officials.

The two men began by visiting Korean business owners throughout Elmhurst and listening to their problems. Many were already members of citywide associations of Korean greengrocers, dry cleaners, or other types of business, but they understood the need for a new local Korean organization as well. Chun also met with Elmhurst-Corona’s police precinct commander after an incident of alleged police brutality involving a Korean taxi driver. This opened a dialogue that continued; when Korean translation was needed by the police or problems involving Koreans arose, the commanding officer would call Seung Ha Hong.

Chun and Hong also established personal ties with whites active in Elmhurst civic politics, became Elmhurst Lions, and participated in Christmas tree lighting and Memorial Day rituals. One of their Mid-Queens association members, a Korean woman whose long-practiced English was better than that of most Korean immigrants, was appointed to Community Board 4. Linkages were also created with African American wardens at Lefrak City. Chun and Hong continued to provide leadership to the Mid-Queens Association, which during 1996 registered 2,000 Korean voters.

X

The arrival of new Latin American and Asian members on Community Board 4 in the mid-1980s coincided with a shift from male to female leadership. In 1985 Rose Renda Rothschild, an Italian American woman long active in PTA work and a CB4 member since 1977, was elected chairperson; the following year she became district manager. Previously she had headed the health committee on which nearly all the board’s female members served. This position had also introduced her to city agency staff and programs throughout Elmhurst-Corona, and to many blacks, Latin Americans, and Asians who lived or worked in the neighborhood.

Under the male chairperson who preceded Rothschild, relations between CB4 and the community’s African American residents were minimal. The several thousand black voters in the Lefrak area, however, were approaching Elmhurst-Corona’s declining white electorate in size and had already formed an important constituency for Corona’s African American state assembly member Helen Marshall. In 1987, Marshall put Rothschild on the agenda of her own Lefrak City town hall meeting, providing Rothschild her first large black audience. The two women continued to work closely, and when Rothschild received a Democratic club award in 1995, it was Marshall, now a city council member, who introduced her to the several hundred Queens party faithful attending the event.

In 1985 Edna Baskin, an African American Lefrak City resident and a tenant association member, began attending CB4 meetings. She was frustrated that no LCTA channel to the community board existed and reported what she learned at CB4 to residents of her building, including parents of children she babysat in her home-based daycare business.

Then, in fall 1986, a crisis began mounting at the Lefrak City branch library. Many children came there after school, and as the weather grew colder their numbers increased. The librarians were unable to provide supervision, and a library security guard was dispatched to assist them. Early in 1987 the library announced that the guard would be discontinued. Helma Goldmark, a white Lefrak area resident and CB4 member, was concerned about both young and elderly users of the library and requested that the guard remain.

In February 1987 a library official came to a CB4 meeting attended by Goldmark, Rothschild, Baskin, the branch librarians, and a dozen Lefrak area residents, half white and half black. Rothschild began the meeting. “It’s quieted down with a guard. Kids today are 10 going on 40, but if they see a security guard there will be less playing around.” The library official defended the withdrawal of the guard and blamed “these latchkey kids” and “the parents” for difficulties.

Rothschild objected. “You are taking a negative approach. So far [you are saying] the kids are from Murder Incorporated. I’m here doing my job, which is to get you to do your job.” Baskin followed: “I speak as a parent [of two grown-up sons]. I pass everyday. I’ve seen the librarian physically and verbally assaulted by a 175-pound, six-foot, 14 year old.” Rothschild backed Baskin up. “Kids are tired after being closed in all day. My son is 6’3”, 17 years old. As Edna said, you should try a security guard.” Rovenia McGowan, a black Lefrak area resident and a school teacher, and Ken Daniels, a white Lefrak resident and CB4 member, added that schools, department stores, and their own buildings had security guards. “If we don’t get a guard, we may lose the library,” McGowan pleaded.

The library official had attempted to split the white and black residents, blaming black children and parents for the problem. Instead, he encountered local solidarity, with black and white adults requesting help to deal with trouble
makers and to allow black neighborhood children and white senior citizens to use the library in peace. The guard remained.

XI

Throughout Elmhurst-Corona, whites were forming personal relationships with their new neighbors. In most of the area these neighbors were Latin American or Asian. A not untypical example of these new ties was one retired white woman who tutored two Korean and two Argentinian-Puerto Rican children who lived on her apartment building floor, and took them to the library, bowling, and movies. In exchange, her female Puerto Rican neighbor often cooked for her, and her Korean female neighbor did her nails.

Whites also encountered neighborhood newcomers at senior centers and in their churches. Two historically white Protestant churches disbanded as their congregations shrank, but a dozen others survived by welcoming Latin Americans, Asians, and blacks. A Presbyterian church pastored by a conservative German minister was the most racially diverse setting I encountered in Elmhurst-Corona, with active white American, Indonesian, Filipino, Cuban, Mexican, African, black American, and Indo- and Afro-Caribbean members. Roman Catholic churches had a large infusion of Latin American parishioners, but the creation of Spanish-language masses and other activities frequently provoked conflict. To overcome this at St. Leo’s Church in Corona, a pre-Easter Stations of the Cross procession through the neighborhood, long dormant, was revived in 1986, with readings and choral response alternatively in English, Italian, and Spanish.

Black-white interaction, or black-immigrant interaction for that matter, was constrained by the pattern of residential segregation. Many whites, however, did have cordial workplace relationships with African Americans. Moreover, both the Corona Democratic party and the growing number of black community board members reinforced ties among white and black Elmhurst-Corona wardens. By 1993 eight black members comprised nearly a fifth of CB4’s membership, and several of them served on the board’s executive committee.

Elmhurst-Corona whites also found that many of those thwarting their quality of life were white. These included Manhattan “permanent government” real estate and corporate interests (Newfield and DuBrul 1977) who received tax abatements and exemptions, white police who lived outside the city and expressed contempt for Elmhurst-Corona, white businessmen who ceaselessly encroached on residentially zoned property, and white southwest Queens school board members more interested in controlling district office jobs and opposing curriculum reform than in school crowding in Elmhurst-Corona. The three schools finally built in the 1990s came not with help from the school board but as a result of lobbying by Elmhurst-Corona wardens.

XII

At no one’s request and by no one’s design, Elmhurst-Corona was transformed from a solidly white neighborhood in 1960 to “perhaps the most ethnically mixed community in the world” by the 1990s. The United States is still at the early stages of a similar “majority minority” transition. Its arrival on a national scale in the next century will not repeat the story I have recounted, nor will the many local transitions from now to then follow any single script. Still, if our goal as citizens and neighbors is “an integrated body politic in which all perspectives are represented, and in which all people work together to find common ground” (Guinier 1994:6), we may ask what lessons can be drawn from the Elmhurst-Corona experience. Here I wish to stress three: listen to women (they listen to each other), government matters, and be color-full before color blind.

Early in my fieldwork, a white warden compared Elmhurst during the 1930s with his contemporary neighborhood.

In those days . . . only the rich had telephones. We had no telephone, and yet I couldn’t do anything and get home before my mother knew about it, and met me on the way in the door with a smack. So my father called it the “mothers’ union”—all the mothers were plugged into the clothesline, he said. Well, the world hasn’t changed. The school bus for the primary school stops in front of my house. One morning a year ago, the kids were all lined up, and a mother was coming down the block, a new American from Korea, with a kid late for the bus. . . . And a little [Indian] boy on the end of the line—you could see this little lawyer’s mind at work—he peels off and heads for home because he’s got a good idea. His mother wasn’t there, she didn’t come with him; he’s going home. So the Korean mother packs her kid on the bus, and then she steps over and says to this little boy who’s going up the road, “Where you go?” He says, “Home, I’m sick, I’ve got a cold.” She opens his mouth, looks in, and says, “No sick. On bus.” He goes on the bus, and I said to myself the mothers’ union is alive and working. . . . The fathers can bitch and belly all they want, but the mothers are going to make sure that it all works out.

In the 1980s women began moving into Elmhurst-Corona’s district-level political field and unblocking the channels between whites, immigrants, and blacks. As Gans observes, “In communities where similarity of backgrounds . . . is scarce, collective action requires a sizeable amount of interpersonal negotiation and compromise—and [also] leaders who can apply personal skills that persuade people to ignore their differences” (1988:111). It was women more than men who supplied this leadership, and we should be prepared for more female leadership
everywhere as America’s majority-minority transition unfolds.

Why was it women more than men who formed a network of cross-racial ties in Elmhurst-Corona? Chodorow (1974) would trace these patterns to socialization that incorporates daughters into a world of women characterized by “relational” identification and “connection to other people,” while sons exit this world to adopt male roles emphasizing “positional” identification and individual achievement. Consequently, as Tannen observes, women’s ways of talking are more likely to stress “a community of connection,” while men’s talk operates “to preserve their independence in a hierarchical world” (1990:227). Further, as Kaplan posits, “the gender system of their society . . . assigns women the responsibility of . . . guarding their neighbors, children, and mates against danger”, under conditions of change, “a sense of community that emerges from shared routines binds women to one another” and “politicizes the networks of daily life” (1982:545–547). Hardy-Fanta concludes that women more than men “focus on . . . connecting people to other people to achieve change, but that such ‘participatory qualities are [not] the unique realm of women [and] these skills and values are within the abilities of men” (1993:13, 191).

In Elmhurst-Corona women certainly acted to “guard their children.” When one district cabinet meeting turned to park projects, Rose Rothschild remarked, “I always suggest preschool buildings [in park plans] because I’m a mother. Men never look at that.” Nonetheless, some men did champion library, after-school, and recreation programs for youth. In terms of race, however, women moved sooner from categorical to personal ties (Mitchell 1966:51–56), relating more readily to women of another race as women than men did with other men. The “positional” and “hierarchical” values that continue to mark race relations in the United States are not only more characteristic of male socialization and gender roles, but they are reinforced by the structural relationships of workplaces. Many of Elmhurst-Corona’s women leaders were housewives or worked from their homes, while men were more likely to be employed in formal organizations. Women who entered civic politics, moreover, frequently had experience in school, religious, or block association groups where improvisation and abilities to involve others were more important than tables of organization and titled positions (compare Gilkes 1980, 1988; Sacks 1988:121–122, 132–133).

XIII

In contemporary America, government is involved at every step in the movement toward common ground. The reasons why people of so many diverse origins live together in Elmhurst-Corona are not simply the result of individual choices disconnected from government policies. Individual whites, blacks, and immigrants indeed chose to stay in, move to, or leave Elmhurst-Corona, but they did so in response to shifting job opportunities, federal highway and housing programs, suburban zoning restrictions, inconsistent fair-housing law enforcement, and changing immigration policies—all the result of government actions.

As neighborhood New Yorkers, they endured assaults on quality of life resulting from the 1975 fiscal crisis and continuing mayoral budget cuts. In Elmhurst-Corona, zoning regulations and diminished housing-code enforcement defined neighborhood realities for all residents and set the stage for struggles to change them. Individuals innovated new alliances and forms of organization, but this took place within “city trenches” (Katznelson 1981) shaped by community boards, district cabinets, and school boards.

Contemporary anti-government conservatives maintain that declining quality of life in neighborhood New York is inevitable. They expect those who can to practice “choice” and move away, and those who cannot to “trust the market” and “display a healthy respect for the natural economic development of the city” (Salins 1993:168, 171). Elmhurst-Corona civic activists had their own ideas about what was “natural.” They did not accept this faith in “market” solutions to inappropriate zoning, unsafe housing, overcrowded schools, and unresponsive police. Their local efforts resulted in new schools, downzoning, a return of “cops on the beat” in the mid-1980s, and restoration of police numbers to 1975 levels after 1990.

Without a community board there would have been no public forum at which white, black, Latin American, and Asian leaders had a place to interact. Each racial and ethnic group in Elmhurst-Corona would have confronted mayoral and permanent government power directly, without the power of numbers and lubricatory expertise (Leeds 1994; Sanjek 1992:12–13) that CB4 made possible. The board was pivotal to the still-ongoing creation in this diverse neighborhood of what Bailey calls a political “community.” He explains that members of a political community create “a common culture [and] conceive of themselves as an entity . . . ranged against a . . . world outside.” Those beyond the community “are likely to be judged in an instrumental fashion, not ‘in the round.’ They are not [interacted with as] human beings to the same extent as those of us who belong within the community” (Bailey 1971:7, 13–15, 24).

Elmhurst-Corona in the 1980s and 1990s was not a political community in any complete sense, but probably no urban district ever is. For many of its wardens, however, lines of race and ethnicity had become crossable. CB4 members knew each other by name, embraced at meetings, and were in a position to see beyond stereotypes of “blacks,” “immigrants,” and “outer-borough white ethnics.”

In Elmhurst-Corona the intolerant tendencies of the 1970s were reversed as civic politics acquired new leaders and more diverse participants. This occurred within what
West calls "a public sphere in which critical exchange and engagement takes place. . . . Principled alliances—tension ridden, yes, but principled alliances and coalitions. That’s the new kind of public sphere that we are talking about. There will be no fundamental social change in America unless we come together [within it]" (1993:6). Indeed, government matters.

XIV

Finally, suppose the worst. In the year 2080 the all-white upper fifth of Americans lives in gated suburbs and edge cities. Its schools, police, health care, recreation facilities, transportation, and communication links are all private. Taxes everywhere are a pittance. For the rest of the population—now 37% white, 29% Latin American, 19% black, and 15% Asian—public schools, hospitals, parks, sanitation services, and mass transit function poorly. Most wages permit only minimal subsistence. Crime and the underground economy sustain enormous numbers, and the few police officers and government inspectors do not interfere. Government statistics on income, poverty, and race are neither published nor collected. The era of big government is over. "Individual choice" and "the market" reign. People live in a "color blind" society.

The more divided the power of numbers, the more likely the worst will prevail. No racial or ethnic group will be able to counter this on its own, and only the upper fifth can afford to be "color blind." To the extent that the rest of us find ourselves only in settings filled with people who look like us, we will be doomed to political ineffectiveness. People will need to ensure that block and civic associations, local government bodies, civic ritual audiences, workplaces, and leadership slates are color-full. In Elmhurst-Corona, people have been moving in this direction, some more consciously than others, and learning from both successes and failures. An exchange at Community Board 4 following a zoning defeat in 1988 highlighted the need to strengthen the power of numbers.

Judy D’Andrea: The high-power developers in this city are trying to eliminate the community review process because we stand in their way and they make political contributions to high-power politicians.

Ron Laney: We have no power. The Mayor opposed us.

Judy D’Andrea: It goes back to the community. [In Bayside] they get buses and go. We are not like that. We had seven people at the public hearing. If we had 7,000 it would be different.

The point is not to be "color blind"—racial categories, after all, are something we learn to see from childhood, and they are in constant use around us (Sanjek 1994). Our goals, rather, should be to see racial identity as one among the many aspects of every person and to appreciate the full range of human cultural and physical diversity in what always has been, and is now an increasingly interconnected, color-full world.

Early in my fieldwork Elmhurst warden Bill Donnelly told me, "All of life, everyplace, is the same thing—trying to get people to see that we’re all in the same damn thing together. I’ve been standing on the street corners and holding for fifty years, and it doesn’t amount to nothing. [But] let one [other] person [say], ‘Yeah, we’re in the same boat together,’ then everyone says, ‘Hot damn, we’re in this same boat together. Let’s get together and paddle this boat.’"

Notes

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2. A 1996 Census Bureau study projects that whites will constitute just 53% of the U.S. population in 2050 (New York Times March 14, 1996). "Latin American," my translation of latinoamericano, commonly used in New York’s Spanish-language press and other contexts as an umbrella term for all immigrants or U.S. citizens tracing origins to Spanish-speaking Caribbean and South and Central American countries, including Puerto Rico, is used in this paper as a more neutral, inclusive label than Hispanic or Latino, each of which carries politically meaningful connotations I have no need here to embrace.

3. Anthropologists envision any political “field” they study as a set of linked “arenas” in which ongoing political events
may be observed; the field also extends beyond these immediate "enclaves of action" to include "encapsulating" structures of power at larger-scale levels; see Swartz (1968). As Turner phrases it, "The arena is a scene for the making of a decision. . . The field [is] the totality of coexisting entities, . . channels of communication, [and] ideological views about the desirability or undesirability of the extant stratification [of power]. Anthropologists are interested in . . concatenations of . . events, relationships, [and] groups . . which bring actors into field relationships with one another and form nodes of intersection between [arenas and] fields" (1974:102, 126-41).

4. For overviews of housing discrimination see Massey and Denton (1993); Yinger (1995).

5. Some 2.1 million undocumented immigrants nationwide, and 188,000 in New York City, were in fact counted in the 1980 U.S. Census; careful subsequent estimates placed the total numbers at no greater that 3.5 million and 375,000. In 1974 the INS commissioner pronounced that there were 4 to 12 million "illegal immigrants" in the United States, and two years later President Gerald Ford put the figure at 6 to 8 million; moreover, in 1975 New York City Congressman Mario Biaggi told Community Board 4 that the INS commissioner's "private estimate" was 40 million. In 1974 the New York INS estimated "more than a million" in the city, and in 1979 the Koch administration offered its "conservative estimate" of 750,000 to a million (Sanjek 1998:74).

6. Bailey locates "parapolitical" activity in the "lesser arenas . . . those which are partly regulated by, and partly independent of, large encapsulating political structures; and which . . . fight battles with these larger structures in a way which . . . seldom ends in victory, rarely in dramatic defeat, but usually in a long drawn stalemate and defeat by attrition" (1968:281).

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