

“The Puerto Rican (Slum) Problem”: Crises in Race, Citizenship, and Housing in Postwar New York

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing San Juan Hill

On November 29, 2021, the remake of the American musical drama *West Side Story* premiered at Jazz at Lincoln Center. The makers of this rendition revisited the original 1961 screenplay at a temporal distance and with the benefits of hindsight, and in doing so, created a film that unearths a history of mid-century New York for contemporary audiences that provided meaningful social commentary on the events unfolding beyond what is captured by the storylines of the film's characters. Specifically, this remake delivers the fictional story of the musical within a larger history of the transformation of Manhattan's West Side through new methods in urban planning, slum clearance, and neighborhood rebuilding.

The beginning of the film establishes the destruction of a neighborhood looming overhead like a specter. Filming for the original movie took place in the rubble of a bulldozed San Juan Hill in the summer of 1960. The opening scene was partially filmed on location on West 67th and 68th Streets between Amsterdam and West End Avenue, an area police of the local precinct once considered "one of the worst blocks on the West Side."¹ The background of the first dance sequence features the very alley ways, streets, and abandoned buildings of a once bustling neighborhood laden with small businesses, local establishments, cultural centers, warehouses, and tenements that were home to and frequented by the working-class residents of the neighborhood.

First appear the Jets, a gang of young white ethnic boys who move about and dance in the rubble of torn down buildings. Dancing from the construction site through the streets of San Juan Hill and picking up fellow members of their crew, the Jets never shy away from taking up space

¹ "Lincoln Center Background," Dated February 1961.

and dominating it, and causing many a disturbance along the way. One Jet steals a newspaper from the front stands of a bodega, which prompts a worker to chase after them admonishing them in Spanish.

When this dance number ends, the Jets face a wall, which is doubly the site of a mural with the flag of Puerto Rico and the phrase “This is our place” written over the flag’s left side. The Jets begin to throw paint over the mural but are met by the Sharks, the rival Puerto Rican gang. In defending the mural from defacement, the Sharks are not only alerting their counterparts of their presence and their willingness to protect this symbol of Puerto Rican stake in the neighborhood, they are also demonstrating that fighting and disputes between juvenile gang in this era were merely petty power grabs; rather, these contestations illuminate struggles that are byproducts of larger historical processes of ethnic succession, neighborhood change, and residential displacement.

At the mural, a larger fight erupts, and the police arrive to break up the brawl. They advise the young men that while fighting is how juvenile delinquents might sort out personal disputes regarding control and preeminence over the streets, such fighting is ultimately futile – the slum of San Juan Hill is set to be demolished in preparation for the construction of Lincoln Square, a “shiny new neighborhood full of rich people in nice apartments with Puerto Rican doormen.”² Despite the warning, the young men remain too prideful to heed the advice of the police, and the two gangs decide to organize a rumble to settle once and for all who the streets belong to.

This encounter with the police implicates the Sharks and the Jets inside a much more menacing and totalizing system of a world beyond the chain-linked fences of San Juan Hill.

² *West Side Story* directed by Steven Spielberg (20th Century Studios, 2021).

Regardless of who wins or loses the rumble, there is a sense that everything about life on the West Side is slated to change. While the Jets are fighting the Sharks over neighborhood turf, the existence of both is simultaneously threatened by the government and impending gentrification.

Even the film's promotional material alludes to this tension, as the trailer includes one Jet exhaustingly saying, "I wake up to everything I know being sold, or wrecked, or being taken over by people that I don't like," a reminder that the fates of the characters and their homes do not reside in the hands of the other residents of San Juan Hill, but in the policy decisions made by people in the federal and local governments that aim to clear away the physical manifestations of "blight" on the built environment.

Different from the original film, the 2021 screenplay more explicitly contextualizes characters' strife with one another within the larger macro-historical processes around them – demonstrating a more complicated history of the West Side that engages with the nuances of the changing political economy marked by demographic shifts stimulated by immigration and migration, crises in residential space, and neighborhood demolition and subsequent restructuring. Yet, despite the crisis, for both the filmmakers and the policy makers of the 1950s, the moment was also imbued with the promise and potential of a monumental remaking of the urban environment.

The film's producers appear to have acknowledged these two faces of slum clearance with an eye-catching promotional image in an article published in *Life* magazine the week of the film's debut in 1961. In a flashy spread titled "Explosion on the West Side," the leader of the Jets, Riff, poses for the camera in a star jump. In the background, a pile of burning rubble lies beneath him and a newly built modern tower-block apartment building stands up in the distance.

The caption describes the image, “Against smoldering rubble of New York slum clearance project Jet leader Riff (Russ Tamblyn) leaps in pride. The Jets, he sings, are kings of the world.”³ Featuring both a sense of urban destruction and the renewed neighborhood that comes after, this promotional image seeks to highlight the social imagination that lies at the heart of urban renewal. It seems to suggest that the old city’s smoldering rubble lies before us, but its urban dissolution is a necessary pre-requisite to the promise of a modern future, one that is represented by the bright apartment complex standing behind the mid-leap Jet and the roar of the fire. Like the building in the backdrop, the Jet seems to leap up from the rubble of the cleared neighborhood, revealing a sense that slum clearance, carrying both violence and promise, is ultimately an invigorating force for the city.

Thus, while *West Side Story* is a site of cultural production that attempts to depict the dual nature of urban dissolution and subsequent rebirth, its depiction of juvenile delinquency, Puerto Rican migrants, dilapidated housing structures, and blighted land show precisely the types of tangled pathologies that are slated to be cleared away in order to make possible a modern city free from such societal ills. Through Title I of the 1949 United States Housing Act’s wedding of public authority and private munificence, Robert Moses, the chairman of the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance, had imagined a “vision of a reborn West Side, marching north from Columbus Circle, and eventually spreading over the entire dismal and decayed West Side.”⁴ As New York’s largest, most ambitious, and most far-reaching slum clearance project under Title I, the Lincoln Square urban renewal project, and its headlining piece, the Lincoln Center for the

³ “Explosion on the West Side,” *LIFE Magazine*, October 20, 1961.

⁴ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

Performing Arts, exemplifies this spirit of urban renewal that lies at the core of such a transformative piece of legislation.

However, the crux of this thesis is not a retelling of the Housing Act of 1949's consequences on New York's urban sphere. Rather, this essay posits that the "virile and vast program of urban renewal"⁵ on Manhattan's West Side during the late 1950s and early 1960s was driven by processes of neighborhood change, demographic transformation, and shifting sociopolitical conditions rooted in the previous decade.

By the summer of 1956, Puerto Rican migrants were the largest non-white minority group residing on the Lincoln Square slum clearance site.⁶ This thesis examines histories of Puerto Rican migration and placemaking in New York alongside local and global struggles for political power and processes of change in the years prior to the demolition of San Juan Hill. In doing so, it seeks to obtain a clearer understanding of how, by 1956, calls by the city's slum clearance agencies to bulldoze this once lively community of tenements, warehouses, small shops, and cultural centers came to be the vision of a federal policy that sought to remedy the "blighted" nature of this neighborhood slum by grazing it and starting anew.

Additionally, this project traces Puerto Rican migration into New York with a particular focus on the postwar era, for the magnitude and scope of this influx of migrants was met by a uniquely vociferous clamor of anti-Puerto Rican hostility. In the shadow of the Cold War, the crisis of reconciling what was to make of Puerto Ricans' United States citizenship became a

⁵ Otto Nelson, "Investments in Urban Renewal," Address by Otto L. Nelson, Jr. at the Twentieth Annual Building Products Executives Conference. Statler Hotel, Washington, D.C. Nov 07, 1958. New York Public Library. Robert Moses Papers. Box 117 "Committee on Slum Clearance 1958."

⁶ Preliminary Report: Lincoln Square Project, City of New York. Committee on Slum Clearance, July 20, 1956.

dilemma of the incorporation of a group of people that are simultaneously citizens and third-world ‘foreigners’ into the American system. In essence, droves of Puerto Rican migration into New York produced a crisis in a few senses of the word. First, as citizens of the United States, their unrestricted migration into New York produced fears of a city takeover and led to a crisis of city definition and redefinition; and second, the social pathologies that were inscribed onto this group of migrants seemed to be intimately tied to the conditions of Puerto Rican migrants’ living arrangements. Thus, by exploring the intersection of these crises in Puerto Rican identity, spatial belonging, and slum-dwelling in midcentury New York, we can then gain a better picture of how these dilemmas reveal contradictions in the supposed promise of Puerto Rican equal citizenship, especially how they play themselves out in the arena of the domestic.

This thesis seeks to build on the work of historians who have contributed significantly to the scholarship of Puerto Ricans in New York as well as those who study changes to New York’s built environment. Drawing from the works of Eileen Findlay, Lorrin Thomas, Edgardo Melendez, Gabriel Haslip-Viera, and Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, this work attempts to navigate the creation and the complexities of a Puerto Rican subjecthood in New York as it often is in tension with Puerto Ricans’ status as US citizenship holders. Exploring these tensions and contradictions is one way this thesis comes to a better understanding of perceptions of a supposed Puerto Rican social deviancy and pathology. This project also relies heavily on the work of scholars of New York City’s built environment, particularly those that study government-backed urban renewal endeavors and matters pertaining to urban spatial governance. The works of Samuel Zipp, Hilary Ballon, and Joel Schwartz, among others, were indispensable sources that helped paint a vibrant and nuanced depiction of a dynamic city during this period that this thesis attempts to explore.

Lastly, this thesis attempts to take the work of such scholars one step further by conducting an analysis of Puerto Rican New York beyond the constraints of the physical environment. Whereas the aforementioned scholars of New York tend to relegate their study to the physical remaking of the city's landscape, this thesis attempts to examine the more intimate constructions of space within the slums and tenements that have historically housed Puerto Rican migrants. By looking more closely at the makeup of slums and the constitution of the living arrangements therein, we find a window into the social pathologization of Puerto Rican arrivals by means of accusations of political insurgency, suspicion of disease, delinquency, criminality, and poor hygiene. Such pathologies were framed as products of the corrupt organization of Puerto Rican domestic space. In this way, we can then better conceive of the types of tangled pathologies assessed to be inhabiting the slums of San Juan Hill that later served to justify/provide a rationale for the wholesale razing of the entire area. Furthermore, we can better understand why wholesale removal was preferred over possibilities of rehabilitation, smaller reforms to the space, and more democratic and peaceful methods to neighborhood change and/or betterment.

In 1957, San Juan Hill, as the area was known to some, or Lincoln Square as it was known by others, was a neighborhood undergoing the intense stresses of ethnic succession and urban renewal. While its composition as a neighborhood that has traditionally housed people on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, namely poor "new immigrants" from Europe, Puerto Rican migrants, and African Americans gave rise to its reputation as an undesirable part of town, the neighborhood of San Juan Hill was home to a bustling community and established population of working-class African Americans and Puerto Ricans who have recently settled in

the area. In fact, throughout the city, these populations blossomed after the Second World War, directly in parallel to the growth of the economy as migrants turned to industrialized cities such as New York for job opportunities and the promise of equal citizenship. Meanwhile, the white population in the city did not endure the same fate: European immigration was on the decline due to immigration restrictions and war. In fact, the white population peaked at 7.1 million in 1950 and fell to 6.6 million in 1960, when the African American and Puerto Rican populations swelled to 1.1 million and 612,000, respectively.⁷

While these population statistics suggest that the white population of New York still outnumbered the African American and Latino populations throughout the decade of the 1950s, the intensification of non-white population growth during these years impeded on the stronghold of white American dominance of the urban landscape, causing tensions to rise over the color line in negotiating control over the space. Specifically, the population dynamics in San Juan Hill saw a sizeable influx of Puerto Rican migrants in the years following World War II during a period known amongst scholars of Puerto Rican Studies as the Great Migration: the largely unidirectional movement of Puerto Ricans from the island to the United States that began around 1940.⁸ This sizable increase in in-migration and settlement destabilized older notions of racial and spatial belonging and caused tensions to rise between the new migrants and the more established white Americans, who at this time resided in clusters more so on the fringes of the neighborhood. Additionally, the strong presence of African American and Afro-Caribbean residents in San Juan Hill established the neighborhood as one of the largest Black communities in New York prior to World War I; however, out-ward migration from San Juan Hill uptown into

⁷ Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1972).

⁸ Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, Latinos in American Society and Culture* 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Harlem in search of higher standards of living created a housing vacuum that was then filled by migrants from Puerto Rico during the postwar uptick in migration.⁹ Due in part to the high concentration of these new migrants, the low socio-economic status of its residents, and the decrepit state of the buildings in the area, by the 1940s, the New York City Housing Authority declared San Juan Hill “the worst slum district of New York City.”¹⁰

⁹ Marcy S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City before World War I*, electronic resource, *Politics and Culture in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio13882938>.

¹⁰ The preliminary report for the Lincoln Square Title I project offers the most comprehensive population data pertaining to the racial composition of the relocated families on the project site. As we come to understand Moses' Title I projects to begin with large-scale sweepings of entire swaths of land, and in this case, the neighborhood of San Juan Hill, population statistics offered in this report can mirror, or closely resemble, that of the entire neighborhood. The report finds that the racial composition of the relocated families on site are estimated to be: 76% White; 18% Puerto Rican; 4% Black; and 2% other.

CHAPTER 2

Beginnings of Puerto Rican Arrival in the United States and the Creation of a Second-Class Citizenship

In the years following the Spanish-American War, the establishment of American corporations after 1898 and the influx of capital from the United States in the Puerto Rican sugar sector undercut the far more labor-intensive coffee and tobacco agricultural industries. Additionally, improvements in health and sanitation brought on by Americanizing forces led to a dramatic reduction in the island's mortality rates. This process of Americanizing the island after the US annexation of Puerto Rico was concomitant with a time when foundational shifts in the island's agricultural production methods, land usage, and land ownership could no longer incorporate this surplus of people into the standard work force.

Due to the increase in population and the subsequent overpopulation of the island's key industries, internal migration and external migration soon became the standard remedies to such a crisis of disorientation. Large sugar plantations virtually eliminated subsistence farming on the island, and much of the subsequent agricultural work became seasonal.¹¹ As United States investment brought significant dislocation of rural workers and produced a crisis of living standards, as traditional patterns of family life and ties to the land were destabilized by these rapid transformations.¹² As Puerto Rican laborers became accustomed to the new reality of traversing the island in search for work opportunities, "each individual displacement altered

¹¹ Eric C. Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, 2001, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9780691223308>.

¹² Gabriel Haslip-Viera, "The Evolution of the Latino/a Community in New York City: Early Seventeenth Century to the Present," in *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition*, ed. Sherrie L. Baver, Angelo Falcón, and Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Second edition, Latino Perspectives (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

extended family values, creating among its members a propensity to move in adverse situations rather than to stay. Thus, the connections between internal population movements and the subsequent emigrations to the mainland became clear.”¹³

On the island, the effects of the Depression were deeply felt by the mid-twenties. The collapse of the Puerto Rican sugar sector was a critical period of transformation as the island became more and more dependent on the United States for aid and basic commodities, as the population of the island increased by 21.1 percent¹⁴ but employment remained almost stagnant. As the effects of the Depression shuttered many Puerto Ricans from stable opportunities of work, many soon had to rely on more precarious streams of income -- the work of women, for instance -- in industries such as home-based needlecrafts. As this was in no way sustainable, emigration from the island increasingly became a preferable alternative to unemployment and reliance on precarious streams of work.

As migration from the island clearly is a product of the lack of economic prospects for Puerto Ricans, the appeal to move to the industrial centers of the continental United States was largely economic. During the First World War, the shortage of unskilled and semi-skilled labor in the United States’ led to an acceleration of migration from the island, where job-seeking Puerto Rican migrants took up the jobs in factories once held by newly-arrived immigrants from Europe. Puerto Rican migration into New York continued steadily into the 1920s, when the prosperous American economy presented a demand for more labor.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Puerto Ricans’ racial identity became a subject of discourse and debate within the Puerto Rican community during the Depression, as their status and appearance as foreigners with enigmatic racial origins seemed to impede their success in

¹³ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*.

¹⁴ Sánchez Korrol.

securing jobs in an economy where far more established groups in the city had well-defended work niches and accessing a burgeoning supply of welfare funds. Sentiments from across the community reflected a new anxiety about being considered “black” in North America. On the one hand, the Puerto Rican lightly-complected elite felt like they had the most to lose if they were to be considered “black” under the United States’ racial framework. Simultaneously, vocal “socialist internationalists and communist racial egalitarians” had similar concerns alongside their elite counterparts about the future risks of the Puerto Rican community being perceived as not only immigrants but as Black foreigners “vying for a place in the metropole.”¹⁵ Prior to this moment, most Puerto Ricans had understood the difference that separated them from the ever-changing category of the white American to be a question of culture or of language. They had expected to follow a similar trajectory as did earlier immigrants, as outsiders at first, whose “difference” would diminish with time which would then allow them to eventually identify as unquestionably American. In this sense, for many Puerto Ricans, the mainland was understood to be a place where they risked losing control over their racial identity. Where North Americans’ binaristic categorization of race has long been the dividing line between the majority of a population that was either “white” or “black,” there was little to no room for the inclusion of groups that did not fit within this binary scheme.¹⁶

In New York, Puerto Rican migrants’ encounters with racial ascription were constantly in tension with the limitations this binary framework. Whereas class rank and skin complexion were markers of social status on the island, these modes of differentiation had less relevance in

¹⁵ Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*, electronic resource, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio10417255.001>.

¹⁶ Lorrin Thomas, “Resisting the Racial Binary? Puerto Ricans’ Encounter with Race in Depression-Era New York City,” *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 22, 2009): 4–36.

New York. Nonetheless, tensions pertaining to class and color transferred over from Puerto Rico and infiltrated the ways that Puerto Rican migrants as a group moved about in their newly adopted city. Specifically, Puerto Rican newcomers had fears about discrimination in a competitive job market in the New York colonia, where more lightly-complected Puerto Ricans felt like they had more to lose by being lumped into the same racial category as more darkly-complected Puerto Ricans.

In writing to *La Prensa*, New York's Spanish-language daily, several writers agreed that being categorized as "black" in the United States was a slippery slope into losing access to the most important benefits that United States citizenship was supposed to provide. During this time, some Puerto Ricans were still hopeful that their immigration story would mirror that of previous immigrant groups, particularly earlier immigrants from Europe. These more aspirational migrants felt invested in the possibility of experiencing a type of racial ascension that came with time and a demonstrated dedication to fulfilling the virtues of the American ideal. From this group, there was much more resistance to a racial ascription of Puerto Ricans that placed them alongside and in alignment with Black Americans. They feared that any association with blackness would "lead to a circumscribed political identity within the nation, a fear that as a group they would fail to attain the promises of American citizenship."¹⁷

Such resistance toward this association is perhaps best exemplified in Lorrin Thomas's analysis of the Harlem Riots of 1935, a crucial flashpoint in racialization of Puerto Rican migrants in New York. The riots erupted after rumors spread that Lino Rivera, a sixteen-year-old Black Puerto Rican boy, allegedly bit a shop owner after attempting to shoplift a knife from a Kress five-and-dime in Harlem. After someone phoned the police, a largely African American

¹⁷ Thomas.

crowd that had gathered at the store to bear witness. Upon not seeing Rivera exit, the crowd began to circulate rumors that Rivera had been beaten to death in the basement of the store. In actuality, police had escorted Rivera out of the store through the back exit – but without this knowledge, and with the sighting of a hearse coincidentally parked nearby, even skeptics of the rumors began to believe that Rivera had died. That evening, as police began to agitate protestors who began an impromptu gathering about the rumored violence against a Black youth, a protestor threw a rock into the front window of the Kress store. That would mark the beginning of a full-scale riot that implicated several thousand Harlemites – an event that would soon “symbolize the acute suffering and resentment of the country's most storied African-American community.”¹⁸

Yet, Lino Rivera's Puerto Rican identity had hardly been chronicled in the discourse regarding this urban uprising. At the time, the reporting at *La Prensa* took a cautionary approach to the coverage of the riots – one that placed a strong focus on the African American actors participating in the protest, who understood the violence against Rivera as another manifestation of anti-black violence that had long been a staple of life in the American South. The reporting by *La Prensa* took care to address disparities in the cultural differences creating two meanings of the word “negro.” In the English vernacular, it referred to an immutable social category of race, “negro” in the Spanish language more so referred to a phenotype rather than a rigid social category. In writing that the riot activity was precipitated by “*gente de color, americana*” in a section of Harlem several blocks west of the *barrio* of East Harlem, *La Prensa* attempted to manufacture a narrative that suggested that the causes of the Harlem riot were attributable to the impulses of Black Americans, not Puerto Ricans.¹⁹

¹⁸ Thomas.

¹⁹ Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

Meanwhile, New York's largest African American daily paper, the *New York Amsterdam News*, did not identify Rivera as a Puerto Rican, and instead referred to him as a "young Negro boy." Thomas argues that this reporting appears to show that observers of the riot who are of the American experience indeed viewed the riot – and by extension, race relations in New York – through the North American binary lens of racial construction. While it is plausible that such reporting took place because there was no knowledge of Rivera's ethnic identity, the very fact that he was "colored" immediately marked him as immutably Black, regardless of further specificity.

The aftermath of the riot shows that competing narratives regarding an event that seemed to conflate Puerto Rican migrants with their African American neighbors work to against Puerto Ricans' efforts to self-define their racial identity. Furthermore, it shows that physical and discursive distances that have once been understood to separate Puerto Ricans from Blacks have essentially collapsed and shuttered any hope for the Puerto Rican community to negotiate and self-define their racial identity in New York as anything absent an association with blackness. One of the most formidable ways this manifested occurred when Puerto Ricans looking for housing in Washington Heights fell victim to a new "anti-Hispanic campaign," where Jewish and Irish landlords in the area allegedly attempted to push out Puerto Rican tenants by steeply raising rents. Observers of this understood this coordinated effort as a response to two perceived threats: first, that the Hispanic arrivals were of the "lower classes" – denoting that in and of themselves, Puerto Ricans held a poverty-stricken reputation; and, second, that these "brown-skinned or darker" new tenants possess the same kinds of tendencies and social pathologies that would risk turning Washington Heights into "a second Harlem."²⁰

²⁰ Thomas.

As anxieties concerning more darkly complected Puerto Ricans drew associations between them and African Americans, even to the point where Euro-American landlords ascribed the same racist prejudices to Puerto Rican and Black potential tenants, the social pathologies once ascribed to Puerto Ricans extended to and became conflated with social pathologies rooted in blackness. The effects of this new consequence of racialization were also felt by the lighter-skinned among Puerto Rican New Yorkers, who perhaps experienced the most social destabilization: as people who were situated far from any association with blackness on the island, this new racial ascription forced the experiences of anti-Puerto Rican and anti-black hostility onto all Puerto Ricans almost indiscriminately. In this way, they experienced a downward mobility in coming to New York. According to Thomas, “the only line was between *white* and dark,”²¹ meaning that the category of whiteness became ever more exclusive and unattainable for those without full and direct European ancestry. As one reader to *La Prensa* warned: “If it could happen to them, it could happen to you,”²² showing that after the Harlem riots, regardless of where someone lands on the spectrum of skin color, Puerto Ricans firmly stood on the non-white side of the American racial binary, making them ostensibly and irreversibly aligned with Black Americans in more ways than just racial; they encountered the same color line. In the American imagination, this linkage rendered Puerto Ricans, like Black people, to be racially suspect – and this relegated both groups to a low social status without promise of much mobility.

This complicated account of Puerto Rican racial ascription sets up further analyses that seek to explain later developments in anti-Puerto Rican sentiments. One such development was the so-called “Puerto Rican problem,” a hostile campaign against the Great Migration of Puerto

²¹ Thomas.

²² Thomas.

Rican arrivals to New York in the years following World War II. Despite its official naming in 1947, symptoms of the “Puerto Rican problem” are traceable throughout the much longer history of Puerto Rican contact with mainland America. While an analysis of the Harlem Riots certainly illustrates a way that Puerto Ricans in New York experienced a shift in racial identity during the years immediately prior to this wave of migration, it does not fully account for other ways that Puerto Ricans experienced otherness in the United States. Due to the perceived failure of Puerto Ricans to successfully assimilate into broader Anglo-American culture and society, migrants also experienced a general social friction against native-born Americans.

Prior to World War II, demographic change contributed significantly to many native-born Americans harboring anti-Puerto Rican attitudes. Following the onset of restrictions in immigration policy passed in the 1920s, which did not restrict immigration from the Western Hemisphere, Puerto Ricans were one of the only groups of foreigners whose population saw rapid expansion in New York City.²³ During this time, large numbers of Puerto Ricans and Black southerners migrated to New York in search of “a better and happier life just as did the earlier waves of immigrants from Europe,”²⁴ reported the Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing in 1955. This explanation of migration maintains that New York is guaranteed to offer higher standards of life, what would be a world away from homes in the southern United States or the slums of Puerto Rico. Secondly, it also implies a note of ethnic succession. It suggests that Puerto Rican and Black arrivals in New York can achieve the same merits as did earlier European immigrants – a rather colorblind comment that neglects the realities of racial discrimination for these groups, especially within the realm of housing.

²³ Thomas.

²⁴ “65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers, Final Report of The Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing of the City of New York.” September 1955. New York Public Library, Stanley Isaacs Papers, Box 26: “Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing,” Folder 2.

Due to the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States and all Puerto Ricans were granted United States statutory citizenship, allowing them to circumvent immigration restrictions. As a result, the impact of this period of immigration was twofold: 1) Puerto Rican migrants stood out in a city where they were considered one of a few groups of newly-arrived foreigners; and 2) New York City, as a city that has historically been the landing point and home to new immigrants, bore the brunt of the social and political impact of such restrictions that have dramatically limited the number of European immigrants entering the United States by 1925.²⁵ Due to this lack, the European immigrant population in the country assimilated into American life during a stretch of time where there was not much other immigration. As a result, the presence of the newly-arrived white immigrant – one with close ties to the homeland – became a dissipating image in American life. Newcomers to the New York scene (Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and Black migrants from the southern states, in particular) stood out as the primary foreigners at this time.²⁶

Anxieties that Puerto Ricans would fail to fully integrate themselves within the mainstream American system were only the latest manifestation of an immigrant “race problem”²⁷ that had previously relegated immigrants from Mexico, China, and Ireland as unassimilable foreigners. It is these groups’ statuses as foreign others that defined their experiences with xenophobic violence, segregation, and discrimination upon arrival in the United States and reinforced the distance between themselves and “native” white Americans that settled in the United States in the years prior to the dawn of the immigration restrictions. Especially for those that did not eventually realize the full extent of social equality due to their non-white

²⁵ Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City*; Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

²⁶ Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

²⁷ Thomas.

racialization, prospects of reaching full and unfettered citizenship looked much bleaker. By this point, while the new construction of a “common whiteness”²⁸ was able to be accessed by virtually all European immigrants, “new” or “old,” what defined non-white group’s social position was instead a “slippery spectrum from ‘black’ to ‘other.’”²⁹

In the case of Puerto Rican migrants, the intricacies of the citizen experience differ from that of other groups in that all Puerto Ricans already were holders of United States citizenship, and thus, while being perceived as outsiders to the American system, were, as a legal matter, already a part of it. Yet despite this legal condition, not all citizenship is equal. Just as how the territory of Puerto Rico operates as a territory within the governance of the United States with a conditional set of political rights, the exercise of a Puerto Rican citizenship is similarly restricted. Beyond legal discrepancies, such as in the realm of voting rights, the actualization of an unadulterated Puerto Rican citizenship – to the extent that this group of migrants truly were imbued with and able to access American freedoms and the democratic process – was largely affected by xenophobic and anti-Puerto Rican attitudes by that resulted in both structural discrimination and a social alienation from native-born white Americans.

²⁸ Mae M. Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 67–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567407>.

²⁹ Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

CHAPTER 3

The Crises of Housing and Puerto Rican Citizenship During the Cold War

Conflicts and contradictions that resided in the expression of Puerto Rican subjecthood and citizenship became further accentuated by the politics of the Cold War. In response to the Great Migration, fears arose that Puerto Ricans living in New York's slums would inflame national security concerns due to their alleged sympathies toward communism, especially as people from the "developing world." Simultaneously, the image of the Puerto Rican-infested slum violated the projection of a newfound American domestic ideal. While the Cold War ethos at the time promoted a sense of American strength through coherence and togetherness, anxieties surrounding the perceived failure of Puerto Ricans to ascribe to such a vision of domestic tranquility threatened American unity, or at the very least, the perception of it.³⁰ This undermined the reputation of the nation to foreign foes, making it ever so more vulnerable to communism. At the time, foreign policy experts envisioned two scenarios that could unfold prior to a hypothetical defeat in the Cold War: 1) that the Soviet Union might muster the military strength to win the Cold War on its own; or 2) that dangers to American hegemony found within the borders – that is, racial strife, class tension, and familial disruption – would contribute to the demise of the United States on the world stage.³¹

Americans did what they could to alleviate such fears and turned to the home and the family as a site of safety in an increasingly insecure world. American leaders, government officials, politicians, and other experts promoted codes of conduct and advocated for public

³⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, electronic resource (New York: Basic Books, 1988), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio8862197>.

³¹ May.

policies that bolstered the preeminence of the American home, where Americans were eager to be comforted by the sense of security offered by the nuclear family, detached suburban homes, and postwar consumerism.³² In fact, the new projection of the affluent suburban home became the setting in which the new mode of postwar consumerism was practiced. In fact, the new mode of consumerism practiced during the postwar years exceeded the mere purchase of material goods and services; it connoted important cultural values in the service of American superiority. In the context of the domestic sphere, this sense of national superiority translated into the ideal of the suburban home equipped with modern appliances, a car, a television set, and other consumer goods that reflected American dominance in the sciences and technology. Through participating in this new consumerism, Americans were able to demonstrate not only their symbolic commitment to this American way of living, but also pay homage to the fields that supported exceptionalism the arms race and the space race.

During these postwar years, the definition of the home began to assume new meanings, representations, and associations. This new ideal of the American home became linked to the strict model of the child-centered nuclear family structure, the cementing of rigid gender roles within these social networks, the expansion of suburban sprawl, and the production of a new set of consumer practices becoming synonymous with and symbolic of an American ideal of living apart from the city center.³³ Turning toward the home was a popular move at this time by politicians, who espoused that home ownership would be one of the best safeguards against communism and class insurgency in the United States. Mayor Joseph Darst of St. Louis, for example, echoed this sentiment when he wrote to the city's board of aldermen that if good and secure housing was afforded to everyone, "no one in the United States would need to worry

³² May.

³³ May.

today about the threat of communism in this country. Communists love American slums. Our clearance of these slums and erection of adequate housing is one of the most effective answers we can give to communism locally.”³⁴ This ideal touted by Darst and other elected officials and policy makers operated on the unspoken assertion that a certain quality of sound housing was to be the United States’ best answer to mitigating episodes of urban unrest and other disturbances that posed a danger to the appearance of American unity. While they argued that the ideal home possessed almost a sacral quality that could potentially guard the family within it against the outside dangers of a decaying social order and a rapidly destabilizing world, the reality was that poverty and racism excluded many from accessing these spheres of suburban affluence.

As one modality of living was endorsed to be the new American standard, reporting on the conditions of living for marginalized groups, recently-arrived immigrants, and poor slum dwellers during this time emphasized the extent to which they deviated from Cold War-inflected norms and supposed “best practices” of home conduct. In calling attention to these differences, writers, reporters, and other political commentators worked to otherize those that failed to conform to such criteria. While the quaint suburban family and home were upheld as Cold War-era aspirations, newspaper reporting and press coverage on the living conditions of poor and minority groups communicated a crisis of living standards with high shock value that hoped to sound the alarms for subsequent intervention.

Reporting on Puerto Rican living arrangements and practices in New York in these postwar years was particularly egregious. As the mainstream media expressed shock towards

³⁴ Letter to board of aldermen from Mayor Joseph Darst, 13 December 1951, Raymond Tucker Papers, Box 104, Special Collections, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo.

reports of as many as “twenty-three Puerto Ricans living in four small rooms”³⁵ in one instance and “fifteen...occupying two and one-half rooms”³⁶ in another, readers were expected to share reactions of outrage and disgust. In contrast to the Cold War-family focused politics at this time, this type of reporting on crises of living standards made the implicit argument that corruption found in living arrangements, structures of housing, and other domestic spheres set the stage for later expressions of delinquency, promiscuous sexual practices, and other examples of socially deviant behavior. To be sure, the recurring theme of a perverse arrangement of living spaces within anti-Puerto Rican reporting by the press reveals that there was a public awareness and concern regarding the outcome of such conditions. More so, it suggests that people’s concern for the quality of others’ domestic arrangements rested in fears that non-normative practices in this arena could spill over and extend beyond the boundaries of failed homes, disrupting American life more broadly.

The influx of migration from Puerto Rico in the years after World War II into New York City was met with pushback by American press outlets claiming a Puerto Rican “invasion” in New York, expressing visceral concerns that migration from the island will worsen the already severe housing crisis in the city’s tenement districts. By the year 1950, New York’s housing shortage reached an all-time high. The market was short 430,000 units, including 280,000 units in such a shape that warranted clearance, and another 100,000 that were terribly overcrowded.³⁷

³⁵ Edward Ranzal. "Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb Migration: Government Plans to Show That New York May Not Be 'Port of Opportunity' City Problems created Health and Housing Strained as mass Movement Adds to the Big Colonies Here." *New York Times* (1923-), Feb 23, 1947. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/puerto-rico-seeks-curb-migration/docview/107827239/se-2?accountid=10226>.

³⁶ Ranzal.

³⁷ Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time: Progress and Poverty in America's Renewing Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

Under the directive of Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., a subcommittee under the Committee for Better Housing dedicated to the study of Old Law Tenements located “the problem”³⁸ of overcrowding to excessive postwar Puerto Rican migration (as well as heavy in-migration of African Americans from other areas in the United States).³⁹ A few months later, the same committee issued a report declaring that housing stood “at the very top of New York City’s physical problems. It affects intimately all other social and human problems with which the State and the City governments are responsibly concerned.”⁴⁰

While New York has historically been a port of entry for older waves of immigrants, particularly those from Europe, the postwar surge of Puerto Rican arrivals was regarded with extreme levels of fear and hostility by the American press. Those that opposed Puerto Rican entry into the mainland felt as though their incorporation into America’s cities would result in the permanent alteration in the look and feel of such spaces. Within the same period of time, as reports recording waves of in-migration from the island by the thousands each month,⁴¹ while an estimated 1,000,000 middle-class white families departed the city in favor of its suburban outposts.⁴² In effect, this Puerto Rican “invasion” of New York coinciding with white departure confirmed fears that the city was experiencing a symptom of urban decay where its demography

³⁸ Old Law Tenements, also known as “dumbbell tenements,” are tenements in New York City built between the Tenement House Act of 1879 and the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901.

³⁹ “Report of Subcommittee on Old Law Tenements, The Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing of the City of New York.” August 1955. New York Public Library, Stanley Isaacs Papers, Box 26: “Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing,” Folder 2.

⁴⁰ “65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers, Final Report of The Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing of the City of New York.” September 1955. New York Public Library, Stanley Isaacs Papers, Box 26: “Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing,” Folder 2.

⁴¹ Charles Grutzner. “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed: Crowded Conditions, Race Bias Are Seen as Reasons for the Social Problem Homes Are Kept Clean Despite Ugly Surroundings, Social Worker Says Women Are Instinctively Tidy.” *New York Times* (1923-), Oct 04, 1949; Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb Migration.”

⁴² Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*.

was becoming increasingly non-white and seemingly foreign. Despite the Jones Act conferring upon all Puerto Ricans the legal status of American citizenship, their concurrent status as impoverished, colonized peoples who “who knew nothing but poverty”⁴³ precluded them from actualizing the same level of rights and respectability as other white Americans. To a large extent, it was this fact of Puerto Rican people’s belonging to an “alien race” that kept United States legislators apprehensive about offering statutory citizenship to Puerto Ricans for almost two decades⁴⁴ until 1917.⁴⁵

According to historian Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, one important feature of the Jones Act is that its timely passing enabled the United States armed forces to draft Puerto Ricans to fight on behalf of the nation in World War I. In addition to enhancing American military power, the Jones Act allowed for a segment of the Puerto Rican male population who had served in the military an “opportunity to familiarize themselves with life, customs, and opportunity in North America.”⁴⁶ This context shows that the conferring of American citizenship on Puerto Rican subjects had both a functionalist utilitarian and assimilationist function. By pairing citizenship with military service and the opportunity to move to the mainland, the United States government asserted that Puerto Ricans’ citizenship rights were an essential element of the total American war effort. In exchange for their efforts, military service members were potentially offered a chance to move to the metropole for a life with better promise.

⁴³ Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb Migration.”

⁴⁴ The United States first took control over the island of Puerto Rico in 1898, after the Spanish-American War.

⁴⁵ Thomas, “Resisting the Racial Binary?”

⁴⁶ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*.

After the passing of the Jones Act, Puerto Rican migration to the mainland went largely uninhibited. In fact, the development of key pieces of infrastructure attempted to accelerate and facilitate such shifts in demography. For example, Puerto Rico's government backed the building of air transportation infrastructure to support movement between the island and New York. Similarly, the territory's education department developed a slew of English classes to better prepare potential migrants for a move to New York,⁴⁷ showing that the island had initiated a proactive migration policy.

In response to such an uptick in migration and the strain a rapidly growing population incurred on the city, especially, in its housing stock, officials in New York's slum clearance agencies called for creative measures to stymie such rapid population change and address the housing crisis. Some feared that so long as low-income people and families from Puerto Rico and the South continue to pour into the city were "content to live under conditions that to our modern civic conscience educated to higher housing standards appear intolerable, there will be such demand for cheap housing that the old law tenement will remain as a very undesirable part of our housing supply."⁴⁸ Others, such as Robert Moses, the City's construction czar and chairman of the Committee on Slum Clearance, suggested the diversion of some federal funds to "finance low-rent housing in Puerto Rico, apparently with the idea that this would stem the heavy influx of Puerto Ricans to New York."⁴⁹ The Committee for Better Housing agreed with this sentiment, citing "informed observers" who expressed that "improvement in employment opportunities there prompts... many of the migrants [to] remain at home if more good housing

⁴⁷ Edgardo Melendez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States*, Global Latin/o Americas (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017).

⁴⁸ "Report of Subcommittee on Old Law Tenements."

⁴⁹ Ralph Chapman. "City Studies Vast Project of Rebuilding West Side from 59th to 125th St.: Wagner Tells House Probe of Slum Plan, Would Join Public and Private Funds." *New York Herald Tribune* (1924-1966), Oct 06, 1955.

were provided.”⁵⁰ While these comments reveal the extent to which people in government wished to curtail in-migration from Puerto Rico, they legally could not do so on the same basis that restricting interstate travel is unconstitutional. Furthermore, even without the restriction of further migration into the City, the dramatic growth of the Puerto Rican population in New York thus far had already burdened the city’s housing market and created a crisis of living standards along the way.

Hostile attitudes against Puerto Ricans spurred by both liberal and conservative party platforms echo demeaning representations of the migrants promulgated by a hysteric press machine. Routinely, by the mid-1940s, the New York press’s characterization of Puerto Ricans as irredeemable threats to New York life were bound by nativist sentiments held over from the interwar period. Here, the image of the Puerto Rican citizen stood in friction against the new ideal American subject – such as the enthusiastic European immigrants-turned-American-citizens showcased in a *Life* magazine piece titled “The People of New York”⁵¹ published in 1947. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, were not included in this publication.

Yet articles in the New York press’s anti-immigrant bend went a step further than a blanket-policy general nativism. Attacks on Puerto Rican arrivals in New York were particularly heinous. Articles framed the wave of postwar migration using the language of infestation and disease to communicate that these new arrivals were akin to “subhuman creatures or sinister natural forces”⁵² taking over the city and thereby feeding into the press’s construction of the

⁵⁰ “65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers.”

⁵¹ “The People of New York,” *LIFE Magazine*, February 17, 1947.

⁵² Eileen J. Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?: Gendered Representations of Puerto Ricans in the US Press, 1940–50,” *Radical History Review* 2017, no. 128 (May 2017): 173–98, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-3857866>.

“Puerto Rican problem.” By this point, the press claimed, the city was knee-deep in a crisis; an irreversible shift in the urban fabric was underway. Migrants from the island settling in New York’s Puerto Rican enclaves were not depicted as any other struggling minority group experiencing difficulties navigating a new environment. Instead, they were described using the descriptors “creeping,” “crawling,” “seeping,” “flooding,” “swarming,” and “teeming”⁵³ – as peoples whose very existence posed a risk to disrupting both the economy and the peaceful existences of their new home. As one journalist bemoaned, “Everything that New York City stands for in the way of progress, culture, and communal leadership is forgotten in the areas where the Puerto Ricans have moved in.”⁵⁴

Another source of public panic rested on fears that Puerto Rican migrants would fail to successfully integrate themselves within American life – specifically, that they would transport the very same issues and conditions they had endured on the island over to New York. This conception paints Puerto Ricans as stagnant and immutable peoples who are stuck in a bygone place and time. Within the public psyche, depictions of the *arrabales* (shantytowns) on the island were a hallmark of American discourse regarding Puerto Rico during colonial rule. Here, not only did the image of the *arrabal* become the most widely circulated caricature of Puerto Rico in the States, Puerto Rico, in the eyes of Americans, became an *arrabal*.⁵⁵ As a nothing but shantytown, it seemed, the United States colonial projection of Puerto Rico was a culture of diseased, poor, and crippled families living rudimentary in one-room shacks that did not meet the

⁵³ Findlay.

⁵⁴ Allan Keller, “Crime Festers in Bulging Tenements,” *New York World Telegram* (1931-1966), Oct 1947.

⁵⁵ Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?”

criteria of an American “home” in the eyes of policy makers and officials who posited that conduct within the domestic sphere reflected attitudes regarding foreign policy.

Furthermore, the press feared that Puerto Ricans bore a “culture of poverty”⁵⁶ that would precipitate overpopulation and its corollary, overcrowding, wherever Puerto Ricans settled. Again, depictions of the island-as-slum prevailed in the American psyche: just as the slums of San Juan absorbed extreme population shifts due to the internal migration of agricultural laborers in search for work in the years following US-led industrialization initiatives on the island,⁵⁷ Americans worried that Puerto Rican migrants would recreate such conditions in the city. Indeed, New York journalists consistently expressed disgust at the Puerto Ricans themselves living in crowded tenements and thereby continuing depraved practices of living. They placed blame on the migrants for residing in such squalid conditions without much or any acknowledgement that such a crisis stemmed from conditions individual tenants cannot control: the shortage of affordable housing and the shoddy practices of unscrupulous landlords who packed newcomers into one room apartments in illegally converted brownstones or rooming houses and into legally converted “hotel” rooms.⁵⁸ It did not help that Puerto Ricans had the reputation of being from the *arrabal* which shaped what Americans perceived to be tolerable standards of living for this group.

In addition to this reporting on Puerto Ricans’ crowded living arrangements, the New York press further scrutinized this mode of living by disparaging Puerto Ricans’ broken families and alleged dependence on welfare and other systems of state relief. It was feared that as Puerto Ricans invaded New York and carried over a “relief culture,” their demands for and abuse of

⁵⁶ Dena Motley, “The Culture of Poverty in Puerto Rico and New York,” *Social Security Bulletin*, September 1967, 6.

⁵⁷ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*.

⁵⁸ Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*.

welfare would strain the public budgets of the city and the state.⁵⁹ In this way, the press made the assertion that Puerto Ricans in New York carried over the same dependence on welfare and state aid as was the case in the homeland. Similarly, Puerto Rico itself has a long legacy of reliance on federal aid from the United States to remain financially afloat. While Eileen Findlay holds that these moves and attitudes constitute a “fresh New Deal twist to anti-immigrant rhetoric,”⁶⁰ they also serve to alienate Puerto Ricans further from the Cold War ideal of domestic suburban tranquility.

Broken families were only part of the concern surrounding the perverted Puerto Rican slum domestic. In a national environment that touted the rigid ideal of the family consisting of the breadwinner husband, homemaker wife, and respectable children, the New York press circulated representations of the Puerto Rican family unit that perverted such norms. Emanating from the narratives regarding the link between Puerto Ricans and the problem of overcrowding and overpopulation, perhaps the most incriminating accusations brought forth were that Puerto Rican men and women refused to follow “respectable” family practices when it came to bearing children. This deviation from sexual norms caught the attention of the Department of Health’s Division of Social Hygiene, who in 1955 conducted a report on the presence of venereal disease in the Puerto Rican population in New York.⁶¹ This indicates a pointed effort by the city government to study this group’s sexual and reproductive behavior vis-à-vis the discipline of public health’s technocratic managerial framework; which is significant because it shows that city agencies are invested in intervening in such matters.

⁵⁹ “Tide of Migrants Pushing Relief Load Through the Roof,” *New York World Telegram* (1931-1966), Oct 22, 1946.

⁶⁰ Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?”

⁶¹ Jules E. Vandow, “Venereal Disease among Puerto Ricans in New York City,” *Public Health Reports* (1896-1970) 70, no. 12 (1955): 1242–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4589333>.

In different ways, Puerto Rican men and women each were accused of observing practices that made them sexually and morally suspect. Puerto Rican men, on the one hand, allegedly did not work, yet continued to father children. Puerto Rican women, on the other, bore too many children out of wedlock with multiple partners.⁶² Sanchez-Korrol offers one explanation for this behavior: the recent history of Puerto Ricans as migrant laborers traversing the island in search for work and better opportunity initiated a shift in societal expectations of the family and the home.⁶³ This social destabilization eroded longstanding patterns of family life and ties to the land. In this way, employment woes on the island had led Puerto Rican workers to adopt a lifestyle of transience that corrupted normative family values and Western ideas of space.

Nonetheless, the drive to physically reproduce supposedly clouded Puerto Ricans from more enterprising pursuits. While it appeared that women who did not seek welfare were more successful at finding work than their male counterparts who allegedly failed to secure jobs, these women workers only managed to labor for meager wages in sweatshops.⁶⁴ Here, the pervasive image of the un- or underemployed Puerto Rican worker made them appear to be lazy, passive, and infantilized. The press sought to explain their miserable conditions in the workplace and the home by deeming them a group whose complacency is what allowed for them to fall victim to political “tricks” by the left-wing.

By the latter end of the 1940s, the increasingly anticommunist New York press regularly noted the large amount of Puerto Rican backing for Vito Marcantonio, an Italian-American lawyer and politician of the American Labor Party who represented East Harlem in the United

⁶² Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?”

⁶³ Haslip-Viera, “The Evolution of the Latino/a Community in New York City: Early Seventeenth Century to the Present.”

⁶⁴ Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?”

States Congress. In line with characterizations of Puerto Ricans as an apathetic and passive group, the press alleged that Marcantonio's campaign deceived marginalized peoples into aligning themselves alongside his radicalism. Marcantonio, equipped with a reputation for supporting Puerto Rican independence, denouncing United States intervention on the island, and advocating for the rights of workers, promoted these issues in his campaign for the New York mayorship in 1949.

According to Edgardo Melendez, the 1949 mayoral election in New York City was a turning point in the political incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the city and the United States. Its significance as the first transnational political event in Puerto Rican politics set an enduring example for how politics between the island and the mainland ought to be administered in years to come.⁶⁵ During this election, however, the question of how to govern Puerto Rican arrivals became a hot-button issue that drew concern from both the governments of New York and Puerto Rico. As the press helped lead the public campaign against migration between New York and the island, hopeful candidates for the Office of the Mayor, including incumbent Mayor William O'Dwyer, drew attention to this wave of postwar migration and its concomitant social challenges. He, in accord with the media, argued that entry of more migrants would exacerbate already acute challenges from the housing crisis, unemployment, welfare abuse, crime, delinquency, illness, unsanitary behaviors, and a perpetual worry that Puerto Ricans would fail to assimilate into the broader American society.⁶⁶ Together, these were the same prejudices that intensified the "Puerto Rican problem."

⁶⁵ Edgardo Melendez, "Vito Marcantonio, Puerto Rican Migration, and the 1949 Mayoral Election in New York City," *Centro Journal, The City University of New York XXII*, no. 2 (2010): 199–233.

⁶⁶ Melendez.

“Everybody and his brother,” wrote José Monserrat, an early leader among Puerto Ricans in New York, is “concerned with Puerto Rico.”⁶⁷ Citing the election of 1949 as the factor that led to the resurfacing of the “so-called Puerto Rican problem,” Monserrat, and the rest of his team at the Migration Division within the Department of Labor of Puerto Rico, lamented over the ways that Puerto Rican arrivals contributed to the issues of poor living standards, reliance on relief, poor health, and delinquency, among others. But ultimately, they concluded that public disapproval for such migration was a form of scapegoating one group of perceived outsiders for challenges that remained city-wide problems. Yet in the shadow of the Cold War, the “Puerto Rican problem” could not merely be referring to a set of problems isolated between New York and the island. While as a group, Puerto Ricans’ sympathies for communism presented a threat to a coherent American political identity that championed the ideals of capitalism and liberal democracy, a new concern arose that Puerto Ricans’ congregate living in New York slums were a threat to the safety and security of the city, the United States, and the larger Western World. Allegedly, due to the sheer concentrations of Puerto Ricans living in proximity to one another, these “communist-breeding slums,” as the right-wing journal *The American Way* advocated, needed to be broken up before they “spread like a festering sore until it endangers the social health not only of New York, but of the nation.”⁶⁸

Rather than “be led down the blind alley of communism to get fair treatment in this city,” claimed Mayor O’Dwyer, when the “hour of need comes, there is an agency known as the Welfare Department.”⁶⁹ During the course of his campaign, O’Dwyer stoked the flames of the

⁶⁷ “The So-Called Puerto Rican Problem,” Joseph Monserrat Papers, Series III, Box 8, Folder 1, Centro Library and Archives, Hunter College, The City University of New York.

⁶⁸ Melendez, “Vito Marcantonio, Puerto Rican Migration, and the 1949 Mayoral Election in New York City.”

⁶⁹ Melendez.

“Puerto Rican problem” by rhetorically linking Puerto Ricans to welfare abuse and communism. These two items were central to Marcantonio’s supposedly communist tactics that he and his “communist stooges”⁷⁰ deployed to deceive Puerto Ricans into believing that they could gain increased access to city services through their vote. Though Puerto Ricans legally had United States citizenship, attacks like these shaped the way that this status materialized, specifically in the experiences of living in New York as new arrivals. Taking note of this, Marcantonio stated that “the Puerto Rican people in this city are being attacked.... forcing them into a condition of second-class citizenship and thereby making them ‘ready victims of a cheap labor market.’”⁷¹

The Mayor’s Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs set out to specifically address the twin issues of Puerto Ricans and a prevailing sympathy towards communism. While the existence of such an entity reveals the extent to which Puerto Rican radicalism was recognized as a legitimate threat to the New York political establishment, the conclusions reached by the committee show how the government approached the issue at hand. One recommendation, suggested by Commissioner of Welfare Raymond Hilliard, was that the Puerto Rican community in New York needed “guidance and leadership”⁷² from both the New York and Puerto Rican governments to curb such extremism. Of course, such a response is rife with paternalism and assumes a Puerto Rican infantilism and naivete, echoing earlier sentiments regarding a supposed “passive nature” innate to this demographic. It shows that the government perceived Puerto Rican migrants to be

⁷⁰ Melendez.

⁷¹ “Defends Puerto Ricans: Marcantonio Sees Them Forced into Second-Class Citizenship.” *New York Times* (1923-), Sep 23, 1947.

<http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/defends-puerto-ricans/docview/108068332/se-2?accountid=10226>.

⁷² Raymond M. Hilliard. “The ‘Puerto Rican Problem’ of the City of New York Department of Welfare. Submitted to Mayor William O’Dwyer,” Sept 06, 1949. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, Box 485.

impressionable, malleable, and to not fully understand what their best interests were. Moreover, of the 46 members of the committee, 20 were Puerto Ricans, many with ties to the Puerto Rican Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), who by this time was driving a propaganda campaign against Marcantonio⁷³ and articulated a more pro-American politics. Under this vision, Puerto Ricans migrants were seen as mere objects that react to policy decisions instead of subjects with agency and a voice for democratic deliberation. In response, Marcantonio resisted the narrative that Puerto Ricans needed such social and political guardrails, arguing that Puerto Rican traditions of “democratic struggle are as old as those of the American people.”⁷⁴

In the end, Marcantonio loses the election in spite his broad swath of popular support from New York’s left-leaning and racially marginalized communities. Nonetheless, this election and the politics surrounding it still cause it to be of particular interest to historians studying New York politics during this era. This election is regarded as an important factor in the political incorporation of Puerto Rican citizens, who just two years prior, were not even mentioned in the *Life* magazine article depicting the “people of New York.” In the span of two years, Puerto Ricans in the city went from being an ostensibly invisible underclass without political pull to one of the largest and most visible non-white minority ethnic groups in New York. Their community presence threatened the political establishment and their exercise of citizenship troubled politicians and lawmakers who had to adjust to the new reality of a changing constituency. Melendez finds that the demise of Marcantonio led the way for the Puerto Rican government and its Migration Division (within the Department of Labor) to represent the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Though it might have seemed that the Migration Division and

⁷³ Findlay, “Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?”

⁷⁴ Melendez, “Vito Marcantonio, Puerto Rican Migration, and the 1949 Mayoral Election in New York City.”

the PPD successfully squashed Puerto Rican political radicalism through their anti-Marcantonio campaign, Puerto Ricans continued to inhabit and possess the same social pathologies that labeled them as racially suspect peoples living in “communist-breeding slums.” Crises regarding the public perception of their rates of delinquency, sanitary practices, sexual codes, and standards of living persisted. They remained a force to be contended with. Thus, the “Puerto Rican problem” was still largely unanswered – this uncertainty calls into focus a continuation of the age-old dilemma: what do to about *social* incorporation?

CHAPTER 4

Crisis in the Slums and the Road to Clearance

Central to the frenzy concerning the perils of Puerto Rican radicalism infiltrating the American political arena was the alarming reality that Puerto Ricans were citizens of the United States. Different from other immigrants, Puerto Ricans' migration to New York could not be restricted. As citizens, they eagerly exercised their rights to vote and to apply for public welfare, another persistent attack in the political discourse at this time. Despite these actions being well within their rights to exercise, Puerto Ricans were routinely reported to "abuse" their citizenship status, collude with "radical social workers," and sought to undermine and destroy the American system at large.⁷⁵ In sum, this "abuse" of citizenship also posed a threat to the "sanity and sanitation" of New York City.⁷⁶

However, the PPD countered this assertion by arguing that instead, the attainment of citizenship was more of a mechanism in the service of successful Puerto Rican assimilation – rather than a threat to the integrity of the United States' body politic, as the anti-Puerto Rican press had warned.⁷⁷ The Migration Division's public relations made sure to enunciate this claim. In a televised speech, José Monserrat touched upon the ways that American citizenship is tied to an opportunity for socioeconomic ascendance: "Most Puerto Ricans in New York have come to seek greater economic opportunity. This is the right of every American citizen."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ "Welfare, Reds, and Puerto Ricans," *New York World Telegram (1931-1966)*, Oct 22, 1947.

⁷⁶ "Says Welfare Dept. Winked at Immorality," *New York World Telegram (1931-1966)*, Nov 12, 1947.

⁷⁷ Findlay, "Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?"

⁷⁸ "Draft of New York TV Program, April 03, 1960." Joseph Monserrat Papers, Series III, Box 8, Folder 2, Centro Library and Archives, Hunter College, The City University of New York.

This language of “rights” to “opportunity” pervades many of the reports issued by the Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing under Robert F. Wagner, Jr. In the report “65 Steps for Better Housing for All New Yorkers,” the Committee recognized the “right of all sections of the Nation’s population to seek for themselves areas of greatest opportunity... We believe it is the City’s duty to see to it that the new residents have an opportunity to live decently and to raise their children in a good environment.”⁷⁹ This is significant, because rather than arguing that citizens have rights to concrete goods, such as decent, safe, and sanitary housing, the Committee only defended the right to the *opportunity* to achieve such a standard of living. In this way, the government articulated that they did not shoulder the burden of providing American citizens, including Puerto Rican arrivals, a decent living space. As a result, the private market for housing was believed to have to step in to fulfill such needs; yet the extreme end of the unfettered private market for housing was the creation of slum districts, where ordinary people were at the whim of private landlords who maximized profits by squeezing in as many tenants as possible in the spaces they had.⁸⁰ In line with this reasoning, the Report also maintains that “more and more, good wages and salaries and individual enterprise will be the means of building up the self-reliance and initiative of these newcomers. Good private housing should be increasingly available to them...as their economic status improves,”⁸¹ indicating that, according to the Better Housing Committee, individual success on the job market is the key to upward mobility in housing. This point enunciates that while American politicians recognize that oftentimes Puerto Rican migrants come to New York in search of a better life, they must rely on themselves, and

⁷⁹ “65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers.”

⁸⁰ Hilary Ballon, “Robert Moses and Urban Renewal: The Title I Program,” in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007), 94–115.

⁸¹ 65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers.”

their individual work ethic use the American “private sense of responsibility for social adjustment”⁸² to achieve such things.

At the same time, while citizens are only afforded the right to an opportunity to achieve decent living, the city government conveyed that they had “the right to expect that these newcomers will, as did the earlier immigrants from Europe, strive to be good citizens, good neighbors, good tenants or home owners. There is not enough public awareness of the problem of providing good housing for our newly arrived citizens. Its seriousness should be made known and excessive in-migration discouraged if decent housing facilities are not available and cannot be provided with reasonable promptness.”⁸³ Through this report, the city expressed that they had the right to expect for these newcomers will, like the upwardly mobile and vocally anticommunist immigrant from Europe in year past, exemplify “good citizenship” through how they conducted themselves as residents. This connection is significant because it prescribes a mode of “good citizenship” that is conditional upon metrics housing – both in that “decent” housing has to be obtained on the private market and then maintained in accordance to American standards.

One way to explore the contradictions residing within the embodiment of good citizenship” and the larger circumstances that produce behavior is by examining the discourse around youth delinquency, which highlights how the environment produces behavioral and

⁸² Peter Kihss. "Puerto Rico Combats Exodus by a Drive to Raise Incomes: Puerto Rican Goal Is a Better Living Puerto Rican Migrants Come here with the Hope of Learning and Earning a Better Living." *New York Times* (1923-), Feb 24, 1953.

<http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/puerto-rico-combats-exodus-drive-raise-incomes/docview/112599268/se-2?accountid=10226>.

⁸³ 65 Steps Toward Better Housing For All New Yorkers.”

societal outcomes. Beginning in the 1940s, fear mongers viewed the waves of Puerto Rican and Black settlement in New York as a threat to the integrity of the city's underlying social fabric. As hysterics portrayed Puerto Rican men and women to defy respectable American gender and family values within the domestic space, a moral panic arose that accused their children of transmitting such crudeness outside the boundaries of the home and thereby disrupting the flow of everyday life for the general public.⁸⁴ Postwar frenzy concerning juvenile delinquency highlighted a middle-class fear of a working-class youth culture and an expression of popular culture distributed by new channels in mass media.⁸⁵ This represented the possibility of the youth to express themselves in ways that defied adult authority and normative social conventions. All in all, fear of a changing youth culture represented a perceived "loss of sanity" that undergirded a widespread hysteria about wayward youth and juvenile crime, particularly in the nation's urban centers.

Many factors supply the structural context surrounding the rise of juvenile crime in New York during the postwar years. According to Eric Schneider, changes in the political economy and the ethnic landscape of the city, transformations of the physical environment following efforts in urban renewal, and postwar suburbanization patterns all affected adolescents in profound ways that have contributed to a rise in delinquent and anti-social behavior. As migrants and immigrants entered the city in droves and competed for increasingly limited residential space, jobs, and other economic resources, inter-ethnic conflict heightened. Young people in the city internalized these tensions and organized themselves into bands of youth gangs along racial,

⁸⁴ Findlay, "Dangerous Dependence or Productive Masculinity?"

⁸⁵ Robert W. Snyder, "A Useless and Terrible Death: The Michael Farmer Case, 'Hidden Violence,' and New York City in the Fifties," *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 226–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144209351107>.

ethnic, and neighborhood distinctions to both defend territory and establish a sense of place and belonging in their new homes.⁸⁶

Patterns of racial and ethnic settlement into New York show that Puerto Ricans and African Americans faced similar experiences of discrimination – a mutual segregation – that provoked the formation of proximal communities. Puerto Rican settlement on the fringes of Black neighborhoods illustrate this, and these patterns of settlement are an enduring effect of Puerto Rican racial construction in North America, especially after the Harlem Riots in 1935. Yet, Puerto Rican youths banded together and found a space to negotiate their racial identity. They considered themselves “Spanish” and fought against any identification with African Americans, and this was often articulated through physical violence and other delinquent behavior.⁸⁷

However, at the time, many observers viewed the uptick in juvenile crime absent the dimensions of structural changes related to the economy, race, ethnicity, and neighborhood. Instead, juvenile delinquency was frequently explained through the wrongdoings of individual actors. This framing permeated the discourse in New York, where proposed measures to curb rates in such crime rested on the solution to be individual acts of accountability. For example, the City Council in 1954 proposed a vandalism bill that attempted to fine parents and guardians of children under sixteen-years-old up to twenty-five dollars where the delinquent behaviors of the child resulted in the destruction of property.⁸⁸ This measure shows that juvenile criminal behavior was understood to be a consequence of parents’ failures in childrearing, or a general

⁸⁶ Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*.

⁸⁷ Schneider.

⁸⁸ “Sharkey Extends Child Vandal Bill; City Council Measure to Fine Parents Is to Cover Private and Public Property,” *The New York Times* (1923-), April 7, 1954, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1954/04/07/archives/sharkey-extends-child-vandal-bill-city-council-measure-to-fine.html>.

lack of proper family values in the home, instead of it being a predictable outcome of stressed circumstances in urban life. In response to the proposition, Councilman Stanley Isaacs pointed to the slum as the root of delinquent youth behavior, rather than the so-called corrupt home: “vandals tend to be victims of broken homes...and in other cases, thanks to the failure of the city to meet its housing problems and enforce its occupancy laws, the entire family is crowded into one or two rooms and the children driven to the streets by miserable housing conditions for which they are in no sense responsible.”⁸⁹ This response by Isaacs makes the argument placing blame on individuals and their immediate families is misguided; that conditions in housing are responsible for aggravating negative behavioral outcomes in the youth, and that such miserable conditions are an outcome of the city’s failure to meet residents’ housing needs.

National panic regarding wayward youths’ supposed loss of sanity was only one part of the discourse framing ethnic change as a public safety issue. The press also promoted fears that foreign arrivals constituted a threat to general safety, arguing that they were carriers of illness and people who disregarded regimens of personal hygiene. Reports by social and government agencies during this time constantly referenced problems found in newly settled communities. One even described conditions in an immigrant neighborhood by saying: “The tenants seem to wholly disregard personal cleanliness, and the very first principles of decency, their general appearance and actions corresponding with their wretched abodes. This indifference to personal and domiciliary cleanliness is doubtless acquired for a long familiarity with the loathsome surroundings, wholly at variance with all moral or social improvements.”⁹⁰ These attitudes make the claim that immigrant or migrant groups are innately unhygienic due to how they have been

⁸⁹ Letter to the New York Herald Tribune, 1954. New York Public Library, Stanley Isaacs Papers, Box 25, Folder: “City Council Vandalism Bill 1954.”

⁹⁰ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed.”

accustomed to live in the homeland, and this is reflected in how they conduct themselves in their homes in New York. Furthermore, it is an argument concerning fears that Puerto Ricans would fail to assimilate to life in New York. However, such arguments tend to presume a causal relationship between one's culture of origin and a disregard for cleanliness or public health. Journalistic reporting of the "Puerto Rican problem" made the same claims about Puerto Rican arrivals to New York, who supposedly threatened public wellbeing with their high rates of tuberculosis and debased sexual practices which were breeding grounds for venereal disease.

Yet, to merely attribute such outcomes to foreign cultures ignores the interplay between the arrangement of the physical environment and such deleterious effects. Based on reports of overcrowding and meager amenities in old tenement-style housing, it is feasible to trace poor health outcomes to these structural flaws. Poor ventilation, lack of windows, substandard heating and plumbing facilities, and lack of space all contribute to the spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Furthermore, it can be argued that the arrangement of the overcrowded slum housing unit was not conducive to protecting the nuclear family structure, thus fostering the creation of families that deviate from that norm.

In reality, the Department of Health found the tuberculosis mortality rate among Puerto Ricans is two to three times that for the city overall.⁹¹ In the same article, it was reported that several members of a mayor's committee studying the Puerto Rican problem directed their approach to examining these "evils" improving slum conditions in general, showing that at least at the city government level, there was a conscious reckoning happening that connected a certain

⁹¹ Grutzner, "City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed."

set of poor health and behavioral outcomes to the conditions in a slum, rather than an innate flaw with cultural or ethnic origins.

At the same time, reporters sympathetic to the plight of Puerto Rican migrants and the Spanish-language press tried to push back against such accusations of disease and uncleanness as a means to promote redeemable self-representations that countered the overarching trends in the discourse. They claimed that while racial discrimination might explain residential segregation and relegation to the city's slum districts, Puerto Ricans' homes were found to be exceptionally "clean and tidy, except for the cockroaches and rats that are so firmly entrenched in the old tenements that no efforts by individual tenants can permanently dislodge them."⁹² Similarly, a similar type of counter-narration occurs in the case of *La Prensa*'s reporting of Lino Rivera. They described him a well-mannered boy from a home "characterized by an admirable cleanliness despite its modesty."⁹³ By emphasizing Rivera's home's level of cleanliness, the writers at *La Prensa* hoped to gain back some level of respectability for Rivera and the broader Puerto Rican community in New York. In this way, if the Puerto Rican community could no longer control for how they were racialized under the North American racial binary, at the very least, they could attempt to control narratives pertaining to their cleanliness – and by extension, their respectability – in hopes of discursively distancing themselves from social pathologies tied to blackness. Yet, these instances of offering counter representations did little to offset the larger discourses at play that shaped how the wider public understood Puerto Ricans' sanitary practices and relationship with disease.

⁹² Grutzner, "City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed."

⁹³ Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

Ultimately, the disease-laden discourse characterizing Puerto Rican migrants in New York became inextricably linked to language describing the slums and neighborhoods they inhabited. “With this sketchy diagnosis of the origin of the disease, let me go on to the happier discussion of the cure. It is safe to say that almost no city needs to tolerate slums. There are plenty of ways of getting rid of them,”⁹⁴ wrote Moses in a 1945 op-ed in *The Atlantic*. Slums were compared to “cancers”⁹⁵ on the city that were only curable through a “bold and aseptic surgery. Delay is dangerous, if not fatal,”⁹⁶ regarded Robert Moses, New York’s most prominent voice for slum clearance, of the Lincoln Square area. Lincoln Square’s reputation as a slum overcrowded by Puerto Rican migrants also led to Moses calling the area “congested land.”⁹⁷ Further, he considered the neighborhood to be composed of “sixty-odd central diseased and rapidly deteriorating acres [that] can be rebuilt and made healthy only by condemning land and selling it to sponsors”⁹⁸ (referring to private land redevelopers). Here, the use of medical language is something that has long been employed to “naturalize the growth of slums and justify the rooting out of their ‘cancerous’ effect on the municipal and national body politic.”⁹⁹ But by invoking this medical language, Moses was able to characterize what he perceived as blight in the slum to be objectively in need of vigorous intervention – specifically, in the form of widescale clearance and redevelopment.

⁹⁴ Robert Moses, “Slums and City Planning,” *The Atlantic*, January 1, 1945, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/01/slums-and-city-planning/306544/>.

⁹⁵ Ballon, “Robert Moses and Urban Renewal: The Title I Program.”

⁹⁶ “Lincoln Square, Talk by Robert Moses at a Luncheon of the New York Building Congress, Hotel Sheraton-Astor, New York City, at Noon, October 26, 1956.” The La Guardia & Wagner Archives, Collection “Housing – Slum Clearance Committee Lincoln Square (5)” 1956, Box 146, Folder 2066.

⁹⁷ Robert Moses, *Robert Moses on Slum Clearance*, 1958, New York City Municipal Archives, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/robert-moses-on-slum-clearance/>.

⁹⁸ “Lincoln Square, Talk by Robert Moses at a Luncheon of the New York Building Congress, Hotel Sheraton-Astor.”

⁹⁹ Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The inescapable effect of slum clearance is tenant relocation, whose hardships, according to James Felt, chairman of the City Planning Commission, were “necessary birth pains”¹⁰⁰ in the mission of urban renewal. While the process of tenant relocation varied significantly across New York’s slum clearance projects, tenant relocation at the Lincoln Square site is particularly interesting because there existed some guidelines as to what qualified as a suitable home for a relocated site tenant. Writers of relocation guidelines seemed to suggest that relocation offered some amount of promise for the families who had to be relocated off the site. They believed that by moving families away from the slum, “the evils of whole families living in a single room without the ordinary necessities of adequate sanitary, heating, ventilation and cooking facilities will be banished if this program is adopted as a new code of guidance for relocation of tenants from potential and planned private housing sites.”¹⁰¹ To be sure, this is a lofty vision because it paints the forced removal of families from their living spaces to have a net positive effect. Though not all tenants at the Lincoln Square site were successfully relocated under the same guidelines or programs due to differences in family size, income status, or other things,¹⁰² an analysis of some proposed guidelines for what made a suitable home for relocated tenants shows what types of qualities constituted an elevated form of living in the minds of the relocators.

Five features of the relocation plan proposed by Hulan Jack, the Manhattan Borough President, emphasized the need for “structural soundness; complete private bath and toilet; central heating and hot water supply; adequate ventilation (window in every room); and adequate size for decent family living (no overcrowding)”¹⁰³ in order for a home to be considered safe,

¹⁰⁰ James Felt, Interview with West Side News. The La Guardia & Wagner Archives, Collection “Housing – Slum Clearance Committee Lincoln Square (5)” 1956, Box 146, Folder 2066.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Hulan Jack, 25 March 1959. The La Guardia & Wagner Archives, New York City Housing Authority Collection, Box 0073B7, Folder 8.

¹⁰² Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*.

¹⁰³ Letter from Hulan Jack, 25 March 1959.

sanitary, and decent. Within this vision of the improved domestic space, valued amenities in the home appeared to also promote an ideal of best home conduct. In other words, the emphasized qualities of homes fit for a relocated tenant communicate precisely how they were expected to live and conduct everyday routines – and in many ways, this directly contrasted with how life operated in the slum.

For example, the need for private bath and toilet in each home unit suggested that relocated tenants were expected to conduct personal hygiene regimens with greater frequency. By mandating that each home has a private bath and toilet, tenants gained increased access to such facilities and as a result, were able to practice personal cleanliness more readily. Furthermore, the needs for central heating, hot water, and adequate ventilation implied a similar health-related notion: that suitable apartments were conducive to preventing the spread of infectious diseases and promoting physical well-being. Lastly, the need for guardrails against overcrowding showed that tenant relocators had vested interests in protecting the sanctity of the nuclear family unit. By stressing the need for a model of “decent” living to take shape in this way, people involved in tenant relocation and slum clearance also upheld a new view of the ideal home that rested upon the need for family units to maintain a level of privacy and separation from one another. No longer is sharing rooms or bathroom facilities between family units appropriate; the American ideal is for each family to have their own. In many ways, such standards of living worked to elevate a mode of respectable home conduct in line with Cold War-inflected domestic ideals that emphasized a level of domestic tranquility.

Also, one could not disregard that 18% of relocated tenants from the Lincoln Square site were classified as Puerto Rican; and 23% of relocated tenants were recipients of welfare.¹⁰⁴ By this indication, we can understand how efforts to reform the domestic spaces that once inhabited the Lincoln Square area cannot be divorced from raced or classed implications. As these spaces were heavily populated by Puerto Rican migrants and welfare recipients, the eradication of the Lincoln Square area, then, is a simultaneous elimination of the social pathologies that these groups possessed and fostered within the slum. Through efforts to remove deteriorated and dilapidated physical structures, perceivably corrupt organizations of domestic space are wiped away as well. In the aftermath, new guidelines for suitable living spaces for relocated tenants worked to elevate a new mode of personal conduct – one that the Mayor’s Committee for Better Housing would have approved of being a practice of “good citizenship” as it is exercised through domestic practice.

In this way, slum clearance became a mechanism to control for some aspects of the “Puerto Rican problem,” at least in the context of the Lincoln Square project. By attacking the slum, slum clearance and urban renewal boosters attempted to locate the roots of Puerto Rican social pathologization; by drawing up standards dictating guidelines for suitable housing units, relocated tenants were expected to move to new housing units where they could demonstrate “good citizenship” through the reinforcement of strict boundaries demarcating privacy in the domestic sphere. As the connective social tissue in the slum became eradicated by bulldozers, so did meaningful connections between residents of the slum whose collective existence posed a threat to the “sanity and sanitation” of American life through their supposed abuse of citizenship

¹⁰⁴ Current Management and Relocation Problems, Department of Welfare Recipients, June, 1959. The La Guardia & Wagner Archives, Collection “Housing – Slum Clearance Committee Lincoln Square (1)” 1959, Box 146, Folder 2068.

and leaning towards political radicalism. Furthermore, the reformed home became the setting for where “respectable” family values were to be practiced. The suitable apartment for the relocated tenant was purported to be conducive to the Cold War-era model of the nuclear family and all its attendant values. The American family’s practice of rigid gender roles and orientation toward American futurity through the raising of respectable children-citizens is central to the promise found in this view of domestic tranquility. By incorporating Puerto Rican New Yorkers into this vision, a new model of the of the Puerto Rican citizen is formed while an older model is seemingly eradicated – these models of being are defined by their domestic contexts.

Much of the rationalization work underlying projects in slum clearance relied on there being objective or clearly visible signs of disorder to justify their removal. However, claims of apparent physical disorder were not always supported by realities at hand. In site-specific brochures written in preparation for various slum clearance projects throughout his tenure, Moses included photographs of blighted areas that he thought captured objective slum conditions. Themis Chronopoulos sees that a contemporary look back on photos included in site brochures show that what is considered blight is less of an objective judgement, but more of a subjective selection. Many of the depictions of blight in these brochures, in fact, captured scenes with “attractive streetscapes with beautiful brownstones, solid apartment buildings, and vibrant commercial areas;”¹⁰⁵ but the frame of objectivity under which such documents were written – and the authority they seemed to possess – helped promote the claim that the “blighted” nature of working-class and immigrant (and migrant) neighborhoods were objectively disorderly and

¹⁰⁵ Themis Chronopoulos, “Robert Moses and the Visual Dimension of Physical Disorder: Efforts to Demonstrate Urban Blight in the Age of Slum Clearance,” *Journal of Planning History* 13, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 207–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513213487149>.

thereby ripe for elimination and redevelopment. In accordance with this line of logic, other published slum clearance materials attempted to endorse the idea that the occurrence of blight is a natural process. In the Preliminary Report for the Lincoln Square project, the Committee on Slum Clearance attributed “the blighted condition” of the area to the “natural development following the growth and expansion of the New York metropolitan region.”¹⁰⁶ By claiming that the city’s growth (both in demographic change and in suburban expansion) naturally leads to blight in some areas, the authors also insinuated that the such a process is inevitable; that it could not be planned against during the process of formation. This report also promoted arguments for slum clearance that relied on determinations of “land value” to say that what the land is being used for currently is not the most economically sensible: “The redevelopment of the Lincoln Square... stems from the recognition that the general neighborhood lying immediately to the northwest of the central business and entertainment district of Manhattan is far too valuable to the City of New York to be permitted to remain as a blighted area of deteriorated and obsolescent structures housing substandard dwelling units and marginal stores.”¹⁰⁷ By weighing different land uses against one another, and by applying financial metrics of analyzing land value, slum clearance backers are then making an economic argument for slum clearance in that it would have a positive effect on the city’s economy.

In most histories of urban renewal and slum clearance in New York, economic rationales provide the brunt of the justification for episodes of widescale slum clearance. Indeed, Title I of the 1949 Housing Act allowed for Robert Moses to dramatically transform the built landscape of

¹⁰⁶ Preliminary Report: Lincoln Square Project, City of New York. Committee on Slum Clearance, July 20, 1956.

¹⁰⁷ Preliminary Report: Lincoln Square Project, City of New York. Committee on Slum Clearance, July 20, 1956.

New York by providing him a mechanism for public-private partnerships in slum clearance and subsequent redevelopment. Even after the passing of the 1954 Housing Act, which offered monies for tenement rehabilitation alongside slum clearance and rebuilding, Moses maintained his initial posture and espoused that only full-scale clearance and rebuilding were most cost-effective.¹⁰⁸

As for the Lincoln Square site, the economic rationale still held true; Moses conducted an episode in slum clearance that sought to eradicate what was once an entire neighborhood. Yet this site is also significant because the construction of the rest of the Lincoln Center site (including the performing arts center, a campus for Fordham University, and a new headquarters for the Red Cross) came with a specific set of geopolitical implications inflected with Cold War ideologies.¹⁰⁹ The goals of Lincoln Center, then, “stood as a kind of cultural corollary to many military and political goals of the Cold War”¹¹⁰ during a moment in American history where the nation was trying re-establish itself as a capital of modernity, cultural maturity, and a bulwark against the threat of communism.

As a result, the theatre itself also became imbued with such implications and connotations. It represented a projection of cultural superiority practiced within a highbrow lifestyle and other circles of the elite; and as a standing structure, it reified dynamics of power and space that made refugees out of previous residents of San Juan Hill. The theatre is also the

¹⁰⁸ Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*.

¹⁰⁹ Wesley Janz, “Theaters of Power: Architectural and Cultural Productions,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 50, no. 4 (1997): 230–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1425436>.

¹¹⁰ Julia L. Foulkes, “The Other West Side Story: Urbanization and the Arts Meet at Lincoln Center,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2007): 227–47.

site of discursive and narrative control and dominance, where the interplay between such powers is exemplified on the stage.

In the 1957 Broadway rendition of *West Side Story*, which occurred during the midst of rapid change on the actual West Side of Manhattan, the song “America” offered lyrics that disparaged Puerto Rican life on the island:

*Puerto Rico . . .
 You ugly island . . .
 Island of tropic diseases.
 Always the hurricanes blowing,
 Always the population growing . . .
 And the money owing,
 And the babies crying,
 And the bullets flying.*

While the song was voiced by a character with origins in Puerto Rico, the lyrics themselves were a product of dominant and oppressive modes of power that manifest ubiquitously. To say, “Puerto Rico... You ugly island... Island of tropic diseases” makes the discursive move that otherizes Puerto Rican people in such way that draws upon the characterizations of ugliness and illness. Critics of the 1957 *West Side Story* loudly voiced their concerns about this representation of Latino otherness, but their protests were blatantly disregarded by creators Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim:

“[We] got a letter complaining about the one line "Island of tropic diseases," outraged on behalf of Puerto Rico, claiming that we were making fun of Puerto Rico and being sarcastic about it. But I didn't change it. Opening night in Washington we had a telephone message from *La Prensa* saying that they'd heard about this song and we would be picketed when we came to New York unless we omitted or changed the song. They made particular reference to "Island of tropic diseases:" telling us everybody knows Puerto Rico is free of disease. And it wasn't just that line they objected to. We were insulting not only Puerto Rico but the Puerto Ricans and all immigrants. They didn't hear "Nobody knows in America / Puerto Rico's in America – it's a little hard to hear at that tempo. We met

that threat by doing nothing about it, not changing a syllable, and we were not picketed.”¹¹¹

Here, the existence of the theatre as a setting of discursive control represents in the disparate practices and experiences of power for groups that do not have equal agency in that space. Since 1957, the lyrics to the song “America” have been augmented to portray Puerto Rico in more favorable ways, but undoubtedly, a critique of the Euro-American dominant representations of Puerto Rican otherness is always in order. Tracing the history of anti-Puerto Rican hostility in New York breaks open how we understand narrative and plot of *West Side Story* – by contextualizing and complicating this period of rapid transformation to the West Side, we can better understand the role that Puerto Rican migration and settlement into the city played within the layered historical processes happening in mid-century New York. Puerto Rican migration in the years after World War II disrupted and destabilized long-standing conceptions of citizenship, race, and spatial belonging in New York, as well as offset radical changes to the city the government and press had to contend with in major ways. In the end, this thesis argues that Puerto Rican arrivals’ threat to the homogeneity of the city through their slum dwelling, supposed criminality, lack of respectability, histories of transience, and other innate social pathologies posed a “Puerto Rican problem” that necessitated intense intervention. These tangled social pathologies that seemed to be innately connected to the slum became the core forces behind movements to eradicate entire swaths of such settlements and neighborhoods in the name of slum clearance and urban renewal. The repercussions of such a vast program, then, had multiple effects – not only did slum clearance work to eradicate architectural dereliction as it presents outwardly, it also cleared away deviant or corrupt organizations of domestic space as

¹¹¹ Alberto Sandoval Sanchez, “West Side Story: A Puerto Rican Reading of ‘America,’” in *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, ed. Clara E. Rodriguez, vol. 58, Handbook of Latin American Studies (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

they occurred inside these structures, as well. In doing so, slum clearance attempted to control for the “Puerto Rican problem” where it seemed to be rooted, and along the way, created a new model of urban living and life for displaced tenants that aimed to produce a new set of social outcomes that more so aligned with changing American ideals.

Ultimately, outcomes of slum clearance projects do not work in the name of urban social justice, nor do they work toward a vision of a city that is truly more equitable. In reality, under Title I especially, slum clearance’s private sector sponsors – and their profit-making interests – dictate the agendas and outcomes for such massive overhauls of the urban environment, and the social, cultural, political, racial, and symbolic changes to the space soon follow suit. While our historical distance from postwar New York and our experience in a currently thriving city may cast efforts in urban renewal to be positive successes, it is important to continually reassess past episodes of historical change and recognize that struggle, especially among working-class and immigrant/migrant groups, inherent within these moments should not be overlooked; they are crucial to building a robust understanding of major processes that had everlasting implications to New York life.

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