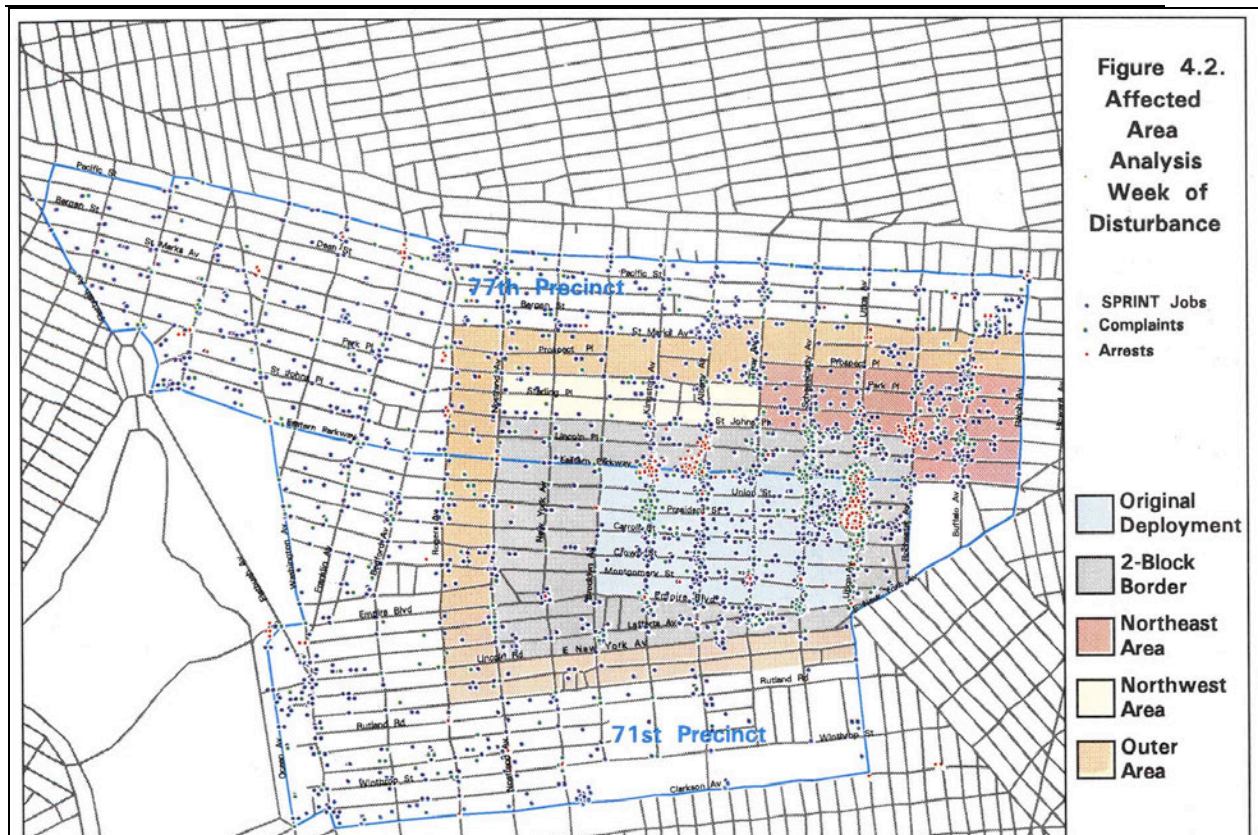


Crown Heights, 1991



J. Estrin—New York Times

Eric Busch



Preface--

To historicize a race riot with any degree of precision seems to require a certain level of comfort with narrative ambiguity and thematic disorder. In this essay, I have attempted to submit a very recent, highly emotional, and controversial event to historical analysis, and as a result, my own uncertainty traverses this piece—from the most global of explanations to the minutest of details. Given the realization that what ‘happened’ during and after the riots depends to a large extent upon which witnesses I have chosen to believe, which ideologies I am constitutionally least prepared to contest, and what I wanted to accomplish when I started, I have been forced into an oddly painful acceptance that whatever I say will be less than ‘right.’ All racially-charged events challenge their would-be chroniclers to understand them at multiple levels: the microcosmic level of

individual choice and perception, the local level of resources and the endless struggle for survival and primacy, and finally, the macrocosmic level of racial belief, group identity, and national governance. Race is truly analytical quicksilver—everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the tragic events of August 19-22nd, 1991 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in order to come to an updated understanding of how people live race in the post-Civil Rights era. Crown Heights provides a unique platform from which to interrogate community racial formation, the nontraditional role of ‘whiteness’ in the origins of modern racial disturbances, and the complex relationship between race, media, and politics.¹ Despite limited time and resource parameters, this paper attempts to evaluate how a local interest differential between groups in a community might become racialized, and how media coverage might serve to accelerate the process. The seeds of acrimony in Crown Heights, planted over thirty years before the riots, had been fertilized by the continuing shortage of housing and other resources, and further nourished, even after the riots, by over-simplified media coverage of the disagreements and occasional clashes between blacks and Hasidic neighbors. I have tried to embed the story of the riot itself into this history, rather than reducing it to background

¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant formulate the conceptual terms “racial formation,” and “racialization,” in their seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States*. According to Omi and Winant, race is a fundamental “organizing principle” of social relationships in the United States. They distinguish between micro-level identity formation, and macro-level collective social structures: economic, political, and cultural/ideological. Their theory of racial formation postulates that race penetrates and links these two “levels” of social relations, and that race is a constantly contested, non-essential, and thus “decentered” complex of social meanings that are perpetually transformed by political struggle. Omi and Winant use “racialization” to describe the process whereby racial meaning is extended to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, pgs. 59-69ß

status. To evaluate the sources of any particular hatred, it is not only beneficial, but necessary to observe its most palpable manifestations. The events on the streets of Crown Heights during the four-day disturbance were the most direct expression of the deep divisions that had long cleaved the community, and therefore deserve a place in the narrative spotlight.

The inherent difficulties of historicizing recent events and of effectively utilizing race as a category of analysis have compelled me, on occasion, to take speculative risks for the sake of the story's continuity. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to indicate where I have done so. The complex and multi-valenced local history, of which the riots were a part, now spans sixty years. It is not possible in the length of a research paper to interrogate every aspect of the disturbances, from genesis to legacy. I have chosen instead to focus on documenting what occurred during the unrest, its most obvious local causes, and some of its political consequences, in order to approximate the motivation of the actors, and to reveal how furious, and also how ephemeral, race can be.

Notwithstanding the risk of devolving into hyperbole, I believe it necessary to emphasize all that this paper does not do. To achieve as full an understanding of the riots as possible, it would be necessary to position local racial formation within larger trends of black-Jewish relations in the United States, and to provide some sense as to how individuals in Crown Heights experienced racialization on a micro-level. There are multiple points of analytical slippage that make the riots a difficult object for study, including the continual conflation race and religion where Jewishness is concerned, and the culturally heterogeneous nature of the black population of Crown Heights. Yet these

difficulties are precisely what make Crown Heights a rewarding subject of historical inquiry.

With this paper, I have tried to paint the first rough strokes on what I am certain will soon become an elaborate and detailed canvas. And indeed, for the historian, a policy of engagement with contemporary subjects like the riots often produces more questions than answers. There is much more to say about Crown Heights than I have been able to cover in this essay. I remain confident, however, that the Crown Heights disturbance was a discursively consequential and provocative historical event, and that even an incomplete engagement with it is better than none at all.

Day 1:

August 19th was a warm night in the central Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights. The humid air of the evening heralded the close of another typical late-summer day in New York City. The sounds of the city were in evidence: the collective moan of rolling tires and accelerating engines on the thoroughfare of Eastern Parkway two blocks to the north, the deep bass and tinny treble of muscular hi-fi's, and the echoes of children playing. At around 8:15 p.m., seven-year-old cousins Gavin and Angela Cato raced their bikes up and down the sidewalk in front of Gavin's family's apartment building on the corner of Utica Avenue and President Street. Around the same time, a few blocks away, a three-car motorcade carried Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, Grand Rebbe of the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect, back home from his weekly visit to the graves of his wife and father-in-law (the former Grand Rebbe) in Queens. Leading the Rebbe's procession was a police car dispatched from the 71st precinct. The Grand Rebbe rode in the second car. Bringing up the rear was a large Mercury station wagon, driven by twenty-two-year-old

Yosef Lifsch. Along with him were three other young men, including twin brothers Levi and Yaakov Spielman.²

At about 8:20, the motorcade turned onto President Street and headed west. The first two cars in the motorcade crossed Utica Avenue without incident, at what witnesses described as an “average city speed.” The station wagon, apparently lagging behind, hurried to catch up. As it entered the intersection, another car pulled out in front of it, heading north. The station wagon collided with the other vehicle, and Lifsch lost control. The station wagon recoiled, jumped the opposite curb, and struck both Gavin and Angela Cato, pinning them underneath the chassis. Eyewitnesses disagreed on the speed of the station wagon as it entered the intersection, with estimates ranging from 25 to 65 miles per hour. In newspaper accounts of the accident, eyewitness disagreements as to Lifsch’s

² For the narrative portion of the paper, I have relied primarily on newspaper accounts from local New York City dailies, and especially on the report on the riots commissioned by then-Governor Mario Cuomo, and assembled by Richard Girgenti, the State Director of Criminal Justice and Commissioner of the Division of Criminal Justice Services for the state of New York, and his staff. These sources, while providing a good overview of the events in their entirety, do little to provide insight into the motivations of the various participants, which difficulty can only be overcome by thorough oral history. Most community leaders hailed the two-volume report as a penetrating and honest analysis of the riots. It was, however, criticized by some in the black community for neglecting to seek the input of the Cato family. Additionally, it is not as thorough in certain areas as it could have been, particularly on the subject of class and economics, where it failed to convey the importance of disparities in relative income between residents of Crown Heights. This information is important in analyzing interracial conflict over property, public housing, treatment at the hands of City Hall and local police, and other local resources. It also fails to examine the arrest records from the riots, and is therefore less successful than it could have been in finding out who the rioters actually were. For the remainder of this paper, the Commission’s report will be referred to as the *Girgenti Report*. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, *A Report to the Governor on the Disturbances in Crown Heights-- Volume 1: An Assessment of the City’s Preparedness and Response to Civil Disorder*. (Albany: Office of Justice Systems Analysis, 1993).

relative culpability seemed to split along black/Hasidic lines.³ For example, witnesses vehemently disagreed on whether Lifsch had entered the intersection while the light was still yellow, or whether it had turned red.⁴

Almost immediately, a crowd gathered at the scene of the accident. Photographs of the accident scene show the fender of the station wagon fender buried into the masonry of one of the facing buildings. The car's doors may also have gotten jammed at some point during the accident. Lifsch and his passengers later recalled experiencing difficulties extricating themselves from the vehicle. When Lifsch and his passengers finally got themselves out, they tried to help bystanders extricate the two children from underneath the station wagon. Individuals in the crowd immediately turned on them however, and began to beat them. Levi Spielman told detectives that after the accident he had tried to call 911 on his cell phone, but was assailed before he could finish the call. At that moment, he recalled, a black man pulled him away from the angry crowd, yelling, "This guy's mine, and I'm gonna have him arrested." The man led Spielman to safety, telling Spielman he owed him one.⁵

Chaim Blachman, an emergency medical technician for Hatzoloh, a voluntary, Hasidic-run ambulance service, heard his dispatcher send an ambulance to the corner of President Street and Utica Avenue. He immediately got into his car, which contained emergency equipment, and hurried to the scene of the accident. Blachman, along with another Hatzoloh ambulance, were the first emergency responders to arrive, but were apparently followed within minutes by two police cars, and an ambulance from the city's

³ Accident reconstruction specialists later estimated that Lifsch had been driving between 45 and 55 miles per hour when he collided with the other car.

⁴ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, pg. 55.

⁵ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, pg. 56.

Emergency Medical Service. The mostly black crowd, already estimated at around 150 people within minutes of the accident, seemed to be separating into distinctive components. Some of the bystanders tried to help the EMS team lift the car off of the Cato children. Others reportedly began beating the occupants of the station wagon. Most, however, just watched. As the crowd pressed in, and became increasingly unruly, the police officers at the scene radioed for help, and tried in vain to move the crowd back. Realizing that the presence of the station wagon's occupants was the most immediate cause of the mounting unrest, the officers instructed the Hatzoloh ambulance to get the Lubavitchers out, and to leave the Cato children to the city EMS team. A rumor that the Hatzoloh ambulance had ignored the critically injured children in order to help the occupants of the station wagon began to spread among the crowd.⁶

Rumor and hearsay are often cited as central elements in urban riots. According to the *Kerner Report*, commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the wave of urban riots in 1967, “[r]umors significantly aggravated tension and disorder in more than 65 percent of the disorders studied by the Commission.”⁷ William M. Tuttle, Jr.’s excellent account of the Chicago race riots of 1919 also identifies rumors as an important component of racialized violence. “Rumors,” he writes, “like stereotypes and generalized beliefs, can redefine ambiguous situations by predicting what will happen, and it

⁶ *New York Times*, “A Long Night in Crown Heights,” 21 August, 1991.

⁷ The *Kerner Report*, famous for its assertion that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” conducted an exhaustive inquiry into the summertime riots in eight American cities, provided the methodological template for the Girgenti Report, drafted twenty-five years later. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, *Report*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968.

sometimes does.”⁸ The *Girgenti Report* places similar emphasis on rumor as an accelerant to violence. The widespread belief that the Hatzoloh ambulance sped off without concern for the Cato children played a significant role in fueling the violent four-day riot.

An EMS ambulance took Gavin Cato to Kings County Hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Angela Cato was taken to Kings County in another ambulance a few minutes later.⁹ During the confusion, Carmel Cato, Gavin’s father, said he was pushed roughly away by a police officer when he tried to help his son. This rumor only added to the pique of the crowd, and would later become one of the demands made by “black leaders” including Al Sharpton, Sonny Carson, Herbert Daughtry, C. Vernon Mason, and Alton Maddox¹⁰. The crowd was becoming progressively more angry and unmanageable: one Hasidic resident of President street recalls returning home at around 9:15 p.m., and seeing a “huge crowd of black people,” most between fifteen and thirty years old, throwing rocks and bottles and screaming that “the Jews killed the kids.” Lubavitch witnesses interviewed for the *Girgenti Report* said that there were few police officers on

⁸ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot—Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996 ed.), 255-257. For a somewhat dated but informative treatment regarding the interplay of rumors, incidents precipitating violence, and collective hostility, see G.W. Allport and L. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 193-198.

⁹ Angela Cato’s right leg was crushed by the station wagon. Although her injured leg is now reportedly slightly shorter than her other leg, she has recovered fully from her injuries. *New York Newsday*, “Pain Still Lingers in Crown Heights.” 19 August, 1993.

¹⁰ Rev. Al Sharpton has been a fixture in New York politics since the mid-1980’s. He is currently the leader of the National Action Network, (N.A.N) and has made numerous unsuccessful runs for Congress. Leading up to the Crown Heights riots, Sharpton had acted as an advocate for the Hawkins family in the wake of Yusef Hawkins shooting in Bensonhurst, and for Tawana Brawley’s family in the wake of her false accusations against New York State Troopers.

the street, and that they seemed to be doing nothing to control the mob. Some members of the crowd were even beginning to assault the police officers themselves.¹¹

The Community Assistance Unit, attached to City Hall, sent staffer Robert Brennan to Crown Heights shortly after the riots began. According to Brennan, by 10:30 p.m., rocks and bottles were raining down on the scene of the accident, making working conditions extremely difficult for the accident investigation squad. The investigators erected large klieg lights around the accident scene, casting a brilliant glare on the surrounding neighborhood, and drawing even more people to the corner of President and Utica. It seemed clear to Brennan that a serious disturbance was brewing, and that it was “not about to end.” Alarmed, he called the City Hall Police Desk, and his own superior, Joseph Gonzales, telling them “the shit is hitting the fan.”¹²

Brennan’s metaphor, though blunt, was certainly fitting. The traffic accident had acted as a match, and the community was beginning to burn. The crowd, the lights, and the insignificant but yet highly visible police presence all seemed to be adding to what might at that point have already been a foregone conclusion. There was going to be a riot. In the *Kerner Report*, the investigators listed five recurrent inciting factors to the major urban disorders of 1967:

- (1) crowded ghetto living conditions, worsened by summer heat;
- (2) youth on the streets;
- (3) hostility to police;
- (4) delay in appropriate police response, and

¹¹ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 78.

¹² *Girgenti Report* 1993. (pgs. 56-57)

persistent rumor and inadequate information.”¹³ Crown Heights is a teeming community, the intersection of Utica and President is near its geographic and demographic heart, and curiosity was now bringing many people to the site of the accident. All accounts agree that the majority of the rioters were black teenagers.¹⁴

Within two hours of the accident, the corner of Utica and President was the scene of a contained riot. As the crowd continued to grow, and the police continued to stand by, the only question was when the riot would spread. At around 11:00 p.m., a “tall black man” stood on the hood of a car and began to address the crowd. Witnesses reported that the man was shouting: “Do you feel what I feel? Do you feel the pain? What are you going to do about it? Let’s take Kingston Avenue.”¹⁵ In response, the mob streamed down President Street, breaking windows and overturning a car. Smaller groups began to split off from the crowd. 911 operators began receiving complaints about groups on Eastern Parkway, Carroll Street, and Albany Avenue.¹⁶ Back on President Street, at around 11:20 p.m., a group of ten to fifteen youths attacked a twenty-nine year old Hasidic scholar from Australia named Yankel Rosenbaum. He was stabbed four times before the police arrived and broke up the mob. Within minutes, the police arrested one suspect—sixteen-year-old Lemerick Nelson—and brought him back to the scene of the stabbing.

Rosenbaum identified Nelson as the person who had stabbed him, and a knife found in Nelson’s pocket was taken into evidence. Rosenbaum was subsequently taken to Kings

¹³ *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* 1968. (p. 172)

¹⁴ *New York Times*, “A Boy’s Death Ignites Clashes in Crown Heights,” 21, August 1991.

¹⁵ *Girgenti Report* 1993, (p. 62) The man who addressed the crowd from atop the car, Charles Price, was later tried and convicted on civil rights charges. He is currently serving a 30 year sentence. *New York Newsday*, “New Trial Takes Cues from the 1st,” 12, January 1997, *New York Times*, “Learning from a Loss- Federal Prosecutors Win a Guilty Verdict By Avoiding Mistakes Made in First Trial” 11, February, 1997.

¹⁶ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 62.

County Hospital, where he died a few hours later. Within the space of a few hours, a black child and Hasidic scholar were dead, and a neighborhood had spiraled into a full-scale race riot.

Crown Heights—

According to legend, the area now known as Crown Heights in central Brooklyn was known at one time as Crow Hill. Some have suggested that the name was originally in reference to the first free black settlements in the area, Weeksville and Carrville. Another more literal interpretation has it that the area was so named in honor of its tallest hill, whose trees were always filled with crows. Either way, Crown Heights remained somewhat external to the burgeoning metropolis of New York City until the early 1860's, when Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the architects of both Central and Prospect parks, designed Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights' major thoroughfare. The parkway, completed in 1868, was the first six-lane parkway in the world. Boasting magnificent median strips lined with oak trees, promenades, equestrian paths, and service roads for carriages, it has since been designated a New York scenic landmark.¹⁷

In the 1940's, Crown Heights underwent a major demographic shift. Robert Moses' highway projects, and the G.I. Bill for World War II veterans made it possible for returning white soldiers to move their families out of Brooklyn and into New York City's outlying suburbs. In the wake this massive exodus, a Hasidic sect known as *Chabad Lubavitch* moved as a unit to Crown Heights in order to escape persecution in their native

¹⁷ Anthony Sanchez, *Neighborhoods of Brooklyn*. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Historical Society Press, 1987), pp. 78-82.

Ukraine, and established their world-wide headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway.¹⁸ Grand Rebbe Manachem Mendel Schneerson was the worldwide leader of the movement until his death in 1994. As Grand Rebbe, Schneerson acted as a spiritual leader and counselor, and managed the community's interactions with the secular world. As of 1991, approximately 10,000 to 16,000 Lubavitchers resided in Crown Heights, comprising around ten percent of the population.¹⁹

The Lubavitchers' religion forbids the use of motorized transport on Sabbath and Holy Days, making it necessary for the Lubavitch to live within walking distance of their religious and social centers. The bulk of the Lubavitch population remains bounded by Eastern Parkway on the north, Empire Boulevard to the south, and Rochester and New York Avenues to the east and west, respectively. The geographical specificity of the Lubavitch movement also helps reinforce a sense of community among its adherents.

In their report to the governor on Crown Heights, the New York Division of Criminal Justice Services described *Chabad Lubavitch* as a "totalistic religion:"

Devotion to the Torah and strict adherence to Jewish law are at the core of daily life for the Lubavitchers. They have developed into an enclave community, insular and self-sufficient in many ways. Their children are educated in their own religious schools and Yeshivas. Contact with the secular world is actively discouraged until adulthood. The community also provides for many of its own social service needs and has its own publishing and real estate businesses.

¹⁸ *Chabad Lubavitch* is one of several dynastic rabbinical movements from Eastern Europe. A smaller movement, known as the Satmar, settled in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

¹⁹ This range is based on 1990 Census data, derived from the number of white non-Hispanics in Brooklyn Community Districts 8 and 9. The exact population of the Lubavitchers is unknown.

The Lubavitchers remained in Crown Heights, despite the transition in the surrounding community. Blending moral precepts with principles of social solidarity and economic pragmatism, Rabbi Schneerson announced in April 1969 that Jewish law prohibited neighborhood flight. He admonished his followers to act responsibly toward one another, to maintain the integrity of the community they had built and not destroy the fabric of the Lubavitcher community by letting their property fall into the hands of outsiders.²⁰

Lubavitchers are a religious sect, bound together by beliefs, common cultural heritage, and the communal decision to remain isolated within the neighborhood, and within the rest of New York City.

As of 1990, the other ninety percent of Crown Heights was black. The African-American segment of the neighborhood had a substantial middle- and upper-class, many of whom were physicians, lawyers, business people, and educators. African-American history in Crown Heights has been as varied as in other northern cities. Some were the direct descendents of the free blacks that had founded and populated the original villages of Weeksville and Carrville. Others came in the years following emancipation.

There has been a considerable Caribbean presence in Crown Heights since the 1920s, although the 1960s brought a massive new influx of Caribbean immigrants into the neighborhood. In the interwar years, Caribbean (mostly West Indian) out-migration was primarily directed toward Britain. In 1962, however, Britain enacted severe restrictions on its number of immigrants, and so on the brink of independence, many Caribbean nations faced the daunting prospect of already large and ever-growing populations, and slow economies that provided little in the way of local employment. This may have caused severe political problems for Caribbean countries, had it not been

²⁰ *Girgenti Report*, 1993. p. 42

for the United States' 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act. This Act eliminated the old national quota system first established in 1924, and enacted a new quota system which allowed 120,000 new immigrants from the western hemisphere, with no quotas per country.²¹ By 1980, people of non-Hispanic Caribbean decent comprised a full 54.8 percent of the entire population of Brooklyn, and the cohort continued to be the most rapidly growing segment of the Crown Heights population.²²

As more Caribbean immigrants moved into specific neighborhoods, acquiring real estate with a "sell-to-your-own-kind" mentality, it became possible to create ethnic enclaves within larger black communities, and to maintain a sense of cultural "Caribbean-ness." Political cooperation between African-Americans and Caribbean immigrants continued as it had earlier in the 20th century, but was now marked by an ethnic divide that hadn't previously existed.

At the time of the riots, the Caribbean community, in relative contrast to the ethnically African-American population, faced higher rates of unemployment, especially among the young. Many had not yet received citizenship. The majority of the Caribbean

²¹ Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York—Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

²² More than 18,000 people who immigrated from Caribbean countries between 1983 and 1989, most from Jamaica, Haiti, Guyana, Trinidad, and Tobago—chose to live in Crown Heights. Their reasons for avoiding traditionally black neighborhoods such as Harlem may have been an aversion to stigmatized ghettos, but Kasinitz notes that by the mid-1970's, neighborhoods in Central Brooklyn and southeastern Queens offered a larger available stock of affordable one- and two-family houses to black homebuyers. Caribbean immigrants represented eighty-two percent of new Crown Heights residents during that period. *The Newest New Yorkers: An Analysis of Immigration into New York City during the 1980's*, Department of City Planning. New York City, June 1992, pp. 102-103, and Appendix Table 5-7 at p. 199.

community worked in blue-collar and service industry positions. Many held down more than one job.²³

High unemployment throughout the 1980's, an increasingly youthful population, and a low rate of citizenship among residents all tended to limit new immigrants' participation within the community. These conditions are also associated with other types of social problems, including crime and drug use. Immigrant Jamaican gangs, or "posses," were among the first in the country to market crack cocaine on a large scale. During the 1980's, Jamaican gang activity received the fearful attention of the media, which angered many in the Jamaican community.²⁴ Indeed, in many ways, posses bear more than a passing resemblance to the criminal groups of white immigrants at the turn of the century. The activities of the gangs, however, provide some evidence of the deepening ethnic divide between native and immigrant blacks in the late 1980's and early 1990's, especially among the younger generations.

In the years leading up to 1991, the conflict between blacks and Lubavitchers began to take on the more serious tones of racial prejudice, anti-semitism, and religious intolerance. A series of divisive issues fueled negative perceptions of the Lubavitchers among other Crown Heights residents. This paper does not assess these perceptions based on their merits, nor does it sanction the actions or rhetoric of either side.

Race is, among other things, an everyday process of accumulated perception. Like politics, race is lived on a local level, and takes its meanings from the ways in which universal motives interact with local circumstances. The narrative of the Crown Heights

²³ *Community District Fiscal Needs, Fiscal Year 1993*. City of New York. Office of Management and Budget, Department of City Planning, pp. 168, 174.

²⁴ *New York Times*, "Jamaican Drug Gangs Thriving in U.S. Cities." 19 July, 1987.

riots helps to illuminate how race operates, and becomes real, in post-Civil Rights America.

The accident on the night of August 19th, 1991 became the catalyst for a disturbance because it epitomized many of the preexisting perceptions in the black community about the Lubavitchers and the police. Indeed, Blacks in Crown Heights had a long-standing list of grievances with respect to both. Each major ethnic group in Crown Heights, for example, has long contended with a chronic and long-running housing shortage. An inadequate housing stock helped to create competition for housing between Hasidic, African-American, and Caribbean communities. “The bottom line is a territorial problem,” commented one Guyanese minister. “It’s a question of vying for limited turf.”²⁵

Some of the anger between the black and Hasidic communities seems to have originated in the fight over the re-districting of the neighborhood in the mid-1970’s. Crown Heights, like other New York neighborhoods, has its own Community Planning Board. Responsibilities for each Board include drafting zoning rules and community covenants, and disbursing school and municipal funds. New York City’s community boards provide citizens with an opportunity to influence policies and resource decisions that affect their lives. The New York City Charter requires that district lines for each community be reviewed every ten years. In 1977, when Crown Heights came up for review, leaders in the black community anticipated that the revised community boundaries would remain similar to the previous boundaries, and that the new Crown Heights Community Board would be coterminous with the old one. The Lubavitchers,

²⁵ *New York Newsday*, “Still Nurturing Dreams.” 12, June 1987.

seeking to consolidate their political power, successfully lobbied City Hall to redistrict Crown Heights into two community boards. Crown Heights was thus divided into Community Boards 8 and 9. Black leaders, perceiving the separation as then-Mayor Abe Beam's payoff to the Lubavitch for their voting support, challenged the fairness and legality of the redistricting in federal court. The case was dismissed. Throughout the 1980's, blacks alleged that the Lubavitchers completely dominated Community Board 9. Four of the board's nine members were Lubavitchers, who traditionally vote as a bloc.²⁶

Leaders in the black community of Crown Heights also consistently complained that the majority of housing resources, dating back to the 1970's, went to the Lubavitchers. Black homeowners were especially angered by Lubavitcher attempts to acquire their property. They complained that the Lubavitchers harassed them with non-stop, unsolicited, and aggressive campaigns to buy their homes for exorbitant sums of money. Residents claimed that this practice constituted a form of "block-busting," and that the Lubavitchers were trying to push them out of the neighborhood.

The Lubavitchers responded that most housing subsidies spent in Crown Heights went to black families. They maintained that they suffered more than others from the severe housing shortage. Because many within the Lubavitch community have large families, and their religious restrictions prevent them from using vehicles on Sabbaths and Holy Days, it is necessary for them, based on the conditions of their religion, to live within walking distance of their synagogues.²⁷

²⁶ *Girgenti Report*, 1993. p. 44. See also Rev. Herbert Daughtry, Sr., *No Monopoly On Suffering*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1997).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

There was also a deep resentment over what black residents felt was a pattern of “preferential treatment” toward the Lubavitchers by the Police Department and the City. Non-Hasidic residents frequently pointed to the closing of public streets and the barricading of service roads on Sabbaths and Holy Days. All traffic to these streets had to be re-routed, and on occasion, residents living on closed streets were required to show identification in order to access their own homes. Additionally, the police and City officials routinely dispatched a police escort to accompany Rebbe Schneerson on his weekly visits to the graves of his wife and father-in-law.²⁸ “I said if they take over, it’s our fault,” said Dr. Vernal Cave, who practices out of his home on President Street. “It only bothered me when the government took sides.” Cave’s wife added, “One of the primary things is for years he [Grand Rebbe Schneerson] had a police car in front of his house 24 hours a day. There could be a mugging on the corner, and they would not move.”²⁹

Members of the black community frequently alleged that the police were quick to react negatively, and often violently, to the potential infractions of black men. In 1978, Arthur Miller, a prominent businessman and respected civic leader in Crown Heights was strangled by the police while trying to intervene in the arrest of his brother for a traffic violation. In 1977, the Lubavitchers organized their own anti-crime patrols, asserting that the police did not provide them with adequate protection. Many local black people perceived a recurring pattern of harassment and intimidation at the hands of these extra-legal task forces. In 1978, one of these patrols assaulted a fifteen-year-old Black teenager

²⁸ The station wagon that struck the Cato children was part of a police-escorted motorcade.

²⁹ *New York Times*, “Tension in Brooklyn; The Bitterness Flows in Two Directions.” 23 August, 1991.

named Victor Rhodes in front of Lubavitcher headquarters on Eastern Parkway, leaving him brain damaged.³⁰ According the Hasidim, Rhodes had attacked an elderly Hasid with a brick. Black witnesses disagreed with the assessment, claiming that Rhodes had just left a party to which he planned to return in order to walk his girlfriend home. In a local periodical, *Seven Days*, June Jordan writes: “It is hardly probable that a 16-year old boy, by himself, after midnight, would walk into such an armed, bristling, vigilante-patrolled encampment, per se, let alone accost a young, or an old, or a middle-aged Hassid (sic)! According to eyewitnesses to the beating, Victor was chased by no less than 30 Hassidic men and women on foot, bicycles, in cars, and in vans, and finally caught. When Black by-standers tried to stop the beating, they were threatened with guns and told, “Don’t come near him, don’t touch him.”³¹ To protect black residents from both the police and Lubavitcher anti-crime patrols, the Black United Front, a city-wide black organization, created the Arthur Miller Community Patrol.³² It soon folded, however.³³

In 1988, a Hasidic man named Avrohom Greenberg was arrested and charged with beating a 15-year-old black girl named Yavilah Fulcher. Greenberg was alleged to have shoved Fulcher’s 8-year-old cousin and punched her in the face after the boy took a ball from his son. Ironically, Fulcher was herself an Orthodox Jew. Her family claimed that the police were reluctant to charge Greenberg. After the police arrived on the scene,

³⁰ *New York Times*, “Youth Left in Coma After Assault.” 17 June, 1978.

³¹ June Jordan, *Seven Days Magazine*. August 1978.

³² Daughtry, *No Monopoly of Suffering*, p.60.

³³ Black United Front also apparently attempted to bargain with the City to increase the amount of public housing for the black community, with little success. A lack of political will within the black community has made it difficult to counteract the highly organized lobbying efforts of the Lubavitcher community. This is almost certainly due to the fractured and heterogeneous character of the black population in Brooklyn. The continuing asymmetry between Lubavitchers and the rest of the Crown Heights community in terms of political power has only added to neighborhood tensions.

they talked to Greenberg but claimed they could do nothing further until police superiors arrived. Greenberg was not charged with assault for several hours. Fulcher's mother recalled asking one of the police officers why it was taking so long. According to Mrs. Fulcher, the officer replied, "Let me explain it to you. A partner of mine who arrested two Jews last summer is now up in the South Bronx walking a beat.' He said, 'there's an unwritten policy at this precinct: You don't arrest these Jew because that's trouble.'"³⁴ There was a widespread perception among blacks in Crown Heights that police officers were afraid to arrest Lubavitchers.

Finally—what many on the night of August 19th found most outrageous—the first responding Hatzoloh ambulance was rumored to have refused treatment to the black victims in favor of the Lubavitch driver and his passengers. Black leaders in the community had long maintained that the service catered exclusively to the Jewish community.³⁵ Although in this case the rumor was false, preexisting perceptions among black residents gave credence to the violence-inciting rumor.

Day 2 :

On the morning of Tuesday, August 20th, Crown Heights appeared relatively calm. The roving bands of rioters had disbanded on their own at around 3:00 a.m., and as the sun came up, traffic moved freely through the streets. The police maintained a visible, almost oppressive presence throughout the neighborhood, lining the sidewalks of Eastern

³⁴ *New York Newsday*, 3 June, 1988.

³⁵ Such was, in fact, probably the case. The Hatzoloh Ambulance Service runs entirely on donations from Hasidic sects and non-Hasidic Jews living in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan.

Parkway, and ringing the intersection where the car accident had occurred the night before.

At City Hall, Mayor David Dinkins convened his staff early, in order to sift through scattered bits of information and devise a strategy. They decided that the most pressing task was to combat the rumors circulating through the Crown Heights neighborhood, and to address some of the underlying community tensions. The Mayor said he instructed the City Hall Community Assistance Unit,³⁶ the Human Rights Commission, and the Department of Juvenile Justice to set up headquarters at P.S. 167, very near the center of the affected area of Crown Heights.³⁷

At 11:00 a.m., Deputy Mayor Bill Lynch convened a community meeting at P.S. 167. Although City Hall had called the meeting to dispel rumors and moderate between the two sides, it turned into a forum for grievances that lasted for almost four hours. Many in the black community believed that the fact that Yosef Lifsch had not been arrested indicated a double standard in community policing. Rabbis from the Lubavitcher community who attended the meeting were angry with the Deputy Mayor because he did little to dispel the Hatzoloh rumors, and did not counteract the threatening anti-Semitic statements that black attendees were making.

In the afternoon, the streets devolved back into violence. Hundreds of black youths took to the streets, throwing rocks and bottles. The Reverends Daughtry and Al

³⁶ Robert Brennan, who had reported to City Hall the previous night, was a member fo the Community Assistance Unit.

³⁷ Although Dinkins has vehemently denied it, most police officers in Crown Heights were under the impression that they were not to make arrests. Although nobody within the NYPD or the Dinkins administration has claimed responsibility for the order, law enforcement agencies would not adopt an aggressive arrest policy for another two days.

Sharpton, Sonny Carson, Alton Maddox and Colin Moore met with police officials and representatives from the District Attorney's office at the 71st Precinct.³⁸ They demanded Lifsch's arrest, and the suspension of the police officer that had supposedly shoved Gavin Cato's father. After meeting with the police, Sonny Carson addressed an assembled crowd outside the 71st Precinct. He demanded that "somebody's got to pay" for the death of Gavin Cato and the injuries to his cousin Angela. Appealing to the crowd to take actions, Carson said, "You know, we do a lot of talk. We ain't talking no more."³⁹

By 5:00, the crowd at President and Utica Avenues, the scene of the accident the night before, was again becoming increasingly violent. The police didn't seem to be doing anything to control the crowd. One police officer later told the Criminal Justice Department that "about 200 officers were present at President and Utica. He said the crowd started throwing 'everything at us,' and that he heard something he would never forget. A 'white shirt,' (i.e., an officer of the rank of captain or above) told them over a megaphone to 'retreat back to the precinct.' He was asked if that was the term actually used; he said he was sure it was, and that 'everybody ran.' Asked if the officers literally ran, he said they started to walk fast, but were hit with so many bottles and bricks that they began to run."⁴⁰ Scene

A mob assaulted Lubavitcher Isaac Bitton and his son while Bitton was returning home from work at around 6:00 p.m. He'd called a car service in order to avoid the

³⁸ Rev. Sharpton, C. Vernon Mason and Sonny Carson are a radical faction of activist clergy and attorneys in New York politics. Rev. Daughtry serves as Pastor at the largeHouse of the Lord Pentecostal Church, and was the founder and first chairperson of the National Black United Front, or NBUF. Colin Moore is a *Carib News* columnist who is considered to be on the left wing of New York's political leadership.

³⁹ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 76.

disturbance, but the car could not get onto his block. Getting out at the corner of Carroll and Schenectady, Bitton asked nearby police officers if it was safe to walk down the street. He said an officer assured him that it was.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bitton saw about fifty people loitering on the other side of Schenectady Avenue. The group walked past the police and started following Bitton and his son down the street. As they approached, they began throwing bricks and stones. Someone tried to hit Bitton with a baseball bat and missed, but Bitton was subsequently felled when a brick struck his head. He tried to cover his son with his body, but the mob pulled the boy out from underneath Bitton and began to beat him. One resident on the street saw the incident from her window and screamed for the police to help them. The police, however, did not come to their assistance. Black newspaperman Peter Noel ultimately rescued Bitton and his son. The reporter rushed over and shielded Bitton's body with his own. "Look, stop this bullshit," Noel recalled yelling to the crowd. "The man is down already."⁴¹

⁴¹ *Girgenti Report*, Vol. 1, 1993. p. 81.



—R. Graubard, *New York Post*

On Tuesday evening, roving bands looted and burned four stores, and set ablaze three cars, one of them a police car.⁴² One merchant watched looters break into a store “while the police just stood by...the cops watched them try to pry open the gate for nearly three hours.”⁴³ Many officers said that during the disorder their superiors told them to “hold the line” or “stand fast,” prohibiting them from making arrests. A heavy rain cleared the streets near midnight, and no further incidents were reported on Tuesday night.

Lubavitchers and Whiteness--

It seemed to black residents in Crown Heights that prior to the riots that Lubavitchers exercised more relative control over the neighborhood, and enjoyed more privileges as a population, than they did. Few Hasids have denied this, at least in print.

⁴² *New York Times*, 21 August, 1991.

⁴³ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 87.

Rather, they retroactively justified their local advantages on the basis of their religion, and the unique space that they occupy within the city. So how “white,” really, are Hasidic Jews?

In an interview with Cornel West, whiteness scholar Noel Ignatiev once said, “I don’t really want to talk about what blackness represents. I just can’t imagine what whiteness would mean, but for privilege. It doesn’t mean culture, it doesn’t mean language, it doesn’t mean religion—it doesn’t mean any of those things that have reality. No one has yet answered the question of what a positive white identity is.”⁴⁴ At least for Ignatiev then, Lubavitchers are something other than white.

According to most practitioners of whiteness studies, whiteness is not a cohesive ethnic identity, but rather a spurious badge of racial privilege, marking certain individuals as members of a reliably superior social group. Whiteness itself is illusory—a chimerical, socially-constructed taxonomy, continually re-manufacturing itself by assuming its own apparent normativity. George Lipsitz writes, “Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans.”⁴⁵ According to

⁴⁴ William “Upski” Wimsatt, Cornel West, Noel Ignatiev, “I’m Ofay, You’re Ofay,” *Transition*, Volume 0, Issue 73 (1997), 176-203.

⁴⁵ George Lipsitz. “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the “White” Problem in American Studies.” *American Quarterly*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (Sep., 1995), 369-387. For a more on institutional white supremacy from a critical legal perspective, see Martha R. Mahoney’s “Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143 (1995): 1659-84, Derrick Bell, “Property Rights in Whiteness—Their Legal Legacy, Their Economic Costs,” *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia, 1995): 75-83, Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New

Lipsitz, in 20th century America, this “possessive investment” by whites in their own whiteness resulted in racist lending practices by banks, racialized legal codes on all levels of government, racialized property value and real estate trends, and punitive zoning laws in cities. The “possessive investment in whiteness” made itself manifest by a massive disinvestment in anything not “white.”

Some Jewish-American scholars, Karen Brodtkin among them, have affirmed the assimilation of Jews into the larger complex of American ‘whiteness,’ and problematized the history of black-Jewish relations. According to Brodtkin, although differences between Jews and other whites persist, the racial breach that once separated them has almost disappeared.⁴⁶ Hasids might account for that “almost.” Lubavitch men still embody most of the visual markers of Orthodox religious Semitism. Their long beards, sidelocks, and black coats physically distinguish them from ‘whiteness’ in much the same way as a genetic phenotype, like melanin, might distinguish other races. If Hasids possess ‘whiteness,’ would this owe itself to the perceived inequality between themselves and blacks in the Crown Heights community? Is it because they could, if so inclined, cut off

York University Press, 1996), and Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (June 1993), 1709-91.

⁴⁶ Karen Brodtkin, “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” in *Race*, ed. Roger Sanjek and Steven Gregory (New Brunswick, NJ, 1996), 78-102. See also Hasia R. Diner, *Almost In the Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1995.), Forman, Seth. *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis in Liberalism*. (New York, New York University Press, 1998), Michael Paul Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Jack Salzman and Cornel West (eds.), *Struggles in the Promised Land: Towards a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

their sidelocks, don a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, and become ‘white?’ What is the significance of their choice to physically distinguish themselves?

Certainly, calculating the relative ‘whiteness’ of the Hasidim is problematic at best. Hasidic Jewish people, of whom the Lubavitchers (the Crown Heights contingent of Hasids) are a part, do not necessarily consider themselves to be ‘white.’ The Hasids appear to occupy a liminal space even within American Jewry, preferring a state of quasi-isolation in order to strengthen their religious community, and to better pursue the tenets of their strictly Orthodox brand of Judaism. Their distinctive dress makes a positive and explicit statement of ‘other-ness,” and the intense demands of their religion almost compel a certain amount of civic disconnection from even their closest neighbors. Hasids generally do not take direct part in elected politics. Lubavitchers tend to see themselves as ethnically, culturally, and perhaps racially separate from white America, and as separated by their faith from more mainstream Reform Judaism and its adherents.

Black perceptions of the relative “whiteness” of Lubavitchers are therefore complicated as well. During the height of the disturbance, rioters attacked Hasids and threw bricks and bottles at Lubavitch buildings while screaming, “Heil Hitler.” When a black mob attacked and killed Yankel Rosenbaum, witnesses reported them to have yelled, “There’s a Jew! Get the Jew!” Predictably, the many writers, pundits, and politicians characterized black rioters and leaders as being “anti-Semitic.” Black leaders defended themselves and the Black community by asserting that Crown Heights rioters

were, in the main, not anti-Semitic, but simply opposed to the local domination of the Lubavitchers.⁴⁷

Hasidic Judaism differs from other Orthodox and more secular varieties of Judaism chiefly by its strong emphasis on religious evangelism. Gaining converts from among the greater Jewish population is central to the purpose of the Lubavitch and other Hasidic movements. In a *New York Times* editorial, prominent liberal Jewish leader Peter Steinfelds remarked with apparent admiration: “[t]he key to [the success of the Lubavitch movement], organizationally, has been the concept of the “schlicum,” or emissaries, who are sent by the movement to a community in need and make a lifetime’s commitment to serve and raise their families there. From their earliest years, Lubavitch young people see such a daunting commitment as the highest form of messianic undertaking. They are carefully selected for their assignments, but they are also expected to be self-supporting in their activities, recruiting assistance and raising funds locally. In this sense, Chabad (Lubavitch) is a movement that is both highly centralized and strongly decentralized.”⁴⁸

The Lubavitchers, whose approach might best be described as a kind of religious entrepreneurship, have expanded both their membership and their treasury in recent years. Although estimates vary with respect to each, the Lubavitch movement numbers at

⁴⁷ In his book, Rev. Herbert Daughtry poses the question: “Can you criticize Jews without being anti-Semitic?” “Jews,” he goes on to assert, “can criticize any person or group as a matter of right, but when criticism turns in their direction many Jews cry anti-Semitism.” Elsewhere, he writes, “On every occasion during those confrontations, [with the Lubavitchers] I, along with other Crown Heights leaders and residents, tried to make clear whom we perceived the usurpers to be; not the Jewish people as a whole, but the Lubavitcher Hasidim....While all Jews are not Zionists, many Jews say, still, to criticize Zionism is to criticize all Jews. And many Jews say the same about the Hasidim...From every standpoint, it is impossible to sustain an argument that any Black is anti-Semitic, to say nothing of an entire people. Black people’s history would argue the opposite. We are pro-everybody.” Daughtry, *No Monopoly on Suffering*, pp. 46, 157-159.

⁴⁸ Editorial, *New York Times*, 22 January, 2000.

least 100,000 followers worldwide, and its activities cost hundred of millions of dollars each year, many of which are supported by non-Lubavitch Jews.⁴⁹

Although the Lubavitch have a powerful international infrastructure, and spend millions of dollars each year in outreach programs, within the neighborhood of Crown Heights, where the Lubavitch have located their world headquarters since the 1940's, many black people perceive them as living in self-imposed segregation. In combination with their old-fashioned garb, payahas, (long side-locks) and seemingly bizarre religious observances, the Lubavitchers' high degree of local organization has made them seem not only alien to their neighbors, but elitist, and even treacherous to an population already sensitized to discrimination and inequality.

Lubavitchers seem to embody a hodgepodge of cultural and religious markers. They dress distinctively, but less like "Jews" than like Eastern Europeans in the 19th century. They have a vast resource of communal funds from which to draw; they are appropriative of others' property, highly organized, and self-segregating. Their neighbors in Crown Heights perceive them as being favored by city authorities. But Lubavitchers have also nurtured and sustained a version of history in which they are labeled by others as "different," and are constantly in a state of cultural siege, informed by thousands of years of persecution. Despite the fact that black residents perceive Lubavitchers as being privileged in a manner similar to that of whites, the use of racial slurs during the riot would indicate an acknowledgement that Lubavitchers are not quite white. And perhaps that they are, therefore, more vulnerable. One way or the other, a lack of dialogue between blacks and Lubavitchers, coupled with close to thirty years of physical, political,

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and economic competition has resulted in a calcified relationship of difference. In the words of Thad Owens, a Crown Heights community organizer, “When you start talking about perception, well, if you live around here, perception is all you’re left with.”⁵⁰

Day 3 :

After the disastrous events of the previous two days, Mayor Dinkins decided to go to Crown Heights himself, in order to meet with community leaders and to visit the Cato residence. Rather strangely, his office did not notify the Police Department of the plan until late in the day. The Lubavitchers held funeral services for Yankel Rosenbaum at 8:00 a.m. at their headquarters on Eastern Parkway. An estimated 1,000 to 2,000 Hasidim attended, taking both City Hall and police by surprise. Officials had apparently been led to believe that Crown Heights portion of Rosenbaum’s funeral would consist of a drive-by of the funeral cortege.

Black community leaders organized a march on Lubavitcher headquarters at around 4:00 p.m. Almost immediately, the march erupted into violence. People near the rear began pelting buildings with rocks and bottles, shouting “heil Hitler,” and burning an Israeli flag. Around 100 Hasidim gathered, and responded by throwing rocks and bottles as well. At the same time, Police Commissioner Lee Brown was arriving in advance of Mayor Dinkins’ visit. A group of rioters broke away from the main group and converged on the Commissioner’s car, bombarding it with rocks. A call went out broadcasting a 10-13 (officer in need of assistance) for “Car One” (the Commissioner’s car). Officers came streaming in to assist. At least nine were injured during the subsequent melee. Less than a half an hour earlier, Brown had told reporters that everything was under control.

⁵⁰ Michael Powell and Jennifer Preston, “Little Proof Inequity Exists,” *Newsday*, 3 September, 1991.

When the Mayor arrived at P.S. 167, his car couldn't get on the block. He arrived at the school at 5:30 p.m., met with a group of 50 black youths, entreating them to "increase the peace."⁵¹ Outside the school, however, demonstrators were going on a rampage. Five police cars were attacked; one was overturned, and flying debris injured at least ten police officers. Officers were able to restore order immediately outside the school, but as in the previous two days, the rioters simply moved elsewhere.⁵²

Mayor Dinkins left the school at around 7:00 p.m, and tried to address the surrounding crowd with a bullhorn. The Mayor asked the crowd, "Will you listen to me, please?" The crowd reportedly shouted back, "No!" As Dinkins was leaving, the assembled mob let loose a barrage of bottles and howled, "Traitor, traitor!"⁵³ The Mayor had originally wanted to walk to the Cato home, in a move reminiscent of John Lindsay's walk through Harlem during the riots of 1967. His advisors persuaded him that such a move would not be wise.



The Mayor's entourage was also pelted outside the Cato residence. Dinkins tried again to address the crowd, and was again rebuffed. At the end of the evening, the Mayor met with the Crown Heights Emergency Committee, comprised of Lubavitcher

," hastily thought-up on Tuesday morning, would catch-phrase for diffusing racial tension until the end of his
sist in Crown Heights for Third Night in Row." 22

August, 1991.

⁵³ *New York Daily News*, "Insults, bottles fly at Dinkins." 22 August, 1991. According to the article, members of the crowd could also be heard yelling, "The mayor is not safe," outside the Cato residence.

rabbis and community leaders. They requested that the National Guard be sent in to end the rioting. Mayor Dinkins demurred on the appeal, but pledged increased police protection for the Lubavitch community.

During the evening, the violence spilled into the 77th precinct. A mob attacked a firehouse, assaulted cab drivers, journalists, and police officers. At 9:45 p.m., a sniper on the roof of a building wounded eight police officers with a shotgun blast. None of the officers' wounds were fatal. Hasidim also poured into the street, breaking down the doors of apartment buildings in which suspected rock throwers and snipers were hiding. Large groups of Hasidim and blacks faced off against each other throughout the evening, barely held apart by police officers on the streets.

Wednesday night was the high point of the violence. Mayor Dinkins and his staff had verified for themselves that the situation was patently out of control. The Patrolmen's Benevolent Association publicly vented frustration that the officers in Crown Heights were "handcuffed," and were putting themselves at considerable risk without being allowed to respond. The PBA put out a circular the next day that read in part:

The PBA has a basic responsibility to protect the life and lives [sic] of police officers, and will not shirk that responsibility. I therefore am urging all PBA delegates to instruct their members that they are not to serve as lame sitting duck; they need not retreat and cower in fear... *If police officers are placed under a life-threatening attack, they should use their nightsticks and firearms to fend against such attacks* (emphasis in original).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *Girgenti Report*, 1993, p. 101.



E. Petersen—New York Daily News

Racial Rhetoric and Media Politics—

Predictably, the published reactions of leaders on both sides of the divide exuded a profound bitterness. A.M. Rosenthal, columnist for the *New York Times*, characterized the riots as a “pogrom,” which sentiment would later be echoed by former Mayor Ed Koch, and Senator Al D’Amato, and gubernatorial hopeful George Pataki. ‘Have they [blacks] already forgotten that the weapons of the black pogromists of Crown Heights use [sic] against the Jews are precisely the weapons the white pogromists in the South used against blacks? First, the cooking up or blowing up of a grievance against a minority. Then the stoking of mob madness with the essential evil—the idea that a civic grievance true or imagined can be the justification of violence. Then dehumanization and demonization by vile racial epithet, ax handle parades and screams for lynch laws inevitably followed immediately by beatings, arson, killing.’⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Editorial, *New York Times*, “On My Mind—Crown Heights Riots.” 3 September, 1991.

Many within the Jewish community pilloried Mayor Dinkins for his slow response to the disturbance. Dinkins' political adversaries—including Ed Koch, and future-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (who had lost the mayoral election to Dinkins in 1989) were quick to pile on.⁵⁶ Soon after the end of the riots, Dinkins went on a previously-scheduled trip to South Africa. Senator D'Amato remarked that the city might be better off if he stayed there. Dinkins took exception to the comment, and denounced the D'Amato's criticism as a form of race-baiting. In turn, Giuliani criticized Dinkins for his “holier-than-thou” attitude. Some pundits even imputed Dinkins' sluggishness in responding to the Crown Heights violence to anti-Semitism. Even his defenders equivocated somewhat in regard to his handling of the situation. “Mr. Dinkins' black skin,” one editorial reads, “is no magical antidote to racial tensions, either between the blacks and the Hasidim of Crown Heights or among other warring groups in this racially divided city.”⁵⁷

After order was restored to Crown Heights, the beleaguered and visibly exhausted Mayor said of his efforts, “I mean, Lord knows, I know that I alone cannot do it, under any circumstances. What I hope I can do is by my behavior, by my willingness to go out there, some will say well, gee, you went to Crown Heights and it was a failure and you didn't do this and you didn't do that—and I assess it a little differently. I'd like to think that I demonstrated a willingness to go, even in a difficult situation, because it was needed and you know, frankly, maybe it did help.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ New York Times, 20 September, 1991.

⁵⁷ Editorial, *New York Times*, 23 August, 1991.

⁵⁸ *New York Times*, 23 August, 1991.

But Crown Heights was to become Mayor Dinkins' political Waterloo. The Mayor had promised to do what he could to ease racial tensions in New York City. To a certain extent, he was elected both to appease and to represent New York's minorities. But Crown Heights proved that putting a black man in Gracie Mansion was not enough to prevent racial flare-ups. Despite the fact that probably no mayor, black, white or otherwise, could have prevented the Crown Heights riots, Dinkins garnered an inordinate amount of blame for the disturbance. Had he not been black, and had he not been elected on a platform of racial rapprochement, he probably would not have sustained such political damage because of it. His political successes with respect to the city's racial issues tended to go unnoticed after 1991. For example, in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, Mayor Dinkins acted with calmness and aplomb to avoid what looked as if it might become a city-wide riot.⁵⁹ And ultimately, Dinkins would lose his reelection bid to Rudolph Giuliani.

Did 'race' ruin Mayor Dinkins? After all, no white mayor would have been packsaddled with the both responsibilities of being mayor, and representing racial minorities in the way Dinkins was. Because he was black, Dinkins was expected to fill mutually exclusive roles. Dinkins, by most accounts, had been elected to "heal the racial tensions that have long divided the city."⁶⁰ That the Mayor was black was a fact not lost on anyone during the riots, and in the days afterward. Considerable coverage was devoted to the dawning possibility that the Mayor had no influence or control over the rioters, although opinion pieces in the major dailies tended to avoid commenting directly on his relationship with black communities. He was soundly criticized, however, for not

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, "Crown Heights: Shared Failure." 21 July, 1993.

⁶⁰ *New York Newsday*, "Dinkins Walks Through Racial Fire." 22 August, 1991.

appearing at Yankel Rosenbaum's funeral. In a press conference after his return from Crown Heights on Wednesday, the Mayor reacted angrily to questions about the funeral:

Nobody has asked me yet, well, did you talk to the Australian...? [Rosenbaum] But I did. I held his hand. He held mine. He looked up into my eyes. I looked into his. We talked to one another. He is dead now. So now I am being obliquely criticized for not having attended his funeral. The compassion and the concern was demonstrated. The fact that I was not there at 8 a.m. this morning in no way diminishes the concern that I have.⁶¹

The Mayor was, in a sense, trapped by his own racial identity. He had been elected to heal racial divides, which meant, in real terms, using the power of his racial identity to prevent minorities from rioting. That he could not do so, even though he was black, represented a double failure: he could be simultaneously criticized by the white press both as being in league with the rioters, and as being unable to control them. In one rather amazing example of such criticism, two civil-rights lawyers, Normal Siegel and Michael Meyers, denounced Mayor Dinkins for thanking listeners on a local black radio show for the support he had received from "a lot of brothers and sisters" which had sustained him through the criticism he'd received for his handling of the riots. The two lawyers called the Mayor's choice of words "polarizing and demagogic rhetoric," that only served to "deepen the racial divide in our city."

"Indeed," they inveighed, "your words have the tone of setting race against race, brother against brother and sister against sister by suggesting that people choose sides of a moral issue and public policy debate on the flimsy and scurrilous basis of their skin color, or yours."⁶² The released copy of the letter was picked up by most major New York

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *New York Times*, "Dinkins's Radio Message Draws Civil-Rights Fire." 25 July, 1993.

dailies. This amazing piece of invective suggests in turn that the Crown Heights riots could be *deracialized* when necessary, in order to serve political interests.

The release of the *Girgenti Report* also served to hurt the Mayor's chances for reelection. The report was released a scant few months before the mayoral election. The Giuliani campaign immediately ripped Dinkins as being incompetent, and overmastered by events.⁶³ The potent combination of criticisms emanating from Crown Heights were too much for even the popular Dinkins to overcome, and Giuliani narrowly defeated him in the 1994 mayoral election.

The harshest criticism, however, was reserved for black "community" leaders. Sharpton, Daughtry, Carson, and Maddox, although very rarely mentioned by name, were taken to task in the mainstream local media as troublemakers, outsiders, careerists, and anti-Semites. Many outside the black community saw their continued insistence on the arrest of Yosef Lifsch as an opportunistic and cynical political power play. Sharpton even showed up in Tel Aviv, a year after the riots, to serve driver Yosef Lifsch with a summons. Unlike Dinkins, however, these community leaders operated in an extra-official capacity, responsible only to their own supporters. The voluble criticism among white media outlets did them little harm, and may actually have increased their credibility within the black community.

Day 4 :

On Thursday, August 22nd, the New York Police Department changed its tactics. Previously, officers had been deployed to fixed posts, and were constrained from

⁶³ *New York Times*, "Giuliani Campaign Theme: Dinkins Isn't Up to the Job." 24 October, 1993.

following the roving bands of rioters as they moved from block to block. The new strategy called more numerous foot patrols supported by mobile response units. A police escort was to accompany groups moving through the area and keep them under control. Commissioner Brown also announced a stricter arrest policy: officers would no longer wait for the mobs to assault anyone, or destroy property. At the slightest hint of unruliness, the police would now move in to make arrests. Mayor Dinkins and his staff also continued their community outreach efforts.

Although crowds continued to form as in previous days, and there were indications that the violence would escalate again,⁶⁴ the massive police presence and an aggressive arrest policy succeeded in keeping the assembled groups peaceful. The police used mounted patrols to break up and arrest roving bands. At around 11:40, two officers stopped a car. As they got out of their patrol car, shots were fired from the roof of a nearby building. Although their car was hit three times, the officers were uninjured. By midnight, the streets were quiet. Although scattered outbreaks of violence would continue for several more days, the Crown Heights riots were effectively over.

“We rescued you from the concentration camps!”

“Oh yeah? Go back to Africa!”⁶⁵

Racial theorists have now almost universally accepted as axiomatic the proposition that race is socially constructed. Arguably, “racism” itself depends on an essentialized conception of race. Racism is an aggressively negative, politically-informed process of induction—one that matches physical traits with traits of character. Thwarting

⁶⁴ Anonymous calls made to 911 on Thursday morning warned of firebombings, and that members of the Jewish Defense League were on the streets carrying explosive devices.

⁶⁵ Quoted from a black-Hasidic verbal exchange during a 1992 demonstration in Crown Heights. *New York Times*, “Tensions Linger in Crown Heights.” 31 October, 1992.

racial essentialism erases any foundation upon which to make race-based value judgments, both positive and negative. Within academia, scholars have largely defeated “racist” thinking on the basis of a tautological insistence that social constructionism makes race itself a meaningless value marker. The theoretical shift away from essentialism has its advantages. Aside from making racism theoretically passé, anti-essentialism joined race theory with post-structural variability, making possible sophisticated new projects that combined race with other categories of historical analysis. A provocative new question arose: how and why is race constructed, or perhaps more accurately, continually re-fashioned, in America? Race, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued, is shaped by political struggle.⁶⁶ Local politics becomes visible in ceaseless struggles to guarantee adequate representation for housing, schools, and other resources, and to secure interests of survival, status, and authority.

Local politics in Crown Heights, over a span of years, began to pit the Lubavitchers against their neighbors, who were all variously black. The political, true to Omi and Winant’s analysis, subsequently changed into something more sinister, hate-filled, and racialized. The riots were lived, and are now remembered, as a clash between blacks and Jews, although reality, as usual, exceeds the explicatory abilities of such a crudely racialized binary. Lubavitchers, along with other Hasidic groups, are hardly equivalent to the more numerous varieties of more secular American Jews. Unlike secular Judaism, the Lubavitchers practice a totalist religion, which serves as a complete source of identity for many of its adherents. Similarly, the supposedly monolithic “black”

⁶⁶ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, p. 64.

population of Crown Heights is actually a complex, tense amalgam of Caribbean immigrants and African-Americans, separated by class, nationality, tradition, and culture.

So why race? In the midst of such complexity, how is it beneficial for all involved to live the conflict in starkly racialized terms? Perhaps it is because race, as analytically unwieldy and inaccurate as it has become, is still one of the most facile avenues through which to comprehend, express, justify, and politicize issues of group identity. Bringing in race to explain the Crown Heights riot has the effect of “tribalizing” the conflict: artificially imposing binary identities and interests on the involved parties in order to clarify the riot for its participants, translate it for outsiders, and make it effectively expressible for all in a political arena.

Put simply, as long as we don’t over-think it, race is politically articulate; it is a method and a language by which to argue (rightly or wrongly) for group survival and personal advancement. People do not begin to live race until *after* it has been invoked. Blacks in Crown Heights may have had a long-standing racial awareness with respect to whites, but on the community level, this knowledge might have remained inert without the presence of the self-differentiated Lubavitch who, after having barely escaped Nazi concentration camps in Europe, settled in Brooklyn with a justifiable determination to guarantee their own survival *as a group*. Consequently, they adopted a defensive, exclusionary, and highly organized approach to neighborhood relations. They distinguished themselves as “separate,” and proceeded to act in a self-interested manner. Other population groups in Crown Heights, almost all of which happened to be black, acquired a local civic identity in response to the Lubavitchers’ self-demarcation. Their racial animosity toward the Lubavitch community, finally, developed not because of

Lubavitch self-segregation, but because of the sect's aggressive engagement in local matters. Race is a way to understand and to fight political battles. In Crown Heights, the sorry result was four nights of racialized civil war.

In the wake of the riots, leaders from both the Lubavitch and Black communities strove to characterize themselves as the victims of unjust racial violence. In the battle over racial victimhood, the Lubavitchers enjoyed an edge primarily because "black" is not an organization, religion, or culture. It profits us little, therefore, to think of the Crown Heights riots as a struggle between two equal, or even comparable groups. This study has tried to show, however, that the Crown Heights disturbance resulted not from a deep-seated racial enmity between previously constituted groups, but from a process of a slowly-developing, highly personal political antagonism between neighborhood factions that became contextually racialized. Although such an assertion may seem overly optimistic, it would seem that the more important local politics are in all processes of racial formation, the easier it ought be to avoid events the like Crown Heights riots. Certainly, a different attitude among Crown Heights residents, and a commitment to dialogue and cooperation, might have helped them avoid the regrettable results of racialization.

Crown Heights also shows that whiteness studies, if it wishes both to remain viable, and to maintain its materialist roots, must be able to theorize political and resource inequality without resorting to a kind of essentialized European-ness. The Lubavitchers were perceived as enjoying a privileged position within the Crown Heights community, in a way very similar to that which whites are assumed to enjoy on a national level. Yet by many of the standards whiteness scholars have set for themselves, Lubavitchers are

something other than white. The whiteness approach can therefore be criticized for its inability, or unwillingness, to explain the kind specific, local racialization processes that have resulted in Crown Heights-like racialization, or to locate groups like the Lubavitchers in general on the whiteness continuum.

Additionally, Crown Heights shows that even the most seemingly dialogical racial conflicts can be, and usually are, much more complex than the media portrays them. Indolent journalism, careless and flippant with its characterizations of the riots, and eager to fasten on its most gruesome aspects, helped to turn a localized event with confined origins into evidence of a larger struggle blacks vs. Jews, which unnecessarily raised tensions between groups who, by their own calculations, bore each other little or no ill will.

Finally, it seems necessary to point out that riots, when they occur, are not always expressions of political powerlessness. I have already received criticism for not indicating that some black residents of Crown Heights rioted because they felt utterly powerless. Earlier in the 20th century, and throughout the 19th, whites perpetrated riots in order to vent their rage on other minorities, or to maintain a chokehold on employment opportunities. Certainly, African-Americans on the streets of Manhattan in 1866 would not have characterized all riots as an expression of political powerlessness. Although many of the rioters may indeed have felt helpless in comparison to the Lubavitchers, it is worth saying that there is no justification for the barbarous and unlawful acts committed against the Lubavitchers. There is no justification for the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Lemerick Nelson was tried as a juvenile on state murder charges in 1993. He was found innocent, but on the strength of lobbying efforts by Jewish groups and Rosenbaum's brother, was arraigned on civil rights charges, along with Charles Price, in 1997. The two

Finally, these assertions come with numerous corollaries. This thesis addresses itself primarily to the formation of race in one particular place, at one particular time. Larger questions of applicability necessarily arise, to which I do not have a fully developed answer as yet. Additionally, although most of the historical subjects in this essay are still alive, due to time and resource constraints, I have not interviewed them. To the extent that race is a matter of perception, I have in hand only the perceptions of those harried few who were interviewed by the press during the height of the violence, those who had sustained great personal loss, or those who are paid to write and publish their perceptions on a regular basis anyway. More thorough, in-depth, and personal research would certainly assist me in gaining analytical access to the actual process of racial formation in Crown Heights. This paper does not examine the legal legacy of the Crown Heights riots, which is a story of racial formation in itself. The “black leaders” who made the news, moreover, were almost certainly not the true leaders and representatives of the community. More in-depth study will help to reveal who truly spoke for the black community during the crisis, and afterward. And finally, the reactions of City Hall and the NYPD to the riots themselves were almost certainly influenced in ways I have not yet been able to discover. These and other unavoidable limitations weigh on my ability to make bulletproof claims or remedial prescriptions.

In fine, I recognize that I have sent myself on an intellectually dangerous mission. I am convinced, however, that it is well for historians to take such risks. Race is living history, and it is incumbent on historians to address it as such. The presence of race in

men were both found guilty in separate trials, and sentenced to thirty five years in prison. Nelson was released in 2001 however, on the strength of revelations that the federal judge had tampered with the jury in order to empanel a certain number of Jews.

political discourse is often a leading indicator of a damaged body politic. If race really *is* socially constructed, as historians are now fond of saying, it will not be dismantled until historical subjects—and historians’ potential audiences—stop socially constructing it. To bring that about, the intellectual engagement of historians with the living present, despite the considerable professional risks involved, should not only be allowed; it should be part of the job. Throughout the writing of this piece, I have attempted to remind myself, and my readers, of the risks I have assumed—knowingly and unwittingly—in this essay. I can only hope that I have passably introduced the rich and evocative racial saga of Crown Heights.