BLACK CORONA

STEVEN GREGORY

Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community

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Steven Gregory

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

Raymond Edward Gregory

Acknowledgments

One summer in the early 1970s, when I was seventeen, my father and I drove down to Richmond, Virginia, from our home in Brooklyn. I had never been further south than Washington, D.C., and I was both intrigued and apprehensive about visiting the place where he had been raised. My father hated the South. He never spoke to me about it—about living under Jim Crow, about the Depression, or about leaving for Harlem in the 1930s with his ten brothers and sisters. Had it not been for the fact that my grandfather and a few relatives still lived there, he probably never would have returned.

Every now and then something would slip out. Once he told me how, during the Depression, he and his brothers would hop freight trains passing through Richmond's black belt and throw coal down to people waiting along the tracks. More often, I would overhear these things at family gatherings or hear them secondhand from my mother. Once she explained to me that my father hated avocados because their texture reminded him of the lard that his family used to make sandwiches during the Depression. But never, ever did he speak to me about segregation or about his experiences with racism in the South.

To be sure, he was not a very talkative man when it came to his own life. Nor was he very political, at least in the ways in which I then thought about politics. (I was a high school militant at the time and dismissed anything short of armed insurrection as "reactionary.") My father practiced his beliefs with a quiet and unembellished determination, not uncommon for his generation: one that had lived the mundane details of life as potentially deadly encounters with American racism. In fact, I only recently remembered the morning in 1963 when my father left for the March on Washington, a suitcase in one hand and a Stetson hat in the other; he had left quietly and without a fuss.

When we got to Richmond, my father took me on a tour of the city, which seemed a bit curious given his usual lack of interest in sightseeing anywhere. He took me first to the area of the city where he had lived and that had since become Interstate 95. For thirty minutes we stood by the highway, cars barreling by, as he perused the few surviving landmarks. "We used to live over there somewhere," he said, frowning and pointing to a spot in the northbound, center lane. "Must've been somewhere over there, near that overpass."

Next, we took a bus downtown. I used to like sitting in the back of the bus—in the last row next to the window, where you could see everything happening up front. I had just started down the aisle when my father bellowed after me in a tone that was at once angry, impatient, and perplexed. "Why you goin' all the way back there? Come sit up here." Frowning, he pointed to a row of seats directly behind the driver and then dropped some change in the fare box. Feeling humiliated and put upon, I sat next to him, avoiding eye contact

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with the gawking passengers. When the bus pulled off, he turned to me. "Took us a hundred years to get here, and you wanna sit all the way in the back." An elderly woman sitting across from us smiled and, looking at me, raised her eyebrows as if to say, "You listen to what he's telling you, hear?" My father nodded to her as they do in the South and then peered out the window to get his bearings.

Despite my youthful conceits, my trip to Richmond with my father made a lasting impression on me. It was as though he wanted me to see the places where he had endured and overcome the day-to-day brutalities of racism in America. It was not enough to talk about them—to give words to experiences that were far too life-shaping to convey through language. Rather, he wanted me to relive them with him—to rehearse the constraints and struggles of the past against the noisy promises of the future. And in the process he taught me a great deal about human dignity, courage, and resolve.

If my father provided the inspiration for this book, there are many, many others who made it possible. Above all, I would like to thank the people of Corona and East Elmhurst, Queens, who, during the course of my fieldwork, gave generously of their time, hospitality, and knowledge. I am deeply indebted to Edna Baskin, John Bell, John Booker, the Reverend Irvine Bryer, Barbara Coleman, Joyce Cumberbatch, Jacob Govan, Selma Heraldo, Blanche Hubbert, City Councilwoman Helen Marshall, Calvin Wynter, and Elwanda Young. These persons supported my research in ways too numerous and indispensable to convey adequately here. I hope that this book does justice to their generosity and good faith.

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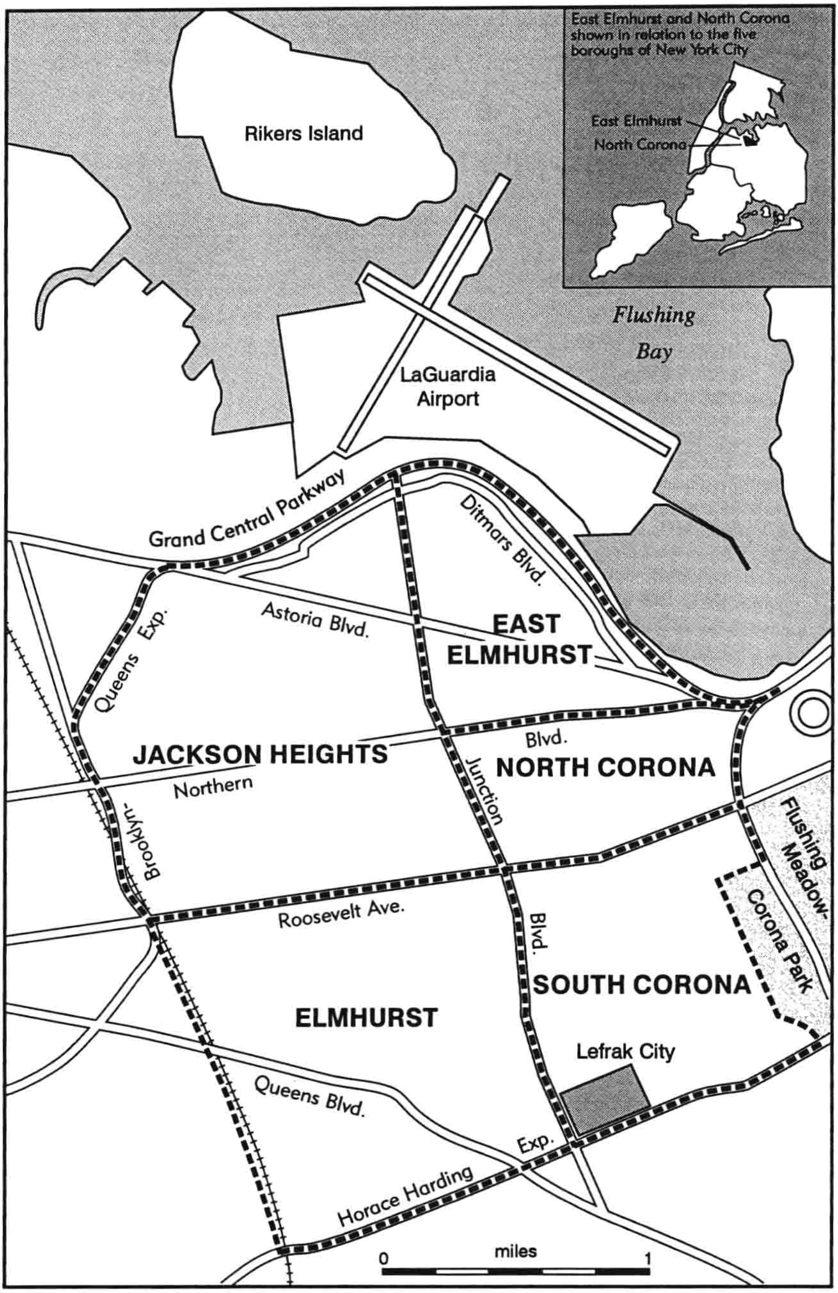
PART ONE


East Elmhurst and North Corona shown in relation to the five boroughs of New York City
East Elmhurst
North Corona
Rikers Island
Flushing Bay
LaGuardia Airport
Grand Central Parkway
Ditmars Blvd.
Astoria Blvd.
EAST ELMHURST
Queens Exp.
JACKSON HEIGHTS
Northern
Blvd.
NORTH CORONA
Junction
Brooklyn-
Roosevelt Ave.
Blvd.
Flushing Meadow-Corona Park
SOUTH CORONA
ELMHURST
Lefrak City
Queens Blvd.
Exp.
Horace Harding
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Map showing the research area, North Corona and East Elmhurst, in relation to nearby Queens neighborhoods.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Jacob Govan pushed aside the venetian blinds covering the windows of his enclosed porch and pointed to the Antioch Baptist Church, a small white brick building across the street. "Used to be the El Dorado Moving Picture Theater," he remarked, matter-of-factly. John Booker, who had arranged my interview with Govan, listened attentively, punctuating each statement with an enthusiastic nod of his head. At ninety-two Jake was still active in community affairs despite the trouble he had getting around when his arthritis "kicked up."

"And that's the building the Corona Congregational Church bought back then," Govan continued, sifting through a huge pile of papers and photographs on his lap. He found the photograph he had been looking for and showed it to us. It was a large, sepia-toned print of the Corona Congregational Church taken in 1922, not long after the congregation had moved to the building across the street. About sixty church members posed before the two wide arches that once framed the building's entrance, women in large floppy hats and fur stoles, men in stiff white collars and oversized topcoats.

"Are you in the picture?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm down there in the corner somewhere," he replied, motioning to a group of hatless young men squatting in the front row. He chuckled and drew his lean hand across his head.

Born in 1897, Jake still lived in the house his father had built nearly a century ago on a lot purchased on the northern fringe of Corona, then a farming and light manufacturing village on the north shore of Queens, Long Island. During his lifetime, Corona had undergone an evolution repeated in various forms in many northern cities. Early in the century, the once rural village on the outskirts of Manhattan was incorporated into the city's expanding industrial economy absorbing in the process waves of European immigrants and, soon after, African-Americans from the southern United States and Caribbean.

When Govan graduated from Newtown High School on the eve of World War I, his parents' home on 102nd Street in Corona was in the heart of a small but prosperous black community. Between the world wars, Corona's African-American population continued to grow as the children and grandchildren of its European immigrants fanned out into surrounding areas and into neighborhoods farther out on Long Island. By the late 1950s large sections of North Corona were predominantly black and, like many urban black communities at the outbreak of the civil rights movement, confronted with escalating problems of neighborhood deterioration, poor public services, and political powerlessness.

Although the Great Society did little to change the face of Corona, the post–civil rights era witnessed the arrival of new immigrants from South America, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and the West Indies. The El Dorado Moving Picture Theater, once a hub of black middle-class life in Corona, would, not long after my interview with Govan, become home to the Iglesia de Dios and to new generations of desires, convictions, and struggles.

Govan was both amused and annoyed by this history. As our interview progressed, he would dismiss decades of people and events with an impatient wave of his hand. "That bunch didn't do nothin' for the colored folks out here," he remarked, frowning with irritation at the memory of a group of 1940s race leaders. His lack of reverence for the past complemented his enthusiasm for the present. Often, in the midst of recounting events that had taken place a generation earlier, he would pause to draw a biting parallel with current affairs, chuckling and shaking his head from side to side as he explained why a local development project was failing; why, as he would often put it, rubbing his legs to ease his arthritis, "you can't get nothin' done around here, can't get nothin' followed up."

John Booker, retired from the real estate business and approaching a youthful eighty, listened intently, now and then posing a sharp question to clarify some fragment of Corona's past that had preceded his own arrival in 1953. A long-time community activist, Booker beamed in anticipation when one of Govan's stories promised to add a new gloss to personalities still shaping community events or make sense of some hitherto puzzling political act or affiliation. When I asked Govan about the Great Depression, Booker nodded in approval and then tightened his eyebrows to attention.

"Well, you see," Govan began, "the depression didn't affect people too much 'cause they had the WPA. You worked three days. And you did something. Construction. That's how they built LaGuardia Airport. That's how you got over the depression. They should have that Conservation Corps now. You see this welfare thing, I think this is some kind of thing put together to try to demean our people."

"That's right!" Booker exclaimed, cutting his eyes to me to make sure that I was listening. "To demean the black race," he added, striking his knees in a gesture of conviction.

For Govan, there was little mystery to the problem of the Negro, a term he continued to use interchangeably with "colored," "black," and "African-American," depending on the context. Nor was there anything particularly baffling about the young crack addicts who hung out at night in front of his house, believing or disbelieving the sign, BEWARE OF DOG, posted on his front door. The twentieth century held few moral lessons for Govan, little cause to reflect on the values, attitudes, and self-esteem of the race. History had to do with *how* things got done and why too often they did not; it had to do with the everyday play of power and powerlessness, action and inaction, commitment and indifference. For Govan the social and economic problems facing African-Americans on the eve of the millennium were as they had always been: political problems requiring political solutions.

Govan's political and deeply historical perspective on African-American experience contrasts sharply with the ways in which the problems and issues facing contemporary urban black communities have been framed in public policy debates, the mass media, and academic research. In many such forums the concept of an "inner city" isolated from the American "mainstream" and plagued with escalating rates of welfare dependency, crime, and teen pregnancy has served as a dominant trope for representing urban black experience in the post–civil rights era, conflating, in the minds of many, black identity, urbanism, and the "tangle of pathology" of the poor (Wilson 1987:21).

What is perhaps most alarming about the trope of the black inner city and its equivalent, the "black ghetto," is the degree to which both have served to block or screen alternative and, for want of a better word, *ordinary* ways of understanding the lives of African-Americans. Narratives of black urban life in the mass media and scholarly research have tended to focus on poverty and its impact on the culture and social organization of the black poor. In pursuing this line of inquiry, investigators have addressed an extremely narrow range of social behaviors and relations: crime, teenage sexuality, family disorganization, and "ghetto street life" have dominated both the research agendas of academics and the imagery of the mass media. History, political organization, work and leisure, and other everyday dimensions of urban life that de rigueur have guided and informed the research of social scientists working elsewhere fade from view within the epistemological frontiers of the black inner city.

This book sets out to challenge and put to rest the trope of the black ghetto that has shaped what we know and do not know about black urban life and that has strongly influenced, if not defined, the terms of political debates in the United States concerning race, social inequality, and the changing political economy of American cities. My general aim is to restore both history and politics to discussions of contemporary black urban life through an analysis of community activism in Black Corona. By shedding light on the political lives and struggles of people such as Jake Govan and John Booker, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the complex and shifting interrelation of race, class, and power in American society.

THE CRISIS IN INNER-CITY THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

During the 1980s the nation's attention became riveted once again on urban poverty and other serious problems in U.S. cities. In the conceptual arsenal of Reagan and Bush-era conservatives, this "crisis" in the inner city was held to be proof positive that the welfare state had failed and that the origins of black poverty rested not in racialized forms of inequality but in a breakdown of family values and structure. The rhetorical figure of the "welfare-dependent mother" raising generation after generation of criminals and unwed mothers in fatherless families provided ideological support for budget-cutting attacks on the social welfare system and massive increases in public expenditures for law enforcement and prison construction.[1]

This discourse of inner-city pathology, popularized in the mass media, depoliticized the problem of black poverty and related social inequalities by locating their origins in the moral economy of the isolated "ghetto" household, rather than in the political economy of the greater society. In this view, the problems facing African-American and other poor populations would best be solved not through political struggles for social and economic justice but rather through the punitive rehabilitation of the family and its weakened moral values. When President George Bush assured the American public on nationwide television that the May 1992 outbreak of widespread social unrest and violence in Los Angeles was "not a message of protest" and "not about the great cause of equality," he gave voice to this depoliticized vision of black identity and community life: a race- and power-evasive view that rendered the political struggles of African-Americans either invisible or as senseless expressions of "black rage" and criminality.[2]

Among scholars, the intensification of poverty in black urban communities during the 1970s and 1980s led to a renewed interest in explaining the origins and persistence of ghetto poverty and the social problems with which it was said to be associated. While some researchers supported the arguments of conservative policy makers and linked continued black poverty to the putative welfare dependency of female-headed families,[3] others challenged this "blame the victim" approach and focused attention on joblessness in inner-city areas brought about in part by the postwar deindustrialization of the U.S. economy. This latter perspective, most notably developed in the research of William Julius Wilson, grounded the problem of black poverty in the changing structure of the U.S. economy. Though the link between unemployment and black poverty had been long recognized (see DuBois 1996 [1899]), Wilson's widely disseminated writings became a lightning rod in debates about the origins of inner-city poverty and its impact on the lives of the minority poor.

Wilson's thesis, developed in his influential book, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), was that the minority poor in certain cities had become concentrated in ghetto neighborhoods and isolated from the socioeconomic resources of the wider society. Wilson argued that this concentration and isolation of the poor resulted from the interaction of two social forces: a restructuring of the U.S. economy since 1970, which accelerated increases in the jobless rate among blacks, and a "social-structural dislocation" in inner-city areas that Wilson associated with an out-migration of nonpoor blacks from ghetto communities.[4]

For Wilson, economic restructuring exacerbated the labor market exclusion of blacks and other urban minorities but did not suffice to trigger the concentration of urban poverty that he associated with the inner-city poor or "ghetto underclass." Increased rates of joblessness, Wilson argued, interacted with an out-migration of the black nonpoor from inner-city areas, concentrating the poor in "extreme ghetto neighborhoods" and producing a qualitatively new form of urban poverty, characterized by "acute social and economic marginalization" (Wacquant and Wilson 1989:9).

Building on arguments developed in his 1978 book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson argued that middle-class African-Americans or, more generally, the black nonpoor were better positioned than the poor to benefit from civil rights era reforms, such as antidiscrimination legislation and affirmative action programs. More educated and skilled than the poor, the black nonpoor were able to exploit newly opened white-collar and professional job opportunities at the very time that changes in the economy were eliminating entry-level job opportunities for the unskilled and minimally educated. As higher-income blacks consolidated income gains, Wilson reasoned, they moved away from ghetto neighborhoods. This "exodus" of the nonpoor incited a social transformation of inner-city areas, not only increasing the concentration of the poor within them but also contributing to an increase in "social dislocations," such as crime, welfare dependency, and out-of-wedlock births (1987:46–62).

Wilson's account of the transformation of inner-city communities in the wake of the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy challenged the views of conservative poverty policy analysts who attributed the persistence and intensification of inner-city poverty to a culturally reproduced "cycle of welfare dependency" rather than to the complex socioeconomic effects of prolonged joblessness. Equally important, Wilson raised key questions about changes in black class structure and in the social organization of black communities in the wake of civil rights era reforms.

The view of black urban life that emerged from Wilson's writings was one of ghetto communities, socially isolated from the values and resources of not only "mainstream society" but of the black working and middle classes as well. From this perspective the black nonpoor, armed with civil rights era gains in income and citizenship rights, had abandoned segregated black areas, leaving behind neighborhoods that were as a result less equipped culturally and institutionally to withstand the socioeconomic strains of prolonged joblessness.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson explained the impact of the removal of this working- and middle-class "social buffer" on the communities that the nonpoor left behind:

> This argument is based on the assumption that even if the truly disadvantaged segments of an inner-city area experience a significant increase in long-term spells of joblessness, the basic institutions in that area (churches, schools, stores, recreational facilities, etc.) would remain viable if much of their base of support

> comes from the more economically stable and secure families. Moreover, the very presence of these families during such periods provides mainstream role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception. (1987:56)

It was Wilson's account of the exodus of the nonpoor from ghetto areas, more than his analysis of economic restructuring, that aroused the attention of critics. Some argued that Wilson had overestimated the economic and social mobility of the black working and middle classes and thereby minimized the effects of contemporary racism on their ability to accumulate wealth and overcome deeply entrenched practices of job discrimination and residential segregation.[5] Others took issue with the normative role that Wilson attributed to the black middle classes as cultural "role models" and as a social buffer against joblessness and economic hardships.[6] On this score, some argued that Wilson had not only discounted the resiliency and sociocultural resources of the black poor but had also elevated an idealized and deeply patriarchal model of the middle-class family to a universal norm against which the "pathology" of the poor was defined and statistically measured.[7] Equally important, Wilson's analysis of the effects of the loss of the middle-class "social buffer" on inner-city areas seemed to imply that class had been relatively unimportant in structuring social relations in black communities during earlier periods.[8]

These concerns highlighted critical weaknesses in Wilson's analysis of the transformation of black communities in the post–civil rights era and focused attention on important research issues that had been relatively unexplored in studies of black urban life. High on the list among these was the process of black class formation and, more generally, the social complexity of black urban life and identities.

With rare yet important exceptions social science research on black urban populations has tended to focus on the black poor or, more accurately, on aspects of "ghetto life" that were viewed as differing from an often evoked but seldom defined "mainstream culture." Pursued in the name of understanding the uniqueness of "ghetto subculture" and the deft survival techniques of the poor, this ghetto research agenda emphasized, and at times celebrated, what Lee Rainwater opined to be the "limited functional autonomy" of black ghetto culture (1970:6).[9]

This notion of the relative autonomy of black ghetto culture served as a leitmotiv for the surge of ethnographic research on black urban communities during the 1960s. By emphasizing the relative autonomy of ghetto culture, anthropologists and, to a lesser extent, sociologists hoped to demonstrate that the behavior of the poor was a creative and adaptive response to an oppressive society and not merely a pathological deviation from its norms. Moreover, in contrast to the view, associated with the culture of poverty thesis, that the

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