

**“A NOTE OF BITTERNESS IN HIS VOICE”: YOUTH GANGS, SELF-  
EXPRESSION, AND CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INTERRACIAL TENSION IN  
POSTWAR NEW YORK CITY, 1945-65**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis challenges the popular idea of 1950s New York City as a liberal desegregated city characterized by racial tolerance by looking closely at the issues of juvenile delinquency and neighbourhood-based youth gangs. Using a wide variety of archival research—including but not limited to newspaper and magazine articles, oral histories, recorded audio, photographs, and databases—it argues that groups of working class teenagers organized themselves into ethnically-divided gangs in response to postwar demographic transitions that saw a large influx of black and Hispanic migrants to historically white areas. It views anti-social gang activity, especially “rumbles” or fights, as modes of conversation that racialized gang members engaged in with fellow teenagers and the public about their experiences and frustrations trying to access the city’s theoretically desegregated recreational amenities. Using two case studies drawn from highly-publicized incidents in the 1950s, this thesis demonstrates that some youth gang members vocally pushed back against municipal and media authorities’ colourblind go-to discourse of “hoodlumism” to explain the juvenile delinquency problem facing postwar New Yorkers—revealing a city riddled with interracial tension after all.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original, unpublished intellectual work by the author, K. L. Russell. Any errors, grammatical or otherwise, are the author's own.

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*For Helen Marie Eifert (1927-2014) & Norman Walter Eifert (1925-2016)*

*“...I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”*

- 2 Timothy 4:6-7

I know how to do the past; doing the future is much harder.

- Judith Bennett, *History Matters*

## Introduction

### 1.1 “You can’t stop this trouble”

One afternoon in early December 1950, “hanging” Judge Samuel Leibowitz ripped into 17 year-old Anthony Scarpati in a Brooklyn courtroom: “There isn’t a kid in this court today that would get up and say anything nice about you...You’re going to swing all by yourself, and you a big gang man!”<sup>1</sup> Scarpati, a member of the South Brooklyns gang, fired a gun that fatally wounded 18 year-old James Fortunato of the rival Tigers during a high-profile fight in Prospect Park on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May. Though Scarpati maintained that the gun had misfired and he did not intend to kill Fortunato, Leibowitz pushed the jury to find the teenager guilty of first-degree murder and openly advocated the maximum punishment. But before the jury could deliberate, fellow South Brooklyns member Joseph Senatore stood up and opened his mouth.

Directly addressing Judge Leibowitz, the slightly-built 20 year-old Senatore voiced his thoughts on his friend’s sentencing, the recent spate of youth gang warfare, and the increase in so-called juvenile delinquency in New York City following the end of the war. He talked about the brutal nightstick justice of Brooklyn’s crooked cops; about the bitterness and anger he learned in jail while serving three years for robbery. He pushed against locking up Scarpati, arguing that a prison sentence would only do him harm—as well as have no effect on New York

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Vincent A. Riccio and John K. Kelly, *Reminiscences of Vincent A. Riccio*. (New York: Columbia Center for Oral History, 1961), pg. 39. Vincent Riccio worked with the New York City Youth Board as a detached gang worker in the early 1950s, and was “assigned” to the primarily Italian-American South Brooklyns gang to get to know them, accompany them to court dates and other meetings with justice officials, and act as a positive role model for the teenagers. Detached gang workers were often young men with education or social work backgrounds who the New York City Youth Board, incorporated in 1947, hoped could “meet” the groups on their own level(s), find out why the youth joined the gang, and eventually redirect the gang’s energies into more socially-acceptable activities—like hosting dances, volunteering in their communities, gainful employment, or schooling, or recreational athletic leagues.

A brief note on quotations: I have chosen not to use “sic” in situations where slang or unconventional grammar and sentence construction occur in sources (especially in transcripts of tape recorded interviews or radio programs), as colloquial expressions and accents can indicate place of residence, upbringing, education, and other markers of social, economic, and/or ethnic identities of the actors.



City's youth gang violence in general. "Look, Your Honor," Senatore concluded. "You can't stop this trouble. It's not us kids. It's the neighborhood, the environment. We've got no place to go."<sup>2</sup> Speaking out during a high-profile gang-related murder trial, Joe Senatore took a not-entirely calculated risk. The heightened presence of the press in the courtroom, coupled with the uncompromising reputation of the presiding judge and the unflattering nature of his remarks about the New York Police Department (NYPD), rendered Senatore both poster boy and pariah. Shortly after the trial, fallout from his publicized observations about the NYPD prompted him to relocate to a different neighborhood to avoid police harassment.<sup>3</sup> Despite the personal, legal, and media pressures that resulted, Joseph Senatore's courtroom commentary provides historians with an opportunity to hear how a vulnerable urban population puzzled through their lives in a city undergoing dramatic demographic change.

This project interrogates a mid-20th century moment in the legacy and everyday embodiment of structural racism in the United States of America by examining the postwar proliferation of neighbourhood-based youth gangs. It opens in the aftermath of the Second World War, in a darker and dirtier version of Brooklyn. Catching Judge Leibowitz by surprise, Italian-American teenager Joseph Senatore connects antisocial youth gang activities and violence to gang members' neighbourhood characteristics and a dearth of recreational options.<sup>4</sup> His

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Senatore, quoted in Richard Kleiner, "Friend's Plea Spots City Gang Troubles: Youth Speaks Up in Brooklyn Court," *Terre Haute Star*, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1951, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Joe Senatore moved to a housing project in the Gowanus neighborhood from his usual "turf" of South Brooklyn, because he was being threatened by local police officers unhappy about Senatore's comments to Leibowitz. New York City Youth Board worker Vince Riccio, who had just been assigned to work with the Gowanus Boys around the time of the Fortunato murder trial, was childhood friends with Senatore's uncle and knew Joe before he moved to the Gowanus project. Walking in the South Brooklyn territory with Senatore, Riccio recounts "about half a dozen" cops saying to Senatore "Look, if we ever have an excuse to shoot you, we're going to shoot. You're the kid that shot his mouth off in court about cops." The press surrounding Senatore's courtroom comments also drew increased police attention to the South Brooklyn gang he belonged to, temporarily stifling gang activity in the area. Riccio, *Reminiscences*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Neighbourhood characteristics include its particular social, economic, and ethno-cultural composition, as well as any recent or ongoing demographic transitions, infrastructure, and amenities like parks, pools, and community centres.

courtroom commentary opens up the question of how youth gang members saw themselves as part of, or isolated from, their respective communities. More specifically, how did they go about making sense of the places and subjectivities they inhabited: as school-aged adolescents, young working class men, sons of recently-arrived migrant families (or more-established European immigrant families), ‘cool’ New Yorkers, and—above all—as *American citizens*?

This project also works to uncover the possibility of power (however limited) and agency in the words, aesthetic choices, and actions of neighbourhood teenagers, framing each as a mode of communication. I argue that youth gangs in postwar New York City carried on a complex series of ‘conversations’ with rival gangs, local communities, and municipal authorities about their experiences growing up in an officially desegregated, urban, northeastern American city. Fragments of these conversations were picked up and repackaged for a wider (whiter?) New York public by various media outlets; including radio, television, print, and documentary photography. As with any translation and interpretation process, something often became “lost” in the time, space, and medium between the original conversation or event and its representation. However, such translations—and the ‘loss’ or exclusions they encompassed—arguably functioned to reveal the unspoken opinions and biases of the reporting media and local authorities, as well as those of the public that the former report to and whose thoughts and anxieties they reflected. By foregrounding the voices, choices, and actions of teenaged gang members in three exemplary cases spanning the 1950s—and listening closely to the accompanying silences in popular media—I chart here a widening disconnect between postwar New York City authorities and the concerns of their “delinquent” adolescent subjects. This disconnect, set against what political historian Wendy Wall identifies as the “presumed

harmony” of the 1950s and early 1960s’ “consensus culture”, would become impossible to ignore any longer after July 16, 1964.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 “A disruptive sickness to be contained and cured”

Thousands of teenage boys marginalized from the mainstream middle class by a range of factors including age, unstable family dynamics, poor economic or educational prospects, substandard housing, and recent immigrant or migrant status—inflected above all by race and ethnicity—organized into neighborhood-based youth gangs in postwar New York.<sup>6</sup> Treated by city authorities as a disruptive sickness to be contained and cured (not necessarily simultaneously), inter-youth gang violence was often conflated by municipal authorities and in the mainstream media with a perceived upward spike in “juvenile delinquency” and “hoodlumism” in urban centres across the USA after WWII. Characterized as such, volumes of newspaper, magazine, radio, and video-recorded media produced on the topic of adolescent gangs feature a great deal of adult civic and expert hand-wringing, head-shaking, and tongue-

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5. Wall charts the careful creation and maintenance of an “American Way” from Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal to the surge of the Civil Rights Movement. Her introduction makes it clear that this consensus culture was contested, with different stakeholders interpreting and using the vocabulary of consensus slightly differently, depending on who they were and what their interests were: “Many government officials and private elites...used the language of consensus to promote *civility* across class, racial, ethnic, and religious lines. Denying or minimizing economic and power imbalances, they stressed the harmony of interests among various groups...and sought to shore up the status quo.” However, other groups “put *equality* rather than comity at the centre of their consensual vision. Civil rights activists, left-liberal intellectuals, and some advocates of the rights of labour tried to unite Americans around a set of values that they believed would ultimately lead to social change. Rather than ignoring power imbalances, they tried to use the language of consensus to correct them.” Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* 8.

<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to imply that *all* boys who experienced any combination of the aforementioned factors were directly involved in organized gang activity, or fought groups from other neighborhoods. The listed factors reflect trends and commonalities reported in secondary scholarship on postwar youth gangs and are also indicated by the primary sources consulted herein. See especially: Eric Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999); Patricia Vettel-Becker, *Shooting From the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Emily Haas Davidson and Bob Powers, *Bobby’s Book* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012); Andrew Diamond, *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

wagging—but hardly any space for the voices of the teenaged subjects themselves.<sup>7</sup> Following the voices of Joseph Senatore and his peers out from the courtroom to the street corner, from fashion to fist fights and worse, it becomes clear that these boys were holding violent “conversations” about their frustrations and fears of keeping or carving out a niche in a city in transition. Whether speaking for themselves, through a well-intentioned social organization such as the New York City Youth Board (NYCYB), or through specific aesthetic and linguistic choices—as well as deliberately anti-social behaviours—youth gang members in postwar New York told less-than-picturesque tales about ethnic, economic, and age-related tensions in their neighborhoods that few city and media authorities were willing to recognize.

To listen and respond honestly to what youth gangs were saying, I argue, would have required the city of New York to acknowledge the thriving existence of structural racism against non-white Americans and arriving immigrants. In a state that welcomes the world’s “wretched

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<sup>7</sup> The Progressive Era in the USA, beginning in the 1890s, and lingering through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought new levels of “professionalization, scientific expertise, and rational administration” to the issues of child welfare in the United States—with expanded roles for both trained child care “experts” and state power (172). As Steven Mintz describes in *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*, Progressives were successful in reducing infant mortality via public health initiatives, encouraging children to play off the streets by building playgrounds in urban areas, enacting compulsory school attendance laws, revising public school curricula, curtailing the hours & acceptable conditions of child labour, and greatly expanding elementary and high school education (173). Of particular importance here, the turn of the century also saw the establishment of the first juvenile court in Illinois in 1899, resulting from “a recognition of the special developmental characteristics of the young and the importance of early intervention, individualized treatment, and rehabilitation” to prevent youth from hardening into “career criminals” under the influence of adults in regular prisons (178). The special provisions of the juvenile court would come under fire for being “too soft” on juvenile crime over the course of the twentieth century, swinging back to a “get tough” policy by the time the 1950s arrive. Also worth noting here is the connection between the Progressive Era’s emphasis on “scientific” expertise, the medicalization of delinquent children, and the rise of medical interventions in an effort to “fix” problem kids and prevent the passage of poor genetics—alongside the growing field of eugenics (178/9). From Steven Mintz, “Save the Child”, in *Huck’s Raft* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2004), 154-184.

While working with the New York City Youth Board (NYCYB) and Mobilization for Youth (MFY) records at Columbia University, I came across several memos about programme funding from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to the executives of the NYCYB and MF, as well as vice versa. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the connections between NIMH and New York’s efforts to “solve” its postwar juvenile delinquency/youth gang problem, but it remains a fascinating area for future study.

refuse”<sup>8</sup> to its shore and a country which holds it to be “self-evident” that all men are guaranteed access to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”,<sup>9</sup> what would it have meant for the predominantly white city officials, press, and police authorities in postwar NYC to openly admit that racial prejudice coloured both youth gang violence and its official handling? Regardless of bureaucratic attempts to whitewash the centrality of race to teenage violence in the 1950s and early 1960s by adopting a discourse of “hoodlumism”, the various types of conversations delinquent youth had functioned within a constellation of implied information about gang demographics in the media and among the general public. To help contextualize what these young men were saying about the versions of the (white) neighbourhoods, city, state, and country they inhabited, I consulted newspaper articles and photographs dedicated to youth gang activity in New York City between 1945-1965 in concert with radio and magazine interviews with concerned parents, victims, and alleged assailants, oral histories, annual reports, doctoral research, city surveys, community organization meeting minutes, social work files, and municipal government correspondence. My research methods worked to utilize conventional *and* more culturally-embedded modes of expression and dialogue, thus opening myself up to the possibility of different voices and stories about a rose-coloured American past I thought I recognized—and that past’s much longer legacy of pain which continues today.

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002) Lazarus’s 1883 sonnet was inscribed on a plaque on the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbour in 1901, the gateway to America for all those arriving via ship. The poem quite literally welcomes sea travelers to New York.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence” (1776), *America’s Founding Documents*, National Archives and Records Administration. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

### 1.3 Literature Review

Hunting for primary and secondary source investigations into postwar urban youth gangs and juvenile delinquency in the United States uncovered a rats' nest of theories from the social sciences, and a plethora of stories from the arts. My predecessors here include, but are not limited to: journalists; anthropologists; social workers; sociologists; feminist art historians; criminologists; Broadway composers, lyricists, choreographers; authors of fiction; and historians with a wide range of preoccupations. Chronologically, Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* is the first in-depth treatment of the urban phenomena of the gang. Asbury's book—which has achieved somewhat of a cult status since its initial publication in 1927—charts the origins and exploits of 19th and early 20th century adult gangs in the Bowery and Five Points areas of Manhattan, New York. The original, nineteenth century “gangs of New York,” were outwardly similar in appearance. But while both the nativist “Bowery Boys” and their Irish “Dead Rabbits” rivals were fair-skinned—what today's audiences would recognize as “white”—their altercations were founded on stark ethnic prejudices.<sup>10</sup> Nativist hostilities toward incoming groups, like Catholic Irish and Italians in the nineteenth

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<sup>10</sup> “Nativism,” according to the *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, is “a form of ethnocentrism that considers previous residence in a country or region to constitute a claim to superiority in culture or a higher class of citizenship.” In the case of the United States, anti-Catholic prejudice and violence was the first form of nativism (given the dominant Anglo-Protestant makeup of the colonial “American” population). With the mass influx of impoverished Irish (Catholic) people to the USA from the 1830s onward, and millions of Italian Catholics, Jews, Russians, and southern Slavs in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American nativism expanded to include anti-Jewish, anti-communist, and a fear and hatred of “aliens” in the United States. David Bennett aptly sums up the nativist movement when he writes, “despite having expelled and dispersed the previous [indigenous] residents and being surrounded by other ethnicities, races, and religions, nativists have viewed themselves as somehow special—‘Anglo Saxons—and other Protestant descendants of northern and western European settlers—the only people worthy of being called ‘American.’” See David H. Bennett, “Nativism,” *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by John Hartwell Moore (Michigan: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008): 358-361; and Eric Kaufmann, “American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Anglo-Saxon Ethnogenesis in the ‘Universal’ Nation, 1776-1850,” *Journal of American Studies* 33 (December 1999): 437-457. For more information on how once-maligned immigrant groups, like Irish-Catholics, became “American” see: David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999) and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999).

century, would crash through the turn of the century and hurtle into the twentieth as violent clashes over territory and citizenship rights.

Also in 1927, Frederic Thrasher published *The Gang*, widely considered by sociologists to be the twentieth century's pre-eminent volume on the organizational structure and culture of urban gangs.<sup>11</sup> Based on extensive research and interviews with Chicago gang members, Thrasher's work is among the first to examine the "social and spatial organization of urban centers, how immigrants dealt with assimilating in new urban terrain, and the role of gangs as social organizations."<sup>12</sup> Mapping *The Gang*'s central questions about who joined Chicago gangs where, when, and why on to the demographic upheaval of New York City in the 1940s & 1950s moves closer to articulating postwar youth gangs' relations to their communities, as well as the resultant (increasingly visible) violence that occurred between ethnically-diverse gangs. Thrasher's descriptive skills also ensured that gangs like the Ally Rat Knights of the Round Table and the Snodgrass Bunch continue to tumble off the page and loiter in the stoops and alleyways of the American imagination, keeping company with the likes of the Dead Rabbits & Bowery Boys, in addition to fictionalized Hollywood gangs like Johnny Strabler and the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club, the Jets and the Sharks, the Warriors, the Outsiders, and the T-Birds.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Daniel Monti, co-editor of 1993's *Gangs*, unequivocally states in his chapter that "any assessment of what we know and do not know about gangs in this century must begin with Frederic Thrasher" (135). Daniel J. Monti, "Gangs in More- and Less-Settled Communities," in *Gangs: The Origins and Impact of Contemporary Youth Gangs in the United States*, ed. Scott Cummings and Daniel Monti (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, "The Situation Complex: Revisiting Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*," *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies* 6 (2006): 336.

<sup>13</sup> The Dead Rabbits & Bowery Boys appear in Asbury's *Gangs of New York* (1927), adapted into a feature film by Martin Scorsese in 2002. Johnny Strabler, played by Marlon Brando, and the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club, are from the popular 1953 Hollywood film, *The Wild One*. The film is based on a 1951 short story by Frank Rooney, called "The Cyclists' Raid". James Dean plays the part of maladjusted teenager Jim Stark in 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*, arguably the most iconic Hollywood portrayal of the "shook up generation." Timely Broadway musical *West Side Story* introduced American audiences to the singing and dancing gangs of the Jets (a white gang) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican) in 1957. *West Side Story* was adapted into a feature film in 1961. The Warriors, a 1965 novel written by Sol Yurick, follows the fictitious Coney Island Dominators as they try to get away from the Bronx, the police, and enemy gangs back to their home "turf". *The Warriors* was updated and adapted into a cult-classic film in

The subject of post-WWII era adolescent gangs and juvenile delinquency would continue to captivate American scholars, professionals, and creatives alike for the rest of the Cold War era. Well-known Polish-American criminologists Sheldon & Eleanor Glueck built a long and successful career on studying juvenile delinquency and rates of recidivism, as well as repeated attempts to identify characteristics of “pre-delinquent” children. In 1950’s *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, the Gluecks review 10 years of research with 500 delinquent and non-delinquent boys aged 16 and under, and broadly conclude that a boy’s inclination toward juvenile delinquency is strongly correlated to a lack of “adequate socialization” by their families and resulting development of “persistent anti-social tendencies.”<sup>14</sup> Also researching and writing about youth gangs from the 1950s onward, anthropologist Walter B. Miller is recognized in the social sciences for his contributions to criminological theory, as well as his public service and tireless work with prominent government agencies in the field of youth crime prevention.<sup>15</sup> Miller is perhaps best-known in criminology for his 1958 paper, “Lower-Class Culture As A Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency,” which posits six “focal concerns” or shared values for members of lower-class subcultures—and may contribute to working-class teenaged gang

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1979. S.E. Hinton’s 1967 young adult novel, *The Outsiders*, introduced North America to the likes of Ponyboy, Sodapop, Johnny, and the rival middle-class “Socs.” In 1983, *The Outsiders* was adapted by Francis Ford Coppola into a movie starring a young Tom Cruise, Patrick Swayze, Emilio Estevez, and Matt Dillon. Finally, the leather-jacketed T-Birds (previously known as the Burger Shop Boys) are from the stage musical *Grease*, which got the Hollywood treatment with Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta in 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1950), reviewed by S.L. Washburn from University of Chicago in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 53, 1951, pp.573-4.

<sup>15</sup> From his autobiographical blurb in 1966’s article on “Violent Crimes in City Gangs,” appearing in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*: “Walter B. Miller, Ph.D., Cambridge, Massachusetts, is Director of the Midcity Delinquency Study and Research Associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology-Harvard University Joint Center for Urban Studies. He has published articles in the areas of political organization, American Indians, crime and delinquency, and low-income populations. He has taught and written on anthropological aspects of the fields of public health, education, government, social welfare, and criminology. He served as consultant to several large-scale demonstration projects sponsored by President Kennedy’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime.” Miller, “Violent Crimes in City Gangs,” 96.



activity: trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy.<sup>16</sup> While theoretical emphasis on the supposed correlation between social class and crime waned at the end of the twentieth century due to a lack of evidence, Miller's hypothesis about the influence of shared values on delinquent activity continued to be bolstered by empirical findings.<sup>17</sup> In 1962, sociologist Lewis Yablonsky published *The Violent Gang*, quoting heavily from tape-recorded interviews with members of the Egyptian Kings and the Dragons—infamous teenagers who participated in the highly-profiled 1957 attack and killing of polio-crippled Michael Farmer, a 15-year old Irish-American youth ambushed in a Washington Heights park after dark.<sup>18</sup> Yablonsky spent four years working with teenaged gang members on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as a gang social worker in the mid-1950s, building rapport, trying to tease out the allure of gang delinquency. *The Violent Gang* summarizes Yablonsky's observations, arguing that fighting gangs use violence as currency in a bid for upward mobility for "psychological and social misfits" looking for "an outlet for their aggressiveness and fantasies of power".<sup>19</sup> But while it is reasonable to assume that *some* members of youth gangs may have had mental or personality disorders, I worry that pathologizing *all* teenage gangsters runs the risk of potentially harmful diagnoses and treatment for "sick" or "disturbed" adolescents—and/or the casual dismissal of teenaged voices pushing back against postwar instances of civic inequity or harm done by others.

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<sup>16</sup> Walter B. Miller, "Lower-Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency", *The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* 14, (1958): 5-19.

<sup>17</sup> David Brownfield, "Miller, Walter B.: Lower-Class Cultural Theory of Delinquency," in *Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory*, ed. Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010): 643-5.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Yablonsky, *The Violent Gang*, (New York: MacMillan, 1962).

<sup>19</sup> Yablonsky, as quoted by John Barron Mays in a review of *The Violent Gang* and *Reaching the Fighting Gang*, published in *The British Journal of Criminology* 4 (July 1964): 495.

## 2. Past as Prologue

### 2.1 “It’s not us kids”

The 1945 cessation of war on an international scale signaled an upswing in media reports and civic discussions about a perceived increase in street-level hostilities among groups of young men, adolescent boys, and their greater communities in major urban centres across America.<sup>20</sup> In New York City, as in Los Angeles and Chicago, authorities could not seem to keep groups of teenage boys off the streets and out of trouble. In a phenomenon rooted in the nineteenth century, an increasing number of working-class male youth in postwar New York organized themselves into ethnically-divided neighborhood gangs.<sup>21</sup>

Over the years, the complexions of migrants and immigrants to New York progressively diversified and deepened in pigmentation. Black southerners, moving north and east during World War I to fill industrial positions created or left vacant by the war effort, again streamed into New York and other urban centres during WWII.<sup>22</sup> Puerto Ricans, granted US citizenship

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<sup>20</sup> See 1943’s highly-publicized, multi-city “Zoot Suit Riots”—kicked off in Los Angeles when white US servicemen attacked young Latino civilians wearing zoot suits—and corresponding incidents of racialized violence of whites attacking young African-Americans and Hispanics in other major urban areas, like Detroit, Philadelphia, Texas, Arizona, and New York City. For more information on the racially-motivated violence of the Zoot Suit and resulting riots, see the excellent PBS “American Experience” webpage on the Zoot Suit Riots, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/index.html> including a timeline, gallery, film, and collection of primary sources. See also Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race & Riots in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) and Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). For further reading on the cultural and political significance of the zoot suit to African-American youth, see Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare,” *History Workshop* 18 (Autumn 1984): 77-91 and Robin D.G. Kelley, “The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of gang violence in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York—including the nativist Bowery Boys and their Irish rivals, the Dead Rabbits—see journalist Herbert Asbury’s seminal *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1928). Timothy Gilfoyle’s “Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes: Child Pickpockets and Street Culture in New York City, 1850-1900,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (Summer 2004) provides a complementary introduction to the “problem” of street youth in New York in the same period, as well as a discussion of the street youths’ creation of an oppositional subculture.

<sup>22</sup> For details about the different waves of black south-north migration and the southern diaspora, see James N. Gregory, *Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and the companion website for the book, featuring supplemental photographs, helpful statistics tables, published peer reviews, and links to complementary resources:

under the Jones-Shafroth Act in 1917, similarly migrated to New York in increasing numbers, following opportunities in the defense and military auxiliary industries.<sup>23</sup> Despite the great numbers of black southerners and Puerto Ricans who arrived in the Northeastern states while WWII was underway, neither of these Great Migrations had yet reached their respective peaks. For its part, African-American northward migration from the South slowed after the 1929 stock market crash, to resurge with greater strength in the overture and coda to the Second World War. The collapse of cotton prices during the Great Depression, rampant poverty, the racial segregation and discrimination codified in the “Jim Crow” laws, and the lack of economic and educational opportunities drew many black southerners north, east and west in the Second Great Migration beginning in 1940.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the black southerners who took part in the first Great Migration (1916-1930), participants in the second wave were not simply rural agricultural workers; many had previously lived in an urban area, worked for a wage, and were better

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<http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/diaspora/index.htm>. For an interactive introduction to the historical movements of Africans and African-Americans in the United States—including the transatlantic slave trade, the First Great Migration (1916-1930), and the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), see *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* website, presented by New York’s Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture: <http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>.

<sup>23</sup> Puerto Rico is a US Territory, transferred to America following victory in the 1898 Spanish-American War. President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act in early 1917, granting American citizenship to all Puerto Ricans born from 1898-on. Incidentally (or not), granting Puerto Ricans US citizenship in 1917 also meant that young island men could be conscripted for the USA’s efforts in WWI, as well as migrate to the mainland for low-skill and low-paying factory jobs without a passport. A similar phenomenon occurred during WWII. For more information on the USA’s relationship with and impact on Puerto Rico, see Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles, *Subject People and Colonial Discourses: Economic Transformation and Social Disorder in Puerto Rico, 1898-1947* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994); Juan González, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> C. Horace Hamilton, “The Negro Leaves the South,” *Demography* 1 (1964): 273-295. Note on the Jim Crow Laws: A term used to describe the segregationist practices that restricted blacks from the end of Reconstruction (1877) until the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. According to the Schomburg Centre’s *In Motion* glossary, “The label “Jim Crow” was derived from a white minstrel act that caricatured black people during the early 1800s. In areas of the North and South, blacks faced separation in public transportation and discrimination in education, jobs, medical care, and housing. In the South, “whites only” signs marked hotels, libraries, parks, restaurants, and theaters, as well as public restrooms and drinking fountains. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that segregation was unconstitutional in state-sponsored programs; the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) further dismantled Jim Crow practices within the nation,” [http://www.inmotionaame.org/glossary/glossary\\_term.cfm?id=184](http://www.inmotionaame.org/glossary/glossary_term.cfm?id=184).

educated than their predecessors.<sup>25</sup> Other potential benefits awaiting postwar internal migrants to the North included access to the established communication and kinship networks of earlier migrants, which could help newcomers transition to life in a new city and climate, as well as find housing and employment.<sup>26</sup> During the Great Migrations, black southerners drifted into Fort Greene as well as other Brooklyn neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Brownsville. Another pocket of African-American migrants settled in Jamaica, in the nearby borough of Queens.<sup>27</sup> Despite the steady formation of African-American neighborhoods throughout New York City, Harlem, a large area in northern Manhattan, became synonymous with black culture and in-migration beginning in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s and '30s, African-Americans in West and Central Harlem enjoyed a flourishing cultural atmosphere, later known as the "Harlem Renaissance."<sup>28</sup> Home and creative space to luminaries in literary, music, performing and visual arts, and intellectual circles, Harlem continued to attract great numbers of black migrants through the postwar period—eventually pushing up against substandard housing, uneasy neighbors, and other migrants arriving from the Caribbean islands.

From 1946-1950, approximately 31,000 islanders per year left Puerto Rico for New York City; in 1953 alone, that number swelled to 75,000.<sup>29</sup> The rise of swift and affordable air travel in the postwar period cut previously arduous journeys from the Caribbean down to a matter of hours, making it easier than ever before for Puerto Ricans to follow family members or to chase

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<sup>25</sup> Eui-Hang Shin, "Effects of Migrations on the Educational Levels of the Black Resident Population at the Origin and Destination, 1955-1960 and 1965-1970," *Demography* 15 (February 1978): 41-56.

<sup>26</sup> Kimberly L. Phillips, "The Plight of the Negro Workers," from *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> The first recorded African-Americans in New York arrived as slaves in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century; after emancipation in 1841 (New York) and 1865 (USA) many former New York slaves settled in Fort Greene, in Brooklyn. Schomburg Centre, *In Motion*, <http://www.inmotionaame.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the Harlem Renaissance, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (USA: Penguin Books, 1997) and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> A.W. Maldonado, "Migration to New York and Brazil", *Teodoro Moscoso and Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 144.

their own American dreams on the mainland. Along with the increasing mobility offered via airlines, the military and domestic opportunities provided during the wars, and the changing state of US-Puerto Rican relations in the first half of the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans also left the overcrowded island in the 1950s for mainland labour markets as a result of Governor Luis Muñoz Marín's economic development plan, "Operation Bootstrap". Intended by the governor to transform Puerto Rico's sugarcane plantation economy—vulnerable to frequent hurricanes—into a "modern" industrial economy dependent on highly-subsidized American investment, Operation Bootstrap's shortage of factory jobs inadvertently ensured a steady stream of migrants to the USA in search of work.<sup>30</sup> To support such an influx of people to New York, in 1948 the Migration Division of the Department of Labour of Puerto Rico opened an office in New York to help newly-arrived migrants connect to pre-existing communities scattered throughout the city, as well as support them in their searches for employment and housing.<sup>31</sup> Though Puerto Rican families settled in all five boroughs, over time some areas would fundamentally transform into *barrios*, or neighborhoods, as the Puerto Rican population swelled and other ethnic groups were "pushed out"—or left.<sup>32</sup> Confronted by incoming residents of Hispanic, Caribbean, and black southern descent; Irish, Italians, Catholics, and Jews alike continued to trade some of their pre-existing ethnic antagonisms for a shared shield of whiteness. As African-Americans and Puerto Ricans moved up and into the city, white New Yorkers who could afford to pack up their

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<sup>30</sup> "Operation Bootstrap" was a series of economic projects championed by the US Government and Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín beginning in 1942 to modernize Puerto Rico's economy by shifting it from agrarian (dependent on sugarcane, which was subject to destruction by frequent hurricanes) to industrial. A shortage of factory jobs on the island, coupled with wartime opportunities on the mainland, and overcrowding in Puerto Rico's cities helped push/pull more islanders to the USA. See Maldonado, *Teodoro Moscoso and Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap* for more information, drawing on extensive interviews with Teodoro Moscoso, the Executive Director of the agency responsible for industrial promotions and economic development under Muñoz Marín in the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>31</sup> Julio Morales, "New York's History of Immigration, Migration, and Ethnic and Racial Competition," *Puerto Rican Poverty and Migration: We Just Had to Try Elsewhere* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1986).

<sup>32</sup> Such *barrios* include one in the South Bronx, a portion of Manhattan's Lower East Side, and, most famously, East Harlem/Spanish Harlem—also known as *El Barrio*.

households and headed, exodus-style, for the fresh air and relative social homogeneity of the suburbs. Families and individuals without the economic ability to relocate were left to uneasily co-exist and occasionally collide with their new neighbours: at the workplace, in the schools, and on the streets.

Teenage gang members, usually unemployed, dropped or kicked out of school, often became the unofficial foot soldiers of neighbourhood purity. Outwardly occupied with gaining access to or control over limited recreational spaces, youth gangs after WWII were, on a basic level, concerned with defending their blocks against “outsiders” during a time of rapid neighborhood transition and in-migration from the South and the Caribbean.<sup>33</sup> While competing to protect and expand territory, as well as retaliating for real or rumoured slights, rival gangs variously engaged in disruptive loitering, petty criminal activity, and inter-gang fighting. More and more in the postwar period, gang rumbles (fights) resulted in the intentional or accidental deaths of other gang members and non-affiliated bystanders.<sup>34</sup> The heightened occurrence of violent antisocial behaviour drew greater-than-ever media attention to gangs, and their activities steadily filled New York newspapers from the end of the Second World War onward—especially if a white teenager was killed by a youth from an “incoming group”.<sup>35</sup> Correlated with the prominent space the popular press gave to detailing and dissecting youth gang manoeuvres in

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<sup>33</sup> The importance of gaining and maintaining access to recreational resources (such as nearby parks, swimming pools, basketball courts) to gangs in the post-WWII period is stressed in several studies. See, for example, Albert Cohen’s *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955); Schneider’s *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 1999; Diamond’s *Mean Streets*, 2009; and Robert W. Snyder, *Crossing Broadway: Washington Heights and the Promise of New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of the many youth gang-related murders from 1950-the early 1960s, see the anonymous, independently-researched history blog, *New York City Gangs: Teenage ‘Jitterbugging’ Gangs from 1950-1959*, <http://newyorkcitygangs.com/> which has been actively updated since 2011. Under the dropdown menu titled “Gang Homicides 1953-1960,” the author has collected details on over 40 reported gang homicides.

<sup>35</sup> I use the term “incoming groups” in the spirit of the sanitized language used by contemporary public and media officials to refer mainly to Puerto Rican migrants, but also African-American, and other “coloured” populations settling in New York in the postwar period. While the choice of “incoming groups” effectively washes skin colour out of the terminology, most (white) New Yorkers knew whom the term referred to. From Columbia University radio shorts, “This Week”.

print, civic distress skyrocketed. How to handle adolescent offenders became a topic of heated public debate, and produced suggestions and methods as diverse as the population of the city.

## **2.2 New York City Responds**

As public concern about “juvenile delinquency” mounted in the immediate postwar period, New Yorkers tested out several methods for dealing with young gang members with varying degrees of success. Police officers meted out on-the-street disciplinary action, but delinquents could also find themselves handcuffed and hauled in front of judges and juries—like Anthony Scarpati and Joe Senatore—incarcerated in a range of isolated reformatories and training schools, held in jail, or reporting to a probation officer for an extended period of time.<sup>36</sup> Coexistent with these more punitive approaches to juvenile delinquency, pre-existing community organizations like neighborhood houses and associations, religious groups, athletic facilities, and boys’ and girls’ clubs progressively focused their attentions on younger children and older boys feared to be “pre-delinquent”. Well-established local organizations like neighborhood houses generally combined adult supervision, moral instruction, structured play, and creative educational pursuits for children ranging in age from pre-kindergarten to senior high school as part of their programmes. When Europe plunged into another war in 1939 and demand for US military-industrial production soared, migrant workers from the South and US territories in the Caribbean poured into open factory positions during a second wave of Great Migrations. The official American commitment to a two-front war in the Pacific and Europe after the 1941 Japanese assault in Pearl Harbour, Hawai’i pulled more migrants north, east, and west to swell

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<sup>36</sup> See Mintz, “Save the Child,” in *Huck’s Raft* for more on the shift in juvenile justice approaches from incarceration in prison to training schools/reformatories at the turn of the century and into the first half of the twentieth century.

shipyards, munitions factories, and the services.<sup>37</sup> Workers' families moved into nearby neighborhoods, joining earlier migrant communities or bumping up against ethnically European areas; some migrant children began to attend programs at neighborhood houses during the war. Responding to demographic shifts made more visible by in-migration and the atrocities occurring overseas, community organizations like Grosvenor Neighborhood House in Manhattan began to align their work with the task of "building Americans" out of their young charges, US-born or otherwise.<sup>38</sup> In this rhetoric, supervising and molding youth into desirable (docile?) American citizens became explicitly connected to the prevention and eradication of urban juvenile delinquency.<sup>39</sup> Instead of finding diversions on the street corner, for example, neighbourhood houses encouraged teenagers to "come inside" and spend time learning skills, like carpentry, cooking, sewing, and needlework. Some, like Grosvenor, also offered a space to practice musical instruments with friends, host evening social dances, and participate in organized sports—all under the watchful eyes of adults.<sup>40</sup> But the organization's target audience, the so-called juvenile delinquents, tended not to frequent recreational programs offered by neighborhood houses,

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<sup>37</sup> For more information on the pull of WWII see the Schomburg Centre's webpage *In Motion*, on the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), <http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/landing.cfm?migration=9>.

<sup>38</sup> The 1940-41 Programme review and annual report for Grosvenor Neighborhood House is simply titled "We Build Americans," and the rhetoric of molding the children of "foreign-born" citizens and native-born children who may have been "improperly raised" into good, law-abiding citizens runs through the annual reports from the 1940s through to the early 1950s. See *Grosvenor Neighborhood House Records*, Box 3, Series 2, Folders 1-36 (New York: Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscript Collection). Given the explicit mission statement of "Building Americans," it would appear that the "politics of consensus" creation that Wendy Wall highlights in *Inventing the American Way* couldn't start too young!

<sup>39</sup> Grosvenor Neighborhood House annual reports from the period often contained references to juvenile delinquency as an "un-American" thing that "properly socialized" children and youth were not tempted to engage in, because "American hands are busy hands" (Grosvenor Neighborhood House annual report, 1943).

<sup>40</sup> As WWII wound to a close, and the postwar period began, Neighbourhood Houses like Grosvenor (GNH) began to work harder to appeal to older youth and teenagers, via the organization and hosting of evening social dances, offering spaces to practice and play musical instruments, sponsoring organized sports teams with uniforms, and teaching heavily gendered courses in carpentry, cooking, sewing, and needlework. See GNH Annual Reports from 1944-1959, in the *Grosvenor Neighborhood House Records*.



religious groups, and community centres as gang members were often unwelcome due to prior instances of poor behaviour, property vandalism, or disrespect for adult staff.<sup>41</sup>

In an attempt to reach teenage gang members not actively served by community groups, the New York City Youth Board (NYCYB) was incorporated in 1947 with the then-radical tactic of meeting youth gangs on their home turf: the streets. Based in part on the innovative Chicago Area Project (CAP), the New York City Youth Board assigned young men with professional backgrounds in education or social work to get in touch with gangs previously identified by the Board as dangerous or “fighting.”<sup>42</sup> Once the youth worker—colloquially known as a detached or gang worker—made initial contact with his allocated gang, he attempted to build a relationship with one or several of the more influential boys in the gang. Depending on the depth of trust potentially established between the detached worker and the gang, the worker’s “role” varied according to the needs and desires of the youth he was working with. The overarching aims of the NYCYB in the late 1940s and early 1950s were two-fold: to gain an understanding of *why* the youth they targeted engaged in delinquent activity; and to help *channel* gang members’ antisocial and occasionally self-destructive behaviour into socially-acceptable activities, like school work, gainful employment, or community outreach.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Riccio talks about the frustrations of “his” gang members not being allowed into local community centres due to real or suspected gang membership/association, as well as a “zero tolerance” approach to gang fighting at the Catholic gym he taught wrestling at as a young man. Riccio notes several times throughout his *Reminiscences* how difficult it was to find alternative social activities that would welcome teenagers who were hoping to transition “out” of gang involvement, or a gang wishing to “go straight” and become recognized as a “social and athletic” club.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on the Chicago Area Project (CAP) of the 1930s and 1940s, see Steven Schlossman and Michael Sedlak’s Rand Report for the National Institute of Education’s study of innovative approaches to juvenile delinquency, “The Chicago Area Project Revisited,” (Santa Monica: Rand Note, 1983). For its part, The New York City Youth Board published a primer of sorts, called “Reaching the Fighting Gang” in 1960, which differentiates between non-disruptive social groups and anti-social organizations referred to as gangs. It also outlines the NYCYB’s goals of meeting the gangs, gaining trust, and trying to help and divert their energy toward more “productive” (and pro-social) activities.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of socially-acceptable activities include: planning and hosting (supervised) social dances, organizing community fundraisers, going on camping or hiking trips outside the city, starting a sports team (with uniforms) and channeling gang rivalries into sports rivalries, as well as gainful employment.

Despite its admirable intentions and the tireless dedication of its detached workers, the New York City Youth Board's efficacy in combating youth crime was challenged from its inception. Misunderstandings over methods and mutual distrust with the NYPD led to a strained relationship with law enforcement, often centering on alleged incidents of verbal and physical police brutality experienced by youth workers when on the streets with their respective gangs. In addition, the Board itself was consistently understaffed; it was difficult to attract and retain young men (many with new families) willing to work the punishingly long hours the job demanded, in return for meagre pay and less-than-ideal safety standards.<sup>44</sup> As well, there were many more gangs active in postwar New York City than there ever were detached workers. The unbalanced worker-gang ratio, combined with the experimental and non-punitive nature of the program further contributed to its public marginalization as a legitimate response to juvenile delinquency when it was first organized in the late 1940s.<sup>45</sup>

Into this climate of concern over "what was to be done" about juvenile delinquency came Democrat Robert F. Wagner, Jr., who presided over New York City as mayor from 1954-1965. Elected by a large majority in late 1953, Wagner announced in March 1954 the creation of a cross-disciplinary municipal task force dedicated to researching and proactively pursuing an

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<sup>44</sup> New York City Youth Board worker Vince Riccio recounts in his *Reminiscences* the physical danger associated with accompanying assigned gangs either to or away from a "rumble" with a rival gang, during which time the detached worker might experience collateral damage from the fighting or be subject to rough treatment from the responding police. As well, detached workers didn't have a set work day; they were available to "their" gang whenever the gang was up and about. According to Riccio, his days could start at 11 am (if the teenagers skipped or were kicked out of school and didn't have jobs) until 2 or 3 am. After a "shift," workers were still expected by the NYCYB to prepare case files on their gangs. Another common theme running through Riccio's *Reminiscences*, as well as the case files of Kenneth Marshall, another NYCYB gang worker in the latter half of the 1950s, is the lack of formal training and sharing of successful outreach "methods" for the young (male) graduate or just-graduated students employed by the NYCYB in its first decade of service.

<sup>45</sup> The New York City Youth Board files, housed in Columbia University's Rare Books and Manuscript Collection, contain many press clippings and internal memos about poor public response to what was perceived as the NYCYB's ineffectiveness in "combatting" anti-social youth gang activities and violence. Vincent Riccio, Kenneth Marshall, and Henry Mulhearn all express frustration throughout their files about the NYCYB being consistently understaffed, underfunded, and crippled by public expectations of immediate results. Partially for these reasons, a "get tough" approach to remedying the juvenile delinquency situation in New York became increasingly popular in the early 1950s, about 5 years following the organization of the New York City Youth Board.

“end” to violent youth gang activity in New York.<sup>46</sup> The declaration met with an outpouring of civic support, and in the weeks following the statement, the mayor’s office was flooded with letters and telegrams from a wide swath of society, including public school teachers, parents, religious institutions, newspapers, advertising agencies, prominent citizens, health organizations, community associations, and youth clubs. All offered congratulations, thanks, and even advice on how to best go about combating juvenile delinquency—and not a moment too soon. Violent youth gang activity exploded again in June 1954, and would only increase during Wagner’s three terms as mayor—coincident with heightened southern black and Puerto Rican in-migration, neighborhood transition, and the increasing availability on the streets of more deadly and diverse weaponry.<sup>47</sup> But rather than acknowledge, examine, and attempt to diffuse the ethnic and racial components of youth gang violence, the liberal Wagner—who enjoyed a diverse base of support among New Yorkers—chose instead to adopt a discourse of “hoodlumism” to explain the fighting, thus diverting official municipal and media conversations away from the sensitive subject of race.<sup>48</sup>

It seemed that in the postwar period, all of adult New York had opinions about the state of street violence, as well as strong words for its teenaged actors. But gang members, though mostly sidelined from participation in traditional forms of civic conversation by age, class, or

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<sup>46</sup> See the “Juvenile Delinquency” folders in the *Robert F. Wagner Files*, from the New York City Municipal Archives, especially Boxes 152 and 153, Folders 2138-2141.

<sup>47</sup> Weapons used in gang altercations, including improvised ones, could encompass: garrison belts, broken bottles, homemade Molotov cocktails, rocks, baseball bats, nightsticks, car antennas, crow bars, tire chains, switchblades/shivs, hunting knives, zip guns and other homemade guns, surplus automatic weapons (handguns, etc.) brought home or leftover from the war. In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Records*, part of the Brooklyn Collection housed at the Brooklyn Public Library, folders containing original photographs of seized gang weapon caches taken between the late 1945-1955 demonstrate a trend toward increasing automation and damage potential, though improvised weapons remained in use.

<sup>48</sup> Robert F. Wagner, Jr. was a liberal Democrat with a broad-base of voter support. During his three terms as Mayor of New York City, he worked hard to support both labour and improve race relations in the city. See Clarence Taylor, “Robert Wagner, Milton Galamison, and the Challenge to New York Liberalism” *Journal of Afro-American History of the Niagara Frontier* 31 (July 2007): 121-137 for more on Wagner’s liberal politics and policies.

ethnic identity, were not silent about their observations and experiences in their visibly changing neighborhoods. Sometimes, civil society didn't know how or wasn't willing to hear what "problem kids" like Joe Senatore or racialized gang members were saying about the systemic challenges teenagers were caught in, because their words shed light on uncomfortable truths about inequalities in the liberal paradise of New York. Sometimes teenaged gangs' opinions, fears, and desires were mediated through a trusted adult, like New York City Youth Board worker Vince Riccio, who represented "his" gang's interests to municipal advisory councils, social organizations, and support services. And sometimes the languages gang members spoke weren't classified as traditional languages at all; such as clothing choices which reflected and refracted both the wearer's ethnic identity and the dominant culture he resided on the outskirts of, and the physical violence he participated in against gangs ethnically different from his own. However unconventional, mediated, or potentially muted their voices may appear to be in these different "languages", youth gang members' actions, experiences, and understandings of their environment offer valuable insights into a city in transition—and on the cusp of the upheaval of the civil rights movement.

### 3. Talking Back: Case Studies

While a lack of access to (or existence of) primary sources produced and narrated by young people can prove challenging to historians of youth, intermittently teenagers who were multiply marginalized by the intersection of age, delinquency, class, and ethnicity saw and heard their voices in print and broadcast over the air. The more photographs I came across, the more newspaper reports, magazine articles, and detached gang worker case files I read and reread, and the more I listened and re-listened to audio recordings of interviews with gang-affiliated youth, the more I realized that the discourse of “hoodlumism” put forth by the Wagner government and upheld by the popular press left no space for alternative interpretations of gang violence and its potential motivations. It was almost too tidy and uncomplicated. Using three case studies drawn from some of the most widely-reported incidents of gang-related violence in the postwar period, and the particular demographic and political context of NYC discussed earlier, I worked to *re*-reread media reports about juvenile delinquency—while foregrounding the voices and concerns of accused adolescent gang members. Chronologically, I started back in 1950s Brooklyn, when the South Brooklyn’s Italian-American leader Joe Senatore faced off against Judge Leibowitz, implicating police corruption and a depressed neighborhood environment in his gang’s so-called “anti-social” activities. Then, in the sweltering summer of 1957 a swimming pool in a Washington Heights park commanded the attention of the city when a polio-crippled Irish teenager was stomped and stabbed to death there by an amalgamation of Puerto Rican and black gangs from the area. Spring 1958 saw the extended trials of the 18 teenagers and juveniles involved in the Washington Heights incident, as well as a CBS radio special featuring the voices of several of the youth who were directly involved. Finally, at the end of August 1959, an emotionally unstable Puerto Rican teen affiliated with an Upper West Side gang—fantastically

dubbed the “Capeman” by the media—stabbed and killed two non-gang Polish boys in a Hell’s Kitchen park at the end of August. Caught by police in the Bronx a few days later, the Capeman filled newspapers with disturbing statements about childhood abuses in Puerto Rico, troubling migrant experiences in New York City, and flippancy towards his impending death sentence for first-degree murder. Each of these three cases complicates the simple “hoodlum” equation that municipal and media authorities sought to impose on young people who participated in anti-social youth gang activities: by drawing attention to a lack of opportunities for working-class youth, centering the roles played by fear and anger in altercations, naming interethnic tension--and continuously reaching to pull off their liberal city’s racial blinders.

### **3.1 “Savage Animals”: Michael Farmer, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings**

On July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1957, 15-year old Michael Farmer was brutally beaten and stabbed to death in a Washington Heights park. His assailants were associated with two separate but occasionally allied neighbourhood gangs, the “Dragons” and the “Egyptian Kings”. While the death of anyone’s child is tragic, the Farmer case arguably received heightened attention from the media due to a convergence of particularities that set the case apart from the violent gang activities that regularly appeared in newspapers. First, it was publicly maintained that Farmer was not affiliated with any youth gang, least of all with the rival gang(s) of the Dragons or Egyptian Kings. Second, much ink was spilled marking Michael’s adolescent body as less healthy and less able than his attackers’. Childhood Polio had left him with a permanent limp and a slower pace than his peers, which worked to further characterize him as a defenseless object of pity in the press. Unlike other gang-related murders, Farmer had a friend and fellow victim with him, who managed to escape and alert the authorities before going into shock as a result of the injuries he

sustained. Sixteen-year old Roger McShane hailed a cab to the Presbyterian Medical Center, after trying unsuccessfully to get the driver to go back into the park with him to retrieve Farmer. By the time police officers found him, Michael had been so severely injured that he wouldn't survive the ambulance ride. Before falling unconscious, Farmer allegedly told the responding officer, "The niggers got me," referring to the Egyptian Kings.<sup>49</sup> The final piece of the press puzzle lays in Michael Farmer's complexion: a crippled white teenage boy with "a saintly face" was viciously murdered by a gang of "savage animals" without "any civilization in them"—the Puerto Rican 'Dragons' and the African-American 'Egyptian Kings.'<sup>50</sup>

Leaving aside the complexities of race and ethnicity for another moment, the defendants in the Farmer case continued to command the attention of New York City months after July 30<sup>th</sup>. When the case finally went to trial in the spring of 1958, the defendants found that their actions warranted 93 long days in court with an "all male, blue ribbon jury" presided over by Judge Irwin Davidson.<sup>51</sup> Of the 21 gang members involved in the death of Michael Farmer and the assault of Roger McShane, ten boys under 15 years old were convicted of "juvenile delinquency"

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<sup>49</sup> There are several different versions of Michael Farmer's final words to the responding officer: "The Egyptian Kings got me" and "The niggers got me." The one referencing the Egyptian Kings (an African-American gang) is the one which appeared in the media reports about the attack, but the second one is what Officer Collwich allegedly heard from the dying Farmer. Robert Snyder maintains that the second version—and the one I present here—is the more accurate of the two in "A Useless and Terrible Death: The Michael Farmer Case, 'Hidden Violence,' and New York City in the Fifties," *Journal of Urban History* 36 (2010): 226-250, and asserts that the Chief of Police repeatedly told the media and public that racial tensions had nothing to do with the attack. What strikes me about these two versions of Farmer's final words is that while they both point to the participation of black youth in Farmer's beating, swapping in the gang name of "Egyptian Kings" for "niggers" partially disguises the ethnic makeup of one of the attacking gangs (unless the public knew they were an African-American gang) AND elides the participation of the Hispanic (predominantly Puerto Rican) "Dragons" gang.

<sup>50</sup> Quotes from Thelma and Raymond Farmer, respectively, in the radio special by Jay McMullen and Edward Murrow, *Who Killed Michael Farmer?* (CBS Radio Network, 1958). While the audio clips of Thelma Farmer focus on the "saintly" features of her slain son, Raymond Farmer's testimony vacillates between the lost opportunities of their eldest son ("We had great plans for his future") and angrily characterizing the responsible gang members as "uncivilized," "savage," "animalistic," and "brutal" "monsters"—a vocabulary which brings to mind colonial characterizations of "alien" groups that served to foster an "us" vs. "them" attitude and mentality.

<sup>51</sup> Judge Irwin Davidson remained conflicted about the verdicts in the Michael Farmer case, and later wrote a book detailing his thoughts about the trial, the jury's punitive verdicts, and the context of the case. See Irwin D. Davidson and Richard Gehman, *The Jury Is Still Out* (New York: Harper Books, 1959). The description of the jury is from McMullen and Murrow's *Who Killed Michael Farmer?* CBS documentary.

and committed to state training schools, like Wiltwyck or Warwick.<sup>52</sup> An additional seven teenage boys, between the ages of 15 and 18, stood trial for first degree murder. Two of the seven older boys were found guilty by the jury of second degree murder; another two of second degree manslaughter. Between the three remaining boys, two were found by the jury to be not guilty as a result of peer pressure; the last boy was declared not guilty as a result of being “mentally sick” and “unaware of what was going on at any time.”<sup>53</sup> As well as taking up space in print, adults involved in the Farmer case—parents, jury members, community ‘experts’ in adolescence, police men—heard their voices and stories broadcast into New York homes as a radio special. But the hour-long CBS News presentation of “Who Killed Michael Farmer?” is extraordinary for more than its far-reaching and polyphonic treatment of an incident of youth gang violence.<sup>54</sup> In addition to interviewing adults, “Who Killed Michael Farmer?” recorded, broadcast, and thus preserved the voices and experiences of some of the black and Hispanic gang members who took part in the July 30<sup>th</sup> attacks. Jay McMullen’s writing and Edward Murrow’s narration of the program also lack the conspicuously biased language and judgmental “tone” common to (adult-written) news articles on juvenile delinquency. Murrow’s opening comments scaffold the special’s even-handed approach to all parties involved in the Washington Heights incident:

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<sup>52</sup> Gang members under 15-years-old did not participate in the (adult) criminal court process, but were instead “charged” and sentenced in a juvenile court. State training schools—or juvenile detention centers—like the Warwick and Wiltwyck schools for boys in upstate New York—trace their roots back to the Progressive Era’s ideas about discipline and rehabilitation for young offenders. See Mintz, “Save the Child,” in *Huck’s Raft* for more on the aims and ideas behind juvenile reformatories. The sentences for the younger gang members in the Farmer trial are cited in McMullen and Murrow, *Who Killed Michael Farmer?*

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jay McMullen researched and wrote the transcript for CBS’s 1958 *Who Killed Michael Farmer?* documentary. Edward Murrow narrates, sociologist Lewis Yablonsky is interviewed, and audio from his extensive interviews with anonymized members of the Dragons and Egyptian Kings is prominently featured. The voices of Raymond and Thelma Farmer, Michael’s parents are heard, as well as Michael’s friend, Roger McShane, who managed to escape Highbridge Park with his life.



“Under the law, the gang alone is guilty of the murder of Michael Farmer. But there is more to be said. More is involved here than one act of violence committed on a summer’s night. The roots of this crime go back a long ways.”<sup>55</sup>

Interspersed between the testimony of Roger McShane, the mourning of Michael’s mother, and the driving, business-like narration of Murrow, members of the Dragons and the Egyptian Kings reflect on their participation in the events resulting in Farmer’s death. What is most striking about listening to the youth gangs speak—aside from the fact that the voices of thrice-marginalized subjects have been recorded in the first place—is that they *don’t* sound like the “monsters” or “savage animals” that Farmer’s father unequivocally categorizes them as. Rather, several boys repeatedly mention how scared they were; before, during, and after jumping Farmer and McShane in the park. They explain that ‘their’ crews had specifically armed themselves with bats, sticks, knives, chains, garrison belts, and other weapons with a serious intent to harm the bodies of rival gang members. According to one of the combined gang’s leaders, his group of neighbourhood teens had originally organized “for protection. The other gangs start the trouble.”<sup>56</sup> Another boy alludes to the nature of the “trouble” he and his fellow gang members experienced at the hands of a gang that controlled one of the neighbourhoods adjoining both the Dragons’ and the Egyptian Kings’ “turf”. He says, “They kept on calling me a Spic. They kept on saying, ‘You dirty Spic, get outta this block.’ Every time I go to the pool, they said to me the same thing.”<sup>57</sup> The antagonists in this case were the Jesters, a predominantly Irish-American youth gang from the Washington Heights area. The swimming pool in question is

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<sup>55</sup> Murrow, *Who Killed Michael Farmer?* approximately 1:30 minutes into the documentary.

<sup>56</sup> All the youth gang members interviewed are kept anonymous, despite hearing the names of the seven older boys convicted in the murder early on in the documentary. The speakers are identified by Murrow only according to the weapon(s) they used, and possibly by their age. However, the unique nature of audio sources affords the historian other clues to anonymous identities via the voice: accent, diction, pitch, tone, and volume add layers to the personalities and personages behind the microphone.

<sup>57</sup> The speaker quoted here is identified at various points as fourteen years old and using a bread knife in the attacks. McMullen and Murrow, *Who Killed Michael Farmer?* 1958.

in Highbridge Park—the place where Farmer and McShane were attacked. The boy continues: “I don’t bother them, because, y’know, I might get into trouble with them; but one day, you know, they beat me up. There was about five of them and there was only me alone.”<sup>58</sup> As the radio documentary continues, listeners learn that the boy whom the Jesters physically assaulted at the pool and taunted with racial slurs was a 14-year-old migrant from the American protectorate of Puerto Rico. He took a bread knife to the park on July 30<sup>th</sup>, looking for revenge.

Instead of a group of Jesters, the Dragons and Egyptian Kings found Farmer and McShane alone near Highbridge Pool in the park that night. Given their fair complexions, the neighbourhood they lived in, the occasionally tenuous nature of gang membership and its accompanying indiscriminate violence, the (mis)identification of Farmer and McShane as Jesters is plausible.<sup>59</sup> Angry about being prevented from enjoying the waters of Highbridge Pool during the unbearable summer heat, about continuously facing verbal race-based discrimination and physical violence if they attempted to use the (officially desegregated) pool, black Egyptian Kings and Hispanic Dragons ventured uptown on the night of July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1957, to avenge only the most recent affront to a member’s bodily autonomy and their collective access to the pool.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Murrow, *Who Killed Michael Farmer?*

<sup>59</sup> In the 1958 documentary, some gang members say that they asked Farmer and McShane if they were Jesters and the two of them apparently said yes. Farmer’s parents denied any gang affiliation, and Farmer’s younger brother Rayme repeated the denial in another radio interview in 2007, but admits that Roger McShane was likely a member of the Jesters (despite public denial at the time). Rayme Farmer speculates that his older brother *could* have been a gang member except “he wasn’t perfect; he had polio—and he couldn’t run.” Quoted in Joe Richman and Ben Shapiro, *West Side Story: Michael Farmer and the Murder That Shocked New York* (NPR Radio Diaries, 2007). Rayme also hints at the occasionally tenuous nature of gang membership and neighbourhood ‘protection’ in the NPR Radio Diaries piece when he recalls that while “we weren’t geared to have problem with colour...things were changing, and you were uncomfortable unless you were in your own neighbourhood,” and that while he and Michael were not members of the Jesters, they were “all friends with them, and they, y’know, took care of us.”

<sup>60</sup> Snyder, interviewed in 2007 for Richman and Shapiro’s *Michael Farmer and the Murder That Shocked New York*, explains “Highbridge Pool was a big, beautiful municipal pool on the eastern side of Washington Heights, mostly a white neighbourhood. And the kids from Harlem, kids from southern Washington Heights wanted to use that pool. Sometimes they could get in, but often they were harassed on the streets leading up to the pool. The Dragons and Egyptian Kings felt they had to retaliate for the insults they’d experienced trying to use Highbridge Pool.” More explicitly, Andrew Diamond, in “Rethinking Culture on the Streets: Agency, Masculinity, and Style in the American City,” argues that “the forces of marginalization and segregation,” in the 1950s in NYC, “created several street gang

Even though vengeance was the motivation for the (counter) attack, members of the Egyptian Kings and Dragons weren't all necessarily the cold-blooded "savage animals" that Michael Farmer's father characterizes them as. As previously mentioned, fear seems to have been a common emotion among some of the younger boys: fear of the extent of involvement they would be expected to take in the beating of rival gang members; of being painfully injured in the fight themselves; of being caught by the police and subjected to 'nightstick' or the juvenile justice process; or worst of all, intra-gang discipline. The 14-year-old with the breadknife explains: "If anybody don't beat up somebody, he gonna get beat up [by the gang] when we get back."<sup>61</sup>

### **3.2 "A kid in a Dracula-like costume": Salvador Agron and the Vampires**

Two years after Michael Farmer was left for dead in Washington Heights, the summer of 1959 closed with one of the most infamous youth gang murders of the decade. While larger-than-life nicknames and personas had been present in gang lore long before 1959—and would outlive many of the teenage gangs—few figures in the mid twentieth century were more gripping than the "Capeman" and the "Umbrella Man". According to *Time* magazine, on yet another "oppressive and steamy" summer night, this time in a Hell's Kitchen park on Manhattan's West

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subcultures with distinct concerns and dynamics," like racialized insults and attacks from white youth (677). Diamond goes on to say that for young men of colour, "there was perhaps no more immediate and potent an expression of the racial injustices they faced than the violence—or merely the hard stares on the street—they experienced in their interactions with white youths and the police." From *Journal of Urban History* 27 (2001): 669-685.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in McMullen and Murrow, *Who Kill Michael Farmer?* 1958. For a detailed examination of gang hierarchies, concepts of honour, intra-gang punishment, and "heart" in gang-related violence, see Schneider's *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*; Riccio's *Reminiscences*; Henry Mulhearn and John K. Kelly, *Reminiscences of Henry Mulhearn* (New York: Columbia Centre for Oral History, 1960); Gertrude Samuels, "Why the 'Assassins' Can't Be 'Punks'," *New York Times*, August 16, 1959, SM13; and Kenneth Marshall's case files from *Kenneth Marshall Papers* (New York: Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, 1969). Former NYCYB worker Riccio, along with former police Sergeant Henry Mulhearn (stationed in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn from 1945-1960), and Kenneth Marshall, another NYCYB worker stationed in Harlem, all recount incidents of police violence against suspected gang youth, as well as hearing stories from the teenagers they worked with about youth being "roughed up" in police 'paddywagons,' forced into confessing crimes they didn't commit, and taunted by officers about receiving the death penalty.

Side, a dozen teenage boys “all Puerto Rican, and led by a kid in a Dracula-like costume” attacked seven neighbourhood boys, fatally stabbing two.<sup>62</sup> Anthony Krzesinski and Robert Young, both 16, were the casualties of what *Time* magazine described as only “the latest outbreak of wanton murder” in New York City.<sup>63</sup> In the fallout from the attack, the “Capeman” earned the dubious distinction of becoming the youngest person in New York history to sit on death row. He didn’t sit there quietly, though.

Fifteen year-old Salvador Agron was the perfect poster boy for juvenile delinquency, according to the leading adolescent ‘experts’ of the day.<sup>64</sup> Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, criminologists based at Harvard Law School, published widely during this period on identifying and correcting traits of children deemed to be at risk of growing into hoodlums.<sup>65</sup> The Gluecks’ fourth study on juvenile delinquency, *Predicting Delinquency and Crime*, was published one month after Agron’s arrest for Young and Krzesinski’s murders. According to them, “five highly decisive factors” can be isolated to “spot a potentially delinquent boy years before he lands in court”: fatherly discipline, motherly supervision, affection of father, affection of mother, and stability of the (nuclear) family unit.<sup>66</sup> Salvador had a less-than idyllic family situation of his own. Bounced between his Puerto Rican birthplace and New York City, Sal told reporters hungry for answers that he’d been abused in religious charity schools in Mayaguez, PR; found his stepmother’s body after she hung herself; was sent to NYC by his father; beaten by his

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<sup>62</sup> From “New York: Slaughter Off Tenth Avenue,” *Time*, September 14, 1959, 28. No author attributed.

<sup>63</sup> The sentence in the article continues: “Since January, New York teen-age gang warfare has accounted for eight senseless killings and scores of beatings and knifings.” *Time*, September 14, 1959.

<sup>64</sup> Agron’s actual age at the time of the murders is unknown, as he was unsure of his date of birth. Newspaper reports suggest he was either 15 or 16, or just barely 16. I chose to write him as 15, as that is what the majority of sources say.

<sup>65</sup> “Medicine: Blueprint for Delinquents,” *Time*, October 12, 1959, 64. The Gluecks’ previous work on delinquency included *500 Criminal Careers*, *1000 Juvenile Delinquents*, and 1950’s *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, referenced earlier.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in “Blueprint for Delinquents,” *Time*.

Pentecostal minister step-father once in the city; uncared for by his mother; and ultimately sent to live with his pregnant 17-year old sister in Harlem, who'd just been deserted by her husband.<sup>67</sup>

Moving from individual familial to social trends more broadly, Agron's adolescent experiences were heavily inflected by the convergence of race, class, and migrant status in New York. Writing for *Time* in 1958 about the "Shook-Up Generation," journalist Harrison E. Salisbury explored "the street gang cancer and the damage it produces" in a seven-part series:

There, in the weltering tenements and public housing complexes that pimple district upon district of the city's 299 square miles, roam the 'bopping clubs,' the teen-age street-fighting gangs. They...organize themselves with the precision of military combat teams, with an officer hierarchy (president, war counselor, armourer, etc.) Their code of ethics is a distorted boy's-eye view of the underworld, laced with real touches of bravado and evil that are gleaned from television and the movies—and from relatives who have first-hand experience. They prowl the dark streets, kill and maim one another, dabble in narcotics, drink themselves into a rage with cheap wine called 'sneaky pete'.<sup>68</sup>

Aside from being an exercise in sensationalism, the passage quoted above interlaces a number of characteristics and narratives of contemporary street-gang formation and violence. Invoking (underage) substance abuse, pseudo-militaristic organization and naming conventions, TV and Hollywood's popular (male) gangsters, gunmen, and outlaws, Salisbury easily shifts between the language of the underworld and that of vicious animals. The youth aimlessly "roam" the neighbourhoods in packs, presumably looking for diversion in the form of criminal activities. At night, they "prowl" poorly lit streets, tracking enemy groups through tenuously-held "turf" (territory). Then, when they do surprise a rival gang—or an unsuspecting bystander—they "kill

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<sup>67</sup> Agron's short biography was pieced together from various sources, including: "Slaughter Off Tenth Avenue," *Time* September 1959; Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*; Ira Henry Freeman, "The Making of Boy Killer," *New York Times*, Robert D. McFadden, "State to Free the 'Capeman,' Street-Gang Leader Who Killed 2 in 1959," *New York Times*, September 22, 1979; David Vidal, "The 'Capeman' Reflects As Prison Release Nears," *New York Times*, October 3, 1979; George James, "'Cape Man': Life of Killer is Over at 42," *New York Times*, April 24, 1986; Mike McAlary, "The Murders and the Musical," *New York Magazine*, November 10, 1997, 38-44; Owen Moritz, "Salvador Agron 'Cape Man'," *Daily News*, September 6, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, "Youth: The Shook-Up Generation," *Time*, April 7, 1958, 23.

and maim one another” with all the grace of ruthless predators. The rhetoric of animalistic behaviour perhaps unintentionally works with the opening image of “weltering tenements and public housing complexes that pimple district upon district” to produce a wholly unflattering portrait of youth whose migrant families could barely afford to live in even such substandard conditions in mid-century New York City. This rhetoric, though not explicitly applied to incoming groups by the press and the public, is reminiscent of a colonial vocabulary historically used by (normative) white, Anglo-Saxon groups to compare and mark differences between themselves and their “civilized” culture and those they deem to be “others” whose cultures may be at odds with—or “threaten” white society. The extensive use of animal imagery and references to savagery to describe the behaviour and attributes of youth gangs by the popular press and parents like Michael Farmer’s father thus complicates the simple narrative of “hoodlumism” touted by the authorities and repeated by the media. Read with the racial slurs brought to the fore by the Farmer murder, it becomes more difficult to deny that racial tensions were simmering beneath the (silencing?) surface of the “hoodlum” discourse.

## 4. Conclusion

Over the first half of the twentieth century, urban teenaged gang members clashed with youth who looked less and less like themselves. In concert with migration and urban (re)settlement patterns in New York City, the two decades immediately following the end of WWII were accompanied by a spike in press reports of “juvenile delinquency” and inter-youth gang violence taking place in the streets and parks of the city. Despite the efforts of the mainstream media, the city’s police force, and Wagner’s municipal government to keep four-letter words out of public conversations on JD and gang rumbles, the specter of “race” loomed undeniably larger over teenaged altercations as the 1950s wore on and more murders filled the newspapers. Citing the Michael Farmer case in Washington Heights as a particular “vantage point,” historian Robert Snyder offers that Farmer’s death in 1957 makes it possible “to look back to the relative confidence of New York liberalism in the fifties and forward to the racialized concern with crime that wracked the city in the sixties.”<sup>69</sup> But while Highbridge Pool might stand out as a key moment in New York City’s struggle to accept and acclimate to its changing complexion, teenage gangs were jostling against each other for legitimacy and space well before (and after) Farmer was killed. Rather, this was the first time that the accused assailants in a widely-reported gang attack were not white: and they had swarmed and fatally beaten a crippled teenager—who *did* happen to be white—in an area of Upper Manhattan just beginning to integrate.<sup>70</sup>

Reflecting the often uneasy and sometimes anxious nature of historically “white” neighbourhoods opening up to families of colour, eruptions of violence among adolescents and

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<sup>69</sup> Robert W. Snyder, “A Useless and Terrible Death: The Michael Farmer Case, “Hidden Violence,” and New York City in the Fifties,” *Journal of Urban History* 36 (March 2010), 232.

<sup>70</sup> See Snyder, *Crossing Broadway* for the story of how Washington Heights, by the mid-1950s a “bastion” of white families tracing their roots to Ireland, Greece, and European Jews—experienced “blockbusting” realtors selling to black and Hispanic families—many from the Dominican Republic.

young men spoke volumes about simmering racial tensions in a supposedly liberal, desegregated city. While the Wagner government and (for the most part) the press at the time denied that race was a factor in youth gang altercations throughout the 1950s, gang members themselves enacted and pushed against the informal policing of racial boundaries on city blocks and recreational spaces like parks and swimming pools. But when the authorities tried to redirect or sublimate ripples of racial tension into the postwar media pastime of “juvenile delinquency,” gang members, parents, and those working with gang members persisted in talking about skin colour, discrimination, and resistance in their own ways. And despite their best efforts otherwise, the uncomfortable issue of race was often an absent presence in press coverage of gang activity anyway: in photographs, descriptors used, whose deaths were deemed publicly mournable—and whose deaths were not.<sup>71</sup>

Last chapter I looked at the beating of Michael Farmer and Roger McShane as retaliation intended for the Irish-American Jesters on behalf of the black Egyptian Kings and Hispanic Dragons who were repeatedly called racial slurs and subject to violence when trying to use Highbridge Pool. The dying Farmer allegedly told the responding police officer that “the niggers” got him, before falling unconscious, yet the Chief of Police publicly maintained that race was not a contributing factor to the case.<sup>72</sup> Then I walked through the recorded voices of

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<sup>71</sup> For an excellent introduction to the concept and various methods of silencing in history, see: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 2003). The idea that some bodies and lives are more “mournable” than others is borrowed from Judith Butler, “Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics,” *Antropólogos Iberoamericanos En Red* 3 (2009). In particular, Butler’s closing assertions that “Performativity is a process that implies being acted on in ways we do not always fully understand, and of acting, in politically consequential ways. Performativity has everything to do with ‘who’ can become produced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning. Precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. An in this way, precarity is a rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless” (xii).

<sup>72</sup> While the *New York Times* declared “Acting Chief of Detectives, Edward W. Byrnes stressed that racial tension was not involved in the stabbings,” Robert Snyder argues that Byrne’s denial of race in the Farmer murder “ignored twenty years of conflict around municipal pools and the actual experiences of gang members,” because though New



some of the many youths accused in the beating, noting their accented English and dialects. I also noted the seven older teenagers charged in the criminal court with murder and/or manslaughter, in particular the four young men who were found guilty and sentenced to lengthy prison terms—but haven't introduced them yet. According to *Time*, Louis Alvarez, 17, was born in Puerto Rico, lost his mother when he was seven, “shouldered out the president [of the Egyptian Dragons *sic*], made himself boss,” and “steeled his courage by getting drunk on cheap wine” the night of Farmer’s beating.<sup>73</sup> He was convicted of second degree murder. Charles Horton, 18, is introduced as a “husky, Alabama-born Negro” who “picked cotton 14 hours a day when he was seven” and moved to New York three years ago to live with his mother, “whom he had previously seen only once a year.”<sup>74</sup> He supposedly brought a machete to the park, and was also found guilty of second degree murder. Leoncio DeLeon and Leroy Birch, nicknamed “Jello” and “Magician” respectively, were both charged with second degree manslaughter. DeLeon, 17, arrived in the U.S. on his own from the Dominican Republic five years earlier, “quit school to help his mother, and [had] not seen his father in six years.”<sup>75</sup> Birch, 19, is described as a “Negro” who “came from a broken home, lived with grandparents” and “advised the gang on strategy.”<sup>76</sup> New Yorkers become familiar with the names and faces of Alvarez, Horton, DeLeon, and Birch—but not those of John McCarthy or Richard Hill; two white members of the gangs responsible for the attack on Farmer and McShane. The acquittal of both McCarthy and Hill by the “all-male, blue-ribbon jury” convened for the trial, coupled with the casual failure of the press to profile

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York’s pool were “officially integrated...as the number of people of colour using a pool grew, white opposition to integration stiffened.” Snyder, “A Useless and Terrible Death,” 233.

<sup>73</sup> “Crime: These Marauding Savages,” *Time*, April 28, 1958, 17. No author attributed.

<sup>74</sup> “These Marauding Savages,” *Time*, 1958.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

them seems a bit strange here.<sup>77</sup> Given how prominent the Farmer attack was in the news from summer 1957 through to 1963 (when the City was ruled not responsible for Farmer’s death), the lack of information about two participants considered central enough to stand trial for murder raises questions about what else might be missing here—and what we might learn through its absence.<sup>78</sup>

The apparent elision of fair-skinned John McCarthy and Richard Hill from the murder of Michael Farmer performs several intertwined functions. First, it bolsters Farmer’s observation that he was attacked by a group of teenagers who had darker skin than him, McShane, or the Jesters. This suggests that racial tension—or at least racialized insults—did have a part to play in the incident in Highbridge Park. At the same time, the omission also publicly *excludes* the possibility that McCarthy and Hill—or other white youth—were involved in a violent attack on a “fellow” white boy.<sup>79</sup> In light of this exclusion, heightened media attention on the four black and Hispanic defendants from the Dragons and Egyptian Kings works to racialize the gang violence even as City authorities openly denied that skin colour played a part.<sup>80</sup> In short, by characterizing gang violence as a result of “hoodlumism” well into the next decade—and repeatedly insisting

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<sup>77</sup> Davidson and Gehman, *The Jury Is Still Out*, 1959. George Melendez, the third youth of Hispanic descent who stood trial with the 6 older boys, was deemed by the jury to be “mentally deficient” and thus criminally not guilty for his participation in the Farmer beating. I am curious as to why Melendez’s acquittal is “justified” with an explanation, but the acquittals of Richard Hills and John McCarthy—the two white teenagers—aren’t given a similar treatment in the press?

<sup>78</sup> “City is Absolved in Youth Killing,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1963. Raymond Farmer, Michael Farmer’s father, brought a negligence suit against the City of New York for “knowingly” allowing “hoodlums” to congregate in parks, which he saw as responsible for the fatal attack on his eldest son in 1957.

<sup>79</sup> What would it have meant to the “colourblind” municipal and media narrative about the Farmer murder if the two white boys WERE found guilty and sentenced, same as the black and Hispanic teenagers? It’s bittersweet to think that if the jury (and by extension, the municipal authorities and popular) were *truly* as colourblind as they publicly maintained, Hill and McCarthy—depending on the extent of their involvement in the beatings, of course—would have been found guilty and sentenced the same as Horton, DeLeon, Birch, and Alvarez.

<sup>80</sup> I am indebted to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* for eloquently articulating that “any historical narrative is a bundle of silences” (27) and demonstrating how to read between the lines for what appears to be missing from dominant historical narratives.

that race had nothing to do with altercations between youth—the popular press inadvertently “othered” gangs and racialized juvenile delinquency.

Taking race out of the “hoodlum” equation silently held whole corners of the New York youth population hostage to a limited narrative about crime, worth, and citizenship in the 1950s and into the 1960s. Suppressing public conversations about racial tension and economic inequality through denial of such problems’ existence after the trauma and literal upheaval of WWII would eventually boil over in areas struggling to adapt to and accommodate influxes of people who may not have looked like each other, or spoken the same language in similar enough ways. News stories highlighting the tragic loss of young white lives to violence perpetuated by youth gang members originally hailing from the South or a Spanish-speaking country potentially crowded out similar stories where the victim’s skin was not as fair, perhaps sending the message that their lives and subsequent deaths were somehow less valuable or publicly mournable. How then, were racialized adolescents supposed to fit into the liberal promise that was New York City in the 1950s? How did they see themselves represented in the press, how did they experience the city’s amenities in their bodies, in their skin? Who and what kind of American Dream and American citizenry did this type of emplotment and these silences serve? Why did it take an additional seven years from Michael Farmer’s death, the murder of an unarmed (black) 15-year-old boy by an off-duty (white) police officer—and a week of rioting in Harlem—for the City of New York to finally take its racial blinders off?

## Epilogue

On July 16, 1964, 15-year-old James Powell was killed by three bullets fired by off-duty police officer Thomas Gilligan in Yorkville, Manhattan. Powell's death, witnessed by dozens of people, sparked six consecutive days of rioting in the New York City neighbourhoods of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, both historically black. Fast forward fifty years. On February 26, 2012, neighbourhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. On August 9, 2014, police officer Darren Wilson killed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Neither teenager was armed. They were, however—like James Powell—both young black men.

While the focus of this research project is on events that took place over half a century ago in an entirely different American city, the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Ferguson weighed heavily in my mind during the writing process. I thought about how different corners of the press talked about the dead teenagers, and drew conclusions about the value of their lives based on past choices and behaviours (*Did he have a criminal record? Gang affiliations? Or maybe a bad attitude in school?*) or their family situations (*Was he raised by a single, working mother? Was his father absent or incarcerated?*). I followed the ensuing public and social media debates about whatever “threats” Martin and Ferguson’s adolescent black masculinity *may have* posed to broader (white) American society—simply through their presence and participation in particular neighbourhoods—and then I followed that thread all the way back into the 1950s.

And here we are. Again.

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