Preface

A WHITE PERSON who teaches African-American studies is sometimes the focus for startling questions. I decided to write this memoir after a particularly bizarre encounter at a small private tennis club in Brooklyn in the fall of 1996. After losing a long match in the semifinals of the club tournament, I was recovering in the clubhouse when a middle-aged white man sat down next to me and asked what I did for a living. "I'm a college professor," I said. "What do you teach?" he asked. "African-American studies," I replied. The man looked at me with complete astonishment. "You mean they let you do that?" he asked. When I assured him that I was secure in my job, and had been for twenty-five years, and that I was on good terms with my black students and colleagues, he looked skeptical and asked about Leonard Jeffries, the controversial former chair of the City College black studies program, whose eccentric theories of racial difference had made him a media celebrity.

Something in me snapped. This was at least the *hundredth* time that someone had brought up Leonard Jeffries when I mentioned what I taught. After patiently explaining that Professor Jeffries was not representative of my colleagues at Fordham University or the other black scholars I knew, I thought about the perceptions that prompted this man's questions. Like many whites I met in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was convinced that black intellectuals had become so hostile to whites that I should have been driven out of my job. His image of the black community left no room for tolerance, empathy, and intellectual curiosity. The historical narrative he believed in made caricatures of the black people I had known for thirty years as students, colleagues, and friends while it erased some of the most important experiences of my adult life, along with much of what I had learned as a student of African-American and American history. Confronted once too often with a racial discourse that rendered me invisible, I needed to present my own point of view. The next morning I started this memoir, trying to explain how a Jewish boy from Crown Heights, whose childhood passions were

sports and rock and roll, ended up as a professor of African-American studies, and how this odyssey reflected powerful, but often overlooked, themes in America's tangled racial history.

According to the dominant narrative of civil rights history, the black studies movement was one manifestation of a powerful nationalist impulse that swept through the black community in the late 1960s, smothering the romantic interracialism that had accompanied the civil rights movement and forcing whites to work for racial justice exclusively within white communities. From that point on, according to this narrative, racial separatism became the dominant ideology within the black community, leading to the de facto segregation of campuses and cultural organizations and nurturing a black political discourse that was inward looking and defensive. In reality, things are far more complicated, and my story illustrates some of the problems inherent in this oversimplified yet widely held view.

Racial polarization, white flight, and black-Jewish tensions did not suddenly appear with the onset of the Black Power movement. I encountered them all in my own Crown Heights neighborhood in the late fifties and early sixties, when the community began undergoing rapid racial change. Although I had black playmates as a child, and I was exposed to images of racial harmony through rock and roll and the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team, my age of racial innocence was relatively brief. By the time I entered Columbia University in the fall of 1962, I was already a veteran of street-corner and locker-room fights, as well as bitter arguments with my parents about my participation in civil rights protests and the impact blacks were having on Brooklyn's Jewish neighborhoods.

These conflicts only escalated when I left for Columbia. While I immersed myself in civil rights work and began studying black history, my parents made their own racial statement by moving to an apartment in an all-white section of Queens. Our relationship approached the breaking point during my senior year in college, when I fell in love with a black woman. Ostracized by my parents, my girlfriend and I were enthusiastically accepted by her extended family of transplanted southerners, which proved far more open to interracial relationships than the lower-middle-class Jews I had grown up among.

The Black Power movement, which came to Columbia in the late sixties, added another layer of tension to our lives. As ideas of self-determination and black unity spread through the black intelligentsia, interracial organizations and relationships came under pressure. My girlfriend and I encountered opposition to our relationship from some

black students, and during Columbia's 1968 student strike we occupied separate buildings. But the black community's traditions of tolerance and hospitality were not instantly erased by the spread of nationalist ideas. Even in the late sixties, my girlfriend and I, who were together for six years, had a vibrant multiracial social life with her extended family, with the black high school students we worked with in Columbia Upward Bound, and with black and white friends who stayed at our communal apartment on the Upper West Side.

The influence of the Black Power movement should not be underestimated. It produced a withering critique of American racism, inspired new standards of beauty and artistic expression, and ushered in much more assertive styles of leadership and personal comportment among African-Americans. But involvement in this movement did not preclude an openness to multiracial strategies and relationships. I forcefully encountered this duality when I joined Fordham University's black studies program in the fall of 1970. I was hired for this position by an all-black search committee, not only because of my research on black history but because the program's founders saw teaching whites about African-American history and culture as complementary to their mission of promoting black unity and empowerment.

Formed as a result of a student sit-in, Fordham's Afro-American Institute had a "movement" atmosphere. Its students and faculty were political activists, committed to increasing the power and influence of blacks on the Fordham campus and in the political life of New York City. But perhaps the most important and difficult of its tasks was to make learning about the black experience a focus of intellectual excitement and to push the Fordham curriculum to encompass non-Western cultures and civilizations. Here I found my calling. I became an evangelist for black studies among white and Latino students, telling them that they could not understand their own lives and history without understanding the black and African elements in their music, language, and material culture.

Some black students resented what I was doing. I had several "stare downs" with student nationalists in the program office during my first year of teaching. But as enrollment in my classes swelled, and I became friends with my faculty colleagues, the hostility dissipated and I found myself drawn into the strategy sessions, demonstrations, lectures, and parties that the Institute sponsored. The Institute's bruising, uphill struggle to win the respect of the Fordham faculty, who seemed to think that

wisdom and knowledge derived exclusively from Europe, created a powerful bond among our faculty and students. By 1976, when my colleagues and I were finally granted departmental status, my race had ceased to be controversial and I could function, when needed, as spokesperson for an institution that was both black and multiracial.

For the last twenty-five years, I have taught black and urban history to thousands of students. I served as chair of black studies for seven of those years and as director of urban studies for most of them. The department I represent is the most multiracial institution on the Fordham campus, a place where students of many backgrounds explore black history and culture in an open, ecumenical atmosphere. If you are black or white, Asian or Latino, it is an excellent place to find a boundary-crossing experience. If this defies conventional wisdom about the politics of race in the United States, perhaps that wisdom needs to be revised.

A Note on Names

The account that follows aims for historical accuracy in all respects but one—the names of participants. Although major historical figures always appear under their own names, I have tried to disguise the identities of individuals I have known or worked with who might be compromised by my portrait of them. Names the reader encounters in the text may or may not be pseudonyms; for the protection of the people I discuss, I offer no cues in the text as to which names are real.

1 Crown Heights in the 1950s

BORN IN 1946, I grew up in a red brick apartment building at the intersection of Lefferts and Kingston Avenues in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Today Crown Heights is a national symbol of black-Jewish tensions, with Afro-Caribbeans and Hasidic Jews living in uneasy proximity. In the 1950s, it was a peaceful neighborhood populated largely by second- and third-generation Jews and Italians, with a sprinkling of Irish and African-American families. The absence of racial and religious conflict was not accidental. Cherishing the opportunity to retreat into private life after years of war and economic hardship, Crown Heights residents seemed determined to shield their children from the weight of history. Anxious to have their children grow up American in a society opening its doors to minorities, my parents' generation worked hard to hide the scars that had been inflicted by the Depression, the Holocaust, and the terrors of the Jim Crow South. Through a communal code of silence upheld by religious leaders and the mass media, the people of Crown Heights tried to erase tragedy from their daily experience and give their children a feeling that the world was fundamentally benign, a place of adventure and opportunity where no accomplishments were out of reach.

Nevertheless, the social geography of Crown Heights was influenced by immigrant traditions and ethnic differences. Most of the Jews in the area lived in six-story elevator apartment buildings put up in the 1920s; there were four at the intersection of Lefferts and Kingston, one on each corner, and ten more within a three-block radius. Most of the Italians lived in a five-block-square area of wooden and brick one-family homes that everybody called "Pigtown." Located one block south and west of my corner, Pigtown had its own Italian-language parish, which ran annual street festivals, and back yards that contained vegetable gardens and chicken coops. Directly to the south of my apartment house there were rows of three-story walkups in which Italians and Jews lived together.

Other nearby neighborhood landmarks included PS 91, a huge, red brick public school with a concrete schoolyard that contained several basketball courts, and a vest-pocket park with a playground, handball courts, a full court basketball area, and a large softball and football field. Six blocks to the south was Kings County Hospital, the largest concentration of hospital buildings in New York City. Six blocks to the west stood Ebbets Field, the fabled home of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Neighborhood life was highly ritualized, giving Crown Heights a village-like atmosphere. On weekdays men went off to work, some by car, some by subway, while women walked their children to school, conversed with one another from apartment windows, and dried their laundry on clotheslines that hung from or between apartments or stood in backyards. On weekends the men sat in folding chairs on street corners or stood outside the candy stores talking with the local bookie, while the women sat on benches by the park, the grandmothers in one section, the women with baby carriages in another. There were still street peddlers, a roving knife sharpener, a rag picker in a horse-drawn wagon who yelled "any old clothes," and numerous vacant lots, where children could chase one another, play ball, and even roast potatoes and marshmallows over a fire. Several small stores within a block of our apartment met most family needs. We had a grocery store, a dry cleaner, two candy stores, a hair salon called "Blonds and Dolls," and a Jewish delicatessen that sold pickles, nuts, smoked fish, and a middle-eastern delicacy called halvah.

Although the neighborhood contained a sizable number of elderly people who spoke only Yiddish or Italian, the largest group in the community were American-born married couples who were educated through high school and spoke English at home and at work. Crown Heights in the fifties was filled with young children, most of whom had been born during World War II or immediately after. Most of the men and women in these families had been poor during the Depression and cherished the modest prosperity they were experiencing. Although no one had more than two bedrooms, this seemed spacious, if not luxurious, to people who had been doubling up with relatives for most of their adult lives. Cars and television sets, once rare in this neighborhood, but virtually universal possessions by the mid fifties, had become important features of family life. People gathered in groups on weekday evenings to watch their favorite shows and took excursions throughout the city on weekends to visit their relatives.

Despite new technologies, the vitality of street life remained the neighborhood's defining characteristic. While adults sat or stood in groups to gossip, gamble, or talk politics, kids used every available piece of space for games and contests. The lives of children, like those of adults, were rigidly divided by gender. Boys played cowboys and Indians in the alleys, used sidewalks for boxball and box baseball, and played stickball, football, and punchball in the street. Meanwhile girls played with dolls in their apartments and jumped rope and played hopscotch on sidewalks under the watchful eye of their mothers. If you were a boy, every nook and cranny of the neighborhood was a zone of adventure and competition, a place where kids fought, tested each other, and made friends and enemies; but girls were prohibited from activities that involved physical aggressiveness or the risk of getting dirty. In all my years in Crown Heights, I never saw a girl play basketball or stickball, throw a football or hit a baseball, roast potatoes in a vacant lot, or join in games of ring-a-levio and johnny on a pony.

Racial boundaries in Crown Heights, at least on the surface, were far less obvious. In the 1950s, only a sprinkling of black families lived in the fifteen blocks between Eastern Parkway and Kings County Hospital, and most of them seemed solidly working class. None of my neighbors appeared to fear the black people in our midst or worry about their children's behavior. The poor and troubled families in the neighborhood, the ones everyone kept away from or felt sorry for, were all white. Whereas Crown Heights today is a community where black-Jewish divisions permeate every aspect of life, from schooling to shopping to patterns of sociability, in the early fifties, working-class and lower-middle-class Jews seemed to express little overt hostility toward the neighborhood's small black population. The Jews whom I grew up among were secular, politically liberal, and—at least until large numbers of blacks started entering their neighborhood in the early 1960s—reluctant to express racial hostility in front of their children. In my childhood, I never heard a neighbor or a member of my family use the word "nigger." Feelings about blacks, whether positive or negative, were masked behind the very ambiguous term *schvartze* (Yiddish for black), which could be either a term of description or a racial epithet. As a child, I found it difficult to know which meaning was being employed because adults invariably reverted to Yiddish when talking about African-Americans. Their racial prejudices, whether subliminal or

explicit, were not something proudly passed on from parents to children. Adults seemed embarrassed, even ashamed to talk about racial issues.

The children in my neighborhood were even less prone to make race a public issue. There were two black kids in the pack of thirty-odd boys I hung out with, Franny and Franklin, and they were included in every one of our activities, from running in the alleys to playing handball and basketball and football. I never heard anybody insult them with a racial slur or exclude them from an activity because of their racial background. The biggest division in our neighborhood was between Italians and Jews, and even this was not marked with great hostility. Jewish kids from "Lequerville" (the term we used to describe our section of Crown Heights) played with Italian kids from "Pigtown" as much as we fought with them.

The neighborhood also had little, if any, violent crime. Until I was ten or eleven years old, the only policemen I saw were traffic cops. Organized crime was a muted presence—my friend Barry's father was the local bookie—but there were almost no burglaries, muggings, car thefts, or assaults, much less rapes or murders. Because Crown Heights was filled with extended families and people (mostly women) who were not in the paid labor force, there was no need for volunteer security patrols or a heavy police presence. These informal block watchers made the neighborhood safe and secure at all times of the day and night, a feature that my parents, who had grown up in much poorer and more dangerous areas, appreciated greatly.

In the mid-1950s Crown Heights had few very poor people and only a handful of rich ones, making for a rough equality that undoubtedly fostered social harmony. However, there was one striking social disparity—-the widespread employment of African-American and Afro-Caribbean women as domestic workers. Almost every Jewish family in our neighborhood, even those where wives were not employed, had African-American women come in to clean their apartments or help care for children. Jewish women referred to these workers as their "girls," even though the women they employed were often older than they were. Every morning they arrived in a group on the Kingston Avenue bus from Bedford-Stuyvesant, and they left by the same route early in the evening. Their educational and cultural attainments varied greatly, as did those of the people who employed them. The woman my

mother employed, "Adler," had no trace of servility or deference. A well-spoken woman with a light-brown complexion and straight hair, Adler carried herself more like a schoolteacher than a maid, and she sat down with my mother for coffee like a family friend. My mother, an ardent trade unionist who had worked at numerous blue-collar and clerical jobs before becoming a teacher, insisted that I treat Adler with politeness and respect. But Adler's presence raised disturbing questions. Why was someone so capable and intelligent cleaning our house? Why wasn't she doing what my mother was doing? Racial barriers in New York, which kept African-Americans from getting jobs as secretaries, sales clerks, and bank tellers, had created a pool of black women workers with few alternatives to domestic labor. By drawing upon this labor force, lower-middle-class Jewish families simultaneously improved their own standard of living and acquired a morally damaging complicity with racial discrimination.

Childhood Idiosyncrasies

The racial issues in my neighborhood, overt and covert, had little impact on my early childhood. The biggest problem I faced was a dissonance between the values of my parents and those of most other families in my neighborhood. My parents were schoolteachers, Jewish intellectuals who revered education and wanted me to become a professor or scientist. They took me to zoos and museums and concerts, gave me piano lessons, provided me with electric trains, chemistry sets, and books on dinosaurs, animals, and outer space. For their own enjoyment, they stocked our apartment with books, records, and musical instruments, and filled our walls with inexpensive reproductions of paintings they saw in museums. My parents regarded themselves as members of an intellectual elite whose job was to bring culture and civilization to unappreciative New York public school students. My achievements were to provide proof that their talents had not gone to waste.

This way of life made us very different from most of the Jews in our Crown Heights neighborhood. Most of our neighbors were tough, earthy people who were more influenced by American popular culture than by Jewish intellectual and cultural traditions. Although their occupations varied—they were skilled factory workers, small businesses owners, taxi drivers, clerical workers—they had the cynical air of people who had to

fight their way out of poverty by means both fair and foul. They spent much more time watching television than reading, and were more inclined to go to the racetrack than a museum. Gambling and card playing were omnipresent. Women played mah-jongg and canasta, while the men played pinochle, casino, and gin rummy and bet on ball games and the horses. Little attention was given to religion. Most people went to synagogue only on the high holy days, and they sent their kids to Hebrew school so they could go through the ritual of a bar mitzvah, not so they could become religious Jews. Childrearing was approached rather casually. Children were expected to do well in school but also to be well-rounded individuals who could dance, play cards, compete in sports, and, if they were girls, dress up and look pretty. People were judged by their physical appearance, the clothes they wore, the cars they drove, and the food they served at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and family parties.

Eating seemed to be the neighborhood's favorite pastime, the activity where social ties were cemented and the burdens of any painful history could be set aside. Wherever they went, children my age were deluged with food: homemade potato latkes and matzoh ball soup prepared by grandparents; chow mein and egg foo yong ordered at Chinese restaurants; deli sandwiches of roast beef, corned beef, tongue, and chopped liver; Sunday breakfasts combining bagels, cream cheese, and platters of smoked fish with onion and salami omelets. Among the secular Jews of Crown Heights, the size and health of their children was more important than their aptitude for learning or their knowledge of Jewish tradition. Most of the children and adolescents in the neighborhood were big and strong, reaching their parents' height and weight by the time they were twelve or thirteen years old, and they possessed a physical self-confidence rarely seen in the shtetels of Eastern Europe or the crowded immigrant slums in which their grandparents had once lived.

Unfortunately for me, my parents were determined to uphold the tradition of Jewish intellectualism in this earthy, materialistic community no matter how much it isolated us. Although their combined income as schoolteachers was no more than that of our neighbors, they regarded themselves as intellectual royalty in a world of philistines, and they decided to use me, their only child, as the vehicle to display their superiority. I was taught to read by the time I was three, forced to

perform at piano recitals and enter science fairs, and paraded in front of neighbors and relatives to show off my knowledge of science, politics, and current events. While exposure to books and museums awakened my intellectual curiosity, being shown off as the product of exemplary childrearing exposed me to incessant teasing and considerable hostility. My peers mocked me for having early curfews, for having to go to lessons and recitals, for getting high scores on standardized tests, and for being praised by teachers for winning science fairs and spelling bees.

Two things saved me from complete social ostracism. First, my parents both worked full-time and lacked the time and energy to supervise my weekday afternoons and weekend mornings. During those times, I could run relatively unsupervised with the pack of neighborhood boys. Second, I was strong and reasonably athletic, and I had been given valuable fighting skills by my father, who had been victimized as a child on the streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn's toughest and poorest Jewish neighborhood. Only five feet, four and a half inches tall, with a receding hairline, glasses, and shoulders slightly hunched from adolescent rickets, my father taught me three wrestling holds—a hammerlock, a headlock, and a full nelson—and he bought me my first pair of boxing gloves when I was three. He also stocked the house with sports equipment and played catch with me whenever he could, even though he was horribly uncoordinated. By the time I was eight, I had become competent in most ball sports and could use my wrestling holds to fling tormenters to the ground and sit on them until they "gave up."

The tension between my parents' standards and neighborhood mores made my quest for social acceptance a daily struggle. Every once in a while, my parents seemed to let their ambitions and fears transcend the bounds of common sense. It was bad enough that I was not allowed to drink out of other kids' soda bottles, share their candy, or go with them to the movies and the bowling alley. But then, while I was still in elementary school, I was also saddled with the burden of skipping a grade. While I was in third grade at PS 91, my parents became so excited at my score on a citywide reading test that they marched me into the principal's office and insisted I be accelerated on the spot. The next day, the principal placed me in a fourth-grade class, where the other students looked at me as though I were a quiz-show geek suddenly dropped into their presence. Very quickly, they assigned me the nickname "Eggy"

(for Egghead) and warned me not to raise my hand too often when the teacher asked a question.

Shortly after, two tough Italian boys in my new class, Anthony and Charley, approached me and asked me to pay them five cents a week in protection money. If I gave them this money, they would make sure that nobody in the school would beat me up. If I did not, *they* would beat me up. Intimidated by my new surroundings, I went along with their scheme and discovered it had a surprising wrinkle. At the end of each month, Anthony and Charley would take the five or six kids under their protection to a luncheonette in Pigtown, where they would buy each of us a "mush," a local delicacy that consisted of sauerkraut and mustard on Italian bread. Someone, probably the Mafiosi they had observed in Pigtown, had taught them that a good criminal displays benevolence and community spirit. In an era when organized-crime families controlled much of New York's waterfront, trucking industry, restaurant business, and construction trades, Charley and Anthony were being given valuable training.

Several months and many nickels later, I decided to rebel. When Anthony asked me for his weekly stipend, I solemnly told him I no longer needed protection. Determined to teach me a lesson, Anthony started raining punches on my head and discovered, at about the same time I did, that I had an extremely high pain tolerance. When his barrage ended, I shook my head, grabbed him in a headlock, and squeezed him until he said "I give up." As he got up, I worried that I might have to fight every Italian kid at PS 91, but Anthony had a more creative way of saving face. He put his arm around me, congratulated me on my victory, and invited me to play on a neighborhood football team his father was coaching.

Being part of the Pigtown junior football team was a gratifying experience. Anthony's father was a good-natured man who loved to watch boys tackle each other and made extremely creative use of the word "fuck," employing it as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. There were no uniforms and no opponents; practices consisted of brutal intersquad scrimmages in which, in our coach's words, we would try to "run the fuckin' ball down their fuckin' throats." In the clash of bodies and the dirt-encrusted pileups that ensued with every exchange of the football, I found a blessed anonymity. To Anthony's father, I wasn't a future scientist, scholar, or inventor; I was just a thick-bodied kid who enjoyed

hitting anything that moved and never complained when he got cut or got dirty.

Unfortunately, my parents took a very dim view of this experience. To protect me from injury, and from the implied threat to my upward mobility, they forbade me to play tackle football. I decided to disobey them. Pretending to play punchball or hide-and-seek in the alleys, I would sneak off to join the football games, hoping to disappear in the pileups. However, my parents, who had a view of every field and schoolyard from their bedroom window, and who enlisted my grandmother to watch me with binoculars whenever they weren't around, quickly found me out. One rainy Sunday morning, as I was smashing through the line to make a tackle, I looked up and saw an extraordinary sight—my father, all five feet, four inches of him, running in my direction in his teaching uniform: a sports jacket, slacks, and a bow tie. When he reached me, he slapped my face, grabbed me by the back of my shirt, and dragged me off the field in front of the thirty-odd players and spectators, all the while screaming, "You brat, you ingrate, how can you do this to us!" Anthony's father, a heavyset longshoreman who ran practices wearing workshirts and boots, looked on in stunned silence and evident sympathy. By the next day, every kid in my class had heard about what happened, but my father's action were so bizarre that no one had the heart to tease me about it.

But this incident took its toll. No words could convey the rage I felt at my parents for humiliating me in front of the entire neighborhood. In moments of vulnerability, I now felt a white-hot anger that quickly turned to physical aggression. Throughout the rest of my elementary school years, my relations with my parents became volatile, marked on my side by screaming tantrums, slammed doors, and thrown objects, and on theirs by punishments that included withholding television privileges, slapping my face, and washing my mouth out with soap. Even my friends became wary of provoking me, fearful that a good-natured comment about my piano lessons or science-fair projects might draw a barrage of punches.

A Child of Popular Culture

Gradually I was able to find more constructive outlets for my anger. Prohibiting me from playing tackle football did not transform me into a concert pianist or inventor; rather, it drove me to channel my energy into

baseball, stickball, basketball, and punchball, and to devote huge amounts of time to watching and reading about college and professional sports. Increasingly, I shut my parents out and retreated into my own world, one ruled by the symbols of an American popular culture that they held in contempt. Sports became the hallmark of my personal identity, the one thing I did well that my parents could not claim credit for. On weekday evenings, I would go to the night center at PS 91 and play basketball, nok hockey, or ping pong. Every weekend morning, I would get up at 7:00 A.M. to shoot baskets in the schoolyard, pitch tennis balls at a rectangular box drawn on an apartment building, or throw a Spalding rubber ball (spaldeen) against a handball court and catch it with my glove. The endless repetition of solitary practice gave me valuable moments of calmness, an escape from the tension I experienced trying to cope with my parents rules and expectations. Standing alone in the schoolyard while everyone else slept, shooting hundreds of layups, hook shots, and one-handers, feeling my heart pounding and the sweat running down my back, I found an order and predictability that escaped me in personal relationships.

I also became fanatically absorbed in the activities of New York's professional sports teams, which in Crown Heights aroused the kind of passion that religion and politics had once inspired in immigrant Jewish neighborhoods like Brownsville, Williamsburg, and the Lower East Side. In my entire childhood, I never saw anyone hold a street rally, pass out a leaflet, or recruit people for a demonstration, but I overheard hundreds, if not thousands, of conversations about baseball, basketball, football, and the horses. The men on my block, most of whom were union members and some of whom had once been socialists, were at their most animated when talking about sports, and they eagerly transmitted these enthusiasms to their male children. In my neighborhood, located less than a mile from Ebbets Field, knowing Jackie Robinson's batting average, Duke Snider's home run total, and Willie Mays's latest box score allowed me to enter the informal fraternity of male street life. Becoming fluent in this discourse became my personal mission. I studied the daily sports pages, memorized the box scores of local teams, and watched every baseball, basketball, and football game that was shown on television. I could sing the jingles of the beer companies and razor-blade manufacturers who sponsored these events, imitate the announcers, and reel off the final scores of every game I watched.

I had an important ally in this mission of subversion, my Uncle Mac, who lived directly below us with his wife and two sons. Mac, my mother's young brother, knew my parents disapproved of his values and lifestyle. A tall, handsome man who worked as a dispatcher for a coal distributor, Mac was a knowledgeable sports fan and an inveterate gambler. Offended by my parents' condescension toward him, he extended a permanent invitation for me to join him for evening and weekend television viewing in his apartment, knowing full well that my parents much preferred that I spend my time reading or practicing the piano. Mac made this space a zone of male camaraderie. With the television tuned to baseball, basketball, and football games, Mac would hold forth on the strategy of the games and the characteristics of the players, periodically punctuating his comments with cries of "Esther, bring me a soda," directed at my long-suffering aunt. I worshiped his two sons, Harvey and Stephen, who were among the best athletes in the neighborhood, and I loved being able to sit back and enjoy the action without feeling any pressure to display my intellect.

Ironically, in Mac's apartment, I encountered an environment where women were treated like servants but race was regarded as irrelevant, as least in the artificial world of professional sports. In the mid 1950s, African-American athletes were beginning to appear in every major venue of televised sports, from Friday night fights to high school basketball and football, but the media rarely employed a language of racial difference. Announcers and sports writers did not refer to the race of players and almost never discussed the problems black athletes encountered with teammates, opponents, coaches, fans, and hotels and restaurants. My Uncle Mac and his friends seemed comfortable with this "color-blind' approach. In my hundreds of hours of watching television with my Uncle Mac or listening to him talk sports on the corner, I never heard him, or anyone else, speak disparagingly about the race of a player, or indeed comment on it at all. Whether this was a particularly Jewish phenomenon, or characteristic of all Brooklyn ethnic groups in the fifties, is difficult to say. As a group, Jews of my parents' generation did not see the emergence of black athletes in professional sports as a threat, and indeed may have viewed it as something that would benefit Jews and other minorities. They were an important part of the cohort of Brooklyn fans who had embraced Jackie Robinson when he broke into the Major Leagues in 1947. At least in my neighborhood, they did not

try to undermine the media's depiction of sports as a place where fair play and ability ruled and race and religion were irrelevant.

Because of this confluence of media images and neighborhood attitudes, my friends and I grew up viewing black and white athletes playing ball together as natural and normal. We were passionately involved with the careers of star black athletes, especially baseball and basketball players. We practiced stealing home like Jackie Robinson. We made basket catches like Willie Mays. We took hook shots like Ray Felix, the tall (and not particularly outstanding) center of the New York Knicks. But we did the same for white players we admired, and we didn't see a player's color as a factor in our endless comparisons and evaluations. In arguments about who was the better center fielder, Duke Snider of the Dodgers, Mickey Mantle of the Yankees, or Willie Mays of the Giants, I heard kids refer to the players' batting stance, power, running ability, grace, fielding prowess, and ability to perform under pressure, but never to a player's color. We had no sense that the black athletes we saw on television were pioneers, that they were challenging a centuries-old legacy of exclusion and contempt. Rather we saw them as individual ballplayers with distinctive ways of performing the techniques their sport required, people we admired or despised for "nonracial" reasons.

We had black athletic heroes without seeing their blackness as socially significant. Yet our attachment to black athletes, even in this "color blind" form, had important social consequences. The activities we loved the most, that touched the deepest chord in our emotions, evoked visual images of blacks and whites working together. When race relations became polarized in the 1960s, these images may have conditioned us to respond more positively than our parents to African-American activism and changes in the racial composition of our schools and neighborhoods.

The same mixture of openness and tunnel vision marked our response to another racially hybrid cultural phenomenon that entered our lives in the 1950s, rock and roll. In the spring of 1956, when I was in fifth grade, the "rock and roll craze" swept through my peer group, awakening our preadolescent sexuality and turning us into passionate consumers of popular music. The eleven- and twelve-year-old boys I spent time with suddenly began to listen to music radio, buy cheap phonographs with plastic converters suitable for playing 45 rpm records, and invite female classmates to parties to dance to the latest hits and retreat to the closet for kissing games. This change was sparked by

a shift in format among the mass-market radio stations. After years of anesthetizing the public with songs like "How Much Is That Doggy in the Window," disk jockeys began to promote records that had hard-driving rhythms and seductive harmonies, many of them featuring African-American artists, and to market them to adolescents as a sign of generational rebellion. Recording companies shrewdly promoted the music with images of young people—most of them white—screaming in the aisles at rock and roll shows, doing flamboyant and acrobatic dance steps, and singing on street corners while snapping their fingers to the beat. My friends and I responded to these images by trying to learn the latest dance steps, by playing the music at dances and parties, and by spending our money on records, phonographs, and transistor radios. The music also brought us together with girls in our neighborhood, whom we had treated as members of a different species prior to this time.

Because rock and roll crossed gender lines, its role in exposing white kids to African-American cultural influences may have been even greater than that of sports. Through clever marketing, a group of Jewish kids in Crown Heights were persuaded to adopt African-American music as the centerpiece of their generational identity, something that sharply distinguished them from their parents and teachers. I vividly remember the first rock and roll record that was played at our parties. It featured Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers singing "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," a masterpiece of harmonic singing with an irresistible opening passage. We were fascinated by this record, which was representative of a genre—rhythm and blues—that had been popular in black urban neighborhoods for years. We not only danced to it, we sang along with it over and over until we had mastered its central elements—a bass line establishing rhythm, choruses in three-part harmony, and lead singing that used falsetto to reach higher octaves. But we never thought of ourselves as "white" people imitating "black" music. "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" was not promoted as the product of an African-American musical tradition but as part of a *nonracial* phenomenon that brought black and white performers together and appealed to people on the basis of their age. The rock and roll show, whether on the airwaves or live, was an exercise in musical eclecticism, throwing together the country harmonies of the Everly Brothers, the barrelhouse piano of Fats Domino, the rockabilly and blues of Elvis Presley, the gospel-influenced

shouting of Little Richard, the electrifying guitar riffs of Chuck Berry, and the rhythm and blues sounds of artists like the Platters and the Drifters. Like the sports teams we followed religiously, rock and roll drew us away from our immigrant past and made America seem like a magical and inviting place, open to people of every background who possessed the requisite talent. For our generation, part of becoming American was becoming culturally "black."

While my parents kept driving me toward academic excellence, by the time I entered junior high school, in the fall of 1957, I had seized upon sports and rock and roll as vehicles for social acceptance among my peers. At Winthrop Junior High School, a five-story, white brick building about a mile from my home, I found myself, along with about a hundred classmates, in an accelerated track that completed three years of school in two. Knowing that I was going to enter high school at age thirteen, I put ferocious effort into making myself as inconspicuous as possible in the world outside the classroom. I studied sports figures and rock and roll stars with the same passion that my parents had approached science and history, determined to win acceptance from older, more confident youngsters who appeared to float through life without the academic pressures I encountered.

Winthrop Junior High proved to be a comfortable place for me, an all-Jewish enclave in a neighborhood about to undergo rapid racial change. Located on Remsen Avenue and Winthrop Street on the border of East Flatbush, in a neighborhood that is now predominantly Afro-Caribbean, it had about a thousand students, no more than twenty of whom were black. Most were lower-middle-class Jews. Drawing on a larger and more prosperous neighborhood than PS 91, the school had only a handful of really tough kids, most of whom hung out by a nearby luncheonette showing off their black leather jackets. The majority of students at Winthrop were clean cut, ambitious, and academically serious; getting good grades there did not subject you to ridicule. Sports at Winthrop were omnipresent and highly respected. The morning began with handball or stickball games played against the concrete wall of the schoolyard. Then came games of johnny on a pony, often involving fifty boys at a time. After school started, the most popular game was basketball, which the boys played in a highly competitive way. The baskets in the boys' gym classes were organized by ability, and the goal of each player was to be acknowledged by the local superstars, who selected

the kids who played on the top court. To make myself valuable to them, I spent hours alone in the schoolyard practicing, trying to compensate for my lack of foot speed with shooting skill and strength.

My efforts to gain popularity with girls were equally energetic, though far more confused. Because I had no sisters or female cousins, and because the culture of my neighborhood was rigidly sex segregated, I found it difficult to relate to the girls I was interested in romantically. The things I cared about most—why the Dodgers had left Brooklyn and whether Mickey Mantle was better than Willie Mays—were not things I could talk about to most girls I knew. In this setting, rock and roll became the outlet for my romantic longings and the antidote to my social awkwardness. I learned the words of every new rock and roll song and practiced singing the bass lines and lead voices in the hope that I would be invited to join a singing group, thereby making me popular even if I was tongue-tied in conversation. I also learned the three dances that were in vogue in the late fifties—the lindy hop, the fox trot, and the cha cha—and took advantage of my one opportunity to practice them in mixed company, the bar mitzvah circuit. There, amid trays of caviar and coldcuts, chopped liver sculptures, and dinners that began with Jewish appetizers and ended with baked Alaska, teenagers joined in wild celebrations of Jewish American materialism that often ended with drunken men dancing on tables and women in low-cut dresses performing burlesque routines. The bands played rock and roll for the younger crowd in between Frank Sinatra songs and Jewish staples like "Hava Nagilah." With the help of screwdrivers and manhattans stolen from the bar, I found the courage to ask girls to dance. The louder and faster the music was, the happier I felt. I was much more comfortable moving to the beat than talking.

By the time I graduated from junior high school in 1959, I had started to feel optimistic about the future. With a lot of hard work, I had learned to insulate myself from my parents' demands and construct an alternative identity, drawn from popular culture and the folkways of my Brooklyn neighborhood, that was serving me well. Like most people in Winthrop, I looked forward to high school. Through years of practice, I had made myself a strong, all-around athlete and anticipated playing on a high school team. I had become skilled in tennis during summer vacations and felt confident I could compete on the varsity level. The prospect of success and acceptance in the things America valued beckoned to me,

unimpeded by the doubts and insecurities that plagued my parents' generation and the financial pressures they faced. To me, high school evoked images of ball games and dances, of athletes in letter sweaters flanked by cute-looking cheerleaders, of academic triumphs and a vibrant social life. I never dreamed it would bring violence, class conflict, and racial tension.

But the age of innocence was ending in Crown Heights. The opening of a new high school in our neighborhood, George W. Wingate, in 1956, coupled with a rapid southward expansion of Brooklyn's black population, was bringing a rapid end to the color-blind era in our community's history. The Wingate student body included several hundred African-Americans who took the bus in from Bedford-Stuyvesant, and their arrival triggered waves of anxiety among Jews and Italians who had previously lived in harmony with their small number of black neighbors. For residents of Crown Heights, young and old alike, race would become a central preoccupation, something they talked about, and acted on, in a highly conscious way. Dimly aware, from television, of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Little Rock school integration dispute, I had never thought of these issues as having relevance to my life. My insular, homogeneous world, was about to open up.