



Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto (Historical Studies of Urban America)

By Wendell E. Pritchett

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From its founding in the late 1800s through the 1950s, Brownsville, a section of eastern Brooklyn, was a white, predominantly Jewish, working-class neighborhood. The famous New York district nurtured the aspirations of thousands of upwardly mobile Americans while the infamous gangsters of Murder, Incorporated controlled its streets. But during the 1960s, Brownsville was stigmatized as a black and Latino ghetto, a neighborhood with one of the city's highest crime rates. Home to the largest concentration of public housing units in the city, Brownsville came to be viewed as emblematic of urban decline. And yet, at the same time, the neighborhood still supported a wide variety of grass-roots movements for social change.

The story of these two different, but in many ways similar, Brownsvilles is compellingly told in this probing new work. Focusing on the interaction of Brownsville residents with New York's political and institutional elites, Wendell Pritchett shows how the profound economic and social changes of post-World War II America affected the area. He covers a number of pivotal episodes in Brownsville's history as well: the rise and fall of interracial organizations, the struggles to deal with deteriorating housing, and the battles over local schools that culminated in the famous 1968 Teachers Strike. Far from just a cautionary tale of failed policies and institutional neglect, the story of Brownsville's transformation, he finds, is one of mutual struggle and frustrated cooperation among whites, blacks, and Latinos.

Ultimately, *Brownsville, Brooklyn* reminds us how working-class neighborhoods have played, and continue to play, a central role in American history. It is a story that needs to be read by all those concerned with the many challenges facing America's cities today.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Between 1943 and 1970, Brownsville went from being a "white, predominantly Jewish, working-class neighborhood" of 100,000 to being a 75% black/20% Puerto Rican neighborhood of 70,000. This fascinating cultural and social analysis traces Brownsville from its economically ambitious if poor beginnings through its rise, economic decline and current stirrings toward renaissance. Developed in the 1890s amid high land costs, speculation and immigration, by 1907 Brownsville was known as a "Modern Tenement City." That reputation held until the 1940s, when unplanned housing development, government neglect and white racism destroyed the thriving neighborhood not least, the author surprisingly argues, via liberal lobbies and labor unions pushing for "slum clearance." Pritchett, an assistant professor of history at CUNY's Baruch College, stays close throughout to community groups, from the earliest Jewish charitable and educational societies to the role women played in political organizing during the war years, the integrated Brownsville Boys Clubs in the late 1940s, the beginning of black and Latino community organizing in the 1950s, the devastating effect of white flight on longstanding Jewish religious institutions in the mid-1960s and multiracial and religious grassroots organizing around issues such as housing and poverty. Pritchett demonstrates with empathy and intelligence how race, ethnicity, culture and gender influence both the successes and failures of these community groups and the community they represent.

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From Library Journal

Pritchett (history, Baruch Coll., CUNY) focuses on Brownsville, a section of Brooklyn, and its changing fortunes in the 20th century. Through the 1950s, Brownsville was a white, predominantly Jewish, working-class neighborhood. During the 1960s, however, it was burdened with one of New York City's highest crime rates as well as the largest concentration of public housing in the country. Despite this troubled new reputation as a ghetto, the neighborhood still supported a wide variety of grass-roots movements for social change. Residents struggled to improve deteriorating housing and gain community control of public schools. Pritchett sees the story of Brownsville as that of mutual struggle and frustrated cooperation among white, African American, and Latino residents. *Jews of Brooklyn* is recommended for New York City and Judaica collections. *Brownsville, Brooklyn* is recommended for New York City collections. Harry Frummerman, formerly with Hunter Coll., New York

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Review

"With its street-level dissection of post-World War II urban decline, *Brownsville, Brooklyn* is both refreshingly new and painfully familiar. This complex and tangled tale of neighborhood transformation, in its emphasis on local actors, provides a nuanced portrait of persistent economic inequality, racial discrimination, and failed government policies. Pritchett has made a significant contribution to the discussion on race and the modern city." - Arnold Hirsch, author of *Making the Second Ghetto*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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