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***NOT IN MY BACKYARD:
THE ROAD TO HOUSING DESEGREGATION IN
YONKERS, NEW YORK, FROM LISA BELKIN'S
SHOW ME A HERO TO ITS ADAPTATION FOR
TELEVISION***

Keywords: *public housing (de)segregation; racial discrimination; court-ordered integration; defensible space.*

Abstract: *Almost twenty years after the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, whose goal was to prevent housing discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender or national origin, the city of Yonkers, New York occupied central stage in a landmark civil-rights suit (1983). In it, City officials were accused of having intentionally followed a systematic pattern of selecting sites for subsidized housing projects that perpetuated racial segregation. My paper discusses the manner in which the ensuing battle to desegregate Yonkers was portrayed in *Show Me a Hero: A Tale of Murder, Suicide, Race, and Redemption* (1999), the nonfiction narrative by former *New York Times* writer Lisa Belkin, as well as in its subsequent adaptation to screen in a six-part HBO miniseries by the same name (2015). It seeks to reveal the dysfunctional politics of urban America in a city paralyzed by fear, corruption, and racial ignorance, which was nonetheless to become the birth place of scattered-site low-income and affordable housing.*

“To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars
is the very bottom of hardships.”
(W.E.B du Bois)

“Money and fear are sufficient to make men and women stupid
everywhere else in the world, but we’re Americans, goddammit.”
(David Simon)

Introduction

In 1987, the city of Yonkers, NY, went through great turmoil when a federal judge imposed the building of low income housing in the city’s mainly white upscale neighborhoods, in an effort to end the willful desegregation of the city by its government. My paper discusses the manner in which the ensuing battle to desegregate Yonkers was portrayed in *Show Me a Hero: A Tale of Murder, Suicide, Race, and Redemption* (1999), the nonfiction narrative by former *New York Times* writer Lisa Belkin, as well as in its subsequent adaptation to screen in a six-part HBO miniseries by the same name (2015) written by David Simon and William

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Zorzi. It explores the dysfunctional politics of urban America in a city paralyzed by fear, corruption, and racial ignorance, which was nonetheless to become the birth place of scattered-site low-income and affordable housing.

Legislative Grounds and the Legal Battle

Six days after the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, Congress passed Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act, commonly known as the Fair Housing Act, which prohibited the “discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status ... and disability.” At the time, Edward Brooke, one of the sponsors of the bill and the first African-American US Senator, observed that cities in the United States were plagued by “galloping segregation, a malady so widespread and so deeply embedded in the national psyche that many Americans, Negroes as well as whites, have come to regard it as a national condition.” (qtd. in Semuels) The product of years of “contentious legislative debate” and difficulty in amassing the necessary congressional support, the Act represented a legislative compromise whose “most glaring deficiency” was its failure to empower the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to *enforce* the law, but which nonetheless authorized the US Justice Department to “bring lawsuits under the Act when it uncovered a pattern or practice of discrimination.” (Schill and Friedman 57-58) Characterized as a “toothless tiger,” (Schill and Friedman 58) the Fair Housing Act would fail to prevent housing discrimination from reaching endemic proportions in the years after its passing. Seemingly, the opportunity created by the passing of the Fair Housing Act was lost mainly because of the Nixon administration’s politics and policy regarding suburban segregation, which stipulated that the national government should and could not force local suburban government to accept subsidized low-income housing within their boundaries (Lamb 3). Charles Lamb argues that although the politics of suburban segregation did not originate in the Nixon administration, it was Nixon who “converted suburban political preferences into national public policy,” (4) a policy which remains unrevoked to this day.

At the end of 1980, the Justice Department and the Yonkers branch of the NAACP filed a suit in civil court against the city of Yonkers, NY, the Yonkers School Board, and the Yonkers Community Development Agency in which they claimed that the City had been violating both the Fair Housing Act and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment¹ by engaging systematically in a pattern of racial segregation. It was argued that, by intentionally locating public and subsidized housing in the Southwestern part of Yonkers, an old downtown area mainly inhabited by black and Hispanic families, the city government and the local Community Development Agency not only confined subsidized housing projects to areas of the city already overpopulated by minorities, but also forced minority children to attend the same few schools, thus aggravating racial separation and

¹ Taking effect in 1868 and crucial to the protection of civil rights, the Clause prohibits states from denying any person within US jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

upholding a racially segregated school system deemed unconstitutional almost three decades before².

Yonkers, NY – A Tale of Two Cities

Formerly known as the “City of Gracious Living” (Williams) or as the “Queen City of the Hudson” (Weigold 1) and situated north of New York City, Yonkers in the 1980s was, according to Lisa Belkin, “rough-hewn and jagged”. It stood for a “working-class bridge between the towers of Manhattan to the south, and the pampered hills of the rest of Westchester County to the north.” (Belkin 31) Its riverfront, “cluttered with warehouses and factories” reminiscent of the old industrial city, looked across the Hudson at “the majestic Palisades, which rise teasingly out of reach.” (31) In point of demographics, the city of Yonkers was spatially divided: the white segment of its population was clustered in the Northeastern and Southeastern parts of the City, typically in middle-class suburban residential areas inhabited mainly by Irish and Italian Americans (Bell 147). The low-income minorities had been residing in the Southwestern area, on the cliffs over the Hudson River, in “apartheid-like neighborhoods,” (Rimer) in different types of abodes ranging from walkups³ to high-rises, but invariably overcrowded and in poor condition (Holden 26).

As screenwriter David Simon observes in his Foreword to Lisa Belkin’s book, back in the 1980s the City was mainly characterized by the “planned hypersegregation of the poor into distinct geographic locales” and by the reluctance to allow for even a limited number of poor, minority people to lead their lives within sight of other citizens (7). Simon’s argument goes along the lines of civil rights lawyer Craig Gurian’s contention that “the most profound form of social engineering was the creation and maintenance of segregated suburbs” or Sherrilyn Ifill’s reasoning that housing discrimination in contemporary United States represents the yet “unfinished business of civil rights.” (both qtd. in Badger) As president of the NAACP⁴ Legal Defense and Education Fund, Ifill maintains – echoing another current controversy in American society – that racial separation in housing opportunities “goes right to the heart of whether you believe that African American people’s lives matter, that you respect them, that you believe they can be your neighbors, that you want them to play with your children.” (qtd. in Badger)

Judge Sand’s decision to desegregate Yonkers and build low-income housing at the center of the middle-class neighborhood was not unlike an experiment in social engineering. Ruling that Yonkers looked the way it did not by chance, but

² In 1954, in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the US Supreme Court decided that the six decade-long “separate but equal doctrine” had no place in public education and urged for the widespread racial integration of schools. Thurgood Marshall, who served as NAACP’s chief legal counsel through the case, went on to become the first African-American Supreme Court Justice.

³ An apartment house or office building with no elevator.

⁴ Established in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has been one of the first and most influential organizations whose mission is to battle race-based discrimination and ensure political, social, educational, and economic equality throughout the United States.

because of a forty-year pattern of politicians entertaining their east-side voters, Judge Leonard B. Sand of the Federal District Court in Manhattan quickly turned himself into a public enemy both for the City representatives, and for the local community inimical to integrated public housing sites in Yonkers. Described by Lisa Belkin as a “reserved, elfin man, with silver hair and bushy, wizardly brows,” an “intellectual judge” who “reveled in reason and lived in his head” and who “could not have been more of a contrast with the raucous and emotional city whose future was now his to shape,” (Belkin 21) Judge Sand wrote in *US v. the City of Yonkers* the longest decision of his career. Six hundred and fifty-seven pages long, it weighed three pounds and included 166 footnotes, five maps, and five appendices, so much so that when the mandatory copies were filed with the court, they had to be wheeled from room to room in a shopping cart (Belkin 22). In it, he identified the intentional and systematic pattern of selecting sites for subsidized housing projects that perpetuated racial segregation. In order to remedy the situation, he ruled that 200 new units be built in the white, middle-class parts of the city, so far reluctant to accommodate public housing sites (Newman 81). As a result, the City was ordered to designate the sites for the integrated building of public housing, which it *failed* to do before the deadline imposed by Judge Sand, for various reasons illustrated both in Lisa Belkin’s account of the case and in David Simon and William Zorzi’s HBO rendition of it.

One of these reasons has to do with the perceived threats and failures of desegregation in general. It has been argued that desegregation seemingly triggers a transfer of resources from a better-off majority with children in better public schools to a worse-off, mostly black and Hispanic minority with children in worse public schools. What is more, this perceived redistribution of resources is doubled by the white majority’s *racially* informed opposition to desegregation. Consequently, such an integrative policy challenging the white majority’s economic *and* social dominance is practically doomed to fail (Wilson quoted in Failer et al.).

Speaking about the white, middle-class community in Yonkers at the time of the trial, former chief of police Bob Olson stated that it was made up of people who had come to Yonkers two decades before, had seen their house prices go up for the last years and who feared that the prices would plummet once the public housing residents moved in (Newman 101-2). De Souza Briggs et al. observe that, despite scarce conclusive empirical evidence, the opponents of housing mobility forcefully argue that the integration of scattered-site public housing triggers the decline of property prices and property investment by owners, leads to white middle-class exodus and consequently to neighborhood decline (28). They further note that, for a nation whose wealth mostly resides within real estate, any potential threats to wealth are translated into threats to home security and family life, community identity and the established way of life (28).

But the potential drop in property prices represented just part of the problem. The fact of the matter was that the middle-class residents were afraid. As Mary Dorman (played by actress Catherine Keener), one of the white residents most vocal against the integrated public housing project, argued in Part Three of Simon and Zorzi’s miniseries, one “shouldn’t take people with one lifestyle and put them smack in the middle of a place with a different lifestyle.” The lifestyle that Dorman

considered incompatible with the middle-class values and the community fabric of Northern and Eastern Yonkers was one plagued by poverty, drug abuse, prostitution, and domestic violence which constituted the reality of the residents in the Southwest projects, such as Schlobohm, featured prominently both in Belkin's story and in its cinematic adaptation. The latter was actually filmed on location but "with bags of trash brought in by set dressers to augment the playground built by the crew in place of one that was no longer there." (Belkin 351)

An all-black and Hispanic project, Schlobohm was made up of eight high-rise buildings which shared a playground, and was described by the media of the day as an "empty shell filled with iron carcasses of jungle gyms and swings, parking lots filled with glass and rubble and concrete steps in need of repair." (Williams) Ironically situated right across from the Yonkers City Hall, where most of the battle for desegregation took place, the few blocks of the project represented for most of its minority inhabitants "a lifetime, another world, a strange land." (Belkin 54) For the fervent opponents of integration, Schlobohm was nothing more than "photos of peeling paint, overflowing trash bins, and broken windows" (Belkin 86) glued together onto a large tagboard and displayed in front of the City Hall to peddle segregationist and arguably racist ideas. Referring to Belkin's narrative and its continuing relevance for the present state of affairs in American society, David Simon observes that it provided "the perfect storm . . . about our enduring racial and class pathologies and the not-in-my-back-yard, don't-tread-on-me sensibilities of modern libertarian and neoliberal politics", in which "the only two operant currencies seem to be greed and fear." (qtd. in Easton) At the same time, he maintains that even though the American realities have come a long way since the 1980s, the "American obsession with race and class is still very much our national paradigm." (qtd. in Easton)

Another reason underlying the City's failure to comply with Judge Sand's decision was the very political profile of Yonkers. Lisa Belkin noted that after harness racing, politics represented the favorite sport in Yonkers and that when done according to the local rules, it turned into a blood sport (31): City Council debates would "veer off into attacks on a council member's spouse," more than one member in office was known to having changed parties three times in one career, political campaigns had been carried out based on illegal wiretapping and fraud (31). Moreover, in her journalistic investigation she exposed the unreliability and volatility of the Yonkers "fiefdom system" in which "no councilman's vote was final." (Belkin 34) In this respect, the HBO adaptation does justice to Belkin's account of the political debates taking place both behind and before the City Council doors, as a great part of the miniseries deals exactly with the *quid pro quos* and the machinations needed for rallying (bi)partisan support and getting the number of votes in order to avoid the violation of Judge Sand's order and hence contempt of court. When the City's "discriminatory obstinacy" threatened to leave Yonkers bankrupt as a result of their failure to comply with the court's decision, the chairwoman of the Emergency Financial Control Board, Gail Schaffer, was sent to take over control of the City's finances. Her findings were that politics in Yonkers had the same dynamics as a preschool classroom and that, like children, the local politicians seemed unable to take responsibility for their own actions (Belkin 78).

Similar to “an adolescent without an allowance” or to “a teenager who had been grounded,” the City was no longer trusted to run itself (Belkin 78).

The Sacrificial Mayor

A great part in the desegregation effort and the building of integrated scattered-site affordable housing in Northern and Eastern Yonkers was due to Nicholas Wasicsko, arguably the “hero” in both Belkin’s story and Simon and Zorzi’s production. Ironically becoming the youngest mayor in the United States because of his appeal to the Supreme Court *against* Judge Sand’s order, twenty-eight-year-old lawyer and former police officer Wasicsko ended up complying with Judge Sand’s integration ruling by unpopularity acknowledging that “the law is the law.” (Belkin 29) And as Belkin notes about the newly appointed mayor of Yonkers, “[f]ew men have ever had to grow up so quickly.” (30) As soon as Nick Wasicsko became aware that the appeal to the Supreme Court was without legal merit and that the City had to comply with the judge’s order or otherwise risk bankruptcy, he also had to confront his own inability to accomplish virtually anything, which was “a function of the way the government of Yonkers worked.” (Belkin 137) Belkin observes that back in the 1980s, the mayor of Yonkers was cast in a largely ceremonial role, with no real administrative power, “a hot seat that received a lot of attention and an equal amount of blame.” (19) Like many cities in the Northeast, Yonkers adopted the city manager system – the city manager had the sole power to hire and fire, to draw up the budget and allocate the financial resources. However, the city manager was appointed – and hence could be replaced – by the members of the City Council. Consequently, as Belkin argues, “no one was ever really in charge in Yonkers.” (137) Or, as the HBO miniseries makes it obvious in its opening scene by taking the viewer directly to a City Council meeting, “in Yonkers, parties don’t matter. Whoever controls the majority of the council controls the city.”

For his decision to support the lawful desegregation of Yonkers, young mayor Nick Wasicsko had to pay with his political career and ultimately with his life. Even though “he wasn’t pro-desegregation, he was pro-compliance,” as his executive assistant pointed out at the time (Berger), Wasicsko had to confront both the strong opposition of the City government and the community’s severe reproof. As illustrated in both narrative accounts under scrutiny here, he was hooted at during public council meetings, received death threats and bullets in the mail, he had his car damaged and cat killed as retribution. Living in Texas at the time Yonkers was still fighting the court order, Lisa Belkin remembers all those “nightly reports on the national news, of the hundreds of people, chanting and screaming, faces contorted with hate.” (Belkin 11) The miniseries as well shows what appears to be a lynching crowd carrying real-life size dolls hanged by their necks bearing the names of Judge Sand and the NAACP lawyer Michael Sussman, shouting “No rest till we’ve won!” and “No rights for whites!” Nevertheless, as a young mayor “in the eye of a national hurricane,” Wasicsko evinced “a pit bull’s tenacity in the face of ferocious opposition” (Berger) which brought him a nomination for the 1991 John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award.

Aspiring to a seat in the US Senate one day, Nick Wasicsko was nothing short of ambitious. Besides the successful integration of low-income housing

projects in Yonkers, Wasicsko's name is also related to the creation of a strong-mayor system with a four-year term instead of the "largely figurehead mayoralty" which had been characteristic to the city up to the 1990s. But in spite of his accomplishments, he would fail re-election, lose his own party's support, lose opportunity to run for city judge and eventually the Democratic nomination for City Council President. Part Two in Simon and Zorzi's miniseries features a dialogue between then Mayor Nick Wasicsko and fellow Democrat Vincenza 'Vinni' Restiano which, in hindsight, prefigures Nick's fall at the end of the series. Speaking about how addictive politics is, Vinni argues that "when you're out of office is like your candle goes out. And everyone just moves on to the next candle." And then she goes on to add that "you can think some pretty dark shit when they make you walk away," which ironically makes Nick profess his entire support for Vinni in those trying times in her political career. Nonetheless, at what he perceived to be the end of *his own* political career, Nicholas Wasicsko, 34, committed suicide at the cemetery where his father was buried.

In the HBO adaptation of Belkin's account, Nick Wasicsko is played with great force and subtle nuance by Guatemalan American actor Oscar Isaac, the recipient of a Golden Globe award for his portrayal of the young mayor. His powerful performance in the television series is supported and doubled by an arguably well chosen score, consisting of Bruce Springsteen songs almost entirely, which pitch in during key moments in the plot to enhance the audience's emotional response to the story and its characters, but also as carrier of extra meaning. The film's score includes twelve songs and not only does it serve to locate the miniseries in time (through the rock-and-roll sound of the 1980s), but also ushers in new meaning about the American working-class hero in a blue-collar town. It helps deepen the exploration of issues such as the class divide in the US society and the (decline of the) American Dream.

Looking for a "musical identity" for Nick Wasicsko, director Paul Haggis and writer David Simon decided to make him "a Springsteen guy . . . This is what he listens to." (qtd. in Miller) In the creators' opinion, it is this diegetic and nondiegetic⁵ use of music that seemingly "brought the whole piece to life." (qtd. in Miller) Early into the movie, Nick Wasicsko listens to Springsteen's "Hungry Heart" over the jukebox in a restaurant and claims that "It's my theme song." Featured on the album *The River* (1980), "Hungry Heart" arguably speaks about a longing which cannot be assuaged and a 'hunger' difficult to appease, but for the occasional transient satisfactions provided by a change of scenery or a new lover, for example. It is arguably not incidentally chosen to mark Nick's "theme song," first of all because it appears to speak about the same 'hunger' which drives the character in his endeavors throughout the movie, as Nick craves recognition and struggles to remain

⁵ Sound is diegetic when its source is visible or implied in the narrative universe, for instance a dialogue between actors, police sirens, music which can be heard from a musical instrument or a sound system apparent in the movie. Sound is nondiegetic when the source is not present or implied in the movie and hence cannot be heard by the characters, for example a film's score, someone's voice-over narration, sounds added in post-production for extra effect (Moura).

in the political spotlight long after it had become obvious that his association with the desegregation effort had cost him his credibility, party support and ultimately his political career. Secondly, the song's final stanza seems to carry the message of the movie in a nutshell, when claiming that "Everybody needs a place to rest/Everybody wants to have a home/Don't make no difference what nobody says/Ain't nobody like to be alone." (Springsteen)

Other Springsteen songs which provide the movie's musical background and mark key moments in the plot and in Wasicsko's life are "Gave It a Name" (the opening of Part One), a song which presents "psychological portraits of people wrestling with relationships and their own isolation" (Springsteen qtd. in Phillips and Masur 4354⁶); "Ramrod" (Part One), as Nick and Nay soon-to-be-Wasicsko are driving together and start noticing the signs put up by people in support of Nick running for mayor; "All That Heaven Will Allow," (Part Two) when the two move in together and whose final stanza is, once again, anticipatory of the movie's tragic denouement by lamenting "Now some may wanna die young men/Young and gloriously/ Get it straight now mister." (Springsteen) The 1996 ballad "Secret Garden" accompanies Nick and Nay Wasicsko's wedding in the series (Part Four), and the haunting, dirge-like "Lift Me Up" provides the soundtrack for Nick's funeral and for the montage of scenes in the series finale (Part Six).

Parke Puterbaugh of *Rolling Stones* magazine observed that Bruce Springsteen's music "developed a conscience that didn't ignore the darkening of the runaway American Dream as the country greedily blundered its way through the 1980s." (qtd. in Womack and Zolten 2) As a self-professed "screw-up, in a small town," (Phillips and Masur 576-577) Springsteen confesses that a predominant theme in his song-writing has been "the politics of exclusion," dwelling on "old-fashioned" characters mostly interested in "being included" and in "trying to figure out what's in their way." (qt. in Kindle locations 3820-3822) The politics of exclusion that seems to guide The Boss's creative activity has always resonated with white, middle-class communities throughout the United States in fear of losing their grip on the so-called "white privilege" and what it entails: the promise of upward mobility, the freedom to buy, own, and sell property, access to better educational facilities, to name but a few aspects, all of which are investigated in both Lisa Belkin's book and Simon and Zorzi's television series.

At about the same time that the struggle to desegregate Yonkers was underway, Bruce Springsteen remarked that the American political system was "really broken down" as "[w]e've abandoned a gigantic part of the population – we've just left them for dead" and "we're gonna have to pay the piper some day." (Phillips and Masur 2891-2892) He similarly argued that American kids all over will be inheriting a "legacy of dread," growing up in "fear, mistrust, blind hatred." (Phillips and Masur 2863-2864) Even ten years later, Springsteen lamented the "distortion and corruption of the American dream" and the fall of community values which led to the decline of the entire nation (Phillips and Masur 7377-7379). During an international press conference in Paris the same year, the artist reiterated that his

⁶ As Phylis and Masur's book is in Kindle format, the number represents location and not page number.

creative work “has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American dream” (Phillips and Masur 7035-7036). This distance has never been greater than for black America and, implicitly, for the four black and Latina women portrayed in Belkin’s book and its HBO adaptation for television.

Four Life Stories

In their study published while the process to integrate Yonkers was still undergoing, Thernstrom and Thernstrom observe that practically all large urban centers in contemporary United States have “some kind of Black Belt,” namely neighborhoods heavily populated by black citizens which comprise an extensive number of their African-American population, and conclude that the “residential separation of the races is one of the most conspicuous features of the American metropolis today.” (204) The impact of this type of separation and isolation along racial lines remains unaltered since the *Brown v. Board* decision in mid twentieth-century, argues Higginbotham, further claiming that this ghettoization limits now, as it did then, the opportunities for educational, political, and social advancement of the black population (137). Bell similarly notes that the children of African-Americans inhabiting segregated neighborhoods more often than not tend to repeat the cycle of limitations by attending the worst schools in neighborhoods rife with crime, which on the long term has a negative impact on their life choices and chances (3).

One of the great merits of Lisa Belkin’s account of the Yonkers case is that it refocuses the narrative from the legal story to the “other half” of Yonkers and highlights the everyday struggle of the people living in the public projects who would benefit from integrated housing. Mini-series co-writer William Zorzi admits that in screening *Show Me a Hero* he felt compelled by the politics of the case, and even more so by the experiences and “heroic stories – journeys, really” (Miller) of the four black and Latina women portrayed throughout Belkin’s book on a quest for a better, safer life for themselves and their children. All of these women are single mothers of different ages, either unemployed or with a strong work ethic, struggling to make ends meet, or disabled as a result of chronic disease.

Originally from Santo Domingo, Alma/Carmen Febles labors from dawn till dusk in a furniture shop to provide for her children and lives in an apartment in Schlobohm where, in order to enter the building, she has to “walk through courtyards that seemed to radiate dread and despair,” then “pull open the unlocked main door, a door whose milky Plexiglas had turned opaque from harsh detergents that never quite won the fight against the graffiti.” To reach the elevator, she “practically tiptoed through dank entryways, which were piled with garbage – old mattresses, beer cans, the detritus of so many disordered lives”, while “the smell of trash mixed with the smell of urine, which mixed with the smell of the disinfectant that failed to wash the other smells away.” (Belkin 48) In one of the scenes in the introductory part, the movie shows Alma and her children having to carry the groceries up the stairs as the elevator served as a haven for drug transactions. Belkin notes about Alma that “[i]f fate had placed her in a different life,” she would have been seen as a beautiful woman, with “dark black hair that fell in perfect rings around her caramel-colored face, accenting her dramatic, magnetic brown eyes.”

However, the hardships in her life “had dimmed all hope from those eyes, and left them puffy and red.” (Belkin 46)

Former personal care assistant Norma O’Neal is almost blind because of diabetes and finds it extremely difficult to receive a health aide because of her residence in the Schlobohm projects. As Belkin notes, the notoriety of the neighborhood made it complicated “to find someone to come at night near Schlobohm, a fact that Norma knew well. Most pizza places don’t deliver to the neighborhood. Taxis say they’ll come, then they never show.” (Belkin 53) Although her son makes repeated calls to the local authority in charge with providing care to the disabled, nobody comes, which makes Norma conclude that he “should have asked [them] to send a Jamaican health aide” as “those old Jamaicans don’t scare.” Eventually, at her son’s perseverance, Norma manages to have an aide come over her apartment in the projects, but the movie makes it a point that the latter will not be probably coming back after the tense moment when she has to share a cramped elevator with four towering young African-Americans who carried a stereo blasting rap music. In spite of her crippling disability and difficulty in receiving due help, Norma initially appears reluctant to move in a “white folk” neighborhood. This proves that for her at least, the challenges of living blind in a walk-up in Schlobohm were overshadowed by having to reside in a neighborhood “where people were angry at you” and by having to confront what Thomas Sugrue identified as the “deep-seated fears of white homeowners who dreaded Black encroachment on their turf.” (qtd. in Bell 4)

In contrast with Alma and Norma, at nineteen Billie Rowan is described as a “teenage whirlwind, partial to cornrows, colorful African print scarves, and glittery costume jewelry,” who was “happiest when she jangled and sparkled, and it was her goal in life to find a way to be forever happy.” (Belkin 104) However, she falls in love with a repeat offender, gives birth twice and undergoes an abortion, being forced to raise the children by herself while waiting for the children’s father to return from jail, twice. She will eventually lose her home in the new housing project after failing to register her partner as resident, and be forced back to Schlobohm.

Unlike the three other women, twenty-one year old Doreen James/Henderson is not running away from Schlobohm, but trying to move in, in order to be with her sister and their friends. Not unlike Billie, Doreen soon has a child with a drug dealer who dies of asthma and she too has to raise the child alone, while also battling drug abuse herself. Nevertheless, once removed from the toxic environment in Schlobohm, Doreen overcomes her addiction and becomes politically involved, first as a candidate for tenant council of public housing at Schlobohm and eventually as president of tenant association in the new development projects under Mary Dorman’s guidance.

As a result of the city-organized lottery, all these women will eventually become residents of the new housing units in Yonkers. Designed by architect Oscar Newman, the “nationally renowned guru of low-income, low-density housing,” (McGowan 26) to fit the single-family row houses in the neighborhoods where they were placed, the new units would represent a great departure from the multi-family packed high-rises in public housing projects (Bell 148). Contending that when it comes to public housing “bigger is badder,” Newman revolutionized public housing

planning with his “defensible space” theory which restructured the “physical layout of communities to allow residents to control the areas around their homes,” including the “streets and grounds outside their buildings and the lobbies and corridors within them.” (Newman 9) In opposition to the large, unattended and unassigned common spaces in public housing projects, “defensible space” programs for low-income families such as the Yonkers development depend mainly on resident involvement to guard their own turf against crime and the presence of criminals and thus “can provide an introduction to the benefits of mainstream life and an opportunity to see how their own actions can better the world around them and lead to upward mobility.” (Newman 9) In support of Newman’s planning efforts and referencing a variety of studies, De Souza Briggs et al. observe that the “advocates for the ‘seeding’ of poor households into nonpoor areas have asserted numerous benefits, including access to better jobs and schools, reduced fear of crime, greater residential satisfaction among the poor, and enrichment of the lives of (primarily) white, middle-class residents in the receiving neighborhoods through exposure to more diverse population.” (27)

The highly contested relocation of black residents from the marginal low-income neighborhoods into the all-white middle-class part of Yonkers was not without its challenges. As Bell argues, acts of violence against racial or ethnic minorities moving into white neighborhoods might seem a residue of a bygone era in American history, but in fact they are not uncommon in contemporary United States (1). In fact, the so-called “move-in-violence” or “anti-integrationist violence” (Bell 4) is still rather prevalent. Such acts of aggression and intimidation accompanied the integration process in Yonkers as well: some of the newly built housing units were initially vandalized and had racial slurs painted on their walls; a pipe bomb even went off one night as a warning. The final part in the miniseries shows the four women being afraid in their new houses, startled by noises and cars driving past, double-checking their doors, sleeping with their lights on and knives under the pillow (Doreen), even rushing out in the middle of the night to take the kids back to their grandmother in Schlobohm (Billie).

However, in spite of both parties’ worst expectations, former chief of police Bob Olson observed that “the doomsday scenario never materialized.” (Newman 102) Along the same lines, the director of the Yonkers Housing Authority stated that not only “none of the anticipated nasty things happened,” but “the whole thing [was] a resounding success.” (Newman 104) As Oscar Newman showed in his study on Yonkers, there was no transfer of crime from the poor, segregated projects in the Southwest to the integrated scattered-site housing, no collapse in real estate prices and no white, middle-class exodus. On the contrary, it was shown that for the group of people who moved in the new integrated projects, there was “lower prevalence of depression symptoms, problem drinking, marijuana use, and experience of violent or traumatic events compared with those who stayed in the segregated Yonkers public housing neighborhoods.” (Acevedo-Garcia and Osypuk 211)

On the other hand, Lisa Belkin expressed her regret that the apparent successful integration in Yonkers failed to trigger a wave of similar suits across the country. More than twenty years after the first residents moved into the integrated projects in 1992, Belkin found herself on the same streets in Yonkers with the HBO

production crew, which allowed for the bitter realization that although “the lesson of Yonkers would be that proximity can make neighbors out of strangers and bridge racial gaps one street at a time,” (Belkin “Painful Lessons”) it did not happen. So high was the cost of victory, Belkin concludes, that “few in the country had the will to risk another divisive, ugly municipal bruising any time soon.” (Belkin “Painful Lessons”)

Conclusion

In June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States acknowledged that “[m]uch progress remains to be made in our Nation’s continuing struggle against racial isolation”, while also pleading for a “historic commitment to creating an integrated society,” (Justice Kennedy qtd. in Semuels) thus restating yet again that policies meant to relegate minorities to poorer areas violate the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The timing of Simon and Zorzi’s cinematic adaptation of Lisa Belkin’s account of housing desegregation in upstate New York could not have been more relevant. In the case of Yonkers, this so-called “court-concocted experiment in social history” (Belkin 15) which in time came to “stand for everything: Race. Class. Neighborhood. The American Dream,” (Belkin 20) had a positive denouement for all parties involved with the exception of the young mayor who oversaw its attainment. Lisa Belkin’s *Show Me a Hero* was written at a time when reporters in the national media would compare Yonkers to cities like Selma and Montgomery and the ongoing struggle to desegregate Yonkers to the integration effort in Little Rock’s Central High School in Arkansas (Belkin 72). While filming for its adaptation for television, there was tension in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and the Black Lives Matter movement was coming into being. Which proves that indeed, as Belkin observed, “the lessons of Yonkers are not just history, but prologue, not a discrete chapter, but a part of a continuum, with lessons that resonate through the decades.” (Belkin qtd. in Easton)

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