

A HISTORY OF

ANTI-BLACK RACISM

ON LONG ISLAND



ILANA LUTHER

I'd like to give credit to Newsday and ERASE Racism, whose reporting and investigations informed much of my research.

For the purposes of this project, I am limiting my discussion to Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

I also want to give credit to the diligent and powerful work of Black activists around Long Island and NYC and encourage readers to follow and donate to the organizations listed in this zine. All money from the purchase of this zine will go to the No New Jails NYC, a group working to disinvest from policing and incarceration.

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HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Long Island is a region with an extraordinarily heinous and public history of racism. De facto segregation and racial disparities in housing, education, healthcare, criminal justice, and income are coded into the DNA of the region, manufactured and maintained by discriminatory laws, policies, attitudes, and systems.

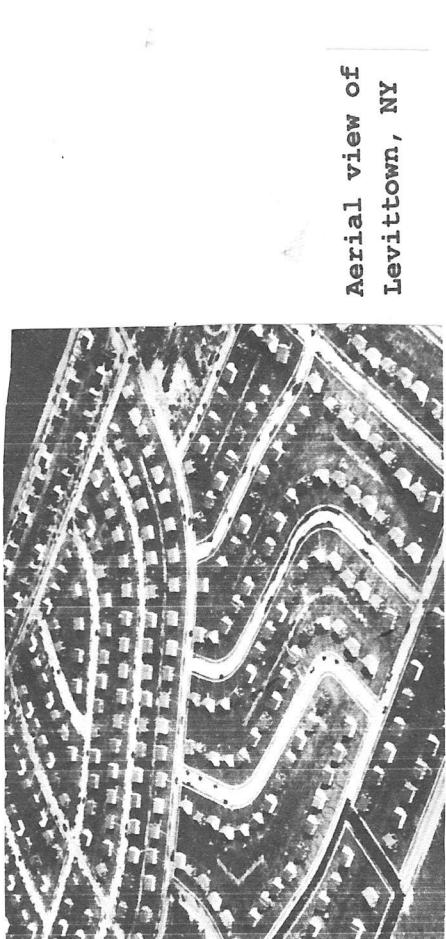
Long Island sits on stolen Canarsie, Rockaway, Matinecock, Merrick, Massapequa, Nissequogue, Secatoag, Seatauket, Patchoag, Corchaug, Shinnecock, Manhasset and Montauk land claimed by European settlers in the 17th century. From the outset of European contact, forced removal, genocide, and cultural erasure were implemented at the behest of Dutch and English colonizers.

The first significant presence of Black communities on Long Island began with trans-Atlantic slavery. By 1698, there were more enslaved people in New York than any colony north of Maryland and almost half were located on Long Island. The vicious and ubiquitous institution of slavery baked racism and intolerance into the fabric of the social, political, and legal systems that maintained in place after the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827.

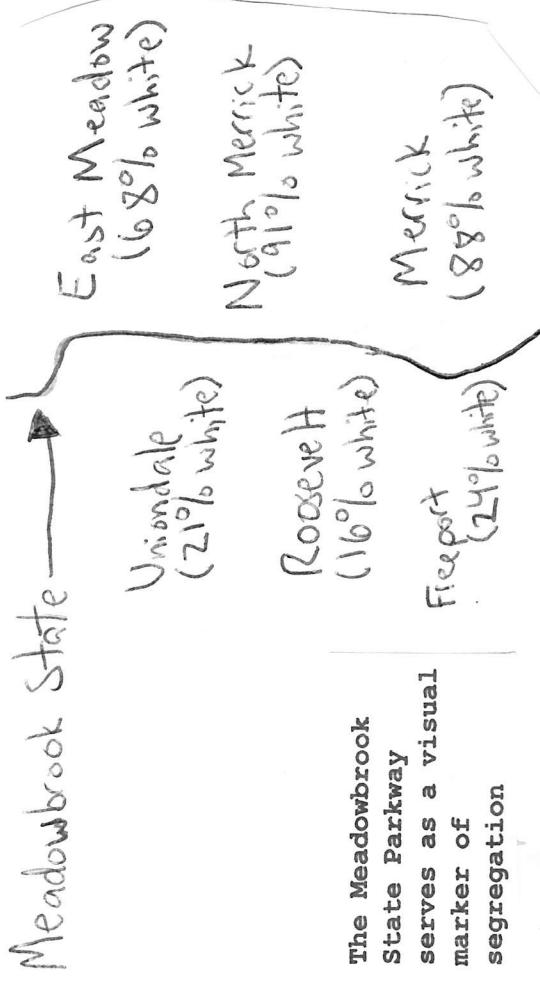
SEGREGATION OVERVIEW

In the 1800s, Long Island was largely rural and agricultural. By the end of the century, wealthy white industrialists from New York City moved eastward and established grand estates across the North Shore of the Island, earning Long Island its reputation as a playground for New York's elite.

There are 291 communities across Long Island today. More than half of Long Island's Black population lives in just 11. The area remains one of the 10 most segregated metro regions in the country, a statistic that will not come as a surprise to residents. Stark racial divides across towns and school districts are alarming, often designated by visible markers.



Aerial view of
Levittown, NY



In the early 20th century widespread suburbanization began and the population skyrocketed post-World War II. In the 50s-70s, two converging phenomena contributed to a second population boom: the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban Northeast, and white flight of white middle-class NYC communities seeking racially homogenous suburban life. As LI's population grew, residential segregation was rigidly maintained through violent and deliberate policies, the echoes of which reverberate today.

Long Island is segregated along race more than income. Black and Latinx families, regardless of income, experience high levels of racial segregation. The 2005-2009 American Community Survey data shows that on Long Island, the average affluent Black or Hispanic household lives in a poorer neighborhood than the average low-income white resident.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

Barriers to integration are often more insidious and shrouded in bureaucracy than the visual marker of a road. Many of the obstacles are ingrained in generations-long discriminatory housing practices including exclusionary zoning regulations, mortgage redlining, racial steering, restrictive covenants, blockbusting and egregious tax codes.

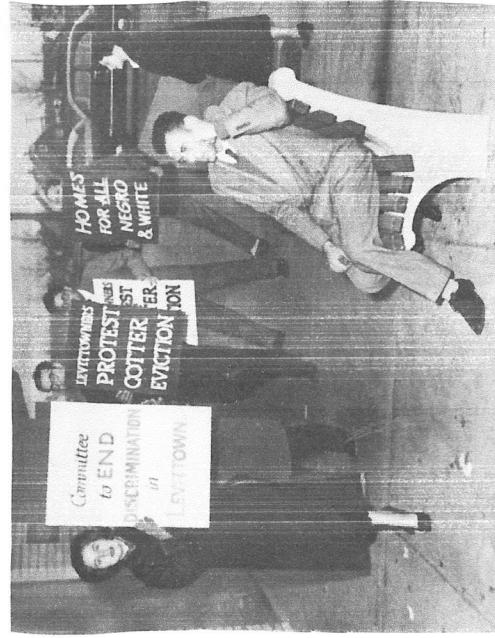
After World War II, the GI Bill was implemented to provide benefits to veterans including low mortgage rates, low-interest loans, and educational funds. The effects of these benefits were asymmetric across racial lines: "In the New York and northern New Jersey suburbs 67,000 mortgages were insured by the G.I. Bill, but fewer than 100 were taken out by non-whites" (Katznelson, 2006).



1.2 million Black soldiers served in WWII but the benefits provided by the GI Bill were largely denied to them

National assistance for homeownership also unfairly benefitted white residents: "between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion in home loans; over 98% went to whites" (ERASE Racism, 2019).

Black homeownership was also thwarted by the development of private housing communities. Levittown, Long Island, a planned community that would serve as a blueprint for nationwide suburban development, restricted residence to white people for decades. Today, Levittown remains less than 1% Black.



1953 march for integration in Levittown

Other suburban planning initiatives were designed to preserve the communities' whiteness. Urban Planner Robert Moses designed the bridges on the Southern State Parkway to be too low for buses to pass under, so POC and low-income communities from NYC could not be bussed onto Long Island.

There were also less explicit obstacles to racial integration. Housing discrimination has been a long-lasting and ubiquitous practice for generations. Segregationist housing policies are a well-documented and widespread contemporary real estate practice, with roots in the restrictive policies enacted when suburban communities were being planned. Here are some major ones:

redlining: government policy of creating color-coded maps to tell banks where they could give out housing loans. Black neighborhoods were deemed "red" (risky for loans) regardless of income

racial steering: realtors point white clients to housing in white towns, and Black clients to Black towns

exclusionary zoning: land-use regulations restricted what buildings could be built where. This practice favored single-family homes at the expense of public housing and drove up housing prices

blockbusting: convincing white homeowners to sell their property out of fear of declining property values from a growing POC population. Realtors could then resell the properties at higher values.

These practices were made illegal by the Fair Housing Act of 1968, but continue to happen all the time.

- In Valdez v. Town of Brookhaven, Latino residents challenged the Town of Brookhaven's aggressive code enforcement policies, which disproportionately led to the displacement of Latino households. The parties agreed to a settlement that provided relief to the Latino residents
- In 2014, ERASE Racism filed a federal housing complaint against Nassau County for "failure to enforce federal civil rights requirements" and discriminatory zoning
- In 2015, a federal lawsuit was filed against an apartment complex in Commack for "discourag[ing] African Americans from renting apartments by misrepresenting the availability of apartments, not showing available apartments, and/or misrepresenting the dates apartments were available to rent"
- In 2018, the Village of Garden City was ordered to pay a settlement of \$5.3 million for "act[ing] with discriminatory intent' by rezoning publicly owned land to prevent construction of affordable housing"
- In 2019 Nassau County settled a housing discrimination case for \$5.4 million that alleged the county had steered affordable housing into minority communities

EDUCATION

Long Island: Divided, a three-year investigation by Newsday, uncovered unequal treatment by real estate agents on Long Island. The journalists paired white, Black, Latinx, and Asian testers with real estate agents and recorded the responses and outcomes. They found that "Black testers experienced disparate treatment 49 percent of the time - compared with 39 percent for Hispanic and 19 percent for Asian testers."

Long Island's racially and economically segregated school districts reflect housing segregation patterns. According to ERASE Racism, "between 2004-2016, the number of intensely segregated school districts (90-100% non-white) more than doubled. Students attending those segregated schools more than tripled." While de jure school segregation has been illegal since *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision in 1954, de facto segregation has continued to flourish.

Real estate agents encouraged Black testers to move to Black neighborhoods but implied the presence of gang violence there to white testers. Some put POC testers under higher financial scrutiny than white testers. Agents also regularly produced different listings and pointed testers towards different towns even when testers had similar incomes or criteria.

Black and Latinx kids are frequently barred from access to high-performing schools. Only 3% of Black students and 5% of Hispanic students have access to the highest performing schools in the region. In addition, 91% of students in high-need districts are Black or Latinx, a result of an imbalanced public school system enforced by poor public funding.

Within schools, Black students are disproportionately targeted for punishment and face greater repercussions for the same behavior. In Nassau County, Black students represented only 11% of enrollment but were 35% of the students suspended. In Suffolk County, Black students represented 8% of enrollment but represented 24% of the students suspended.

Racial segregation on Long Island is not a chance outcome or a result of individuals apolitically deciding where to live. Rather, it is a direct and deliberate effect of long-standing harmful social and political practices.

Racial disparities in school populations and discipline tactics are widespread across the Island and pose significant barriers to academic success for Black and Latinx students.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

In January 2020, two teen boys from Roosevelt were arrested, beaten, and held for hours by Nassau County police after being accused of being gang members.

76% of jailed people in Nassau County and 64% in Suffolk County are legally innocent pre-trial detainees awaiting bail. Nassau spends more on jails than it does on education, and Suffolk spends more than it does on healthcare.

POC residents are five times more likely to get arrested than white residents. They also face higher charges for identical crimes. POC are also more likely to face felony charges and jail time than white arrestees, who are more commonly charged with misdemeanors or offered rehab programs. Two-thirds of all felony drug possession charges on Long Island involve POC.

Police on Long Island regularly focus on "crime hot spots": street corners, open spaces, and buildings located in predominantly Black and Latinx areas. Arrests can be made based on "reasonable suspicion," which often serves as a blank check to overpolice POC neighborhoods and opens the door for brutal racial targeting.

Police brutality remains a heinous reminder of institutionalized violence against Long Island's Black communities.

In February 2020, Nassau County Police officers shot and killed 19 year old Matthew Felix in Queens.

In December 2018, Akbar Rogers of Freeport was tackled and beaten by seven white Village of Freeport police officers, on camera. One of the officers was the mayor's son. While the case is under investigation, none of the officers have yet faced consequences.



Akbar Rogers, center, at protest against police brutality in Freeport in 2019.

Racial bias also hinders legal justice for Black victims. In 1992 William Ford, a 24-year-old Black teacher from Central Islip, was shot and killed by a white auto body shop employee. An all-white jury indicted his killer, who claimed "self-defense." In 2007, William's brother Yance directed an Oscar-nominated documentary of the murder, called *Strong Island*.

PUBLIC HEALTH

CONCLUSION

Factors including poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and exposure to pollution (all tied to structural and environmental racism in the American healthcare system) contribute to poorer health outcomes in POC communities across Long Island. Healthcare infrastructure in Black and Latinx neighborhoods is heavily underfunded.

Long Island's segregation and violent racism is not random, but rather a deliberate outcome of an extraordinarily well-oiled machine of political mechanisms and social structures. Combating institutional racism and discrimination requires investigating and overhauling our current housing, education, criminal justice, public health systems. To create an equitable Long Island, we need to participate and invest in community initiatives spearheaded by Long Island's Black residents and continue to engage with local grassroots organizing efforts.

Additionally, the brunt of COVID-19 fatalities is faced by Black Long Islanders, who make up 12% of Nassau and 8% of Suffolk, but 19% and 11% of COVID deaths in those respective counties. Towns with large Black populations also tend to have higher infection rates per capita. Barriers such as underfunded medical infrastructure, inadequate access to healthcare, and being more likely to work essential jobs that disproportionately place POC at a greater risk of developing underlying conditions contribute to the staggering racial disparities of COVID perils faced by POC and low-income communities.

READING LIST

ORGANIZATIONS TO FOLLOW

- "#FreeNewYork: New York's Jails by the Numbers," JustLeadershipUSA
- "Civil Rights Tracker," ERASE Racism
- "Exclusionary Zoning Continues Racial Segregation's Ugly Work," by Kimberly Quick for The Century Foundation
- "Heading in the Wrong Direction: Growing School Segregation on Long Island," ERASE Racism
- "Housing and Neighborhood Preferences of African Americans on Long Island," ERASE Racism
- "Housing Discrimination and Local Control," by Elaine Gross for NYU Furman Center
- "How Redlining Shaped Black America as We Know It" (the Root)
- "How the GI Bill's Promise Was Denied to a Million Black WWII Veterans," Erin Blakemore for History.com
- "The Jim Crow South? No, Long Island Today," New York Times
- "Long Island: Divided," Ann Choi, Keith Herbert, Olivia Winslow and project editor Arthur Browne for Newsday
- "Strong Island," documentary available on Netflix
- "Unequal Justice," Ann Choi and Thomas Maier for Newsday

- Black Lives Matter Greater NY: NY BLM chapter
- Brooklyn Community Bail Fund: pays bail for pre-trial NYers
- Cooperation Long Island: mutual aid collective
- ERASE Racism NY: public advocacy and research
- Long Island Black Alliance: works to improve the lives of the Black community on LI
- Make the Road NY: immigrant-led activist org
- NAACP Chapters: Brookhaven, Central LI (Amityville), Eastern LI (Southampton), Freeport/Roosevelt, Hempstead, Huntington, Islip Town, Lakeview, North Shore/Great Neck, Westbury
- New Hour for Women and Girls: supports incarcerated women
- New York Communities for Change: builds grassroots political power with low-income POC communities
- Shades of Long Island: media outlet
- reporting on communities of color on LI
- Okra Project: addresses challenges facing Black trans people
- Various Mutual Aid Networks: Nassau County DSA, Community Solidarity, Long Island Jobs with Justice, Four Directions (GoFundMe), Shinnecock Nation Relief Fund (GoFundMe)

BLACK-OWNED BUSINESSES

- The Fish Trap (Baldwin)
- Dunn's River Lounge (Rockville Centre)
- Bayview Kitchen (Amityville)
- Butler's Cafe (Hempstead)
- Bobby Q's (Freeport)
- Benny B's (Baldwin)
- Island Soul (West Hempstead)
- Rock and Come In (Baldwin)
- Real Veggie Cafe (Island Park)
- Swirl Bliss Yogurt (Baldwin)
- Mobay Breeze (Huntington)
- The Sweet Love Company (Westbury)
- Backyard Barbecue (Freeport)
- Island Jerk (North Babylon)
- Sweet 'N' Savory (Port Jefferson)
- The Coalhouse Grill (Baldwin)
- Spices Negril (South Hempstead)
- Bygood Coffee (Oceanside)
- The Cheesecake Spot (Garden City)
- Gingerbites Cuisine (Huntington Station)
- Hush Restaurant and Lounge (Elmont)

credit to @kumeda.design on instagram!

POLITICAL ACTION

- Working within the current political system won't address the root causes of the issues, but is an important first step: learn about the candidates and bills to support
Vote for Melanie D'Arrigo in the June 23 primary:
 - NY's 3rd Congressional District: North Shore from Queens to western Suffolk
 - Grassroots activist who supports Medicare for All, Green New Deal, ending private prisons and cash bail
- Vote for Skyler Johnson in the June 23 primary:
 - NY State Senate District 1: eastern LI
 - Black Jewish community organizer who supports rent cancellations during COVID-19, criminal justice overhaul
- Repeal 50-A:
 - NY law that deems personnel records of police confidential: hides police misconduct
 - Text 50A to 50409 to write to your reps
- Go to protests:
 - Follow instagram accounts @justiceforgoerge_Longisland and @justiceforgoergeorgeli for info on protests
- Ask your reps to defund the police!

