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Untenable: The True Story of White Ethnic Flight from America's Cities

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In 1999, Anthony Imperiale died at age sixty-eight of natural causes. In this regard, he fared better than Meir Kahane, who was assassinated in 1990. Imperiale suffered only character assassination. In the opening sentence of its nuance-free obituary, the New York Times described Imperiale as “a race-baiting civic leader and politician from Newark who became a national symbol of the backlash against urban unrest.”¹⁹⁴ By 1999, Baraka’s long history of racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and homophobia had either been romanticized or forgotten. In August 2002, caught up in the romance, Democratic Gov. Jim McGreevey appointed Baraka New Jersey state poet laureate. A month later, Baraka rewarded McGreevey by reading his poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” on the first anniversary of 9/11. The money line, “Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers/ to stay away from home that day,” cost Baraka his new gig and clouded the rest of his career. It would have pained Baraka to know that the Times used the same key word in the headline of his 2014 obituary as it had in Imperiale’s obit fifteen years prior. That word was “polarizing.” By 2014, there were no more opposing poles in Newark. If proof were needed, four months after Baraka’s death, his son Ras Baraka was elected mayor. Two years before Baraka’s death, Whitney Houston died. Although her parents left Newark for the suburbs in 1970, Whitney could not escape the culture. It caught up with her in a Los Angeles hotel room bathtub where she drowned “due to the effects of atherosclerotic heart disease and cocaine use.” In her honor, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie had statehouse flags flown at half-mast. Supporters pressured Cissy Houston to stage a memorial service at a downtown arena for her “national treasure” of a daughter. But the deeply Christian Cissy insisted on a funeral for “Nippy” at the New Hope Baptist Church, about a mile from my old home on Myrtle Avenue. “I shared my daughter with the public long enough,” said Cissy. “Nippy is coming home!”¹⁹⁵

Note:
