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"I Had Not Seen
Women like That Before”:
Intergenerational Feminism in
New York City’s
Tenant Movement

Roberta Gold

With the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many young feminists went looking for a “usable past” of women’s achievement. In New York City, they did not have to look far. New York’s tenant councils had, for decades, operated under predominantly female leadership. And in the late 1960s, these organizations supported a new wave of squatter campaigns aimed at relieving the city’s shortage of affordable housing. As young activists rallied to support the squats, they encountered the senior generation of female leaders who directed local and citywide tenant groups. These older women became political mentors to the young volunteers, providing them not only with expertise on housing but also with a model of “actually existing feminism.”1

This article argues that the tenant struggles of the 1960s and 1970s amplified the women’s liberation movement in New York by linking young feminists with the Old Left generation of female housing organizers. Tenant campaigns served as a parallel space, alongside other political movements, in which women’s leadership could and did flourish. The tenant story adds to our understanding of Second Wave feminism by revealing a set of affectionate mentoring relations between two generations of radical female activists, thereby challenging many narratives of feminist politicization that focus primarily on young women’s rejection of

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387
what came before, be it postwar domesticity, liberal feminism, or New Left sexism.²

The senior tenant leaders were not entirely anomalous. Recent scholarship has identified a cohort of unsung organizers of the mid-twentieth century, people who kept the Popular Front flame from dying out during the cold war and passed it along to activists who ignited the political upheavals of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.³ But although tenant history extends these narratives, it also departs from them, particularly with regard to what might be called “political intentionality.” In most stories of cold war connections, the struggles young people took up were the very struggles the senior cohort had intended to foster. That is, postwar civil rights activists paved the way for subsequent civil rights campaigns, cold war feminist strategies informed Second Wave feminism, and so forth. In New York’s tenant arena, by contrast, senior organizers did not set out in a programmatic way to advance one of the major developments—women’s power—that would inspire their young recruits. Instead, they were concerned with housing—both a universal need and, ironically, an entity located in the “domestic sphere” of conventional gender ideology. But their work nonetheless presented a model of “on-the-ground” women’s activism, which complemented the more self-conscious women’s liberation movement that exploded on the U.S. political stage just as the squatter actions caught fire. Thus, older tenant leaders’ contribution to Second Wave feminism was largely an unintended consequence of their work on the front lines of struggle over tenant rights versus property rights.

The older tenant organizers had picked up a torch, or at least an ember, from the working-class and antiracist tradition that Dorothy Sue Cobble has dubbed “labor feminism.”⁴ Many of these organizers had been active in Left-wing unions during the 1940s, and as mid-century tenant leaders they had continued to place poor people’s needs, along with New York’s pioneering antidiscrimination laws and ghetto housing struggles, at the top of their agenda. The squatter actions of the 1970s carried on these traditions: the movement was genuinely multiracial, and squatter families were virtually all poor.

Such demographics created another contrast between the squatter campaigns and more typical women’s politics, often characterized by a
mutually frustrating split between predominantly white, middle-class feminists, on the one hand, and minority and working-class feminists, on the other. The parallel space of New York’s squatter movement offered local feminists an alternative to such political fragmentation. Here, young activists not only inherited a set of older, class-conscious feminist mentors, they also came into a field of organizing that centered on low-income, racially diverse participants. And their demand for renters’ rights challenged one of postwar America’s most powerful class and racial stratifying mechanisms: the real estate industry.5 Squatter struggles thus became both a training ground in which Popular Front veterans nurtured the next generation of activists and a venue in which these activists pursued a remarkably integrated vision of class, racial, and gender justice.

The Postwar Tenant Movement
Many tenant leaders of the early 1960s had been schooled in the Popular Front struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. During those years, tenant organizing was closely connected to a dense network of labor unions and leftist political formations, especially the Communist Party (CP) and, in New York City, the American Labor Party (ALP). Although tenant associations did not usually establish formal ties with these larger groups, they often shared cadre and political agendas.

The basic units of tenant organization were local ones: building and neighborhood councils, which thrived especially in highly politicized areas such as the Lower East Side and Harlem. These groups, often led by women, mobilized rent strikes and staffed “rent clinics” where knowledgeable volunteers helped individual tenants assert their legal rights. Such activities meshed with the work of the larger Left. Communists, for example, regularly provided street muscle to forestall evictions during the Depression, and ALP veterans staffed many 1940s rent clinics.6 In the formal political arena as well, early postwar tenant groups joined labor, liberal, and leftist organizations to lobby for three critical policies: rent control, public housing, and building code enforcement.

The 1950s brought a new threat to city residents: “urban renewal.” This federally subsidized program was billed as an answer to tenant and leftist groups’ longstanding call for “slum clearance,” that is, the develop-
ment of affordable modern housing in lieu of decrepit tenements. But due to both conservative provisions in the 1949 federal statute and the machinations of New York's public works czar, Robert Moses, "urban renewal" projects in New York did nothing to improve poor people's housing. Instead, they led to the demolition of many working-class neighborhoods; the dislocation of 500,000 New Yorkers; and the replacement of their low-rent homes with highways, middle-income housing, and elite cultural facilities such as Lincoln Center. Moses's wreckers showed a special penchant for razing black and integrated areas, prompting critics to dub the program "Negro removal." Tenants' power to resist these projects was limited, as urban renewal advocates successfully promoted redevelopment as "progress," and McCarthyite politics decimated the city's leftist unions and parties.7

But ultimately the wave of urban renewal evictions galvanized the city's tenant movement. By the late 1950s, local organizers, mainly women, were rallying residents against urban renewal in several neighborhoods. These organizers began meeting to plan strategy, and in 1959 they formally constituted themselves as a citywide coalition, the Metropolitan Council on Housing ("Met Council" for short). Met Council leaders would play a critical role in supporting the squatter actions that broke out in 1970.

**Practical Feminism**

At first Met Council's founders took turns leading meetings, but soon they chose a chair, Jane Benedict. A child of liberal German Jews, she had studied English at Cornell, joined the Book and Magazine Guild, and there fallen in with a crowd of idealistic Depression-era Communists, the most dashing of whom she married. Through the 1940s she held leadership positions in her union. Then she stepped down to care for her two young children but began volunteering with the local ALP club to keep one foot in politics. Making the party rounds in blue-collar Yorkville, toddlers in tow, Benedict learned firsthand about the conditions—heatless apartments, shared toilets—in New York's tenement housing.8

But something worse was in store for Benedict's neighbors. In the mid-1950s, local tenants started "coming into the ALP saying, 'Oh my God, the landlord says he's going to tear the house down.'" Urban
renewal had arrived in Yorkville. With thousands of local people facing eviction, Benedict organized the Yorkville Save Our Homes Committee to resist the wrecking ball.9

A few miles downtown, tenants were also girding for a fight. The Lower East Side was a leftist stronghold—a working-class, integrated, largely immigrant neighborhood where international and homegrown traditions of struggle enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Frances Goldin had moved there from Queens in 1944, and she “felt like [she] had moved into heaven.” A daughter of Russian Jews, Goldin had befriended Communists at her shipping job, joined the party, and studied Marx at the CP’s Jefferson School. “And I was hot to trot. I was going to have socialism in my time.”

After marrying a comrade and setting up housekeeping in Manhattan, Goldin visited the Lower East Side Tenant and Consumer Council (which shared offices with the local ALP) to check on the legality of her rent. The volunteers asked her to help with other cases, and Goldin became a respected tenant organizer.10

Goldin worked alongside Esther Rand, another downtown Communist whose passion, legal brilliance, and ornery disposition became legendary in housing circles. “Oh, could she be nasty!” recalled Benedict. “But she was the spirit of that East Side branch.” A housing judge once chided a landlord’s attorney, who had disputed Rand’s knowledge of housing statutes, by declaring, “If Esther Rand says that’s the law, that’s the law!”

In the late 1950s, Goldin and Rand led the charge against an urban renewal proposal to raze six blocks of the Lower East Side’s Cooper Square and replace them with a middle-income housing development. Organizers formed a committee; invited broad participation by residents and business owners; and, with guidance from a maverick city planner, hashed out an alternative redevelopment plan that promised to re-house all original residents in sound but affordable units on the site.12

Goldin and Rand helped found Met Council.13 At the nascent coalition’s meetings they were joined by yet another Old Left veteran, Chelsea organizer Jane Wood. Wood was a St. Louis native and Smith graduate who had moved to New York in 1930 and joined the ALP.14 Going door to door for the party in the 1940s, the young volunteer found dismal condi-
tions in local tenements and began talking with people about housing. Her college Spanish helped her forge especially close ties with the many Latinos settling in Chelsea. An activist neighbor later recalled, “We in the Latino community felt she was one of us.” Quietly and tenaciously, Wood built a neighborhood tenant network.15

Benedict, Goldin, Rand, and Wood formed the core of leadership that would guide Met Council through its first decade and beyond. All veteran Communists or “fellow travelers,” they imparted to the organization a belief in grassroots struggle and a critical view of the capitalist housing industry. Rand’s signature saying was, “Landlords are not the lords of the land; they are the scum of the earth.” They also brought to Met Council a creed that was less fully developed in the Marxian tradition, something that might be called “practical feminism.” Battling landlords in city courtrooms and leading demonstrations in the streets, these women did not conform to the domestic model of femininity promoted by cold war pundits. Although the object of their struggles—people’s homes—might count as “women’s sphere,” the terrain on which they fought lay squarely in the political arena. These women did not take up feminism explicitly, or as their primary political affiliation. But none of them doubted their fitness to take action in the “man’s world” of politics.

How had they arrived at this unorthodox sense of capability? All adventurous as young adults, they had found unusually fertile soil for their activist impulses in the world of leftist politics. The CP was no paragon of sex equality, but it did devote theoretical attention to “the woman question” and fostered a practical arena for women’s political activism. Historian Ellen Schrecker suggests that women in the party’s orbit “constituted a kind of missing generation within American feminism.” Moreover, most of the core Met Council women had been ushered into masculine arenas of work or union leadership as a result of the “manpower shortage” during World War II. In a sense they belonged to the larger saga of Rosie the Riveter. But unlike the many Rosies who were fired in 1945, these leftist women maintained their political trajectory through the cold war—as housing organizers.16
COMMUNITY AND ITS CONTENTS
During the 1960s, New Yorkers mounted a series of new tenant and community struggles that partook of nationwide radical movements but also reflected New York's unique tenant history and resilient Old Left. Two such struggles in particular presaged the squatter movement.

The first unfolded uptown in response to yet another bulldozer plan, this one for Morningside Heights. Here, however, the tenants' chief antagonist was not city government but a consortium of educational, medical, and religious institutions led by Columbia University, which had for years been buying up and converting local properties. In 1961, tenants in seven buildings on Morningside Drive received eviction notices, and one of them, Marie Runyon, began urging her neighbors to fight back.

At first glance an unlikely organizer for a multiracial neighborhood—she hailed from a conservative, poor, white family in North Carolina—Runyon had been "leaning" toward social change since her 1930s stint at the progressive Berea College. In 1946 she came to New York, which she loved immediately, and found a job in journalism. After a marriage, childbirth, and divorce left her in need of more income, she became assistant membership director at the American Civil Liberties Union. There she learned the skills of organizing and continued to gravitate toward the Left. Despite "strong socialist leanings," she never actually joined the CP but added, "Don't say that, because it's none of anybody's goddamned business."17 By 1961, Runyon had joined Met Council.

Now she forged a tenant-student alliance to fight "institutional expansion" throughout Morningside Heights. Through amateur sleuthing she learned that her real landlord (hidden behind a paper corporation) was Columbia University and won a court order to halt demolition. However, because Morningside Heights tenants (unlike Cooper Square activists) were fighting against private owners, they could exert little leverage, usually winning eviction delays rather than lasting victories. But as Columbia's campus Left gained steam, Runyon directed students' attention toward the university's expansionist plan to build a private gymnasium in Morningside Park, a city property that lay between the campus and Harlem.18 Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Afro-American Society escalated protests at Columbia in the spring of 1968,
denouncing the "Gym Crow" plan and scuffling with police guarding the
construction site. The protest and the media attention it garnered per-
suaded administrators to abandon the park plan and build a gym on
campus—a heartening, if largely symbolic, victory for Morningside
Heights tenants.

As local activists flexed muscle, they also advanced a creative ideology
of urban citizenship and rights. Runyon, like the Cooper Square leaders,
spoke of New York’s neighborhoods as “communities” that possessed a
moral right to secure housing. This diction challenged postwar America’s
prevailing rhetoric of “urban blight” and “slums” with a depiction of low-
income neighborhoods as vibrant, organic social formations. Runyon also
countered the postwar ideology of homeownership as the basis of citi-
zenship. At one meeting, she described her neighbors’ years in the area as “a
lot of investment, a lot of roots,” which in turn entitled them to stable
homes in Morningside Heights.19 Here tenants’ historical investment of
living together as neighbors figured as a kind of “investment” that went
deeper than owners’ outlay for land.

The second prefigurative campaign involved a series of takeovers
staged by young radicals of color. The Black Panthers and Young Lords
parties saw the urban ghettos of the United States not just as communities
but as “internal colonies” striving to liberate themselves, as Africa’s inde-
pendent nations had recently done. New York’s Black Panthers chapters
organized in 1968 and provided free breakfasts, health clinics, and support
for the burgeoning “community control” movement among parents of
schoolchildren and other public service recipients. Extending this strategy
into the sphere of housing, Black Panthers then went into crumbling
Bronx neighborhoods, where many landlords had abandoned properties
rather than pay for upkeep, and organized residents to take charge of
buildings and their maintenance. Finally, with the aid of progressive
doctors, the group raised the alarm on a little-publicized but urgent
ghetto housing problem: lead poisoning from peeling paint.20

The Young Lords Party was a kindred-spirit organization of Puerto
Rican radicals, many with experience in War on Poverty projects. In July
1969 they made their street debut with a “Garbage Offensive,” sweeping up
East Harlem’s street refuse and dumping it at a local highway entrance to
call attention to the city’s dismal sanitation service. Their subsequent “Lead Initiative” took on both officials and landlords, as party members “liberated” forty thousand lead-testing kits that the city had warehoused and took them door to door in East Harlem to publicize the poison epidemic.21

Notwithstanding their macho iconography, both the Black Panthers and Young Lords organizations in New York featured a number of women leaders who focused on housing actions. Prominent Black Panther Afeni Shakur organized tenant takeovers in neglected buildings in the Bronx, as did Cleo Silvers, a fellow party member who had begun housing work as a War on Poverty volunteer. Amid turmoil in the local Black Panthers chapter, she was “transferred” in 1970 into the Young Lords, where she joined Iris Morales, Denise Oliver, and Gloria Cruz, all strong feminists, in working on lead paint and healthcare problems.22

Casa Libre
Sound healthcare, clean streets, safe walls, and open parks: together these made up a sum of wholesome living conditions that New York’s ghetto residents, through their late 1960s protests, claimed as a basic right. But those actions did not address the linchpin of slum economics: New York City’s dearth of affordable housing. In 1970 that changed when a new breed of activists, organized squatters, embarked on the “liberation” of housing itself.

The casus belli was a new wave of evictions that reached crisis proportions in the late 1960s. As slumlords’ abandonment of ghetto housing started to garner headlines, sharp-eyed New Yorkers discerned something else below the radar: a surprising number of sound, rent-controlled buildings in New York stood vacant, notwithstanding the shortage. Far from abandoned, these properties were being deliberately emptied by their owners in preparation for luxury renovation or institutional razing. Because rent control applied only to units built before 1947, landlords could often boost their profits by wrecking older buildings and replacing them with new structures. They could also break free of rent control by converting to co-ops, which sold at handsome prices. Meanwhile they might hold apartments vacant for months or even years.
These conditions set the stage for the squatter movement that seemed to erupt suddenly in the spring of 1970. Yet the movement was not quite as spontaneous as it appeared. Although most squatters had little experience in tenant politics, they drew on the precedent of recent ghetto takeovers and on support from seasoned tenant leaders, maverick poverty warriors, and dissident city officials.

With its strong visceral appeal—putting homeless people into vacant homes made common sense—the wave of break-ins served to dramatize the dearth of low-cost rentals in New York. And where unusually militant organizing combined with exceptional proprietary circumstances, squatters could create lasting homes. Where these factors were absent, however, property rights prevailed and squatters were forced out.

On Morningside Heights the movement was jump-started by Runyon and her allies in the student Left. Runyon knew about warehousing first-hand: by the late 1960s she was the last holdout at 130 Morningside Drive. In 1968 and 1969, Runyon led protests over the hundreds of apartments she believed Columbia was holding vacant. Then she broke into a large apartment in her building to attract further publicity. Some months later, the United Bronx Parents—a militant public school alliance that was loosely linked with Cleo Silvers's Bronx tenant groups and the Black Panthers—put Runyon in touch with Juanita Kimble, an African American mother of ten whose family had been subsisting in dismal Bronx housing for years. With Runyon's orchestration, the Kimbles moved into 130 Morningside Drive in May 1970, while neighbors helped and a news crew filmed. "More important than anything else," Runyon recalled, "was that they had maybe a half a dozen kids who looked like Black Panthers. Big, tough, shades, berets. Scared the bejesus out of Columbia!" After two months, Columbia finally agreed to turn on the gas; a year later it offered Kimble a lease.

As Morningsiders courted the media, another group of homesteaders moved quietly thirty blocks downtown. The area between West 87th and 95th streets had become an urban policy battleground after vocal protests prompted officials to designate it for a "progressive" form of urban renewal in 1958. Through the late 1960s, a variety of local voices had vied for a say in the neighborhood's fate, particularly its share of low-rent
housing. Met Council’s West Side affiliates called on the city to declare receivership of deteriorated buildings rather than knock them down. But the low-rent advocates made little headway, and in the spring of 1970 some of them took matters into their own hands.24

They called it Operation Move-In. Under cover of night, organizers from a local “anti-poverty” group installed low-income families into sound but vacant buildings that the city was planning to raze. These activists were War on Poverty mavericks—people like Silvers and the other Young Lords—who had concluded that the urban poor could not win their war by following city rules. Operation Move-In’s leader, Bill Price, had ties to Met Council and knew Runyon. Asked what the tenants’ most effective organizing tool was, he responded, “a crowbar.” By summer the group had 150 families in place. Most were African American or Latino; some had been doubled up or otherwise precariously housed for years. Breaking the law, one mother of eleven explained, “was the only way our family could stay together.”25

Operation Move-In proceeded under relatively green leadership, but the network of veteran tenant organizers quickly offered support and instigated similar actions around the city. In Chelsea, Met Council founder Wood helped more than fifty Puerto Ricans settle into a vacant building on West 15th Street where luxury conversions were under way. Across town, Met Council and Cooper Square leader Goldin did the same with a multiracial group. A few blocks north, Goldin’s friend, William Worthy—a longtime radical and the New York correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American—let four families of squatters into the building where he served as tenant chair. Meanwhile, Benedict established a “We Won’t Move” committee to fight evictions, and Met Council put aspiring squatters in touch with sympathizers who could guide them toward vacancies. The old-timers’ neighborhood networks allowed them to call out troops at critical moments, and landlords became overwhelmed by block parties and community rallies supporting the squats.26

The movement also won support from networks of radical youth of color. Kimble was helped into her Morningside Heights apartment not only by Black Panthers but also by Young Lords and a cadre of high school students, one of whom fixed the lights and plumbing.27 Down in China-
town the radical Chinese American party, I Wor Kuen ("Righteous and Harmonious Fists")—an ally of the Black Panthers and Young Lords—placed squatters into vacant units that had been bought up and purged by the Bell Telephone Company.28

Squatters, Sisters, and Seniors

Squatter actions sparked particular interest among young white feminists. On the Upper West Side, a feminist collective "liberated" a storefront and set up a women's center where local squatters could "rap, exchange information on various women's issues, exchange clothing, enjoy free dinners, and meet their sisters to organize." Meanwhile, New York's underground feminist journal, Rat, devoted extensive coverage to the squatter movement and the larger housing crisis. Photos showed the banners on occupied buildings: "Territorio libre," "Hell no! We Won't Go." Editors invited readers to assist squatters, organize rent strikes, and compile a "shit-list" of negligent landlords.29

To young feminists, the move-ins were not just an object of sympathy but also a source of inspiration. Founders of the West Side Women's Center consciously followed the squatters' example of "liberating" space for the people. Similarly, a Rat reporter who interviewed Kimble argued that the black woman's ties with local militants underlined "the need that we as white women have to define a community for ourselves in which we can fight together and support each other." Kimble, a veteran of many battles with housing, school, and welfare authorities, described women's role in the struggle this way: "I just feel that a woman is more stronger . . . She can take more, she can do more, a man . . . don't have the ability to fight. . . . Women are being turned down, but we demand." The reporter quoted Kimble at length to drive home the lessons for Rat's predominantly white female readers.30

These squatter-sister interactions cast light on a subtle pattern of connection between New York's tenant history and its feminist upsurge of the early 1970s. Although women's liberation sprang from many sources, its New York incarnation drew strength from the city's unique tenant infrastructure. Local tenant groups had maintained a predominantly female leadership in the 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, they had carved out
an exceptional political space where Old Leftists could carry on their work, and women's authority was not only tolerated but seen as normal.

Then the 1960s infused new blood from the civil rights and community movements, complicating the racial, gender, and generational dynamics within the tenant struggle. Relations between the new ghetto organizers and older Met Council leaders did not take the form of simple intergenerational succession: anticolonial radicals like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords hardly saw themselves as Jane Benedict's protégés, and, if anything, they believed they could teach the older, mostly white "housers" a thing or two about making revolution. And women like Silvers and Oliver were more likely to turn to age-peer sisters than to elders for support in demanding gender parity. But the new ghetto movements nonetheless benefited from the legal and political-cultural groundwork—rent control, receivership law, broad notions of housing rights—that New York's Old Leftists had laid, and these movements in turn produced a second generation of female organizers such as Silvers, Oliver, Shakur, and Morales. Meanwhile, in slightly later multiracial tenant mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s—the redevelopment struggles on Morningside Heights and in Cooper Square, the squatter struggles in Chelsea and on the Lower East Side—young, racially diverse activists both emulated the Black Panthers and Young Lords and accepted the leadership of seasoned white women organizers such as Runyon, Wood, Goldin, and Rand.

As young women across the country sought new avenues of struggle in the early 1970s, many of New York's nascent feminists gravitated toward the tenant movement. The intensity of the city's housing crisis made tenant struggles a "natural" object of interest for politicized youth. And the multiracial character of those struggles appealed to young white feminists whose political touchstone was the civil rights movement. Indeed, the Rat's admiration for Kimble can be seen as a northern analog of the awe that young white women in the South felt toward courageous black "mamas." Runyon encouraged this identification when she called for volunteers to fix up "Ma Kimble's" apartment on Mothers' Day. One hundred students showed up.

Beyond feeling such visceral ties, young feminists discerned economic connections between housing and women's struggles. A Rat article enti-
tled "Why Housing Is a Women's Liberation Issue" argued that the city's housing shortage weighed most heavily on women, who rarely earned enough to afford decent accommodations on their own. Consequently, they were hard pressed to leave bad relationships or, if single mothers, provide shelter for their children. Through housing activism, the West Side Women's Center collective sought to forge a feminism that went beyond white, middle-class concerns.

Thus, attracted by ideals and encouraged by Rat, a new wave of young, mostly white women became involved with Met Council and its neighborhood affiliates. In turn, these Old Left strongholds provided a kind of feminist apprenticeship that touched the young recruits both emotionally and politically. Benedict, Goldin, Rand, and Wood were a unique set of exemplars. "I thought they were amazing," says Marge DuMond, who drifted into Met Council in 1971, "and I recognized them as—almost another world. . . . In the way that they would tangle with authority, and the way that they would master the ins and outs of the law, and the history, just in such a rational and bold way. I had not seen women like that before." Claudia Mansbach, another 1970s recruit, recalls, "It was very inspiring, to see these older women with gray hair. . . . [Before joining Met Council], I didn't have very many models of older women who were vital and powerful and unafraid to stand up at meetings and say what had to be said." Susan Cohen, who came into Met Council while attending graduate school in the late 1960s, echoes these thoughts: "They were wonderful role models, all of them. And they kind of showed you what could be done. In the academic setting, there I was being told that I was a bad risk because I was a woman. And nobody in housing talked about that. They just did it. Here were these women that were doing things that were making a difference."36

The pragmatic nature of the older women's modus operandi—their "just doing it"—should not obscure its feminist dimension. Unlike "maternalist" community activists of their day, New York's senior tenant women did not shy away from confrontation with gender norms. That is, they did not claim political legitimacy because they were mothers or because community-based struggles were somehow "nonpolitical." Instead, they recognized housing as a thoroughly political arena and took for granted
their fitness to do battle there. They had met the political, and she was them.

If Met Council’s old guard thought and spoke little about gender, they were more conscious of race. Indeed, nobody who had been awake through New York’s decades of fair-housing and urban renewal battles could ignore the intertwined relationship between racial justice and housing, and the older white tenant leaders had long histories of supporting civil rights. Further, Met Council’s leadership was integrated from the start. However, by the 1970s, Harlem organizer (and former Communist) Bill Stanley was the only remaining charter member of color. He and Bess Stevenson, a church-based Harlem activist who had come aboard later, were highly respected senior leaders; but neither was closely connected to the 1970 squatter organizing, most likely because Harlem was not then a site of warehousing and upscale redevelopment. Thus, the intergenerational dimension of the squatter movement unfolded largely as an instance of predominantly white older women’s mentoring a somewhat more mixed group of young organizers, who in turn worked with a diverse squatter population.

Available evidence indicates this interracial movement proceeded far more smoothly, even joyously, than did many other such efforts of the day. Tito Delgado, a young Puerto Rican Lower East Sider, tells of first coming to Met Council for help with his family’s eviction case, “and we were home.” Having stayed on as an organizer, he proudly casts himself as a political descendant of Esther Rand. Norma Aviles and many other Spanish-speaking Chelsea tenants similarly considered Jane Wood to be family. Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality director (later congressional representative) Major Owens, a black activist who cut his teeth on rent strikes with Met Council, beamed years later as he proclaimed himself “a proud bearer of the philosophical DNA of Jane Benedict.”

This interracial comity seems to reflect a pragmatic combination of “not talking about” and recognizing the centrality of race. In recounting his first meeting, Delgado emphasizes that some other white people “talked about racism, but these [Met Council] people really felt it.” That the white women lived out rather than simply articulated their solidarity appears to have been critical to Delgado’s sense of fellowship. On the other
hand, Wood famously insisted that all Chelsea tenant meetings be conducted bilingually, thereby doubling their length. Her readiness to counter calls for brevity with an articulated defense of racial inclusive-ness—that is, to talk about race—was equally critical to the fellowship she built. In a similar vein, Frances Goldin recalls deliberately recruiting a racially diverse lineup of families for the takeovers she organized and for the leadership of the Cooper Square Committee.39

Also important was the older, predominantly white cohort’s willingness to play supporting rather than leading roles in cases where people of color had taken the initiative. This happened with the Upper Manhattan squats as well as the Housing Crimes Trial described below. Delgado notes a similar dynamic within Met Council: “[The older leaders] wouldn’t preach to [the young organizers]; they would just kind of guide them and let them make their mistakes.”40

As young people took up tenant organizing, senior leaders endorsed the younger women’s feminist concerns, expressing support for abortion, welfare rights, and the women’s movement in general.41 Several young activists were recently out lesbians who would soon create one of the city’s first lesbian rights organizations, and they, too, found acceptance among older Met Council women. Benedict’s and Goldin’s own daughters came out, one of the latter using her skill as an electrician to turn on the lights in several “liberated” buildings.42

Yet, although the older women supported women’s liberation, they stood apart from the younger cohort in their “practical” style. “They were certainly feminists, all of them,” recalls Cohen. “But they lived it rather than talked about it, and studied it and analyzed it. . . . The people who were in the [feminist] support groups, I think, were a little more theoretical . . . they would read books, they would discuss them, they would talk about how to change that politically, and at some point they took action.” Goldin reflects on this subject in remarkably similar terms. One of her own models in the CP was a woman whose organizing position was challenged after World War II “because the guys came back, and they thought they would take over the leadership. And she said, ‘No, you won’t.’ So, she didn’t think of herself as a feminist, but she was a feminist. . . .” Yet Goldin stresses that she and her peers did not explicitly address the topic.
"Feminism? We were it. I mean, we didn’t strive to do [feminist] things, we just did them."43

The older women’s feet-first approach to action probably owed less to a lack of theoretical apparatus (as CP members, these women had read their share of theoretical texts) than to an ideology that cast feminism as one front in a broader struggle. Thus, when a state commission invited Met Council leaders to testify at hearings on women’s rights in 1970, the board voted “to participate to an extent to include all housing problems relating to women.” Similarly, Met Council regularly endorsed other 1960s struggles, particularly the effort to end the Vietnam War that was devastating housing funds as well as lives.44

What is the significance of this web of connections? It would be too much to say that New York’s tenant politics “drove” Second Wave feminism; after all, feminism flourished in many other towns, none of which had a tenant history on the order of New York’s, and it also clearly grew out of such nationwide antecedents as the civil rights and antiwar struggles. But New York was a leading site of early 1970s women’s liberation. It was the place where the Redstockings met; where the National Organization for Women and Ms. and the National Black Feminist Organization were based; where Stonewall erupted and the Radicalesbians took form; and where feminist mobilizations were larger and small women’s liberation groups more numerous than anywhere else. Clearly, New York’s feminist movement sprang from the city’s larger Left, but that local Left had, in turn, been sustained and reproduced in part through the city’s extraordinary infrastructure of female-led tenant organizing. In other words, feminism and housing activism had interacted in symbiotic fashion over many years. The early 1970s tenant campaigns propelled one more revolution in the symbiotic cycle, providing a reality of “on-the-ground” women’s leadership that inspired and supported the next generation of female activists.

Over time, Met Council affiliates amplified the local women’s movement by serving as a kind of parallel space, a venue for people who had developed a feminist consciousness but did not necessarily see women’s liberation as their primary political project. Although Rat supported tenant struggles, Susan Cohen believes that few people took part consis-
tently in both feminist and tenant organizing. “There just wasn’t enough time. . . . People who did the feminist stuff . . . might come out for a [housing] demonstration if you called them. But their thing, the thing they put their time into, was the feminist stuff. I wasn’t part of that. I was the person who put my time into the housing stuff.” Yet from housing Cohen reaped a markedly feminist experience. “My [other women] friends, who became interested in radical politics, they went to all their meetings and stuff, and . . . [they said] everything was very equal, except they always got to get the coffee. . . . And they would say [of the male radicals], ‘Underneath it, they’re all sexist.’ And they would complain. With [housing], it did not happen that way, I have to tell you. We did not have that problem.”

Our Neighborhoods, Our Buildings
As they amplified feminism, veteran tenant radicals also informed the squatter movement’s class and racial ideology. Squatters and organizers expressed a distinctive New York view of housing that braided together several ideological threads: a broad vision of state responsibility, a labor theory of value, and a notion of tenants’ “community rights” (similar to Black Power’s concept of “community control”). Frances Goldin, chair of Met Council’s Squatters Committee, articulated the state provision ideal clearly. She called on the city to take over the privately owned squatter buildings and convert them to “public ownership with tenant control,” pointing out that city agencies had worsened the low-rent housing shortage by sponsoring urban renewal and luxury redevelopment. Thus, she drew on the leftist tradition of political economy to show that the housing crisis was not just a consequence of private market forces but a creation of the state. Squatters, for their part, implicitly revived the Marxian “labor theory of value” by carrying out themselves the extensive repairs that many vacant buildings required and using that labor investment to strengthen their moral claim to long-term residency.

“Community rights” had developed over a decade of local struggles against redevelopment. Sally Goldin (Frances’s daughter) drew on this notion when she pointed out that warehousing was a matter of community interest because vacant buildings served as “an open invitation for junkies,
thieves, and drunks to start hanging around.” Similarly, squatter supporters asserted, “we won’t let the landlords tear down our buildings in order to build luxury housing that we can’t afford.” Here, Lower East Siders asserted moral ownership—“our buildings”—as a rebuttal to conventional understandings of private property.

The largest squatter action of 1970 took place on Morningside Heights, where Columbia’s ally, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, announced plans for a luxury old-age home, which called for razing six structurally sound buildings at 112th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. With support from Marie Runyon, tenants fought the eviction orders and won several reprieves. But by July 25th, the cathedral had removed most holdouts and poised its wrecking ball. That Saturday evening two young men strolled by the site and struck up a conversation with the guard. Suddenly hearing noises behind him, the guard turned to find that two hundred people had materialized on 112th Street and were purposefully entering the condemned buildings. He simply told the decoys, “Fuck Columbia; I want an apartment, too.” By the time Sunday services started at St. John’s, fifty families of mostly Dominican and Puerto Rican squatters had encamped in two buildings on the site.

These squatters did not have ties with Runyon or other tenant groups; they had been organized in a matter of weeks—in some cases, from the Operation Move-In waiting list—by a handful of young Latinos in nearby Manhattan Valley. But Runyon’s publicity efforts had doubtless contributed to the action, and the squatters quickly became a cause célèbre among her allies. Met Council led a support rally while students gathered endorsements from politicians, neighborhood groups, and the Young Lords. The Columbia Spectator ran a long sympathetic feature that culminated with the reporter asking the Episcopal canon, “Would Christ have evicted the [former tenants]?” (Canon Chase promised to pray for them.) As a religious institution, St. John’s was an easy target for such questions. Indeed, a group of Episcopalians began to press the bishop to compromise, and an insider reported that the bishop’s own staff understood the conflict as “the rich against the poor.”

Equally important, the squatters showed themselves to be a resolute and resourceful community, carrying out major repairs, developing a
democratic council, sanctioning abusive members, and displaying solidarity. These successes reflected hard work and probably shared political precepts. "All of us working in that neighborhood had a political consciousness," recalled one organizer. "We didn't see things necessarily in racial terms anymore, but in economic terms. We were very conscious of all these middle-class people living very comfortably in Morningside Heights—in apartments that a lot of poor people could actually afford." A rank-and-filer noted, "Our people here are very political—the Dominicans, especially. They're all in some kind of movement—or have been, in the Dominican Republic." With the memory of the 1965 U.S. invasion still fresh, Dominicans may have drawn particular satisfaction from "liberating" space in New York.50

The St. John's squatters also proved adept publicists. Speaking of the grim dwellings they had fled, Ana Lopez explained to reporters that the families did not object to paying rent but were "tired of paying for rats, roaches and junkies."51 An anonymous writer posted this verse:

The door was not open
It was locked, tinned, cinderblocked, nailed, spiked cemented.
They thought in this way to keep the house empty and silent
And to keep us in the street and in the gutter.
But we came—quietly in the evening—
Boldly in the morning—
Through the tin—the cinderblocks—the nails—the spikes and the cement
Through the locked door.
And the house welcomed us—
It sheltered and embraced us.
The laughter of our children echoed in the hallways—
Love entered the house, and the house rejoiced
To hear again the long forgotten words—
Mi casa. Home!52
Resonating with the nascent Nuyorican poetry movement, these lines cast the break-in not only as expedient but also as right and just. The image of an inanimate object “embracing” humans suggested a deep force, akin to natural law, at work in the takeover.

The breadth of the housing crisis and its organized opposition could be seen again that winter in the Housing Crimes Trial, a public event that brought young militants together with older activists from Met Council, the Cooper Square Committee, and Runyon’s Morningsiders United. Small tenant groups, progressive unions, and black clergy also signed the indictments. Racial inclusiveness and female leadership were on full display as Met Council’s Benedict, the Black Panthers’ Durie Bethea, and the Young Lords’ Morales sat on the bench, along with representatives from two other Puerto Rican groups and I Wor Kuen. Spanish speakers testified through translators. Intergenerational alliances were similarly visible, with Benedict, then around sixty, serving alongside the young judges, and Goldin and Rand leading the prosecution. Judge Bethea schooled older witnesses in current argot and expressed judicial approval by saying “right on.”

Significantly, the People’s Court heard testimony not only from scores of squatters and tenants but from several housing professionals as well. One former city official acknowledged that urban renewal plans made little provision for the low-income tenants they displaced. Bill Price, the Operation Move-In leader, took the point further: “The way the City can do this is by not acquainting the people in the communities of what the plans are in store for them.” He himself had spent months futilely asking officials for a copy of the city’s Master Plan, until in desperation he had stolen one. (Judge Bethea corrected him: “You liberated it for the people. We don’t steal.”)

Such strategically placed sympathizers sometimes affected the fate of squatter sites. Thus, it was important that the Episcopal Church was not only concerned with outward appearances but was filled with staffers and parishioners who supported the squatter cause. The St. John’s squatters also benefited from a twist of state financing law that ultimately made it cheaper for the old-age home to relocate to a vacant lot in the Bronx—a move Met Council had been advocating since 1968—than to engage in
lengthy eviction proceedings in Manhattan. The law, the widespread sympathy, and the squatters' own determination finally convinced the church to scale back its plan and allow three apartment houses and their tenants—now grown to 400—to remain.

Two hundred Operation Move-In families also won a major concession when officials announced that the West Side squatters could stay as long as they began paying rent to the city. Further, the city added nine hundred low-rent units to the West Side's renewal plan. Here, the size of the squatter community, combined with the city's status as landlord and its growing embarrassment over the failure of "progressive" renewal, worked in the squatters' favor.

In some buildings on the Lower East Side and in Chelsea, as well, squatters reached lasting agreements with landlords. But in general, properties owned by individuals, schools, and hospitals turned out to be the least successful squats. Some Chelsea and Lower East Side squatters were evicted in a matter of days. Uptown, meanwhile, Columbia ousted thousands of legal tenants through property conversion over the years. Runyon and Kimble were exceptions who probably won out as much through good fortune (Columbia's unstable plans for the Morningside Drive site) as through their organizing efforts.

**Echoes in a Post-Radical Age**

New York's summer of squatters, however, produced lasting effects that reached beyond the several hundred poor families who secured homes in 1970 and 1971. One involved housing policy. Starting in the early 1970s, city and state housing officials established several programs to provide loans and other support for low-income tenants who wished to rehabilitate their neglected buildings and convert them into low-equity co-ops. These programs rested on the ideological and practical groundwork laid by tenant actions over the preceding decade. The building takeovers organized by the Black Panthers in the Bronx; the Garbage and Lead Offensives conducted by the Young Lords; the "Battle of Morningside Park"; and the 1970 squatter move-ins all had made tenant seizure of physical resources a daily reality in poor neighborhoods. Further, the rhetoric that went with these actions—"our community," "our buildings"—had disseminated the
notion of moral ownership to the larger public and even mainstream politicians.

In keeping with tenant history, women predominated among leaders of the successful co-ops, where many residents reported that their buildings were “like a family.” Researchers theorized that the “household skills” women were socialized to develop—conflict resolution, listening, patience with ongoing tasks—were essential to good tenant and co-op organizing. City-subsidized co-op programs have survived, in weakened form, to this day.

The second long-term consequence of the squatter wave appeared in the larger sphere of leftist and feminist politics. Squatter mobilizations drew a new generation of activists into contact with the Old Left cohort at Met Council, which welcomed the newcomers and groomed them to become leaders in their own right. “In younger people taking leadership in Met Council,” Benedict wrote to the Executive Board in 1970, “lies great encouragement.”

This is not to say that intergenerational relations were always smooth. One area of conflict involved what might be called political lifestyle. Benedict, Rand, and their contemporaries came from an Old Left culture in which the struggle absorbed virtually every waking hour. As a CP slogan put it: “Every Evening to Party Work.” The senior Met Council women continued to live that way, devoting every night and weekend to tenant politics well into their sixties and beyond. But the young folks could not keep up. Mansbach speaks of “a huge burnout factor” among younger Met Council workers, especially those seeking to balance political activities with family life. Over time, the older generation’s expectations fueled a large turnover among young volunteers and staff. Benedict wanted to pass the torch, but she was looking for successors who would keep it burning at her intense level. Young people who could not meet that standard drifted away.

This pattern produced several ironic effects. For one thing, it delayed by many years the changing of the guard that Benedict wished to effect. For another, it meant that while Met Council served as a link between two generations of feminists, the organization also imposed on its members one of the very burdens that latter-day feminists sought to throw off: a
standard of full-time work that left few moments for home and family. Yet Met Council's high turnover rate may also have increased the organization's amplifying effect on feminist consciousness by causing the group to churn out scores of young people who had developed mentoring relationships with senior women. The turnover rate made these "alumni" more numerous than they would have been if a single baby-boom cohort had simply come aboard and stayed.

Over time, these individual experiences in Met Council and its affiliates added up to a larger process of political reproduction that transmitted Popular Front precepts to the children of postwar prosperity. When Benedict and Wood died recently, their memorials ran for hours as three generations of activists—including grassroots organizers and several of New York's leading progressive politicians and pioneering women—paid tribute to their mentors. Owens's remarks on Benedict's "philosophical DNA" resonated widely. Ruth Messinger, former city council member and the second woman to serve as Manhattan Borough president, added, "Jane taught me as much about organizing as about tenants' rights, and was a model for all of us."

At Wood's service, dozens of Chelsea residents, including original squatters and their children and grandchildren, lined up to testify, in Spanish and English, to Wood's courage, compassion, and monumental stubbornness. "She got that bit in her teeth and she did not let go," remembers Cohen. "And she was very dynamic and very charismatic. And people followed her. It was amazing: one minute I was this naive little shy kid, and the next minute I was getting arrested! What happened to me? It was very liberating to finally put your body where your mouth was. And she gave you the courage to do that. . . . Somehow, you got into it with her . . . , and you just followed. And then you learned the stuff and you led."

Notes
1. This is a takeoff on "actually existing socialism," a phrase various Marxists have used to discuss life in communist Europe, in contrast to abstract and speculative notions of what socialist society might be like.


9. Ibid.


14. Wood and her husband may have belonged to the Communist Party as well. (Susan Cohen, interview with author, 14 June 2004.)


31. These women nonetheless drew on the examples of strong older women in their communities; Silvers, for instance, was influenced by her mother and grandmothers. Silvers interview, 30 Jan. 2004.

32. Evans, Personal Politics, 74-76.


35. Met Council minutes show a spike in new memberships averaging more than 100 per month in the early 1970s. See box 1, assemblies 2 folder, MCHR. Cohen, interview, recalled a large cohort of young women joining Met Council and the Chelsea coalitions during these years.


37. See administrative box 4, Executive Minutes folder 1, MCHR.


40. Delgado interview.
41. Assembly Minutes, 18 Dec. 1967, box 1, Assemblies no. 1 folder; Executive Board Minutes, 28 June 1971, box 4, Executive Board no. 5 folder; box 12, Legislation 1974/ Tenants Bill of Rights folder, all in MCHR.
45. See Patricia Yancey Martin, "Rethinking Feminist Organizations," Gender and Society 4 (June 1990): 193-94. Martin’s “outcomes” criterion, in which an organization transforms members’ sense of power and possibility, particularly with regard to political activity, aptly describes the feminism of Met Council. See Cohen interview.
47. WIN Magazine, 15 Sept. 1970, 4-5. “Our” also appears frequently as a modifier for “land” and “neighborhood” in all of Frances Goldin’s discussions of the Lower East Side.
48. The Morningside Sun, 4 Oct. 1969, 1; 18 May 1970, 7, box 6, folder 14, CCC; the guard’s comment is in Mary Anne Brotherton, “Conflict of Interests, Law Enforcement, and Social Change: A Case Study of Squatters on Morningside Heights” (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1974), 61-64, Brotherton notes that for local residents, “Columbia” came to symbolize all the expansionist institutions.
50. Brotherton, “Conflict of Interest,” 66, 135; U.S. marines were dispatched into the Dominican Republic’s civil war to thwart the ascension of popular socialist and would-be land reformer Juan Bosch.
53. Housing Crimes Trial flyers and transcript, 9, 10, 14, box 8, Housing Crimes Trial folder, MCHR.
54. Ibid., 5, 13-14.
57. NYT, 14 June 1971.
61. Executive Board Minutes, 23 Feb. 1970; and Jane Benedict to Executive Board, 29 June 1970, box 4, Executive Board no. 4 folder, MCHR.
62. Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes, 8.
63. Mansbach interview. In her interview, Cohen also recalls this pattern.
64. Mansbach interview.
65. Sign-in sheets from Met Council’s monthly "assemblies" between 1969 and 1974 reveal over 400 different names, many appearing at multiple meetings. See box 1, Assemblies folders, MCHR.
67. Jane Wood memorial service.
68. Cohen interview.