“SAVE OUR STREETS AND SHELTER OUR HOMELESS”:

THE HOMELESS CRISIS IN NEW YORK CITY IN THE 1980S

by

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In memory of Anita Silver and Jerome Silver

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Introduction: The Emergence of a New Problem

In 1981, New York City Mayor Ed Koch received letters from constituents about an alarming new problem. "Something has to be done," one letter began, "about the 'bag people' walking all over the city and sleeping on the park benches." Some urged the mayor to send police to "pick up these sick, filthy people"; others encouraged him to provide meals, showers, and shelter to them. Many letters contained a mix of sentiments, as New Yorkers from different neighborhoods and diverse socio-economic strata struggled to process emotions including both sympathy and disgust at the sight of an increasing number of destitute people living in the city's public places. As Mrs. Pearlie Moore, a Brooklyn resident who worked in Manhattan, wrote to the mayor in June of 1981, "Why don't you take a walk threw the Penn [Terminal] and see for your self…I have worked in this area for ten years and the last two is unbelievable."[1]

The concern voiced by a few dozen New Yorkers to Mayor Koch reflected a larger reality: Homelessness was a central issue of the 1980s, both locally and across the country.[2] The number of people without homes rose dramatically in the United States during that decade, and the problem was particularly acute in New York City. In 1979, the city estimated that it served 9,000 men and 6,000 women per year; by November of

[1] New York City residents' letters to Edward I. Koch, 1981. Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[2] National public opinion poll respondents consistently ranked homelessness as a very important issue facing the country in the 1980s. Equally significant, however, is that polling organizations sought the public's opinion on homelessness in the first place. Questions about domestic homelessness did not appear on national opinion surveys at all before 1982. The survey results reported here were obtained from searches of the iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

1983 the city provided beds to almost 15,000 men, women, and children *per month*.[3] Uncounted thousands more slept in New York City's public places, and tens of thousands lived in precarious and impermanent situations, "doubled up" with relatives or friends.[4]

This remarkable increase was primarily the result of affordable housing loss among the city's poorest residents. A perfect storm of factors coalesced during this period: New York City's rental market tightened, blue-collar job opportunities diminished, the real value of public assistance payments depreciated, and the state and federal government failed to aid mentally ill people after the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only did the sheer numbers of un-housed people increase dramatically, but the types of people losing their homes grew more diverse: African American and Latino young adults and children soon surpassed older white men as the predominant groups comprising the "new homeless," and a significant proportion of these people had a mental illness. These changes gripped New York residents, and focused nationwide attention on an already struggling city. As a 1983 report by the New

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[3] 1983 was the first year for which comprehensive shelter statistics were available. The city did not keep statistics on transgender or gender non-normative people. For the 1979 number, see Kim Hopper, *Reckoning With Homelessness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 61; for the 1983 number, see "New York City Homeless Municipal Shelter Population, 1983-present," Coalition for the Homeless, accessed July 2014, http://coalhome.3cdn.net/0178751adf01c4b465_fom6ivqne.pdf.

[4] The government, homeless advocates, and statisticians disagreed on how to accurately count these people or which ones of them were in fact homeless, and scholars have yet to reach any conclusion on the actual number of New York City's homeless population in the early 1980s. The oft-repeated number 36,000 was originally printed in Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper, *Private Lives/Public Spaces: Homeless Adults on the Streets of New York* (New York City: Community Service Society, 1981), but the city of New York quickly contested that high count and placed the number at 10,000 to 12,000. For more on the issue of quantifying New York City's homeless population in the early 1980s, see Brendan O'Flaherty, *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 60. For an analysis of the controversy over statistics and their importance in constructing homelessness as a social problem, see Cynthia Bogard, *Seasons Such As These: How Homelessness Took Shape in America* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, Inc., 2003), 97-123.

York-based Community Service Society contended, "There is little dispute that homelessness has reached crisis proportions."[5]

But homelessness was a crisis of perception as well as statistics.[6] In this period, the government, the media, advocates, and New York City residents came to understand "the homeless" as a new, different, and growing demographic category, separate from other poor people.[7] Yet far from being concrete, "the homeless" was in fact a nebulous and poorly defined term that varied by circumstance and changed over time. Local housing activists and self-identified homeless people debated who counted as "truly homeless" during struggles over scarce housing resources, for instance; and Mayor Koch accused homeless families of using the shelter system solely to jump to the front of a long queue for city-subsidized housing. As New Yorkers debated who counted as homeless, they invoked historical notions of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, which themselves were encoded with discourses of gender, race, disability, and class, as well as health, cleanliness, and behavioral appropriateness. The outcome of these debates often determined the terms of charity and political solidarity, and the allocation of shelter, housing, and aid for poor New Yorkers. It also shaped the parameters of homelessness as

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[5] *Cruel Brinkmanship: Planning for the Homeless – 1983* (New York: Coalition for the Homeless, 1983), 3.

[6] As social scientist Mark J. Stern has argued, "Not all phenomena become public problems." Mark J. Stern, "The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem," in Erickson and Willhelm, ed., *Housing the Homeless* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, third edition, 1989), 113-123. The shape, to paraphrase Cynthia Bogard, that the homeless crisis took was historically and culturally contingent and depended upon the assertions of "claimsmakers" including the government, the media, scholars, and activists. Bogard, *Seasons Such As These,* 1-4.

[7] Sociologist Anthony Marcus states this most forcefully in his eloquent ethnography. As he argues, policy makers, scholars, and advocates constructed the homeless as "an atomized group of individuals…who were designated to receive a new form of totalizing public assistance." Anthony Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone? The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2006), 3. See also Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 252; Hopper, *Reckoning With Homelessness*, 7.

a category and a public problem in the 1980s and beyond, as "the homeless" remains a familiar – and still contested – category into the twenty-first century.

"Save Our Streets and Shelter Our Homeless" examines why homelessness became a crisis in New York City in the 1980s and why it continues to matter into the twenty first century. Homeless people became a central focus of New York City politics, and their increasing visibility made them a primary point of conflict in the dramatically changing city. Conflicts over the presence of un-housed people in public space, homeless families in private "welfare hotels," and squatting and homeless activism were also moments in which the government, the media, advocates, and New York City residents constructed and debated the category "the homeless" around the literal and figurative bodies of homeless people. Understanding the creation of the homeless as an embodied category provides crucial insight into how cities increasingly policed homeless people and regulated access to shelter and aid in cities across the nation in the 1990s and beyond. Scholars have yet to fully examine this history, but doing so provides crucial insight into the making of a category – and a crisis – that shaped public opinion and policy on poverty, housing loss, mental illness, and urban space for decades to come.

The homeless crisis offers important insight into the tumultuous recent history of New York. Historians have not yet devoted significant attention to the city in the 1980s, and fewer still have centered homelessness within the broader story of urban change in the late twentieth century.[8] As the city emerged from the 1970s fiscal crisis, neighborhood stratification became more pronounced and visible signs of disorder

[8] Sociologist Alex S. Vitale's work is an important exception that uses – in part – historical methods and analysis as it considers public policy and urban politics on homelessness in 1980s New York City. Alex S. Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

including crumbling and abandoned buildings, uncollected garbage and graffiti abounded. By the time of Koch's election in 1978, the city's economy was rebounding but neighborhood recovery was uneven: Koch encouraged real estate development and business investment in some neighborhoods (especially in Manhattan), while continuing to neglect others that had long suffered from the effects of deindustrialization, redlining, white flight, urban renewal, and municipal and commercial disinvestment. Homelessness rose against – and as a result of – this backdrop, and as a public problem it spanned the increasingly stratified city in complex ways.

The crisis provoked a complex range of reactions from New Yorkers of all walks of life. Locals asked the Mayor to help the homeless, and many themselves contributed money or time to homeless people and organizations devoted to helping the homeless. But both poor and better-off communities also decried the visible presence of homeless people and protested plans for homeless shelters in their neighborhoods. Many were frustrated – often with good reason – by the municipal government's unilateral imposition of social services in their neighborhoods, and they saw homeless facilities as particularly undesirable. Homelessness offered a clear crystallization to many New Yorkers of the social and economic problems that plagued their city. As visible figures in the public spaces of the city, homeless people appeared to be both the cause and the consequence of rising urban disorder.

But the homeless crisis resonated far beyond the borders of New York City. National newspapers and television shows including *Donahue*, *Nightline*, *60 Minutes*, and *Geraldo* contained features on the homeless of New York City. Sitcoms, dramas, and movies that were set in the city featured homeless people as central protagonists or, often,

as parts of the landscape of city neighborhoods. Municipalities across the country looked to New York as a policy model and a cautionary tale on homelessness.[9] Even though homelessness rose throughout the country in the 1980s, the public most closely associated New York City with homelessness, and homelessness in New York became a lens for Americans to understand the changes of the Reagan era, especially as they pertained to urban America.

Still, just as the homeless crisis in New York City resonated beyond its spatial and temporal borders, so too does its historical significance far exceed the specifics of its locality. Indeed, it provides unique insight into the late twentieth century United States. For one, the homeless crisis greatly enriches our understanding of recent American political history. Historians have long asserted that the rise of conservatism at the end of the twentieth century resulted from the decline of liberal northern cities and the ascendant political power of suburbs and Sunbelt cities in the 1960s and 1970s.[10] But New York City's 1975 fiscal crisis and Mayor Koch's leadership in the ensuing decade set the stage for a new type of urban politics that soon became a model for cities around the country. Neoliberal policies first imposed by the state Emergency Financial Control Board in 1975 created new opportunities for private investment to flourish, while reducing public programs and disempowering public employees. These measures directly contributed to

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[9] As Cynthia Bogard argues, the city's centrality in national politics, the news media, and "public opinion formation" brought the homeless crisis widespread national attention. Bogard, *Seasons Such As These,* 7. Jonathan Kozol similarly argues that "in homelessness as in high fashion, [New York] gives Americans a preview of the future." Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006, second edition), 18.

[10] Works that locate the rise of conservatism in the Sunbelt and the suburbs are Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

the homeless crisis and created greater economic stratification in the city, more broadly.[11] And while New Yorkers remained, on the whole, more socially liberal than their suburban and Southern counterparts, many also began to identify poor, non-white welfare recipients as the cause of the city's problems, and to identify homeless people as a cause – rather than result – of the city's many afflictions.[12] They found solutions in the neoconservative social tenets that Mayors Koch (1978-1989) and Dinkins (1990-1993) tested before they became hallmarks of the Giuliani administration (1994-2001).[13] Charting these changes through the 1980s brings us from the suburbs back to the cities, and to New York City in particular. The homeless crisis placed New York City at the center of this pivotal arc in recent U.S. history.

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[11] I derive my understanding of neoliberalism from David Harvey, who defines the term as "A theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade." He confirms that the 1975 New York City fiscal crisis – in which a group of bankers worked with New York State to empower the city's financiers while disempowering unions and slashing city services – was a pivotal moment in the rise of neoliberalism in the United States. David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (March 2007), 22-44. Themis Chronopoulos and Alex S. Vitale both address the rise of neoliberal policies and neoconservative politics in New York City, including their effects on homelessness, in their respective works: Themis Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Vitale, *City of Disorder*. For New York City's long history of urban liberalism, see Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and the Development of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993).

[12] Kim Phillips-Fein addresses the growing conservatism of New Yorkers after the fiscal crisis in "The Legacy of the 1970s Fiscal Crisis," *The Nation*, April 16, 2013. Jennifer Brier has argued that community protests in Queens against allowing students with AIDS to attend public schools were not due to an increasing conservatism among historically liberal New Yorkers, but were rather specific responses that arose in the context of community members' efforts to exercise greater control over their neighborhood institutions. I agree with Brier, to an extent; however, I also argue that rising conservatism increasingly affected New Yorkers' opinions, especially as they pertained to issues of poverty, uses of public space, and neighborhood change in the city in the 1980s. Jennifer Brier, "'Save Our Kids, Keep AIDS Out': Anti-AIDS Activism and the Legacy for Community Control in Queens, New York," *Journal of Social History* 39:4 (Summer 2006), 965-987.

[13] Alice O'Connor has argued that America's conservative turn in the 1970s not only affected, but also to some extent originated in, New York City via the work of the neoconservative Manhattan Institute. Alice O'Connor, "The Privatized City: The Urban Crisis, the Manhattan Institute, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 34 (January 2008), 333-353.

A major reason why scholars have missed or misinterpreted these events is because they have not addressed the ambivalence that marked New Yorkers' reactions to the homeless crisis. From the letters written to Mayor Koch in1981 to Koch's sweeping policy changes, New Yorkers' reactions to the homeless crisis was marked by a continuing mixture of sympathy and disgust towards homeless bodies. Scholars who study homelessness have certainly not ignored public sentiment toward the homeless, but they have viewed the early 1990s as a turning point that culminated in Rudy Giuliani's 1994 election.[14] This was undoubtedly true; but Giuliani's victory was the product of a much longer dynamic. Frustration with visible homeless people was evident even in the earliest years of the homeless crisis, as the municipal government explored the legal possibility of removing homeless people from city streets, parks, and transportation terminals, as business development corporations created strategies to discourage loitering in commercial districts, and as New York citizens called on the government to curb the presence of visibly homeless people. The increased regulation of homeless people's movements through the geography of New York City was hardly the result of a "sympathy fatigue" that settled like a malaise over city residents in the 1990s, as some journalists and scholars suggested.[15]

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[14] Samira Kawash, "The Homeless Body," *Public Culture* 10:2 (1998), 326 (footnote 7); Kenneth Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*: *The Homeless in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 246; Don Mitchell, "The Annihilation of Space by Law: The Roots and Implications of Anti-Homeless Laws in the United States," *Antipode* 29:3 (July 1997), 326; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrificaiton and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 210-232; Neil Smith, "Which New Urbanism? The Revanchist '90s," *Perspecta* 30 (1999), 98-105; Vitale, 1-14. Several authors have also argued that the tone of media coverage on homelessness changed in the late 1980s from "positive" to "somewhat harsher," with "more stories on the deviance of homeless persons, the disorder they create, and the steps being taken to deal with them." For an overview of this literature, see Lee et al, "The New Homelessness Revisited," *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010), 511.

[15] For some media reports on sympathy fatigue, see: Fox Butterfield, "New Yorkers Growing Angry Over Aggressive Panhandlers," *New York Times*, July 29, 1988; Barbara Day, "Is NYC's public becoming more intolerant of the homeless?" *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1991; Pete Hamill, "How to Save the Homeless – And Ourselves," *New York*, September 20, 1993; Sara Rimer, "Doors Closing as Mood on the Homeless Sours," *New York Times*, November 19, 1989.

Rather, frustration with visibly homeless people, and strategies to minimize their presence, existed side by side with sympathy: Both were a part of the very fabric of the homeless crisis since its earliest years. As Greenwich Village resident Ruth Rosenberg confessed to Mayor Koch in 1981, "my own revulsion [is] followed by feelings of pity and compassion."[16]

Public policy on homelessness was characterized by a similar ambivalence. The municipal government was slow to act on homelessness, and the state deferred blame for its hand in the problem.[17] Stymied by the withdrawal of federal funds and by his own doubts about the city's responsibility to provide shelter for un-housed New Yorkers, Koch only began expanding the shelter system in earnest after a court ruling compelled him to do so in 1981.[18] Even then, the quality of shelters remained grossly inadequate. As Bishop Joseph Sullivan, former head of Catholic Charities, explained, "[Koch] felt that there was a danger that it would be a rip off system…He did not want to make the shelter to be appealing."[19] President Reagan, for his part, publicly decried the abysmal state of

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[16] Ruth Rosenberg to Mayor Koch, September 9, 1981. Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[17] Mayor Koch and his top administrators long blamed New York State for deinstitutionalizing mentally ill people who – Koch believed – subsequently became homeless. State officials in turn accused Koch of implementing policies that encouraged the redevelopment of Single Room Occupancy buildings in which the poorest New Yorkers lived. As one early article noted wryly, "Both sides blame the Federal Government for ending financing of low-income housing." Deirdre Carmody, "New York Is Facing 'Crisis' On Vagrants," *New York Times*, October 10, 1984.

[18] The ruling was the outcome of a class-action lawsuit, *Callahan v. Carey*, that lawyer Robert Hayes filed on behalf of clients of the overcrowded municipal Men's Shelter in lower Manhattan. The ruling judge declared shelter a constitutional right, and the city of New York signed a consent decree to provide shelter to all men in need, which went into effect in August of 1981. Coalition for the Homeless, "The Callahan Legacy: Callahan v. Carey and the Legal Right to Shelter," http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/the-callahan-legacy-callahan-v.-carey-and-the-legal-right-to-shelter.

[19] Bishop Joseph Sullivan interviewed by Joe Doyle, January 6, 1993, Koch Oral History Collection. As Koch's former deputy mayor, Stanley Brezenoff, recalled, "the entitlement" (by which he meant the 1981 Callahan v. Carey consent decree) "is an inducement. It doesn't mean that there weren't real problems out

New York City's shelter system and the lack of low-cost housing in the city, positioning himself as sympathetic to the plight of homeless families. But he also continuously refused to support federal funding for housing, and asserted on several occasions that the homeless were homeless "by choice."[20] These dualities characterized the rhetoric on all levels of government, reflecting a growing conflict between liberal models of social welfare and conservative ideologies that sought to reduce the government's role in service provision and funding. Historical notions of the undeserving poor, however, were not particular to either ideological group. Rather, they reflected the attitudes around which ideas about poverty had long been forged in the United States.[21]

Like these longer dynamics, the mixture of sympathy and disgust that marked New Yorkers' responses to the homeless crisis were centrally and specifically located on the bodies of homeless people. Homeless bodies were material sites of poverty in the 1980s: The sights, sounds, smells, and acts associated with people living in public shaped New Yorkers' understandings of what it meant to be homeless; and the homeless crisis, in turn, informed the public's interpretation of the bodies and acts of the people they saw

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there, but until there was a clear, publicized settlement, people coped and made other arrangements." Stanley Brezenoff interviewed by Sharon Zane, October 23, 1992, Koch Oral History Collection. Despite Koch's doubts, New York City's budget for homeless single people – funded in part by the state – ballooned from $8 million to $100 million from 1978 to 1985 alone. Spending for homeless families also reached $100 million by 1985, funded in large part by one of the few federal programs Congress had not cut during the Reagan retrenchment, Emergency Aid to Families (EAF). Donna Wilson Kircheimer, "Sheltering the Homeless in New York City: Expansion in an Era of Government Contraction," *Political Science Quarterly* 104:4 (Winter 1989-1990), 609.

[20] "Koch Gives Response to Reagan on Hotels," *New York Times*, November 21, 1986. For more on the conservative shift in national politics in the 1980s, see Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[21] For instance, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (commonly known as "the Moynihan Report") was one of the most influential documents of post-1960s United States domestic policy. It's assertion that the "cycle of poverty" was rooted in dysfunctional African American families influenced both Lyndon B. Johnson's liberal War on Poverty social programs, and the decades of conservative pushback that followed, including the 1996 welfare reform laws passed by Democratic president Bill Clinton. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (United States Department of Labor, 1965).

on the streets. Historians of gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism in earlier eras have long recognized that norms of health, cleanliness, and bodily appropriateness were mutually constitutive with hierarchies of social difference.[22] The homeless crisis makes evident the imperative to understand how these dynamics were at work in the late twentieth century United States. As Bronx resident Diane Vincent wrote to Mayor Koch in 1981 after viewing a local news program on "bag people," "I had no trouble recognizing the large black woman that appeared on the show. The stink as I approached to sit next to her left an indelible memory."[23] Such moments make evident the ways that homeless people were constructed and recognized by and through their embodied features.

As Diane Vincent's remarkable language reveals, homeless bodies were discursive sites where the government, the media, advocates, and New Yorkers produced knowledge about the homeless (and, by extension, the poor) that reflected deeper perceptions of race and gender, as well as health, disability, cleanliness, and comportment.[24] Vincent's letter suggests that all of these things were crucial components through which New Yorkers discussed and understood homeless bodies. In the earliest

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[22] Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Natalia Molina, *Fit To Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[23] Diane Vincent to Mayor Koch, July 7, 1981. Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[24] As Judith Butler argues, "[Bodies'] irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi. Michel Foucault argues that the modern state produces power through the production of knowledge about bodies. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990, reprint). On the embodied markers of the homeless, see Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone?,* 15.

years of the 1980s, public areas in New York City became contested spaces where debates over homelessness bodies played out in public policy, media representations, and the activism of homeless people and housed New Yorkers. Scholars have largely failed to recognize the centrality of bodies in space when discussing the homeless crisis.[25]

Despite this scholarly silence, the bodies of homeless people are a constant presence in the era's discussions of the crisis. A 1984 *New York Times* article is particularly noteworthy in demonstrating how homeless people's material bodies intersected with and were portrayed through discourses of race, gender, class, health, cleanliness, disability, and comportment. According to *Times* reporter Deirdre Carmody, Judy was a homeless woman who lived on the streets of Manhattan's Upper East Side, and spent most nights screaming obscenities. Judy had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and the effects of her disease made her public presence difficult for housed neighborhood residents, some of whom first tried to help her and then, when Judy rebuffed their efforts, futilely attempted to have the city commit her to a psychiatric institution. But reporter Carmody's words emphasized Judy's otherness in ways that were informed by – but also extended beyond – her illness. For instance, Judy washed and groomed herself daily, a process that Carmody colorfully referred to as "ablutions." Carmody described Judy's daily cleansing with a level of detail befitting an anthropologist observing a member of a foreign culture.

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[25] Theorist Samira Kawash is an important exception; but Kawash suggests that the homeless body is itself "a particular mode of embodiment" separate from "skin color or sex." Kawash, "The Homeless Body," 319-339. Talmadge Wright has similarly argued that homeless people are particularly othered as homeless people. Drawing on Judith Butler's discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Wright portrays homelessness as a particular mode of embodiment created against the normative non-homeless person. He sees this as similar to the othering of women, thereby stopping short of discussing homelessness as itself a gendered phenomenon. Talmadge Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 63.

> First she brushes her teeth, using an imported toothpaste. Then she takes out a bar of soap in a plastic soap dish, paper towels and Evian bottled water. She removes a few of her outer garments and begins methodically to wash her face, her body under her clothes and her feet. Next she washes her hair and rinses it. Finally she applies anti-fungal solution to her feet.

While most Americans in the 1980s performed similar actions every day, the fact that Judy did this on a busy Manhattan sidewalk, in the context of her homelessness, made them seem different and comment-worthy to Carmody. She expected that Judy would, like "many homeless people," be dirty and unkempt; surprised when she was wrong, Carmody nevertheless interpreted Judy's embodied actions through the lens of her homelessness. Carmody called Judy's effort to clean herself one of her "rituals and routines," implying that compulsion – rather than hygiene – motivated her. Judy's use of "imported toothpaste" and "Evian bottled water" were also worthy of comment: They were items that did not make sense to Carmody in the un-domestic context in which she encountered them, and ironic luxuries in an otherwise impoverished life.[26] Embodied acts like brushing one's teeth and bathing were, for people living on the streets, public acts; and reporters like Carmody constructed portraits of people like Judy in which factors including cleanliness, mental illness, and the occupation of public space were irrevocably intertwined.

Even among a wide range of signifiers, mental illness was a uniquely prominent source of anxiety, debate, and misinformation throughout the homeless crisis. People with diagnosed mental illnesses became a larger part of the homeless population in the 1980s, and city officials and the news media often overstated or oversimplified the role

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[26] Bill Brown argues that people invest meaning and worth into things separate from their market value. "Texts," he writes, "describe and enact an imaginative possession of things that amounts to the labor of infusing manufactured objects with a metaphysical dimension." Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature (Chicago:* University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

that the deinstitionalization of patients from state psychiatric hospitals played in creating New York City's homeless crisis. Perceptions of the homeless as mentally ill were a major source of New Yorkers' fear and annoyance at encountering the homeless in public. Many – including the mayor himself – were quick to label the actions of street people "delusional," regardless of psychiatric diagnosis, and to understand mentally ill people as violent and unpredictable. Koch saw living on the street as itself a sign of mental unsoundness, and repeatedly sought to implement policies to compel street people to enter shelters or psychiatric hospitals.[27] In an earlier era, homeless women like Judy were most commonly characterized as harmless, eccentric "bag ladies." But as the incidence of visible homelessness grew, New Yorkers began to understand mental illness as one of the more serious and threatening problems associated with the homeless crisis.[28]

Scholars have tended to isolate mental illness in discussions of the New York homeless crisis, but Carmody's portrayal of Judy reveals the complex ways observers incorporated real and perceived mental disorders into other embodied categories associated with homelessness. Observers like Carmody paid particular attention to the backgrounds of seemingly mentally ill homeless people, as though the details of their upbringing could either explain their current condition or demonstrate their otherness.

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[27] Robert Sullivan, "Mayor Offers Aid and Hand to Homeless," *New York Times*, March 25, 1983. As Koch's Deputy Mayor Nathan Leventhal recalled, "[Koch] was very disappointed that he couldn't just order them to go into shelters, because they were a danger to themselves." Nathan Leventhal interviewed by Sharon Zane, August 12-November 24, 1992, Koch Oral History Collection.

[28] The bodies of poor people, disabled people, immigrants, and non-white people have historically been subjected to high levels of scrutiny for purposes including charity, governmental regulation, and scholarship. This scrutiny in turn worked to construct people as embodied subjects, made legible by and regulated through and by their bodies. On the notion of biopower and the regulation of humans through embodied knowledge, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. On the regulation of disabled bodies in public, see Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York City: New York University Press, 2010). On the examination and regulation of immigrant bodies as related to health, disease, gender, race, and sexuality, see Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005) and Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

Again, gender and race were particularly central. According to Carmody, Judy "grew up in the Middle West – a lively, pretty girl who sang in church choir…[and] married the son of one of the most prominent men in town." By age forty-one, after years on the street, Judy's skin was "ruddy from outdoor living" and she wore her clothes in eclectic layers – a coat over a sweater over a dress over a shirt, a wool cap that covered another wool cap on her head. Neither Judy's gender nor race is static in this portrayal; Rather, Carmody narrates Judy's migration from a wholesome Midwestern childhood – in which she fulfilled conventional standards of white femininity and sexuality – to street life in New York City, where her beauty faded as her complexion literally and figuratively became darker. Carmody never explicitly mentions Judy's race, but photos accompanying the article show a phenotypically white person, and race is coded into the narrative of Judy's middle-class, Christian, Midwestern upbringing.[29] Race and gender, along with disability, cleanliness, and comportment, were categories that contributed to embodied constructions of the homeless in the 1980s.

Race and gender were also critical components in homeless people's access to shelter, services, and sympathy in New York City. Sociologist Anthony Marcus has noted that African American homeless men often experienced discrimination due to their

[29] Focusing primarily on Blackness, social scientists have demonstrated the ways that code words including "urban" and "welfare" have replaced explicit discussions of race in the twentieth century United States. Examples include Khiara M. Bridges, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust and the Public Identity of the "Welfare Queen"* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Note, "Dethroning the Welfare Queen: The Rhetoric of Reform," *Harvard Law Review* 107 (1993-1994), 2013-2030; Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). Both Bridges and *Harvard Law Review* cite Marian Wright Edelman as the originator of the idea that "welfare" was a code word for Blackness.

simultaneous identities as homeless, Black, and male.[30] Indeed, public fears of "the homeless" centered most upon homeless men, whom New Yorkers feared were aggressive and potentially violent. While rarely explicitly stated, language used by New Yorkers and the media often implicitly coded homeless men as Black and dangerous, associating them with the crime and disorder that plagued many areas of the city in the 1980s.[31] Shelter, services, and public sympathy were often doled out according to gendered and race-based hierarchies of deserving-ness that placed women and children ahead of men. Government officials' accusations that homeless mothers were unduly manipulating New York City's homeless services system, however, demonstrate the continued salience of the "welfare queen" image in shaping poor women's access to income, health care, shelter, and housing opportunities in the 1980s.[32] The sympathy these groups received had ambiguous but very real limits shaped by race- and gender-

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[30] Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone?,* 34. Mitch Duneier made a similar point when he discussed African American street peddlers' difficult finding places to relieve themselves and avoiding police harassment for public urination on the streets of the city. Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 173-187.

[31] As Khalil Gibran Muhammad notes, "Violent crime rates in the nation's biggest cities are generally understood as a reflection of the presence and behavior of the black men, women, and children who live there." Mark Anthony Neal argues that black men are seldom "legible" as anything other than criminals in the popular consciousness, and that this construction is used to justify the staggering rates at which black men are incarcerated and subjected to other forms of legal and extralegal violence in the United States. Michelle Alexander examines the legal and citizenship ramifications of this racialized system of criminalization in *The New Jim Crow*. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York City: The New Press, 2010); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1; Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York City: New York University Press, 2013), 4-6.

[32] Works that have explored the social construction of the "welfare queen" in the popular imagination include Bridges, *Reproducing Race* and Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*. On poor women's activism around welfare, see Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004). On the discourse on poor women and public assistance in the earlier twentieth century, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

based notions of deservingness.[33] Urban historians have long recognized the importance of race and class in constituting labor and community activism, neighborhood geography, and social conflicts in cities; far fewer have considered the importance of gender (and gender's intersections with race and class) in the history of cities. Historicizing gendered and raced hierarchies that shaped the group "the homeless" therefore provides new and important context for understanding cities in the late-twentieth century United States.

Bringing race and gender into focus also reveals that homelessness was a geographical and spatial issue in ways that exceeded and intertwined with the public visibility of street people. Scholars have addressed the role of public space in defining the homeless as a group, but these examinations necessarily focus on the most visible un-housed people, neglecting the homeless families – primarily Black and Latino/a women and children – who comprised the largest segment of New York City's homeless population by the mid-1980s.[34] Few of these families lived on the streets; instead, the city sheltered the majority of them in private hotels – commonly known as "welfare hotels" – which themselves became increasingly prominent parts of public discourse and policy on homelessness by the end of the decade. Conflicts over the condition of welfare hotels were also moments when the media, the government, and New York residents scrutinized the lives of homeless families, often in terms that invoked raced and gendered notions of

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[33] This is the main argument of Joanne Passaro's *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Passaro, however, also perpetuates one of the most egregious stereotypes about welfare queens by asserting that homeless people have children for the sole purpose of gaining access to aid for families. She provides little analysis or bibliographical citation for this claim, but repeats it several times throughout the book. Passaro, 2-3, 32.

[34] Works that focus primarily on the visible homeless include Chronopoulis, *Spatial Regulation in New York City;* Smith, *The New Urban Frontier;* Vitale, *City of Disorder;* Wright, *Out of Place*. On the legal re-structuring of urban geography in response to the public presence of homeless people, see Don Mitchell, "The Annihilation of Space by Law" and Jeremy Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom." *UCLA Law Review* 39 (December 1991), 295-324.

poverty, work, sexuality, and morality. Expanding an examination of the homeless crisis to include family homelessness reveals the many different ways that the changing space of New York City was important to the public perception of homelessness as a problem.

In certain respects, the New York homeless crisis of the 1980s was not that distinct from other eras. Homelessness had been a feature of United States history for centuries, as had the notion that un-housed people represented a social problem in need of solving. The number of people who lacked permanent housing rose and fell with the nation's economic, political, and social tides. How un-housed people thought of themselves and how others characterized, aided, and regulated them was always rooted in the context of social conditions and geography, as well as changing notions of poverty, gender, race, disability, and other intersecting categories.[35] As in New York in the 1980s, attitudes towards impoverished people were never monolithic: In early America, cities created workhouses to incarcerate the "wandering poor," even as religious groups and labor guilds distributed charity widely and generously.[36] Also as in the 1980s, homelessness in earlier eras was often understood through an embodied lens. In the late nineteenth century, "hobohemia" – as Todd DePastino termed the rise in transient men after the Civil War – was a new iteration of homelessness with a central figure, the white male hobo, that artists romanticized and municipal governments vilified.[37] During the Great Depression of the 1930s, images of homeless families were an especially potent

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[35] As Ella Howard has noted, "The institutions that address poverty embody the values of their creators." Nineteenth century almshouses exemplify how charitable relief reflected societal values connecting work to individual worth, and the varying effects they had on people. Almshouses, for instance, "may have benefited young, healthy individuals, but [they] proved torturous for many children as well as elderly, ill, mentally ill, and disabled adult residents." Ella Howard, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) , 11-12.

[36] Kusmer, 21.

[37] DePastino, xix; Howard, 10.

symbol of the nation's crisis, but the federal government directed many of its most sweeping relief efforts at unemployed men, marginalizing single women and both married and unmarried mothers. Raced and gendered notions of labor, relief, and the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor were sewn into the very fabric of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, which benefited white, young, able-bodied men and white nuclear families disproportionately. African Americans and Mexican Americans, two of the groups hardest hit by the Depression, also had the least access to government aid in the 1930s; Western states – most notably California – coerced over 100,000 Mexican Americans to "repatriate" to Mexico in response to their growing applications for relief.[38] Homelessness in 1980s New York City is undoubtedly a part of this longer history.

But the subject of this study is also distinct to its time and place in important ways. In New York – as in many northern U.S. cities – homelessness had long been an issue of public perception as much as it was an issue of poverty. While many types of people experienced extreme poverty and housing instability, charitable reformers, scholars, and municipal governments saw transient men as "homeless": their lack of participation in domestic norms of marriage, family, and employment made them particular threats to social order, and particularly in need of aid and reform. Reformers and the government constructed an infrastructure of soup kitchens, shelters, and alcohol detoxification programs on the Bowery – lower Manhattan's historic skid row – that served as much to contain these homeless men as it did to aid them.[39] By 1980s, this

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[38] Francisco E. Balderrama, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Gordon, 183-199.

[39] Howard, 1-4.

population was changing, and so was the public's perception of it. The "new homeless," as scholars and advocates quickly labeled the group, was demographically distinct from the men soon known as the "old homeless": They were younger, more of them were Black or Latino, and a higher percentage of them had been diagnosed with mental illness. When the city's shelters exceeded their capacity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many thousands who remained outdoors by choice or necessity became highly visible reminders of the city's continuing problem. And, significantly, fewer of them remained on the Bowery. Recognizing new homelessness as the result of demographic, geographic, and discursive shifts explains how "the homeless" became a new category in 1980s New York City, leading to a "crisis" that had significant implications for the city and the United States.

This work explains this crucial story. I begin with the earliest years of this new period, which saw a rise in citizen and media awareness of homelessness and a rise in neighborhood-based conflict surrounding it. Chapter One addresses conflicts between New York City residents and the municipal government over the placement of facilities for the homeless in the earliest years of the 1980s. Mayor Koch and the local media portrayed these struggles as evidence of not-in-my-back-yard" (NIMBY) attitudes, and residents of neighborhoods across New York City often framed their complaints in terms that drew upon new perceptions of homeless people as dirty and diseased. Their presence, residents argued, was a danger to the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Scholars have devoted little attention to these struggles, and generally frame them as evidence of housed New Yorkers' intolerance of the homeless.[40] An examination of three of the

[40] Alex S. Vitale is an important exception. In *City of Disorder*, he recognizes that many neighborhood protests were due to residents' frustration with the city over its haphazard approach to shelter creation that

neighborhoods involved in protests, however, reveals more than simple intolerance. Manhattan's Upper West Side and Harlem neighborhoods, and East New York, a neighborhood in central Brooklyn, had all experienced disinvestment and neighborhood decline during the financially tumultuous 1970s. Neighborhood residents accused the city of "dumping" undesirable populations and facilities in their midst, and indeed, all three neighborhoods had a disproportionate share of the city's social service facilities. By 1985, however, these neighborhoods' trajectories had begun to diverge sharply: as the Upper West Side became increasingly gentrified, Harlem and East New York – both predominantly poor and Black – remained politically and economically marginalized. Examining the three cases together demonstrates that even as New Yorkers across racial and socio-economic lines protested the presence of homeless people and facilities in their neighborhoods, these areas' broader histories – and diverging trajectories – complicated any easy claims about sympathy or intolerance. NIMBY protests in 1981 and 1982 were an early moment when New Yorkers constructed their understandings about the homeless against the backdrop of a radically changing city landscape.

Conflicts over visible homelessness often revolved specifically around mentally ill people and the role of deinstitutionalization in creating the current crisis. Chapter Two explores the connection between homelessness and mental illness that increasingly preoccupied the Koch administration and housed New Yorkers as the homeless crisis unfolded. When Joyce Brown, an African American, mentally ill homeless woman, was forcibly hospitalized by the city of New York in 1987, it set off debates in courtrooms, newsrooms, and the mayor's office about whether or not homeless people have a right to

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often neglected the concerns of local communities. However, Vitale downplays the role of neighborhood residents' sometimes negative opinions about homeless people in these struggles. Vitale, 68-76, 145.

sleep, eat, and defecate in public, and whether (and when) they forfeit that right if they are mentally ill. Examining Brown's legal case and the publicity surrounding it allows for a deeper exploration of the narratives that linked deinstitutionalization, mental illness, and homelessness in 1980s New York City. It also reveals the ways in which the policing of homeless bodies and behaviors was a matter of public policy well before the Giuliani administration. Since the earliest years of the homeless crisis, the Koch administration had explored legal measures to remove homeless people from public spaces, including city sidewalks and subways. Examining Brown's hospitalization in this context reframes it as not simply an issue of one individual's mental health, but also of the struggles over homelessness and public space that ensued across New York City over the 1980s.

Increasingly as the decade progressed, homeless families captured the public attention and altered the public discourse about the homeless crisis. Chapter Three examines the rise of family homelessness as a growing part of the homeless crisis. While the city had long provided shelter – often in private hotels – for poor families who lost their housing in New York City, it was only in the 1980s that these families became identified as part of the group known as "the homeless." The hotels in which the city sheltered families became the focus of intense scrutiny from the media and activists towards the middle of the 1980s; they also became a site around which homeless mothers organized for justice. Few scholars have examined the rise in family homelessness or the media scandals around so-called "welfare hotels" in the context of the New York City homeless crisis. Expanding the conceptual and geographical parameters of the homeless crisis to include homeless families – most of which were comprised of African American and Latino/a women and children – allows for an analysis of the gendered, racial, and

spatial components of homelessness that extend beyond the issues of public space that have primarily been the focus of scholarly attention.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the pivotal moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s that has already been the subject of so much scholarly interest. In 1988, a police riot in the Lower East Side neighborhood's Tompkins Square Park became a catalyzing moment for local housing, squatting, and anti-gentrification activists. Much of the ensuing neighborhood conflict revolved around Tompkins Square Park and, in particular, the homeless population that lived there. The conflict played out in complex ways: Many neighborhood residents sympathized with the park's homeless, but also accused politically radical squatters of co-opting the homeless cause. Debates about whether or not the people occupying Tompkins Square Park were "truly" homeless reveal the continuing instability of the category "the homeless" nearly a decade into the homeless crisis. Expanding the focal point to squatting, housing, and homeless activism across New York City further blurs the lines between these different groups.

The 1980s was a decade of intense social, economic, and political change for New York City. The rise in homelessness paralleled the upward trajectory of the city's economy, as business investment and tourism grew after the financially disastrous 1970s. This duality was not coincidental: the neoliberal policies that encouraged new business in the city directly caused the decline of low-income housing, as the government courted developers to convert buildings into middle- and upper-income real estate. In this context, the plight of the homeless became a major focus of city politics and national interest. As homelessness increased, more people – government officials, the tourism industry, and diverse groups of residents and visitors – promoted a city landscape free from poverty's

visible trappings. And even as the category "the homeless" expanded to include a more diverse array of un-housed people, many also came to see it as a distinct category, separate from the broader landscape of poverty and economic stratification that developed in 1980s New York City. The homeless crisis was connected to people's changing visions of what New York City should be, and for whom. Homelessness arose amidst (and due to) that change, and the homeless crisis in turn shaped the scope and tenor of broader debates over housing, poverty, gentrification, and the uses of space in the city.

Chapter 1
Not In My Back Yard: Anti-Shelter Protests in New York City Neighborhoods

Introduction

> URGENT. STOP DERELICT ASSESSMENT CENTER AT WEST 88 STREET. THIS WILL DESTROY RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD. COMMUNITY BOARD 7 VOTES TONIGHT.

On June 2, 1981, New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch received a wave of identical telegrams. Each urged him to reconsider the city's plan to open a "derelict assessment center" at the corner of West 88th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, on Manhattan's Upper West Side. A few of these telegram writers elaborated further on the damage the facility would cause their community. One noted, "125 DERELICTS A DAY WILL CERTAINLY CAUSE MENTAL DISTRESS AND PERHAPS BODILY HARM TO THE YOUNGSTERS WHO LIVE HERE."[41] Letters to the Mayor echoed this sentiment, citing the children and elderly individuals whose safety, writers claimed, would be at risk if the center were to open. They urged the Mayor to consider putting the center in a non-residential neighborhood, and implored him to "stop using the West Side as a dumping ground."[42]

With the number of New Yorkers who lacked a permanent place to live rising, services like the Derelict Assessment Center seemed desperately needed.[43] And yet 1981

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[41] Telegrams to Mayor Edward I. Koch, June 2, 1981. Mayor Edward I. Koch, "Derelict Assessment Center on W. 88th St." Unless otherwise noted, the telegrams and mail to Mayor Koch cited in this chapter are all located in the Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, "Derelict Assessment Center on W. 88th St.," General Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[42] Postcard to Mayor Koch, undated (1981).

[43] Little agreement exists on just how many un-housed people there were, or even how to classify an individual as "homeless." The city's Human Resources Administration (HRA) kept statistics on the number of people using its shelters, which in 1981 was an average of 2,500 people per night. The Community Service Society, one of New York City's primary non-governmental homeless advocacy groups, argued that shelter statistics failed to account for the many people who did not use shelters but nevertheless did not have a permanent place to live; they estimated that number was closer to 36,000. Scholars have yet to reach

marked the beginning of a turbulent time in the provision of shelter and services to the city's homeless population. That August, the city signed a consent decree – the outcome of a lawsuit, *Callahan v. Carey* – that carried with it the legal obligation to provide shelter to all men in need. As the municipal government scrambled to fulfill this decree, it was met with growing resistance from neighborhood groups not just on the Upper West Side but across New York City. It seemed that no New Yorkers wanted to take on a large public shelter: In 1981, every local community board rejected Koch's efforts to place a 200- to 300-bed men's facility in its area of jurisdiction, and local residents protested the city's plans on the streets and in the courts.[44] By 1982, a frustrated Mayor Koch addressed this not in my back yard (NIMBY) attitude, proclaiming that an "outbreak of selfishness" had taken hold among city residents. Citing the protests that had occurred in the last year over city projects including the opening of a men's shelter in Harlem, Koch chastised, "Communities raise their hands not to volunteer, but to point somewhere else. Build it over there…not here."[45] The *New York Times* concurred, noting that if New Yorkers seemed in agreement about one thing, it was the sentiment, "Keep them out of *my* neighborhood."[46]

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a satisfying conclusion on this disparity, and most agree that the number resides somewhere in between the two estimates. Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper, *Private Lives/Public Spaces: Homeless Adults on the Streets of New York* (New York City: Community Service Society, 1981); Brendan O'Flaherty, *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 60. For a brief analysis of this disagreement, see Thomas J. Main, "The Homeless of New York," in Jon Erickson and Charles Willhelm, ed., *Housing the Homeless* (New Brunswick, NJ: The Center for Urban Policy, third edition, 1989), 86-87 (originally printed in *The Public Interest* 72 (Summer 1983), 3-28).

[44] Deirdre Carmody, "New York Is Facing 'Crisis' On Vagrants," *New York Times*, June 28, 1981.

[45] Maurice Carroll, "Koch Discerns an Outbreak of Community Selfishness," *New York Times*, December 18, 1982. Koch referred in his speech not only to anti-shelter protests, but also to protests over the construction of a jail in Chinatown, a waste treatment facility in Brooklyn, and low-income housing on the Upper West Side.

[46] "If Not Here, Where?" *New York Times*, November 27, 1982.

At the time, NIMBY protests were widely understood as an issue of community and individual intolerance. Media commentators and public officials believed that anti-homeless facility protests evidenced New Yorkers' unwillingness to compromise their own comfort for the sake of necessary – if admittedly undesirable – facilities and the people they served. Few historical studies have yet offered in-depth analysis of this issue. In *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America*, Ella Howard notes that in the 1980s they were "the common reply" of New York City neighborhood residents to municipal efforts to open homeless facilities.[47] Alex Vitale takes the opposite approach: In *City of Disorder*, he argues that "extreme NIMBYism" was "quite rare," and that many communities in the 1980s and 1990s were justifiably frustrated with the municipal government's haphazard and inequitable shelter policies.[48] But anti-homeless facility protests were not rare. Throughout the 1980s, communities across New York City continuously fought the city to prevent it from installing shelters in their neighborhoods. And these protests were based upon complex, ambivalent sentiments concerning not just government policy but also the new and – to many housed New Yorkers – disturbing people who were increasingly visible in New York City.[49]

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[47] Howard documents many instances of community opposition to homeless shelters and services in New York City throughout the 20th Century, but provides little historical analysis of these instances. Howard, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America*, 208. Political scientist Kathleen R. Arnold similarly describes NIMBY-ism as a common response to homeless facilities, and argues that it is one aspect of a broader societal prejudice against those with the least secure access to citizenship rights – namely, the homeless and immigrants. Kathleen R. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity: The Uncanniness of Late Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 52-53, 65.

[48] Alex Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York City Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 145-146.

[49] Social scientists have been thorough in examining the causes of NIMBY attitudes as they relate to the homeless. Yet few devote much attention to historicization, or to understanding the homeless as a culturally constructed group. Barrett A. Lee, et al, "Revisiting the Contact Hypothesis: The Case of Public Exposure to Homelessness," *American Sociological Review* 69:1 (February 2004), 40-63; Lois Takahashi,

Not in my back yard attitudes towards homeless shelters and service facilities were indeed informed by sentiments that could be characterized as anti-homeless. But these struggles took place in a drastically changing urban environment that had, for years, been the site of pitched battles over neighborhood change and against municipal disinvestment. Koch's accusations of an "outbreak of selfishness" masked this complex story. Neighborhood protests against homeless shelters and service facilities like the Derelict Assessment Center joined New Yorkers' ambivalence about the new demographic category known as "the homeless" with their continuing frustration at the disorder that had characterized the city's governance and landscape for the better part of the past decade.[50] As Joel Blau noted in his important 1992 work, much strife was due to "the city's own clumsy interactions" with community boards and neighborhood residents over the opening of homeless facilities.[51] Anti-homeless facility protests were not simply evidence of selfishness, intolerance, or anti-poor attitudes on the part of New Yorkers, but were rather the result of, to paraphrase Jennifer Brier, the specific circumstances that forced activists to confront homelessness.[52]

Homelessness, AIDS, and Stigmatization: The NIMBY Syndrome in the United States at the end the Twentieth Century (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1998), x-xi.

[50] As Kim Hopper has argued, the homeless in 1980s New York City actually signified disorder. Kim Hopper testimony at the Public Meetings of the Commission of the Homeless (aka "The Cuomo Commission), January 14, 1992. Mayor David Dinkins Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[51] Joel Blau, *The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 146.

[52] My understanding of this issue has been greatly informed by Jennifer Brier's work on community protests around children with AIDS in public schools in Queens, New York in the 1980s. Brier argues that such protests were not due to an increasing conservatism among historically liberal New Yorkers, but were rather specific responses that arose in the context of community members' efforts to exercise greater control over their neighborhood institutions, and their distrust of the scientific knowledge put forth by the municipal and federal government. Jennifer Brier, "'Save Our Kids, Keep AIDS Out': Anti-AIDS Activism and the Legacy for Community Control in Queens, New York," *Journal of Social History* 39:4 (Summer 2006), 965-987. Kim Hopper similarly hypothesized that NIMBY opposition stems from

Protests reflected the sense of unease and even danger that many in New York City felt when encountering un-housed street people, and when thinking in more abstract terms about the crisis of homelessness that afflicted their city. New Yorkers reacted to the increased public presence of homeless people with equal parts sympathy and disgust. In this dual conception, the homeless were unfortunate individuals who needed help, but also people whose "homeless" characteristics – including their unwashed appearance and odor, and public sleeping and urination – placed them outside of societal bounds of normalcy or appropriateness. The fact that the majority of anti-shelter protests occurred over facilities for homeless men was no coincidence: Rather, it was this group that most raised the hackles of already-embattled New Yorkers. The "new homeless" was the term most frequently used to describe the growing demographic of young men of color, and New Yorkers associated their presence with other aspects of urban disorder including petty crime, drug dealing and drug use, and litter and graffiti vandalism, all of which the media and government associated primarily with African American and Latino men.[53] While homeless women did exist, their numbers in these early years were smaller and they were often classified differently – both in the popular consciousness and in public

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anxieties about "the deranged" as threats to bourgeois order and property values, but also that "articulated concerns may have nothing to do with the specificities of proposed programs or housing, and everything to do with entrenched patterns of eroding local control." Hopper, *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 239 (footnote 28). And urban theorists Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear argue that homeless shelter opposition is related to the economic inequality and geographical segregation that has characterized many late-twentieth century United States cities. Jennifer R. Wolch and Michael J. Dear, *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

[53] Scholars have explored how raced and classed efforts to control disorderly bodies and behaviors were hallmarks of the infamous "broken windows theory" which influenced the "quality of life" policing measures explored by Mayors Koch and Dinkins and more fully implemented by Mayor Giuliani in the 1990s. Themis Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1. The original "broken windows theory" was articulated in James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, "The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic* (March 1982), 29-38.

policy – than homeless men.[54] This dynamic was evident in neighborhood protests, most of which were against the opening of men's shelters and service centers. Neighborhood residents often saw women's shelters as less problematic compared to facilities serving men, thus substantiating the argument that homeless men were at the heart of New Yorkers' discomfort.

Anti-shelter protests were also a manifestation of years if not decades of citizens' frustrations with the municipal government. Many neighborhoods experienced significant infrastructural decline after the New York City financial crisis of the 1970s, as the city failed to repair streets and streetlights and closed hospitals, schools, and firehouses. Often, the neighborhoods that the municipal government targeted for service cutbacks were the ones that already contained the highest number of low-income residents.[55] It was in these low-income neighborhoods – most of which were comprised of majority non-white populations – that the city was most likely to place a homeless shelter in the 1980s.[56] An editorial in *City Limits*, a left-leaning journal for local social justice issues, argued that the NIMBY problem lay not with city residents, but with Mayor Koch. "It is no accident," the editorial claimed, "that the four examples the Mayor was able to cite in his diatribe against the 'outbreak of selfishness' among community groups all involved

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[54] Joanne Passaro discusses this phenomenon in great depth in *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[55] For more on New York City in the 1970s, including the governmental policy of "planned shrinkage" and other aspects of urban disinvestment, see Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 256-287; William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982).

[56] Sharon Lord Gaber, "From NIMBY to Fair Share: The Development of New York City's Municipal Shelter Siting Policies, 1980-1990," *Urban Geography* 17:4 (1996), 301.

low income neighborhoods."[57] Indeed, despite the city's efforts to open shelters and service centers in a number of different neighborhoods, most of the facilities that came to fruition were located in neighborhoods that were predominantly comprised of low-income people and people of color.[58]

In addition, the mayor's approach in the early years of crisis often involved opening a shelter or service facility with little warning to or input from the surrounding community, and many of the sites chosen for shelters were the public schools and hospital buildings that the city had shuttered during the 1970s.[59] Community protests over the placement of facilities for the homeless were often tied to a broader sense that the municipal government was working against, not for, underserved neighborhoods. New York City residents saw the congregate shelters and large-scale service facilities proposed by the Koch administration as blight in their neighborhoods, and an insult to the injuries they had already sustained from decades of political and economic negligence.

Several neighborhoods played pivotal roles in reflecting public opinion and shaping city policy on homelessness in the earliest years of the crisis. This chapter first examines the role of the Bowery, New York City's historic skid row neighborhood, in shaping New Yorkers' understandings of the gender, race, and geography of homelessness. Then, it examines the protests that occurred as New Yorkers responded to the expansion of homeless people and services into their neighborhoods. It focuses

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[57] "Neighborhood Generosity Rejected," *City Limits* 8:2 (February 1983), 3.

[58] J. Zamgba Browne and Jerold Bishop, "Koch won't move homeless shelter," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1982.

[59] Nathan Leventhal interview; examples of homeless facilities that the city opened in shuttered community buildings include Public School 156 in Harlem and Public School 63 in East New York, Brooklyn, which became the two main municipal men's shelters in New York City outside of the original Men's Shelter in the Bowery.

particularly on protests that occurred on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in Harlem, and in East New York, a neighborhood in central Brooklyn.

In some ways, these three neighborhoods were similar: they all had sizable poor and working-class non-white populations; they all had a high concentration of old, low-income housing stock; and they had all suffered from some degree of municipal neglect and commercial disinvestment dating back a decade or longer. But there was a crucial difference: Unlike Harlem and East New York, which were predominantly low-income and Black, Manhattan's Upper West Side neighborhood was gentrifying. It had a sizable – and growing – population of middle-class white residents. Developers were buying and renovating Single Room Occupancy hotels and other low-cost residential properties. New higher-end businesses were opening and being built.[60] On the Upper West Side in particular, the New York Police Department was putting more effort into policing the types of petty crime and misdemeanors – including street corner drug dealing and public drinking – that would, by 1993, come to be defined as "quality of life" crimes by future mayor Rudolph Giuliani.[61]

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[60] By 1985, the Upper West Side far exceeded Harlem in wealth and housing cost. The Upper West Side's median income was $23,006, whereas in Harlem it was $7,071. Rental housing in Harlem was far less expensive than on the Upper West Side, and Harlem residents were far more likely to live near abandoned or dilapidated buildings than were Upper West Side residents. "Inequality Among Neighborhoods," *City Limits* 10:7 (August-September 1985), 13. This race and class bifurcation had begun much earlier. As Jerald E. Podair notes, New York was a blue-collar town in 1945, but had become a white-collar town by 1965, and "the city's new middle class was composed primarily of whites, not blacks." Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

[61] Some of the best evidence of the expansion of this type of policing on the Upper West Side in the 1980s can be found in the pages of the local publication the *West Side Spirit*. There, articles regularly reported on efforts to police the street drug trade and other public space issues, as well as on the gentrification of the neighborhood (only rarely did these two topics consciously overlap in *WSS* articles). For a few examples, see: Gilbert Scott, "West Side Crime," *West Side Spirit*, March 4, 1985; Christina Hoag, "What's Next For Amsterdam?" *West Side Spirit*, March 11, 1985; and an advertisement that ran continuously entitled, "Turn In A Pusher and Get A Reward," in which the *WSS* editorial board offered readers $500 "for ever tip that leads to the arrest, and conviction of a drug dealer, anywhere on the West Side."

This difference produced a major disparity in the outcome of neighborhood protests. While shelters for several hundred men each opened in Harlem and East New York, Upper West Side residents ultimately succeeded in halting the city's plans to locate a facility for homeless men in their neighborhood. Disparities in wealth, geography, and political power affected both the origins and outcome of not-in-my-back-yard struggles over homelessness. Neighborhood protests were motivated by far more than selfishness. Even as New Yorkers sought insight into the causes of mass homelessness and sympathized with the plights of un-sheltered people, they also understood their struggles against homeless facilities as necessary self-advocacy in the face of injustice. They believed that the presence of large numbers of un-housed, placeless people threatened their personal safety and the integrity of their communities.

"Another Bowery"

The class-action lawsuit *Callahan v. Carey* marked a turning point in the history of homelessness in New York City. Its 1981 outcome, a consent decree that compelled the city and state of New York to provide shelter to all men in need, changed not only *how* the city sheltered the homeless, but also *where*. The city had historically concentrated its services for un-housed single men in the Bowery, the Lower East Side neighborhood that was New York City's skid row.[62] The Human Resources Administration (HRA) distributed a limited number of vouchers for beds in private Bowery hotels; but by the late 1970s, more and more men were spending nights at the facility that HRA operated on East Third Street in Manhattan. Its official name, the

[62] "The Callahan Legacy: Callahan v. Carey and the Legal Right to Shelter," obtained from website of Coalition for the Homeless on September 26, 2013. http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/the-callahan-legacy-callahan-v.-carey-and-the-legal-right-to-shelter.

Men's Shelter, was misleading, as the building had not been equipped to operate as a shelter since 1965. Nevertheless, anywhere between 100 and 300 men often slept on folding chairs in a common area known as the Big Room.[63] The signing of the consent decree in 1981 meant that spaces like the Big Room, with its makeshift accommodations, inadequate restrooms, and lax security, would no longer cut it. After 1981, the Men's Shelter went from being the center of New York City's homeless services for men to just one point in an expanding constellation of facilities created by the city to meet the legal mandate of *Callahan v. Carey*. But the geographical expansion of homeless services did not sit well with many New Yorkers. They feared, in the words of Peter A. Rabinowitz, press secretary to state congressperson Stephen J. Solarz of Brooklyn, that a shelter in their neighborhood "might turn the place into another Bowery."[64]

The Men's Shelter had been in operation since around 1945, and its continuous presence on East Third Street between Bowery and Second Avenue had long defined that area of the Lower East Side. The Bowery had, for most of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, been known for its cheap saloons, cheap hotels, and the people who patronized them. It had also been home to a population of predominantly white men who, at various points in the twentieth century, might have been known as bums, vagrants, hobos, derelicts, or homeless. Though this population fluctuated – expanding during the

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[63] Stanley Brezenoff interviewed by Sharon Zane, October 23, 1992-June 14, 1993; Brendan O'Flaherty, *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 57. Shelter options were even more limited for homeless women, who were nevertheless not plaintiffs in the lawsuit. The introduction to this dissertation discusses the governmental and cultural construction of difference between homeless men and women in more detail. After Callahan v. Carey, the city of New York claimed that it would apply the same standard of shelter for women as it did for men. However, it took a 1982 lawsuit, Eldredge v. Koch, to enforce this promise, and multiple subsequent lawsuits to extend the right to shelter and minimum standards of shelter for homeless families with children.

[64] Colin Campbell, "Residents Assail City Proposal to House Derelicts in Gateway Park," *New York Times*, August 14, 1981.

Great Depression, for instance, and contracting in the 1950s and '60s – it was constant enough that an "infrastructure of soup kitchens" and other aid organizations developed around it, of which the municipal Men's Shelter was just one. While un-sheltered and marginally sheltered men also lived in other parts of the city – most notably Harlem, where African American "disaffiliated" men concentrated – the Bowery was the neighborhood most associated with homelessness and homeless services in New York City.[65]

Choice and circumstance may have in part been responsible for the Bowery's reputation as a haven for men who existed on the margins of society, but so was public policy. Its boundaries, like those of other urban skid rows around the nation, were enforced through police action throughout the twentieth century. In an effort to keep "Bowery bums" out of surrounding neighborhoods, police would arrest men who strayed outside the Bowery and charge them with public drunkenness or disorderly conduct. Often, these men were not guilty of anything more than sleeping or urinating in public, or jaywalking. But as historian Kenneth Kusmer notes, such arrests "helped to maintain class boundaries in the city and improve the image of downtown neighborhoods."[66] Koch's Deputy Mayor Nathan Leventhal confirmed this arrangement, noting of the Lower East Side "bums," "As long as they stayed in [their neighborhood] I guess the

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[65] "Infrastructure of soup kitchens" quoted from Stanley Brezenoff interview, 138-140. For more on the Bowery and the Men's Shelter's history, see Hopper, *Reckoning With Homelessness*, 6-7; entries for "Bowery" and "New York City" in Rick Fantasia & Maurice Isserman, *Homelessness: A Sourcebook* (New York City: Facts on File, 1994).

[66] Kenneth Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*: *The Homeless in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 234.

public did not perceive them as such a terrible problem."[67] On an island as geographically small and densely populated as Manhattan, neighborhood boundaries were necessarily porous; but policing the actions of homeless men and the spaces they inhabited helped to ensure that the Bowery was not simply the preferred neighborhood for New York's down-and-out population, but in fact one of the only neighborhoods where they might be left in peace.

Though the Bowery may have had a static image as New York City's skid row, it was, in fact, undergoing many of the same changes as other neighborhoods. Even while it was still a slum, New York's politicians and business leaders recognized the Bowery's potential real estate and commercial value, owing to its prime location downtown. In 1946, the New York Chamber of Commerce established a Bowery Improvement Committee to make the neighborhood more desirable for "the family, for business and for city revenues."[68] Mirroring the trend of urban renewal that characterized many cities in the middle decades of the twentieth century, New York's urban policymakers envisioned razing the decrepit buildings of the Bowery and building new structures that would appeal to middle-class residents and businesses. Decades before these changes actually occurred, the city first ceased improving the infrastructure of the neighborhood, allowing sidewalks and streets to crumble and neglecting to hold landlords accountable to municipal building codes. These measures contributed to the physical decay of the neighborhood, and reinforced the Bowery's image as unsalvageable, even as plans for

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[67] Leventhal interview, 102-103. Leventhal also notes that the standard seemed different for homeless women than for homeless men: He notes that unlike the "bums" who stayed in the Bowery, "the bag ladies…did proliferate," suggesting that people's understandings of homelessness and the space that the homeless could occupy was informed by gender differences.

[68] Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*, 234-235. ("…the family, for business and for city revenue" is a quote from Bowery Improvement Committee chair Wilfred Kirk, quoted in Kusmer.)

demolition and redevelopment stalled. By the 1970s, the practice of urban renewal had declined in American cities; but as real estate values once again began to rise in New York City, many of the old hotels and Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings that had historically provided shelter to the male derelicts of the Bowery were demolished or converted by developers to attract the higher rental incomes of new businesses and residents. This process soon became widely known as gentrification.[69]

Plenty of New Yorkers were ambivalent about the effects of gentrification on the Bowery. Even as middle-class residents participated in the process by renting or buying real estate in gentrifying neighborhoods and patronizing new commercial establishments, they also bemoaned the loss of the people and places that gave neighborhoods like the Bowery their unique character. A newer Bowery resident, Rick Rohife, eulogized the Bowery in near romantic terms. He noted in 1981, "Some real estate developers, some co-op owners, some shops that attract mainly suburban customers may want to clean up the Bowery, sanitize it, make it safe for money." But in the mean time, "men with plenty of time to pass will pass it with Night Train wine. Incoherent babblers will be released from psychiatric institutions into the cool fast world. Amputees will sling their extra clothes over a crutch. And they'll all find their way to the Bowery." Rohife's words were

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[69] Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*, 235-236. In the past, most scholars and policymakers explained gentrification as a racial and socioeconomic phenomenon in which property values increased as wealthier, mostly white residents moved into a neighborhood and displaced poorer and non-white residents. Some argued that artists and gay men often led these gentrification pushes by serving as "shock troops" into un-gentrified neighborhoods, thereby reinforcing the notion that gentrification was, first and foremost, a grassroots phenomenon. However, recent literature has attempted to nuance this perspective, drawing attention to the ways that gentrification is also a city- and business-driven process. As scholars now recognize, cities and developers have often used the presence of artists and queers to market a neighborhood as "edgy" or "creative," but those groups rarely benefit from a neighborhood's gentrification, and often experience the same "pricing-out" that drives other less wealthy residents from a gentrified neighborhood. Jenny Schuetz, "Casual Agents or Canaries in the Coal Mine? Art Galleries and Neighborhood Change," in Michael Rushton, ed., *Creative Communities: Art Works in Economic Development* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2013); Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

tinged with nostalgia for the gritty Bowery that was fading, and particularly for the men who inhabited the neighborhood. Yet as he acknowledged, change was already underway – and, in his portrayal, it was an inevitable force that he could not or would not attempt to stop.[70]

By 1979, the Bowery was changing, and so was the city's homeless population. As the historic population of white "Bowery bums" declined, a new group arose comprised of younger African American men. While the consent decree settling *Callahan v. Carey* was not signed until 1981, the Koch administration took steps before then to create more municipal shelter options for these men. In 1979, the city of New York opened the Keener Building, a new shelter for homeless men, on Ward's Island. The island had few permanent residents and, as its name implied, had historically hosted facilities for the indigent and other wards of the state, including psychiatric patients. Its location in the middle of the East River, separated by a body of water from Queens to its east, the Bronx to its north, and Manhattan to its west, reflected a long history of geographically isolating marginal and undesirable people, and ensured that the new shelter received few protestations from New Yorkers.[71] But the Keener Building quickly filled up. As Koch's Deputy Mayor Stanley Brezenoff recalled, "I remember telling Ed, 'I think this will handle the problem' [of more men seeking shelter]. It handled it for about a year." Indeed, within a year of the Keener Building's opening, the facility had

[70] Rick Rohife, "The Bowery Scene," *New York Times*, April 4, 1981.

[71] Robin Herman, "Providing Shelter for New York City's Homeless," *New York Times*, September 18, 1981.

exceeded its 300-person capacity by several hundred, and the city once again scrambled to create shelter for the growing number of people in need of it.[72]

In the wake of *Callahan v. Carey*, the Men's Shelter and its clientele played an important symbolic role in the battles that ensued around New York City over the opening of new facilities for homeless people. A sympathetic *New York Times* editorial noted of the growing conflict between the city government and anti-shelter activists, "New York has less experience with the homeless" than with prisoners and other undesirable populations. But the example to which residents could refer – namely, the decrepit, overcrowded Men's Shelter – was "not reassuring."[73] On the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Francis A. Lackner gave voice to these fears when he wrote to the mayor, "Just as the Men's Shelter has victimized its neighborhood for many years, this [derelict assessment] center will mean the death of the area surrounding it."[74] No one, it seemed, wanted their neighborhood to become "another Bowery."

The Upper West Side

Fears that the Derelict Assessment Center would turn the Upper West Side into "another Bowery" ran strong among many Upper West Side residents. In June of 1981, the Derelict Assessment Center became the first major not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) controversy of the homeless crisis. The impetus for the center's creation was not *Callahan v. Carey* – the consent decree was not signed until August of that year – but

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[72] Brezenoff interview, 138-140; O'Flaherty, *Making Room*, 60; "Hypothermia," *New York Times*, December 15, 1979; Robin Herman, "New York City Psychiatric Wards Overflow as Albany Changes Its Mental Health Role," *New York Times*, December 8, 1980.

[73] "If Not Here, Where?" *New York Times*, November 27, 1982.

[74] Francis A. Lackner to Mayor Edward I. Koch, October 8, 1981.

rather a state initiative to provide funds for the care of former patients of psychiatric institutions. The center would assist the "thousands of vagrants and former mental patients" who, according to a 1981 *New York Times* article, were "visible all over the West Side."[75] Rather than provide shelter – as the Keener Building did, and as other shelters soon would – the Assessment Center would provide showers and meals to its clients, and would be staffed by social workers equipped to help clients access drug and alcohol recovery programs, psychiatric treatment, emergency shelter and permanent housing.

The telegrams and letters that Mayor Koch received in the weeks and months following Community Board 7's meeting – in which the board approved the Derelict Assessment Center – suggested that the new center would compromise the stability of the surrounding neighborhood and the safety of its inhabitants. Doug and Dana Wyles wrote, "While as long-time West Siders, we agree that such services are necessary, we feel that they would be better located in a commercial neighborhood. Ours is a solidly upwardly mobile middle class neighborhood with many children."[76] The Wyleses feared for both the safety of neighborhood residents and the safety of the neighborhood itself. They saw those two things as bound together: Both their "upwardly mobile middle class neighborhood" and the children who resided in it were vulnerable to corruption by derelicts. Children's growing bodies and minds and the neighborhood's growing socio-economic status needed defense in the face of the malignant threats of the assessment center and its clientele.

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[75] Deirdre Carmody, "Proposed Referral Center for Homeless Disturbs West Side Neighborhood," *New York Times*, May 25, 1981; "Center to Help Vagrants Wins West Side Vote," *New York Times*, June 4, 1981.

[76] Doug and Dana Wyles to Mayor Edward I. Koch, June 10, 1981.

But the process by which the neighborhood acquired its "solidly upwardly mobile middle class" population was far from organic. Rather, it was largely the result of the previous three decades of urban renewal, and the citizens' activism that surrounded it.[77] The West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) was one of New York City's most ambitious urban renewal projects. Spanning a twenty-block stretch of the Upper West Side from West 87th to West 97th Streets, Amsterdam Avenue to Central Park West, WSURA was the site of major construction, and even more major conflict, for much of the 1960s and '70s. The WSURA – which was never completed – would have primarily built high- and middle-income residences in an area that the city had long classified as a slum.[78] But primarily at issue in resident debates over WSURA was the low-income housing the city planned to construct. While the area had historically been racially and economically mixed, the neighborhood's growing population of white middle-income residents contested the city's plan to reproduce this balance – even on a the smallest scale – when reconstructing the neighborhood. They argued instead that low-income housing would negatively affect the character of the Upper West Side.[79]

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[77] Local newspapers attested to the transformation of the northern blocks of the Upper West Side from a racially diverse, lower-income area of the city to a gentrifying neighborhood drawing upscale businesses and more white, upper-income residents by the 1980s. The *West Side Spirit* addressed this gentrification and its implications in numerous articles during its inaugural year of publication, 1985. For examples, see: Christina Hoag with Michael Davison and Evelyn Powers, "What's Next for Amsterdam?" *West Side Spirit*, March 11, 1985; State Senator Franz S. Leichter, "The Future of the West Side," *West Side Spirit*, April 8, 1985.

[78] For more on WSURA and the city's long history of urban renewal on the Upper West Side, see Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City,* 20-32. As Chronopoulos argues, many of the slum-like conditions in the area originated with the city's slum-clearance program itself: Most households evicted by the city from the renewal area relocated mere blocks away, creating overcrowding conditions and artificially inflating rents in the area.

[79] Susan Baldwin, "West Side Renewal Story: The Legal Battle Is Won, The Political Battle Remains Unwaged," *City Limits* (December 1982), 27-29; Dick Oliver, "The Hidden Demographics of the West Side," *West Side Spirit*, June 17, 1985. Even as late as 1980, the neighborhood was decidedly poorer than the area to its south, with household incomes averaging between $10,000 and $20,000, compared to the

A group that called itself CONTINUE, or the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment, led the legal battle to maintain a proportionately higher level of middle- and high-income housing in the West Side Urban Renewal Area. In several successful court cases that stretched over the 1970s, CONTINUE argued that low-income housing – and in particular, a planned public housing development of 160 units – was inappropriate for the neighborhood. The group cited federal Department of Housing and Urban Development guidelines on natural and social environmental impact to argue that public housing would create "an unideal 'concentration' of low-income people," which would negatively affect the neighborhood's social environment. As lawyer and housing advocate John Douw observed, this essentially amounted to the argument that "poor people" were an "environmental hazard," and not part of the "normal urban environment" CONTINUE desired.[80] The notion of a normal urban environment that did not include people from diverse socioeconomic classes reflected a narrow understanding of "normal," one that equated the word with "homogenous," rather than "average" or "typical."[81]

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average income of $25,000 for households in the neighborhood's southern half (roughly below 87th Street). Harlem, which bordered the neighborhood on the north, had an average household income below $10,000.

[80] The history of the siting of "undesirable" facilities—including factories, waste treatment facilities, and harmful chemical storage facilities—in underprivileged neighborhoods is long and increasingly well documented. The environmental justice movement arose to address such issues in the 1970s. To connect the placement of homeless shelters and other social service facilities to more traditionally-understood "environmental" hazards is both apt and disturbing: apt because a similar process of placing "undesirable" facilities in disempowered communities is indeed at work, and disturbing because the implication—often explicitly or near-explicitly stated—is that un-housed people, drug and alcohol addicts, mentally ill people, and others in need of social services are themselves environmental hazard.

[81] John Douw, "Poor People: The New Environmental Hazard," *City Limits* (February 1979), 12-13. In 1981, the city finally won the right to build the low-income housing it had planned, but urban renewal had, by then, declined as a policy, and observers noted the increasing unlikeliness that the city would follow through with its long-deferred plans. Baldwin, "West Side Renewal Story."

Upper West Siders' responses to the proposed Derelict Assessment Center bore the marks of this history; their letters to Mayor Koch reveal the extent to which they believed the neighborhood's character was threatened by a facility for homeless and marginally housed people. Francis A. Lackner wrote that the center would "drive out those who are attempting to improve and invest in this depressed neighborhood."[82] Others expressed their fears that the center "will lead to many disruptions at a time when the West Side is beginning to take pride in itself and people are feeling optimistic," or, more bluntly, that the center would ruin "what is now one of the few livable residential areas in Manhattan."[83] While the particular issue of homeless bodies in public space spurred Upper West Side community members' protestations, their actions also existed in the context of the previous decade's protests against the construction of public housing in the WSURA.

"The homeless" was indeed a newly-identified and stigmatized demographic whose presence invoked a singular reaction among housed New Yorkers;[84] but as the similarities between the Derelict Assessment Center protests and the WSURA protests reveal, the "homeless crisis" was also, in many ways, a new articulation of an old problem. Reactions to the presence of homeless people on city streets existed along a historical continuum that singled out poor people as undesirable neighbors, and as illegitimate presences in public space. Upper West Side residents understood poor people as destabilizing forces in their community, and feared that the Derelict Assessment

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[82] Francis A. Lackner to Mayor Edward I. Koch, October 8, 1981.

[83] Minnie G. Horowitz to Mayor Edward I. Koch, June 13, 1981; Ellyn Berman to Mayor Edward I. Koch, October 5, 1981.

[84] Takahashi argues that in the 1980s, the homeless – along with people with HIV/AIDS – carried a unique stigma in the U.S.-American popular consciousness that was distinct from other marginalized groups. Takahashi, *Homelessness, AIDS, and Stigmatization,* x-xi.

Center, like public housing in the WSURA before it, would lead to the dereliction of the neighborhood itself.

In the case of the assessment center, the threat of neighborhood decline rested particularly on the backs of homeless men. Susan Levin, the secretary of the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Assessment Center, characterized homeless men as "hostile and violent," and predicted that the clients of the Derelict Assessment Center would "traumatize" the surrounding neighborhood.[85] Edith Rosenstock wrote to Mayor Koch that "Children who attend school and elderly people like ourselves want to feel safe," and the presence of derelicts precluded that sense of safety. Doug and Dana Wyles similarly noted in their letter to the mayor, "Many children will be forced to pass by the center on their way to school." And one anonymous parent wrote, "Having a teen age daughter that must go to school thru this area…worries me."[86] None of the letter writers explicitly stated what fate might befall those who would have to walk past the Derelict Assessment Center, yet their words imply that the center's clientele could inflict violence upon groups typically thought of as vulnerable, including children, young women, and the elderly. Though few writers named their fears as explicitly as Susan Levin did, it is clear that the threats derelicts posed in the minds of neighborhood protestors were those commonly associated with men – and particularly non-white men – in the public consciousness, including violence, theft, and sexual assault.[87]

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[85] Susan M. Levin to Mayor Edward I. Koch (undated).

[86] (Mrs. Jesse) Edith Rosenstock to Mayor Koch, June 14, 1981; Doug and Dana Wyles to Mayor Koch, June 10, 1981; Resident (no name given) to Mayor Koch, October 5, 1981.

[87] As Khalil Gibran Muhammad notes, "Violent crime rates in the nation's biggest cities are generally understood as a reflection of the presence and behavior of the black men, women, and children who live there." Mark Anthony Neal argues that black men are seldom "legible" as anything other than criminals in the popular consciousness, and that this construction is used to justify the staggering rates at which black

Ironically, the Upper West Side had a higher population of homeless white men, women, and elderly people than did the city as a whole. Even as race and gender undoubtedly tinged the perspectives of residents decrying the Derelict Assessment Center, the image they held in their minds of "the homeless" may not have always matched what they saw on the streets.[88] And indeed, few could point to any concrete examples of criminal behavior. What they could – and did – point to again and again was bodily disorder: the homeless were "half naked"; they "wandered the streets," aimless and sometimes delusional; the scent of urine and feces clung to their bodies; they were, in the words of one letter writer, "human pollution."[89] Susan Levin argued that the "physical and mental problems," as well as the "skin ulcers, dirt, and lice so many homeless people exhibit" needed to be treated in a "medically-oriented setting" for which the Derelict Assessment Center was inappropriate.[90] And the Wyleses warned the mayor that the center would increase the prevalence of hepatitis in the neighborhood. (Hepatitis A, the most common strain of the virus, is spread through contact with an infected person's feces.)[91] The real danger of derelicts, then, lay in their bodily misbehavior: public

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men are incarcerated and subjected to other forms of legal and extralegal violence in the United States. Michelle Alexander examines the legal and citizenship ramifications of this racialized system of criminalization in *The New Jim Crow*. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York City: The New Press, 2010); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1; Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York City: New York University Press, 2013), 4-6.

[88] Kim Hopper, Ellen Baxter, Stuart Cox, and Laurence Klein, *One Year Later: The Homeless Poor in New York City, 1982* (New York: Community Service Society, 1982), 4.

[89] Ms. Roberta Jeanne Nicolella to Mayor Edward I. Koch, September 4, 1981; Nina Collins to Mayor Edward I. Koch, July 19, 1981. Mayor Edward I. Koch, "Homeless People: Pro," General Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[90] Susan Levin to Mayor Koch, August 11, 1981.

[91] Doug and Dana Wyles to Mayor Koch, June 10, 1981.

defecation and sleeping; unwashed appearance and odor; and delusional-seeming language and actions. The danger lay in the very fact of homeless people's unsheltered existence and the embodied qualities it laid bare in the city's public spaces.

The term "derelict," though its usage was fading by the early 1980s, captured well the social position un-housed people occupied.[92] The term literally means "abandoned" or "neglected," implying that derelicts were passive victims of a society that deserted them. But in the context of the conflict over the Assessment Center and other not-in-my-back-yard struggles, "derelict" was also an accusation leveled against those who held its title. City residents feared for their safety and social comfort; they worried that derelicts' mental and bodily disorder would, uncontained by physical boundaries, spill into their neighborhoods and onto their own bodies. Derelicts had not only been abandoned by society – they had also abandoned themselves, or at least the social norms that governed proper behavior and bodily comportment. They themselves, the discourse implied, were the authors of their own dereliction.

"Derelict" was also a decidedly masculine term, as municipal documents and citizens' letters attest. In her letter opposing the Derelict Assessment Center, Susan Levin chided Mayor Koch for his misleading characterization of the center's potential clients, noting, "You spoke of a place for 'shopping bag ladies,' an accurate description of only some of the clients at the Amsterdam Center."[93] New Yorkers tended, when speaking of female homeless people, to explicitly identify their gender – for instance, by referring to them as "shopping bag ladies" or simply "homeless women." Homeless men, in contrast, were "the homeless," "bums," "vagrants," or "derelicts," and masculinity was implicit in

[92] Hopper, *Reckoning With Homelessness*, 7.

[93] Susan Levin to Mayor Koch, August 11, 1981.

all of those titles. Nathan Leventhal, for instance, described the geography of visible homelessness by remarking, "Once [the homeless] started proliferating, other than the bag ladies who did proliferate, but once other homeless people just started sleeping in doorways in middle income neighborhoods, then of course everyone got outraged and wanted to do something about it."[94] In Leventhal's understanding, "bag ladies" were a different group than "other homeless people," and they provoked a different reaction from New Yorkers. This gendering of the language of homelessness undoubtedly informed Upper West Siders' understandings of the Derelict Assessment Center; Francis A. Lackner's letter to Mayor Koch even referred to the planned center as the "Men's Assessment Center," demonstrating the extent to which he (and presumably others) associated the Derelict Assessment Center with a male clientele.

The fear that male derelicts would lead to the dereliction of the Upper West Side was a new manifestation of an old dynamic. The Upper West Side had for years been a site of conflict as residents fought for more control in determining the future of the neighborhood, and many of the issues residents raised concerned the presence of poor people in the community. In the 1970s, in addition to CONTINUE's battle against public housing, a large amount of activism revolved around the growing concentration of poor people – and particularly, poor mentally ill people – living in the neighborhood's abundant supply of single room occupancy hotels.

Rooms in SROs were often the only types of housing that people surviving on a meager Supplemental Security Insurance income could afford. The New York City and state governments often directed mentally ill people – some of whom were former

[94] Leventhal interview, 102-103.

patients of state psychiatric institutions – to these facilities, and sometimes contracted directly with building owners to provide housing to people receiving SSI and other forms of government assistance. One organization, the West Side Community Task Force on Single Room Occupancy Housing, claimed that "former patients were, in some instances, literally transported in buses to our neighborhood and dumped into SRO hotels," where they were then left to "wander the streets of Broadway."[95] The estimated number of Upper West Side residents with psychiatric disorders dramatically increased in the 1970s, reaching somewhere between seven and ten thousand by 1978.[96] Poorly managed SROs were ill equipped to handle this clientele, and – as the following chapter discusses in more detail – few governmental services existed to replace the role that state institutions had previously played in the treatment and spatial containment of mentally ill individuals.

Far from simply demanding the closure of SRO hotels and the banishing of their populations, the West Side Community Task Force on Single Room Occupancy Housing called for the city government to provide more oversight to SROs and services to their residents, and to recognize that "the problem of SRO's must be defined as a housing problem in which single people with low incomes or on public assistance do not have adequate housing."[97] The group worried that without improvement, the Upper West Side would soon become a "service ghetto" where the city concentrated its community

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[95] The West Side Community Task Force on Single Room Occupancy Housing, "Report #1" (June 1978), 6.

[96] Peter Koenig, "The Problem That Can't Be Tranquilized," *New York Times*, May 21, 1978; "Report #1," 2.

[97] "Report #1," 29.

services for indigent people, and that better-off residents would flee the neighborhood.[98] While the group cited the "violent crime" and "prostitution" that it felt had become more prevalent in the neighborhood,[99] the vast majority of their thirty page report was given over to a discussion of deinstitutionalization, mentally ill SRO residents, and fears of neighborhood decline. The report vacillated between describing the SRO population as helpless and dangerous: they were both "preyed upon by criminals" and also criminals themselves, implicated in the neighborhood looting that followed the citywide blackout of July 1977.[100] Despite some references to their dangerousness, it seemed that most of the threat mentally ill SRO residents posed to the Upper West Side came in the form of their bodily and behavioral difference.

The intertwined issues of mental illness, bodily disorder, and neighborhood conflict were on vivid display in a 1978 article in the *New York Times*. In "The Problem That Can't Be Tranquilized," author Peter Koenig portrayed Gerard Kerrigan, a former state mental institution patient who lived in a Single Room Occupancy hotel on the Upper West Side. Kerrigan's insistence that his trousers have silver-colored zippers led him to frequently check his pants to ensure they met his requirements. Yet, as Koenig observed, such behavior on the streets of the city "upsets Zabar's-bound shoppers, sets off disorderly alarms in orderly minds, and is one more of those incidents that made formerly

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[98] "Report #1," 7. The report sites an unpublished paper by Julian Wolpert, "Service Facility Representation in Urban Communities" (1975). Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear identified this phenomenon, which they label the "service-dependent ghetto," in *Landscapes of Despair: From deinstitutionalization to homelessness* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1987), 3-5.

[99] "Report #1," 9.

[100] "Report #1," 7, 9.

hospitalized mental patients a political issue."[101] Koenig drew a connection between socially inappropriate bodily comportment (and especially the threat of unrestrained male sexuality) and mental illness among the homeless and tenuously housed. This was an association that many New Yorkers made; calling attention to it helps to elucidate the fear of the Upper West Side parent quoted above who worried about their teenage daughter passing by the Derelict Assessment Center on her way to school. The combination of mental instability and bodily licentiousness could be a dangerous one indeed.

Class was also an important part of this story: Kerrigan's actions offended "the Zabar's-bound shoppers" of the Upper West Side. Naming Zabar's, the famed gourmet grocery story, allowed Koenig to subtly reference the economic standing of those who shopped there. While fear or disgust at the sight — or perceived sight — of a man fondling himself or mentally ill people "wandering the streets of Broadway" was not a sentiment exclusive to the privileged, the ability to register complaint over such a sight, and to receive attention and validation for that complaint, often was.

The Derelict Assessment Center was conceived with this population in mind. James Rice, the assistant commissioner of the city's Department of Mental Health, described the center as a way to "make amends for the injustices heaped on these people who were dumped in the community."[102] But residents worried about the center's clientele: Although the HRA intended the facility to serve the large population of un-sheltered and tenuously sheltered people who lived on the West Side of Manhattan, some

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[101] Peter Koenig, "The Problem That Can't Be Tranquilized," *New York Times*, May 21, 1978.

[102] Carmody, "Proposed Referral Center for Homeless Disturbs West Side Neighborhood."

feared that the neighborhood would become "a dumping ground for the entire city."[103] Upper West Siders wrote to Mayor Koch of the unwelcome influx an assessment center would bring to the neighborhood. "Stop using the West Side as a dumping ground," wrote one resident of West 88th Street. Another writer wrote of how the center would "collect homeless people" and lead to the "traumatization" of the neighborhood. Such comments implied that the center would bring outsiders into the community, making the Upper West Side, as one resident put it, "a gathering place for undesirables."[104] Such descriptions suggested that the clients being served by the center would be outsiders to the community, but a letter from Minnie Horowitz suggested otherwise: She referred to the center's potential clients as the "vagrants, alcoholics, and former mental patients who roam the streets of the West Side."[105] Even as her words acknowledged the presence of impoverished people residing in the neighborhood, they also drew a line of demarcation between those whose presence in the neighborhood was suitable or legitimate and those who simply "roam" it.

Like most New Yorkers, the Upper West Siders protesting the Derelict Assessment Center recognized that the city's unsheltered people "desperately need help." But they urged the city to find a different neighborhood in which to provide that help. "Couldn't the Center for these unfortunate people…be put in a non-residential neighborhood?" asked Edith Rosenstock.[106] Another person bluntly wrote, "I am a resident of West 87th Street, and I am opposed to having an assessment center in the

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[103] Carmody, "Proposed Referral Center for Homeless Disturbs West Side Neighborhood."

[104] Vivian Hagl to Mayor Koch (undated); N. Figuero to Mayor Koch (undated).

[105] Mrs. M.G. Horowitz to Mayor Koch, June 13, 1981.

[106] (Mrs. Jesse) Edith Rosenstock to Mayor Koch, June 14, 1981.

middle of a residential neighborhood."[107] Minnie Horowitz articulated this mix of sympathy for the homeless and protectiveness for her neighborhood when she wrote, "this Center – to service perhaps thousands of these unfortunates – would be destroying what is now a good and fairly safe neighborhood."[108] As much as Upper West Side residents recognized the need for facilities to serve the city's growing population of un-housed people (and people who were perceived to be dangerous, unstable, or simply out of place like Gerard Kerrigan), they also drew upon a long history of envisioning the Upper West Side as an embattled neighborhood which needed to be preserved for middle-class residents.

The city never built the Derelict Assessment Center. It is unclear why not, as neither newspaper nor archival documents followed the struggle to its conclusion. It seems probable that the activism of neighborhood residents had a hand in defeating the center. However, it is also likely that the municipal government recognized that the Upper West Side was in fact a community in transition, and that the forces of gentrification were turning it from a "service ghetto" into a "solidly upwardly mobile middle class neighborhood," even though such a transition was by no means complete in 1981. It is telling that in 1982, the city finally won the right to build public housing in the West Side Urban Renewal Area and yet never did; as one observer noted, "The chances of this ever happening are far less plausible than if the case had been won in 1972," when there was more public support and political initiative for the construction of low-income

[107] Danielle McCafferty to Mayor Koch (undated).

[108] Susan Levin to Mayor Koch, August 11, 1981; Minnie G. Horowitz to Mayor Koch, June 13, 1981.

housing.[109] It is probable that, as was the case with public housing, so too did the municipal government recognize that the days when the Upper West Side was a "service ghetto" for the city were coming to an end.

Harlem and East New York

Mayor Koch delivered his speech on New Yorkers' "outbreak of selfishness" over one year after the protests against the Derelict Assessment Center. Koch's frustration was not aimed solely at those protesting the placement of homeless services in their neighborhoods: At the same moment, Chinatown residents were decrying the expansion of a city jail and Brooklynites marched against a planned waste treatment facility. But homeless shelters and services often took center stage during this period as the city's homelessness rate continued to rise dramatically and as the city government struggled to fulfill the mandate of *Callahan v. Carey*. At the moment of his speech, Koch was particularly incensed by protests in Harlem against a men's shelter the city opened in the building that had formerly housed Public School 156 on Eighth Avenue and 155th Street. But he no doubt also had in mind two other recent protests: One in East New York, Brooklyn, where residents had demanded that the city shutter a hastily-opened congregate men's shelter in the old Public School 63 building; the other in the former Sydenham Hospital building on Manhattan Avenue in Harlem, which itself had been the site of a fierce battle over the city's decision to close the hospital's doors fewer than two years earlier. The rhetoric of these protests did not differ substantially from that of Upper West Side residents protesting the Derelict Assessment Center, but the city's response to the

[109] Baldwin, "West Side Renewal Story," 27.

protests – and the eventual outcome – demonstrate the differences that existed between the neighborhoods.

East New York was the first neighborhood to experience upheaval. On October 21, 1981, HRA opened a 400-bed men's shelter at P.S. 63, an elementary school that the city had closed the previous year. The city claimed that the decision to use the building as a shelter was a quick one, spurred by a Manhattan Supreme Court judge's order just one day earlier that the city must immediately create a facility for the hundreds of men who – months after the *Callahan v. Carey* consent decree – were still not adequately sheltered. Yet East New York residents suspected otherwise: At a community-wide meeting in early November, residents noted that the city had carefully maintained the building since its closure the previous year, leading Jack Deacy, deputy commissioner of public affairs for HRA, to admit that the building had in fact been "under active consideration" as a shelter site for some time.[110]

In a retrospective interview, Koch's deputy mayor Nathan Leventhal conceded that in the early 1980s, the city's tactics for opening shelters were often secretive and swift:

> …Nobody wanted homeless shelters, which they don't today either, but they were really refusing. Forget it…So what I did is I – we opened homeless shelters regularly at two in the morning. And I would usually tell the borough president in advance and they would say, 'Fine, do what you have to do and then I'll blast you in the papers the next morning.' I said 'fine.' And so that's how we did it…We'd take schools, under-utilized schools. It was a real emergency kind of situation.[111]

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[110] Angela Jones, "Angry East New Yorkers want 400 derelicts out," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 7, 1981. This fact was also confirmed when State Senator Major Owens visited the site on October 21st and found that "extensive preparations had been made and the school had been kept in excellent condition for this 'sudden emergency.'" "Owens attacks quotas," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 7, 1981.

[111] Nathan Leventhal interview. While many politicians and housing advocates did indeed describe rising homelessness as an "emergency," Leventhal's use of the term obscures the city's own shortcomings in

Leventhal's blunt reminiscence confirmed what East New Yorkers had suspected: the city had planned to place a shelter in their community without consulting them. While Leventhal's words indicate that early-morning covert shelter openings became standard operating procedure for the city, they stand in sharp contrast to the prolonged process of debate and bureaucratic procedure that preceded the (failed) opening of the Derelict Assessment Center on the Upper West Side just a few months earlier. There, the Derelict Assessment Center was subjected to the (non-binding) approval of the neighborhood's community board, which had the effect of alerting community members to the plan, giving them time to mobilize before the center's opening. No such transparency existed with the East New York men's shelter: Neighborhood residents – including members of local Community Board 5 – learned of its opening after the fact, leading one shocked neighborhood resident, Clint Wike, to describe himself as "an angry parent," noting, "this was dumped on me without me having any say."[112]

To many East New Yorkers, the city's covert tactics represented more than simple ineptitude; they also signaled the city's lack of respect for or interest in the future of the neighborhood, confirming a decades-long pattern of discrimination and neglect. East New York experienced a trajectory similar to many urban neighborhoods in the United States following World War II. A combination of white flight, bank redlining, discriminatory federal loan policies, residential segregation enforced by realtors and

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planning for the rising amount of need for shelter that, by 1981, was well established. In its 1982 report, "Cruel Brinkmanship," the Coalition for the Homeless noted that the city had repeatedly ignored court orders to submit plans to expand the municipal shelter systems. Further, most of the shelters it did open – including the P.S. 63 shelter – violated the terms dictated by Callahan v. Carey by exceeding building capacity and not providing adequate toilets or showers for shelter users. Coalition for the Homeless, "Cruel Brinkmanship: Planning for the Homeless – 1983" (August 16, 1982).

[112] Angela Jones, "Angry East New Yorkers want 400 derelicts out," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 7, 1981.

landlords, and commercial and governmental disinvestment left the neighborhood's housing stock and infrastructure decrepit, and its mostly black and Latino residents with few options for geographical mobility or economic advancement. By the late 1960s, the neighborhood was in a state that historian Walter Thabit described as "almost total collapse."[113]

This legacy was by no means a thing of the past in 1981, as residents were all-too-aware. As one East New Yorker put it, "There's a complete lack of city services in our area: street lights are out, potholes are all over the place, sanitation facilities are shot, and our park is completely devastated, and people are afraid to walk out in the streets after dark."[114] A number of neighborhood associations had worked for years – with virtually no assistance from the city – to improve East New York's housing stock and to create programs that would support the community. Since the closing of P.S. 63 in 1980, local civic leaders had been moving forward with plans to use the building as a headquarters for an East New York business development corporation, which they hoped would spur the area's economic improvement. But as C. Moore, president of the local Bedford Friendship Block Association, noted after the shelter's opening, "Nobody wants to come

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[113] Walther Thabit, *How East New York Became A Ghetto* (New York City: New York University Press, 2005), 169. Scholarly works on residential segregation, redlining, and urban decline are numerous. Two of the most prominent examples are: Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 190-230; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). For this history as it relates to other areas of Brooklyn, see Wendell E. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2001), 175-218.

[114] Frank Dexter Brown, "Homeless shelter sparks fear, spite," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 2, 1982.

to East New York now."[115] East New Yorkers had long been working to reverse the tide of commercial and municipal disinvestment from their neighborhood; but the shelter, they feared, was a calamitous roadblock on the fraught path to neighborhood recovery.

The next year, a similar scenario unfolded in Harlem when the city opened a 200-bed facility for homeless men in the recently closed P.S. 156 building. Like the closure of P.S. 63 in East New York, the closure of P.S. 156 in Harlem was merely the latest episode in a trajectory of municipal disinvestment that had characterized the historically black neighborhood for decades. Harlem residents organized continuous protests outside of the facility, eventually compelling city officials to meet with them. The meeting was fruitless, however, as Mayor Koch declared that Harlem residents would have to convince him that the city's decision to place a shelter in their neighborhood was "wrong," a task at which he apparently doubted they would succeed. And in fact, the shelter remained.[116]

At protests against the P.S. 156 shelter, Harlem residents cited community safety as a primary reason that they opposed the shelter. Its location near a public school and two public housing developments was a particular sore point, as parents and concerned community members urged Mayor Koch to consider the safety of neighborhood children. Outside the shelter, one protestor's handwritten sign summed up the sentiment: "GET RID OF THE BUMS. WE WANT OUR COMMUNITY SAFE, CLEAN, AND FREE OF DISEASES FOUR OUR RAISING CHILDREN!!!!!"[117] Such protestations are virtually indistinguishable

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[115] Angela Jones, "Angry East New Yorkers want 400 derelicts out," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 7, 1981.
[116] J. Zamgba Brown, "Koch won't move homeless shelter," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1982.

[117] Thea Breite, "Harlem to Koch – 'No Homeless Here'," *Uptown*, December 8, 1982.

from those of the Upper West Side community members who, just one year earlier, cited neighborhood vitality and their children's safety as their primary reasons for objecting to the Derelict Assessment Center.

In both Harlem and East New York, as on the Upper West Side, neighborhood residents viewed homeless men in particular as a threat. Residents cited the potential for crime and violence that they feared the shelters' clientele would bring to their respective neighborhoods. State Senator Major Owens, whose district included East New York, accused Mayor Koch of mischaracterizing the shelter's population as "harmless, homeless old men." As the *New York Amsterdam News* article that quoted him clarified, such characterization "is a deliberate falsification of the reality of the situation. Many of the men are neither old nor harmless," but in fact "alcoholics, drug addicts and/or mentally ill young men."[118] At a meeting to discuss the P.S. 156 shelter in Harlem, the Reverend Lawrence E. Lucas, pastor of Resurrection Church, had even stronger words. Speaking against Koch's assertion that he would wait to be proven wrong on the decision to open the shelter, Lucas asserted that what Koch really meant was, "If you show me some dead kids and raped kids, then I will reconsider."[119]

In neighborhoods across New York City – neighborhoods that spanned the racial and socio-economic spectrum – homeless men were understood as a particular risk. Their bodies were associated with disease, addiction, and criminal and sexual deviance. Further, both Harlemites and East New Yorkers – like Upper West Siders – understood homeless men as foreign threats that infiltrated their communities. Just as Upper West

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[118] "Owens attacks quotas," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 7, 1981.

[119] J. Zamgba Browne and Gerald Bishop, "Koch won't move homeless shelter," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1982.

Siders worried that a Derelict Assessment Center would make their neighborhood a "dumping ground" for the entire city, so too did Harlem and East New York residents understand the homeless being brought to newly-opened shelters in their neighborhoods as outsiders. In East New York, local activist Vito Batista accused the city of trying to "get all the homeless men off the Bowery so they can put high-rise buildings there."[120] In Harlem, protests against another proposed men's shelter in the building that had formerly been Sydenham Hospital leveled similar accusations at the city. A group calling itself Community Residents of Harlem distributed a flier proclaiming that a men's shelter at Sydenham "will mean destruction to the Harlem community."[121]

> This crazy plan will bring over 400 drug addicts, rapists, killers and mental rejects to the Harlem community. The Outsiders, mostly white homeless men, will be transported by buses from the Bowery to Sydenham.

The characterization of the shelter's clientele as white served to reinforce the men's outsider status in relation to the majority black Harlem community. Whether or not the characterization was based in fact (and it was most likely not, as New York's homeless population was, by 1982, increasingly comprised of black men), it highlights the extent to which many Harlem residents believed their community to be under siege by the municipal government. It also is merely one component of the broader racial analysis groups like Community Residents of Harlem made. Their flier continued,

> HARLEM NEEDS DECENT HOSPITALS, DECENT HEALTH CARE FACILITIES, AND DECENT HOUSING – NOT A CRIME RIDDEN DESTRUCTIVE MEN'S SHELTER. The Men's Shelter for the Sydenham building is a plan devised by Mayor Koch as a vindicted (sic) way of punishing the Blacks for voting against him for Governor. He selected Sydenham because it

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[120] Frank Dexter Brown, "Homeless shelter sparks fear, spite," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 2, 1982.

[121] Community Residents of Harlem, "Harlem Community in Danger: Men's Shelter Planned for Sydenham," November 15, 1982. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, Clark Whelton, New York City Municipal Archives.

> is symbolic to Blacks throughout New York State…WHY SHOULD THE HARLEM COMMUNITY BE OVERCROWDED WITH THE OUTSIDE HOMELESS MEN AND THE WHITE COMMUNITIES ARE EXCLUDED AND PROTECTED FROM THE HOMELESS? It is okay to destroy the Black communities by racist standards. It should be noted that all of the City shelters are located in Black and Puerto Rican communities.

Harlem residents had good reason to feel that they were being punished by the municipal government: Since Koch's election in 1978, little had changed in their neighborhood, even as neighboring communities began to see improvement. Instead, areas like Harlem and East New York watched as developers began to renovate residential buildings and as new businesses opened in other neighborhoods. In addition, most of the schools and hospitals the city closed in the interest of fiscal "austerity" after 1975's near-bankruptcy were in low-income neighborhoods of color.[122] Sydenham was just one such site; in Harlem the municipal government had also closed Logan Hospital and re-purposed Metropolitan Hospital as an addiction treatment facility, thus taking away the emergency services and clinics upon which many uninsured Harlemites (as well as those insured by Medicaid, which many private hospitals and doctors did not accept) had relied for medical care. Thus, as communities like Harlem and East New York were losing vital services, they were gaining facilities like congregate homeless shelters that drastically altered the population and landscape of their neighborhoods.

In a memo to mayoral staff member Clark Whelton, Koch emphasized his "contempt" for those protesting city shelter sites, including a neighborhood priest. He contemplated writing an opinion piece for a local newspaper in which he asks Reverend Lucas, "Father, 25 days before Christmas and no room in the inn?" invoking the biblical story of Jesus's birth in a manger after his homeless mother, Mary, was turned away by

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[122] Jinaki Bryant, "Hysteria sets in," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 14, 1979.

an innkeeper.[123] The editorial staff of the *New York Amsterdam News* offered a more nuanced analysis of the issue that Koch was willing to give. "The Harlem residents who are demonstrating against the use of P.S. 156 are outraged because they feel that their neighborhood was chosen as a site for a shelter without regard for their views," the editors noted. "It would," however, "be shameless for anyone to suggest that the homeless by definition are undesirable and therefore unwelcome."[124] This sentiment was echoed in several letters to the editor, where readers urged Harlem residents to rise to the occasion ("The mayor has presented us with a challenge and an opportunity to turn despair into triumph," wrote Mrs. Julian Jordan), and, more cynically, to direct their protest towards other, more pressing concerns, such as the prison work release programs located in Harlem, and to accept a new homeless shelter.[125]

But Harlemites' accusations of racism could hardly be dismissed out of hand: Of the six city-run homeless shelters in New York City in 1982, four were in majority poor, majority non-white neighborhoods, and one other was on Ward's Island, which had no residential population.[126] And many politicians, civic and religious leaders agreed with local residents that racial bias motivated the siting of homeless shelters in New York City. As Reverend Lucas asked at the public meeting on the P.S. 156 shelter, "Why do all

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[123] Mayor Edward I. Koch, "Memorandum," December 15, 1982. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Department Correspondences, Clark Whelton, New York City Municipal Archives.

[124] "The homeless in Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 27, 1987.

[125] Julie Duvall, "Choices facing Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 18, 1982; Mrs. Julian Jordan, "Homeless issue is a challenge," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 18, 1982.

[126] J. Zamgba Browne and Jerold Bishop, "Koch won't move homeless shelter," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1982. For further documentary evidence of this phenomenon, see Gaber, "From NIMBY to Fair Share," 301, 303, and 305.

the jails have to be in Chinatown, and why do all the shelters have to be in Niggertown or Spictown?"[127]

Conclusion

Reflecting in February 1983 on the heated anti-shelter battles that had characterized the previous two years, David J. Stern, executive director of the Upper East Side's Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter, noted, "When Harlem protested, they were fighting for neighborhood survival." The previous month, the city of New York had opened a men's shelter at the Upper East Side's Seventh Regiment Armory, and Stern's Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter had been instrumental in mobilizing community support. No protests accompanied the shelter's opening; in fact, community members had welcomed the homeless men with donations of clothing and pastries. Though Stern admitted that he had "no easy answers" for why residents of the wealthy, predominantly white Upper East Side responded so affirmatively to the new shelter, he hypothesized, "A shelter can tip the scales sometimes. It's not going to tip the scales on the Upper East Side. People here are not going to flee because of a shelter."[128]

The idea that a facility for homeless men would "tip the scales" in a less secure area, leading to (or reinforcing) its decline, did indeed seem to inform the fears of New Yorkers in Harlem, East New York, and the Upper West Side. As Stern acknowledged, neighborhood stability was one key factor in the successful integration of a homeless shelter: If community members felt that their neighborhood was secure and well cared for by citizens and city, fears of its demise might be less likely to arise. Community

[127] Thea Breite, "Harlem to Koch – 'No Homeless Here'," *Uptown*, December 8, 1982.

[128] Sheila Rule, "Neighbors Join to Assist Shelter on the East Side," *New York Times*, February 19, 1983.

involvement was another factor: The opening of the shelter at the Seventh Regiment Armory marked the city's first successful attempt to collaborate with community members on the opening of a facility for the homeless. Upper East Siders had also previously been involved in the creation of a private shelter for homeless women, and Stern hypothesized that that first positive experience "made it easier for the armory shelter to work." Facilities for the homeless were not – Stern's comments implied – particularly desirable, and yet their presence did not have to mean the death of the surrounding neighborhood.

As Stern noted, however, the Upper East Side's location, demographics, and history of homeless aid efforts made it vastly different from other neighborhoods.[129] The neighborhood's experience with the city was an exception to the rule. Throughout much of the 1980s, the municipal government continued to open shelters using the policy that geographer Sharon Lord Gaber labeled "sneak 'em in," opening (or attempting to open) multiple shelters without notifying community members or community boards.[130] The municipal government clearly did not apply its homeless policy equally in all neighborhoods, but rather weighed the political costs and benefits of working with – or ignoring – community members' interests.

Residents across New York City reacted with ambivalence to the increased presence of un-housed people in public space, with sentiments that often contained elements of both sympathy and disgust. Anti-shelter protests reflected New Yorkers' ambivalence about the new demographic category known as "the homeless," but it also reflected many New Yorkers' deep distrust and frustration with the municipal

[129] Rule, "Neighbors Join to Assist Shelter on the East Side."

[130] Gaber, "From NIMBY to Fair Share," 302-304.

government. Mayor Koch's condemnation of anti-shelter protests as an "outbreak of selfishness" grossly mischaracterized the situation. As *City Limits* analyzed in a special 1987 issue entitled "The NIMBY Dilemma,"

> Unlike Koch's older technologies – like calling his opponents 'wackos,' NIMBY is subtle and lethal. It is a kind of verbal neutron bomb that allows the mayor's policies to remain standing, while decimating all serious criticisms of his wasteful and wrongheaded housing and homeless programs and obscuring the merits of alternative programs proposed by critics. NIMBY undermines the credibility and honesty of his opponents, portraying them as narrow, mean, and self-interested.[131]

Indeed, housing and homeless advocacy groups – including the Coalition for the Homeless, the organization founded by Robert Hayes, the lead lawyer in *Callahan v. Carey* – remained critical of the Koch administration's tactics to shelter homeless New Yorkers. Throughout the 1980s, the city continued to open large congregate shelters in low-income, non-white neighborhoods with little warning to or dialogue with the surrounding community. At the Summer Avenue Armory in Bedford-Stuyvestant, a majority-black neighborhood in central Brooklyn, the city did just that in 1986, leading to a new wave of community protests. As Coalition for the homeless staffer Beth Gorrie noted, Bedford-Stuyvesant residents "have every reason to feel the Summer Avenue Armory is For Washington revisited," referring to yet another community struggle against a homeless shelter. The city had opened a shelter at the Fort Washington Armory in 1981, in a neighborhood comprised primarily of poor Latino residents. Although it had been intended to house only 200 men, by 1986 it sheltered anywhere between 900 and

[131] "Editorial: NIMBY's Smoke Screen," *City Limits* (November 1987), 2.

1,200 men per night. Bedford-Stuyvesant residents feared a similar scenario would occur in their community; but their pleas to the city were largely ignored.[132]

The NIMBY dilemma continued through the Koch administration and into his successor David Dinkins' term. When, in 1991, Dinkins announced his plan to open 35 small shelters across New York City – which would allow the city to downscale and even close some of the large congregate shelters that had drawn the ire of citizens, homeless advocates, and homeless people alike – residents across the city protested. City Council speaker Peter Vallone, who represented Astoria, Queens, remarked, "It's almost as if you're saying we have a serious disease and we'll spread it so everybody will suffer from it."[133]

Examining anti-homeless facility protests helps us to better understand how New Yorkers reacted to the placement of homeless facilities in their neighborhoods, and why. Rather than viewing these protests as uniform reactions to a city-wide dilemma, examining the local specifics of these NIMBY protests allows us to contextualize them in the local history and activism of individual neighborhoods and community groups. Even as New Yorkers across a wide range of races, classes, and geographic locations displayed sentiments towards the homeless that seemed informed more by fear and disgust than by sympathy, considering the contexts in which these protests took place is crucial to understanding the specific circumstances that led activists on the Upper West Side, in East New York, and in Harlem to confront homelessness.

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[132] Mary Papenfuss, "Shelter Wars," *City Limits* (December 1986), 8.

[133] Peter Vallone testimony at Public Meetings of the Commission of the Homeless (aka "The Cuomo Commission"), November 20, 1991.

Chapter 2
"I Was A Political Prisoner": Joyce Brown, Mental Illness, and the Civil Liberties of the Homeless

Introduction

On October 28, 1987, a team from New York City's Homeless Emergency Liaison Project confronted Joyce Brown, a middle-aged African-American homeless woman, on the corner of Second Avenue and 67th Street on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The team forcibly removed Brown from the sidewalk where she had lived for the past year and transported her to Bellevue Hospital, where an attending physician injected her with Haldol, an anti-psychotic medication, and Ativan, a tranquilizer. This was not Brown's first interaction with the Homeless Emergency Liaison Project, or Project HELP, as it was frequently called. In fact, the city had attempted to hospitalize Brown on several prior occasions, each time transporting her to Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric treatment. But this instance was different: In the past, Brown had quickly been evaluated and discharged by an attending physician. This time, the city instructed Bellevue to admit Brown to its psychiatric ward. Upon waking from her drug-induced sleep and finding that she was not free to leave, Brown telephoned the New York Civil Liberties Union and requested the aid of a lawyer.[1]

The ensuing battle over Brown's freedom played out in both the courtroom and the media, and it gripped New York City. While the legal parameters of the case focused on a narrow issue—whether or not Brown posed a danger to herself or others, thereby meeting the criteria for involuntary hospitalization—the media did not stop there. Both

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[1] *In the Matter of Billie Boggs, Petitioner*, 136 Misc. Reports, 2nd Series, 1084 (N.Y. State S.C. 1987). A detailed analysis of Brown's case and its legal implications can be found in Judith Lynn Failer, *Who Qualifies for Rights? Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Civil Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 11-28.

during and after her release from Bellevue, Brown became a minor celebrity, appearing on local and national television programs—including Regis Philbin's *Morning Show* and on the talk show *Donahue*—and featuring prominently in a seemingly endless stream of newspaper and magazine articles. Many of these portrayals emphasized the seeming contradictions Brown embodied: A mentally ill person known for her sidewalk rants who spoke lucidly and intelligently with television hosts; a homeless person known for her bodily filth who cleaned up so well. These portrayals demonstrate the inextricability of Brown's homelessness from her mental illness, and how both of these issues were bound to a powerful set of raced and gendered assumptions about poverty, personal responsibility, and civil liberties.

Race and gender were implicit but ubiquitous presences in narratives of Brown's history and behavior, and in analyses of her rights. An in-depth article in *New York* magazine, for instance, described Brown's long history of mental instability, which had—according to her sisters—made it difficult for Brown to hold employment, pay rent, or maintain a relationship with her family.[2] Yet the author, Jeanie Kasindorf, also detailed many seemingly superfluous moments. She wrote, for example, of the lead-up to Brown's appearance on *Donahue*:

> When the *Donahue* producers called, [Brown] asked them if they would buy her some clothes and pay to have her hair done. They said, "Yes, as long as it's within reason." So on the day of the show, Joyce went to Bloomingdale's and bought stunning black knit pants and a top for $296. Then she made an appointment for a shampoo, cut, and permanent at Suga, the chic East 57th Street hair salon.

[2] Jeanie Kasindorf, "The Real Story Of Billie Boggs: Was Koch Right – Or The Civil Libertarians?" *New York* (May 2, 1988), 36-44.

Kasindorf's tone implies that Brown's purchases were not, in fact, "within reason." Her intent might have been to provide further evidence of Brown's mental instability, but the detailed account of Brown's spending on her clothes and appearance is also reminiscent of the raced, gendered discourse that surrounded "welfare queens" in the 1980s. The idea that poor Black women were gaming the system, spending honest people's money on luxury items, infused the image Kasindorf painted of Joyce Brown as much as it did the iconic image of the woman in Chicago with "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 social security cards," and $150,000 in cash whom Ronald Reagan first described in his 1976 presidential campaign.[3]

Like the stereotypical welfare queen, Brown was simultaneously conniving and inept.[4] As Kasindorf described it, Brown convinced *Donahue* producers to pay for her expensive beauty treatments, but failed to budget enough time for the treatments before she was expected to arrive at the television studio. And when Brown arrived at the salon, the stylist "found something—apparently lice—crawling in her hair. He refused to touch it."[5] Kasindorf's portrayal suggests that while Brown may have attempted to convince the public otherwise, her illness and her poverty were pathological characteristics that she could not so easily escape. The focus on Brown's self-indulgence, her incompetence, and her filthiness reveal the ways that race and gender were encoded into the embodied discourse on homelessness and mental illness.

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[3] "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *New York Times* (February 15, 1976).

[4] For more on the concept of the "wily" welfare queen as a "marriage of contradictions," see Bridges, *Reproducing Race,* 201-212.

[5] Kasindorf, "The Real Story of Billie Boggs," 44.

Scholars including Ange-Marie Hancock and Khiara M. Bridges describe the power of "code words" in perpetuating raced, gendered images that, paradoxically, make no explicit mention of race or gender. "Welfare" for instance has, in the late-twentieth century United States, become near synonymous with "Black" and "woman."[6] Coding played just such a role in the construction of public opinion about Brown, and in the creation of public policy around homelessness and mental illness, more broadly. In the New York City of the 1980s, the adjective "homeless" often described a type of behavior and appearance as much as it did a concrete population.[7] "Homeless" was also a raced and gendered category that reflected not only African American men's, women's, and children's predominance among un-housed populations, but also the cultural stereotypes that linked blackness, poverty, crime, and uncontained sexuality in the 1980s (and, arguably, throughout much of modern U.S. history.)[8]

The discourse that took place both within and outside of the courtroom reflected not only the narrow question of whether Joyce Brown was a danger to herself or others, but also the larger panic over urban homelessness that characterized the 1980s. Brown became a medium for such debates, and her case embodied deeper tensions over race, poverty, social welfare, individual liberties, community rights, and urban gentrification in New York and across the United States. At the same moment that New Yorkers debated the merits of programs like Project HELP, they also considered the permissibility of

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[6] Bridges, *Reproducing Race,* 212-220; Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust,* 1-5.

[7] Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone?* 13-34.

[8] For discussions of these links, see Bridges and Hancock, and also Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

public sleeping, begging, and peddling.[9] They questioned the presence of homeless shelters and welfare hotels in residential neighborhoods, and linked them to the scourge of petty crime, littering, and graffiti that many believed was harming their quality of life.[10] It is impossible to consider Joyce Brown's forced hospitalization without also taking into account these broader issues and the way they informed debates over the rights of mentally ill homeless people in New York City.

Politicians, journalists, and laypeople understood the connection between mental illness and homelessness to be a particular and tragic "truth" of the crisis. Indeed, people with mental illnesses did comprise a sizable minority of the overall homeless population in New York City. But that proportion was far outstripped by the degree to which mental illness dominated the discourse around homelessness.[11] Perceptions of the homeless as mentally ill greatly influenced popular understandings of who "the homeless" were and what risk they posed to the safety of New York residents and neighborhoods. These perceptions also influenced many New Yorkers' desired solutions to homelessness, as

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[9] (All acts that, while not exclusively performed by the homeless, were often associated with homelessness and its visibility in the public spaces of New York City.)

[10] "Quality of life" was a term that Ed Koch had used since early in his mayoralty, and this was reflected in multiple internal documents from the Koch administration, and in letters that his constituents wrote to him. The concept guided the Koch administration's understanding of how to both formally and informally police the people and acts they considered to be public nuisances. Striking a balance between promoting "urban civility" and staying within (or cautiously testing) the legal parameters of individual civil liberties appeared to be a constant focus of members of the Koch administration. For one example, see William H. Grinker, Commissioner, Human Resources Administration, "Memorandum: Panhandling" (to Stanley Brezenoff, First Deputy Mayor), August 17, 1988. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[11] In one particularly egregious example, Charles Krauthammer cited the results of one study of one homeless shelter to argue that 90 percent of homeless Americans could be classified "mentally ill" and should therefore be institutionalized. Charles Krauthammer, "For the Homeless: Asylums," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1985. The original study Krauthammer cited is Ellen Bassuk, et al, "Is Homelessness a Mental Health Problem?" *American Journal of Psychiatry* 12:141 (1984), 1546-1550.

hospitalization and institutionalization were seen as viable measures to control the city's presumably mentally ill and incompetent homeless population.

The case of Joyce Brown illustrates and troubles these conventional narratives about mental illness and homelessness in equal parts. Even as her mental illness played a seemingly large role in her homelessness, Brown's own words and experience defy those who would draw a facile connection between the issues, or presume easy solutions concerning treatment (in the medical, legal, and social senses of the term). And indeed, this complexity is reinforced by the lack of popular or political consensus that existed around the issue. Joyce Brown's hospitalization, the public's reaction to it, and her story's ambivalent conclusion suggest in fact that few simple answers exist about this controversial topic's origin or solution.

Brown's story also raises pertinent questions about disability, individual rights, social welfare, and public space in the United States. Many of these questions predate the homeless crisis of the 1980s; they are visible in earlier moments of cultural discord over the presence of indigent and disabled people in public, and in the United States' long and complex history of institutionalizing people whom doctors or the government deemed "mentally deficient," "morally deviant" or "dangerous." As scholars have shown, discriminatory laws against disabled people and diagnoses resulting in institutionalization most often arose where gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability intersected in impossible or unacceptable permutations.[12] Joyce Brown was deemed "mentally ill" and

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[12] For the history of ordinances against public begging by disabled people, see Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*. A multitude of books provide insight into the United States' legacy of forced institutionalization and its connection to race, gender, sex, class, and disability, including Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Alison C. Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth Century America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 52-82; Kim Nielsen, *A Disability History*

"dangerous" by the city of New York, but this diagnosis cannot be separated from her status as an African-American homeless woman occupying public urban space. How did the discourse around mental illness and homelessness, in general, and Joyce Brown's case, in particular, reflect raced, gendered, classed, and ableist notions of health, public belonging, and citizenship? Joyce Brown's story demonstrates the deeply tangled nature of these categories and the ways that New Yorkers (including Mayor Edward Koch, and Brown herself) parsed them as they participated in the fraught and morally complex debates over homelessness and mental illness in the United States.

"You're Loony Yourself": Expanding Project HELP

Brown was the first person seized by Project HELP under a new citywide initiative spearheaded by Mayor Koch. Over the course of his mayoralty, Koch had frequently expressed frustration with the legal constraints against requiring homeless people to seek shelter or hospitalization. Like many New Yorkers, he seemed to believe that most of the people who lived on the streets of New York City were mentally unstable, and that they posed a danger to themselves or others and required state guardianship. His efforts to expand Project HELP, and to designate more hospital beds for the homeless mentally ill, reflected this belief.[13]

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of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); and Michael Rembis, *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls, 1890-1960* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

[13] Nathan Leventhal, former Deputy Mayor in the Koch administration, confirms Koch's frustration. He claims, "[Koch] was very upset that he could not do what he thought needed to be done. So he often went out sometimes himself and tried to persuade people to go to shelters. Remember that. And it wasn't just for publicity….He was very disappointed that he couldn't just order them to go into shelters, because they were a danger to themselves." Nathan Leventhal, interviewed by Sharon Zane, August 12-November 24, 1992, Edward I. Koch Administration Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York City, 98-99.

The connection between homelessness and mental illness was not imaginary: People with mental illnesses comprised an estimated twenty-five to thirty percent of New York City's homeless population, and the rate among people living on the streets was probably higher.[14] Yet the connection that many government officials, journalists, and homeless advocates drew between homelessness and mental illness was overstated: As Cynthia J. Bogard has noted, nearly every article on homelessness published in the *New York Times* in 1981 emphasized "the mental derangement of the homeless."[15] The discourse surrounding these two issues was intertwined to such an extent that it became difficult, in New York City in the 1980s, to consider one issue without the other, or to know where one issue ended and the other began. As New Yorkers constructed these discourses linking homelessness and mental illness, they made it increasingly easy to understand mental illness as causative of homelessness, and to envision solutions to homelessness that presumed the mental incompetence or irrationality of the homeless, and to call for the use of force in removing the homeless from public places. But as the

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[14] Commission on the Homeless, "Testimony of Sam J. Tsemberis, Ph.D., Director of Project HELP," December 10, 1991, 1. Mayor David N. Dinkins Collection, New York City Municipal Archives; Joseph P. Morrisey and Deborah Dennis, *NIMH-Funded Research Concerning Homeless Mentally Ill Persons: Implications for Policy and Practice* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 1, 1986), 15 (cited in Rael Jean Isaac and Virginia C. Armat, *Madness in the Streets: How Psychiatry and the Law Abandoned the Mentally Ill* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 4). This percentage was true not only of New York City, but the entire nation. Gerald N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (New York: The Free Press, 1994). These estimates varied both on a national and individual-city basis, and could also vary based upon the particular sub-population being address, or the definitions of "homeless" or "mental illness" that authors used: For instance, in their famous work on homelessness, *Private Lives, Public Spaces,* Kim Hopper and Ellen Baxter placed the number at closer to fifty percent of all homeless adults; and in 1990, New York City Council Speaker Peter Vallone (a noted opponent of the placement of homeless shelters in residential neighborhoods) claimed that two-thirds of New York City's homeless population was mentally ill. Commission on the Homeless, "Testimony of Peter Vallone, Speaker of the Council of the City of New York," November 20, 1991. Mayor David N. Dinkins Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[15] One of the *Times*' primary public authorities for these claims was Sarah Connell, the regional director of New York State's Office of Mental Health, which helped reinforce the linkage between mental illness and homelessness. Bogard, *Seasons Such as These,* 32-33.

conflicts over Joyce Brown's hospitalization and Project HELP made clear, the relationship between mental illness and homelessness was anything but facile.

Brown first took up residence on the streets of the Upper East Side—one of New York City's most wealthy neighborhoods—in late 1986. Her life had not always been one of poverty: She had worked for many years as an administrative assistant in New Jersey, and came from a middle-class African American family. But, after years of conflict with her sisters, who had on numerous occasions attempted to institutionalize her to treat her growing psychiatric problems and drug use, Brown left New Jersey. She took to the streets, and began to tell people that her name was "Billie Boggs," possibly in an effort to protect her privacy from family members, aid workers, and government officials. Despite the difficult of living on the streets, the situation suited her fine, she claimed. She wanted to be left alone.[16]

In several important respects, Brown was exactly the type of person whom Koch hoped to reach through Project HELP's expanded mandate: The street was her primary home, and she had refused previous offers of help in finding shelter or medical aid. She was not properly clothed for inclement weather, and she sometimes appeared delusional. It was unclear how much control she had over her bodily functions or her behavior: Project HELP workers reported that her clothes were stained with defecation, and they claimed to have once observed her running off the sidewalk and into oncoming traffic. Brown's pseudonym, "Billie Boggs," was also viewed with suspicion: The name paid homage to local New York City news anchor Bill Boggs, and Project HELP workers saw this as further evidence of Brown's delusional nature. Citing her exposure to the elements

[16] *In the Matter of Billie Boggs, Petitioner*, 136 Misc. Reports, 2nd Series, 1084 (N.Y. State S.C. 1987); Maralyn Matlick, "'Save My Sister': Anguished plea to keep Billie the bag lady in psychiatric ward," *New York Post*, November 5, 1987; Kasindorf, "The Real Story Of Billie Boggs."

and erratic behavior, Project HELP workers identified Brown as a strong candidate for involuntary hospitalization under the new interpretation of the Mental Hygiene Law. At Bellevue Hospital, the psychiatrists who evaluated Brown agreed with this assessment.

In Mayor Ed Koch's account, Brown was a major impetus for the implementation of this newly expanded mandate of Project HELP. In a speech at the American Psychological Association convention in New York City one month before the new policy went into effect, Koch recalled a visit to an unnamed woman who lived near the Beekman Theater, at 2nd Avenue and East 67th Street. The woman had, according to Koch, defecated in her clothes. As Koch related, the aid workers accompanying him told him that this act was not enough to qualify the woman for involuntary hospitalization. His reaction, he told the audience of psychological professionals, was to think, "You're loony yourself." His audience met this remark with laughter and applause.[17] The person whom Koch encountered that day was Joyce Brown and Brown was subsequently the first person forcibly hospitalized under the new initiative.

Koch positioned himself as not only the legal authority on how best to enforce the state's Mental Hygiene Act, but also as the medical and moral authority on street homelessness and mental illness. In diagnosing the Project HELP professionals as themselves "loony," Koch delegitimized their expertise in favor of his own. He referred to civil libertarians and homeless advocates who opposed his plan as "crazies," and proclaimed himself "the No. 1 social worker in this town—with sanity."[18] Koch's paternalistic attitude extended to those for whom the city must act, in his words, as

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[17] Bruce Lambert, "Psychologists Back Koch's Policy On Hospitalizing Homeless People," *New York Times*, September 1, 1987; Suzanne Daley, "New York Expands Treatment Policy for the Homeless," *New York Times*, August 29, 1987.

[18] Lambert, "Psychologists Back Koch's Policy On Hospitalizing Homeless People."

"family."[19] With Joyce Brown in mind, he implemented Project HELP'S new policy. "Both morally and legally," Koch rationalized, "we have an obligation to help those who can't or won't help themselves."[20]

Project HELP workers had, since 1982, operated under the auspices of New York State's Mental Hygiene Law to forcibly hospitalize homeless mentally ill people who refused to seek psychiatric treatment on their own. Section 9.39 of the Mental Hygiene Law dictated that the State of New York could retain mentally ill people against their wills only if they posed "serious harm" to themselves or others.[21] Interpretations of "harm" varied even among medical professionals: Between 1982 and 1986, Project HELP teams—each comprised of a psychiatrist, a social worker, and a nurse—evaluated 1,866 homeless people on the streets of Manhattan. However, they brought just 307 homeless people to municipal hospitals, and then only fifty percent of those people were admitted, because hospital psychiatrists did not always agree with Project HELP psychiatrists' evaluations.[22]

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[19] "Brown vs. Koch," *60 Minutes*, January 24, 1988.

[20] Suzanne Daley, "Koch Policy For Homeless Creates Fear," *New York Times*, October 12, 1987.

[21] "Serious harm" was specifically defined in Section 9.39 of the law as "threats or attempts at suicide or serious bodily harm" or "homicidal or other violent behavior by which others are placed in reasonable fear of serious physical harm." "In the Matter of Ms. Billy Boggs," Memorandum in Opposition to the Application for the Retention of Ms. Billy Boggs Pursuant to Section 9.39 of the Mental Hygiene Law, Supreme Court of the State of New York, undated, 3-4.

[22] Tsemberis testimony, 7. Tsemberis's statistics are complicated by those provided in a 1984 *New York Times article* on Project HELP, which notes that in the first two years of the program, Project HELP teams made contact with 3,800 individuals and performed psychiatric evaluations on 799 of those people. These numbers are not necessarily contradictory, but they do point perhaps to inconsistencies in terminology and record keeping or reporting. "Evaluated" and "made contact" could very well be two different categories, which would explain the discrepancy between the *New York Times'* number from the first two years—3,800—and Tsemberis's 1,866 for the first five years of the program. Deirdre Carmody, "The City Sees No Solution for Homeless," *New York Times*, October 10, 1984.

Frustrated with these narrow limits, Mayor Koch pushed city hospitals to broaden their interpretation of the Mental Hygiene Law, and to increase the number of beds available to Project HELP patients. As a result, Project HELP workers and police officers would, as of October 1, 1987, operate with the understanding that they could forcibly detain homeless people who posed a danger to themselves or others not only in the present moment, but also in the "foreseeable future"—a logical interpretation, Koch reasoned, of the extant statute. Homeless people whom Project HELP deemed dangerous would now be admitted to a newly designated inpatient unit at Bellevue Hospital, and could be transferred from there to a 60-bed unit at Creedmoor, a state psychiatric facility in Queens.[23]

With this change, Koch tested the limits of the law and also sparked a citywide debate about the law's application. The New York City government had essentially reinterpreted a state statute so that it could more easily be applied to a certain group of people: The homeless. This point was not lost on Project HELP's critics, including Brown herself. She understood her homeless status to be central to her forcible hospitalization, claiming, "I was a political prisoner. Koch used a political strategy" to remove her from the street.[24] But was this—as Brown claimed—an act of discrimination and an infringement upon her civil liberties? Or was the city fulfilling its responsibility towards its most needy citizens? As Koch rationalized, "we're doing exactly what [Brown's] family would do for her, except in this case, her family happens to be the city of New York." But whether or not involuntary hospitalization was the legal, correct

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[23] Suzanne Daley, "New York Expands Treatment Policy for the Homeless: Mentally Ill to Be Hospitalized Involuntarily if They Can't Care for Themselves," *New York Times*, August 29, 1987; Tsemberis testimony, 7.

[24] Stuart Marques, "Prof. Billie Boggs goes to Harvard," *Daily News*, February 19, 1988.

measure for Joyce Brown—or other homeless mentally ill people—was another, more complicated question.[25]

Project HELP's Context

Homelessness and the Specter of Deinstitutionalization

> The most visible and desperate segment of the homeless population are the mentally ill….Many of the mentally ill are on the streets today as the result of a policy called "deinstitutionalization."
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> -"Sane Asylums," *Metroline*, February 11, 1987

A 1987 episode of *Metroline*, a New York-area public television news program, demonstrated the complicated and often contradictory ways that discourses around homelessness and mental illness were entwined. The episode, entitled "Sane Asylums," focused on mentally ill homeless people and "what is being done to help them find sane asylum."[26] Host Mike Schuster claimed that "a policy called 'deinstitutionalization'" led to the mass homelessness of the 1980s. Schuster was by no means alone: Countless television programs, books, articles, and government documents explicitly linked deinstitutionalization to rising homelessness. Mayor Koch also made this connection: In his 1987 speech to the American Psychological Association, he noted that like "most people," he "believe[d] the pendulum swung too far when it went from 90,000 in our mental institutions down to 20,000 and put 70,000 out on our streets."[27]

But troubling gaps exist in this narrative. While both Koch and Schuster presented deinstitutionalization as having led directly to increased homelessness in New York City,

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[25] "Brown vs. Koch," *60 Minutes*; "The NYCLU and Billie Boggs," *New York Post*, November 6, 1987.

[26] "Sane Asylums," *Metroline*, February 11, 1987.

[27] Bruce Lambert, "Psychologists Back Koch's Policy On Hospitalizing Homeless People," *New York Times*, September 1, 1987.

mass homelessness in the 1980s was in fact the result of a number of factors, including low-income housing loss, increased unemployment, and a decrease in funding for programs that provided housing subsidies and other types of aid for poor people. A 1982 study of long-term residents of the Keener Building, the large municipal men's shelter on Ward's Island, found that one-third of the shelter's clients had previously been hospitalized for psychiatric problems, but only 59 percent of these hospitalizations had occurred in New York State facilities. This suggests that factors other than changing public mental health policies had led to rising homelessness in New York City.[28] Further, "deinstitutionalization" was far more complex, and its results more multifaceted and difficult to define, than either Koch or Schuster implied.

Deinstitutionalization was not so much an event as a process; while the term "deinstitutionalization" implies the release of patients from institutions, the process was as much characterized by a reduction in the admission of patients for long-term care as it was by the release of residential patients from these facilities. This situation came about because of a variety of factors. Three of the most important were evolving norms for psychiatric treatment, federal initiatives that changed the structure and financing of mental health care and social welfare throughout the United States, and changing legal standards for involuntary commitment.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, conventional psychiatric wisdom held that the mentally ill could best be treated if they were removed from the stress factors of everyday life and community. In the nineteenth century, individual states and the federal government constructed sprawling residential institutions in rural areas. As these

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[28] Stephen Crystal, "Study of Long-Term Keener Clients," New York City Human Resources Administration, May 28, 1982.

institutions became more crowded with patients, they also became less focused on therapeutic solutions and more focused on containment; their purpose, many argued, was less to "cure" those with mental illnesses than to sequester them from society.[29] By the end of World War II, psychiatric philosophy and practice were changing, and more practitioners called for the integration of mentally ill and disabled people into their families and communities. Others, including most famously Thomas Szasz, argued that mental illness was a social construction with injurious effects on patients, and that institutionalization was a form of social control rather than a legitimate medical treatment.[30]

While not all accepted Szasz's argument, the 1960s saw a profound shift in cultural understandings of psychiatry, mental illness, and the federal government's role in public health. The 1946 Mental Health Act provided funding to states for the treatment of and dissemination of information about mental illness;[31] but by the 1960s, Congress sought to shift much of this responsibility to the federal government. From 1960 to 1965, it passed legislation designed to shift the funding of mental health treatment to the federal government. At the center of this treatment plan was the creation of Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs).[32] CMHCs, the beacons of the mental health movement in the United States, would work with local municipalities to create outpatient care facilities for

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[29] Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, 98-99; James W. Trent, Jr., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[30] Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, especially chapters 8-11; Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[31] Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, 210-211.

[32] *Ibid*. 249-261. This legislation was a part of a larger federal initiative, often referred to as President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, to use federal funding to alleviate poverty by increasing the scope and purpose of social welfare.

people who would have previously been confined—voluntarily or involuntarily—to residential institutions.

Residential institutions were costly, and most states were all too willing to cede control of the treatment and care of the mentally ill to federally funded CMHCs. But despite their promise, CMHCs never materialized at anywhere near the rate necessary to treat patients in need; after 1968, Congress allotted significantly less money to the creation and maintenance of CMHCs than it had previously promised. And over time, existing CMHCs' missions often shifted to focus more on talk therapy and substance abuse treatment, and less on providing care for patients with chronic, potentially debilitating mental illnesses. The promise of CMHCs was never fully realized, and yet states, including New York, proceeded to shut down or reduce the capacity of many of their residential institutions. While some former residents were absorbed back into their communities of origin or made lives for themselves in new ones, many others found themselves adrift. They, along with a new generation with limited access to treatment, subsisted on Social Security payments and the smattering of outpatient public services that existed to meet their needs. Many of them gravitated to cities like New York, where social services were concentrated and where they could live in single room occupancy hotels (SROs), which were often the least expensive housing available.[33]

Finally, a number of court cases throughout the United States challenged the legality of involuntary institutionalization. Most famously, in O'Connor v. Donaldson (1975), the Supreme Court ruled that a state may not legally confine individuals who do

[33] Dear and Wolch argue that deinstitutionalization, as it took place in the United States, led to the creation of a "service dependent urban ghetto," in which the meager social service and housing options that existed for populations including the "mentally disabled, physically handicapped, mentally retarded, prisoners and other dependent groups from asylums and similar places of incarceration" concentrated in mostly poor urban areas. Dear and Wolch, *Landscapes of Despair,* 3-5.

not pose a danger to themselves. In a landmark ruling that the NYCLU would later cite in its case on Joyce Brown's behalf, Associate Justice Potter Stewart asked, "May the State confine the mentally ill merely to ensure them a living standard superior to that they enjoy in their private community?" Stewart continued,

> While the State may arguably confine a person to save him from harm, incarceration is rarely if ever a necessary condition….May the State fence in the harmless mentally ill solely to save its citizens from exposure to those whose ways are different? One might as well ask if the State, to avoid public unease, could incarcerate all who are physically unattractive or socially eccentric.[34]

O'Connor v. Donaldson created stricter standards on involuntary hospitalization, and shifted decision-making responsibility away from medical professionals and onto the courts. This would be a particular point of contention in the coming years, as doctors, policymakers, and the media decried the ability of judges to overturn the expertise of medical professionals. Stewart's words also resonated because of his recognition that institutionalization had been—and continued to be—used to "avoid public unease," rather than to "save [an individual] from harm."

Due to these new standards, tens of thousands of people were released from state and county mental institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Gerald Grob, most of these long-term patients were released between 1965 and 1970.[35] Social commentators described the mass deinstitutionalization of mentally ill people as a direct cause of urban homelessness, yet homelessness did not rise dramatically in New York City or other

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[34] Susan Schweik recounts an earlier period of American history when the state did just such a thing in *The Ugly Laws*.

[35] Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, 295.

urban areas until the late 1970s and early 1980s.[36] The decade of time between when long-term patients left state mental hospitals and when homelessness rose suggests a more complicated story.

In the early decades following mass deinstitutionalization, many mentally ill people struggled to survive. Those who had previously lived in institutions, and those who came of age after the 1960s and '70s, often had few ways to obtain treatment or services. Many—especially those whose mental illnesses prevented them from working, or kept employers from seeing them as viable workers—had limited ways to earn income. Through most of the 1970s, such people still had access to federal disability benefits and, if they did not live with family members, to privately owned low-income housing in which to live. The Reagan administration's drastic cuts to social welfare in the form of cash payments, food assistance, and housing aid eliminated one of the primary sources of income for the unemployed mentally ill and millions of other impoverished Americans. Reagan's fiscal cuts coincided with the beginning of urban initiatives to convert Single Room Occupancy buildings and other low-income housing to higher-income residences. In New York City, Mayor Koch introduced J-51 tax abatements as an incentive for landlords to renovate their buildings, a policy which drastically reduced the city's low-income housing stock and left many New Yorkers without adequate access to affordable

[36] Koch's deputy mayor Stanley Brezenoff acknowledged as much, noting of deinstitutionalization, "That really goes back to the '70s, the early '70s. But now it isn't the same people on the street, but you lost a resource in which people—There is nothing there to send people to who are similarly situated." Stanley Brezenoff, interviewed by Sharon Zane, October 23, 1992-June 14, 1993. Edward I. Koch Administration Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York City, 56.

housing. These changes meant that the mentally ill and other vulnerable populations lost the safety nets that had been keeping them off the streets.[37]

The result of this complicated host of historical factors is demonstrated particularly well in "Sane Asylums": Almost immediately after host Mike Schuster claimed that deinstitutionalization was responsible for "many of the mentally ill [who] are on the streets today," his narration was contradicted by the testimony of both homeless people themselves, and the medical professionals and social workers who advocated for them. Dr. Ezra Susser, a psychologist at New York's Albert Einstein Hospital, argued that the way most people link deinstitutionalization to homelessness was "just too simple." Confirming this complexity, the program featured residents of Fountain House and Saint Francis Residence, two non-profit organizations that provided housing and assistance for people with mental illnesses in New York City. The interviewees discussed the complexity of navigating a dispersed and unintuitive system of public healthcare and government entitlements, as well as the difficulty of finding employment and of retaining housing in a tightening rental market. The interviewees are comprised of both men and women, and most of them appear to be either black or white. All of them self-identified as mentally ill. None of them cited deinstitutionalization as the cause of their homelessness, and in fact, all of them had lived independently or semi-independently for at least some time in New York City before becoming homeless. While they were mentally ill, the cause of their homelessness was a complex tangle of factors

[37] Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, 296-302.

including low-income housing loss, social security and social service cutbacks, and drastically reduced employment prospects.[38]

The narrative linking deinstitutionalization and homelessness was prolific, and it greatly informed public policy and debate about contemporary urban homelessness.[39] A 1983 Koch administration internal report, "Legal Considerations Relating to Efforts to Rehospitalize Homeless Mentally Ill Persons," is telling: The use of the term "rehospitalization" assumes that hospitalization—better known as institutionalization—was a part of many homeless people's histories, and that it was a necessary part of their future.[40] Examining this narrative, and the narratives that linked mental illness and homelessness, more broadly, provides important insight into the homeless crisis and New

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[38] Some in the Koch administration realized the complexity of the issue, as well. Nathan Leventhal's reflection almost a decade after the end of his tenure in the Koch administration is telling: When asked about the rise of homelessness that occurred while he was Deputy Mayor, Leventhal first responded, "I'm not sure where it all came from." Prompted by his interviewer to make the connection between deinstitutionalization and homelessness ("Part of it [homelessness] came from the proprietary hospitals, right?"), Leventhal then spoke of how the state hospitals closed, and "they [former patients] all wound up in New York." Leventhal, Edward I. Koch Administration Oral History Collection, 93-96.

[39] In a 1983 report presented at the National Governor's Association Task Force on the Homeless, New York Governor Mario M. Cuomo listed deinstitutionalization as one of the four "causes of homelessness today," along with unemployment, scarcity of affordable housing, and social service cutbacks and the culling of disability rolls. Governor Mario M. Cuomo, *1933/1983 - Never Again: A Report to the National Governor's Association Task Force on the Homeless* (July 1983). This is a more multifaceted, less single-issue characterization of the role of deinstitutionalization in the rising homelessness of the 1980s than that presented by other authors. Countless newspaper articles and scholarly reports focused on mental illness as a particular feature of New York City's street homeless population, in particular: for just a few examples, see "Asylum in the Streets," WNBC special report, December 29, 1983"; Deirdre Carmody, "New York Is Facing 'Crisis' On Vagrants," *New York Times*, June 28, 1981; Deirdre Carmody, "The Tangled Life and Mind of Judy, Whose Home Is the Street," *New York Times,* December 17, 1984. Later scholarly works would perpetuate this narrative: see Isaac and Armat, *Madness in the Streets* (1990); Ann Braden Johnson, *Out of Bedlam: The Truth About Deinstitutionalization* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); David A. Rochefort, *From Poorhouses to Homelessness: Policy Analysis and Mental Health Care* (Westport, CT: Auburn House, 1993).

[40] The report recognizes that the very notion "that state hospitals will admit and indefinitely retain dependent mentally ill persons [is] grounded in the history of the state mental health system." The author, thus, recognizes the specter of deinstitutionalization on current homeless policy and "community expectations," and attempts to demonstrate that current legal precedent would make "rehospitalization" for most people both costly and legally tenuous. Paul Litwak, "Legal Considerations Relating to Efforts to Rehospitalize Homeless Mentally Ill Persons," December 15, 1983. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondence, New York City Municipal Archives, 2.

Yorkers' attempts to diagnose and solve it. In addition to being historically simplistic, the tendency to link deinstitutionalization and mass homelessness suggests a startling myopia about not only the causes of mass homelessness in the 1980s, but also solutions to it. Insisting that homelessness was the result of the closing of institutions implied that the homeless crisis could be solved if only deinstitutionalization had not happened, or if re-institutionalization occurred.

Homelessness and the Policing of Public Space

Project HELP existed in tandem with countless other public and private (i.e. non-governmental) initiatives aimed at sheltering, providing services for, and policing the movements and public presence of the homeless. None of these initiatives can be considered in isolation from one another: City, state, and federal funds and laws, and public and private organizations and initiatives, combined to create a vastly entangled system of homeless regulation and aid in New York City. But the relationship between Project HELP and other local initiatives to remove street people from public places deserves particular attention. Many of the Koch administration's initiatives were focused on how to persuade or legally compel people to leave the sidewalks and public spaces they occupied and enter a shelter. Considering Project HELP in the context of similar initiatives is vital: While Project HELP specifically focused on diagnosing dangerous degrees of mental illness, it had in common with other programs the ultimate goal of removing homeless people from sidewalks and other public places in New York City.

The connection of these programs was not lost on the city or the media, as a *New York Times* article from 1988 demonstrates. "New York Court Strikes Down Law To

Curb Loitering," the headline declared. The city had used the loitering law to remove the visibly homeless from Port Authority Bus Terminal, Pennsylvania Station, and other transportation centers. The article reassured readers, however, that "the case…has no bearing on the Koch administration's program to pick up mentally ill homeless people." Indeed, Project HELP's mandate relied not on the loitering law, but the Mental Hygiene Law. That the *New York Times* linked the two in such a way was telling: While the former was more explicitly aimed at curbing the presence of the homeless in public places, and the latter ostensibly on aiding the homeless, both were understood as forms of homeless removal by the general public.[41]

The two laws also had common origins in the early decades of the twentieth century. The loitering law, while passed in 1965, used as its model a 1939 state law that sought to rid transportation terminals of "undesirable characters" for the convenience of New York World's Fair attendees.[42] The Mental Hygiene Law originated in Progressive-era social reforms: First passed in 1927, the act codified the state's power to care for the

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[41] James Barron, "New York Court Strikes Down Law To Curb Loitering," *New York Times,* February 18, 1988. The Koch administration sought strategies for circumventing the effects of the New York State Court of Appeals' ruling in People v. Clark, the loitering law case. Mayor Koch (in a letter drafted by his special advisor, Jack Lusk) informed Peter Stangl, the President of Metro-North Commuter Rail, which operated out of Grand Central Station, of the Port Authority's approach in the wake of the ruling. The Port Authority had adopted "rules and regulations for each of its facilities that prohibit various forms of conduct such as sleeping in stairwells, disrobing in bathrooms and storing baggage in open areas." This strategy, Koch concluded, "represents a lawful approach to dealing with the problem." Edward I. Koch to Peter Stangl, May 10, 1988. Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[42] Barron, "New York Court Strikes Down Law To Curb Loitering." At the time of its 1965 passage, the loitering law's main targets were prostitutes; but by the 1980s, police primarily used the loitering law to arrest visibly homeless people in transportation terminals. Police officers would regularly stop people whom they identified as homeless and ask them to provide a "satisfactory explanation" of their presence. If the police decided that a person's explanation was not satisfactory, they would arrest the person and remove them from the premises. The similarities between this application of the loitering law and the "stop and frisk" practices that came to define Giuliani-era policing in New York City are not coincidental. Indeed, it is a primary contention of my project that such practices originated in the Koch-era before being more fully implemented under Mayor Giuliani in the 1990s. Both programs primarily targeted a class of individuals defined by their race, physical comportment, and the spaces that they occupy in the urban environment. For more on "stop and frisk," see Delores Jones-Brown, *Stop, Question & Frisk Policing Practices In New York City: A Primer* (New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2010).

mentally ill, the developmentally disabled, and epileptics.[43] By the 1980s, the city's application of both laws had changed dramatically: Both played very prominent roles in the regulation of the bodies of homeless individuals.

The city's use of the loitering law (before it was declared unconstitutional) and the Mental Hygiene law demonstrate a trend that, by the mid-1980s, was becoming more common: The application of general, pre-existing municipal and state laws on the usage of city spaces and services to target homeless individuals. This strategy would be perfected by the Giuliani administration in the 1990s, but the Koch administration first experimented with it in the 1980s. As it became apparent to city officials that policies explicitly targeting homeless individuals were legally tenuous at best, the city worked to identify pre-existing laws and to establish new policies that could be used to control the embodied presence and actions of homeless people in public places.[44]

An early area where the city found success in this regard was public transport. Even after the New York State Court of Appeals struck down the state's loitering law in 1988, Transportation Police were still able to invoke "anti-social behavior" laws, including laws against obstructing traffic and disorderly conduct, to compel individuals to leave the public transportation terminals, subway cars and platforms where they slept or lay. By 1988, this approach was well established, so that when Metropolitan Transit Authority board member Ronay Menschel complained to Transit Authority President David Gunn of the increased number—in her anecdotal estimate—of vagrants sleeping

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[43] "Overview of Mental Health in New York and the Nation," *New York State Archives*, http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/research/res_topics_health_mh_timeline.shtml.

[44] A 1983 internal report warned the city of the legal tenuousness of explicitly targeting homeless individuals. Paul Litwak, "Legal Considerations Relating to Efforts to Rehospitalize Homeless Mentally Ill Persons," December 15, 1983. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondence, New York City Municipal Archives.

on subway cars, and attached a photo of a man stretched across a subway car's entire bench to prove her point, Gunn could reassure her that "we have increased our uniform presence…in an effort to alleviate the problem." He continued,

> With regard to the behavior of the individual in the photo, the Chief [of the Transit Police, Vincent Del Castillo] informs me that this type of behavior is prohibited. The individual would at least be awakened and asked to occupy one seat or be removed from the train and possibly ejected from the system. During March of this year the Transit Police contacted and offered assistance to 760 homeless individuals, an increase of almost 8%. The department is also involved in an ejection program that focuses on anti-social behavior on trains such as portrayed in the photo you sent. In March, 990 individuals were ejected from the system, an increase of over 11%.[45]

Menschel's complaint and Gunn's response provide insight into the attitudes that shaped public policy towards the homeless, as well as the results of such policy. While the Transit Police "contacted and offered assistance" to 760 homeless individuals, they also ejected 990 other individuals from the transit system. It is unclear how many of those ejected were homeless; what is clear is that punitive measures for "anti-social behavior" were, by this assessment, more common than assistive ones.[46] And of course, what qualified as assistance—removing people from where they lay or sat, bringing them to a police-designated area, and offering them transport to a municipal shelter—could be a highly threatening or fearful experience for the recipients of such aid.

Few people who lived on the streets saw in municipal authorities the potential for ally-ship or aid, and few trusted that the shelter available to them was desirable or safe.

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[45] Ronay Menschel, "Memorandum: Vagrants," April 15, 1988; and David L. Gunn, "Vagrants," April 27, 1988. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Department Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[46] At Koch's behest, the NYPD created "hospitality centers" from which vans could transport those rounded up by transit police to shelters (on a voluntary basis). Outreach teams funded by the municipal government also patrolled Penn Station and other transport hubs, establishing rapports with the people who slept there, and trying to convince them to accept a ride to a shelter. While the city could not force these people to enter shelters, they could—and did—forcibly remove them from subway cars and station platforms. Untitled report on the removal of derelicts from subway stations, 1982. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

Early outreach efforts by employees of the city's Human Resources Administration had been largely unsuccessful. In the winter of 1982, HRA employee Debbie Nevins spent her nights walking through Pennsylvania Station, Grand Central Station, and Port Authority Bus Terminal, attempting to convince the homeless women she met to accompany her to a shelter. Most women refused Nevins' offer, and the constant rejections were frustrating. "'…I'm tired,' she said. 'After sitting and talking and begging, I know when they say no, they mean no.'"[47] Police officers may have exercised more power over the un-housed people they encountered, but it is doubtful that they inspired more trust.

The Transit Authority's efforts and other citywide initiatives met with limited success. While the number of people sleeping in city shelters grew exponentially in the 1980s, thousands of unsheltered people in New York City could still be found on the streets and in public places on any given day. Despite the risks of inclement weather, discomfort, and violence at the hands of individuals or the state, many homeless people continued to sleep outdoors, in public transportation terminals, or in other public and semi-public areas around New York City.[48] Their presence was troubling to those who

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[47] Anna Quindlen, "About New York: Despite Frigid Weather, Many Homeless Women Still Shun Shelter," *New York Times*, December 15, 1982.

[48] *Ibid*. Quindlen lists some of the reasons homeless women, in particular, refused to enter shelters as myriad: "Some said they were afraid of being sexually harassed there by other women and of having their possessions stolen. Some said they did not like to be kept inside or told what to do. Some said they just wanted to stay where they were and be left alone." A 1989 Koch administration internal document on safety in shelters revealed that "shelter staff report serious incidents on a daily basis," thus suggesting that the fears of those who chose to forego shelter were not unfounded. Untitled briefing on incidents in adult shelters, February 10, 1989. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

witnessed it, and the city continued to treat visible homelessness as a nuisance as it tried to woo tourists and businesspeople to Manhattan.[49]

This is the context in which Project HELP existed, a situation in which mentally ill homeless people were a sizable portion of the street homeless population, but also in which the city focused to a startling degree on using the law as a tool to remove homeless individuals from public places. Hospitalizing people whose mental illness truly posed a danger to themselves or others was a worthy and necessary cause, but the city's focus on hospitalizing homeless people, in particular, was troubling to many. As commentators hastened to point out, the city's drive to hospitalize mentally ill homeless people came at the expense of helping non-homeless people with mental illnesses. Over-crowded public hospitals regularly turned away non-homeless people in need of care, including those who attempted to voluntarily commit themselves.[50] Such policies also came at the expense of developing alternate solutions to aid mentally ill street people. Many couldn't help but wonder if the city was hospitalizing certain people based more on their homeless status than their psychiatric status.

Koch's October 1, 1987 initiative meant that homeless patients taken to hospitals by Project HELP or police officers received priority care over other patients, whether or not they requested that attention. A September 1987 memo from the city's legal counsel to the psychiatric directors of New York City's public hospitals emphasized that, for homeless mentally ill patients brought to their emergency rooms, doctors should operate

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[49] Jane Gross, "A First Look at Homelessness Is Raw Sight for Tourists," *New York Times*, November 9, 1987; Kirk Johnson, "Officials Debate How to Get Homeless Out of the Subways," *New York Times*, September 5, 1988; Sarah Rimer, "Doors Closing As Mood on the Homeless Sours," *New York Times*, November 18, 1989.

[50] Maureen McLeod and Robert Levy, "Point Counterpoint: Involuntary Commitment of Mentally Ill Homeless Persons," *The Affiliate* (January 1988), 7-8.

under the "broadest possible application" of section 9.39 of the Mental Hygiene Law—the section that allowed for forcible hospitalization for those posing a danger to themselves or others.[51] Prior to this policy shift, mentally ill homeless people were routinely brought into psychiatric emergency rooms—usually after they had created some kind of disturbance or obstruction in the street, or gained the attention of neighborhood residents—and released. Until October 28, 1987, this too had been Joyce Brown's experience: The city repeatedly apprehended her and brought her to Bellevue hospital, only to quickly release her when she was found not to be in danger of imminently harming herself or others.

"A Decent Life In A Decent City": Homelessness and "Quality of Life"

As quickly became apparent in the ensuing debates over Joyce Brown's freedom and its repercussions, Brown's mental health and civil liberties were not the only things at stake: Mayor Koch, city social workers, and neighborhood residents also contended that Brown's presence on the corner of 67th Street and 2nd Avenue was infringing upon a broader and more ambiguous set of rights: Those of the community. As one editorial put it, "Some argue that the city wants to round up homeless people for purely cosmetic reasons. But is it 'cosmetic' to want to see the streets of New York free of homeless wanderers? Not at all. It's a matter of common civility. Of the right of New Yorkers to lead a decent life in a decent city."[52] In this formulation, Brown was not only an eyesore and a menace, but also definitively *not* a New Yorker. Rather, she—and others like her—

[51] John E. Linville, Vice President, Legal Affairs, to Directors of Psychiatry, "Memorandum Re: Mentally Ill Living on the Street," New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (September 9, 1987). Thanks to Robert Levy for access to this document.

[52] "The loitering laws: Cosmetics or civility?" *New York Daily News*, 1988 (exact date unknown).

was posited as an outsider, standing in the way of a "decent life" for others. Such language is reminiscent of the discourse around other "quality of life" issues that New Yorkers were identifying in the 1980s, including graffiti, litter, panhandling, drug dealing, and unlicensed street vending. Battles over these issues took place in the highly raced and classed landscape of gentrified and gentrifying New York City neighborhoods. It is in this context that Brown's forced hospitalization and subsequent legal battle became an important—even defining—example of the struggle over homelessness, mental illness, and conflicts between civil liberties and community rights in New York City.

Brown quickly became a fixture in her Upper East Side neighborhood. She spent most of her day, every day, on the same corner, outside Swenson's ice cream shop and restaurant, across the street from the Beekman Theater. Some neighborhood residents and businesspeople claimed that Brown was a disturbing and at times menacing presence on the street: Though she would often converse politely with people whom she knew, she would just as often break into incoherent rants, and yell at passersby. Those who observed her regularly claimed that she would ask passersby for spare change, but would not accept dollar bills and would sometimes burn them when they were handed to her.

Brown conducted most of her life in public: in addition to panhandling and interacting with neighborhood residents and shopkeepers who knew her, she also slept, ate, and voided outdoors. The latter was an especially sore point with neighborhood residents and with Mayor Koch: A *New Yorker* article pointed out that "so far as City Hall reporters can recall, Koch has never mentioned [Brown's] sojourn in the streets without describing her as 'defecating in her clothes' or 'wallowing in her own

excrement.'"[53] And in a televised confrontation, one man pointed to a photograph that he claimed depicted a building wall stained by Brown's frequent urination. Brown did not deny this accusation; rather, she claimed that she had little choice, as neighborhood businesses would rarely let her use their bathrooms, even if she offered to purchase something in return.[54] Brown's most private bodily functions, like most everything else in her life, were terribly public.

Eating and defecating on the streets was not a direct result of Brown's lack of shelter: Millions of Americans ate quick, inexpensive meals away from home every day at delis, diners and fast food restaurants; and in a large city like New York with few public restrooms, bathrooms in cafes and bookstores were the default option for shoppers, workers, and tourists on the go.[55] That these options were not available to Brown was the consequence of her stigmatized status as an African-American homeless person, rather than her homelessness itself. Businesses refused to serve her not because she couldn't pay, but because she was not a desired customer. Her unwashed odor, her unkempt appearance, her blackness in a predominantly white neighborhood, and the reputation she had as a neighborhood homeless woman, a panhandler, and a mentally ill person, kept her from receiving equal treatment in the commercial establishments of her Upper East Side neighborhood.[56]

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[53] "Around City Hall," *The New Yorker*, February 29, 1988, 83.

[54] Joyce Brown interviewed by Phil Donahue, *Donahue*, January 1988.

[55] In fact, many of the public restrooms that did exist in New York City were closed by the municipal government in the 1980s to prevent their uses as places to sleep, wash one's body or clothes, buy, sell, or do drugs, or have sex. In a city in which few spaces were un-trafficked or out-of-view, public restrooms were crucial to the daily geographies of many of the city's most marginal residents.

[56] Mitchell Duneier discusses the connection between race and the ability of street people to gain entry to commercial establishments for the purpose of using the bathroom in *Sidewalk*, 173-187.

Many also questioned whether or not Brown's hospitalization was due to discriminatory treatment. While some mental health and homelessness advocates lauded the mayor's plan,[57] others decried the policy. "The real issue," noted Robert M. Spoor of the State Office of Mental Health, was not the lack of beds in mental institutions, but "the lack of low-income housing needed to place people in." State Senator Nicholas A. Spano expressed fear that New York was returning to the "dark ages" of institutionalization with the policy. And Norman Siegel, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, noted that Koch's new policy "appeared unconstitutional" and had "potential for great harm."[58] The NYCLU, the New York Coalition for the Homeless, and other homeless rights and civil liberties groups did not oppose the idea of those with urgent, life-threatening issues receiving the help they needed; rather, they feared the potential for abuse, and wondered how closely a homeless person's being deemed a "danger to themselves or others" would correspond with the neighborhood in which that person lived, or the volume at which neighborhood residents called for that person's removal.

This was hardly a far-fetched concern. Protests against the presence of homeless people in public spaces occurred in a variety of neighborhoods and across race and class lines, but these protests were often strongest and most effective in neighborhoods with higher socio-economic status and a greater concentration of white residents, like the gentrifying Upper West Side. And Project HELP did itself seem to fall into this trap: When the program began in 1983, it covered only the West Side of Manhattan below 96th

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[57] Alliance for the Mentally Ill of New York State, "Press Release: Families of Mentally Ill React to New Homeless Policy," November 8, 1987. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives; Bruce Lambert, "Koch Says He Saw Hospital Plan For Homeless As A Spur for the State," *New York Times*, September 4, 1987.

[58] Lambert, "Koch Says He Saw Hospital Plan For Homeless As A Spur for the State"; Bruce Lambert, "Koch and Public Opinion: Getting the Homeless Off the Streets," *New York Times*, September 8, 1987.

Street and the East Side of Manhattan below 106th Street. The justification for this limit, according to an internal Koch administration memo, was that "This is where the gravely disabled are concentrated." But these geographical boundaries largely correlated with the areas of New York City that were loci of pre-existing wealth or increasing gentrification. West 96th Street marked the boundary between a rapidly gentrifying, increasingly white neighborhood to the south and a poor neighborhood comprised mostly of African Americans and Latinos to the north. East 106th Street was located in the southernmost section of the neighborhood known as "Spanish Harlem," and was bordered on the south by the Upper East Side, the wealthy, predominantly white neighborhood in which Joyce Brown resided. Many advocates questioned whether the concentration of mentally ill poor and un-housed people was truly worse in these neighborhoods, or simply more visible to those with social clout and political power. Hoping to stem such accusations of bias, Koch noted that the policy would not remove people who "simply did not look good or were an eyesore to the community." Koch was clearly aware that Project HELP seemed, to some, more cosmetic than practical. He maintained, however, that the program provided an essential service to one of New York City's neediest and most vulnerable populations.[59]

Koch allies hastened to point out that Project HELP's new mandate would hardly result in the broad removal of the homeless from the streets. As Martin S. Begun, chairman of the Community Service Board (which advised the city's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Alcoholism Services) noted, "If…people are

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[59] By 1987, Project HELP had expanded its operations to include all of Manhattan, but still did not cover the other four boroughs of New York City (though it was suggested that a future expansion was a possibility). Caryn A. Schwab, "Memorandum: Project Help II," November 17, 1987. Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives. Suzanne Daley, "Koch Policy For Homeless Creates Fear," *New York Times*, October 12, 1987.

under the impression that we're going to sweep the streets clean, that they'll get up the morning of October 1 and all the homeless people are going to be gone, well, that's not going to happen."[60] But many of New York's homeless population interpreted the move as a threat. Employees of Project Reachout, a private group that worked with homeless people on the streets of the Upper West Side, pointed out that many of the clients with whom they'd worked—in some cases for months or years—had gone into hiding. Project Reachout worker Diane Sonde noted, "'There used to be people living in Central Park near Columbus Circle. Now we're finding them in the 90s [the more densely wooded part of Central Park that spans 90th to 100th Street] behind bushes.'" Civil liberties advocates, then, were not alone in their objections; unsheltered people themselves feared this policy, and the effects it could have on their personal autonomy.[61]

Shortly after Koch's policy went into effect, thousands of New Yorkers marched through the streets of Manhattan to protest the federal, state, and city government's handling of homelessness. The march attracted homeless and housing advocacy groups from across the city. Organizers hired buses to bring hundreds of welfare hotel residents to the rally at Columbus Circle. Those attending marched for numerous issues, including the lack of low-income housing in New York City, the gentrification that was making the city increasingly unaffordable, and the mass emergency shelter plans that had defined New York City's response to rising homelessness. But Koch's new Project HELP policy, so recently implemented, had a prominent place in the day's activities. "Free Joyce

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[60] Bruce Lambert, "Koch and Public Opinion: Getting the Homeless Off the Streets," *New York Times*, September 8, 1987.

[61] Suzanne Daley, "Koch Policy For Homeless Creates Fear." This trend continued for years after Koch's policy went into effect: Clara Hemphill, "Anguish in Central Park: More mentally ill homeless seeking refuge," *Newsday*, January 3, 1989.

Brown!" protesters cried, and Norman Siegel, who represented Brown in court, spoke of the negative effects of gentrification on the city's poor. On that December day, Brown had been held against her will at Bellevue Hospital in midtown Manhattan for nearly two months.[62]

Gender, Race, Paternalism, and the Politics of Shelter Choice

Those the city deemed incapable of helping themselves were a diverse lot: Of the twenty-eight people involuntarily hospitalized by Project HELP in October and November of 1987, fifteen were men and thirteen were women; fifteen were white, eight black, four "Hispanic," and one "Asian." According to municipal worker Carolyn Schwab, these statistics were "consistent with Project HELP's caseload overall."[63] While it seems clear the Project HELP did not disproportionately target people of any one race or gender,[64] Joyce Brown's status as the first and most prominent person picked up by Project HELP is noteworthy. Even before she was apprehended, Brown was already, if anonymously, a symbolic figurehead of mental illness in New York City. And beginning with her involuntary hospitalization, she became the very public face of Project HELP.

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[62] James Barron, "Thousands March Against Homelessness," *New York Times*, December 21, 1987.

[63] Carolyn Schwab, "Memorandum: Project Help II," November 17, 1987. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

[64] However, both women and white people are somewhat overrepresented in this group. While the majority of un-housed people living on the streets of New York City were black men, evidence suggests that many of the governmental and non-governmental programs created to aid the homeless focused on women and families. Joanne Passaro presents an interesting anecdote of this phenomenon in her ethnography, *The Unequal Homeless*. Passaro observes that while one of her female subjects, Deborah, received many offers of help from social service workers and passersby during the two weeks Passaro spent with her, "No one had approached any of [the men who lived in Deborah's encampment] in those two weeks, nor in any that followed. Although the entire encampment was highly visible and accessible…only Deborah was approached with offers to help." Passaro argues that this is the result of cultural constructions of women and domesticity, which create consensus that women's proper place is in the home; while I disagree with some of Passaro's larger argument about gender and homelessness, I concur that homeless women evoked sympathy in part because they were seen as particularly out-of-place on the streets. Passaro, *The Unequal Homeless,* 78.

That portrayals of her so frequently drew upon and reinforced raced and gendered norms of poverty, health, and appropriateness suggests that race and gender were in fact crucial to popular understandings of Brown and, by extension, mental illness among the homeless in New York City.

Gender was a particularly salient factor in portrayals of Brown and other homeless people singled out by the city. Koch's repeated claim that the city must act as Joyce Brown's family, for instance, reveals a paternalistic attitude about social welfare and its recipients. And in fact, many of the individuals who received the most attention in the homeless crisis of the 1980s were women. In *The Unequal Homeless*, Joanne Passaro argues that homeless women evoked more public sympathy—and a greater share of public policy initiatives—than did homeless men. This is the result, Passaro theorizes, of cultural constructions linking women with domesticity and subordination, which create consensus that women's proper place is in the home and under the protection of the masculine state.[65] Such gendered constructions were clearly visible in the Koch administration's portrayal of the issue of mental illness among the homeless.

To Ed Koch, the idea that people without homes would avoid—rather than seek—free, city-provided shelter was inconceivable. On several occasions, he claimed that that was itself a sign of mental instability, rather than a rational choice made from a very constricted field of options. He held this belief from early on in his mayoralty. A 1983 *New York Times* article documented the day Koch spent riding around the city in a van with social workers, attempting to persuade people he encountered on the streets to accompany him to a shelter. Though he convinced one person to enter a shelter, the vast

[65] Passaro, *The Unequal Homeless*, 11.

majority of people that day—a typical day, according to city workers—refused his offer. One woman explained, in response to Koch's insistence that she surely would be better off in a shelter, "'I sleep on the street…and I eat just fine. For lunch, I had a piña colada and two slices of pizza.'" Upon re-entering the van after this encounter, Koch exclaimed that the woman was "'obviously deranged.'"[66]

Koch's understanding of mental instability was subjective and unscientific, but his identification of the problem of people sleeping out-of-doors was not without merit. Winters in New York City posed a particular risk for unsheltered individuals, and each winter saw the deaths of several un-housed people who had refused or been unable to seek appropriate shelter from the elements. One of the most well known cases—around which Koch based much of his early efforts to implement Project HELP—was that of another African-American woman, Rebecca Smith. Smith, who had diagnosed schizophrenia, died in a small, self-constructed shelter made of cardboard boxes on 10th Avenue and 17th Street on a frigid January night in 1982. Prior to her death, city aid workers had offered to transport Smith to a shelter; when she refused, they attempted to obtain a court order to forcibly hospitalize her. She died before the order was obtained.[67]

Smith's death received a wave of media attention.[68] She was, the city learned after her death, a college-educated woman from a middle-class family in Hampton, Virginia. She left Hampton, her daughter claimed, so that her schizophrenia would not be a burden

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[66] Robert Sullivan, "Mayor Offers Aid and Hand to Homeless," *New York Times*, March 25, 1983.

[67] Bogard, *Seasons Such As These,* 54-55.

[68] "Rebecca Smith, Who Said 'No,'" *New York Times*, January 29, 1982; Robin Herman, "One of City's Homeless Goes Home—In Death," *New York Times*, January 31, 1982; Richard Cohen, "Fatal Policy," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1982; The Death of Rebecca Smith," *Washington Post*, February 16, 1982. Smith's name continued to be invoked in the years to come as a justification of the city's cold weather policy: "Come in From the Cold," *New York Times*, November 15, 1985.

on her family. Nearly six years before Joyce Brown's hospitalization, Smith became one of the first recognizable names of the homeless crisis. None of the articles about Smith mention her race. However, they do report that she graduated from Hampton Institute, a historically black college in Virginia. Therefore Smith was probably African American.[69] The fact that race is so seldom mentioned in media coverage of homelessness, when it was in fact a major statistical and symbolic factor in New York City's homeless crisis, demonstrates the complicated role of race in the discourse on homelessness.

Citing Rebecca Smith's death as a prime example of the need for the city to use force, if necessary, to compel people to seek shelter, Koch initiated what became known as the "cold weather policy" in New York City in1982. The cold weather policy authorized city workers to forcibly remove homeless people from outdoor public places when the temperature dropped below thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit. It used Section 9.39 of New York State's Mental Hygiene Law as the legal justification for doing so, citing the danger of sleeping outdoors in freezing temperatures as sufficient proof that a person was a danger to themselves, as the law required. Initially, the New York Police Department was at the forefront of this effort; cops walking nighttime beats were told that someone out on the street in dangerously cold weather was "de facto a candidate for psychiatric evaluation." A later memo confirmed, "if there is any doubt about a person's safety, officers [should] bring that person to a shelter or hospital. Already this year [1987] two individuals have been found frozen to death" (emphases in original documents).[70]

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[69] Herman, "One of City's Homeless Goes Home—In Death."

[70] Stanley Brezenoff, "Memorandum: Homeless Pickups", March 5, 1987 and "Memorandum: Homeless Pickup," December 3, 1987. Mayor Edward I. Koch, Departmental Correspondences, New York City Municipal Archives.

Project HELP workers took a proactive role in this process, identifying at-risk people and initiating their removal. Most agreed that preventing people from freezing to death was important and legally defensible, but few cases were as unambiguous as Rebecca Smith's.[71]

To hear accounts from both shelter occupants and the journalists and scholars who studied the shelters, sleeping out-of-doors or in indoor public areas was not a wholly unreasonable decision: most city shelters (and many private ones) were notoriously chaotic, unsanitary, and dangerous. Shelter buildings—often, old armories and public schools—typically lacked adequate ventilation and plumbing to accommodate the hundreds who slept there each night. Further, security was often lax and residents risked having their belongings stolen as they slept. Fights between residents were common, and stabbings and sexual violence were not unheard of. Shelters were also gender-segregated, presenting an obstacle for gender-non-normative people and heterosexual couples who wished to stay together. In addition, men's shelter beds were more plentiful than women's shelter beds, especially in the earliest years of the homeless crisis. And like other at-risk groups, many women chose not to risk their safety or personal autonomy by seeking a bed at a shelter.[72] People with mental illnesses were another particularly

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[71] Years later, Joyce Brown's lawyer, Robert Levy, would note that in 1982, "the law [the Mental Hygiene Act] was broad enough that [Smith] could have been hospitalized…I think they made the wrong decision [in not hospitalizing her without obtaining a court order]." Author interview with Robert Levy, April 20, 2011.

[72] Quindlen, "About New York"; Memos from Mayor Koch to Blanche Bernstein, Commissioner of Human Resources Association, re: the difficulty of sheltering homeless women, 1978-1988. Departmental Correspondences, Mayor Edward I. Koch, New York City Municipal Archives. On the question of homeless people making the rational choice not to sleep in shelters, see "Cruel Brinkmanship: Planning for the Homeless – 1983," Coalition for the Homeless, August 16, 1982; Chris Mead, of Legal Action for the Homeless, testimony at Public Meetings of the Commission on the Homeless (aka "The Cuomo Commission"), January 7, 1992.

vulnerable population: Those who were not fully lucid could fall prey to thieving or violence, and those who had delusional outbursts could be ejected from private (though not public) shelters. By choice or by necessity, many un-sheltered people opted out of the system, whether or not they were mentally ill.

By her own account, Joyce Brown was one such person. "I had a limited choice," Brown claimed later, "and that's what I chose to do. I am a forty year old woman," she added, emphasizing her capacity to make rational decisions on her own.[73] This was a major point of contestation: Could Brown in fact make decisions for herself? Mayor Koch did not think so, and neither did Project HELP workers, who quickly identified her as in need of hospitalization. The criteria, however, that went into such a decision was hotly contested. Decisions about Brown's mental state were determined not only in the context of street homelessness and the removal of homeless people from public spaces in New York City, but also in the context of a long history of controversy over the diagnosis of mental incapacitation in New York and the nation. While most people agreed that Brown was mentally ill, their reasons for thinking so, and their understandings of what her legal rights were as a result, differed tremendously.

Joyce Brown on Trial

Despite the publicity surrounding Brown's forced hospitalization and subsequent hearing, and despite its implications for the power that the city of New York could legally wield over its residents, the case brought before New York State Supreme Court Judge Robert Lippman by NYCLU lawyers Norman Siegel and Robert Levy on behalf of Joyce

[73] *Donahue*, January 1988.

Brown was relatively narrow. It focused not on the legality of the Mental Hygiene Law itself, nor on the ability of the city of New York to judge what behavior counted as dangerous, but on Brown's individual mental health status, and whether or not she was in imminent danger of harming herself or another person. Following Brown's lead, Siegel and Levy put forth the argument that their client was not, in fact, severely mentally ill. They argued that Brown had made the rational choice—given her limited options—to live on the streets of New York City, and that whatever mental illness she might have did not impede her decision-making ability. Further, they cautioned against mistaking Brown's undesirability for dangerousness, reminding the court of the precedent set by O'Connor v. Donaldson.[74]

The city of New York vehemently denied Brown's lawyers' contention, and brought forth psychiatrists who confidently diagnosed Brown with "schizophrenia" and characterized her behavior as "suicidal."[75] But the opinions of the psychiatrists brought forth by Brown's defense were at odds with those hired by the City, leaving Judge Lippman dubious. As he observed in his ruling, "From the testimony of the seven psychiatrists it is evident that psychiatry is not a science amenable to the exactness of mathematics or the predictability of physical laws. Examinations of the same patient resulted in disparate diagnoses."[76] He concluded, "'Whether Joyce Brown is or is not mentally ill…it is my finding…that she is not unable to care for her essential needs.'" He continued, "Project HELP, the Mayor's program, is a first step in the right direction

[74] "In the Matter of Ms. Billy Boggs," Memorandum in Opposition to the Application for the Retention of Ms. Billy Boggs Pursuant to Section 9.39 of the Mental Hygiene Law, Supreme Court of the State of New York, undated.

[75] *In the Matter of Billie Boggs, Petitioner*, 136 Misc. Reports, 2nd Series, 1084 (N.Y. State S.C. 1987).

[76] *Ibid*.

towards helping the homeless mentally ill. Joyce Brown, however, does not fall within the ambit of that program."[77]

The city of New York appealed Lippman's decision, and the New York State Supreme Court ruled in its favor, allowing the city to continue to hospitalize Brown. Though she was in Bellevue, however, Brown continued to refuse treatment. Levy and Siegel's subsequent appeal on Brown's behalf was cut short when the city of New York—after being denied a court order to forcibly medicate Brown—decided to release her from its custody. After an 84-day stay in Bellevue Hospital, Joyce Brown was free.

Brown's release from Bellevue, however, was not the end of her story. In subsequent days, the media courted her, and she agreed to appear on a number of television news and talk shows. With Levy and Siegel, she appeared smiling, kempt, and eminently lucid to argue her case to the general public. The NYCLU found Brown an apartment at a women's Single Room Occupancy in Midtown Manhattan, and provided her with a temporary secretarial position at their office. Yet just weeks later, Brown was once again spotted wandering the streets of New York City, panhandling and—by some accounts—yelling at those who confronted her.[78]

This was one of the last times that Brown would be the focus of mainstream media attention, leaving anyone following her story with the impression that after proving her competence, winning her freedom, and expressing hopes of gaining a home and a steady job, Brown had swiftly resumed her former life on the streets. Indeed, journalists and politicians have pointed to Joyce Brown's case as the ultimate demonstration of the failure of the civil liberties argument for homeless individuals. As

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[77] *Ibid*.

[78] "Boggs Begs," *New York Post*, March 10, 1988; Kasindorf, "The Real Story of Billie Boggs," 36.

Nathan Leventhal, Koch's Deputy Mayor, put it, "Billie Boggs…was a perfect example of the system gone amok. The civil libertarians take up her cause. They force her out of treatment. They give her a job. They put her on television and three months later she's defecating in the street again and shouting obscenities."[79] Mayor Koch agreed. In an editorial for New York's daily circular *Newsday*, he wrote, "[Brown] has now apparently returned to her incoherent condition and once again lives on a grate on the corner of 67th Street and Second Avenue adjacent to Swensens (sic) Ice Cream Shop. Those who attacked the City of New York, and me in particular, for having initiated the action to institutionalize Billie Boggs at Bellevue against her will, surely must wake up at night wondering if they did the right thing regarding this case."[80]

That certainly was the conventional wisdom. Several scathing articles about Brown reinforced the notion that her release from Bellevue was a mistake, the improper outcome of a faulty justice system. The *New York Post*, one of New York City's more politically conservative daily papers, was especially intrigued by Brown's case, and especially condemnatory of Brown, her defense team, and the court's decisions on her behalf. In an editorial written several days after Brown's release from Bellevue, the *Post* characterized her as "a very troubled woman, who has been done no favor by the NYCLU."[81] Subsequent articles criticized Brown's media tour as a "traveling circus," and, on March 10, 1988, gleefully revealed an "exclusive photo" showing Brown panhandling in Manhattan under the headline, "Boggs Begs." The photo, in which Brown

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[79] Nathan Leventhal, interviewed by Sharon Zane. Edward I. Koch Administration Oral History Collection, 93-96.

[80] Edward Koch, untitled editorial (draft) for *Newsday*, week of February 3, 1989. Mayor Edward I. Koch. Department Correspondences. New York City Municipal Archives.

[81] "The 'victory' of Billie Boggs," *New York Post*, January 20, 1988.

clutches a plastic shopping bag and holds a trench coat closed around her throat, captured Brown with an angry or disturbed facial expression. The caption noted, "As a beggar, Boggs puts on a different face than she displays in her public appearances," suggesting that this—and not the well-dressed, groomed and articulate demeanor that Brown had in her court and media appearances—was Brown's true or hidden persona.[82]

In fact, many portrayals of Brown—both in the media, and by lawyers, psychiatrists, social workers, and even the mayor—emphasized this duality, suggesting that Brown's public persona was a façade. This was emphasized in news articles that remarked upon Brown's physical transformation from bag lady to a more respectable middle-class standard. A brief piece in the *Daily News* remarked upon this change with the headline, "A Slick New Look For Billie Boggs," and a corresponding image which juxtaposed a "before" photo of Brown during her commitment hearing with an "after" taken following a shopping trip and haircut which resulted in a "glamorous new look."[83] Remarks upon Brown's new clothes and hairdo emphasized the artifice of her change, and suggested—as the *Post* article made explicit—that such changes masked her true, homeless, mentally ill self. These articles also make apparent how Brown's story was informed by the discourse around welfare queens and other unruly non-white cultural caricatures. Suggestions that Brown was fooling the public or pretending to be someone she was not were informed by the knowledge of her mental illness, but they were also informed by broader cultural understandings of poor African-American women as "wily" and manipulative, undeserving of taxpayer's dollars or sympathy.[84]

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[82] "Boggs Begs."

[83] "A Slick New Look For Billie Boggs," *The Daily News*, January 29, 1988.
[84] Bridges, *Reproducing Race*, 201-212.

While the *Post* may have exaggerated in calling Brown's media appearances a "traveling circus," Brown's presence on talk shows and news programs marked several breaks in the script, so to speak, from how such programs generally operate. Her encounter with anchor John Roland on New York's Channel 5 nightly news was the most remarked upon: Rather than interview her with the detached coolness that usually characterizes such appearances, Roland, an Upper East Side resident, railed at Brown, countering her claim that she never needed hospitalization. "I walked by you almost every day," Roland exclaimed. "You used to talk to yourself…You used to run out on Second Avenue in front of cars…You would defecate on the sidewalk. You'd urinate on the sidewalk."[85] With the exception of the charge that Brown ran into the street—a claim that both she and her lawyers hotly contested in court—none of Roland's "evidence" met the legal standard for involuntary hospitalization. Yet to Roland, these acts should have been enough to justify Brown's removal.

An appearance on the popular talk show, *Donahue*, was equally chaotic. Audience members openly jeered Brown, as well as statements made by homeless advocates. George McDonald—founder of the Doe Fund, an organization that provided shelter and aid to homeless individuals—argued that the homeless are not homeless by choice, but rather "have no place to go," calling attention to New York City's low-income housing shortage. He was booed by the audience, whose members were so eager to speak on the topic that they often did not wait for Phil Donahue, the show's host, to acknowledge them with the microphone. They retorted, among other things, that people were homeless by

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[85] "Ch. 5 Drops Anchor," *New York Post*, January 21, 1988.

choice, and that homeless people should simply "get a job."[86] Such appearances may have had a "circus" atmosphere, but they were not of Brown's creation.

The audiences' hostile reaction also points to a deeper conflict, for which Brown's case served as a convenient focal point. As the discussion on *Donahue* revealed, cultural consciousness of urban street homelessness was high, and sentiment towards "the homeless" was—while not wholly unsympathetic—rife with complicated, sometimes conflicting emotions. One woman in Phil Donahue's audience acknowledged that "four dollars and fifty cents an hour will not give you anything," responding to the claim of one self-identified homeless audience member that he makes only $4.50 an hour as a home health aid—not nearly enough money to stay housed and fed in most areas of New York City. She preceded that comment, however, by saying of the homeless, "People cannot help them if they cannot help themselves."[87] This "bootstraps" mentality was not uncommon: in discussions about homelessness and poverty in America, the rhetoric of personal responsibility was pervasive, and often drew upon popular associations between blackness and government dependency.[88]

Many audience members were of the opinion that the homeless—like poor people, more broadly—were unfairly taking taxpayer money and services that they didn't need. One white man in the audience commented, "I've heard a lot of things of what they

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[86] *Donahue*, January 1988.

[87] *Ibid*.

[88] This mentality was embodied in countless initiatives, both public and private, to "help the homeless help themselves." For instance, *Street News*, a New York City newspaper created (by a non-homeless man) for the express purpose of being sold by the homeless, was a way of harnessing the "untapped work force" of people "lying around," giving them something of value to do. A similar attitude underlay both Koch's and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's initiatives to compell the homeless to work below-minimum wage jobs in exchange for public shelter—or, for that matter, the federal government's 1996 "welfare to work" laws that changed the way welfare works in the United States. For more on this topic and its racialized undertones, see Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*.

expect from us. How about what we expect from them? Decent jobs—go out and look for work!" The audience met his comment with a thunderous round of applause. In such moments, the connections between homelessness and coded racial discourses around work, poverty, and welfare become apparent.[89]

Even more telling, however, was the uproar that occurred over the group of homeless people sitting in the audience of *Donahue* that day. A caller to the show asked the cameras to pan to the group, which was entirely male and almost entirely African American. The caller remarked, "That's a very scary, intimidating shot. When we walk through the subways, this is what we see." At Donahue's suggestion that the caller is being racist, he replies, "not at all." But it is clear that notions of race, masculinity, and danger were intertwined for this caller—and, presumably, for much of Donahue's audience. While homeless and poor women on welfare were stereotyped as lazy and dependent, if also sympathetic, homeless and poor men had the additional burden of also being widely understood as a criminal class. This sense of danger informed New Yorkers' opinions on the presence of homeless people on city streets, and influenced public policy on the sheltering and aiding of New York City's homeless population.[90] Joyce Brown's plight was a product of this raced, gendered, and classed legacy; the

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[89] Numerous authors have studied the cultural image of the "welfare mothers" or "welfare queens" and the cultural discourse around gender, race, and poverty that led to legislation like the 1996 national Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Fewer have discussed how this cultural discourse also affected and was constituted by popular images of non-white men. For examples of the former, see Bridges (2011) and Hancock (2004), as well as Jane L. Collins and Victoria Mayer, *Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom in the Low-Wage Labor Market* (University of Chicago Press, 2010). Examples of the latter more frequently address pre-1980s history, including Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford University Press, 1996); and Michael Willrich, "Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America," *Journal of American History* 87:2 (September 2000), 460-489.

[90] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow;* Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness;* Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

public's reaction to her was irrevocably tied to the broader, conflicting sentiments of sympathy and disgust that governed popular opinion about homelessness and poverty, and situated poor people, and African-American poor people in particular, outside of the realm of public belonging.[91]

Conclusion

Once the initial hype died down, Brown's publicity faded. Project HELP continued, but the number of people it hospitalized was relatively small, and no other case received the attention that Brown's had. Joyce Brown went on to live a quiet—if not completely untroubled—life until her death in 2005. Feeling betrayed by the press upon whom she had originally relied to gain publicity and support for her case, Brown turned down a book contract and declined further interviews and engagements.[92] While she had several more hospitalizations for drug abuse and psychosis over the course of her life, she remained willfully out of the media spotlight.[93]

The publicity that Brown received during her commitment hearing and in the wake of her release from Bellevue indicates the level to which homelessness—and in particular, street homelessness and homelessness among the mentally ill—were hot-button issues in New York City in the late 1980s. But an analysis of this publicity also reveals the level to which debates over these issues were not morally simple debates over how best to help the homeless or treat the mentally ill, nor could such debates be

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[91] For works specifically on public belonging or citizenship, see Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity;* Robert Asen, "Imagining the Public Sphere," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34:4 (2002), 345-367; Hancock (2004).

[92] Interview with Robert Levy, April 20, 2011.

[93] "Out of the Spotlight, But Also Off the Streets," *New York Times*, November 10, 2002.

removed from the context of race, gender, and class, in the late-twentieth century United States. Rather, they were debates over the scourge of visible homelessness in a gentrifying city, and over raced and gendered, spatialized and embodied understandings of homelessness, mental illness, civil liberties, and community rights.

Chapter 3
"Where Misery is a Way of Life": Homeless Families and Welfare Hotel Scandals

Introduction

> Since 1980, homelessness has changed its character. What was once a theatre of the grotesque – shopping bag ladies in Grand Central Terminal, winos sleeping in the dusty sun outside the Greyhound station in El Paso – has grown into the common misery of millions…The most chilling fact is that families with small children have become the fastest-growing sector of the homeless.
>
> -Jonathan Kozol, 1988

In the mid-1980s, journalists began to recognize what the municipal government and housing advocates had known for several years: Homelessness among families – defined as parents with dependent children – was increasing at a rapid rate. In 1982, the New York City government provided emergency shelter to around 1,000 families per night; by 1983, that number had doubled, and by 1987 it had risen to above 5,000 families comprised of over 17,000 individuals, including 12,000 children.[227] Jonathan Kozol's report – which *The New Yorker* magazine first published in 1988 and which Kozol subsequently expanded into a book, *Rachel and Her Children* – was just one of dozens of texts that posited family homelessness as a profound shift in the landscape of extreme poverty. If the first years of the new homelessness had been a "theatre of the grotesque," populated by men and women all-too-easily characterized as society's misfits, then the rise of homeless families was an unsettling re-casting of the homeless crisis's main players.

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[227] Like most quantitative data on homelessness, the statistics on homeless families in New York City – and even simply in its shelter system – are inconsistent and contested. I have gleaned the best estimates I could based on the following sources: Boylan, "Homeless Remarks Summary" (Summary of remarks Mayor Koch made before the Ad Hoc Task Force on Homelessness and Housing, New York City) January 21, 1988; Adina Goldstein, "'A Place of My Own': Homeless Families in the New York City Shelter System" (unpublished dissertation, 2007), 28; Jane Gross, "In Gloom of Welfare Hotels, Voice of Hope Is Heard," *New York Times*, November 11, 1985; Kozol, 17; John H. Simpson and Margaret Kilduff, *Struggling to Survive in a Welfare Hotel* (New York City: Community Service Society, 1984), 1. And, as Adina Goldstein points out, these numbers do not include families who are doubled up or who reside in substandard or non-legal housing; those numbers are much more difficult to quantify.

This chapter examines how homeless families shaped the New York City homeless crisis. Homeless families, many felt, were different than homeless individuals. Their inclusion in the group known as "the homeless" changed the very meaning of the term and contributed to a shift in how public policy makers and ordinary citizens understood the homeless crisis. As the former executive director of New York City's Catholic Charities, Bishop Joseph Sullivan, noted, "[Mayor] Koch was reluctant to embrace the homelessness upfront because he felt it was an endless pit, that you would just keep pouring resources and it would go no place, alright? And then I think the thing that happened, people around him persuaded him to change when it became more and more homeless women and children…I think that's when he realized he really had to do something in a more permanent way."[228] A combination of government awareness, judicial decree, and media publicity on homeless families spurred the Koch administration to go beyond the stopgap measures that had largely characterized the city's homeless policy to that point.[229] Yet homeless families were not only the impetus for but also the primary recipients of these policy changes. New York City's drive to create more social services and paths to permanent housing for homeless families mostly did not extend to homeless single adults, nor was sympathy for them as prevalent as it was for homeless children (and, to some extent, their parents).[230] At the same time that families were becoming known as the newest victims of the homeless crisis, then, they

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[228] Bishop Joseph Sullivan interview, Edward I. Koch Oral History Collection, Columbia University.

[229] In the earliest years of the homeless crisis, the Koch Administration operated on the principle that providing high quality shelters would simply increase the demand for shelter; thus the city intentionally created shelters that only maintained a bare minimum of standards (and often, not even that). Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City,* 132; Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 282.

[230] This topic is the subject of Passaro's *The Unequal Homeless*.

were also segregated in the popular consciousness and in public policy from the broader population of "the homeless." This chapter explores how homeless families were both *a part of* and *apart from* the crisis of homelessness in 1980s New York City.

The influence homeless families had on the homeless crisis was not unidirectional. Rather, the two phenomena – the rise in homeless families, and the growing homeless crisis – were in many ways mutually constitutive: Just as homeless families shaped the New York City homeless crisis, so too did the homeless crisis shape public policy towards and representations of poor families. The city had long provided emergency shelter and housing assistance to families in need, but it was only in the 1980s that the media, the government, and advocates began to more regularly identify these families as part of the group known as "the homeless."[231] Homeless families, then, became a social group affiliated with "the homeless" only in the context of the 1980s homeless crisis. Peter H. Rossi has noted that the category "the homeless" evolved in the 1970s and '80s from a descriptor for those who were "without the social relations implied in the meaning of home" (namely, family affiliation) to one describing people who were literally without shelter.[232] This change affected the categorization of un-housed families in the 1980s, obscuring (though by no means severing) their connection to other very poor families in New York City and linking them to a new and much more diverse

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[231] In the 1960s and 1970s, the term "homeless" was sometimes used to describe families that the city sheltered in hotels; but the term was by no means stable or constant, as evidenced in newspaper articles including Charles Grutzner, "Relief Families Still in Hotel," *New York Times*, May 6, 1962; "City Paying $85 a day to Shelter Welfare Families," *New York Times*, August 5, 1970; Wolfgang Saxon, "'Hotel Families' on Rise After Drop to 218 in '72," *New York Times*, May 5, 1974. A 1970 article that uses the descriptive term "homeless" in its headline clarifies in the first body paragraph that it is referring to "welfare clients who have been made homeless by fires and other disaters." Edward Hudson, "Levitt Urges City to Maintain Units for Homeless," *New York Times*, August 6, 1970.

[232] Peter H. Rossi, "Troubling Families: Family Homelessness in America," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 37:3 (January 1994).

demographic category, "the homeless." As homelessness grew and as the homeless crisis became an important public issue, the term "the homeless" came to encompass a wider array of people and groups, including families who lacked permanent housing.

Homeless families' place in the homeless crisis was greatly informed by social norms on the meaning of "family" and the differentiation and hierarchization of people and groups along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and class. The majority of New York City's homeless families were comprised of Black and Latino/a women and children.[233] While their status as members of a family unit gave them access to some services not available to childless homeless individuals, homeless families' deviation from the white, two-parent family norm greatly affected the policy directed towards them and the public's perception of them.[234] Homeless families were routinely described as dysfunctional, and mothers in particular as incompetent. Paul Crotty, Koch's housing commissioner from 1986 until 1989, argued that one of the primary causes of homelessness in New York City was the "disintegration of family," and noted of many of the young mothers entering the system,

> Some of the young girls who were coming in never had any mothering, never had any parenting, had no parenting experience. They don't have any high school education. They've always been living as dependents someplace, and haven't been well supervised and they're undisciplined.[235]

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[233] Richard I. Towber, *Characteristics and Housing Histories of Families Seeking Shelter from HRA* (New York City Office of Human Resources Administration, October 1986), iii.

[234] As Linda Gordon has noted, "The stigmas of 'welfare' and of single motherhood intersect; hostility to the poor and hostility to deviant family forms reinforce each other." Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 6.

[235] Paul Crotty interview, Columbia University, 140-141, 157-159. In the next sentence, Crotty actually referenced Daniel Patrick Moynihan, saying, "I listened to Senator Moynihan talk about it the other day." Moynihan is widely credited with publicizing and legitimizing the notion of the dysfunctional Black urban family in his 1965 "Moynihan Report." Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (United States Department of Labor, 1965).

These portrayals drew – sometimes subtly, but often not – upon the stereotypes of poor non-white women and family pathology most commonly associated with the image of the "welfare queen" in American culture.[236] And indeed, as Marybeth Shin and Beth C. Weitzman have argued, homeless families in many ways had more in common with other poor, female-headed single-parent households than they did with childless homeless individuals.[237] Yet scholars have not yet analyzed how the 1980s cultural discourse on welfare and single motherhood affected public policy and perceptions of family homelessness.

By the mid-1980s, homeless parents were actively working to gain a greater level of control over their fates and over the discourse that shaped their public image. Homeless mothers were at the forefront of this change. Ruth Young, an African American woman who lived with her children at the Brooklyn Arms – the city's second largest family shelter – became a prominent organizer in the late 1980s. Young titled her short autobiography *One Mother's Journey*, framing her experience of homelessness and activism in terms of her motherhood that stood in marked contrast to negative stereotypes of poor Black mothers. But she also connected her struggle to the larger issue of homelessness and inequality in New York City, writing, "You can't talk about homelessness without addressing economics. You can't talk about homelessness without

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[236] For more on the image of the welfare queen and its mobilization in public policy debates, see Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*.

[237] Marybeth Shin and Beth C. Weitzman, "Homeless Families Are Different," in Jim Baumohl, *Homelessness in America* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1996). Studies have also found that even as homeless women were more likely than homeless men to live with their dependent children, 35 percent of homeless women still did not live with at least one of their children. Further, a 2002 study found that 44 percent mothers living in family shelters often had other children living elsewhere (compared to 8 percent of poor non-homeless mothers). Marybeth Shinn and Ellen Bassuk, "Homeless Families," The Encyclopedia of Homelessness, 149-155; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, "Mother-Child Separation Among Homeless and Housed Families Receiving Public Assistance in New York City," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30 (2002), 711-730.

talking about well paying, secure jobs, comprehensive health care, certified child care, and quality education. You can't talk about homelessness unless you talk about racially, socially and economically integrated housing for all."[238]

The private hotels – commonly known as welfare hotels – in which the city sheltered homeless families were at the center of Young's activism. But few scholars have yet extended their analyses of the geography of homelessness – and homeless people's activism – to address these sites. As authors including Themis Chronoupolis, Neil Smith, Alex Vitale, and Talmadge Wright have argued, the homeless crisis was in many ways defined by spatial conflict, as streets, parks, and other public places – especially in gentrifying neighborhoods – became sites of contestation over the presence of homeless people (and people whom others perceived as homeless or otherwise disorderly).[239] Homeless families, however, rarely slept in city parks or panhandled on city sidewalks. In many ways, their lack of public visibility was their defining feature, and commentators subsequently called homeless families the "invisible homeless."[240] Yet family homelessness was intricately tied to the space of the welfare hotel. These hotels, which were paid for by a combination of city, state, and federal funds, sheltered the vast

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[238] Ruth Young, *One Mother's Journey*, excerpted in *Fighting For Our Lives* 1:4 (April 1993), 12-14.

[239] Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City;* Smith, *The New Urban Frontier;* Vitale, *City of Disorder;* Wright, *Out of Place*. On the legal re-structuring of urban geography in response to the public presence of homeless people, see Mitchell, "The Annihilation of Space by Law," and Waldron, Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom."

[240] For some instances, see "The Homeless," *Metroline* (New York: PBS/WNET, 1986), which reports, "There are really two kinds of homeless people: the visible, and the invisible homeless." The invisible are children, "young boys and girls who have no place to live and are sheltered with their families in welfare hotels and congregate shelters throughout the city." Similarly, a 1985 City Limits article wrote, "Women and their children are the invisible homeless." Mary Breen, "Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness," *City Limits* 10:4 (April 1985), 10.

majority of homeless families in New York City in the 1980s,[241] and were at the center of fierce debates between government officials, homeless advocates, neighborhood activists, and homeless people themselves. Scholars who study homelessness and spatial conflict have overlooked the importance of these hotels, and have not related the issue of homeless families in welfare hotels to that of homeless individuals on the streets of New York City. But controversies over welfare hotels – which often focused as much on the dysfunction of homeless families as on the abysmal conditions of the hotels themselves – reinforced gendered, raced, and space-based notions of poverty and urban disorder in the late twentieth century United States. Furthermore, both homeless families' activism and anti-hotel neighborhood activism focused on not only hotels but the area that surrounded them, whether the former group was occupying the streets to demand justice, or the latter group was decrying the declining conditions of the block upon which a "welfare hotel" resided. Despite their largely separate treatment in scholarship, the media, and public policy, the issue of homeless families in welfare hotels must be understood in the context of the broader history of contested space that characterized the New York City homeless crisis.

The Emergence of Family Homelessness

Many of the same factors that caused homelessness among childless adults were responsible for the rise in family homelessness in New York City. The decline in manufacturing and other blue-collar employment opportunities, the federal reduction of

[241] This continued into the 1990s. As mayor, David Dinkins vowed to phase out the use of welfare hotels to shelter homeless families. Yet like Ed Koch before him, the Dinkins administration – and the Giuliani administration after that – continued to rely on these hotels to shelter the vast majority of homeless families that entered the city's homeless services system.

social welfare programs (including Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, and public housing), and an increasingly dire shortage of low-cost rental housing options resulted in a growing number of people who lacked a permanent place to live.[242] These issues disproportionately affected the city's Black and Latino/a populations, who for decades had suffered the effects of urban renewal, white flight, and municipal and commercial disinvestment.[243] These groups were more likely to be underemployed and to live in neighborhoods with fewer and less adequate housing options than were white New Yorkers. Families with children, especially those headed by single mothers, often struggled the most to find decent housing for their children and, more generally, to make ends meet.[244]

Homelessness among families was not a new phenomenon in 1980s New York. The city had long used federal "emergency family assistance" funds to provide emergency shelter to families when they lost their homes in building fires or became evicted.[245] Despite being temporarily un-housed, however, these families were rarely considered part of the group known as "the homeless." As Ralph da Costa Nunez has

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[242] For statistics on the rental housing shortage (and rising prices) that first began in the 1970s, see Peter Marcuse, *Rental Housing in the City of New York: Supply and Condition, 1975-1978* (City of New York, 1979). At the same time that the city was losing rental housing, it was gaining cooperatives and condominiums as developers converted rental units into more profitable dwellings, thus further tightening demand for the fewer remaining low-cost rental units. Josh Barbanel, "City Has Fewer Rental Apartments, Survey Finds," *New York Times*, March 6, 1985; Ralph da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City: The Public Policies of Four Mayors, 1978-2009* (New York: Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2010), 11-13; Peter Marcuse, "The Homefront," *City Limits* (August-September 1985), 10-14. On the role of the federal government in exacerbating poverty and housing instability, see Peter Dreier, "Reagan's Legacy: Homelessness in America," *Shelterforce Online* (May/June 2004), publication of the National Housing Institute.

[243] Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier;* Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn;* Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis;* Wilder, *A Covenant With Color*.

[244] Jill Nelson, "No Kids or Dogs Allowed," *City Limits* 10:4 (April 1985), 12-13; da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City,* 11.

[245] Kircheimer, "Sheltering the Homeless in New York City, 609.

noted, "the idea of family homelessness was practically an oxymoron before the 1980s." Since the term "the homeless" generally described single men, un-housed families were not seen as part of the same demographic category.[246] Emergency shelter for families was commonly understood as a service the government provided to recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, commonly known as "welfare").[247] This affiliation contained its own set of stigmas which would soon become important to the emerging issue of family homelessness; but before the 1980s, un-housed families were decidedly different in public policy and popular consciousness from the men commonly known as "the homeless."

However, the phenomenon known as "family homelessness" was hardly just the result of a discursive shift: The number of families entering New York City's emergency shelter system grew drastically in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, municipal or private charitable facilities sheltered around 900 families per night; by 1987, that number had grown to over 5,000.[248] The causes of family homelessness were also changing: Before 1982, two-thirds of the families seeking emergency shelter were homeless as a result of fire or issues relating to landlord abandonment, and the other one-third of families due to eviction. After 1982, that proportion was reversed. Many evicted families reported that they had not been primary leaseholders, but rather had been doubling up with family or

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[246] da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City,* 12.

[247] da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City*, 12.

[248] Simpson and Kilduff, *Struggling to Survive in a Welfare Hotel*, 5; Kozol, 17; "Homeless Families at Record Number in City Shelters," *Newsday*, August 11, 1987. As noted in this chapter's introduction, statistics on homeless families in New York City – and even simply in its shelter system – are inconsistent and contested.

friends before entering the shelter system.[249] The housing instability that had long characterized poor families' lives became even more tenuous in the 1980s. At the same time that the category "the homeless" was changing, then, family homelessness became a growing problem that was more readily identifiable as part of the same phenomenon that was leading to rising homelessness among childless adults.

As family homelessness – and the public's awareness of it – rose in the 1980s, it became one of the most pressing aspects of the homeless crisis in New York City. Beginning around 1984, newspapers increasingly covered the phenomenon of family homelessness, profiling families who were living in "welfare hotels" paid for by the city and reporting on the "cruel odyssey," as one headline put it, of families seeking lodging in the municipal shelter system.[250] These portrayals contained sympathetic elements, which spoke to the more prevalent nature of public sympathy for homeless families as opposed to single homeless adults. For instance, while neighborhoods across the city protested the placement of congregate homeless shelters for adult men, Ken Murphy of the city's Human Resources Administration confessed that he anticipated less trouble opening shelters for homeless families. "In terms of public outcry," he noted, "there's a different perception of families than singles on the street." Finding space to accommodate families was strategically difficult, but many in the city saw it as both more necessary and more palatable than sheltering male homeless adults. "The homeless family is not as

[249] Tom Robbins, "New York's Homeless Families," *City Limits* (November 1984), 8.

[250] Jane Gross, "Cruel Odyssey of the Homeless Seeking a Bed," *New York Times*, January 16, 1985.

threatening as a homeless person," confirmed Murphy. "We can get facilities to accept a family."[251]

As the next section of this chapter will explore in more detail, Murphy's words were overly optimistic. The city encountered real difficulty sheltering homeless families. Aside from a few congregate shelters – including the notoriously large and noisy shelter at Roberto Clemente State Park in the Bronx – the city relied on private hotels to house most of the homeless families who entered its system. Hotel owners charged the city exorbitant fees to house homeless families in rooms that were often decrepit and lacked amenities like refrigerators or private bathrooms, and residents of the areas surrounding the hotels complained bitterly about the presence of homeless families in their neighborhoods.

By the mid-1980s, un-housed families were increasingly integrated into the cultural and political apparatuses of the New York City homeless crisis. This status was legally cemented in 1986, when a judge ruled that New York City must guarantee the same right to shelter for homeless families that it granted to homeless men in *Callahan v. Carey* in 1981 and to homeless women in *Eldredge v. Koch* in 1983. But far from being fixed, families' membership in the group known as "the homeless" was contested and qualified. As the homeless crisis changed New Yorkers' understandings of what it meant to be "homeless," un-housed families' affiliation with welfare was never far below the surface. Rather, the raced, gendered, and classed stereotypes informing popular notions of welfare in America infused how homeless families were portrayed in the press and their interactions with government agencies.

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[251] Robin Herman, "City Temporarily Sheltering over 700 Homeless Families," *New York Times*, March 5, 1982.

A 1982 *New York Times* article illustrates this well. The city's system of family shelter was nearly taxed, the article claimed, by families who had been "burned out of their homes by arsonists or frozen out by negligent landlords," and who were now taking longer than usual to move from their hotel rooms on to permanent housing.[252] The article profiled Lucille Carter, a Brooklyn mother who, along with her eleven children, had vacated her apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn after arsonists repeatedly attempted to set fire to the landlord-abandoned building. It had been impossible, Ms. Carter claimed, to find new housing that could accommodate her entire family. Instead, they became one of the growing numbers of families utilizing New York City's emergency shelter system for longer and longer stays. Despite Ms. Carter's explanation – which correlated with statistics showing an increasingly expensive, tightening rental market in New York City – some city officials offered a different rationale for the long stays of families like Ms. Carter's. Wilfredo Vargas, the assistant commissioner for relocation operations in the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), claimed, "The shelter is sometimes a much nicer place than [the families] came from, and they are reluctant to leave."[253]

The idea that a family living in a single, often filthy and unsafe hotel room was "reluctant to leave" was part of a broader narrative put forth by some members of the media, scholars, municipal employees, and politicians (including Mayor Koch) that homeless families were not truly needy, but rather were taking advantage of the city's generosity. Mayor Koch had, on several occasions, publicly accused families of declaring

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[252] Robin Herman, "City Temporarily Sheltering Over 700 Homeless Families," *New York Times*, March 5, 1982.

[253] "City Temporarily Sheltering Over 700 Homeless Families."

homelessness so as to more quickly obtain a subsidized city-owned apartment by skipping to the front of a long waiting list.[254] The reporter Dick Oliver concurred, writing in 1985 that because homeless families received priority placement in city-owned housing, "the earliest and easiest way to get public help for housing…is to go homeless."[255] Homelessness was, in this construction, a performance: To "go homeless" was to make a strategic choice to manipulate the city's social welfare system.

These narratives bore a striking resemblance to the accusations politicians and the media had historically leveled at people – especially Black mothers – who received AFDC. During his 1976 gubernatorial campaign, Ronald Reagan spoke of a "welfare queen" in Chicago who swindled the system, having children so as to receive an increased amount of benefits and collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of public aid.[256] Though he was not the first person to suggest that mothers receiving AFDC were immoral or that AFDC reinforced poor people's dependence on the government, Reagan ensured the perpetuation of this myth, invoking it during his presidency to justify scaling back the U.S.'s social welfare system. (Ironically, this reduction was one of the

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[254] As a *Newsday* article on New York's growing homeless problem noted in 1985, Koch said "that he believes the increase [in homeless families] stems, in part, from families moving into shelters to gain a city-owned apartment." Kevin Flynn, "Why So Many Homeless Families?" *Newsday*, December 4, 1985. Koch had also long attempted to implement a hotel "termination" policy that would evict homeless families from their hotel rooms and relocate them to congregate shelters if they rejected a permanent housing placement in an apartment of the City's choosing. Kevin Flynn, "Why So Many Families?" Newsday, December 4, 1985; Stanley Brezenoff to Edward Koch, "Memorandum Re: Termination Policy," January 3, 1986. Mayor Edward I. Koch collection, City of New York Municipal Archives; Annette Fuentes, "Termination Van Rides," *City Limits*, May 1986.

[255] Dick Oliver, "Did the Pentagon Bankroll One American Dream?" *West Side Spirit*, August 12, 1985.
[256] "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *New York Times* (February 15, 1976). For more on the image of the welfare queen and its mobilization in public policy debates, see Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*.

causes that led more families in New York City to become homeless.)[257] At the heart of the discourse on the welfare queen was the notion that AFDC served women of color who, along with their children, were undeserving recipients.[258] This undeserving-ness was described in terms that drew upon stereotypes of poor Black women as hypersexual, lazy, and manipulative, and of Black families as dysfunctional and aberrant from the white heterosexual family norm.[259] While not all welfare recipients in the U.S. were Black (in fact, the majority of them were white), "welfare" functioned in the late-twentieth century United States as a code word for race, and specifically for Blackness.[260]

As Linda Gordon has noted, the history of women and public aid is fraught with conflicting stereotypes that draw upon images of single mothers as pathetic martyrs, on the one hand, and irresponsible or sexually loose, on the other.[261] This duality was evident in the rising crisis of family homelessness, where sympathetic portrayals of homeless families stood – often in the same texts – alongside many of the common stereotypes of "undeserving" poor welfare recipients. When Wilfredo Vargas, the HPD administrator, accused families like Lucille Carter's of taking advantage of the government, his accusations must be understood in light of this history.

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[257]As Bridges has noted, "What was key in Reagan's construction of the myth of the welfare queen was the sense that the single mother who received public assistance took more than what she needed; moreover, the structure of the programs allowed her to do so." Bridges, *Reproducing Race,* 211-212.

[258] Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation With Poverty* (second edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[259] One of the texts most responsible for the institutional perpetuation of this idea in the late-twentieth century United States is the Moynihan Report, which argued that the cause of poverty among urban African-Americans was single mothers, who undermined African American men, creating a disincentive for men to act as husbands, fathers, and providers and instilling abnormal value systems in children.

[260] Bridges, *Reproducing Race*, 201-249; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body;* Note, "Dethroning the Welfare Queen." Both Bridges and *Harvard Law Review* cite Marian Wright Edelman, a children's rights and anti-poverty activist, as the originator of the idea that "welfare" was a code word for Blackness.

[261] Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*.

Race was an important – if largely unspoken – part of this portrayal. As Khiara Bridges has noted, "the figure of the welfare queen has never been explicitly raced as Black. Rather, the figure allows those who refer to it to gesture towards race…without expressly mentioning race at all." Noting that Carter and her family were from Bedford-Stuyvesant – a historically Black and poor neighborhood in central Brooklyn – and that she had eleven children – reinforcing stereotypes about Black women's hypersexuality – were two ways that the *New York Times* coded Carter as Black without ever mentioning her race. As Bridges has noted, however, even non-Black welfare recipients are "always already Black" in a system of logic in which deserving-ness is equated with whiteness, and in which those receiving welfare are automatically un-deserving.[262] Wilfredo Vargas' claim (and others like it) stood alongside Carter's own explanation for her plight, creating dual and dueling narratives of the causes for family homelessness in New York City, in which race is ever present but resides just below the surface of discourse.

In the ensuing years, some scholars would reinforce these characterizations of homeless families. The liberal sociologist Christopher Jencks suggested that families' homeless statuses were born more of bureaucratic manipulation than true lack of shelter. "Welfare departments are always looking for a way of getting their clients to the head of the waiting list [for subsidized housing]," Jencks claimed. "Calling a family homeless is a way of helping it jump the queue."[263] Jencks stopped short of accusing homeless families themselves of cheating the system; yet his assertion had much in common with the narratives perpetuated by both conservatives and liberals about welfare's (and welfare recipients') flaws. Similarly, in her 1996 book on gender and the homeless crisis, cultural

[262] Bridges, *Reproducing Race*, 212, 220-221.

[263] Christopher Jencks, *The Homeless* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 4-5.

anthropologist Joanne Passaro repeatedly asserted that poor people were having children solely to gain access to AFDC and the "home relief" programs that New York City offered to homeless families. Of the city's efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to provide shelter and services to children, she contended, "Children are often not well served by this focus…since too many of them are being born to give adults access to family privileges." Passaro's and Jencks' assertions demonstrate the pervasiveness of the welfare queen stereotype even in liberal academic discourse.[264] Their works also both demonstrate that well into the 1990s, whether or not homeless families were truly homeless remained a question in many minds.

A 1986 study conducted by the city's Human Resources Administration (HRA), the agency then responsible for creating services and shelter for homeless families, firmly refuted these allegations. It found "little evidence that families are forsaking stable housing arrangements to become homeless in hopes of getting an apartment." Rather, the study found, "these families come from tenuous housing arrangements, and most appreciate the tenuousness of their situations for some time before losing their housing."[265] Economic recession and federal social service cutbacks in the 1980s exacerbated the housing instability that had long been an issue for New York City's poorest residents. It resulted in a higher number of evictions, and a greater difficulty in finding affordable replacement housing. These causes, and not poor mothers' greed or

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[264] Passaro, *The Unequal Homeless,* 3, 20.

[265] Towber, *Characteristics and Housing Histories of Families Seeking Shelter from HRA*, 20.

social service agencies' manipulation, led to the drastic increase in family homelessness in the 1980s.[266]

Despite the city's many shortcomings and outright failures, New York City's record of aiding homeless families stood, in the 1980s, in stark contrast to the rest of the nation. As the federal government drastically reduced aid to cities and as cities in turn reduced social service programs, New York City's shelter program actually expanded, due in large part to right-to-shelter judicial decrees and the continued advocacy of a growing group of non-governmental organizations.[267] Yet the lack of federal support for sheltering homeless families, combined with the city's haphazard approach to providing shelter and the mayor's ambivalence about the legitimacy of families' claims to homelessness, meant that the help homeless families received was often far from adequate. As poor conditions in private hotels – in which the city sheltered the majority of homeless families – became more well known, the discourse surrounding them was often a vehicle through which New Yorkers constructed and debated ideas about family homelessness, welfare, housing rights, and neighborhood change in New York City.

Homeless Families and Welfare Hotel Scandals

In 1987, the popular New York City tabloid *New York Daily News* published a four-part exposé on the Holland, a decrepit Times Square-area hotel with which the City of New York had contracted to provide shelter to homeless parents and children. Described as "one of the bleakest welfare hotels in New York City," the Holland had housed hundreds of homeless families since the early 1980s, and in 1987 alone had netted

[266] Da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City*, 13.
[267] Da Costa Nunez, *Homeless Families in New York City*, 9.

a $3 million profit from the city of New York. Despite the financial windfall, the building was decrepit and its owner had failed to correct many serious code violations. Homeless families did not comprise the entirety of the hotel's clientele, and its other patrons included poor, mentally ill people and people who sold sex and drugs. The constant flow of visitors through its halls – and the lax enforcement of security – drastically increased the risk of muggings and burglaries for all of the hotel's residents. Families were, in the *Daily News'* assessment, "condemned to raise their children amid crack and crime, mice and mayhem" at the Holland.[268] Just four months earlier, a fire in the building had injured thirteen residents – some of whom rescue workers found trapped behind doors that had been stripped of doorknobs to prevent break-ins. The fire spurred homeless families residing in the hotel to rally outside its entrance on 42nd Street, holding signs that read, "New York City Pays For This Dump" and "Would You Like To Live Here?"[269]

Welfare hotels became a locus for debates on family homelessness in 1980s New York City. These hotels – where the municipal government spent tens of millions of dollars per year in federal, state, and local funds to house homeless women and children in squalid conditions – were in many ways the spatial embodiment of the crisis in family homelessness. They exemplified the dysfunction that characterized the New York City shelter system and – to some – homeless families themselves. Much as "welfare" was a code word for "Black" in the 1980s, "welfare hotels" acted as a code word for homeless families, allowing New York citizens, politicians, and the media to discuss the issue of family homelessness without explicitly passing judgment on un-housed families.

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[268] "The Holland Hotel: A Four-Part Series," *New York Daily News* November 15-18, 1987.

[269] Joyce Young, "Room for Improvement," *New York Daily News*, July 24, 1987.

Welfare hotels were also, however, some of the prime spaces around which homeless people – and particularly, homeless mothers – organized for political change. Far from being an isolated instance, the rally homeless families held outside of the Holland in 1986 was part of a larger movement for housing justice that increasingly focused upon the problem of welfare hotels and homeless families' rights as the 1980s went on. Homeless mothers in New York City played an active role in this movement, forming collectives that practiced grassroots advocacy – for instance, by holding city administrators accountable for long-promised building repairs – while also explicitly linking their struggle to other struggles for race, gender, and economic justice around the world. The story of welfare hotels in New York City, therefore, is not only a story of scandal but also one of activism and empowerment.

New York City administrators had long been aware of the poor conditions in the hotels used to shelter homeless families. In the 1960s and 1970s, occasional scandals erupted as the media (and sometimes social workers) drew attention to the issue, yet the city continued to place families in hotels and did little to improve hotels or reform the system.[270] By 1982, as family homelessness was once again becoming a prominent social issue, the city government was once again forced to publicly confront the problem. A municipal employee complained to the *New York Times* in 1982 of "dirty mattresses, dirty and torn carpeting in the rooms and graffiti in the hallways" at the Martinique, another notorious hotel in Midtown Manhattan.[271] A 1984 study of the Martinique by the

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[270] Charles Grutzner, "Relief Families Still in Hotels," *New York Times*, May 6, 1962; Steven V. Roberts, "City Investigates 50 Cheap Hotels," *New York Times*, January 4, 1967; Tom Robbins, "New York's Homeless Families," *City Limits* 9:8 (November 1984), 9.

[271] Robin Herman, "City Temporarily Sheltering over 700 Homeless Families," *New York Times*, March 5, 1982. The Martinique Hotel was also Jonathan Kozol's primary site of study in *Rachel and Her Children*.

Community Service Society of New York went into even greater detail. According to the report, entire families were crowded into single rooms that lacked refrigerators and cooking implements, making it difficult to store or prepare food and leading to rat and roach infestations. Families also complained about the filth in the building's elevators and common areas, and the frequency with which maintenance staff "indiscriminately [entered] tenants' rooms without notice, warning, or invitation." They also reported a serious lack of security: Not only were muggings and physical assaults in hallways and the trash room common, but the hotel staff sometimes attempted to coerce sexual favors from homeless residents. Tenants were afraid to complain about these problems because, in the words of one interviewee, "Everybody's been told that if you complain…they (management) will throw you out."[272] Subsequent studies of the Martinique, the Holland, and other hotels provided similar – and worse – descriptions as the 1980s went on. Numerous newspaper articles and reports by government and non-profit agencies condemned these hotels "where misery," in the words of a *Newsday* headline, was "a way of life."[273]

The Holland Hotel was located on West 42nd Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenue, and the Martinique on West 32nd Street. They were just two of over a dozen hotels in the Times Square and Midtown neighborhoods of Manhattan that the city used with increasing frequency in the 1980s to house homeless families, paying anywhere

[272] Simpson and Kilduff, *Struggling to Survive in a Welfare Hotel*, 23.

[273] Carol Polsky, "Where Misery Is A Way of Life," *Newsday*, December 2, 1985.

from $49 to $110 per night per family.[274] Most of these hotels had once catered to tourists, and some had even once been considered upscale. But by the 1980s they, like the neighborhoods surrounding them, had declined in economic value and in reputation. Times Square had long been a prominent entertainment district where, in Jonathan Soffer's words, "lowlife rubbed shoulders (and more) with high society."[275] As the city's economy declined in the 1960s and '70s, many of the more upscale businesses and tourists left the area. While it still remained a hub for Broadway theatre and second-run movie houses, the area became better known for its pornography theaters and street hustlers, pickpockets and prostitutes. It was a haven to some, but the neighborhood frightened middle-class tourists and, to many (including homeless parents), seemed an inappropriate place for children to live.[276]

Local newspapers' breathless exposés examined the space the hotels occupied in great detail, addressing the abysmal conditions of the hotels and the neighborhoods that surrounded them. Dick Oliver, the *West Side Spirit* reporter who had in a separate article accused families of "going homeless" to obtain public housing, likened the families' living conditions at the Holland to the stuff of a Dickensian novel, and noted,

> As bad as it is inside these wretched buildings, it is worse outside…The world [the kids] see is one of hookers and hustlers hanging out on Eighth Avenue;

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[274] In 1986, the city of New York sheltered more than 3,000 families at fifty-five welfare hotels across the city. Suzanne Golubski, "She wants the city to grab worst welfare hotels," *New York Daily News,* June 17, 1986.

[275] Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 270.

[276] Lynn Sagalyn describes 1980s Times Square as a "tawdry concentration of social ills." Jonathan Soffer tries to complicate this analysis, noting, "Times Square was not so dangerous that New Yorkers couldn't enjoy it," though he admits also that it was not for the "fainthearted." Samuel R. Delany has attempted to shift the perspective of analysis onto the "tawdry" people who occupied and utilized Times Square, arguing that it served an important but under-recognized function in the 1960s-1980s as a place of cross-class contact and sexual community. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Lynn Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 6; Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 271.

> 'chicken hawks' preying for boys as young as seven years old; Johns on the prowl outside the bus terminal, and the rest of the flotsam of humanity—derelicts, winos, bums and just plain crazies dumped into the Times Square area.[277]

His words in this article posited the families in the Holland as unfortunate victims, cast unwillingly into a sea of the worst kinds of humanity. His emphasis on the sexual danger of the area is noteworthy, since Times Square was an area long associated with prostitution and other types of deviant sexuality. Equally important, however, was their separation, in Oliver's conception, from the "derelicts, winos, [and] bums…dumped into the Times Square area." Clearly, *those* un-housed people occupied a different category, in his mind, than the un-housed people being sheltered in the Holland. Homeless families were different than homeless individuals.

Yet many of these articles portrayed the families living in the hotels with a mixture of sympathy and disgust, alternately positing homeless families as victims and suggesting that they themselves were the causes of the chaos that characterized the hotels. The *Daily News'* 1987 report on the Holland read like turn-of-the-century literature on the tenements of lower Manhattan, providing "a floor-by-floor tour" of the building and commenting on the "wretched" lives of the individuals living within.[278] The danger to children was, in many of these reports, not only on the streets surrounding the hotels, but also inside of it. Reports of young children dying or becoming gravely injured in the hotels were cause for public outcry and promises of government reform. But the danger lay not just with unsafe hotel conditions, but also with the families occupying the hotels,

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[277] Dick Oliver, "Horrors of Welfare Hotels," *West Side Spirit*, August 5, 1985.
[278] The most famous example of such literature is Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, a collection of text and photos documenting the people who lived in the decrepit, overcrowded tenements of the Lower East Side in the late nineteenth century. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York City* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

themselves. A journalist for the Associated Press, reporting on the plight of pregnant homeless women in New York City, claimed, "kids sit in hallways while their mothers deal sex for crack."[279] And an article in Brooklyn's *Rockaway Press* concluded that the children in welfare hotels were doomed to follow in their parents' footsteps, with girls becoming young mothers and the boys becoming "uncontrollable" as they grew into their teenage years.[280] These descriptions used language reminiscent of the "culture of poverty" arguments that had, since the 1960s, characterized understandings of race, poverty, and family pathology in the urban U.S. In such conceptions, homeless families were both victims of a corrupt system, and also themselves corrupted, abnormal, or even dangerous.

New Yorkers were appalled that mothers and children were living near vice and crime in such poor conditions; but they also associated the homeless with the *creation* of these conditions. Midtown neighborhood groups comprised of residents, religious leaders, and small and large business owners decried the city's use of area hotels to house homeless families. They claimed that the city's use of hotels as homeless shelters was destroying their neighborhood, and hired lawyers and a public relations firm to help press their case with the city. Their efforts reveal not only conflicting attitudes, but also the very real limits of their activism. While they claimed that they wanted to help homeless families – and in fact, some did attempt to organize programs for the homeless in their neighborhoods – their legal efforts were only directed toward seeking a halt to the placement of homeless families in Midtown hotels.[281] Hotels were not idea places for

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[279] Robert Dvorchak, "Pregnant, Homeless Women Juggle Survival, Child Bearing," *Associated Press*, published in *Times-News*, Hendersonville, N.C., July 13, 1988.
[280] Joseph A. Doyle, Welfare Hotel Blight Reveals Koch & Co. As Totally Ridiculous," *Rockaway Press*, July 23, 1987.

[281] Barbara Basler, "Organizing to Block the Homeless," *New York Times*, October 31, 1986.

homeless families – in fact, they were often wretched – but in the absence of many alternatives, they provided crucial shelter to the families who lived in them. Working towards the closure of the hotels was, in this context, a proposition that only benefitted housed neighborhood residents and businesses. The closure of Midtown hotels would only relocate the problem, rather than solve it.

Beginning around 1984, homeless families living in the hotels organized with increasing frequency to challenge the city to create better shelters and more permanent housing solutions. In August, a group calling itself Parents and Friends on the Move – comprised of homeless families from hotels across the city, along with the social service and legal professionals who served them – gathered in City Hall Park in downtown Manhattan. As office workers walked by on their lunch breaks, a group of mothers from the Brooklyn Arms hotel sang songs about hotel life that they set to gospel tunes, and homeless parents spoke of their families' need for housing. These parent-activists stressed the disconnect between the city's welfare allowance for permanent housing (which was generally between $200 and $300 per month per family) and the actual cost of rental housing in New York City, which often far exceeded that sum. They also noted with irony that the city paid as much as $100 per night to house a family in a single decrepit hotel room when, for a much smaller sum, they could house that family in a permanent apartment.[282]

Throughout the 1980s, Mayor Koch repeatedly insisted that the city could do little to ameliorate this problem. As he correctly noted, federal restrictions on the use of AFDC (which covered about fifty percent of emergency shelter costs for families in New York

[282] Robbins, "New York's Homeless Families."

City) stipulated that funds could only be used to provide emergency shelter.[283] Yet homeless families and their advocates argued that Koch was not accounting for the full range of possibilities for funding. They also pointed out the irony that the city government continued to grant tax breaks and low-interest loans to developers that built apartments that far exceeded poor families' budgets. With low-cost housing already a scarce commodity in New York City and middle- and high-income housing on the rise, they questioned the wisdom of the Mayor's public policy decisions.[284]

Hotel tenants continued to organize throughout the 1980s. The organizations that Ruth Young and other homeless parents formed were often short-lived – a result, as *Callahan v. Carey* lawyer Robert Hayes expressed, of the fact that "If being homeless is the membership credential, every member of the group is desperately trying to get out."[285] But they nevertheless affected real change in the city's family shelter system. In hotels across the city, groups of mothers organized to negotiate with hotel management for better living conditions and to create social and educational events in which their families could participate. Individual parents informed social workers, elected officials, and members of the press about the conditions in which they lived. At the Brooklyn Arms, Ruth Young and another homeless mother, Jean Chappell, registered voters and sat on local Democratic Assembly candidate Christopher Jackson's campaign committee. And when the city refused to engage homeless parents in decisions about their future, they protested: In January of 1989, Young, Chappell, and as many as 60 other homeless

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[283] "Koch Gives Response to Reagan on Hotels," *New York Times*, November 21, 1986; "Remarks of Edward I. Koch, Mayor of the City of New York, Before the Ad Hoc Task Force on the Homeless and Housing," January 21, 1988. Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, City of New York Municipal Archives.
[284] Robbins, "New York's Homeless Families," 9.

[285] Sara Rimer, "Homeless Organize to Fight for Themselves," *New York Times*, January 26, 1989.

parents and children barricaded themselves inside the offices of Crisis Intervention Services, a city agency, to protest the Koch administration's decision to close the Brooklyn Arms and move its residents to other temporary shelters. As one of the protest participants, Valerie Holliday, said of their cause, "We're women in our 30's and 40's fighting to get back into society."[286]

In the summer of 1988, the Hotel Tenants' Rights Project – a group comprised of hotel tenants and their advocates – and the Martinique Hotel Tenants' Association jointly published the first issue of *Catalyst*. The eight-page newsletter featured essays, poetry, and announcements for upcoming meetings and rallies related to homelessness, housing rights, and hotel tenants' activism in New York City. MHTA members – all of whom were residents of the Martinique – contributed to the issue, writing forcefully about the effect that governmental policies had on their lives. MHTA member Maggie Carter wrote,

> I feel it is a shame the way homeless people have to live when the city has a lot of abandoned buildings that should be fixed to give living quarters for homeless people and whoever needs a home. The city pays thousands and thousands for the hotel rooms we live in, when they could pay a lot less for apartments. We should all lend a hand to fight for the right of better living, for our children and adults of all ages and nationalities. Please help us fight for our rights.[287]

Priscilla Velasquez, another member of MHTA, similarly noted that while apartments are available for "$400 or $500 a month for the same family…The city [instead] pays $2,800

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[286] "Residents of Welfare Hotel Seize City Office to Demand Permanent Housing," *New York Times*, January 10, 1989; Sara Rimer, "Homeless Organize to Fight for Themselves," *New York Times*, January 26, 1989.

[287] Maggie Carter, "Fight For Our Rights," *Catalyst* 1 (Summer 1988), 1.

a month for one room. I wouldn't pay so much money for one room. It's really stupid."[288] Carter and Velasquez both made important connections between homelessness and public policy. Like many citizens, they recognized the irony that a city in which thousands of apartments stood empty, and in which developers built or renovated thousands more, was also one with a homeless population that numbered in the tens of thousands. Carter and Velasquez also rejected the notion that homelessness was a private issue that individuals must solve for themselves; rather, they framed it as an issue of public policy and social justice.

Writers for *Catalyst* largely seemed to agree that homelessness was a social justice issue, more than a sign of individual deficiency. In a piece entitled, "Vote!", Teria Escala entreated readers, "We must vote to change the problems we have." She criticized the lack of investment political leaders had in solving homelessness, noting,

> Because we are homeless, we are subjected to all manner of disrespect from the people who are designated and paid to help us get through the crisis we face…Only we, in numbers, have a loud enough voice to bring [elected officials'] attention to our point of view. We must let them know that we will no longer allow them to spend money for a fantasy Star Wars at the expense of our children.[289]

Through publications like Catalyst, homeless mothers sought to construct their own subjectivity. They asserted their rights to decent housing, political power, and respect as women, mothers, political activists, and United States citizens.

All of these competing images and interests came to a head as the scandal over The Holland exploded in 1986 through 1988. As the *Daily News* revealed, the Holland's owner was earning over $3 million per year on his business; most of that profit came

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[288] Priscilla Velasquez, "City Policy," *Catalyst* 1 (Summer 1988), 3.
[289] Teria Escala, "Vote!" *Catalyst* 1 (Summer 1988), 3.

from city, state, and federal funds for emergency shelter.[290] The city brought several consecutive court cases against the Holland's manager, demanding, among other things, that he replace the hotel's broken furnace, re-paint walls, and replace broken beds and moldy mattresses in the rooms used by homeless families. When, after over a year, he did not comply, a judge sentenced him to a term in jail. But most of the other hotels in the city received no such attention. It's location at the heart of Times Square – where groups like the 42nd Street Development Corporation were actively working to re-make the area – made it a potent but relatively isolated symbol.

Conclusion

By the second half of the 1980s, the Koch administration had begun to create more transitional and permanent housing for homeless families. Most of the apartments it used were from the city's in-rem stock, and those that were in poor condition – which was the majority of them, since most apartments were in buildings that the city had neglected for years – were renovated by the municipal department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Reflecting the increasing neoliberalization of public policy in 1980s New York City, many of the apartment projects were funded with a combination of city, state, and corporate dollars, and the city contracted with non-profit organizations to provide social services to building tenants.[291]

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[290] The Holland was, not coincidentally, one of the most well examined welfare hotels in New York City. From 1984 until 1989, when the city bought the hotel from its bankrupt, absentee owner, the Holland was the subject of dozens of newspaper articles and government reports, as well as several significant lawsuits. "The Holland Hotel: A Four-Part Series," *New York Daily News* November 15-18, 1987.

[291] Deirdre Carmody, "Homeless Receiving Apartments and New Hope in a City Program," *New York Times*, January 11, 1985; Michel Marriott, "Apartments Planned for the Homeless," *New York Times*, January 28, 1988.

This, too, was the eventual fate of the Holland Hotel. The Holland's owner declared bankruptcy in 1988, and the City eventually bought the Holland and contracted with a non-profit agency to run it as a shelter for homeless families. The city also closed the Martinique in 1988. The families who had lived in the hotel for over one year were given priority placement in city-owned apartments; others were transferred to other family shelters that, the city promised, would be cleaner and safer than the Martinique had been. As they left the hotel, some tenants expressed wariness at the thought of moving into city-owned apartments. Jannette Holland, who had lived in the Martinique for four years, explained, "I got friends in some of those apartments…They're still living on hot plates, in terrible places. The city don't do right. Anything goes wrong, they don't fix it." But city officials provided a different explanation for the women's reluctance. William Grinker, the head of HRA, explained that families became entrenched in the hotel and its way of life. "The longer people are in this situation, the harder it is to get them out…They get comfortable."[292]

By the time it published its third issue of *Catalyst* in 1990, the Hotel Tenants' Rights Project had changed it's name to Action for Community Empowerment (ACE), and the group began to address issues that went beyond hotel tenants' rights. While no longer solely focused on the issue of welfare hotels, ACE continued to be led by New Yorkers who lived and worked in the communities for which they advocated. Many of the in-rem apartments that the city had renovated were still in drastic need of repair when homeless families moved into them, and ACE primarily focused on pressuring the municipal department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to improve

[292] Holland and Grinker are both quoted in Suzanne Daley, "Leaving a Welfare Hotel, Reluctantly," *New York Times*, September 14, 1988.

conditions in the city-owned buildings in which they lived.[293] The group also continued to connect poor New Yorkers' fight for housing justice to larger political issues. An article entitled "Women Fight!!" outlined "some of the women-led struggles that are presently being waged throughout the world," including in Palestine and South Korea.[294]

While homeless mothers had long bemoaned the state of welfare hotels and the neighborhoods in which they were forced to raise their children, it was ultimately the movement to redevelop Times Square and Midtown into tourist-friendly destinations that helped to close some of the area's most notorious hotels. The city closed many of them and moved some of their inhabitants to apartments, and others to welfare hotels and transitional housing in Queens and Brooklyn. Many of the Times Square hotels were subsequently bought by new owners and renovated for more high-end use, serving the tourists who increasingly flocked to the area as it was redeveloped in the 1990s.[295] But homelessness remained a pressing issue in New York City. While Mayor David Dinkins, Koch's successor, attempted to cease the use of welfare hotels to house homeless families, he had limited success. Private low-income housing was an increasing rarity in New York in the 1990s, and the city, state, and federal government created few viable alternative types of shelter or permanent housing for the poor. In 1992, the *New York Times* reported that Dinkins would once again place a larger number of homeless families in welfare hotels; an increasing number of these hotels, however, would be located in

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[293] "City Tenants Fight for Their Right to Decent Housing," *Catalyst* 3 (October 1990), 2.

[294] "Women Fight!!" *Catalyst* 3 (October 1990), 9.

[295] "Hotels in West 30s Recover Their Aplomb," *New York Times*, February 20, 1994.

Queens, the Bronx, and far northern Manhattan, away from the rapidly-gentrifying landscape of Times Square and Midtown.[296]

The 1990s saw the perpetuation of many of the same ideas that had dominated discourse about homeless families in the 1980s, as the crisis emerged. In 1991, Mayor Dinkins appointed future-New York State governor Andrew Cuomo – then a lawyer and founder of Housing Enterprise for the Less Privileged (HELP) – to chair a commission to investigate the ongoing problem of homelessness in New York City and propose solutions. Dozens of people testified at the Cuomo Commission hearings, including political leaders, homeless researchers, social workers, and people who identified as homeless or formerly homeless themselves. During his testimony, Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari claimed, "With homelessness becoming less stigmatized than it was a decade ago and with generous housing programs in New York City, a 'Field of Dreams' syndrome has developed. If you build it, they will come." Molinari's testimony reinforced the idea that homeless families were not truly needy, but rather were manipulating the government for their own gain. As Molinari continued, "Very often the savvy homeless leave overcrowded living conditions. While certainly these conditions may not be pleasant, the presumption that such conditions entitle one to government-provided shelter is creating an extravagant kind of homelessness in our city."[297]
Many others disagreed with Molinari, including Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, who said that she was "extremely distressed" at the perpetuation of the idea that "hundreds or thousands of families are entering the shelter system to get an

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[296] Celia W. Dugger, "New York To Expand Use of Welfare Hotels," *New York Times*, November 20, 1992; "Welfare Hotels to Stay Open Under Dinkins," *Catalyst* 3 (October 1990), 11.
[297] Guy Molinari testimony before the Cuomo Commission, January 14, 1992.

apartment…exaggerated fears, stereotyped notions and unsubstantiated theories should not determine our public policy toward the homeless."[298] The issue of homeless families and the welfare hotel scandals of the 1980s reflected the importance of homeless families in the broader phenomenon known as the homeless crisis in New York City. Treated as a separate category of "the homeless" in public policy and in media portrayals, homeless families and the spaces they occupied served to reinforce the "otherness" of the homeless and their literal and figurative placeless-ness in society. The panic over welfare hotels illustrates the importance of space in the raced, gendered, embodied discourse on homelessness in 1980s New York City.

[298] Ruth W. Messinger testimony before the Cuomo Commission, December 10, 1991.

Chapter 4
Squats, Shantytowns, and the Right to Housing

Introduction

> We're not the purple-hair homeless…We're not let's pretend homeless. We're the authentic homeless, fend for ourselves.
>
> -Bill Jones, former resident of Tompkins Square Park[1]

At 5:00 a.m. on June 3, 1991, New York City police officers and Parks Department employees entered Tompkins Square Park on Manhattan's Lower East Side. After nearly three years of protests and political conflicts over the park that began while Ed Koch was mayor and continued under the David Dinkins administration, the city had finally made good on its plan to empty the park of its homeless inhabitants. As the police ushered homeless residents out, Parks Department workers donned facemasks and gloves and began to demolish residents' makeshift shelters, depositing the shelter materials and residents' possessions into waiting garbage trucks. After the eviction, workers erected a tall fence around the park's perimeter, and police officers took up their posts guarding the barrier. Tompkins Square Park was officially closed for a $2.3 million renovation, a move that local journalist Sarah Ferguson quipped was "the most expensive way to get a homeless-free park."[2]

By insisting that the park clearance was for the purpose of renovation, the Dinkins Administration officially skirted the touchy issue of homeless encampment removal. But

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[1] Quoted in Evelyn Nieves, "Tensions Remain at Closed Tompkins Square Park," *New York Times, June* 17, 1991.

[2] Sarah Ferguson cited in Dorine Greshof and John Dale, "The Residents in Tompkins Square Park," in Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994). The political turmoil around Tompkins Square Park received both local and national news coverage, and has been the subject of much scholarly analysis in the ensuing years. For a few examples, see Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village;* Vitale, *City of Disorder,* 147-163; Smith, *The New Urban Frontier,* 3-29.

perhaps city administrators needn't have worried. As neighborhood resident and political scientist Diana R. Gordon noted of the evictions, some Lower East Siders were "unambivalently glad to see the tent city demolished…They asserted that many of [the homeless] were actually anarchist squatters, that is, 'voluntary homeless' with a political agenda, rather than 'truly needy' people."[3] Even politically liberal community members – many of whom supported the right of the homeless to occupy the park, and critiqued the city's inadequate response to the homeless crisis – had, by 1991, become wary of the perceived connection between the park's homeless and local squatters.[4] The homeless people that the city evicted were clearly aware of this perception. Bill Jones, a park evictee who subsequently moved to an abandoned lot several blocks east of the park, sought to differentiate himself from the "purple-hair homeless" who, he felt, had instigated the hostility that gripped the neighborhood and tarnished the reputation of the "authentic homeless," among whom he counted himself. "We don't have time for protests," he insisted.[5]

The Tompkins Square Park riots and their aftermath were the ultimate example of the blurred boundary between homelessness, squatting, and other forms of housing instability and activism. 1988 through 1991 on the Lower East Side was a time and place where "the homeless" ceased to be a stable, independent category, and was revealed

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[3] Diana R. Gordon, "A Resident's View of Conflict on Tompkins Square Park," in Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 268.

[4] Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park," Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 250-251; Alex Vitale argues that this turnaround came in part from a rhetorical shift which rebranded the park's "homeless problem" as a "disorder problem," thus allowing liberals to and conservatives alike to re-frame their complaints about the park in more palatable terms. Vitale, *City of Disorder*.

[5] Quoted in Evelyn Nieves, "Tensions Remain at Closed Tompkins Square Park," *New York Times, June* 17, 1991.

instead to be at the extreme end of a spectrum of housing inequality in New York City. Lower East Siders' attempts to distinguish between squatter activists and the truly homeless reveal that a decade after the homeless crisis began, the category "the homeless" continued to be a subject of debate in New York City. As the homeless emerged as a new and different category of poor people in the 1980s, the issue of homelessness had largely become isolated in public policy and media representations. With the rising number of homeless people visible in public places and municipal shelters, homelessness really did seem to be a problem unto itself. But on the Lower East Side, the line between the homeless and other poor, tenuously housed people was visibly blurred, even as many in the neighborhood asserted its legitimacy. As community members fought over the relationship between homeless people and squatter activists, they simultaneously reified the boundary between the two groups and revealed that boundary's porousness.

The Lower East Side was a hotbed of squatting in New York City, and some of the most politically confrontational neighborhood squatters were white, anarchist-leaning activists. They held loud protests and drowned out other people's voices at community meetings. They protested other groups' attempts to work with the city on issues including housing and poverty. When faced with eviction from the buildings they occupied, their confrontations with the police sometimes turned violent (although whether or not the squatters themselves instigated the violence was a hotly contested topic). Many Lower East Siders (including some homeless residents of Tompkins Square Park, like Bill Jones) viewed these squatters' tactics as disruptive, counterproductive, and disingenuous.

As the 1980s went on, this vocal, highly visible group increasingly became the face of the squatting movement in New York City.

But those who squatted – in other words, those who occupied buildings or land without ownership or payment of rent – were a diverse lot. Beginning in the 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s, squatting had expanded in New York City. This was especially true in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, the South Bronx, and central Brooklyn that experienced the worst housing loss from landlord abandonment and urban disinvestment. Squatters in these neighborhoods included young and old people of all races and class backgrounds. Some were single, and some had significant others or children. Some were longtime neighborhood residents who had been priced out of the private housing market or evicted by landlords hoping to increase their profits; others were recent arrivals drawn to the area by political motivations or simply by the opportunity to live cheaply. For some, little if any boundary existed between being homeless and being a squatter. Some had slept on the streets or in municipal shelters before finding a place to squat; others had moved to the street, a municipal shelter, or a tent in Tompkins Square Park after losing their squat to arson or eviction. To many, the issues of housing rights and homelessness were irrevocably bound. Alfredo Gonzalez, for instance, had spent 18 months in a municipal shelter before beginning to squat in a Lower East Side building. As he noted to a *New York Times* reporter, "The squatters are people who couldn't afford apartments in New York City…They wanted an alternative to the shelters, where the homeless are treated as less than human."[6]

[6] Evelyn Nieves, "Tensions Remain at Closed Tompkins Square Park," *New York Times,* June 17, 1991.

Looking beyond the Lower East Side broadens and complicates this picture. In neighborhoods including the South Bronx and East New York, Brooklyn – both of which experienced significant low-income housing loss in the 1970s – squatters, tenants' rights activists, and community leaders took varied approaches to creating community-based solutions to homelessness and housing loss. The city's reaction to activism in these neighborhoods was often profoundly different than its reaction to Lower East Side housing activism: In both the South Bronx and East New York, squatters and grassroots community organizations succeeded in reclaiming some abandoned buildings, and the city invested considerable resources into rehabilitating dilapidated buildings and constructing new ones for low-income and homeless New Yorkers. A full 36 percent of the funds from Mayor Koch's 10-year, $5.2 billion housing plan were directed to the South Bronx after 1986, replacing the rubble of decimated neighborhoods with new apartment buildings and single-family homes.[7]

Scholars have addressed housing activism on the Lower East Side, in the South Bronx, and in East New York separately, but few have provided a comparative analysis of neighborhoods.[8] Doing so demonstrates that, far from existing in isolation, neighborhood housing activism developed in the context of a city whose residents were exploring a wide variety of approaches to solving the crisis of housing, often relying upon governmental, non-profit, and corporate assistance, legal and extralegal measures in

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[7] Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), 393.

[8] On the South Bronx, see Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising;* and Alexander Von Hoffman, *House By House, Block By Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19-76. On East New York, see John Atlas, *Seeds of Change: The Story of ACORN, America's Most Controversial Antipoverty Community Organizing Group* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 88-98; and Thabit, *How East New York Became A Ghetto,* 205-227.

tandem and with varying degrees of success. It also demonstrates that, far from being universal, the city's application of its housing policies varied from neighborhood to neighborhood and was influenced by municipal and corporate visions of the future of each neighborhood. The Lower East Side was proximate to the city's main financial district and tourism centers, and was therefore seen as ripe for gentrification. The South Bronx and East New York, in contrast, held little of the same promise, and the city saw these neighborhoods as more appropriate locations to rebuild low- and moderate-income housing. Some housing activists accused the city of reinforcing and even worsening patterns of residential segregation through this approach. As the March 1991 issue of *The Livable City*, the Municipal Arts Society's publication, asked, "Are these programs giving new life to destitute neighborhoods? Reinforcing existing ghettos? Or creating new ones?"[9]

The political activism of self-identified homeless people in New York City also deserves further examination. Scholars have generally characterized the homeless as an apolitical group, difficult to organize because of their geographical and demographic transience.[10] Janet Abu-Lughod further noted that while some of Tompkins Square Park's homeless people were "active participants" in community debates about their presence in the park, "most chose to keep as low a profile as possible, in the hope that by lying low, they would also be allowed to lie nightly in the park."[11] This was undoubtedly true; but equally true is that as the conflict on the Lower East Side escalated through the late 1980s

[9] *The Livable City* 15:1 (March 1991), 1.

[10] Kim Hopper, "Litigation in Advocacy for the Homeless: The Case of New York City," *Development: Seeds of Change* 2 (1982), 57-62.

[11] Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park," 260.

and early 1990s, more homeless people became more politicized. Even as some self-identified homeless people, like Bill Jones, attempted to steer clear of the battles that gripped the neighborhood, others entered into them head-on, offering pointed critiques of city policy and neighborhood gentrification to local journalists and organizing amongst themselves to fight for the right to housing and social services.

Looking beyond the struggle over Tompkins Square Park elucidates this story: At the same time tensions first rose in Tompkins Square Park in 1988, homeless people in other parts of the city were organizing. The previous chapter explored how homeless mothers staged protests to call attention to poor conditions in welfare hotels; also in 1988, other homeless New Yorkers staged a months-long occupation of City Hall Park to gain Mayor Koch's (and the media's) attention, and a strong New York City contingent of the National Union of the Homeless was forming. That same year, a broad coalition organized Housing Action Week, a week long series of events including public protests, theater productions, and volunteer opportunities meant to inform and engage the public on the problem of homelessness and housing loss in New York City. A wider analysis of homeless and housing activism in New York City accounts for types of activism not exclusively neighborhood-based. Such events often remain unacknowledged in more location-based portrayals of homeless, squatting, and housing activism; examining them adds another facet to the broad and diverse housing rights movement that coalesced in 1980s New York City.

Even as some activists in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side fought to define the boundary between "truly needy" people and "squatter anarchists," others sought to illuminate the connections between different groups of tenuously housed people in New

York City. These activists called on the city and the nation to address the systemic issues including federal funding cuts, a dearth of social services, housing abandonment and warehousing, and disparities in municipal and corporate investment that were leading so many people in New York and across the nation to experience difficulty obtaining and retaining housing. In doing so, they challenged the notion that the "truly homeless" was a stable category, or homelessness a crisis apart from the broader crisis of housing that gripped many New Yorkers.

Squatters and the Homeless on the Lower East Side

> My whole crew is squatting…We have no other choice or we're out on the streets.
>
> -Renaldo "Ron" Casanova[12]

Renaldo "Ron" Casanova grew up in foster homes and juvenile detention centers before becoming homeless and then subsequently becoming a homeless activist.[13] Tompkins Square Park was his occasional home for years, but he was moved to action by the police raids on the park's homeless encampments that happened with increasing frequency after 1988.[14] Casanova was a founder of Tompkins Square Park's Tent City homeless collective, and went on to travel the country as a speaker and organizer for the National Union of the Homeless, an advocacy and direct-action group run by homeless people. As he noted of his "crew" – the people with whom he lived and worked on the Lower East Side – many of them squatted as a means of survival, some after having lost

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[12] Doug Turetsky, "Rebels With A Cause?" *City Limits* 15:4 (April 1990), 15.

[13] Casanova died in 2011, according to Stephen Blackburn, who co-authored Casanova's memoir. http://www.stephenblackburn.org/each_one_teach_one__up_and_out_of_poverty__memoirs_of_a_street_activist_28058.htm

[14] Ron Casanova and Stephen Blackburn, *Each One, Teach One: Up and Out of Poverty: Memoirs of a Street Activist* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1996), 130-134; Sarah Ferguson, "Tent City Blues," *Mother Jones Magazine* (September-October 1990), 29.

their Tompkins Square Park homes in a 1989 police eviction. For Casanova and other Tent City activists, being homeless and squatting were not mutually exclusive activities or identities. Casanova's story complicates the notion that the Tompkins Square Park cause had been overtaken by politicized squatters who were not among the "truly needy." It suggests not only that some of the park's homeless activists were overtly politicized, but also that the line between squatters and the homeless was not as concrete as some critics claimed.

As homelessness rose in New York City in the 1980s, Tompkins Square Park had become a gathering place, sleeping place, and site of community for un-housed New Yorkers. The 1980 Census counted 50 homeless men sleeping in the park; by the 1990 Census, the population had risen to over 200. The park's changing population mirrored the larger trends happening in New York City's homeless demographics: While in 1980, most of the homeless people living in the park were white men, by 1990, the majority of them were Black and (in the Census' terminology) Hispanic men, along with a small number of women.[15] Despite the relative transience of park occupants – some stayed for one night, others for several years – residents and observers noted that the encampment was governed by a strong unwritten code of ethics, and that a community spirit prevailed among residents and visitors alike. As Paul Kniesel, a journalist who covered the Lower East Side for *Downtown* magazine, noted, "The truth is that Tompkins Square Park is one of the safest in the city…The very population density that makes some wish to close it also protects those in it since some people are always awake." Kniesel quoted a four-year resident of the park known only as "Blond Nancy," who observed, "It's the only park

[15] Greshof and Dale, 268.

I've felt safe in. I've been feeling my oats and people would stop me at 3 a.m. and ask if they could help me back to my tent. You don't get that on the streets of N.Y."[16]

Tompkins Square Park's growing homeless population joined a wide variety of New Yorkers who utilized the park in the 1980s. Bounded by Avenue A on the west and Avenue B on the east, East 7th Street on the south and East 10th Street on the north, the small, rectangular-shaped park had historically hosted the diverse communities that comprised the Lower East Side. A diminishing population of older white ethnics who had lived in the neighborhood since its heyday as a mecca for Eastern and Southern European immigrants shared the park with the Puerto Rican and Black communities who had moved to the neighborhood in increasing numbers since the 1950s. Artists – many of whom were lesbian and gay – had been moving to the neighborhood since the 1960s, drawn by the low rents as well as the neighborhood's openness to social outsiders. Drug dealers and users could be found in one corner of the park; punks (sometimes called "skinheads" for their shaved heads or mohawk hairdos) partied and attended concerts by the band shell, and activist groups held protests, continuing a long tradition of political activism in the park and the surrounding neighborhood. Few clear lines existed between these groups: Sarah Schulman, the writer, activist, and long-time resident of the neighborhood, acknowledged, "The line between 'us' and 'them' was very thin." Being an artist, a queer person, or a political outsider "meant being in a community with very marginal, scuzzy people who were living in marginal, scuzzy ways." The municipal government's historic neglect of the neighborhood led to its decrepitude and allowed urban problems like drug dealing and crime to proliferate; but that negligence also

[16] Paul Kniesel, "An Inside Look At the Folks Who An Inhuman City Chased From Their Homes (With Not An Alternative In Sight," *Downtown*, June 12-19, 1991, 8-A.

provided a space for marginal people – people who lived on the edges of mainstream society, or often in defiance of it – to flourish. As Schulman noted, "If you're paying $100 [per month]…you can be very, very marginal and still pay your rent."[17]

The Lower East Side was also, by the 1980s, home to growing contingents of squatters and middle-class professionals. While these groups seem disparate, their presence in the neighborhood was often spurred by the same phenomenon: gentrification. The Lower East Side – and especially the neighborhood surrounding Tompkins Square Park, which was increasingly known as the "East Village" – had experienced significant housing loss in the 1970s, and the area was pockmarked with vacant, city-owned buildings (known as *in rem* properties) and vacant lots where buildings once stood. But the city had long viewed the neighborhood as a prime area for further real estate development due to its proximity to Manhattan's most exclusive commercial and residential districts. In the 1970s, a growing number of people had begun squatting in the neighborhood's *in rem* properties and building shacks and gardens in its vacant lots; but by the 1980s, the city began to reclaim these properties with the intention of selling the vast majority of them to for-profit developers. Squatters and many other neighborhood activists fought to retain these properties after so many years of municipal and commercial neglect; but the development of *in rem* properties and other low-income buildings into more profitable residences did increase as the decade progressed, resulting in an influx of wealthier residents whose values were sometimes at odds with others in the neighborhood.

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[17] Author interview with Sarah Schulman, January 26, 2011. I am greatly indebted to Schulman for speaking with me at length about her recollections of the neighborhood and her analysis of the AIDS crisis and the gentrification that changed it drastically. Schulman's book, which was published after we spoke, further explores these themes. Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

The rise in Tompkins Square Park's homeless population – and the group's subsequent eviction from the park – was also spurred by larger trends happening in the city. The Koch Administration had begun to evict homeless people from public spaces with increasing frequency by the late 1980s, and public parks were one target of its efforts. The Administration claimed that sleeping on benches and erecting tents and other makeshift shelters prevented other citizens from fully accessing those spaces, and it increasingly invoked laws mandating 1:00 a.m. park curfews that had long been on the books but had rarely been enforced. As city police increasingly rousted the homeless from parks in surrounding neighborhoods including Midtown East and Greenwich Village, Tompkins Square Park, a historically open space in the historically radical Lower East Side, was one of the few public spaces that remained open to homeless people. Even as some neighborhood residents felt unease at the presence of this rising homeless population, many advocated on its behalf, reasoning that the city had provided no better alternative and that eviction was inhumane. But as the 1980s came to a close, those who supported the Tompkins Square Park homeless encampment became a minority, out-voiced and out-voted by a growing number of residents who favored eviction.

A 1987 essay by Lower East Side resident Lesley Hazleton illustrates well the shifting and ambivalent sentiments many of the neighborhood's newer residents felt towards the park's homeless population. Hazleton, a British author, had moved to the neighborhood several years earlier and had quickly become acquainted with the local homeless people who, she found, did not panhandle and generally treated her with courtesy. "They respect the fact that I live here too. All they ask, it seems, is

acknowledgement of their presence, something other than the blank-eyed stare that looks right through them as if they don't exist." Living with homeless people on her doorstep, though, had forced Hazleton to face some uncomfortable truths.

> When I moved here, I thought I accepted the presence of the homeless in the park, and saw those who opposed shelters on their blocks as mean-spirited, stony-hearted bigots. But I could afford that attitude: I don't have children. If I did, I wouldn't live on Tompkins Square. I wouldn't want my children to watch the shuffling hopelessness, to know that squalor is accepted as normal…I'd want to protect my children against that kind of knowledge.[18]

Hazleton's comments provide one example of the types of qualifications Lower East Side residents placed upon their support of Tompkins Square Park's homeless population. As a newer, wealthier resident of the neighborhood who lived in a condominium in what she described as "a renovated landmark building overlooking the park," Hazleton felt that she had no right to complain about the human squalor on the streets below. Yet despite her sympathy, she ultimately felt that the homeless were a threat to the innocence of neighborhood children and perhaps also to her own comfort. Hazleton called on the city to create better services for the homeless, but also revealed that she was not, perhaps, as willing to coexist with Tompkins Square Park's homeless population as she'd initially thought.

Hazleton's essay was published just ten months before an event that neighborhood residents and scholars recognized as a catalyzing moment in Lower East Side (and New York City) history. The Tompkins Square Park riot of August 6 and 7, 1988 set off three years of intense debate and occasional skirmishes between police and local activists over the park's future. However, the riot catalyzed different community members in different ways. For some, the riot increased their resolve to defend Tompkins

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[18] Lesley Hazleton, "About the Homeless Men on My Doorstep: We'd prefer to avoid the truth," *New York Times*, October 3, 1987.

Square Park's homeless population. In September 1988, a month after the riot, local Community Board 3 voted overwhelmingly to allow the park's homeless encampment to remain undisturbed.[19] Local squatter activists, as well, began to explicitly express solidarity with the park's homeless population, which took forms including organizing protests, sharing food and supplies with park residents, and inviting some homeless park residents to move into local squats. Other neighborhood residents began to object more strongly to the presence of the homeless in the park. While some of these residents were pro-gentrification and generally more politically conservative, others were liberals who increasingly blamed the noise, litter, and excrement in the park on tent city residents. The Tompkins Square Park riot and the events surrounding it provide insight into the increasingly central role the park's homeless occupants played in neighborhood conflict on the Lower East Side. However, it also reveals that far from being "concrete," the term "the homeless" was contested by park residents and residents of the surrounding neighborhood.

At midnight on August 7, 1988, police officers clad in riot gear – some on horseback – began gathering outside Tompkins Square Park. Community members had recently urged the city to enforce the park's 1:00 a.m. curfew in order to curb the "rowdyism," in the words of a *New York Times* report, caused by the "drug pushers and punk-rock skinheads" who frequented the park at night.[20] As the number of police officers rose above one hundred, local activists marched through the park waving banners

[19] Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 155.

[20] Robert D. McFadden, "Park Curfew Protest Erupts Into A Battle and 38 Are Injured," *New York Times*, August 8, 1988.

and chanting "No police state" and "It's our fucking park."[21] Protests were not uncommon in the park, and had generally been met with tolerance in the past. The mood that night remained upbeat and even by some accounts party-like for an hour or so as protesters continued to chant and other park goers, including both homeless residents and people attending a concert at the park's band shell, milled about. But as 1:00 a.m. drew nearer, officers on foot converged upon protesters, and the mounted police charged into the crowd. As Janet Abu-Lughod described of the video that captured the event,

> The scene is brutal. The camera shows police beating people; a prone figure in the street is being viciously kicked by several policemen…Over the [police] loudspeaker comes the demand "Clear the streets!" followed shortly thereafter (as the mounted police chase people onto the sidewalks) by the bizarre demand to also "Get off the sidewalk!" People scatter to avoid the flying nightsticks as foot police attack without apparent provocation, screaming "Go home!"…By about 15 minutes after 1 a.m. the violence steps up drastically. Stragglers are pursued mercilessly.[22]

Eyewitnesses reported similar accounts to the *New York Times*, noting that the police seemed to have "panicked" and attacked protesters and bystanders alike after some protesters outside the park began to throw glass bottles at them. Police attacked a couple leaving a grocery store, a local business owner, and journalists and photographers from local newspapers, among others caught in the melee.[23]

The police did not target homeless residents of the park for attack. In fact, the city had given specific orders to police to close the park to all except the homeless, who were to be allowed to stay. The homeless were, by and large, not identified as the source of the problem, nor was their eviction seen as a solution. Most homeless residents of Tompkins Square Park sat out the riot by keeping to parts of the park that were far away from the

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[21] Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park," 241.

[22] Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park," 242.

[23] McFadden, "Park Curfew Protest Erupts Into A Battle and 38 Are Injured."

violence on Avenue A, at the park's western border. Local journalist Sarah Ferguson first met Ron Casanova that night, as she described in 1990:

> In the shadows behind the [park's] band shell, I find half a dozen homeless people dozing on benches. One of them, Renaldo Casanova, is watching over the others with a Bible in his hands. I ask him why his companions are sleeping in the midst of a riot sparked in part by the police crackdown on the homeless, and he responds, "We just want to be left alone."[24]

Ferguson's description of the riot as "sparked in part by the police crackdown on the homeless" is contested. Ethnographers Dorine Greshof and John Dale, in contrast, concluded, "the homeless were neither the initial nor fundamental issue in the political contestations that closed Tompkins Square Park." As they recognized, "Their presence in the park emerged only belatedly as a political issue within the larger battle over gentrification." Ferguson's memory might reflect the fact that, by 1990 as she was writing, the homeless had indeed become central to the struggle over Tompkins Square Park's future. Casanova, as well, recognized the riot as a pivotal moment: "When we woke up," he recalled to Ferguson of that morning in August, "We had a revolution."[25]

While many in the area fled, a crowd that Abu-Lughod described as mostly male "punks, blacks and Puerto Ricans" stayed on Avenue A to continue the protest, throwing bottles and firecrackers at police officers, who re-grouped and charged into the crowd several times over the course of the early morning. The police eventually retreated; but rather than disperse, remaining protesters marched to Christadora House, a recently-renovated condominium building on Avenue B at East 10th Street that very well may have been the building in which Lesley Hazleton lived. A gleaming high rise that loomed over Tompkins Square Park, Christadora House in many ways embodied the history of the

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[24] Sarah Ferguson, "Tent City Blues," 29.

[25] Greshof and Dale, "The Residents in Tompkins Square Park," 268.

Lower East Side, as well as the housing struggles that were profoundly changing the neighborhood's demographic and geographical composition. Its edifice was a potent symbol for the protesters who decried the gentrification of the Lower East Side.

Christadora House had been built as a settlement home in 1928, at the tail end of the neighborhood's heyday as a working-class immigrant mecca. In 1947, as the area's European immigrant population declined and was replaced by a largely Puerto Rican and African American population, the city of New York bought the building and allowed neighborhood residents to use it as a community center for meetings by – among other groups – the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords. The neighborhood's demographic transition was hardly organic; rather, it was the result of federal and local policies including redlining, urban renewal, and urban disinvestment that segregated poor communities of color in neighborhoods that were increasingly neglected by both government and commerce. By 1970, when the city closed the community center, it was just one of hundreds of vacant city-owned properties in a neighborhood that was increasingly characterized by decay and municipal neglect. Drug dealing and petty crime became rampant, especially in the area known as Alphabet City (Avenues A through D) where many of the abandoned buildings were concentrated.

The neighborhood's decrepitude was deceiving: Even as its physical decline worsened in the 1970s, speculative investors began to purchase properties, leaving vacant buildings unoccupied (a phenomenon known as "warehousing") and occupied buildings unmaintained as they waited for the real estate market to improve. As Christopher Mele noted, these initial investors "placed their hopes on a continued upswing in New York's

economy and real estate market, and on a continued eastward push of gentrification."[26] Indeed, the Lower East Side was, by the 1980s, home to a growing population comprised mostly of white artists, students, and young professionals who had been priced out of the more expensive Greenwich Village neighborhood to the west. Speculative investors and the developers who followed them viewed these groups, especially artists, as the pioneering forces of change in the community. The city, as well, sought to promote artists' settlement of the neighborhood, and some of its earliest forays into community housing development in the neighborhood were aimed at artists and other members of the creative classes whom city administrators and real estate developers increasingly understood as the pioneers of urban revitalization.[27]

Many of these new neighbors were not only sympathetic to the plight of older neighborhood residents, but also in many instances worked actively to cooperatively improve the neighborhood and the landlord-neglected buildings in which they all lived. Housing and tenants' rights activism has a long and varied history in New York City. At 506-508 East 12th Street, for instance, residents banded together in 1979 to withhold rent when the building's landlord refused to make necessary repairs. A city judge initially upheld the tenants' rights to withhold rent, but just three weeks later the building was sold to new owners and a new ruling was issued against the tenants, forcing them to pay

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[26] Christopher Mele, "The Process of Gentrification in Alphabet City," Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 272.

[27] A 1983 *New York Times* article, for instance, noted the polarized opinions over a plan to use $2.4 million in federal community development funds to rehabilitate buildings as artists' cooperatives on Forsyth Street and East Eighth Street. While Anthony Gliedman, then the head of the city's Department of Housing and Preservation, hailed the development as an opportunity to stimulate the neighborhood's revitalization, others saw it as a blatant attempt to gentrify the neighborhood. The Board of Estimates did eventually defeat the measure. Stephen Daly, "The Shape of Its Future Splits the East Village," *New York Times*, March 20, 1983.

back rent and ceasing their efforts to gain management control of the building. As journalist Bernard Cohen noted of the case in *City Limits*, "The mysteries of the legal process and the swift transfers of property…make moving targets out of owners" who sold and flipped properties on the Lower East Side at an increasingly rapid rate.[28] Since at least the early twentieth century, tenants of rental apartments – which historically comprised the majority of housing units in the city – have organized for better living conditions, and against unjust evictions and rent increases. This tradition was especially strong on the radical Lower East Side, and many new and old neighborhood residents fought to continue this tradition.[29]

But success was becoming a rarity for such activists. The fate of Christadora House was emblematic of the new direction of real estate in the neighborhood. Neighborhood residents appealed to the city to keep Christadora House open for community use, but to no avail. In the mid-1970s, the city sold the building to a private real estate developer for $62,500. After failing to obtain federal funds to convert the building to low-income housing, that developer sold the Christadora to another developer for $1.3 million, and that developer in turn quickly sold the building to another for $3 million. By 1986, the building's final purchaser had converted the former settlement

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[28] Bernard Cohen, "Saving Lower East Side Buildings as 'Age of Abandonment' Nears End," *City Limits* 5:1 (January 1980).

[29] The most comprehensive book on this topic is R. Lawson, *The Tenant Movement in New York City* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Other works that address tenants' and community housing activism in New York include Arlene Dávila, "Dreams of Place and Housing Struggles," *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Jared N. Day, *Urban Castles: Tenement Housing and Landlord Activism in New York City, 1890-1943 (*New York City: Columbia University Press, 1999); Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2012); Alexander Von Hoffman, "Miracle on 174th Street," *House By House, Block By Block*.

home and community center to luxury condominium apartments that sold for up to $1 million apiece.[30] Looming as it did over Tompkins Square Park, the building was, to many Lower East Side residents, a potent symbol of the changes that were taking place in their community.

That such a drastic turnaround could happen in such a short period of time is indicative of the pace at which, by the early 1980s, real estate speculation had exploded in the neighborhood. In 1985, the East Village – as the portion of the Lower East Side that sat north of East Houston Street was increasingly called – was featured in the *New York Times*' "If you're thinking of living in," a weekly real estate feature. The author, Richard D. Lyons, observed, "Prospective buyers of city-owned properties are swarming over the East Village, looking for bargains in hundreds of dilapidated buildings and vacant lots owned by the city." Despite the neighborhood's decrepitude, its crime and "quality-of-life problems," and public schools filled with students "from families mired in the welfare system," Lyons wrote that the neighborhood's "proximity to midtown Manhattan and Wall Street is catching the eyes of an increasing number of New Yorkers who view it as the next likely alternative to chic Washington Square, the trendy Upper West Side or the East Side."[31] The Christadora was just one of the dozens if not hundreds of buildings that real estate developers increasingly identified as profitable on the Lower East Side, New York's newest urban "frontier."[32]

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[30] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*.

[31] Richard D. Lyons, "If You're Thinking of Living In: The East Village," *New York Times*, October 6, 1985.

[32] Neil Smith argues that the concept of "frontier" originated by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 is crucial to understanding how gentrification took place in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side in the late twentieth century. Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*.

The conversion of buildings like the Christadora into luxury apartments did not simply take away a potential housing source from low-income people in the historically poor and working-class Lower East Side; it also drove up prices across the neighborhood as property values rose and landlords began to renovate decrepit buildings in order to attract higher-income tenants, often evicting existing tenants in the process. Commercial loans for such projects were increasingly available in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side after years of redlining; yet banks provided the bulk of this capital to commercial developers, not to individuals or "mom and pop" landlords, thus perpetuating and exacerbating disparities in wealth and access to capital in the neighborhood.[33]

The tensions that arose from this situation exploded after August 7, 1988. The riot itself ended dramatically: After the police and crowds had dispersed from Tompkins Square Park, the protesters who marched to Christadora House broke through the police barricades that surrounded the building. They smashed the large potted plants that lined the walls of the lobby, and upon leaving, they hung a sign reading "Gentrification is Class War" on the building's façade.[34] These actions startled and disturbed many Lower East Side residents, new and old. The crowd that battled the police in Tompkins Square Park was diverse; but in the aftermath of the riot, a vocal band of squatters and self-proclaimed anarchists assumed the mantle as advocates for the homeless and dispossessed of the Lower East Side.

The 500 (by some estimates more) squatters who lived on the Lower East Side in the late 1980s were diverse and included, in their own words, "young and old, black,

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[33] Mele, "Gentrification in Alphabet City," 177.

[34] Abu-Lughod, "The Battle For Tompkins Square Park," 244-245.

white, Latino, and Asian, families and singles."[35] But especially after 1985, more young white people from outside of the neighborhood had moved in to take up squatting on the Lower East Side. The efforts of the most radical among them to mobilize the largely Puerto Rican and Black community against gentrification was received with ambivalence, at best, and often with outright distrust or disdain. Dave Tompkins, an African American Lower East Sider, had lived in the neighborhood since the 1960s. After losing his rental apartment when the building was converted to a co-op, he had lived in Tompkins Square Park before beginning to squat in a local building. Tompkins described the squatter activists' efforts as overly persistent and out of touch with the local community. "The analogy," Tompkins observed, "would be if a white guy come up to me and says, 'Hey Brother!' and gives me all these different hand shakes…You just don't trust people who give you that. It's too much."[36]

The mostly-white activist squatters had somewhat more success connecting with the homeless people who lived in and around Tompkins Square Park. Some homeless park residents, like Ron Casanova, found common cause with squatters who offered both political solidarity and practical help, including sharing food and supplies and offering some park residents space in the squats they had founded. As Casanova described of the months following the 1988 riot,

> The park became a sanctuary…We were a festive combination of squatters, anarchists, activists and mostly just homeless people…People in the neighborhood would go out and buy or collect food and bring it for our kitchen. People began to get the word out that we were feeding the homeless and anybody was welcome.

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[35] "Who We Are, and What We Believe," quoted in Andrew Van Kleunen, "The Squatters: A Chorus of Voices…But is Anyone Listening?" in Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 285-286.

[36] Quoted in Van Kleunen, "The Squatters: A Chorus of Voices…But is Anyone Listening?" 304.

In Casanova's recollection, the neighborhood anarchists would often bring chicken and vegetables to the communal soup kitchen that formed in Tompkins Square Park. They sometimes "started talking to us about how to deal with the authorities." But Casanova and others "would just pick out which [strategies] sounded the best…and make suggestions along those lines to the Tent City residents. Usually they agreed."[37]

Yet even these alliances were fraught, and some homeless residents of Tompkins Square Park questioned whether or not activist squatters truly had their best interests at heart. Raheem, a local Black squatter and activist whom many in the park considered a leader, called the white activists "opportunists." And Debbie Manigault, a homeless woman who lived in Tompkins Square Park, said that white squatter activists were "just making the situation worse for us. They only have their own interests at heart." Many of Tompkins Square Park's residents were politically aware and sought to create alliances with each other and with sympathetic neighbors, yet many of them disagreed with the approach of the squatters who attempted to organize and forge alliances with them. Geo Ivey, a carpenter who lived in the park, hoped that his homeless community would pool their resources and buy a house together. To him, the squatter activists were people who "want…property for nothing."[38]

Even some within the radical squatters' movement recognized this disconnect. Many of the protests activists held – especially those located outside of the park, where

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[37] Casanova, 122-128.

[38] Betsy Herzog, "Lower East Side Blacks say they feel exploited," *Amsterdam News*, January 27, 1990. As Janet Abu-Lughod observed of the relationship between radical squatter activists and Tompkins Square Park's homeless population, "Many of the homeless did not share the squatters' anti-property views. Most of the homeless were not opposed in principle to private property; they just couldn't afford to amass much of it or afford to pay rent to owners of private property!" Abu-Lughod, "The Battle for Tompkins Square Park," 264 (endnote 52).

the homeless were concentrated – were small and attended mostly by white activists. A group that called itself Emergency Coalition Against Martial Law (ECAML) exemplified this issue. ECAML held marches to protest the city's plan to institutionalize homeless mentally ill people and the city's reliance on municipal shelters instead of permanent housing for the homeless. Its events received attention from news media outlets, but were sparsely attended; most of the group's members appeared to be young white men who, in their speeches, compared New York City's homeless policy to "roundups" in Nazi Germany. The group's actions and rhetoric often seemed un-self-critical and tone-deaf. Home video footage from 1987 shows the group marching through Manhattan and imploring men standing in front of a local shelter to join them. But it also shows a rally dominated by white male speakers, one of whom interrupted and spoke over an older Black man who objected to the younger man's words. The organization's membership and action seemed not always to align with its radical egalitarian rhetoric.

At another ECAML rally, an African American participant expressed his frustration to the crowd.

> This is not a hit parade here. We're not here ego searching. We're talking about the major problems that exist right now, which happen to be homelessness. At this point in time, we are representatives of the homeless, but yet and still, I don't see too many homeless people here. If you go across to the Bowery, and you realize that most of the homeless are young, Black, Hispanics, then you see that this is not a real, like, showing of the actual homeless people.

Debates about who the "actual" homeless were, then, were not confined to disillusioned and disgruntled Lower East Side residents; some radical squatters –especially non-white ones like Dave Tompkins and the unnamed rally participant – also recognized that the movement was not adequately including or appealing to the voices of the people they presumed to represent. ECAML's rally at which the unnamed African American man

spoke took place in a vacant lot on the Lower East Side. In an apt twist of irony, protesters had set up their makeshift stage and banner backdrop directly in front of a homeless man who had been sleeping in the lot. The man was only revealed when the protest's critic called attention to his presence:

> We're playing games if we don't include, like, this guy in the picture here. This guy is sleeping here and nobody sees him. Move the signs! And let's see. This is what we're trying to prevent. You see this now? You understand the problem. We can win if we can all pull together and try and get this brother here off the ground.[39]

Some activists recognized that their movement was not succeeding in helping or allying with the homeless. Homeless people also recognized this, although their desire to work with the activists varied, from those like Dave Tompkins and Ron Casanova who shared housing and resources with other squatters, even as they continued to be critical of their approaches, to those like Bill Jones, Debbie Manigault, Geo Ivey, and Raheem, who distrusted "purple hair" squatter activists and openly criticized their presence in Tompkins Square Park.

Scholars have disagreed in their analysis of the relationship between the homeless and squatter activists on the Lower East Side. While Dorine Greshof and John Dale argued that "the homeless formed a symbiotic alliance with anarchists, squatters, and other groups opposed to gentrification in the East Village," Janet Abu-Lughod viewed these relationships with more cynicism: "Only the squatters," she noted, "seem to have been unambivalent about and pleased with the association" with Tompkins Square Park's homeless population.[40] The coalition, it seems, was overstated, yet after 1988, it

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[39] "ECAML 1987 Combination: Homeless Roundup Protest w/Tee Pee Soup Kitchen," DVD (converted from video) Box 1, Folder 15a, Jerry "The Peddler" Wade Papers, Tamiment Library.

[40] Greshof and Dale, 267-268; Abu-Lughod, 250-251.

increasingly informed other housed neighborhood residents' opinions of the struggles that were taking place on the Lower East Side and the solution to the problem of disorder in Tompkins Square Park.

In response to a neighborhood resident's remark that the issue of whether or not to allow homeless people to sleep in Tompkins Square Park was "very complex," a *New York Times* editorial claimed that the issue in fact "isn't all that complex." It continued, "The park belongs to the people – all the people. To turn it into a shantytown is to rob the larger community of its park." This argument was gaining an increasing amount of momentum on the Lower East Side. Some community members – including some of the liberal, middle-class residents in the gentrifying neighborhood – argued that the park must remain open as long as the city refused to construct permanent housing for the homeless. But more increasingly echoed the *Times*' sentiment, framing the issue as one of public access and decrying the disorder and filth that many felt the homeless brought to the park. The editorial did not, however, end with the call to reclaim Tompkins Square Park for "the people." Instead, it offered further justification for evicting homeless people and their encampments from the park, noting,

> What's more, not all of those living in Tompkins Square Park were homeless, if the homeless are defined as poor people without the financial or mental resources to support themselves. The shanty population included radicals angered about neighborhood gentrification, drug addicts, skinheads, self-proclaimed anarchists and people furious at the city for tearing down an abandoned building where they had been squatting. It seems sadly clear that some people in the park cynically used the plight of the truly homeless to further their own agendas.[41]

The *Times* echoed the sentiment of an increasing number of Lower East Siders when it accused radicals, drug addicts, skinheads, anarchists, and squatters of exploiting the homeless. It, like many neighborhood residents, seemed unwilling or unable to

[41] "I Want This Park Back," *New York Times*, July 8, 1989.

acknowledge solidarity between different groups who occupied the park, or that many of the identities listed – radical, drug addict, squatter, homeless – might all intersect in the body of one individual.

Weeks later, the *Times* published a short piece by Kate Walter, the co-founder of a Lower East Side neighborhood association, in which Walter similarly claimed that Tompkins Square Park's homeless "are being used and exploited to promote a wider anarchist agenda." Walter expressed her frustration with the activists who seemed to be the leaders of the Tompkins Square Park movement, and observed,

> I have seldom heard the "real" homeless population speaking out from the microphones, and I doubt that the people who've been living in the park for years suddenly ran out to a store and purchased camping equipment [to construct the growing number of tents in the park].

Walter's observation was not dissimilar from the critiques posed by some of the park's homeless residents themselves; yet for Walter, the presence of exploitative "anarchists" in the park served as justification for the removal of the encampment. "The tents," she declared, "must go…City parks belong to everyone, not just the loudest segment of the population."[42] Walter's frustration with the neighborhood's increasingly vocal group of radical activists may have been justified. But she, like many of her neighbors, increasingly used this frustration to rationalize her opinion that the city should evict the homeless from Tompkins Square Park. As sympathy and solidarity turned to frustration, Lower East Siders increasingly challenge the veracity of park residents' status

[42] Kate Walter, " 'Village' Anarchists, Master Intimidators," *New York Times*, July 26, 1989.

as the "real" homeless. Doing so allowed them to justify their desire to rid Tompkins Square Park of its homeless population.[43]

The allegiance between squatters and the homeless was never complete, and it was often contested. But as Ron Casanova suggested, many different groups cohabitated in Tompkins Square Park relatively peacefully. And for many – including Casanova himself – being homeless was hardly a stable category, nor were homelessness and squatting mutually exclusive acts or identities. In neighborhood around New York City, homeless and tenuously housed individuals demonstrated that the lines between homelessness and squatting were indeed blurred, and that neither identity precluded one from also being an activist. In fact, squatting had a long history in New York City as an activist cause, as homelessness increasingly would as the 1980s progressed.

Squatting in the 1970s: The South Bronx

> Although the men and women of PDC are involved in forward-looking things like solar energy and worm raising, their goals are quite old-fashioned. These young people are urban pioneers. Like the families that settled the West 100 years ago, they are looking for decent homes, independence, and some control over their lives in today's urban wilderness.[44]

Ramon Rueda founded the People's Development Corporation (PDC) in 1974. In 1186 Washington Avenue, an abandoned 5-story apartment building in the South Bronx, Rueda saw the possibility to revitalize a decrepit building and, perhaps, the community around it. The idea was actively taking root in New York City in the 1970s: PDC was one of many organizations across the city that sought to create housing for poor people

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[43] Alex Vitale argues that Walter's sentiment is evident of a redefinition of the Tompkins Square Park dilemma as an "order problem," which allowed "liberal concern for the homeless [to be] displaced by a new communalist concern with access to social goods like the park."[43] Walter's letter also demonstrates the ways that Lower East Side residents increasingly displaced the problem from one of homeless bodies – the truly needy – in public space to one of unruly anarchist bodies. Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 157-158.

[44] Charles Lockwood, "Taming the South Bronx Frontier," *Quest* (December/January 1978), 97.

through "sweat equity," trading labor for a stake in a building's future. Faced with the indifference of the municipal government and commercial lenders, Rueda – and many others like him – saw sweat equity as the best hope for revitalizing dying communities, one building at a time.

In the decade before New York City's homeless crisis began, the more common phrase on the lips of poor New Yorkers, their advocates, and the municipal government was "housing crisis." The same trends that created a glut of vacant buildings on the Lower East Side also affected other poor areas of the city, as landlords abandoned their unprofitable buildings and the city of New York acquired tax-defaulted properties by the tens of thousands. The city's population declined by 317,000 between 1975 and 1978 alone, but those who remained faced an increasingly difficult time finding adequate, affordable housing. In those three years, the number of housing units available for rent declined by 67,000, with the majority of housing loss occurring the in the poorest neighborhoods, like the South Bronx, central Brooklyn, and the Lower East Side. Even as the city was wracked by financial crisis, rents in privately owned buildings rose across the board, and landlords in some neighborhoods were beginning, as early as 1970, to evict low-income tenants in order to renovate and rent units at a higher price.[45]

The tactics activists adopted to combat low-income housing loss varied from neighborhood to neighborhood and changed over time. Many local citizens became activists out of necessity: Living in a landlord-neglected building, tenants banded together to withhold rent until necessary repairs were made, or applied for 7A status which, under New York State law, allowed the city to transfer management from a

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[45] Marcuse, *Rental Housing in the City of New York*; Michael Stern, "Police Evict Chelsea Squatters," *New York Times*, July 21, 1970.

negligent landlord. Some needy New Yorkers took up squatting informally and without political agenda, either by seeking shelter in an abandoned building, or remaining in their apartments after a building had been abandoned, thus becoming squatters ex post facto. But squatting had, by the mid-1970s, also become a way for citizens to empower themselves and to pressure the city to enact policies that would benefit low-income New Yorkers and housing-poor neighborhoods. Some people who moved into and renovated abandoned buildings preferred the term "homesteader," especially if they were in the process of applying to the city for legal occupancy through the Tenant Interim Lease program (TIL). They often sought to distinguish between themselves and squatters who "just clear a little corner of rubble and lie there," as homesteader Joe Jackson put it.[46] But many New Yorkers embraced the term and proudly fought for squatters' rights, forcing the city to face the buildings and the tenants whom it had largely abandoned.

When Ramon Rueda first founded PDC in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx, the neighborhood was one of the most devastated areas in New York City. The South Bronx's reputation and infrastructure had been declining since the 1950s, as white flight and urban renewal drastically altered the neighborhood's racial and economic composition and crime and drug use rose. But the 1970s witnessed the near total abandonment of the area by commercial institutions and the municipal, state, and federal government.[47] As the city closed fire and police precincts in a policy commonly known as "planned shrinkage," burglaries became increasingly common, and building fires often raged uncontrollably. Arson became an ever-present threat as landlords attempted to

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[46] Pat Lamiell, "Squatting in New York," *City Limits* 10:8 (October 1985), 12.

[47] Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2004), 125; Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 178-179.

collect fire insurance on unprofitable buildings, and as vandals sought to burn buildings to gain access to the only parts of them still valuable: the copper pipes that lay beneath plaster walls.[48] Fires and neglect had reduced parts of the South Bronx to rubble; but the area's decline was also due to the withdrawal of manufacturing and commercial institutions. The South Bronx had lost forty percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1965 and 1977, leading to an unemployment rate well over twenty-five percent of the area's population; and even as residents and local businesses deposited hundreds of millions of dollars into commercial banks, those banks refused to issue mortgage loans in the community. Thus while the decrepitude of residential architecture was due in part to arson and landlord neglect, it was also the work of banks that refused to provide mortgages to neighborhood residents for home and small business purchases and renovations.[49]

Parts of the borough felt vacant and lawless, and the South Bronx was increasingly referred to in terms that evoked the mythic American frontier. The 41st Police Precinct, located just a few blocks from 1186 Washington Street, became known as "Fort Apache," evoking a racialized image of violence and warfare in a neighborhood populated mostly by Black and Latino - rather than Native American – people.[50] This image also extended into the positive coverage of the neighborhood, including the work

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[48] For more on the wave of arson that swept the South Bronx and the city policy that withheld much-needed services from the area, see Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York, Verso, 1998).

[49] Chronopoulos, 125; Errol T. Louis, "Branch Closings: The New Redlining," *City Limits* 11:8 (October 1986), 10-14.

[50] Ian Fisher, "Pulling Out of Fort Apache, The Bronx," *New York Times*, June 23, 1993.

of PDC and other groups like it.[51] *Quest* magazine's 1978 article on PDC called its members "urban pioneers" in the "urban wilderness" of the South Bronx. Such rhetoric, even when well meaning, reinforced the otherness of New York City's poorest neighborhoods and their inhabitants. At the same time that it celebrated the possibilities for change in New York City's most devastated neighborhoods, it also reflected an attitude not unlike the frontier mentality of the nineteenth century, when the U.S. government and speculators encouraged rugged individuals to stake their claim to land and, in doing so, to help civilize uncivilized territory. The city's homesteading program reflected this ethic; it was, if anything, an attempt to civilize the very act of squatting. As Andrew Van Kleunen noted, the program "was established in the late 1970s only after illegal occupations…had multiplied to an alarming level throughout the ghettos and barrios of New York." Homesteading was an attempt to harness the energy of squatting, while still placing it under the regulation of the municipal government.[52]

PDC was not comprised of "pioneers," but of Bronx residents attempting to create housing and employment opportunities for themselves and their community. Ramon Rueda was a college-educated man of Puerto Rican descent. His working-class parents had raised him in the Bronx, and some of the first people he enlisted to join PDC were Puerto Rican friends and acquaintances. The group quickly reached out, however, to the predominantly Black community that lived around 1186 Washington Avenue. With the first small grant that PDC received in 1975, the group hired a dozen local neighborhood

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[51] As Neil Smith has argued, as cities gentrified in the 1970s and 1980s, "the appeal to frontier imagery has been exact: urban pioneers, urban homesteaders and urban cowboys became the new folk heroes of the urban frontier," and the terms use in the late twentieth century is "as arrogant as the original notion of 'pioneers' in that it suggests a city not yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans, the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment." Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, xiv.

[52] Van Kleunen, 288-289.

youth to participate in the project. Community members leapt at the opportunity to learn marketable skills and to use sweat equity in exchange for a place in the building. These newer members quickly became the core of PDC's membership and the driving force in the future of 1186 Washington Avenue.[53]

While PDC first began through the extralegal tactic of occupying a city-owned building, it quickly sought to gain the support of the municipal government and private foundations. In its earliest years, it often did so through non-traditional tactics, including some that were almost political theater. Rueda and other PDC members, for instance, stormed into a municipal housing meeting in downtown Manhattan wearing their work clothes, covered in plaster, and carrying construction tools to make their case for why the city should fund PDC. The group received grants from both the city of New York and groups like the Consumer-Farmer Foundation, which began in the 1970s to provide low-interest loans to self-help housing rehabilitation projects.[54] In 1977, President Jimmy Carter visited 1186 Washington Avenue during his famous tour of the South Bronx, and the resultant publicity led to more funding opportunities and expanded dreams: Rueda soon envisioned reconstructing an entire neighborhood, building parks and farm cooperatives to sustain the Morrisania community. But those who were providing the bulk of the sweat equity on 1186 Washington Avenue, the neighborhood residents who hoped to make homes for themselves in the building, wanted to see the building completed. Rife with internal divisions, PDC had largely imploded by 1979.

New York City's support of homesteading never became as widespread as activists hoped it would: Only 50 buildings with 583 units were developed through sweat

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[53] Katz, "The Faded Dream of Washington Avenue," 12.

[54] Bernard Cohen, "Consumer-Farmer: A Housing Foundation," *City Limits* 3:1 (January 1978), 6.

equity throughout the 1970s. Most of the projects undertaken by individuals and small grassroots organizations like PDC were held up by the "fiscal and policy vacuums" that delayed approval and funding. Many of the most successful efforts to rebuilding housing in devastated neighborhoods instead came at the hands of larger community development corporations (CDCs) founded by groups with strong institutional infrastructures, like the South East Bronx Community Organization Development Corporation (SEBCO) and the Nehemiah Houses in East New York, Brooklyn. Both of these projects received support from the municipal government, as well as from powerful religious organizations and private financial intermediary institutions that often had corporate roots. As housing redevelopment in poor neighborhoods proved more and more successful, conventional developers became increasingly willing to undertake projects – including for subsidized housing – in these areas, and the city of New York seemed more comfortable supporting them then they did small grassroots organizations like PDC.[55]

As New York City climbed out of financial crisis, it also began to re-assert its claim to the vast swath of *in rem* buildings in its possession. While it continued to promote urban homesteading as a legal option for those seeking to own a home, it only made a handful of buildings available for such projects. And it increasingly began to discourage squatters and homesteaders from occupying buildings unlawfully, and to evict squatters who had lived – in some cases – for years in *in rem* buildings. In 1975, the municipal government had responded favorably to PDC's guerrilla development tactics, offering them a municipal loan and title to the 1186 Washington Avenue; but by 1985,

[55] Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (Nation Books, 2011), 31-32; Von Hoffman, 15.

Koch wrote in an internal memo, "I don't believe we should tolerate [squatters] unless there are extraordinary circumstances. I am sure this matter will not go away."[56]

Squatting, Homelessness, and Housing Activism in the 1980s

Koch was right in thinking that the matter would not go away. Even as squatters encountered more bureaucratic hurdles, squatting was on the rise in many parts of the city. Andrew Van Kleunen observed that 1985 was the beginning of a "new wave" of squatting on the Lower East Side. And in East New York, Brooklyn, 1985 was a climactic year for squatters waging a multi-year battle with the municipal government over the fate of 30 *in rem* single-family houses. In both of these neighborhoods, squatters increasingly cited homelessness as justification for their occupation of abandoned buildings. As East New York squatting organizers noted in a letter to HPD commissioner Anthony Gliedman, "In desperation, many of the families that we were working with that were homeless, or soon to be homeless began to move into and clean up and repair vacant city owned buildings."[57] As the homeless crisis grew more urgent, housing activists – including many squatters themselves – drew connections between their struggle for affordable housing and the problem of homelessness in New York City. This activism extended to self-identified homeless people themselves, who, as the decade drew to a close, organized with increasing effectiveness to call for a city housing policy that included them.

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[56] Koch to Robert Esnard, December 27, 1985. Edward I. Koch Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

[57] Letter to Anthony Gliedman from ACORN, December 22, 1985. Box 181, Folder 5, Edward I. Koch Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

East New York was once a middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood. By the 1980s, however, a combination of white flight, redlining, and unscrupulous lending practices that led to foreclosures had radically altered the neighborhood. Primarily Black and primarily poor, East New York was also, by 1979, home to over 4,000 in rem vacant units, many of which were single-family houses from the neighborhood's more prosperous days.[58] The neighborhood was in many ways just as devastated as the South Bronx; as one observer had noted of President Jimmy Carter's 1977 visit to the South Bronx, if the presidential motorcade had turned east into Brooklyn instead of west into the Bronx, it would have encountered a similar scene and, perhaps, provided Brooklyn with the national attention and funding that the Bronx received instead.[59]

No great grassroots housing movement swept Brooklyn in the 1970s as it had in the Bronx. Yet increasingly in the 1980s, local leaders and national activists alike began to organize Brooklynites to demand a larger piece of the housing pie from the city of New York. One of the most prominent efforts, led by East Brooklyn Churches (EBC), a coalition of liberal, mostly-Black Christian churches, and financed in part by the New York City municipal government, resulted in the construction of single-family homes known as the Nehemiah Houses. EBC sought to help low-income Brooklynites realize the goal of homeownership; but Nehemiah houses sold for over $40,000, well outside the reach of the poorest community members.[60] Hoping to address this gap between supply and demand, ACORN entered the picture.

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[58] Penny Wolfson, "Memories Are All That Remain of One-Time Little Pittsburgh," *City Limits* 4:7 (October 1979), 14-15.

[59] Von Hoffman, *House By House, Block By Block,* 67.

[60] Pat Lamell, "Squatting in New York," *City Limits* 10:8 (October 1985), 16.

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, was a national group that had conducted successful squatting campaigns in other cities, including Philadelphia. The group first sent leaders to organize tenants in East New York in 1983. Against accusations of encouraging illegal squatting, ACORN organizers responded that they simply "point out the options" available to people who want homes, leaving it to them to decide whether or not they want to squat to gain those homes.[61] Such rhetoric struck many as disingenuous, as it was accompanied by ACORN's open advocacy of squatting and its history in other cities. Nevertheless, as word of ACORN'S efforts swept across New York, many housing advocates and liberal media outlets expressed support for their cause. A 1985 *New York Times* editorial, for instance, was entitled "Give Squatters A Chance." The *Times* differentiated between those who were "interested only in temporary shelter" and those who, like the East New Yorkers being led by ACORN, "turned squatting into a tactic for would-be urban homesteaders." Yet it also justified squatting since the alternatives proposed by the city – including legal homesteading – "have been long in coming and fall far short of the demand. The longer the city delays expanding them," the editorial concluded, "the more compelling becomes the squatters' case."[62] Robert Esnard, Koch's Deputy Mayor for Physical Development, shot back at the New York Times, "Homesteading is not an opportunity for a dissatisfied few to occupy illegally what may be a potentially unsafe building."[63] Koch and his housing administrators viewed ACORN as a serious threat to their own planned housing

[61] Michael Henry Powell, "ACORN Comes to Squat," *City Limits* 8:1 (January 1983), 27.

[62] "Give Squatters A Chance," *New York Times*, August 11, 1985.

[63] Robert Esnard, "Squatters Are Not the Answer," *New York Times*, August 20, 1985.

programs; many poor East New Yorkers viewed it as a source of hope and practical assistance.

Jacinto Camacho had immigrated to the United States in 1967, leaving his wife and children behind in Ecuador as he set out to make a better life for his family in New York City. With ACORN's support, Camacho began squatting in a vacant three-family house at 925 Glenmore Avenue in East New York in 1985, working practically around the clock to secure the home from drug addicts who used the home as a shooting gallery and to remove the debris that resulted from years of neglect. Mayor Koch was deeply wary of validating the claims of squatters like Jacinto Camacho: It attempted to evict him from his squat several times between 1985 and 1987, but ACORN mobilized legal defense to prevent the evictions and continued to campaign legislators and administration officials to change their stance on the squatters. As Camacho remembered, "It was illegal – four times they wanted to evict me, and ACORN defended me."[64]

The Koch administration's increasing refusal to tolerate squatters as the 1980s went on led to many heated confrontations between the municipal government and East New York residents. In addition to the eviction attempts like those experienced by Camacho, the East New York squatters also engaged in protest, storming and occupying city administration buildings and rallying in front of buildings that they had claimed with ACORN'S help. In August of 1985, New York City police arrested eight people – including State Senator Thomas J. Bartosiewicz, a Brooklyn Democrat who was sympathetic to the squatters' cause – on charges of disorderly conduct outside of 412

[64] Steven Erlanger, "For A New Homesteader, Struggle Leads to Success," *New York Times*, October 12, 1987.

Vermont Avenue, a squatter-occupied East New York home.[65] Although charges were later dropped, the relationship between the city and the squatters remained tense.

Despite the city's resistance, a powerful chorus of voices chimed in to defend the East New York squatters. In addition to Bartosiewicz, City Council President Carol Bellamy voiced her support, and architects from the nearby Pratt Institute offered their assistance in helping squatters to bring the buildings up to code. With the Pratt Institute's help, the squatters formed a collective called the Mutual Housing Association of New York (MHANY), and drew up a plan to not only renovate the homes, but to collectively manage them. Due to the increasing support of local institutions like the Pratt Institute, MHANY soon gained the support of the New York City Board of Estimates, which in 1987 approved the plan to allow MHANY retain the 25 buildings that they occupied in East New York. As Jacinto Camacho enthused, "Now they can't take us out anymore." He had been able, in the previous decade, to slowly bring his wife, children, and grandchildren to the United States from Ecuador, and was thrilled to have a home in which they could all live. His success had come, he felt, from the use of his "own hands and the help of God."[66]

Camacho largely excluded ACORN from his narrative of personal success. The Koch administration hoped that in legitimizing the squatters as homesteaders under MHANY, it could do the same. As a *New York Times* article proclaimed, "New York Turns Squatters Into Homesteaders." As squatters, the municipal government condemned the actions of East New Yorkers attempting to secure housing amidst a shortage of

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[65] "State Senator and 7 Others Arrested at Squatters' Rally," *New York Times*, August 4, 1985.

[66] Steve Erlanger, "New York Turns Squatters Into Homesteaders," *New York Times*, October 12, 1987; Joyce Purnick, "Bellamy Defends Brooklyn Squatters," *New York Times*, August 10, 1985.

available rental units and a glut of vacant properties; but as homesteaders, the city could retroactively legitimate East New Yorkers' actions. But the shift came at a stiff price: As a stipulation of recognizing the Mutual Housing Association of New York, the Koch administration required that ACORN cease organizing squatters in New York City. As Felice Michetti, then the deputy commissioner of HPD, told the *New York Times*, "Once ACORN was willing to recognize that squatting is illegal and not an answer…it paved the way for a mutual sharing of ideas and financing by the city."[67] The conclusion was largely hailed as a victory; but happy as it was for the East New Yorkers who gained homes, the creation of MHANY did little to bolster support or to create more favorable conditions for other squatters around New York City.

Few other New Yorkers received a similar reprieve. On the Lower East Side, the city escalated its battle against people occupying *in rem* properties, evicting people living in vacant buildings and those who built tent cities and shanties on vacant land with increasing regularity. The municipal government sometimes justified these evictions by condemning the buildings or declaring them fire hazards. Squatters questioned why, if that was so, the city had turned a blind eye to the buildings' inhabitants for so many years prior. The city also evicted a growing number of squatters from buildings and lots upon which new construction was planned after years of dormancy. In the summer of 1985, a group of "homeless squatters," as the *New York Times* called them, awaited eviction from the shantytown they had erected on vacant land on Avenue C, between 5th and 6th Streets. The group was being evicted to make way for a city-funded building that would house 200 homeless families, an irony that was not lost on the homeless residents. The city

[67] Erlanger, "New York Turns Squatters Into Homesteaders."

offered the lot's occupants space in a municipal shelter, but all of them refused. Charles Perkins, an HPD spokesman, put forth a rationale that the city increasingly used to justify these evictions: "It is hard for me to understand how anyone can argue that 10 people in tents should be allowed to stay there," when "there are 200 families waiting for housing." While the city's stance was understandable, and its efforts to create housing were sorely needed, it also placed people squatting on vacant land and in *in rem* buildings in an impossible position. Priced out of the private housing market and faced with a waiting list for public housing that stretched into the hundreds of thousands, homeless people who had attempted instead to claim space for themselves in long-neglected pockets of the city were increasingly finding that even that option was no longer available. Few wanted to enter municipal shelters, which were not only crowded and filthy, but also dangerous. As Michael Cruzado, one of the homeless people living in the vacant lot, had asked rhetorically, "Who wants to have his head cracked open?"[68]

Homeless people in New York City had long been forming collectives like the one in the vacant lot on Avenue C – small groups of people who, drawn together by choice or circumstance, banded together to build homes and provide security for one another. But such relationships were often temporary, subject to the whims of the city government, changing weather conditions, and the shifting lives and preferences of homeless people themselves. The shiftlessness that defined homeless existence in 1980s New York City made homeless people a difficult group to organize on a larger scale. Being homeless in New York City meant frequently relocating – from an emergency shelter to a relative's couch, for instance, or from a vacant *in rem* building to an

[68] Larry Rohter, "Squatters and City Clash on Housing," *New York Times*, July 30, 1985.

accommodating doorway or park bench. Many homeless New Yorkers did not have a permanent address or regular access to a phone; many spent their days simply struggling to survive, navigating the city's vast and complex social service system or traveling from a church in one neighborhood that served lunch to a soup kitchen in another neighborhood that served dinner.

As the 1980s progressed, however, more homeless people began to consciously organize themselves to advocate for housing reform and to protest inhumane treatment at the hands of social service providers. Some of the most successful of these efforts occurred when activists were able to identify physical spaces around which to organize. While many self-identified homeless people and squatters had long been asserting their right to occupy public space and obtain safe and permanent housing – as the "homeless squatters" on Avenue C did in 1985 – homeless individuals and small bands of activists were often overwhelmed by the power of municipal bureaucracy and the city's growing interest in developing *in rem* properties; even with legal aid, many of these groups lost their battles, as the Avenue C group did. But in the face of the extreme placeless-ness that often characterized the homeless experience in late twentieth century New York City, protesting in, around, and for a physical place was often the most successful way to unite homeless New Yorkers in support of a common cause. The 1988 City Hall Park occupation was one such moment.

On June 1, 1988, 400 homeless people and their advocates gathered at City Hall Park in lower Manhattan. The group had convened annually for the past several years to hold a vigil in front of City Hall to commemorate and draw attention to the continued rise of homelessness in New York City. But that night, despite the pouring rain, several

homeless vigil-goers decided to remain in the park. As Larry Locke, a homeless man who quickly became the group's spokesperson, said, "They preferred being here rather than being in one of those so-called shelters the city runs that are infested with drugs and violence." As word spread of the protest, some members of the media began to refer to the encampment as "Kochville," a nod to the practice, during the Great Depression, of naming shantytowns "Hoovervilles" after President Hoover, who many blamed for the poverty that gripped the nation in the 1930s. But the group itself took the name Homeward Bound Community Services. They vowed to remain in the park until Mayor Koch met their demand: To have housing – ideally an *in rem* building – in which they could live independently and support one another. "An experimental project," Locke explained, "a client-run, client-directed alternative, instead of dehumanization." Another group member, Dennis Grant, criticized the city for misspending funds: "All that money they are putting into temporary housing should be used for permanent housing – affordable, permanent housing."[69]

The protest began just two months before the Tompkins Square Park riot, and just as the Koch administration was beginning to clear homeless people more forcefully and concertedly from public parks. June of 1988 was less than half a year after the city of New York released Joyce Brown from Bellevue Hospital after failing to prove that she could not make medical decisions for herself. It was also two years since Koch had begun to implement his 10-year housing plan. Despite the federal government's continued tightfistedness, the city of New York was indeed renovating more *in rem* properties and constructing new buildings to house homeless people – especially families with children.

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[69] Harold Jamison, "Homeless vow to continue vigil until city acts," *Amsterdam News,* July 9, 1988; Michel Marriott, "35 Homeless Protesters Stay Put in 'Kochville,'" *New York Times*, June 19, 1988.

But homelessness in New York City was still in the tens of thousands – a number that was easily doubled if people living with friends and family in overcrowded apartments were counted – and the primary recourse for most homeless people seeking help from the city was a bed in a large municipal shelter.

The city of New York almost immediately challenged Homeward Bound's presence in City Hall Park. Within days of the protest's beginning, the Parks Department denied the group's application for a permit to protest and attempted to clear their temporary shelters. The group fought back: With the assistance of New York Civil Liberties Union lawyer Norman Siegel (who had also represented Joyce Brown less than half a year earlier), Homeward Bound asserted their first amendment right to protest. Further, they urged the city to take their position seriously. As Locke explained, "We're a group of homeless people who have gotten together and have learned that we can work together in a positive way…We want to work together along with Mayor Koch to show that we can work together in a positive way to help ourselves."[70]

Homeless advocacy organizations and many New York citizens rallied around the protesters. As the protest stretched into autumn, local restaurants donated food and housed neighbors provided blankets and cold weather clothing to sustain the members of Homeward Bound. The protest also received support from prominent political leaders, including Jesse Jackson and then-Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins. In September, Dinkins took the stage at a rally in the park with Jackson and Homeward Bound leaders to express support for the protesters and to criticize the Koch

[70] Harold Jamison, "Homeless vow to continue vigil until city acts," *Amsterdam News,* July 9, 1988.

administration's homeless policies.[71] Dinkins had long advocated for a more humane, less shelter-based municipal homeless policy; in 1987, his office had published an influential critique of New York City's family homeless policy, *A Shelter Is Not A Home*.[72] He was also at the time planning to challenge Ed Koch in the 1989 Democratic mayoral primary; by 1988 Koch's treatment of the homeless had become a central component of Dinkins' campaign against the mayor.

Homeward Bound's population vacillated over the months, reaching at some points a low of 30 residents and at other points a high of 100. Despite the transience of its members, the park remained a constant. *Village Voice* reporter John Jiler called Homeward Bound "New York's newest community." Attempting to turn their ideas into action, the group governed through collective decision-making and a focus on mutual aid. As Jiler concluded, "It is a society with laws, values, bickering factions, and embattled leaders; a rough primer for democracy from which the squabbling Budget Makers in the big building [City Hall] might have learned much."[73] Despite continuous Parks Department raids that destroyed their shelters and possessions, Homeward Bound held fast in City Hall Park. The city agreed to respect the group's first amendment right to occupy the park in protest; but this did not extend to group members' possessions. As Parks Department commissioner Henry Stern told the New York Post after a November 1st raid, "This is not a storage area, not a flea market, not a warehouse, not a junkyard – it's a public park," explaining the city's decision to collect and discard the cardboard,

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[71] John Jiler, "Sleeping with the Mayor: Jesse Cometh," *Village Voice*, September 13, 1988; Michel Marriott, "Homeless in Park Sticking to a Cause," *New York Times*, November 28, 1988.

[72] David Dinkins, *A Shelter Is Not A Home: A Report of the Manhattan Borough President's Task Force on Housing for Homeless Families* (New York: Manhattan Borough President's Office, March 1987).

[73] John Jiler, "Sleeping with the Mayor: The Guests That Wouldn't Go Home," *Village Voice*, July 19, 1988.

blankets, and tarps that Homeward Bound members had used to keep warm and clean during the occupation. The raids seemed to strengthen the group's resolve; as one Homeward Bound member, William, said after the raid, "I'm not going nowhere." Some were clearly inspired by the resistance Lower East Siders had mounted at Tompkins Square Park the previous August. "If they want another Tompkins Square Park," said park resident Heavy Robinson, "I'm down for it."[74]

On Christmas Eve in 1988, Homeward Bound voluntarily disbanded. The group never mounted the Tompkins Square Park-style resistance that some members had threatened, but the group's legacy remained an influential touchstone for other homeless and housing advocates.[75] The City Hall Park protest was reminiscent of the direct, confrontational tactics used by the PDC in the South Bronx and by squatters in East New York. They, like many homeless and housing activists in New York City, had a pointed critique of the city's policies that provided shelters, but not homes, for un-housed New Yorkers.

Conclusion

The Koch administration's resolve to pressure Homeward Bound to leave City Hall Park was part of a larger trend: By 1988, both New York citizens and the municipal government had become increasingly intolerant of homeless encampments in public parks and other public spaces. After the Tompkins Square Park riot of August 6, 1988, the city of New York made multiple attempts to evict homeless residents from Tompkins

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[74] Larry Bivens, "City Raids Homeless Camp in Park," *Newsday*, November 2, 1988; Michel Marriott, "Belongings of Homeless Are Removed From Park," *New York Times*, November 2, 1988; Michel Marriott, "Homeless in Park Sticking to a Cause," *New York Times*, November 28, 1988; Jane McCarthy, "Squatters De-Benched from City Hall Park," *New York Post*, November 2, 1988.

[75] Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 288.

Square Park. Garbage trucks, Parks Department workers, and police officers would periodically arrive to collect and dispose of homeless residents' possessions, and to eject the homeless residents themselves from the park. Yet each time, within a few days or a few months, homeless residents and their supporters would re-enter the park and begin to rebuild their Tent City encampment. This cycle continued through 1989 and 1990, even as Mayor Koch left office and Mayor Dinkins entered it.

Neighborhood support for eviction grew stronger as citizen advocates and the municipal government began to more overtly connect the presence of homeless people in Tompkins Square Park to the other types of disorder, including petty crime and drug dealing.[76] Yet as Ronald Kuby, an attorney, member of the Tompkins Square Legal Defense Committee, and Lower East Side resident, put it, accusations that the homeless engaged in drug dealing "was a cruel canard fed to a community legitimately concerned about drugs."[77] Indeed, the city presented little evidence that drug dealing was connected to Tompkins Square Park's Tent City, or that it was reduced by the encampment's removal. But many Lower East Side residents (and New Yorkers, more generally) increasingly saw the homeless as a physical embodiment of the social disorder that plagued their city. They complained not only of drug use in the parks, but of panhandling, street peddling, and the use of park lawns as a restroom by the homeless and other park frequenters. Their concerns were not illegitimate; but often, proposed solutions focused more on removing the identified problems rather than addressing the underlying issues that caused those problems. For instance, few citizens who complained about the homeless urinating and defecating on park lawns noted that the city locked all of

[76] This is one of Vitale's central arguments in *City of Disorder*.

[77] Ronald L. Kuby, "Bullying Tompkins Homeless," *Amsterdam News*, March 10, 1990.

Tompkins Square Park's restroom facilities from 4 p.m. until the early morning. So, too, was the broader crisis of housing often obscured in efforts to "give the park back to the people it belongs to."[78]

After the riot, Ron Casanova expanded his leadership role in Tent City. He was one of the primary proponents among park residents for uniting with local activist squatters, and participated in the controversial 1989-1990 occupation of the long-abandoned Public School 105 building. He and other activists hoped to turn the building into a residence and community center, and they re-named it the Alphabet City (or ABC) Community Center. P.S. 105 was also, however, on the growing list of buildings that the city had slated for development into low-income housing. The controversy that ensued over control of the building was one of many instances that pitted neighborhood residents against each other. The squatters who took over the building did so in response, they claimed, to the ongoing low-income housing crisis in the neighborhood. In a flier entitled, "We Aren't Leaving," a group calling itself the A.B.C. Occupational Group listed demands that included the re-opening of Tent City in Tompkins Square Park, as well as a "moratorium on all evictions on squats in the Lower East Side."[79]

But other housing activists understood the episode differently. The Joint Planning Council, a coalition of New York City organizations that sought to collaborate with the city to preserve and develop housing on the Lower East Side, were especially incensed by the activists. Elaine Chan, the JPC's Budget Coordinator, wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* that the squatters' actions were "irresponsible and disruptive." Those who

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[78] "I Want This Park Back," *New York Times*, July 8, 1989; see also "Who Rules the Park?" *New York Times*, March 16, 1989.

[79] "ABC – WE AREN'T LEAVING," Box 1, Folder 3, Jerry "The Peddler" Wade Collection, Squatters' Rights Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

took over P.S. 105, she wrote, were "not representative of the community." She concluded, "Those who are not a part of the solution are part of the problem."[80] Chan was not the only person unable to recognize that perhaps multiple solutions existed to the complex problem of creating affordable housing in a gentrifying neighborhood. Squatters, too, were often unwilling to work with the JPC or accept the city's efforts to create affordable housing. No doubt many squatters had political agendas that were incompatible with those who sought to work with the city to determine the neighborhood's future; but equally true was that the Koch administration's determination to sell the majority of its *in rem* stock to private developers pitted like-minded people against each other over the increasingly scarce resource of affordable housing. Ron Casanova recognized the damage these divisions over individual properties created. As he wrote in his memoir, "Looking back, I see we made a mistake by not emphasizing to the media over and over and over that the issue was not P.S. 105 or Tompkins Square Park; the issue was poverty and homelessness."[81]

In 1991, Mayor David Dinkins ordered Tompkins Square Park cleared and closed. Dinkins had won the 1989 mayoral election in part on the promise to devise a more humane approach to sheltering homeless New Yorkers. In 1990, he convened the Cuomo Commission (led by future New York governor Andrew Cuomo) to investigate homelessness in New York City; but the commission's report did not lead to many substantive changes in the system of shelter and service provision or housing. Citizens resisted Dinkins' plan to construct smaller homeless shelters across all five boroughs of

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[80] Elaine Chan, "Lower East Side Squatters Block Community Housing Projects," *New York Times*, November 29, 1989.

[81] Casanova, 200.

New York City to replace the large municipal shelters that Koch had opened.[82] And homeless and housing activists continued to critique the city's lack of commitment to creating affordable housing in place of shelters. Dinkins' approach to housing and homelessness ultimately did not vary significantly from Koch's, and New Yorkers became increasingly frustrated during the Dinkins years at the disorder that seemed to be growing rather than receding on the streets of the city.

Ultimately, homelessness and urban disorder were irrevocably connected, and the Dinkins administration – like the Koch administration before it – seemed to be failing at solving either problem. After evicting forty homeless people from the sidewalk outside a vacant, city-owned convention center in June of 1991, the city had erected a snack stand and picnic tables which local resident Herbert Oppenheimer reported was soon "deep in litter." The city had not solved any problem, Oppenheimer argued in a letter to the *New York Times*. "The food sheds cannot last. The litter will persist. The failure of city policy to save our streets and shelter our homeless will also remain."[83]

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[82] Todd S. Purdum, "Dinkins to Defer Plans to Scatter Homeless Shelters Across the City," *New York Times*, December 10, 1991.

[83] Herbert B. Oppenheimer, "Just the Rats," *New York Times,* August 19, 1991.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Homeless Crisis

My biography is, in some small way, a part of this history. I was born in the Bronx and spent the early years of my childhood there before moving with my family to Montclair, New Jersey in 1987. My family is a part of the New York City diaspora that followed historic paths into and out of the city over the course of the twentieth century: My great grandparents emigrated to New York City from Eastern Europe. Their Brooklyn-born children all decamped for Long Island in the 1950s, part of the great urban exodus that historians call "white flight." My parents, who had been raised primarily in the suburbs, were among the first wave of suburban children to return to the city their parents had left, a trend that would become increasingly popular in the 1980s. I followed my family's tracks into and out of the city throughout my childhood and teenage years, traveling there for visits with family and friends, for trips to restaurants and the theater, and, as I got older, for the sheer joy of walking its crowded streets. In 2000, following the increasingly well-trod path of young, white, middle- and upper-class suburban-raised people into the city, I became a student at Barnard College – at Broadway and 116th Street in Manhattan – and lived and worked in the city until the middle of 2005, when I left to attend graduate school.

The homeless crisis informed my experience of New York City from a very early age. "Going into the city" – the phrase we most often used to describe our travels to Manhattan – was a fairly regular occurrence. We would arrive from New Jersey via the Port Authority Bus Terminal, at 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue, or we would take the commuter train to Pennsylvania Station, at 33rd Street between Seventh and Eight Avenues. Un-housed people regularly took shelter in both of those terminals, and many

others passed their days (and sometimes nights) on the streets of the surrounding neighborhood. My mother recalled that once as we walked through Midtown Manhattan, when I was five or six years old, I asked,

"Why are those people laying on the ground, Mommy?"

"Because they don't have anyplace to live," my mother replied.

For a time after that, I no longer wanted to go into the city. "I don't think you were scared, exactly, but…" My mother searched for a word to characterize my sentiments, but failed to find one. Looking back now, I do remember feeling scared. There was something profoundly unsettling about seeing people in tattered clothes, sleeping on dirty sidewalks. There was something unsettling, as well, about how most passersby – including the adults with whom I traveled – averted their eyes and veered around these people, brushing past their outstretched hands or depositing coins into them and moving forward in one fluid motion. These encounters were often rife with unspoken tension, as people in a densely crowded and fast-paced neighborhood quickly calculated if and how to approach and respond to one another across divides of age, race, gender, health and disability status, and social class that even under less extreme circumstances may have seemed vast. Seeing people sleeping on sidewalks shocked and frightened me, and the palpable tension between homeless and non-homeless people made me profoundly uncomfortable, and confirmed my belief that there was in fact something to fear about these encounters. I didn't want to experience it.

It was the visibility of un-housed people on the streets of New York that first made me aware of homelessness, and shaped my understanding of it. I don't think I'd previously known that not having a place to live was a possibility in one's life: As a child

of middle-class parents growing up in the suburbs, I had had few opportunities outside of my city trips to consider such a thing. Of course, it is possible that I did encounter other homeless people when I was growing up, but didn't know that they were homeless. I attended public schools with economically and racially diverse student bodies, and Montclair in the 1980s and 1990s contained both wealth and poverty. How many of my classmates or neighbors lacked a permanent place to live? If any of them were homeless, it was not readily apparent. To me – as, I suspect, to many people who lived in and around New York City in the 1980s and 1990s – homelessness was embodied in the people we saw laying on the ground.

When I moved to New York City in 2000, I continued to recognize the same tension that I had first noticed as a child. The city had changed dramatically in the intervening years, becoming wealthier and more corporatized. This was especially true since the beginning of Rudy Giuliani's mayoralty in 1994. Homelessness had not decreased significantly since the 1980s – and the income gap between rich and poor New Yorkers continued to widen – but the Giuliani administration had worked to rid the streets of many of the visible signs of poverty and urban disorder, especially in tourist-centric neighborhoods like Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. Police officers regularly rousted people who were sleeping on sidewalks and in parks and public transportation terminals. But visible homelessness was far from hidden in most parts of Manhattan: Lack of shelter was a continued reality for many New Yorkers, and the presence of un-housed people was a reality that housed residents negotiated in a variety of ways.

Despite having spent many hours as a teenager and young adult volunteering with homeless outreach organizations in New York and New Jersey, I still often felt at a loss for how to respond to the people I encountered in the city's public spaces. One particular incident stands out in my memory: My friend and I were riding a crowded subway train on a weekend night when a woman entered the car, loudly identified herself as homeless, and began walking the length of the car asking passengers for spare change. Everyone averted their eyes; nobody, as far as I could tell, handed her money or acknowledged her.

"I'm sick!" she yelled. "I need money for my medication! Won't somebody help me?"

As she spoke, she rattled her near-empty plastic pill bottle for emphasis, but to no avail. By the time she reached the end of the car where my friend and I sat, she was noticeably frustrated. As we gazed intently at our feet, she planted herself in front of us.

"Girls! Girls, help me!" she implored.

We continued to look down.

"Look at me!" she yelled.

We looked. She was small and thin. Her hair was dark grey. Her face was tense.

"I'm sorry," we both muttered. The woman eventually walked on in frustration. My friend and I got off the train at the next stop, saying nothing to each other about the incident, though we were clearly both shaken by the women's pleas and by our own reactions.

Why did neither of us offer her the change that we most likely had? Why didn't we – or anyone else on the train – want to interact with her, or even to look at her? Perhaps part of it was a sense of fatigue, or inevitability, or helplessness: This person was

not the first person to pass through a subway car asking for – futilely demanding – acknowledgement and help, and she would not be the last. Barely a day went by in New York City without such an encounter. Perhaps we were informed by a misguided instinct of self-preservation when faced with a desperate, confrontational person. Or perhaps we were governed by the mostly unspoken but clearly present idea that there were acceptable ways to help the homeless, and unacceptable ways. The New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority and Mayors Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani had, for years, discouraged New Yorkers from donating to panhandlers in an effort to deter public begging. The homeless advocacy organizations with which I volunteered reinforced this stance, and provided further justification for it. As one team leader remarked to a group of volunteers at a training session, "You never know what they'll use your money for." The idea that begging was a nuisance that must be discouraged, or that homeless people would spend "our" money irresponsibly, and were therefore undeserving of it, informed our silence that night, and demonstrate the complex factors that caused me – like many New Yorkers – to react in varying and often inconsistent ways to the people we saw around us. Homelessness was a social justice issue that we were invested in solving; but it was also a public problem that centered around our own sense of discomfort, as much (or more) as it did the needs of the people we encountered.

Indeed, I too am a product of the New York homeless crisis that I have examined in this discussion. My own understandings of poverty and urban space were fundamentally shaped by the crisis and the centrality of the bodies of homeless people within it. Like so many others, I experienced the same mixture of sympathy and (even unconsciously) disgust towards the visibly un-housed people whose presence affected my

experiences of living in New York. My youthful confusion at seeing people sleeping on the sidewalks and my later inability to respond to pleas from a person on the subway are evidence of the ambivalence that formed the core of the homeless crisis. To this day, I struggle with this ambivalence and how it affects my understanding of the city and its people.

Like my own complex memories, the embodied discourses that created and fueled the 1980s homeless crisis remained significant for New Yorkers long after the crisis had supposedly receded from the public spotlight. After the 1980s, incidences of homelessness did not lessen, but the idea that homelessness was a crisis changed. Anthony Marcus argues that the homeless crisis lasted from 1983 until 1993, when the public spotlight on homelessness faded significantly.[382] But the 1980s shaped popular understandings of poverty, housing loss, and the group called "the homeless" going forward. As New Yorkers debated who was "truly homeless" throughout the 1980s, they were also collectively forming an image of "the homeless" informed by their encounters with street people, and media, government, and scholarly representations. The homeless were – in the popular stereotype – dirty, disheveled, and possibly incoherent. They were often Black. They were always outdoors. Images of "the homeless" in magazines and newspapers, on the covers of books and reports, and in television shows and movies both reinforced and worked to construct this stereotype, which had, by the 1980s, become legible not just in New York City but across the country.

In 1987, the popular CBS television show *Kate and Allie* aired a special episode entitled "Brother Can You Spare A Dime?" *Kate and Allie* starred Susan Saint James and

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[382] Marcus, *Where Have All the Homeless Gone?* 2.

Jane Curtin as, respectively, Kate and Allie, two divorced, middle-class women who live together and raise their children together in New York City. In the episode, Allie accidentally leaves her purse in a taxicab that quickly drives off. Far from home and without any money, Allie decides to walk from Columbia University in northern Manhattan back to her home in Greenwich Village – a distance of over 100 blocks. Along the way, she becomes increasingly tired, dirty, and incoherent. Her loafers become scuffed; she begins talking to herself; a person digging through a trash can spills wine on Allie's shirt; a woman she approaches to ask for spare change cries, "Get away from me or I'll call a policeman!" Allie has effectively become a homeless person. Yet the episode never states this outright: Rather, it relies upon the visual cues of Allie's appearance (and onlookers' reactions to it), her behavior, and the interactions she has with others to imply it. By 1987, the writers of *Kate and Allie* clearly (and correctly) assumed that its national audience would know that Allie looked and acted like a homeless person, without ever having to explicitly state it.[383]

The image of the "street person" as the typical homeless person persisted into the twenty-first century. Homeless families had, since the 1980s, comprised the majority of New York City's overall shelter population; but many reporters and social service workers described family homelessness as a "new" phenomenon following the 2008 economic recession. In 2010, National Public Radio declared homeless families the "new face of homelessness," suggesting that their rise was a divergence from previous trends.[384] While homelessness among families did indeed rise after 2008, it had not been

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[383] "Brother Can You Spare A Dime?" *Kate and Allie*, October 19, 1987.

[384] "New Face of Homelessness: The American Family," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, December 25, 2010. Media outlets around the country had similar stories after 2008. "In the Cold," *New*

low in any meaningful sense since the early 1980s.[385] What did change was the image of who the homeless were. After the home mortgage crisis that coincided with the national recession, more families were losing homes to foreclosure. While as many as 40 percent of the people affected by home foreclosures were renters who faced eviction from foreclosed properties, the other 60 percent were people who had grasped (however tenuously) the American dream of home ownership before falling victim to the unregulated mortgage market through which they had obtained their home loans.[386] Many of these people were middle class, and lived not in the inner city but in the suburbs. While they never made up as large a percentage of homeless families as media representations might have portrayed, they did in fact increase and their presence was shocking to many. They represented the failure of the American dream; and despite advocates' assertions since the early 1980s that "the homeless are just like you and me," pictures of white, suburban, formerly middle-class Americans made that seem far more true for many observers.[387]

The home foreclosure crisis also brought about the rise of a phenomenon that had largely been dormant in the United States since the 1980s: squatting. Across the country, tens of thousands of bank-foreclosed homes stood vacant, even as homelessness rose.

York Times, January 1, 2009; Bennett Hall, "The New Face of Homelessness," *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, November 24, 2013; Kimberly Wiggins, "New Face of Homelessness in America," *myfoxorlando.com*, November 4, 2013.

[385] Wendy Koch, "Homeless numbers 'alarming,'" *USA Today*, October 22, 2008. For data on New York City municipal shelter statistics from 1983 through 2014, see "New York City Homeless Municipal Shelter Population, 1983-Present," Coalition for the Homeless, http://coalhome.3cdn.net/0178751adf01c4b465_fom6ivqne.pdf.

[386] "Renters in Foreclosure Fact Sheet," National Low Income Housing Coalition, http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/RIF_FS.pdf.

[387] Diane Cardwell, "The Homeless Are Wherever Jobs Vanish," *New York Times*, December 13, 2009.

Homeless activist groups in Miami, Philadelphia, and Minnesota organized efforts to install homeless people in vacant houses; in those cities and others across the country, individuals also took matters into their own hands, staying on illegally after a bank had evicted them from their home, or moving into a different vacant house.[388] Few of these activities were based in New York City, where the real estate market had continued its upward climb since the 1980s. During periods of economic recession, rents and home prices did dip, but vacancies remained rare and foreclosures rarely stood unoccupied for long. The face of squatting – like the face of homelessness – therefore changed in the twenty-first century.

In an opinion piece for *Newsday*, the Long Island, New York-based daily newspaper, scholar Nicolaus Mills articulated this sentiment particularly clearly. "These days," wrote Mills in 2012, "poverty is less and less a remote phenomenon." Suburban poverty had risen, Mills noted, even as the overall population in the suburban United States remained static. Employed people were increasingly at risk of becoming homeless. The people Mills observed on the streets of New York City seemed different, too. One woman he saw frequently on Manhattan's Upper West Side was "tastefully dressed. Her gray hair is clean. She doesn't talk to herself. She is white…It is hard to imagine that she became homeless through her own fault." Mills contrasted this woman to the African American homeless men who, in his observation, used to be the primary people begging for change in public. As he noted, the woman received many more dollar bills from passersby than did the men of the past. This observation led Mills to reflect: perhaps the better treatment the homeless woman received "says something terrible about the way we

[388] Tristram Korten, "Foreclosure Nation: Squatter or Pioneers?" *Mother Jones* (May/June 2008); John Leland, "With Advocates' Help, More Squatters Calling Foreclosures Home," *New York Times*, April 10, 2009.

have in the past stereotyped homelessness." He characterized the attitudes shaping New Yorkers' sympathy for this white, older woman as "quiet racism" against African American men, and urged readers to examine their assumptions about poverty, sympathy, and worthiness.[389]

Indeed, the predominance of African American men amongst the visible homeless of New York and other cities in the 1980s and 1990s most informed the public's understanding of what homelessness was. Few observers stated this as clearly as did Mills. But the common refrain on the "new face of homelessness" after 2008 is telling – it reveals that, even as an increasingly diverse group of people could not afford housing in the United States, homelessness long continued to be defined by the image of a relatively small subset of homeless individuals. Margaret Miles, who directed a homeless portrait project in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2014, observed that people's reactions to the photographs was often to remark, "They don't look homeless."[390] The image of the homeless that was constructed in the 1980s – one built on both sympathy and disgust – continued to inform debates around and representations of homeless people into the twenty-first century. The 1980s were the decade when homelessness became a crisis. In the struggles over homelessness in the 1980s, the idea of the homeless that the government, the media, activists, and citizens debated would have profound implications for the future of homelessness in America.

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[389] Nicolaus Mills, "The New Face of Homelessness," *Newsday*, July 19, 2012.

[390] Rebecca J. Rosen, "The Lives of America's Homeless," *Citylab*, June 5, 2014, http://www.citylab.com/housing/2014/06/the-lives-of-americas-homeless/372266/.

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