

Harlem's Rent Strike and Rat War: Representation, Housing Access and Tenant Resistance in New York, 1958-1964

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Housing Access

On December 30, 1963, photographers patiently awaited the arrival of tenants from two Harlem tenements scheduled to appear in Manhattan Civil Court on charges of rent non-payment. Since the chilly early morning hours, photographers had mulled around outside the civil courthouse on Centre Street, moving cameras from one shoulder to the other, lighting and extinguishing cigarettes. The press had been tipped off by strike leaders that they would smuggle dead rats into the courtroom to serve as both symbol and evidence of what the media liked to call their "sub-human" living conditions. These defendants represented thirteen families on 117th Street who had been withholding rent in protest of the their buildings' combined 129 building violations, pointing to "dark and littered" hallways, "crumbly" ceilings, and broken windows, water, and heat. But what photographers waited to capture in black and white were the "rats as big as cats" that plagued the dilapidated buildings. "They so big they can open up your refrigerator without you!" reported one tenant.¹

Finally, at 11:30 am, the tenants waded through the river of television and newspaper cameras and removed three dead rodents from a milk container, a paper bag, and a newspaper. Flash bulbs exploded. As he displayed the enormous dead rat he had brought from home, tenant William D. Anderson told a *New York Amsterdam News* reporter, "This is the only way to get action from

the property owners who don't care anything about the tenants."² The grotesque statement made by the rat-brandishing rent strikers was, as William Anderson told the reporters, an eleventh-hour stab at the visibility tenants were consistently denied.

These tenants' demands for heat, electricity, plumbing, extermination, and other basic housing needs had long been ignored by both property owners and city agencies. The rent strike was the culmination of more than a decade of tenant organizing efforts by the Community Council on Housing (CCH) (formerly the Lower Harlem Tenants Council) and the civil rights and citizen groups that came to its aid. Despite early courtroom victories, including the legalization of the rent strike, tenants won only the privilege of staying in their decrepit apartments while paying money to the courts instead of to their negligent landlords. Still, their organizing efforts established community networks and garnered public awareness for the low-income housing crisis in New York City.³

I argue here that the rent strike was motivated by not just slum conditions, but also, more importantly, the exclusion of nonwhite, low-income families from a very short supply of safe, affordable housing. This exclusion was, in part, accomplished deliberately and covertly through a confidential tenant selection program, which the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) ironically called "Open Occupancy." This program, first implemented in 1958, gave public housing priority to white applicants while thousands of black families, displaced by urban renewal and living in substandard conditions, lingered on waiting lists. There were, of course, political reasons behind this. State and federal support for public housing had waned over the years as it became predominantly black, and the Housing Authority claimed the program was aimed at the "integration" that officials thought was necessary if support for public housing was to continue. The result was not integration, but the active recruitment of white tenants (often elderly individuals), while black families sent letters to city authorities and to editors of the black press—some even placing personal phone calls to the mayor—in hopes of gaining access to the city's short supply of public housing.

This article argues that the rent strike, often understood as an act of consumer resistance against "slumlords," was actually a contestation over residential space, targeted at the city and state government as much as the absentee property owners, and motivated not just by housing conditions, but also—and more fundamentally—by a lack of access to low-income public housing. After narrating and analyzing both the Open Occupancy program, the city's low-income housing crisis, and the rent strikes of 1964-1965, I then turn to cultural and racial politics of representation by examining the city's response to the rent strikes, in the form of Mayor Wagner's 1964 "Million Dollar War on Rats." I argue that this response distracted from basic issues of housing access and discrimination, isolating the rent strike as a struggle between landlords and tenants, and that the visual and verbal language used by the mainstream press to

address this “rat” problem—this “War on rats”—drew shocking analogies between low-income tenants and rat infestations, at the same time as striking tenants wielded this symbol of the rat to call attention to their housing conditions and the need for more public housing.

More fundamentally, this article seeks to illuminate the cultural and representational underpinnings of structural discrimination. It locates the intersection of housing policy, an urban protest movement, and representation. By tracing the struggle for housing access through both the archival paper trail and representations in the mainstream and black press, it picks up, from one end, where social science often leaves off, while simultaneously picking up, from the other end, where cultural analysis often ends. These cultural and political events were not unique to Harlem, but the extensive press and archival records on New York City provide a unique opportunity to compare the black to the mainstream press. Harlem's location in a cultural and political hub elevated its images and narratives to a level of national awareness at which tenant conditions in, for example, New Haven, CT—where a series of rent strikes and extermination campaigns around the same time the same time—were never publicized. Examining the representational framework of housing discrimination and the culturally coded racist assumptions of housing policy and urban geography enables us to reconsider the historical relationship between housing, race, and the state.

Despite the connections between the rent strike and the fight for access to public housing suggested by the testimonies of countless letters to the editors of the black press, and by the two movements' common time and place, the histories of housing discrimination and tenant mobilization in New York City seldom make it onto the same pages. The Harlem rent strike of 1963 and 1964 is not mentioned in Judith Saltman's account of open housing as a social movement. Histories of public housing, such as Leonard Freedman's *Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty* (1969), also neglect to mention the tenant protests and rent strikes that captured front-page headlines for most of that winter.

Meanwhile, the Housing Authority's discriminatory tenant selection practices are not mentioned in Michael Lipsky's exhaustive account of the rent strikes and related tenant protests. Nor are they mentioned in Ronald Lawson's 1986 history of the tenant movement, Christopher Mele's *Selling the Lower East Side*, or the accounts of the rent strikes in Meier and Rudwick's 1973 history of the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE).⁴ However, it was the lack of decent, low-income housing in New York City during the fifties and sixties—compounded by the discriminatory tenant selection practices of the NYCHA—that ultimately laid the foundation for tenant mobilization.⁵

When the rent strike is recorded and remembered as strictly a battle against the slumlords, it is intellectually amputated from its role in the larger social movement for housing access and civil rights. The academic isolation of the rent strike narrative frames the movement as a fight against rats and broken

radiators, rather than exposing its significance as an explosion of discontent from a population that had been summarily and officially denied the freedom to live in a safe, clean home. Because they were conceptually identified by the city's power structure and its white, mainstream press (specifically the *New York Times* and such popular news magazines as *Look* and *Life*) more closely with rats than with humans, nonwhite, low-income tenants found their housing options severely limited. City officials and mainstream media outlets cast the "housing crisis" as an issue of sheer quantity—that there simply were not enough housing units available. In reality, there were not enough low-income units for the fast growing number of nonwhite low-income tenants in need of a home. It's not that construction was lagging behind demand, but rather that demolition of low-income units was followed by the construction of middle-income units. New York City government and Housing Authority officials faced a crisis of their own very deliberate making.

At the time of the strike, only 12 percent of the city's welfare recipients lived in public housing.⁶ The rest occupied the city's most dilapidated and dangerous buildings, many of which had long since been declared unlivable under the 1901 Tenement House Act. Tenants struck against the slumlords and the city because it was their only recourse, waging their battle at the same moment that the open housing movement took on discriminatory practices in real estate, and the State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD) investigated the New York City Housing Authority's discriminatory tenant selection procedures.

The desperate shortage of New York's low-income housing that trapped the rent strikers of 1963 in "squalid firetraps" had its origins in the preceding decades. Looking back to 1953, just as renewal programs began to displace many of the city's poorest families, congress proposed the complete elimination of public housing funds. The initiative failed, but funding was scaled back for the next three years while demand increased dramatically. Title I funds, established by the Housing Act of 1949, increasingly funded housing developments for the middle class.⁷ Waves of post-war housing policies through the early-1950s aided returning GIs and upwardly mobile white immigrant groups in securing housing, both private and public, while expenditures on low-income housing—quickly becoming the accommodations of nonwhites in the inner cities—continued to dwindle.⁸ Between 1945 and 1955, citywide building rates slowed to a crawl as federal money and political support buttressed the suburban growth that followed World War II. The 1944 city vacancy rate of 16 percent dropped in the next ten years to less than one percent.⁹

At this same time, many extremely dangerous, unlivable structures in white ethnic neighborhoods were excluded from slum clearance initiatives while "Negro removal," to borrow a term from comedian Dick Gregory, pushed hundreds of thousands of families in black neighborhoods out of their homes, making way for middle-class and luxury buildings. For example, Anna Levkulic died on May 18, 1957 when her home on Pitt Street on the Lower East Side collapsed

on top of her. Her white neighborhood was not marked for clearance, while tenants were driven out of black parts of Gramercy Park and the Riverside-Amsterdam area, despite the livability of the structures.¹⁰ Race, not dilapidation, marked an area as blighted.

In February 1960, the mayor's office announced it planned to "take over" one-room housing units. The mayor's spokesperson said that it was these very units that housed the families "responsible for most of the city's crime and social problems." These were families who had been excluded from public housing, the *Times* reported, because they were "felons, prostitutes, narcotics addicts, alcoholics, promiscuous persons, the financially irresponsible, and dirty housekeepers."¹¹ In the following months, roominghouse operators went on the defensive, claiming they were being made into "scapegoats" for a "sociological problem" that the city government couldn't seem to solve. The New York City Housing Authority planned to seize 125 buildings and convert "8500 dingy rooms into 2000 comfortable apartments."¹² The problem with that plan was that these were to be 2000 apartments that the former inhabitants of those 8500 dingy rooms could not afford.

New York City's housing law clearly stated that any displaced person had the "right to be relocated into safe, sanitary quarters that are within his means," but, as Mrs. Ulysses Johnson could have testified, that was not happening. Johnson and her five children were among three hundred black tenants frozen out of the Hotel Marie in the winter of 1960.¹³ The Johnsons—like the other families living in the Hotel Marie's single-room units, paying an average of \$25 a week—were given six days to "relocate." The pipes then went silent and cold set in. The Department of Health told Mrs. Johnson that they could not mandate the restoration of heat to a "legally vacated building." She called the Department of Welfare. They said they could only help the Hotel Marie tenants "after they had found another place to live." With vacancy rates hovering below one percent and applications by black families to public housing encountering repeated denials, this did not seem likely.¹⁴ So the Johnsons and the other "felons, prostitutes, narcotics addicts, alcoholics, promiscuous persons, the financially irresponsible, and dirty housekeepers" of the Hotel Marie were left to fend for themselves.

Facing considerable pressure by state and federal authorities to "tear down the slums," Mayor Wagner appealed to the state for more public housing funds. Nothing could be torn down, he insisted, until the 200,000 "slum dwellers" on the public housing waiting list had someplace to go.¹⁵ This wasn't news to mothers like Kay Rivera who, by 1968, had spent 12 years waiting for public housing.¹⁶ The New York City Housing Authority did not make matters better for itself when it initiated its confidential "Open Occupancy" program in February of 1959.¹⁷ Prioritizing white applicants in one-third of the city's low-income units at a time during which displacement of nonwhite families sent hundreds of thousands in search of public housing meant that the largest demographic from the

applicant pool competed for a very small number of housing units. When former employee Bernard Roscho outed the plan to *The New Leader* in July of 1960, he articulated the question that would be on the minds of countless denied public housing applicants as they read about his disclosure in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Times*, or the *Tribune*. “Considering the acute shortage of low-rent housing for nonwhite families and the effect of this shortage on slum clearance,” Roscho asked, “to what extent is it desirable to divert part of this housing supply in order to serve a different social purpose?”¹⁸

As Roscho pointed out, the overall result of the city’s tenant selection policy was a “sharp reduction” in the number of apartments available to nonwhites—the very group most desperately in need of low-income public housing. The city was, in fact, violating both state and city anti-bias laws, including a stipulation that preference for state-subsidized housing be given to those displaced by its construction or to those already living within a one mile radius of a development. Federal law also stated automatic priority for urban renewal displacees. Under the Authority’s “Open Occupancy” program, the only applicants given priority were white applicants.¹⁹ So while Mrs. Ulysses Johnson and her five children—and thousands like them—found themselves stuck on waiting lists and shuffling from one city agency to the other, a white widower named Joseph Monti posed for a photograph in his brand new apartment and told the *New York Times*, “It’s the best break I ever got in my life!” Monti was one of nearly 2600 “Chelsea Exiles” displaced from their apartments by the construction of a middle-income housing project in the summer of 1959. After his relocation, he paid less than \$34 a month for a clean, new, low-income unit operated by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).²⁰

Whether they sought extermination, repairs, or relocation, landlords and city agencies consistently ignored the demands of Harlem’s low-income tenants. In a desperate letter to the editor, Constance Willie, a black welfare mother of two, told the *New York Amsterdam News* that she had already asked the “mayor, the governor, and the president” to help her get into public housing since finding out her building was to be demolished.²¹ Her letter, sent in February of 1964 during the height of rent strike fury, reflects the hopeless situation of slum tenants and the crucial role that public housing access played in fanning the flames of tenant unrest.

New York’s black tenants turned to the editorial pages of the black press to voice grievances that city agencies refused to hear. Letter after letter appealed to the readership of the *New York Amsterdam News* in the years leading up to the rent strike. The city’s largest-circulation black newspaper chronicled Harlem’s housing access struggle and its relationship to the tenant movement that ensued. In September of 1960, Bertha Fisher sent the paper a poem she called “Housing Gripes.” “\$90 rent for poor conditions, rats, no heat, HW, asks for help but can’t get it. Try for the new apartments, they want the history of your life. Why bother to get in? You are not able to pay the price.”²² Fisher’s four lines read like four

walls trapping Harlem's struggling tenants, encapsulating both the grievances and the limitations facing those who would join the rent strike movement in the years to follow.

Mary Dale, a deaf and partially blind welfare mother of six, hoped to find an apartment near public transportation so she could get to and from church. When she wrote her letter in September 1962, she had been on the housing authority's waiting list for six years.²³ The Ashford family explained in their May 1962 letter that they had been trying since 1959 to get into a housing project, all the while forced to live in one electricity-free room with their three children.²⁴ Mrs. E. McMichael also applied to the NYCHA and wrote to the mayor before sending her letter off to the paper.²⁵ She and her husband, a stock clerk at Key food store making \$65 a week, lived in one room with her mother-in-law and their two children. All five slept in one bed. When she wrote to the *Amsterdam News* in July 1962 to ask if they would "speak to someone at the housing authority" for her, she had been looking for a place to live since early spring.²⁶

Another tenant, Gladys Jackson, had a plea more direct and an outrage more explicit. The mother of six was "put out on the street" in October of 1961. A month later, after a denied application to the NYCHA and a phone call to the mayor, she wrote to the *Amsterdam News*. "I am a citizen. I vote every year. I take good care of my children. I am not on welfare. I am employed by the city in the Department of Hospitals, so therefore, you know I pay my taxes. They tell you on t.v. and on the radio to let them know if you need help. Of course that is just for the vote."²⁷ Ms. Jackson's anger, like her understanding of her own struggle for a safe, clean, permanent home, reached far beyond the terms of crumbling walls and enormous rats by which the rent strikes are commonly remembered.

Rent Strike

On Tuesday, October 29, 1963, just days before Harlem's first organized tenants on 117th Street announced their plans to withhold rent, New York State Senator Jerome L. Wilson addressed the Temporary State Commission on Low Income Housing, proclaiming that he could fill the 427 new public housing units that the state had authorized over the past three years by simply "standing on an East Harlem street corner for a single weekend."²⁸ Every one of the applications, he explained, would come from "tenement homes that would make you either want to weep, or vomit, or both," homes much like those of the rent strikers who lived in the very buildings Wilson described. His statements to the commission clearly lay out the connection between the conditions of the slums and the shortage of low-income public housing. If it was not the rent strikers of whom he spoke, it was certainly their friends, neighbors, and families.²⁹

Much of the opposition to low-income housing, Wilson said, came from the notion that poor tenants were unsanitary. The practice of tossing garbage out

the windows of tenement buildings, often called “air mail,” was one reason for this perception. However, as Wilson explained to the commission, the tenants often had no other choice. Many tenements had no supers; most had no trash pickup or even garbage cans. “You would think if you paid \$18 a week for two and a half rotting rooms, you would at least get your garbage picked up or have some place to put it. But you don’t. There is little choice but ‘air mail.’”

He called on the commissioners to increase the supply of low-income public housing and take control of the tenements that continued to go without repair, water, heat, or supervision. He testified that he and his Harlem colleagues received more than 5000 requests annually from constituents looking for public housing, and those, he reminded, were just the ones who wrote to city officials and politicians. “Sometimes it seems like every other person in much of my district is walking around with a public housing application in his pocket,” although, he reported, that there were twelve public housing projects in his district.³⁰ Black tenants had very limited access to the units in these twelve projects, and the “Open Occupancy” tenant selection program only exacerbated that problem. These tenants were forced to remain in their overcrowded, substandard units and strike for improvements, public awareness, and government action.

Although the Harlem rent strike is often remembered as an element of the racial torment leading up to the summer riots of 1964, the strike actually began in 1958-1959. In that winter a handful of cold, angry tenants, with the help of a community organization called the Lower Harlem Tenants Council, organized to demand that the city restore their heat and hot water. They broadened their demands to include other basic and legally required repairs, and eventually coordinated the withholding of rent in fifteen of Harlem’s worst tenement buildings. This early strike failed to gain widespread media attention, and it waned as the weather grew warmer. As renewal initiatives accelerated and the housing shortage worsened, withholding rent seemed a risky avenue of protest. Few dared to tempt eviction. Nonetheless, the Lower Harlem Tenants Council remained active, providing support for low-income tenants throughout Harlem.

The following summer, in July of 1960, the Lower Harlem Tenants Council represented sixteen families that had been evicted from a rooming house on 112th Street. The landlord issued eviction orders to comply with a new law prohibiting families from living in single room units, sending these sixteen families with a total of 83 children out on the street. Many of the families were neglected welfare clients who had fallen through the cracks of a faulty system. In response to pressure from the Tenants Council, acting mayor Abe Stark graciously assured the tenants that they would “not be put out on the sidewalk at least until Monday.”³¹ Fifteen adults and 30 children, organized by a Tenants Council leader named Jesse Gray, protested at City Hall to demand that officials take responsibility for the families they had, indeed, “put on the sidewalk.”³²

The movement slowly gained momentum over the next few years. Frequent public protests increased the visibility of the tenant movement in the months

leading up to the 1963 strike. In July, 25 Harlemites picketed the Health Department offices on Worth Street to protest the city's failure to eliminate rats in a 117th Street tenement.³³ The building had been abandoned by its landlord for nine months and tenants had long since stopped paying rent, although their actions could hardly be called a rent strike since no services had been provided and the building was uninhabitable. In all of the buildings where tenants organized to withhold rent payments, multiple violations—tantamount to landlord abandonment—had gone unchecked for months, and sometimes as long as 50 years. In this case, the Council had complained repeatedly to the health department, but to no avail. This small-scale public action holds great significance in that it was aimed not at “slumlords,” but rather at the City of New York, illuminating that landlord-tenant relations in Harlem were complicated by neglect so extreme that even these private buildings, in effect, became (first unofficially, and in many cases officially) public housing.

A few weeks later, CCH staged a rally on 117th Street, near their headquarters, calling on Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., to respond to housing conditions in Harlem. Rent strike leader Jesse Gray urged residents to march on City Hall on August 19 to let the mayor know, in no uncertain terms, that they would withhold rents until repairs and improvements were made.³⁴ By this time, the words “rent strike” were back on the streets, in church basements, and in the headlines of the black—if not yet the white—press.

Although the rent strike's public leader was a man, the tenant movement was predominantly a “woman's fight.”³⁵ The ranks of rent organizers were made up primarily of young mothers, and if Jesse Gray was the public face of the rent strike's organizational leadership, Inocencia Flores embodied the public image of the Harlem rent striker. Excerpts from her diary, re-titled “Diary of a Rent Striker—Life Amid Rats and Junkies” by the *Herald Tribune*, chronicled a few months in the life of a Harlem mother of four. She was an employee in the garment industry, a college-educated native of Puerto Rico, abandoned by her husband, forced onto the welfare rolls, and above all, fed up with her living conditions.³⁶

As a resident of 16 E. 117th Street, near CCH headquarters, her building was among the first to join the strike. She suggested an alternative to fines and jail time for the city's recourse in dealing with neglectful landlords like her own, “Ruth Zalaznick of New Jersey.”³⁷ “Instead of sending them to jail,” she wrote in her diary, “they must make them live at least a month in this same condition so they know the way they pile up money in a bank.” Flores explicitly stated that she had no interest in integration. “I like to stay here and change the system,” she proclaimed.³⁸ Flores' photograph, taken by *Herald Tribune* photographer Ted Kell, appeared in more than one rent strike account. She stood, arms at her side, stone faced and unsmiling, staring at the camera in the narrow hallway of her home. Dressed in dark colors against the dark hallway, her face seemed to float in the center of the pressed, narrow frame, flanked on either side

by chipping paint. Below her feet, the floor was scuffed and beaten and above her head hung what looked like a naked bulb. The framing of the image showed her trapped but somewhat distant. She, like the other strikers for whom she served as both voice and icon, understood the injustice of her powerlessness in the housing market.

Flores recounted her repeated attempts at gaining access to public housing, demonstrating that in some abstract way she understood the politics of the NYCHA, if not the intricacies of their structural racism. “I know that to get a project you have to have somebody prominent to back you up,” she wrote. “Many people got to the projects and they don’t even need them. I had been feeling (sic) applications I don’t know since when. This year I feel (sic) another one.” In recalling the steps, from landlord neglect to public housing denial, that lead her to the rent strike, she declared that she was willing to “go to jail” to fight for her family’s rights even though, as her name so aptly suggests, she “never hurt anyone.”³⁹

In November of 1963, with the help of tenants like Inocencia Flores and the Northern Student Movement’s Harlem Action Group (NSM), the Community Council on Housing coordinated rent withholdings in a few buildings on 117th Street near its main office.⁴⁰ In August of 1963, NSM organizers stumbled upon Granville Cherry, a shipping clerk and chauffeur, and a father of seven, living in a railroad flat old-law tenement next to the NSM office.⁴¹ He had been independently organizing tenants in his building to demand improvements. With the help of NSM and the CCH, his name was on the front page of the *New York Times* by September.⁴²

In the wake of highly publicized civil rights actions across the country such as the August march on Washington, the boycotts of buses and national restaurant and hotel chains, and repeated public pledges (and policy failures) by the liberal, Democratic Wagner administration to end discrimination, tenant protest in Harlem transformed from strike to social movement, finally capturing the media attention it deserved. At weekly strike meetings in tenement, church, and community center basements, tenants and volunteers from civil rights and legal aid organizations organized countless protests, leaflet campaigns, sit-ins, and public demonstrations outside of city agency offices. The official start of the rent strike came that winter of 1963 when hundreds of tenants and community leaders filled Harlem’s Milbank Center on 118th Street one chilly December evening. They demanded repairs, extermination, services, and—most adamantly and aggressively—more public housing.⁴³

In the Community Council on Housing’s storefront office on 117th Street, just east of Fifth Avenue, volunteers made do with the bare office essentials—a desk, a few chairs, a typewriter on a table, a wall-mounted telephone. There, organized protest movement grew organically out of an avenue for tenant grievances. Community Council volunteers fielded calls from cold tenants in need of heat, broom-wielding tenants besieged by rats, and frustrated tenants demanding running water.⁴⁴ Despite highly publicized images of mass demonstrations

and protest marches, the Harlem rent strike had its most significant impact through the courts and file cabinets of city agencies.

When the tenants from 16 to 18 117th Street appeared in court on charges of rent withholding on December 30, 1963, smuggling rats into the courtroom in handbags and shoeboxes, they were participating in an organized protest action. The plan to bring the rats into court was one of many media stunts orchestrated by Jesse Gray and CCH, demonstrating how even city-mandated court appearances could be put to good use as a visible public action.⁴⁵ In a landmark decision Judge Guy Ribaud ordered the tenants to pay rent to the court rather than the landlord. Following the December decision, the rent strike snowballed its way through the winter. As one student CORE leader described, "everyone caught the fever—Rent Strike. No one knew about the legal consequences, or the amount of work involved. It seemed like the thing to do . . . the only way to beat the landlord."⁴⁶

The winter of 1963-1964 marked the peak of "rent strike fever" during which courtroom victories and anti-rat campaigns kept rent strikers on the front pages of both the black and white press. The smallest of strike-related stories received big media attention, and reporters racked up one "color" slum story after another. One Harlem "housekeeper" complained that reporters and photographers traipsed through her apartment day after day to record her leaky faucet, falling plaster, and unusable bathroom, but nobody came to fix it.⁴⁷ On January 5, realizing the rate at which this fever was spreading, Mayor Wagner released a statement declaring his support for the strikers' demands. He announced plans to legalize the rent strike, establish more special housing courts, increase both landlord fines and the number of building inspectors in the city, and simplify and consolidate the city's confusing mess of housing laws and building codes.⁴⁸

With the "rent strike" as a legal, recognized avenue of protest against slum conditions, a more basic fight for housing access effectively fell off the radar of low-income tenants, who had limited financial and organizational resources. By legalizing the rent strike, the mayor's office effectively directed tenants' energies at the courts and distracted the movement from both more disruptive means of direct protest and from other types of tenant grievance. In January, *The Nation* triumphantly reported that landlords had been getting away with simply paying minor fees "for years," and that finally "the rats will have to go."⁴⁹ The article didn't explicitly clarify if it was referring to rats of the two-legged or four-legged variety, but the implication was that the culprits had been brought to justice—be they the rodents or the slumlords—and that the legally sanctioned rent strike, landlord fines, rent reductions, and more inspections marked the road to justice for the people of Harlem. What the *Nation*—and the nation—failed to note was that the tenant movement at hand was about far more than rats.

Rat War

At a rent strike rally on February 15, 1964 at Mt. Morris Presbyterian Church, more than 200 people gathered to hear Jesse Gray urge the state legislature to take over New York City's slums. The strikers demanded not only rent reductions and rat campaigns, but also support for public housing: state and federal intervention to provide affordable, safe, sanitary living spaces. As tenants protested slum conditions, Mayor Wagner's responses—both his rhetoric and his policy—focused on the physical rehabilitation of the existing housing stock, not the broader issue of housing access.

The mayor ordered buildings commissioner Harlold Birns to release the names of 250 "slumlords" in order to, in the words of rent commissioner Hortense Gabel, "do something to avoid a major showdown on housing conditions." Wagner's immediate response to the February rent strike rally was an announcement that he would add 35 new housing inspectors, bringing the city's total to 438. Headlines suggested that the improvement of housing conditions was on the top of the mayor's list as he, publicly and with much pomp, dropped money into the departments of buildings and health.⁵⁰ Charles Grutzner of the *New York Times* suggested that Wagner's decision to respond at all was only because he always had an eye on votes, and had "counted noses and found that there are more tenants than landlords."⁵¹ The Mayor responded to the symptom rather than the illness when he launched his "Million Dollar War on Rats" in February of 1964.

A long history of anti-rat warfare preceded Mayor Wagner's million-dollar initiative. "The People Are Fed Up With the Rats Who Run Harlem!" declared the *New York Amsterdam News* in the summer of 1959, referring both to the rodents who "lived better than there [sic.] victims," and the slumlords who perpetuated those conditions.⁵² Three years before the mayor announced his million dollar anti-rat campaign in response to rent strike demands, community groups in Harlem teamed up to launch their own war on the rats that the city had consistently failed to remove.⁵³ Information outreach sessions taught "simple techniques of rat control." Children and chaperones went door to door with information on garbage disposal, hole patching, and inspections.⁵⁴ The Lower Harlem Tenants Council, before it became the Community Council on Housing, also launched a "War on Rats" three years before the mayor announced his initiative of the same name.⁵⁵

The city intensified slum inspections in the summer of 1963, a few months before the rent strike took over the front pages. The mayor added 69 new inspectors and authorized funding for a hundred more positions.⁵⁶ With the announcement of the Wagner's "Million Dollar War on Rats" the following winter in the wake of rent strike unrest came the appointment of 148 new employees in the Department of Health—inspectors and exterminators—and a plan for a block-by-block, house-by-house extermination campaign. The mayor's war also included an "educational" program for tenants on how to keep their living spaces

"rat-free." "The smell of food attracts rats," warned the Department of Health, "so wash dishes immediately after a meal. Empty liquid wastes into sink not the garbage can. And wash garbage can with soap and water after emptying it."⁵⁷ No discussion of low-income housing availability or access to public housing entered into the debate surrounding the "rat war," or the policies that emerged.

The rat became a dynamic and distracting symbol of tenement conditions, wielded by strikers, press, policy makers, and politicians, alike. While Wagner's "War on Rats" aimed to erase, hide, and eradicate the rat problem, rent strike leader Jesse Gray's rat campaign sought to do the opposite. The Community Council's rat initiatives set out to display Harlem's rats, and in fact produce a grotesque and alarming multiplicity of the vermin, real and fake, dead and alive. Gray announced CCH's "Rats to Rockefeller" campaign in January of 1964, just as Wagner's War on Rats hit the front pages. CCH, he told the *New York Amsterdam News*, would send 2000 rubber rats to the governor in Albany to get his support for "more state public housing to replace substandard dwellings." Gray unmistakably connected tenant activism to public housing discrimination by brandishing the symbol of tenement squalor to press the governor on issues of housing policy. Only *The Amsterdam News*, the city's largest circulation black newspaper, reported this particular motive behind the "Rats to Rockefeller" campaign, linking Harlem's access to public housing and the tenant movement blossoming in the slums. Governor Rockefeller all but ignored both the rent strike and the 52 rats (not 2000, he claimed) he received in the mail. In a gesture of what Michael Lipsky called "symbolic transfer," the governor sent one of the rubber rats back to Mayor Wagner.⁵⁸ Back home in New York City, 13,000 rent strikers took to City Hall on "Rat Marches" of their own, wearing rubber rats around their necks or pinned to their lapels.⁵⁹

Those who waged war against the slumlords between 1958 and 1964 directed their protest at city agencies as well as property owners. Many lived in forgotten buildings, long abandoned by slumlords and neglected by the city. Through the strike, slum dwellers rendered themselves visible in a city that had walled them into a sometimes feared, and more often ignored ghetto. Although they struck against rats and neglect, their larger battle was against this invisibility, which they could only overcome by thrusting dead rats in front of cameras and courtrooms. That is why Gray embraced every opportunity to remind the public of the rat problem. He told the *New Yorker* in a 1964 interview, "You ought to talk to someone who's been bitten by a rat. The tenants are like rats now. Once the tenants feel their power, they stop running. They're not afraid anymore."⁶⁰ Through the image of the rat, the rent strikers had finally achieved visibility.

As December 1964 approached, the CCH continued its efforts to turn the flickering rent strike into a political movement, toying with plans to run a candidate for mayor or city council. They cranked out handbills and press releases on housing-related issues that a *Herald Tribune* reporter called "militant in tone and arrantly racist."⁶¹ The word "militant" had become a buzzword in relation

to any black mobilization for reform, especially in Harlem in the wake of 1964's violent rioting. Although the summer's unrest was depicted in the fiery hues of warfare and revolt in contrast to the orderly courtroom grays, blacks, and whites of the rent strike, both grew out of frustration with the same struggle for voice and visibility.

As Harlem tenants continued their weakening struggle to improve housing conditions, Roger Kahn of the *Saturday Evening Post* exploited a growing fear of black revolution when he warned "we had better look hard at Harlem which, for 50 years, has been looking hard at us." Kahn called Harlem an "alien, ugly, frightening place," where the swelling masses "buy barely edible chicken backs at 10 cents a pound, borrow friends' children to fool welfare inspectors into increasing relief checks, mug strangers in order to buy narcotics, beat rats away from cribs." The situation was "even worse than most whites suspected," Kahn proclaimed, and it went on to outline three reasons for the deplorable conditions. The first was drugs, which "turned idlers into muggers." Second was the dreaded "Black Revolution" that drove away "deference" and propelled the ghetto further into a state of despair. The final reason, like the previous two, placed the responsibility for blight on the shoulders of the people who were forced to live in it. A degenerate population of "impoverished semi-literates," Kahn said, had taken over Harlem. It seemed Harlem's failings, illuminated by tenant unrest, were primarily because it was, to quote Kahn's words to his white, middle-class readership, "endlessly, overwhelmingly black."⁶²

Back in March of 1963, as Harlem tenants emerged from a cold winter and organized in church basements, Sam Castan of *Look* magazine told his similarly white and middle-class readership that Harlem was a "sour chunk of urban rot" where New York sticks people it "doesn't want to see." Most of the residents, Castan explained, were black or Hispanic, and most were on welfare—a "payment to stay out of sight."⁶³ In January of 1964, former Manhattan Borough President Hulan Jack told a crowd of tenant organizers that "the people who live in New York City never come to Harlem. When they pass on the train through 125th Street and Park Avenue on their way to Connecticut," he declared, "they see the houses they built to keep you there."⁶⁴ "Often you cannot tell from the outside whether a building is abandoned or inhabited," reported Kahn in the *Saturday Evening Post's* feature on "Harlem: The Black Jungle," suggesting the very literal invisibility of Harlem's slum dwellers.⁶⁵

The Community Council on Housing's 1964 "Rats to Rockefeller" campaign and their subsequent plans for a "Rat March to Albany" directly responded to that frustrating invisibility. In late January, at a "conference on housing," CCH kicked off the sale of four-inch rubber rats, at 25 cents apiece, to its members and other tenants and activists involved in the rent strike. Each rat was then stuffed in an envelope with a letter from a Harlem tenant that read, "There are rats (see enclosed), faulty plumbing, unsafe wiring, no hot water, no janitorial services, which are serious threats to the health of me and my family." At the conference, as tenants filled out their "rat letters" and shoved the rodents into

envelopes, community leaders and clergy spoke of the need for more state and federal support for public housing. Father Browne, a Roman Catholic Priest, told the crowd that they must “fight the enemies of public housing—Southern senators, rednecks . . . and the real estate lobby, and wake up the friends of public housing who have fallen asleep!” Gray called on tenants to mail more than 2000 of the rubber rats directly to the Governor’s mansion to demand more state public housing to replace the “substandard dwellings” in which they were forced to live.

The sale of the rubber rats would also fund a “Rat March on Albany” in the coming months. Planned in coordination with a labor-organized “\$1.50 an hour Minimum Wage” march, the rent strikers called on other tenant activist groups to join them in Albany on March 10 to “remind Governor Rockefeller that Central Harlem and other areas like it are part of the State of New York.”⁶⁶ As March 10 drew closer, Gray proclaimed, “We cannot get the governor to come down personally and look at housing conditions of rent strikers so we shall go to see him.”⁶⁷

The day before the protest, the *New York Times* reported that more than 5000 people were expected to march on Albany. A chartered 7am train would carry 700 demonstrators from Grand Central Terminal to Albany, and rent strike organizations from throughout the city chartered 22 buses to shuttle tenants to the march. Along with minimum wage and housing demands, many marched for school desegregation and increased funding for education.⁶⁸ The group hoped to bring their demands directly to Rockefeller, himself, in a 10am meeting which would include march leaders A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, James Farmer of CORE, and Jesse Gray, representing the rent strikers. Gray’s demand was “a state law legalizing rent strikes” and “appropriations for integrated housing for working people.”⁶⁹

Despite freezing rain, snow, and slush, and despite weather delays on all of the chartered train cars and buses, more than 3000 protesters crowded the streets on March 10, 1964. The crowds were optimistic and energized despite the weather, but it seemed the meeting with the governor resulted in nothing but, in the words of one CORE organizer, “what we’ve always gotten—sympathy.” At a press conference following the march, A. Philip Randolph told the press, “We do not believe that the governor was fully aware of the degree of suffering the Negro and Puerto Rican people are enduring . . . and I don’t believe we were able to impress the governor with the emergency nature of this problem.” In a frighteningly prescient statement, Norman Hill of CORE told the *New York Times*, “Only if we light fires all over the state, only if we disrupt and dislocate in a creative way, will we get what we want.”⁷⁰

By October, as the weather grew colder and rent strike fury faded despite the persistence and intensification of the problems that had spurred it, Gray asked President Johnson to declare Harlem a disaster area. By doing so, the city would receive federal anti-poverty money and Red Cross aid for heating oil, blankets, and hot water.⁷¹

Public imagination created a Harlem that was simultaneously invisible and horrifically vivid. The “urban wasteland” that the New York State Temporary State Housing Rent Commission feared, in 1960, would engulf the 35-block community of Morningside Heights, was defined by demography rather than geography.⁷² Those who lived in the slums were both victim and perpetrator in the city’s decay. “Less than half the households,” they found, “conform to the image of the normal household—a married couple (with or without children) in exclusive possession of their house or apartment.”⁷³ The downfall of the city, the commission feared, would be these “abnormal” households.

The landlords who found themselves in courtrooms and headlines during the rent strike blamed their tenants for the condition of tenement buildings and rat infestations. They often said tenants insisted on throwing trash out the windows, refused to use trash cans instead of bags, and persisted in defacing the properties with graffiti or, in one case, carving their names into the wood with screwdrivers.⁷⁴ Others, like Samuel Hawkins who managed rent-striking buildings at 16 and 18 E. 117th Street, claimed repairs and improvements were impossible because “drug addicts” ripped radiators out of the walls, stole pipes and faucets, and dismantled plumbing systems to sell for loose parts. These drug vandals, he claimed, scared off the supers and kept him from meeting health and building codes. He also noted that tenants were responsible for all of the “rubbish” inviting rat infestations. Tenants did often have to resort to tossing their trash out the window—a practice that became known as “air mail”—because there was no trash collection or incineration. They were forced to use trash bags rather than cans because cans were not provided for them, and were considerably more expensive than bags.⁷⁵ Drug addicts, Hawkins claimed, had made his buildings places where “police, fire inspectors, and repairmen were afraid to enter without escort,” underscoring the isolation of the neighborhood, and begging the question of who might be expected to escort the police.⁷⁶

“Harlem’s heatless, sub-human tenements,” as described by the *New York Post* in January of 1964 during the height of the rent strike, were, in fact, the homes of millions of tenants.⁷⁷ But as the rat came to represent the problems of the ghetto, the mainstream white press embraced the rodent as a metaphor for those who lived there. A 1964 *New York Times Magazine* feature by Fred Powledge entitled “One Hundred Million Rats Against Us” mused, “There is something about a rat that gives man an uncontrollable desire to kill him.”⁷⁸ The article’s images and language in characterizing the city’s vermin bear shocking resemblance to the manner in which similar journalistic endeavors portrayed the residents of Harlem, themselves—particularly families on welfare. Images of adamant rent strikers staging protests with rubber rats on their lapels, and photographs of tenants on courtroom steps dangling dead vermin by the tail shared newsstands with the *New York Times* in October of 1964 when Powledge wrote that New York’s rats “will go anywhere, do anything, in order to get the three-quarters of an ounce of food . . . that he needs to make it from one day to the next, over the course of his lifetime, which is one year.” “The average fe-

male rat," Powledge explained, "will wean about 29 babies and send them out into the world. She will also eat them if they are caught in a trap and she can find no other food."

This echoed *Look* magazine's expose on welfare families from the previous year, written by Julius Horowitz, a consultant on public welfare to the New York State Senate Majority Leader. Horowitz fixated on both the sheer multiplicity of children and the desperation with which mothers attempted to cheat welfare agents in order to get their hands on more than the 47 cents allotted each day for food.⁷⁹ In Horowitz's welfare story the mother of the pregnant 14-year-old was, herself, pregnant with her sixteenth child. Both mother and daughter lived with four other children in a two-room apartment. In Horowitz's words, "Every girl in Mr. Sheck's building over the age of 13 was pregnant, or had delivered a baby, or was imminently in the process of initiation." The article, like many of its contemporaries in the white, mainstream press, portrayed Harlem residents as breeders and desperate victims. Horowitz further characterized welfare families in nonhuman terms when he described his encounter with another 17-year-old mother in the building as he tried to explain some of the welfare procedures to her. "She probably understood as many [words] as a well-trained cocker spaniel," he wrote.⁸⁰ Roger Kahn's *Saturday Evening Post* expose on Harlem's "black jungle" also perpetuated the themes of terrifying multiplicity and subhuman behavior in its description of a "street some 300 yards long inhabited by 4500 people" where they "make love in rooms without shades."⁸¹

In his 1964 *New York Times Magazine* piece on rats, Powledge suggested that the four-legged and two-legged "vermin" impose similar drains on city resources, saying that each of the city's 100 million rats eats three pounds of food a year, contaminates another \$6 worth and destroys at least a dollar of property. This consumption of public resources harkens back to *Look's* shocking disclosure in 1963 that 360,000 New Yorkers were on public assistance, including 200,000 children. Each rat, Powledge claimed, dropped 25 to 150 pellets of "excrement" every day, 10 to 20 cubic centimeters of urine, and shed its hair all over the city. Similarly revolting descriptions of ghetto filth were commonplace in the white press, delineating numbers of pounds of trash tossed from windows, the unsanitary conditions of bathrooms, or the offensive odor of the apartment buildings.

Powledge explained in his rat feature that a female tenant—a human—had been given a "brief lecture in sanitation" after a health official "found several scraps of food on the floor," like so many rat droppings. This "lecture" was part of a wider initiative to "educate" the urban poor about how to fend off rats by keeping a clean home. In fact, it was the responsibility of the landlord or the city to patch up rat holes and provide effective means of trash disposal.

The *New York Times Magazine* made its most explicit connection between rats and slum dwellers when Powledge explained, "the rat problem's really a

human problem. You could put poison all over the place and still if you had a dirty apartment, you'd have rats." In fact, the city *did* put poison all over the place. The "anticoagulant poison" that the city's extermination teams sprinkled liberally throughout tenement apartments killed the rats by causing internal bleeding. The magazine matter-of-factly reported that the substance caused nausea, vomiting, and cramps in humans. The city exterminators scooped the substance into tiny cardboard boxes and placed them behind tenement sinks and refrigerators, with little concern, it would seem, for contact with dishes, food, or children.⁸²

Where did these hundred million rats that were taking over the city and depleting its resources come from? Again suggesting that the rats in question were of the two- and not the four-legged variety, Powledge describes an infestation of the Jefferson Memorial caused when a large number of rats were "left homeless" by demolition for nearby renewal projects. Attempting a broader cultural analysis of "the rat" in American society, he inserted a characterization of the "friendly white rat," explaining "he alone is respected." "Some of your best friends are rats," proclaimed an ad for the American Cancer Society in the same issue of the magazine, stating that these "white and cuddly" rats deserved respect because they were useful as lab animals. In the context of the rat piece, it is not lost on the reader that they are also useful and deserving of respect because they are white.⁸³ Also not lost on the reading audience was that New York's feared four-legged rats, like the families of two-legged threats for which they served as a thinly veiled metaphor, were naturally suited for the city's slums.

Conclusion

Living conditions in the crowded tenements, where humans were forced to live like vermin, perpetuated the stereotypes of the city's low-income, nonwhite population.⁸⁴ These conditions could only be improved by increasing the availability of low-income housing, but racially motivated political opposition, fueled in large part by the mainstream press' frightening and repulsive portrayal of the black community, stymied public housing programs. In March of 1963, as rent strikers began regular Wednesday night meetings in church basements and tenement boiler rooms to enforce their demand more public housing, the Congressional record reprinted an article by Stephen H. Marcus called "Crime in New York City's Public Housing." The article cited a "confidential report" in its characterization of public housing tenants as "degenerates and criminals," and fed on existing stereotypes of housing projects in order to undermine attempts at gaining congressional support for more low-income public housing. Marcus asserted that crime rates in public housing were especially high, and that any funds towards the construction of more low-income units was money thrown into an irreparable abyss.

Marcus, a 19-year-old college sophomore, subsequently fielded much criticism from both NYCHA chairman William Reid and Jack Stanley of the *Brook-*

lyn Eagle.⁸⁵ The “confidential report” Marcus referenced, both men pointed out, was nothing more than the annual report from the director of NYCHA management. Its content, which was widely distributed, served only to disprove Marcus’ own claims. Reid revealed that Marcus had neither contacted him nor visited the NYCHA offices or any NYCHA housing development. In fact, the records of the New York City Police Department showed that the arrest rate for NYCHA tenants was significantly lower than the rates for the city as a whole. According to 1961 records, NYCHA arrest rates were 3.8 per thousand, compared to citywide rates of 6.3 per thousand.⁸⁶ Juvenile delinquency and homicide rates were also lower in public housing than in surrounding neighborhoods.

NYCHA chairman William Reid pointed out the political motivations behind reprinting the Marcus article, most of which was a “rehashing” of “sensational stories” from the popular press depicting (and inflating) violent events. “A favorite device of those who oppose public housing,” Reid explained, “is to assign to it responsibility for curing all the ills of our society and then berate it for failing to do so.”⁸⁷ The *Brooklyn Eagle*’s Jack Stanley suggested that Marcus needed to take a few courses in ethics and statistics before graduating from college. “We must assume Mr. Marcus believes it is preferable to have the underprivileged citizens of our country continue to live in ramshackle, rat-infested, fire-trap, slum buildings that lack the fundamental amenities for decent living,” wrote Stanley, “than to afford them an opportunity to live in public housing.”⁸⁸ Those ramshackle, rat-infested firetraps were the homes of the rent strikers, many of whom, contrary to public and historical perception, were working-class black families. Denied an opportunity to live in public housing while priced out of and barred from the private market, their movement became as combustible as the firetraps in which they were forced to live.

Nonetheless, the NYCHA persisted in its efforts to whiten public housing even as the need to house nonwhite families increased. These strategies did not go unnoticed by the black press. An examination of the black press during the NYCHA’s “Open Occupancy” effort to bar black applicants from admission into public housing suggests that the authority was simultaneously doing all it could to rid the projects of the black tenants it already had. Between 1959, when the “Open Occupancy” program began, and into the early sixties, evictions of black tenants were common, and often no reason was given other than the label of “undesirable.” This word seems to have become a crafty euphemism for “black.” Charles Taylor, a 24-year-old steelworker, lived in Brooklyn’s Brownville Homes for more than four years with his wife and two young children. A representative from his employer, Newark Steel Drum Company, called him a “steady, quiet, hard-working man who had never caused them any trouble and seldom missed being at work.” The NYCHA called him an “undesirable tenant” and handed him eviction papers. “No one wants children, and we can’t find a home,” his young wife told the *New York Amsterdam News* in January of 1959, three months after the tenants review board—composed entirely of NYCHA representatives—ruled to evict the family of four.⁸⁹

Taylor's case was one of many chronicled in the black press between 1957 and the start of the rent strike in 1964 in which the City Housing Authority labeled black tenants "undesirable" and slid through eviction procedures, kept in check only by the protests of tenant advocacy groups.⁹⁰ Occasionally, as in the case of the Taylor family, widespread press exposure led to public outcries and, buttressed by the support of civil rights organizations and community leaders, the NYCHA decisions were reversed. The Lower Harlem Tenants Council, the organizational backbone of the Harlem rent strike, often challenged NYCHA eviction procedures, laying the groundwork for subsequent organizing efforts within public housing for a "tenant bill of rights."⁹¹ As early as 1961, the tenants' council at the Frederick Douglass Houses, a low-income project on the Upper West Side, started a petition drive to support a bill curbing NYCHA eviction powers.⁹² At that time no court review was necessary for an eviction, allowing the Housing Authority to evict at will.⁹³ While section 1410 of the Civil Practice Act guaranteed New York residents the right to a hearing if evicted by a landlord, public housing tenants like Mr. Taylor had no avenue of redress, and the housing authority didn't even have to define "undesirable," much less prove that evicted tenants were.

When hundreds packed Mt. Cavalry Baptist Church on the evening of January 25, 1960 for a "general mass protest rally" celebrating the twenty-first anniversary of the Harlem Tenants League, tenant selection in public housing took center stage. "Thousands of black tenants have been turned away as ineligible," reported the *New York Amsterdam News* in its announcement for the event.⁹⁴ These were the same Harlem tenants who mobilized for the rent strike a few years later. They took up public housing access as a central issue, exposing the discriminatory tendencies of the NYCHA more than six months before its secret program was revealed, and indicating the extent to which public housing denial sparked their mobilization.

Packed churches, crowded sidewalk protests, and courthouse steps crammed with protesters all reflect one difficult dimension of recording and remembering community movements like the one surrounding the rent strike. As a social movement—and not merely a "strike"—it involved far more people than those who were actually in a financial, social, and emotional position to withhold rent. To do so effectively required the support of neighbors and family, and assumed a situation in which a landlord was taking an interest in the collection of said rent. In many buildings this was not the case. But all who joined in the rallies, attended the meetings, and held signs or donned rubber rats on the steps of the courthouse were participants in the rent strike, along with those who defended their actions in court.

History, like the contemporary media coverage and municipal response, frames the rent strike as an isolated slum struggle, effectively removing it from national housing desegregation discourse. However, strikers remained in those unlivable buildings largely because of the very discriminatory practices that

both excluded them from public housing and kept livable private rentals out of reach. Past examinations of the rent strike have been limited by their tendency to rely predominantly or solely on representations in the white press. An examination of mainstream black press coverage reveals that, in comparison, the mainstream white press significantly downplayed both the broader civil rights aims of the strike and essential issues of housing access in favor of stories about the physical deterioration of tenement buildings. Such an examination also reveals the mainstream white press' tendency to favorably depict NYCHA initiatives and downplay the large-scale low-income housing shortage that excluded so many families from safe, affordable housing. While the rent strike, as a tactic, is conventionally viewed as an assertion of consumer power—the withholding of money for services like repairs and exterminations—the Harlem rent strike movement was, in many respects, a contestation over urban space in the wake of decades of urban renewal.

Cultural analysis can be a slippery venture, and connecting elements of representation to the events, decisions, and actions that constitute “history” often feels like a trapeze act to both historian and reader. But the conceptual isolation and dehumanization of Harlem by the white press paved the way for the “War on Rats” as an acceptable policy solution for the low-income housing dilemma. Rather than attack issues of housing access, unequal wages and affordability, and discriminatory practices in tenant selection, the characterization of Harlem and its nonwhite residents as “alien” or as human “vermin” naturally suited for victimization and squalor, allowed rats, chipped paint, and slumlords to become the enemy. In fact, structurally imbedded and mass-circulated racism was to blame.

The *New York Times*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, *New York Post* and *Herald Tribune*, characterized Harlem as “a blight,” “a cancer,” “a jungle,” or “a wasteland.” For those for whom the white press' slum stories served as the only window to Harlem life, the population appeared to be dominated by young, unemployed welfare mothers of six to eight hungry, lice-infested, unbathed, uncontrollable children whose father was in jail, on drugs, or—in the case of one 14-year-old mother profiled in a March 1963 issue of *Look* magazine—unknown other than the fact that he was the “super's helper” who lived in the building's basement.⁹⁵ The Harlem of the black press—specifically the *New York Amsterdam News*, New York's largest circulation black newspaper, and *Ebony* magazine, a national black publication—was far more empowered, political, multi-layered, and engaged in a national struggle for basic freedoms and full citizenship. Moreover, these sources reveal that Harlem's average tenant-victim-activists who waged the rent strike were less often welfare mothers of six or seven and more often hard-working families whose path to middle-class life was blockaded by a racist wage and housing structure.

Through the manipulation of the rat symbol as public face of both rent strike and rent striker, the city had a symbolic displacement for racist policy,

and the middle-class, white, reading public had a symbolic displacement for racist sentiments towards black welfare mothers. For both parties, discussions about people masqueraded as discussions about vermin and chipping paint. At the same time, the rent strikers, themselves, embraced the rat symbol as a convenient means of obtaining a highly visible—and visual—voice.

Rat images garnered front-page coverage, horrified middle-class Americans, and stirred local politicians.⁹⁶ By 1963 when the image of an enormous dead rat dangling by the tail from the fingers of an enraged striking tenant had become permanently engraved on the front pages and mental canvases of housing discourse, the struggle for better housing conditions was not new. This was not the beginning, but rather a breaking point at which angry tenants, frustrated with lack of access to public housing and lack of low-income unit availability, set their sights on improving the livability of the structures to which they had been restricted. However, in the mainstream press, and in the halls of city government, the rent strike was represented on strictly slumlord-versus-tenant terms. This absolved the city of any responsibility to address larger housing access issues.

The NYCHA's discriminatory "Open Occupancy" program points to the difficulties and complexities of integration, or more accurately, the slow and arduous steps to correcting the inequalities caused by structural racism. Running concurrently with the "Open Housing" movement, which sought equality in the private housing market, the NYCHA opted for what seems like a particularly disingenuous name choice. The agency saw a growing black population, rather than racist housing and wage structures, as the root of the city's low-income housing shortage. Today, affordable housing remains scarce, wages remain unequal, and the walls erected by racism in the nation's largest northern metropolis remain intact.

More than forty years after the first tenants organized to withhold rent in November of 1963, many of the strikers are living somewhere in New York, walking epilogues to this incomplete story. My difficulty in locating former rent strikers reflects the very nature of their struggle. They fought for safe, secure, permanent housing, and despite legal victories and grassroots organizing, they ultimately lost. Writing of the strike's aftermath just six years after it disappeared from the headlines, Michael Lipsky reported that despite subsequent reforms in tenant law, Harlem's striking tenants were left right where they started. "Although the ceiling has been fixed and the kitchen faucet no longer comes off in their hands," he wrote, "they continue to live in the same apartments in the same buildings on the same streets."⁹⁷

Many of these tenants leave a broken trail, mired in evictions, disconnections, and dislocations, and muted by the confidentiality policies of the New York City Housing Authority. They also leave a network of tenant organizing that persists to this day, and from which others have since benefited. The tenant laws, advocacy groups, and legal aid services are as crucial today as they were

for the rent strikers of the 1960s. Perhaps today these resources are even more important because that same persistent segregation masquerades as a problem for the history books, rather than a problem for the headlines.

Notes

1. *Newsweek*, January 13, 1964, 24-25.
2. *New York Amsterdam News*, January 4, 1964.
3. Interview with Bruce Gould, rent strike attorney, June 10, 2002. Additionally, Gould asserts, their court victories led to dramatic reforms in landlord and tenant law and public attention to code enforcement, while carving a new role for the city in addressing housing neglect in privately-owned buildings.
4. Juliet Z. Saltman, *Open Housing as a Social Movement*. (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971). Her extensive timeline skips directly from the summer 1962 demonstrations at Harlem construction sites against discrimination in trade unions to Harlem protests against the opening of the Worlds' Fair in spring of 1964. Leonard Freedman, *Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); Michael Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics: Rent Strikes, Housing, and the Power of the Poor* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970); Ronald Lawson, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
5. See Daniel Jay Baum, *Toward A Free Housing Movement* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), Anders Corr, *No Trespassing: Squatting, Rent Strikes, and Land Struggles Worldwide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), Freedman, Leonard, *Public Housing*, Lawson, *The Tenant Movement*.
6. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1964, 4.
7. New York State, *Reports of the Task Force on Middle-Income Housing*, 1959, 7.
8. Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 132.
9. City-Wide Council for Better Housing, *New York City's Slum Clearance Committee: A Critical Study* (New York: 1957), 2.
10. City-Wide Council for Better Housing, *New York City's Slum Clearance*, 9.
11. *New York Times*, February 10, 1960, 1.
12. *New York Times*, March 5, 1960, 40.
13. *New York Times*, December 11, 1960, 1. Even the testimony of the city's "slumlords" shows the appalling injustices renewal and the low-income housing crunch imposed upon its victims. Slumlord "Mr. Sheck" (a pseudonym, according to the reporter) told *Look* magazine that "there's no place else to put the 150 babies" he had "urinating" in his halls "I run a pigsty for the city of New York," he said. "We're partners." Mr. Sheck housed welfare families who had no place else to go. He, and others like him, Charged exorbitant rents for crowded, squalid apartments and the welfare department paid the bill. (*Look*, March 26, 1963, 77).
14. *New York Amsterdam News*, January 23, 1960, 3.
15. *New York Times*, April 26, 1961. Page unknown—Metropolitan Council on Housing clipping file, Tamiment Library, New York University.
16. The mother of six would be among the hundreds who demonstrated outside the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development regional offices on Broadway on April 11, 1968. The MCH-organized protest addressed the lack of federal funding for low-rent public housing. Evidently, the pangs behind Wagner's 1961 appeal continued to be felt on the ground—in tents outside a city office building—seven years later. (*News*, MCH clipping file, Tamiment, April 11, 1968, 16).
17. For a comprehensive study of this program, see Joseph Kelley, "Racial Integration Policies of the NY City Housing Authority, 1958-1961," D.S.W. diss., Columbia University, 1963. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 64-2763.
18. Roscho, Bernard. "The Integration Problem and Public Housing," *The New Leader*. July 4-11, 1960, pp. 10-13.
19. Five years after the NYCHA's discriminatory practices were revealed, investigated, publicly criticized, and allegedly reformed, unexplained denials of eligible black applicants to low-income public housing persisted. MCH chair Jane Benedict wrote to William Reid, NYCHA Chairman in October of 1965, on behalf of Jennie Thomas, a welfare mother living with her "retarded, bed-ridden and epileptic" 28-year-old daughter and a "steadily employed" 19-year-old nephew. Ms. Thomas had applied for public housing out of "mortal fear" of a fire in her tenement building, since her daughter would not have been able to escape from their fourth-floor walkup.

(Letter from Jane Benedict, MCH, to William Reid, NYCHA, October 8, 1965, MCH files, Tamiment Library, New York University) A few weeks later, Benedict received a response from Reid. "I regret to advise that Mrs. Thomas has been found ineligible for public housing," he wrote. "This decision was made after careful review and evaluation by our tenant review board. The reasons for her ineligibility are confidential. . . ." (Letter from William Reid, NYCHA, to Jane Benedict, MCH October 25, 1965, MCH files, Tamiment Library, New York University) It was this very confidentiality that ensured the Housing Authority remained beyond charges of racism. The NYCHA uses the same claims to confidentiality today to prevent historical inquiries such as this one from revealing any further discriminatory patterns. I had hoped to obtain the names of applicants denied housing for being "undesirable"—a commonly stated and unquestionably acceptable reason—in the years leading up to the rent strike. In doing so, I hoped to show a direct connection between being denied public housing and resorting to this alternate form of protest. The archivists at the LaGuardia at Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College and Wagner at CUNY, Long Island, NY archives (where the NYCHA archives are stored) told me that such information would be sealed and inaccessible. When I contacted the NYCHA directly I was told that such records didn't exist because they were only kept six years. When I persisted with my requests for access to the information, I was told tenant selection records were confidential. When I submitted my request in writing, I received a form letter indicating that my request would be answered in the order it was received. I would imagine persistent applicants had similar dealings with the NYCHA.

20. *New York Times*, February 9, 1960, 33.

21. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 8, 1964, 10.

22. *New York Amsterdam News*, September 3, 1960, 8.

23. *New York Amsterdam News*, September 8, 1962, 10.

24. *New York Amsterdam News*, May 12, 1962, 10.

25. This common theme of the letter to the paper as a "last resort" suggests that even the large number that appeared were only a small sample of the worst cases.

26. *New York Amsterdam News*, July 28, 1962, 10.

27. *New York Amsterdam News*, November 4, 1961, 1.

28. Wilson noted that the state had authorized only these 427 units to meet the needs of very 200,000 low-income families. (Statement by State Senator Jerome L. Wilson before the Temporary Commission on Low Income Housing, 42 W. 44th St., October 29, 1963, 10am. Interview with Bruce Gould, a rent strike attorney, 6/10/02.)

29. Rent strike attorney and Community Council on Housing volunteer Bruce Gould says it was "Likely he visited striking buildings as Jesse Gray's headquarters was east of Fifth Avenue on 117th Street." (Interview with Bruce Gould, April 24, 2002).

30. Wilson also advocated raising the income ceiling to achieve racial integration, and increasing police responsibility in the projects—although he was careful to point out that crime rates in public housing were, in fact, lower than in the general population. However, he asserted in closing that the availability of more low income public housing was the most important measure, and that steps needed to be taken immediately. Statement by Wilson, October 29, 1963.

31. *New York Times*, July 15, 1960, page unknown—Bruce Gould Clipping Files.

32. *New York Post*, July 13, 1960, 30 and *New York Times*, July 15, 1960, 49.

33. *New York Amsterdam News*, July 12, 1963, 28.

34. *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1963, 57.

35. *New York Herald Tribune*, December 6, 1963, page unknown—Bruce Gould Clipping File.

36. In fact, most rent strikers were not on welfare at all, according to rent strike attorney Bruce Gould, who remembered them as predominantly hard-working, gainfully employed families (Interview, April 24, 2002).

37. That the landlord was "of New Jersey" reflects a common source of distrust in many tenant grievances about neglectful landlords. There was an overwhelming sense in tenant testimony that landlords were of a very different geographic—and by that token, ethnic—identity. Many landlords maintained anonymity and inaccessibility by living in the suburbs or in New Jersey. Another notable element of their inaccessibility was that they were, in most cases, white. Few were powerful, wealthy property owners. Most were ethnic, working-to-middle-class whites, many Jewish, many first- and second-generation immigrants who saw profiting from the exploitation of nonwhite tenants as one of very few means of establishing their "whiteness."

38. Flores' position reflects one of the underlying problems with the New York Housing Authority's notion of "integration" as demonstrated through their discriminatory "Open Occupancy" tenant selection program. They claimed that they were not being discriminatory because, although they gave white applicants "priority" in predominantly black projects, they offered priority for black applicants in the predominantly white projects. Most of the latter were middle-income projects where low-income black applicants could not afford the rent, and did not feel welcome (Roscho, Bernard. "The Integration Problem and Public Housing," 10).

39. *New York Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1964, 28.

40. The Northern Student Movement (NSM) was a group of college-aged, mostly white organizers who took a leave of absence from school to help with the tenant movement. It was organized in 1961 by a Yale College junior, Peter Countryman, and operated initially with Countryman's own campus address and phone number. The group's primary concern was discrimination in Northern cities, and the central committee began in New Haven as a "clearing-house for information and resources." The group participated in many national campaigns, including SNCC's voter registration drive and lobbying for civil rights legislation, and stimulated the formation of many other student groups. (Northern Student Movement. *Freedom North, A Publication of the Northern Student Movement*. Vol. 1, no. 7 and 8, January 1965) NSM had an office to the north of the CCH headquarters where they mobilized tenants in central Harlem.

41. An "old-law tenement" commonly refers to any building constructed before the passage of the Tenement House Act of 1901 which imposed new building and fire codes.

42. Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics*, 58.

43. *New York Herald Tribune*, December 16, 1963, page unknown—Bruce Gould Clipping File. Those in attendance included Assemblymen Lloyd E. Dickens of the eleventh district, Jose Ramos-Lopez of the fourteenth district, and former Manhattan borough president Hulan Jack, a political leader in fourteenth district.

44. Gray was the only paid staff member, taking home about \$75 each week. *New York Times*, December 31, 1963, 1.

45. In fact, the rats were never introduced as evidence, and the media spectacle surrounding the CCH's plan to be armed with the rodent specimens allowed court officials to be forewarned of the unwanted visitors. Sixteen court "attendants" were told to "bar the rodents, dead or alive." Although security checks at the courtroom entrance barred the entrance of a number of rodents, five litigants were able to sneak in either six or eight rats, depending on the source.

46. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 245. CORE's involvement in Harlem's tenant movement marked a shift in the organization's focus from advocating reforms for the middle class to working towards improving the lives of the poor. (Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 243) A vocal minority within the organization were initially opposed to opening a Harlem office because they felt that if they were working to "break down the walls of the ghetto" they should not set up shop "in its heart." However, this was not the majority opinion, and CORE established a Harlem chapter in the fall of 1961. Within two years, CORE was leading rent strike efforts throughout the city. (Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 198).

47. Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics*, 64. This story reflects the way the media spectacle of slum conditions often trapped these tenants in images of the "slum dweller" the same way it trapped them in dilapidated buildings. Reaction to their plight was to record, report, inspect, and exploit, but rarely did it cross the press' mind that things should be fixed, much less that these people should have the access and freedom to move.

48. *New York Times*, January 4, 1964, page unknown—Gould Clipping File.

49. *The Nation*, "War Against the Rats." January 20, 1964, p. 63.

50. In fact the city had begun receivership on 262 buildings at that point, and in only 12 of those had "improvements" actually begun. (*New York World-Telegram*, January 2, 1964, page unknown—Gould Clipping File.)

51. *New York Times*, January 7, 1964, page unknown—Gould Clipping File.

52. *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959, 1.

53. Participating groups included the Consolidated Tenants League, Upper Manhattan YMCA, Abyssinian Baptist Church, Rendell Memorial Presbyterian Church, the Youth Council of the 32nd Police Precinct, and the Health Department.

54. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 18, 1961, 3.

55. *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1961, 2.

56. *New York Times*, July 11, 1963, 31.

57. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1964, 7.

58. Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics*, 71.

59. *Ebony*, April 1964, 113.

60. *New Yorker*, January 25, 1964, 19-20.

61. *New York Herald Tribune*, November 29, 1964. page unknown—Bruce Gould clipping file.

62. Roger Kahn, "Harlem Sketchbook: White Man, Walk Easy" photos by Richard Saunders, *Saturday Evening Post*, June 13, 1964, 26.

63. Sam Castan, "The New New York: Victims of Welfare" *Look*, March 26, 1963, 68.

64. *New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1964, 2.

65. *Saturday Evening Post*, June 13, 1964, 26.

66. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1964, "Rubber Rats Being Mailed to Albany,"

67. *New York Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1964, 28.
68. *New York Times*, "5000 Are Expected for Albany March," March 9, 1964, 29.
69. *New York Times*, Fred Powledge, "Civil Rights and Labor Leaders Join for March on Albany," March 10, 1964, 19.
70. Fred Powledge, "3000 in Rights Protest March in Albany in the Snow," *New York Times*, March 11, 1964, 1.
71. *New York World Telegram and Sun*, October 22, 1964, page unknown, Bruce Gould Clipping File.
72. New York State Temporary State Housing Rent Commission, *Prospects for Rehabilitation: a demonstration study of housing in Morningside Heights New York City*, 1960, 1.
73. New York State Temporary State Housing Rent Commission, *Prospects*, 26.
74. "Harlem Rent Strike Continues While Conflicting Charges Fly," paper/page unknown—Bruce Gould clipping file, October 3, 1963.
75. *New York Times*, December 4, 1963. Testimony of Senator Jerome L. Wilson, October 29, 1963.
76. *New York Herald Tribune*, December 4, 1963.
77. *New York Post*, January 15, 1964, 36.
78. Fred Powledge, "One Million Rats Against Us" *New York Times Magazine*, October 18, 1964, 36.
79. Julius Horowitz, "The Grim State of Welfare" *Look*, March 26, 1963, 72.
80. *Ibid.*, 78.
81. *Saturday Evening Post*, June 13, 1964, 26.
82. *New York Times Magazine*, October 18, 1964, 78.
83. *New York Times Magazine*, 84.
84. In his indictment of the Housing Authority's tenant selection procedures, former HA employee Bernard Roscho called public housing the "most important source of decent urban housing for nonwhite families," but also the place where the government has the most unchecked control over who is admitted and who is denied. Roscho called it the "battleground" for the integration debate. (Roscho, Bernard. "The Integration Problem and Public Housing," 10).
85. Stanley's article from May 1963 criticizing Marcus is suspiciously similar in wording to William Reid's April 1963 letter to Congressman Abraham Multer, looking very much like a "reprint," itself.
86. *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 1963, MCH clipping file, Tamiment Library, New York University.
87. Letter from William Reid, NYCHA Chair, to Congressman Abraham Multer, April 24, 1963, MCH file, Tamiment Library, New York University.
88. *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 1963, page unknown, MCH clipping file, Tamiment Library, New York University.
89. *New York Amsterdam News*, January 31, 1959.
90. The *New York Amsterdam News* ran stories of the following NYCHA evictions:
In July of 1960, Inez Brown, a welfare mother of four who had lived in the Stephen Foster Homes for six years, was evicted on Charges of being an "undesirable tenant." The HA later claimed her eviction was for rent non-payment. Following pressure from Jesse Gray and the Lower Harlem Tenants Council, the Welfare Department stepped in to pay her rent, but later insisted that she move into a roominghouse. (July 30, 1960, 8).
- On November 26, 1960, the paper ran a story on another Stephen Foster Homes eviction involving a family of six. After charging (but not trying) the husband, Willis Watson, with selling drugs, the HA evicted him, along with his wife, Flora, and four children. A 1959 municipal court ruling overturned the eviction, saying there was no other proof that they were "undesirable," but the HA appealed. During the appeals process, the family was unable to pay rent, and in October of 1959, the family was evicted for rent nonpayment. The state Supreme Court subsequently upheld the HA's right to evict the family. (November 26, 1960, 3).
- In a letter to the editor, Mrs. Adele Ramage a mother of six, told the *Amsterdam News* that she was evicted for being "undesirable" and had been fighting the eviction for over a year. Her family was broken up and she moved in with her mother. From a five room apartment housing nine people, she wrote her letter pleading for help. (April 22, 1961, 10).
91. Gray and the Lower Harlem Tenants Council pressured the Welfare Department and the Housing Authority in the case of Inez Brown, a welfare mother of four evicted from the Stephen Foster Homes in July of 1960 after she had lived there for 6 years. (*New York Amsterdam News*, July 30, 1960, 8).
92. The bill was introduced by Assemblyman Daniel M. Kelley.
93. *New York Amsterdam News*, February 4, 1961, 4.
94. *Ibid.*, January 16, 1960, 5.
95. *Look*, "The New New York: Victims of Welfare," March 26, 1963, 77.
96. The rat continues to be a symbol for labor strikes. As the *New York Times* reported on May 11, 2002, "Workers striking over health benefits at Group Health Inc. in Manhattan were

accompanied yesterday by The Rat, a symbol of union protest.” Above this caption is a photograph of a giant inflated rat standing Frankenstein-like over a crowd of protesters, claws and teeth bared. (*New York Times*, May 11, 2002, B6).

97. Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics*, 199.