WOMEN IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Feminist Coalitions

Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States

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10. Unlikely Allies

Forging a Multiracial, Class-Based Women's Movement in 1970s Brooklyn

TAMAR CARROLL

My motivation to do community work stems from my upbringing. I grew up in East Harlem hearing that the "American Dream" was to go to school, get a good education, and move out of the ghetto. I always wondered who would be left to lead, if we moved "up and out." There seemed to be a big vacuum left in the neighborhood and I felt that it had to be filled. My mother and other family members had a strong influence on me. They were active in the community and fraternal organizations. As a small child, I saw my mother organizing in the church. Without thinking about it, I began to see a contradiction between "moving out of the ghetto" and "investing your life" in the community.

—Ethel Velez, "Why Do You Do Community Work?"

Ethel Velez is a life-long community activist in East Harlem and former president of the James Weldon Johnson Houses Resident Council. Beginning in the mid-1970s, public housing leaders in Brooklyn and East Harlem formed a coalition with the Williamsburg-Greenpoint, Brooklyn-based National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW), a working-class feminist organization. This coalition is remarkable for its ability to cross racial, ethnic, and class lines, in a historical context of racial strife and segregation and increasing economic stratification. In this chapter, I chronicle the early history of the coalition and argue that its method of consciousness raising led to an understanding of how identities can intersect, which enabled members to work across their many differences.[1]

This process represents what scholars have theorized as intersectionality, by which social relations of class, gender, and race, among others, shape each other, and are therefore best understood when analyzed together. Paraphras-

ing Robin Kelley, I want to argue that for these women, gender was lived through race and class.[2] By recognizing and acknowledging the important differences between women, NCNW members were able to move beyond parochial identities to construct a new, broadened community and a social movement based in mutual needs. Building trust across barriers of race and class took time; it was an ongoing process that transformed members' self-identities and generated innovative politics. Through personal interactions, guided consciousness raising, and group education and by working together for common goals, NCNW members generated a feminist philosophy that took into account "the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies."[3]

As has often been the case with women's activism, notably among labor feminists and social justice feminists, gendered understandings of women's roles as caretakers of family and community proved especially important in motivating the coalition members' political activity.[4] However, their programs also led them to challenge traditional gender roles, including those that had been encoded into social policies that assumed women's economic and social dependence on men and devalued women's labor.[5] Because state programs and policies impinged on their lives so intensely, the NCNW coalition offered a unique critique of the state. They also demanded that second-wave feminists broaden their agenda to oppose the ongoing destruction of low-income neighborhoods and the reduction of social services that denied the realization of social citizenship to poor and working-class Americans.[6] Though working-class in origin, the NCNW attracted middle-class professionals interested in engaging with a diverse women's organization. Although professional women played a played a key role in its success, the coalition eventually experienced tensions between its egalitarian goals and its actual decision-making processes. These tensions emerged particularly in the mid-1980s as NCNW founder, Jan Peterson, sought to maintain funding for the organization under the increasingly restrictive social policies enacted by the federal, state, and local governments as part of the global realignment of capital known as neoliberalism.[7] The conflict the organization experienced over its transition to an international network reveals the difficulties facing progressive social organizations challenged with adapting to changing political realities and limited resources.[8] Ultimately, however, differences of class and race were both a challenge and an asset for NCNW members, who learned from each other and benefited from members' varying strengths.

In the mid-1970s, poor and working-class neighborhoods in New York, including East Harlem in upper Manhattan and Williamsburg-Greenpoint

in Northern Brooklyn, were in crisis.[9] Faced with eroding tax revenue and increasing pressure from financial institutions to cut its municipal budget, New York City clamped down on fiscal spending, hitting these neighborhoods hardest. Many basic social services, including ambulance, fire, and police service, that had once been taken for granted, disappeared. On the brink of bankruptcy in 1975–76, the city fired thousands of municipal employees, raised transit fares, cut welfare benefits, closed library branches and health facilities, and imposed tuition at the city colleges for the first time in 129 years. Head of city housing and development, Roger Starr, announced a policy of "planned shrinkage," which referred to the withdrawal of police and fire stations and the closure of schools, hospitals, bus routes, and subway stations, all in poor and nonwhite areas of the city, which, he suggested, should "lie fallow until a change in economic and demographic assumptions makes the land useful again."[10]

Responding to this state-based attack on their neighborhoods, residents organized resistance strategies. African American women took the lead in public housing tenants' associations, continuing a long tradition of "othermothering" for their extended community by creating educational and social programs and pressuring city officials for decent housing conditions.[11] As the opening quotation from Velez indicates, these women felt a responsibility to stay in their neighborhoods and make them better. Working-class white ethnic women in Williamsburg-Greenpoint also took on leadership roles in their neighborhood, forming block associations and joining protests such as the successful sixteen-month occupation of a firehouse slated for closure by the city.[12]

This empowering sense of responsibility for improving the lives of family members and fellow community residents has been termed "activist mothering" by sociologist Nancy Naples. In her study of community workers involved in the War on Poverty, Naples found that many women from low-income backgrounds choose to stay in their communities and try to improve them, even when they had acquired education and the means to move out. She attributes this to the women's identities as activist mothers, often formed in relation to strong female role models, who practiced "political activism as a central component of mothering and community caretaking of those who are not part of one's defined household or family."[13] Members of the NCNW coalition shared this identity of community caretakers, whether or not they had children themselves. As Bronx public housing leader and NCNW member Linda Duke explained in an interview, her activism evolved from initial concern over her children's education to taking part in city and national politics:

> First of all, I am a mother of five children, grandmother of four. And I've been in public housing for, I don't know, 39 years. And by being a parent, and having children, the first thing you get active and involved in is the nursery school that your kids go. And things kind of grow from there because you want to make sure that your kids and other kids in the community have better service. So now I think that was my first introduction into being a community activist. And from there it just grew, not only from the nursery being involved with my kids' daycare, but also being involved in my kids in their school system. And in the school system where I lived there was this community and it just grew to being active.[14]

As Duke emphasized in recounting her own trajectory, a sense of community was often a key motivation for activism. Rooted in this gendered sense of social responsibility, a communal activism united disparate members of the NCNW coalition. Yet, even though women of color and white women shared similar motives when forming neighborhood groups, the long and intense history of racial segregation and violence in New York initially prevented them from joining together.[15] Fortunately, Naples notes, the process of constructing community itself "offers the possibility for redefinition of boundaries, for broadened constituencies, and for seemingly unlikely alliances."[16] NCNW founder Jan Peterson played a crucial role in bringing the groups together, facilitating the creation of a new, diverse community.

A tireless organizer and astute politician, Peterson participated in the civil rights movement, second-wave feminist consciousness raising groups in Manhattan, and the white ethnic movement of the 1970s.[17] She came to Williamsburg-Greenpoint in 1969 with a War on Poverty grant to start a community center aimed at local Italian American residents. Quickly recognizing that women were doing the majority of community work in the neighborhood, Peterson became interested in creating a new, specifically women-oriented organization in Williamsburg.[18] Concerned that "the mainstream women's movement did not reach and touch a majority of women who were poor, working class or involved in neighborhoods," and also that male-led white ethnic neighborhood groups were lacking (and sometimes hostile to) "a women's analysis," Peterson sought to establish "a new movement" in which "the fight for equal rights" would be "integrated with . . . efforts to improve the quality of life for . . . families and communities."[19]

With the help of Monsignor Geno Baroni, author Nancy Seifer, and then-Baltimore Councilwoman Barbara Mikulski, all prominent members of the white ethnic movement, Peterson organized a conference of 150 "neighborhood women"—defined as "welfare poor, working poor, and working-class women who live side-by-side."[20] Held in 1975 in D.C. and funded by Baroni's

National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, the meeting brought together women from all over the country, including fifty from Brooklyn.[21] During an emotional consciousness-raising session, recorded on film, women described their family backgrounds and life histories, and discussed their involvement in politics and their feelings about feminism and class. Many, including Mikulski, traced their political involvement to concerns over urban renewal schemes, pollution, and public policies, all of which were affecting their communities in significant ways.[22]

Congresswoman Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.) captured the spirit of the conference when she proclaimed her own working-class background and explained, "What people don't understand is that a women's movement is a movement of all women. And fundamental to that is the participation of all women to come together. It's not some upper-middle class intellectual thing that people try to make it. It's our problems."[23] For those gathered in D.C., confronting government bureaucracies in order to preserve their families and communities in the face of mounting adversity were primary objectives, and their feminism emerged in the context of working together toward such common goals.

The women gathered at the meeting voted to form an organization of their own—the National Congress of Neighborhood Women—to "affirm their values and roles, help them improve their lives and neighborhoods, and represent neighborhood women accurately to the world at large."[24] Following the conference, Peterson worked hard to secure funding for the group, utilizing her War on Poverty ties. In 1975, she succeeded in obtaining government grants to employ twenty-five Williamsburg women to comprise the first NCNW staff, as well as to create positions in local community organizations, including the Cooper Park Housing Tenants' Association.[25] The Brooklyn office Peterson established served not only as the headquarters of the national organization, but also as the site of most early NCNW initiatives. One of the groups' most important achievements was the creation of a community-based two-year college program, founded in 1975, offering tuition-free courses taught in Williamsburg with a curriculum designed by the students and focused on urban sociology and neighborhood organizing.[26]

At first, the Italian American women Peterson had begun working with were reluctant to share the NCNW's newfound resources with African American and Hispanic neighbors, especially the Comprehensive Employment Training Association (CETA)–funded jobs and slots in the college program.[27] As Ida Susser noted in her study of Williamsburg-Greenpoint from 1975 to 1978, good jobs were scarce and many families were desperate for income, making the CETA-funded positions extremely desirable.[28] However, Peterson and Christine Noschese, who was then directing the college program, sought

to involve women of color from nearby public housing complexes, especially Cooper Park, in NCNW programs.

African American public housing leaders, including Margaret Carnegie, Mildred Tudy, and Mildred Johnson, had formed the Cooper Park Tenants' Association with the goal of improving "living conditions in the project community, and uniting the tenants of the community for the betterment of the community."[29] Courted by Peterson and Noschese, leaders from the Cooper Park Tenants' Housing Association, became involved with the NCNW through the CETA jobs and college program and shared with them their considerable knowledge and experience in neighborhood-based activism.[30] Many local women reported becoming involved in the organization as mothers, utilizing the day care program or joining the college program to be able to better provide for their families.

Initially, it was difficult for both white women and women of color to work together because of suspicion and fear. As Italian American Sally Martino Fisher put it, "I was 10 when Cooper Projects were built. And it was forbidden [for me to go there] because it was . . . all minorities in there. . . . I was raised in a very white neighborhood . . . I had to change my feelings and thinking in the support groups and everything else because [before joining the NCNW] I never saw black people."[31] Martino Fisher explains that although there were people of color living in her neighborhood, she had no personal relationships with black women before joining the NCNW, and her sense of crossing racial boundaries by collaborating with women in public housing is significant. Most of the white ethnic women involved in the NCNW lived in private housing, but many of the African American and Hispanic women lived in public housing. Housing segregation was maintained, in part, by private property owners who refused to rent to people of color. Also, white ethnic families took pride in doubling or tripling up—placing several nuclear families in one house—to avoid residing in public housing, which they perceived as stigmatizing, because of its associations with people of color. The unexamined racism, fear, and hesitancy of the group's white ethnic members did not make it easy for the women of color to trust them. According to Velez, her early experiences with consciousness raising within the group were frustrating because of the racial divisions: "I hated it. I did not like it at all. . . . I used to think a lot of the women in the group were real racist. . . . There wasn't a lot of integrating going on."[32]

Women from both groups faced being disparaged for their participation. As one NCNW member reported: "The majority of women do not understand . . . if you talk to them about women being independent, they start thinking gay. . . . My husband said 'You'll never go back to the [National]

Congress [of Neighborhood Women],' after he saw some gay women there." Similarly, she said, "when I went to the Congress, they'd say she's selling out to the white group."[33] In a poor and working-class community where survival depended upon family and kin networks, the threat of social ostracism and the withdrawal of male support worked against collaboration across racial boundaries.[34] However, as Bernice Johnson Reagon once said, "You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive."[35] The NCNW coalition offered its members opportunity, an alternative support network, and a shared vision of a better future.

Over time, both groups stuck it out because, as Velez put it, in the end, "the good outweighed the bad."[36] The NCNW and public housing tenants' associations shared mutual needs, ranging from the immediate, such as getting traffic lights installed at intersections where children were being hit by cars and providing shelter for those needing to escape from domestic violence, to the long range, such as obtaining college degrees and taking part in public policy decision making. According to Duke, the hallmark of the NCNW was bringing diverse groups of women together and allowing them to recognize common goals:

> And that is one thing that I can say for National Congress of Neighborhood Women, they bring people together. They bring people together. And from all walks of life, cross cultures, definitely different religions, definitely nationality, they bring people together. And the way they bring people together, that we all have the same needs, the same problems, but we're just in different parts of the puzzle. But as one puzzle. We all have the same problems and we all can relate to one another.[37]

Professional women within the group played an important role in helping the grassroots women recognize these mutual needs.

In June 1978, Christine Noschese explained the benefits of NCNW's college program:

> In the "Labor and Immigration" course, women saw there was a difference of what it means to come to New York City as a black person, or to come as an Italian or Irish working-class person. The college program helped them to explore these similarities from a different perspective . . . [it] provides a forum to get together to see what their problems are without white-washing their differences.[38]

NCNW's college program brought white ethnic, Hispanic, and African American women together in a shared social space, highlighting, in its multiplicity,

the highly segregated residential patterns of New York City. It proved to be crucial in allowing the NCNW and public housing leaders to bridge their differences. The curriculum's emphasis on family, community, and labor history provided a guided forum for students to explore the intersections and implications of their multiple identities. For example, students explored the structural racism embedded in the local labor market that led white ethnic families, who generally were able to secure at least one regular job per household, to be identified as working-class, but some African American families were unable to secure any regular employment, and were identified as poor.[39] Discussions of immigration history and the sociology of poor and working-class families not only helped students break down the categories of "black," "Hispanic," and "white," but also to understand a variety of ethnic backgrounds and differing experiences of oppression.

African-American public housing leader and NCNW graduate Diane Jackson remembered the college program as the most important site of interracial dialogue:

> We had to get over a lot of obstacles. . . . There was some racial tension. In working with these other women from outside the community, we were able to identify what those racial issues were and talk about it. I remember when the film *Roots* came out and it was part of our assignment to watch it for class. Just to hear some of the responses from other people opened up the door to start talking about race and racism and misunderstandings. We began to find out more about each other, found out that we had a lot in common. . . . Some of the women that I met in the college program, we helped each other, we worked things out.[40]

The college program's feminist analysis of institutions including the family also led members to recognize mutual needs, such as gaining the right to be protected from domestic violence. Many of the women in the college program were victims of abuse, and, for some, participation in the NCNW increased their vulnerability, as husbands and boyfriends grew to resent their growing independence. Sociologist Terry Haywoode, who at one time taught in and directed the NCNW college program, recalled white women and women of color coming together to protect each other from abusive husbands and boyfriends: "One woman whose husband didn't want her to go to class would be escorted by four very large women."[41]

In another case, when an angry husband came to the NCNW office and began attacking his wife, the other women in the office fought him off and invited her to move in with them until she could find her own housing.[42] Offering physical protection promoted trust between members and led to future collaboration around a number of women's issues. For example, in

1976, the NCNW's college program sponsored a "speak-out on wife battering," which led to the establishment of the first battered women's shelter in New York City, the Women's Survival Space, a joint effort between the NCNW and Young Women's Christian Association.[43]

Drawing on Peterson's experiences in the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements, the NCNW used consciousness raising, followed by leadership support training, as its primary organizing methodology. Their program, which was also adopted by affiliates of the Brooklyn-based group, first recruited a diverse group of neighborhood women, who worked to develop "personal supportive relationships between themselves," using "a dialogue format." For example, questions included "What is great about being female? What are some great memories you have about growing up female? What has been hard about being female? What couldn't you stand about growing up female? What can't you stand about other women? What do you require of another woman in order for her to be your ally?"[44] Women sat in a circle, refrained from talking over each other or judging one another, and, ideally, gave each other equal talking time. Other sessions focused on additional aspects of identity, including race, class, religion, and sexuality. As they listened to each other, members came to recognize commonalities as well as differences and were encouraged to reflect upon the ways in which institutions such as the family, the mass media, and the workforce had shaped their lives and worldview.

Additional structured conversations encouraged them "to identify their particular concerns, analyze the impact of their concerns on their lives; and work with others to map out strategies that neighborhood women can act upon within their community."[45] Through this process, women were encouraged to connect their personal history with societal institutions and structures of power and to generate their own theories of identity and social change. According to Velez, this was a powerful experience, motivating and sustaining her activism, because, "for me, social change organizing needs to come out of personal experience, consciousness, and a vision of what should be."[46]

Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon describe consciousness raising, the primary mode of organization for the women's liberation movement, as "a form of structured discussion in which women connected their personal experiences to larger structures of gender" and "came to understand that many of their 'personal' problems . . . were not individual failings but a result of discrimination."[47] Because the NCNW membership was more diverse than many radical women's liberation groups,[48] the NCNW discussed race and class as well as gender and developed an understanding of the intersection of these categories of identity. Analyzing their own experiences and connecting

them to social structures allowed NCNW members to overcome class and race shame and to build upon the positive aspects of their identities as poor and working-class women. For example, their resilience and commitment to furthering social justice and improving conditions for their communities are positive aspects. Hence, societal relations of power, including race, class, and sexuality, shaped but did not determine member's identities.[49]

The NCNW first developed its leadership training program for use in support groups within the college program in the late 1970s. In 1979, Lisel Burns, who was trained in peer counseling techniques, joined the NCNW and worked to formalize the group's guided consciousness-raising methodology into a leadership training program that could be used by other women's groups across the United States and internationally.[50] Outlining this leadership training program for poor and working-class women, NCNW founder Jan Peterson demonstrated a holistic conception of identity when she wrote in 1982: "Since low and moderate [income] women experience not only sex oppression but other oppressions based on their age, race, class and ethnicity, it is essential to combine this understanding in our work. . . . In understanding sexism we will have to understand all other oppressions."[51] Over time, this multidimensional understanding of power relations allowed the NCNW to see interconnections between institutions such as the family, the welfare state, and corporations and to draft a broad and inclusive agenda for social change. NCNW members were well aware of the state's regulation of their lives through punitive welfare policies targeting single mothers; urban renewal programs that uprooted their communities; and the exportation of jobs, education, and health care from their neighborhoods. Identifying the federally mandated shift of resources from urban and mixed-race areas to suburban and white areas, and linking this shift to women's ability to survive within their communities, the NCNW offered an analysis of structural inequalities embedded in state policies and practices. Challenging feminists to broaden their agendas, NCNW member Terry Haywoode argued in 1978 that the "destruction of neighborhoods through bureaucratic callousness" and budget cuts should be prioritized along with reproductive rights and the establishment of women's studies programs.[52]

Influenced by their coalition work with public housing leaders, NCNW members identified adequate housing for all families as their top priority in the 1980s and fought to secure their own, women-friendly housing development in a city-owned, abandoned hospital in Greenpoint. Peterson and NCNW member Ronnie Feit explained, "it was clear to us that the design and operation of poor and low-income neighborhoods and communities . . .

worked against the efforts of poor women to attain self sufficiency and decent lives for themselves and their families."[53] Approaching feminism from their social location as poor and working-class women, and like many others, as single mothers, they argued that to achieve equality as women, their basic needs for housing must first be met.

Class-based differences between the NCNW members and their professional allies and middle-class–oriented feminist groups sometimes led to conflict over the prioritization of issues and resources within the feminist movement. In the long term, NCNW member Caroline Pezzullo argued, poor and working-class women in the United States often had more in common with grassroots women's organizations abroad than with feminists at home: "We found that more poor women had similar problems all over the world than women in general, even though theirs may be more intensive in other countries, and it was a unifier."[54] At times these differences turned bitter as NCNW members chided white, middle-class feminists for neglecting their "bread and butter" issues of daily survival, and for "leaving behind" their families and communities in a search for self-improvement. Peterson described the NCNW's working-class feminism as distinct:

> A new women's voice is developing in the United States. This voice comes from poor and working-class women who can not fight for equity as women without trying to improve things for their families and communities. They can not or will not separate themselves from their families and communities to stand up as women, yet no longer will they step back in their community organizations when the monies come in so the men or "outside" professionals can have the jobs. At home they want partnerships with their husbands. They know that their men are also discriminated against in the areas of ethnicity, race, and class; they need each other to make it in today's world.[55]

The NCNW certainly did focus on community building, and some of its members did achieve lasting partnerships with men. However, many of the coalition members were single or divorced, and others were lesbian, suggesting that Peterson's rhetoric of "a brand new kind of feminism—pro-family, pro-church, and pro-neighborhood," with its emphasis on tradition, was designed in part to appeal to the press. Mainstream journalists endlessly attacked "selfish" middle-class women's liberation groups, who openly critiqued the domestic division of labor along gender lines and promoted more flexible family arrangements. In contrast, the *New York Times* applauded NCNW member Sally Martino Fisher for cooking her family's dinner "without complaining" before heading to Washington, D.C., to testify before a committee on urban and ethnic affairs, while another *Times* reporter noted: "The women of the

Northside sound remarkably free of recriminations about men and the past. They identify more than ever with their neighborhood, and their particular self-discovery seems less selfish than that of other revolutionaries."[56]

Even though the popular press exaggeratedly—and unfairly—charged women's liberation groups with being radical man-haters because of their call for men to take on a fair share of household duties, there were in fact important class-based differences in women's attitudes toward housework. During the NCNW's "Speak out on Housework," and in subsequent conversations in their college courses, members talked about their positive feelings toward caretaking for their families. For example, Marie Casella stated:

> I don't appreciate some middle-class woman telling me to get out of the kitchen who didn't know if there was a kitchen there, and didn't know if the struggles of her home related to the struggles of my home. . . . I happen to like my kitchen. I like being a mother and happen to like being a wife. I don't think you have to give those things up to be a liberated person. . . . I come from a very proud heritage. I know I'm Italian. It was drummed into me what Italian people are: they keep their home; they keep their husband; they keep everything. It was just a proud thing for me.[57]

For women such as Casella, pride in their cooking and household maintenance skills was tied to ethnic identity. It also reflected class-consciousness, especially for women who did not have the privilege of choosing whether to enter the workforce or not, and whose paid employment often was not fulfilling. The NCNW's dismissals of "middle-class feminists" revealed both genuine differences in perspectives as well as a desire to divert the backlash of criticism surrounding the women's movement from engulfing the organization.

Yet, despite Peterson's protraditional family and church rhetoric, it is clear that she and other members were aware of and sought to challenge traditions of male domination and female subordination within those institutions, as well as within local, state, and national governments. Notes from their consciousness-raising sessions include under "Obstacles": "Christianity is also male dominated." However, the NCNW's original goals included helping "women identify, perceive and assume power without feeling that it was a threat to family and feeling o.k. about it," making "women more aware of abilities and their rights, that they are not necessarily the weaker sex," enabling "women who didn't get out of the home to meet other women besides family members," to raise "consciousness on many levels," and to create "a new sense of identity."[58]

This tension between preserving or transforming male-dominated insti-

tutions such as the patriarchal family and the Roman Catholic Church was played out not only within the group's ideological publications, but also within member's personal lives. As one member put it in a 1976 interview, "I don't think of myself as a feminist, but I think of myself as equal to my husband. But he doesn't think of me as equal."[59] According to many members, the coalition was able to withstand the pressures generated by such tensions by allowing members to focus on working together on programs they all supported, but not taking an organizational stance on controversial issues: "It's very much of a family model, I think, and agreement was not the aim. We have these wonderful 13 principles but not like on reproductive rights. You didn't have to get agreement on issues, just agreement on wanting a better world for children and families with women taking responsible leadership."[60]

Focusing on processes-consciousness raising and support groups—and areas of mutual goals allowed the NCNW to avoid fracturing along lines of contention.[61] Despite their differences, the coalition bound together socialist feminists and devoutly religious women who opposed abortion. Many of the grassroots members were initially hostile to what they termed "middle-class feminism," which they perceived as antifamily, threatening or irrelevant to their lives. However, like Jean Kowalsky, who participated in the NCNW's CETA jobs program, many women testified to broadly supporting feminist goals. As Kowlaksy explained, at first, "the women's movement never meant a thing to me. It was the PTA, the church, that's all." In a 1979 interview with *Ms.* magazine, she reflected on her changed view: "I feel more worthwhile. I feel good about myself. And I think the women's movement is wonderful. Because I have daughters, and I want their life to be easier than mine was. I want them to get paid what they're worth, and to get money when they're promoted. I want them to feel good about themselves."[62]

Over time, NCNW members developed a feminist stance, then, both through consciousness raising in the college program and in support groups and through challenging power structures, including the patriarchal family and state bureaucracies.[63] Professional women, who generally functioned as leaders, brought important knowledge and organizing strategies to the group and worked to empower the grassroots members to participate in local, state, and national politics. As Jackson explained: "So many women in our community, through Jan [Peterson], got involved in a whole lot of other things. We got involved in school board elections, in registering to vote, getting young people involved, improving the streets in our communities, getting street lights, stop lights. . . . Learning how to work the system, how to make elected officials work for us."[64]

Defeat, as much as success, helped mold members' understandings of

interlocking systems of oppression. For example, when the NCNW tried to form a multiracial women's political party to put women in local political offices in Williamsburg, Peterson recalled that, "the whole political machine came out against [the NCNW's] candidates because they saw the threat of diverse women from different racial backgrounds coming together." Male party politicians worked to divide them along racial lines, inflaming long-standing tensions to get their candidates in office. The traditional parties' candidates won the election and the Williamsburg's women's political party never got off the ground.[65] As Celene Krauss observed in her study of white working-class women's environmental justice campaigns, female activists, especially those that are poor, working-class or nonwhite, often find themselves excluded "from direct participation in political life," experiencing "a contradiction between the state's democratic promise" and its actual workings. This recognition of their exclusion allowed NCNW members, like the women in Krauss' study, to develop an oppositional consciousness[66] and to push for the realization of their citizenship rights.[67]

In addition to playing an important role in leading consciousness-raising groups and teaching in the college program, professional women within the NCNW also enabled the coalition to obtain federal grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for improving public housing. Velez explained how the NCNW's initial cooperation with public housing leaders in Brooklyn deepened in the 1980s through her participation in the group:

> "In 1982, I joined the National Congress of Neighborhood Women. At first, I couldn't see how the women's issues applied to my community focus until I thought about it and realized that the leaders in James Weldon Johnson Houses were all women. Since then I have challenged the National Congress of Neighborhood Women to adapt its leadership and organizing processes to the development of the James Weldon Johnson complex. I also expanded the network of public housing tenant groups within the NCNW to help end the isolation of public housing leaders from the broader development movement."[68]

Building on the strength of Cooper Park leaders and Velez, in the early and mid-1980s, the NCNW helped organize other public housing tenant's unions through out New York City, including the largely Hispanic Borinquen Plaza Union in Williamsburg. With funds from the Community Service Society, the NCNW facilitated the formation of the Federations of Greenpoint-Williamsburg and of East Harlem Public Housing Developments, in the hopes that coalition building would allow tenants' associations greater leverage

in combating the hazardous living situations they faced.[69] Many residents endured conditions similarly dismal to those described by Borinquen Plaza Tenants Union President Jesus Lorenzo in a 1986 letter to Senator Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.):

> We the tenants of Borinquen Plaza in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, have seen the deterioration of our housing complex since it opened in 1976. We have suffered the consequences of inadequate management by the housing authority. Crime, vandalism, lack of communication between the tenants and the New York City Housing [Authority] is rampant. The tenants have also been charged fees without justified reason. Flies, rats, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions make living here unbearable.[70]

With the federal government pursuing a policy of privatization of public housing and cuts in social welfare, help was not forthcoming.[71] The NCNW coalition believed community action was the only recourse to ensure the survival of their communities.

Through their national network, the NCNW put New York public housing leaders in touch with St. Louis activist Bertha Gilkey, who gained recognition when Jack Kemp, director of HUD during the first Bush administration, praised her for transforming the once-dilapidated Cochran Gardens public housing development into a successful tenant-managed complex. Gilkey worked with the coalition members to develop long-range plans for improving public housing in New York City and provided both practical advice and networking ties for obtaining federal funding. In October 1994, with Gilkey's help, the NCNW and the East Harlem Public Housing Coalition successfully applied for a $400,000 grant from HUD, which went to five different public housing complexes in New York City, allowing the coalition to organize tenants into more politically effective unions through leadership training and the assignment of block captains, as well as funding physical improvements, including fencing, better lighting, and the construction of community centers within the developments.[72]

Without the specialized knowledge, formal credentials, and political affiliations of the professional members of the NCNW, the public housing tenants' associations would have been unable to obtain these federal grants. Coalition members were aware of this need for professional legitimacy. Velez noted, "what I appreciate about the [National] Congress [of Neighborhood Women] is that they allowed us the opportunity to gain resources and to broaden our perspective on things we want to do."[73] However, the professional leadership of the group also led to a patronage system, where women with graduate degrees—mostly white from working-class backgrounds—were administering the federal grant programs and, therefore, hiring and supervising the less formally educated women working at the NCNW through the CETA program or through public housing grants. As Ida Susser emphasizes in her study of community action programs in Williamsburg-Greenpoint, low-income workers' need for jobs in a climate of 12 percent unemployment made them unlikely to challenge the leadership of program administrators.[74] This funding-mandated patronage system, combined with Peterson's dominant tendencies, at times created conflict between the group's rhetoric of group empowerment and its less inclusive decision-making practices.

Peterson was an astute political actor, recognizing shifts in government and foundation funding dictates and adjusting the NCNW's programs to meet new requirements. Trained as a psychotherapist, she was also a highly charismatic leader, befriending neighborhood women and cultivating their own leadership capabilities. Christine Noschese recalled Peterson's talent for encouraging and inspiring the women around her: "When she was in your corner and she was pushing you, you could climb mountains. She was just fantastic that way."[75] Though many NCNW members testified to Peterson's ability to empower them personally, she proved unwilling to cede overall leadership to others, and NCNW members who challenged her governance, or supported women who did, eventually left the group. In 1979–80, and again in 1985–86, fractures between Peterson and the NCNW's other strong leaders over questions of the group's direction and priorities created an environment of distrust that led to the breakup of important friendships and the loss of momentum for social justice organizing.[76]

Although the organization did regroup and continue to function following both splits, these losses were extremely painful to other members such as Rosemary Jackson, who likened their fissures to "ripping out your guts." Jackson recalled the contentiousness of the organization in the mid-1980s, when grants from previous sources of funding, including CETA, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the New York City Department of Labor, had dried up, causing Peterson to increasingly seek new sources of revenue through the organization's national and international network. While some members welcomed the new opportunities afforded by the NCNW's growing network, others feared the loss of the local women's programs they had fought so hard to establish in Brooklyn in the 1970s.[77] The strong emotional connections between members were both an asset and a liability for the group; they bound members together and encouraged risk taking for social change, yet they also led to personalization of conflicts and intense feelings of pain and loss over perceived disloyalty. As one member wrote, "NCNW really is like a family—in all its aspects; it tears you apart, it puts you back together again."[78]

Like other charismatic, strong-willed leaders, Peterson's actions revealed tensions between her belief in democratic participation, and her need to direct the development of the organization she founded and devoted her life to. A pragmatist as well as an idealist, Peterson followed the funding, often acting out of necessity. These programmatic realignments frustrated some members who wanted the NCNW to continue focusing on serving the needs of low-income women in New York and not to give greater emphasis to national and international work. Interestingly, most of the public housing leaders remained in the coalition. Although they expressed feeling frustrated at times with Peterson's control, unlike some of the white ethnic members of the NCNW, they had other outlets to express their leadership capacity and needed the resources that Peterson could provide, especially access to federal funds and politicians.

The coalition of the NCNW and public housing leaders has survived into the present, a testimony to the dedication of these activists and the strength of their dream for a better collective future. NCNW's longevity and success may be best explained by Velez: "Social change is about persistence, stubbornness, and the willingness to follow a wiggly road."[79] Remarkably adept at responding to changing political tides, Peterson has refocused the NCNW from a local to a global network, forming in 1985 a new nonprofit, Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS International). Through GROOTS, Peterson has been able to secure U.N. funding and to introduce the New Yorkers to women from all over the world in an effort to share organizing strategies and to build a global grassroots women's movement.[80] This international development has been a fruitful area of growth for the NCNW in the past two decades, partially because it has allowed women's groups to work around and beyond the limitations set by national governments.[81]

As Peterson worked to expand her global network, Velez and other public housing leaders in New York built upon the coalition forged through their work with the NCNW to form a new citywide organization of public housing tenants in 1996. The New York City Public Housing Resident Alliance charged themselves with the mission of informing and connecting residents "so that they can have a strong and effective voice, and secure greater accountability" in government decisions affecting public housing. The alliance has successfully lobbied city, state, and national legislators in an effort to preserve rent ceilings and to prevent enactment of time limits on tenancy. As a result of the alliance's outreach efforts, over 1,500 public housing residents have attended the housing authority's planning meetings for city compliance with the 1998 Quality Housing Act. The alliance currently is fighting for federal repeal of

mandatory community service required of public housing residents under the 1998 Act as well as working to preserve residents' role in decision making in the shaping of public housing policy in New York.[82]

The coalition between the NCNW and public housing leaders continues, and one-half of the ten-person board of the alliance is composed of women who have participated in NCNW programs. The alliance uses the NCNW's Brooklyn office to house its records and for meeting space, and the two groups continue to collaborate on grant requests and training programs. However, in interviews, many former and current members of the coalition expressed a desire to return to the closer emotional ties between members that were created in the context of daily or weekly contact in the 1970s, when the coalition provided CETA jobs, the college program, and frequent consciousness-raising sessions.[83] Although she has remained active in community organizing, Fisher recalled those years as the best of her life, saying that she felt an unequaled sense of accomplishment and belonging as a result of her participation in the NCNW:

> I mean, we're telling poor, working class women that National Congress is a vehicle for a voice for them in the women's movement. Not the traditional women's movement and we're going to bring your issues, your bread and butter issues to that movement for support. So that you could move. And you know, that's what we did, exactly what we promised. We came up with job training, we came up with women, you know, getting jobs. All of what we said, getting their high school diplomas, learning how to speak English. I mean, all of the things that we said that we would do. And that's why I feel so good about organizing around that because I saw the outcome and that made me feel that I really, you know, had a place. I really helped them and I guess that's another reason I feel so great about those years.[84]

Fisher's strong connection to the NCNW, twenty years after she left the organization, highlights the importance of creating nurturing, inclusive activist communities to achieve social change. Histories of the second wave are only recently beginning to explore the activism of working-class white women and women of color,[85] but the NCNW offers an important model for studying the ways in which a concept of intersectionality can help us understand the nature of coalition work across differences, offering insights for broader social justice movements.

Drawing upon their identities as poor and working-class white women and women of color, NCNW members formed a new, broadened community. NCNW's specific focus on recognizing and analyzing the differences between members facilitated the construction of successful cross-race and

cross-class partnerships. Rather than allowing differences among them to fracture their coalition, the NCNW implemented intersectionality through its practice of guided consciousness raising, to engage in a principled coalitional form of identity-based politics. Once understanding and trust was established, NCNW members were able to identify areas of mutual needs and even to work on issues that did not directly benefit their own group because they valued the coalition and enacted their belief in working to advance the position of all low-income women and communities.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote in 1981, "we've pretty much come to the end of the time when you can have a space that is 'yours only.'" Identity politics, she noted, are indeed powerful and necessary, but ultimately must be combined with coalition building in order to achieve lasting social change. Reagon reminded feminists to broaden their communities, stating that, "the 'our' must include everybody you have to include in order for you to survive."[86] Against powerful odds, NCNW coalition members recognized that they needed each other to survive and were willing to work out their differences—which has become their lasting strength. Today, U.S.-based feminists face significant challenges in forming inclusive organizations for social change. Greater residential segregation along racial and class lines is one functional barrier to the formation of neighborhood-based integrated women's groups.[87] The elimination of federal funds for organizing and service provision in poor communities makes it much more difficult for innovative grassroots groups such as the NCNW to obtain the resources they need to succeed. As the cost of higher education rises and affirmative action programs are abandoned, opportunities for meaningful exchanges across class and racial differences in educational settings are diminished. We should not give up in despair, however. Rather, we can draw on the legacy of the courageous women of the NCNW and others like them who continue to fight for progressive change and continue to challenge themselves to work through and across the differences that separate them.

In spite of the internal and external challenges they faced, the legacy of the NCNW coalition reveals the rewards of grassroots organizing. Through consciousness raising and collaborative education as long-term strategies for group empowerment and understanding, the NCNW transformed its members' lives. NCNW members achieved an oppositional consciousness and made demands for recognition of their citizenship rights and for redistribution of economic power and social decision-making responsibility.[88] Although their efforts did not always bring the results NCNW members hoped for, they did result in concrete improvements in their communities as well as greater opportunities for participants in the college and training

programs. Ultimately, the NCNW's consciousness-raising and leadership support groups have been crucial in supporting and sustaining women's activism, resulting in diverse and lasting networks for social change.

This type of slow, process-oriented organizing for social change is similar to that successfully employed by the great civil rights leaders Fannie Lou Hammer and Ella Baker, as well as by members of the Young Lords Party in New York City, and the female members of Students for a Democratic Society in its Economic Research and Action Project.[89] Significantly, even though these groups did not begin as specifically feminist oriented, through consciousness raising and struggling against discrimination, like the NCNW, they came to adopt a feminist perspective. Through their activism, they enacted the second-wave feminist principle that the personal is political.[90] Activists today can learn much from the NCNW's use of consciousness raising and group education and its building of diverse coalitions, as primary social change strategies. Broad-based progressive movements must begin with individual transformation and face-to-face relationship building across lines of difference. Although this type of organizing is time-consuming and intensive, it yields long-term commitments to change—and coalitions to facilitate it—which are necessary to combat entrenched bureaucracies and other barriers to the empowerment of low-income Americans and the realization of democratic participation for all residents.

Notes

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brother, David, have brightened my spirits and encouraged me to keep at it. Finally, I would like to thank the many NCNW members who shared with me their experiences in oral history interviews, telephone conversations, and e-mails and continue to inspire me with their courage, commitment, and understanding.

1. The NCNW also formed coalitions with other grassroots women's groups across the United States and internationally, which I explore in Tamar Carroll, "How Did Working-Class Feminists Meet the Challenges of Working across Differences? The National Congress of Neighborhood Women, 1974–2006," *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000* 10, no. 4 (December 2006).

Drawing upon the organizational records of the NCNW and oral history interviews, this chapter will focus in particular on the coalition between the NCNW and public housing tenants' associations in New York City. Velez joined the NCNW in 1982, but other public housing leaders including Mildred Tudy, Mildred Johnson, Margaret Carnegie, and Diane Jackson began working with the NCNW shortly after its founding in 1975.

2. Kelly writes, "Class is lived through race and gender." Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 11.

3. Here, I draw on Estelle Freedman's definition of feminism: "Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies." Following Freedman, I consider the NCNW to be feminist although not all its members self-identified as such, because the group did articulate these beliefs in equal worth, social movements, and intersectionality. Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 7.

4. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Nancy A. Naples, ed., *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing across Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830–1900* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); Kathryn Kish Sklar, Anja Schuler, and Susan Strasser, eds., *Social Justice Feminists in the United States and Germany: A Dialogue in Documents, 1885–1933* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

5. Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

6. For an overview of social citizenship, see Gordon's introduction in Linda Gordon, ed., *The New Feminist Scholarship on the Welfare State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989).

7. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade." The ascendancy of neoliberalism across the globe since 1970 has led to "deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision." David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2–3. The Reagan administration's embrace of neoliberalism led to severe cuts in discretionary domestic spending on social programs in the United States.

8. On this point, see also Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 287–98; and Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969–1990* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 181–205.

9. East Harlem is a predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhood dominated by large public housing complexes. Williamsburg-Greenpoint was, earlier in the twentieth century, largely white ethnic, with a working-class population of Irish, Italian, and Polish residents, and a smaller group of Hasidic Jews. Construction of public housing in the 1950s introduced African American residents to the neighborhood; however, it remained heavily segregated, with many private homeowners refusing to rent to nonwhites, and a high level of white-on-black racial violence. Throughout the 1970s, Williamsburg-Greenpoint experienced tremendous population change, with the exodus of many middle-class whites and the influx of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants. As the Latino population of Williamsburg-Greenpoint grew, so too did the participation of Latinas—primarily Puerto Rican, but also Mexican and Dominican—in the NCNW. Over time, some men also became involved in the organization, attending its college program or working for the NCNW, although it remained a women-focused and directed group. Ida Susser, *Norman Street: Poverty and Politics in an Urban Neighborhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Carol Brightman, "The Women of Williamsburg," *Working Papers*, January/February 1978, NCNW records, box 28, folder 12.

10. Glenn Fowler, "Starr's 'Shrinkage' Plan for City Slums Is Denounced," *New York Times*, February 11, 1976; Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor since World War Two* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 277.

11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 189–92. Collins describes *othermothering* as stemming from an "ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women" that often leads them to care for all children in their community and to become social activists.

12. People's Firehouse Housing and Community Development Co., tenth anniversary brochure, November 23, 1985, NCNW records, box 135, folder 19; Susser, *Norman Street*, chap. 10.

13. Nancy A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 11. For another important analysis of the leadership role of grassroots women in antipoverty community-based programs, see

Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

14. Linda Duke, interview by author, digital recording, Smith College, February 21, 2004. This interview and all other interviews with NCNW members by author are collected in the Tamar Carroll Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

15. Susser, *Norman Street.* See also Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Craig Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

16. Nancy A. Naples, "Women's Community Activism: Exploring the Dynamics of Politicization and Diversity," in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing across Race, Class, and Gender,* ed. Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998), 337.

17. While the white ethnic movement is often regarded as a white racist reaction to the civil rights movement, some of its leaders advocated cooperation between poor and working-class whites and people of color, especially in urban areas. Especially influential in calling for interracial cooperation was Monsignor Geno Baroni, Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Carter Administration, and founder of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs. Philip Shabecoff, "Msgr. Geno Baroni, a Leader in Community Organizing," *New York Times,* August 29, 1984. For Peterson's biography and an account of the NCNW's founding and early years, see Mary Field Belenky, Lynne A. Bond, and Jacqueline S. Weinstock, *A Tradition That Has No Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families, and Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), chap. 8. The civil rights, second-wave feminist, and white ethnic movements of the 1960s and 1970s provided an important context for the NCNW's organizing by politicizing gender, racial and ethnic, and class identities in a new way, allowing NCNW members to see themselves as (more) legitimate political actors. I explore this political and cultural context further in my dissertation, Tamar Carroll, "Grassroots Feminism: Direct Action Organizing and Coalition Building in New York City, 1955–1995," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2007).

18. Jan Peterson, interview by author, tape recording, Brooklyn, NEW YORK, August 16, 2002. Susser attributes women's greater involvement in the community to their tendency to maintain extended kin and friendship networks while visiting on stoops in their neighborhood and taking part in childrearing activities, and men's friendship networks more often centered around work, bars, or gangs. Susser, *Norman Street,* 119.

19. Jan Peterson, "A Bridge to the Neighborhoods for the Women's Movement," n.d., NCNW records, box 1, folder 23. Barbara Mikulski served as a Democratic Congresswoman from Maryland from 1976 to 1986, when she was elected to the U.S. Senate, where she continues to represent Maryland.

20. National Congress of Neighborhood Women, "The Neighborhood Women's Training Sourcebook," 1993, 7.

21. *National Congress of Neighborhood Women Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1976), NCNW records, box 29, folder 4.

22. See the chapters in Part II of John Bauman et al., eds., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Press, 2000).

23. *Working Class Women Changing Their World,* videocassette, produced by Jan Peterson and Christine Noschese, 1975, NCNW records, box 145, tape 4.

24. National Congress of Neighborhood Women, "The Neighborhood Women's Training Sourcebook," 3.

25. Lindsay Van Gelder, "National Congress of Neighborhood Women: When the Edith Bunkers Unite!," *Ms.,* February 1979, NCNW records, box 28, folder 10. The funds came from the pilot for the Comprehensive Employment Act (CETA). Jan Peterson, interview by author, tape recording, Brooklyn, NEW YORK, August 16, 2002.

26. Alice Quinn to Ralph Perrotta, May 22, 1975, NCNW records, box 31, folder 1. The NCNW college program proved highly successful and was adopted by six other women's organizations nationally. Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock, *A Tradition That Has No Name,* 217.

27. Christine Noschese, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, New York, April 1, 2004.

28. Susser, *Norman Street,* 52–53.

29. "The Constitution of the Cooper Park Tenants Association, Inc.," November 23, 1985, p. 1, NCNW records, box 101, folder 15. The tenants' association participated in a wide range of activities, from sponsoring meetings to discuss public policies and meeting with local officials, to planning holiday celebrations and sponsoring sports teams, to coordinating tenant monitored security. They also provided referrals for services, including alcohol and drug counseling, voter registration, emergency shelter, food stamp information, and child care. Jessie Conley to Tilly Tarrentino, March 11, 1986, NCNW records, box 101, folder 16.

30. *Metropolitan Avenue,* videocassette, produced and directed by Christine Noschese, 1985, NCNW records, box 145, tape 1.

31. Sally Martino Fisher, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, Queens, New York, March 23, 2004.

32. Ethel Velez, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, East Harlem, New York, March 30, 2004.

33. "Ethnic Heritage Cooper Park," audiocassette, NCNW records, box 143, tape 10.

34. Johanna Brenner, *Women and the Politics of Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 4.

35. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology,* ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 356–57.

36. Ethel Velez, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, East Harlem, New York, March 30, 2004.

37. Linda Duke, interview by author, digital recording, Smith College, February 21, 2004.

38. "A Dialogue on the Organization, Goals and Needs of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women," June 1978, pp. 1–2, NCNW records, box 3, folder 8.

39. Christine Noschese, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, New York, April 1, 2004. For a nuanced and informative account of the post–World War II labor market in New York City, see Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?: African Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

40. Diane Jackson, interview by Martha Ackelsberg, tape recording, New York, April 28, 2004.

41. Terry Haywoode, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, Boston, April 30, 2004.

42. Diane Jackson, interview by Martha Ackelsberg, tape recording, New York, April 28, 2004.

43. Lindsay Van Gelder, "Battered Wives Hit Back at the System," *New York Post*, Thursday, December 2, 1976, NCNW records, box 28, folder 10.

44. Jan Peterson to Counseling Staff, February 29, 1988, pp. 11–14, NCNW records, box 99, folder 9.

45. "Summary," n.d., pp. 2–3, NCNW records, box 98, folder 5.

46. Ethel Battle Velez, "Why Do You Do Community Work?," n.d., NCNW records, box 101, folder 34.

47. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 13.

48. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); Anne Valk, "Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 303–32; Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of Radical Women's Activism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

49. For a moving discussion of class shame and its effect on identity, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Red Dirt: Growing up Okie* (New York: Verso, 1997).

50. Lisel Burns, interview by author, digital recording, Northampton, Mass., February 21, 2004.

51. Jan Peterson, "Draft of Leadership Training Program," September 3, 1982, NCNW records, box 3, folder 19. I am not claiming that the NCNW was the first or the only group to employ an analysis of intersectionality; rather, I am arguing that using a conception of multiple identities allowed the NCNW to treat seriously the differences between members while also identifying areas of mutual needs. For an early and eloquent statement of intersectionality, see Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). Kimberly Springer writes that black feminists were the first to theorize "the intersections of race, gender and class." Black feminist organizations, she argued, employed an understanding of intersectionality to mount "interstitial" politics—"politics in the cracks"—that addressed the needs posed by black women's multiple identities. Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–2.

52. Terry Haywoode, "Women against Women: Middle-Class Bias in Feminist Literature," September 2, 1978, NCNW records, box 118, folder 4.

53. Ronnie Feit and Jan Peterson, "Neighborhood Women Look at Housing," in *The Unsheltered Woman: Women and Housing in the 80s*, ed. Eugenie Ladner Birch (Camden, N.J.: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 178.

54. Caroline Pezzullo, interview by author, audiocassette, New York City, August 19, 2002.

55. Jan Peterson to Counseling Staff, February 29, 1988, p. 7, NCNW records, box 99, folder 9.

56. Jan Peterson, "The NCNW," n.d., NCNW records, box 4, folder 22. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "Hers," *New York Times*, May 22, 1980, p. C2, NCNW records, box 28, folder 12. Francis X. Clines, "About New York: A Quiet Revolution in Northside," *New York Times*, January 21, 1978, NCNW records, box 28, folder 12.

57. Untitled term paper, n.d., p. 2, NCNW records, box 118, folder 5.

58. "Obstacles," n.d., NCNW records, box 1, folder 11; "NCNW: Original Goals and Objectives," n.d., NCNW records, box 1, folder 7; "Goals/Objectives Staff," November 20, 1979, NCNW records, box 1, folder 11.

59. Enid Nemy, "For Working-Class Women, Own Organization and Goals," *New York Times*, January 24, 1976, p. L20, NCNW records, box 28, folder 12.

60. Lisel Burns, interview by author, digital recording, Smith College, February 12, 2004.

61. Kimberly Springer describes a similar emphasis on process and consciousness raising within black feminist groups. Springer, *Living for the Revolution*.

62. Lindsay Van Gelder, "National Congress of Neighborhood Women."

63. Many NCNW members came to embrace reproductive rights. However, some members remained opposed to abortion, which likely posed a threat to their primary identities as mothers. See Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984).

64. Diane Jackson, interview by Martha Ackelsberg, tape recording, New York, April 28, 2004.

65. Jan Peterson, interview by author, tape recording, Brooklyn, New York, August 16, 2002.

66. Jane Mansbridge writes that "members of a group that others have traditionally treated as subordinate or deviant have an oppositional consciousness when they claim their previously subordinate identity as a positive identification, identify injustices done to their group, demand changes in the polity, economy, or society to rectify those injustices, and see other members of their group as sharing an interest in rectifying those injustices." Jane Mansbridge, "The Making of Oppositional Consciousness," in Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, eds., *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1–19, quote on p. 1.

67. Celene Krauss, "Challenging Power: Toxic Waste Protests and the Politicization of White, Working-Class Women," in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing across Race, Class and Gender*, ed. Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998). This process of developing a race- and class-inflected feminist consciousness through challenging existing power hierarchies is also similar to sociologist Nancy Naples's findings in her study of women community workers involved in the War on Poverty in New York and Philadelphia. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors*. Sociologist Terry Haywoode argues that the NCNW developed a working-class feminism rooted in women's sense of belonging to familial and kin-based networks, which utilized communal survival strategies. Haywoode notes, "this approach centered on the importance of community, both as an organizing tactic and as a goal. Through this approach they asserted the importance of community life and neighborhood culture in opposition to the growing emphasis on administrative rationality in government and corporate life." Terry Haywoode, "Working Class Feminism: Creating a Politics of Community, Connection, and Concern" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1991).

68. Velez, "Why Do You Do Community Work?"

69. See, for example, "Williamsburg/Greenpoint Federation," n.d, NCNW records, box 98, folder 10; and Zan White, "Pre-Application Form—For 1986 Funding Cycle," p. 4, NCNW records, box 98, folder 12.

70. Jesus Lorenzo to Daniel Moynihan, July 10, 1986, NCNW records, box 101, folder 1. Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

71. Roger Biles, "Federal Housing Policy in Postwar America," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, ed. John Bauman (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Press, 2000). Thomas Byren Edsall, "The Changing Shape of Power: A Realignment in Public Policy," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980, ed.* Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 269–93; R. Allen Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing: Ideology and Change in Public Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?: Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

72. "Partnership in East Harlem: James Weldon Johnson Houses and the NCNW," videocassette, directed by Lynn Pyle, NCNW records, box 145, tape 2. Jason DeParle, "Cultivating Their Own Gardens," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, January 5, 1992, NCNW records, box 15, folder 20. For more on Bertha Gilkey, see Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 106–7, 96–97. James Weldon Johnson Resident Association, Needmor Fund Application Form, p. 3, NCNW records, box 101, folder 35. The NCNW and James Weldon Johnson Houses Resident Association had previously received a $40,000 grant from HUD's Tenant Opportunity Program to expand resident participation in the tenants' association.

73. Ethel Velez, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, East Harlem, New York, March 30, 2004.

74. Susser, *Norman Street*, 27, 53.

75. Christine Noschese, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, New York, April 1, 2004.

76. "Update on the National Congress of Neighborhood Women," March 12, 1985, NCNW records, box 71, folder 6. The conflict in 1979–80 was over who should head the NCNW: when Jan Peterson took a position in Washington, D.C., in the Carter administration as aid to Midge Constanza, presidential assistant for public liaison, from October 1977 to 1980, Christine Noschese took over as executive director of the NCNW. When Peterson returned from D.C. to Brooklyn, she fought with Noschese for control of the organization and won, and Noschese left the organization to focus full-time on her film, *Metropolitan Avenue.* Additional information for this section comes from oral history interviews conducted with more than fifteen former and current NCNW members, as well as my own observations of the group's leadership at its reunion at Smith College in February 2004.

77. Rosemary Jackson, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, Northampton, Mass., February 20, 2004.

78. Rebecca Staton to Chris (sister and brother staff members and members of the board), July 22, 1979, NCNW records, box 31, folder 5.

79. Velez, "Why Do You Do Community Work?"

80. Sandy Schilen, "Presentation at the Global Coalitions for Voices for the Poor," World Bank Consultation, July 31–August 1, 2000, NCNW office, Brooklyn, New York. The international groups that the NCNW partnered with were composed of both grassroots women and professionals and were devoted to addressing the needs and values of local, grassroots women, like the NCNW itself.

81. Janet Peterson, interview by author, tape recording, Brooklyn, New York, August 16, 2002.

82. New York City Public Housing Resident Alliance, "About the Resident Alliance," June 2003, and "New York Public Housing Residents Read This," in author's possession. David Chen, "In Public Housing, It's Work, Volunteer, or Leave," *New York Times*, April 15, 2004, Juan Gonzales, "Fitting Day to Protest Housing Law," *Daily News*, January 16, 2001; J. A. Lobbia, "Home Breaker: Doing Community Disservice," *Village Voice*, June 13, 2000.

83. The job and college program were closed due to a lack of funding, stemming from federal and state cuts in social service spending, and a shift in private foundation's grant allocating priorities.

84. Sally Martino Fisher, interview by author and Martha Ackelsberg, digital recording, Queens, New York, March 23, 2004.

85. Nancy MacLean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class," *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 42–78; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Nancy Naples, ed., *Community Activism and Feminist Politics*;, Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York University Press: New York, 2003); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution.*

86. Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," 357, 65.

87. See the essays in John H. Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991) for analysis of the increased racial and economic polarization in New York City since the 1970s.

88. For an explanation of recognition and redistribution and an appraisal of the role of difference in democratic politics, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

89. Johanna Fernandez, "Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York City, 1969–1974" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2004); Jennifer Frost, *"An Interracial Movement of the Poor": Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s* (New York: New York University, 2001); Chana Kai Lee, "Anger, Memory and Personal Power: Fannie Lou Hammer and Civil Rights Leadership," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York City: New York University Press, 2001);

Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003).

90. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," in Shulamith Firestone, ed., *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (New York: Radical Feminist, 1970).

11. The Cooperative Origins of *EEOC v. Sears*

EMILY ZUCKERMAN

In 1973, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) began investigating Sears, Roebuck & Co., alleging that it discriminated against women because its commissioned sales force, selling big-ticket items such as home appliances and auto parts, was predominantly male. At the trial in 1985, Sears argued that female employees simply "were not interested" in these jobs because they were too stressful and competitive; they did not like the hours or could not work nights; and the jobs conflicted with their family responsibilities. Rosalind Rosenberg, an intellectual historian from Barnard, testified on behalf of Sears that women wanted jobs that complemented their family responsibilities, and that differences in hiring and promotions could be due to social construction rather than discrimination. Labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris testified for the EEOC that throughout history working women have always taken the opportunity to earn more money when it was offered to them. The court found Sears not liable for discrimination, and a debate ensued in academic circles and the media.

Although the investigation and case against Sears had been going on for almost twelve years by the time Rosenberg and Kessler-Harris testified in 1985, the media had paid relatively little attention until then. The coverage then expanded and became increasingly mainstream, pitting Kessler-Harris against Rosenberg as two distinctly opposite sides of the issue.[1] Historians engaged in the media debate to an uncharacteristic degree, through interviews, letters to the editor, conference discussions, and journal articles, and many middle-class feminists appeared to accept the polarized terms of the debate and choose sides, rather than redefine it in their own way.[2] The overall focus on the details of the debate distracted attention away from