

# Introduction

Thinking through and beyond the 1980s

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Writing in *Lesbians Talk Making Black Waves*, a book that sought to document the history and experiences of Black lesbians living in Britain, Araba Mercer, a publisher for Sheba Feminist Press who had been involved with Manchester's Black Women's Group in the mid-1980s, reflected that "There seemed to be so much more going on in the 1980s, everything was new, things were possible. There was so much dialogue and political theorising."<sup>1</sup> Here we reaffirm the 1980s as a period of activist dialogue, creativity, and energy in the face of the rise of the New Right. As Mercer said, things were *going on*. In spring 1979, the inaugural National Black Women's Conference was held in London; in autumn that year tens of thousands of women and men took to the streets of London to defend women's access to abortion; in 1980, Sheba Feminist Press was founded to prioritize the work of marginalized women. On the precipice of the new decade, then, new organizations and lines of defense were being established. That is not to say that the new decade was welcomed with optimism by activists in Britain. This is perhaps unsurprising. The general election of May 1979 had ushered in a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, which would go on to cut back the welfare state, disempower unions, and curb immigration. This conservative climate would provide the background against which British activists—both those concerned with the topics of this collection, and other groups, like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the trade unions—would

agitate over the coming years. In the 1980s, activists established new frontiers of resistance, organized around new demands, and built new collaborations. New ways of thinking—and, indeed, arguing—about liberationist projects would develop. New communities, campaigns and solidarities would crystallize. Some of these communities and campaigns of resistance are the subjects of this edited collection.

Despite their decades of mobilization, feminist and queer activists in the United States also approached the 1980s with trepidation. President Jimmy Carter was shortly to be ousted by Republican Ronald Reagan, who rode into the White House on a wave of electoral support fostered by the New Right, a multifaceted conservative movement that included reactionaries of many stripes. Social conservatives fueling the New Right's electoral success via wide-reaching televangelism railed against the gains of the civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements of the 1970s, citing such activist successes as *Roe v. Wade* and more visible queer communities in American cities as signs of moral decline.<sup>2</sup> Fiscal conservatives gained speed in the same era, as a global neoliberal intellectual movement began to influence the policies of Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and those of the incoming US president. This movement, which sought to replace government spending on society with apparent increased individual responsibility, centralized welfare as a moral-political issue, and young Black women on welfare were frequently chastised by the Reagan campaign in a way that united the socially and economically conservative factions of the New Right and electorate.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the HIV/AIDS pandemic took hold across the United States, initially arising in communities of gay men. Religious conservatives framed this as an act of “retribution from God,” and the Reagan administration was extremely slow to publicly acknowledge the disease that was devastating the country and the world.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of both neoliberal and social conservatism in the United States in this era was an inextricable racism, misogyny, and homophobia—one which activists were sharply attuned to, and which drove continued social justice work in the United States as the decade progressed. These two forces—of progress away from the inequalities that defined the nation's history, and of the desire to conserve the traditional morals and myths of the United States—became so powerfully opposed in the lead-up to Reagan's election that the period would later be framed as the start of the country's most recent set of “culture wars.”<sup>5</sup>

As in the United Kingdom, however, activists were not only responding to these painful political developments, fighting fires as they arose, but also drawing on histories of activism, and imagining and building futures beyond the violence of the present. It is these activisms that this edited collection draws to the fore. How did feminist and queer organizations of the 1980s simultaneously resist immediate threats, and establish theory, organizations, and structures that would support their communities in the years to come? How can we draw from these histories to understand how to resist and build in the wake of a recharged far-right movement across both contexts?

This collection brings together chapters that set out some of the sites, causes and organizations that activists used to both resist the emergencies of the present and forge forward in creating lasting social change in the 1980s. The book emerged from a need the editors identified as teachers: our students, often activists themselves, look to the past to explain and inspire their worlds, and have increasingly sought to explore beyond the better-known historical terrain of the period. It also emerged from our interests as researchers. As historians of Britain (Crook) and the United States (Jeffries), we wanted to bring scholars and histories of British and American activisms together: not to compare, but to position alongside one another and to see what intellectual synergies might emerge. Informal conversations had highlighted points of transatlantic convergence and difference in the activist histories we worked on. What sort of productive energies, we wondered, would be revealed if we brought work from the United States and the United Kingdom together, and what might be illuminated if we introduced American and British audiences to more fine-grained activist histories of the period in each other's areas?

The second reason for our dual focus was grounded in the shared politics of the period. Feminist and queer activists faced political opponents ideologically allied with one another. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher shared a personal and political rapport: "Mr. President, the natural bond of interest between our two countries is strengthened by the common approach which you and I have to our national problems," Thatcher told Reagan in 1981. "If we are to succeed in the battle of ideas, if we are to hold fast and extend the frontiers of freedom," she urged, "we must first proclaim the truth that makes men free. We must have the courage to reassert our traditional values and the resolve to prevail against those who deny our ideals and threaten our way of life."<sup>6</sup>

This volume amplifies the voices of those on the other side of the “battle of ideas”; those who challenged “traditional values”; those who dreamed of new ways of living. The “frontiers of freedom” that activists pushed were a stark contrast to Thatcher’s conservative frontiers: they centered on liberation and radical change as they sought to build better worlds. This collection seeks to shine a light on some of the locations and mechanisms of liberation campaigns in this epochal context. The chapters in *Resist, Organize, Build* tell the story of an era wherein—as the title of this volume suggests—queer and feminist movements on both sides of the Atlantic were resisting the historical inequalities exacerbated by Reagan and Thatcher, building communities of immediate survival and protest, but also nurturing ideas and organizations that would outlast the specific conditions of that period.

This volume positions scholarship on feminism alongside scholarship on queer activism. Putting it together, we asked: what if we took an expansive view of activism and looked at women’s and queer liberation campaigns alongside another? As this volume shows, considering feminist and queer organizing alongside one another highlights shared trajectories, ideas, and aims, but also reveals tensions.<sup>7</sup>

These chapters demonstrate the importance of a close attention to the debates and discussions that arose around race, solidarity, and coalitional organizations in the 1980s: debates that have implications in the present.<sup>8</sup> In the US context, Julie R. Enszer’s chapter describes the history—and present—of Aunt Lute Books, a “multicultural, feminist publisher” that has been an important site of feminist organizing since the 1980s and remains so today, and the lesbian-feminist publisher Spinsters Ink, who together published Gloria Anzaldúa’s critical Chicax feminist text *Borderlands/La Frontera* in 1987.<sup>9</sup> Jade Bentil’s chapter explores areas where Black and Asian women worked together to resist Thatcher’s government in the United Kingdom. The beginning of the Black Women’s Movement after 1979, Bentil says, “symbolized a historical moment in which Black feminists made political alliances with Asian feminists to reflect the everyday struggles of women of color and their collaborative efforts to confront and destroy the material sources of their deprivation.”<sup>10</sup> These alliances worked across, but were made vulnerable by, the different experiences of the women within them. “Endeavoring to fashion a collective analysis of the ways in which women of color navigated society became increasingly fraught due to the differing social locations that the majority of Black and Asian women occupied within Britain,”

Bentil writes.<sup>11</sup> While foregrounding areas of collaboration, Bentil focuses on the political activity and organizing of women of African, African Caribbean, and African American descent in Britain. In her expansive chapter, she explores the ways that the Black Women's Movement confronted racism in white feminism, challenged police violence, and established sites for community organizing. Bentil's chapter demonstrates the imperative for historians to turn to Black women's organizing when seeking to understand resistance to Thatcher's government.

Another important contribution of the chapters in this volume is the historicization of the concept of intersectionality, as an embodiment and as an organizing principle, for Black feminist activists.<sup>12</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw's pivotal essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" was published in 1989, at the end of the decade covered in this text.<sup>13</sup> Bentil's and Taous Dahmani's essays, in particular, show how UK-based Black feminist activists "theorized" intersectionality in the decade leading up to Crenshaw's US publication.<sup>14</sup> Bentil describes how the "Black socialist feminists in BBWG analyzed their marginalization as "intersecting," contributing to a transnational Black feminist practice that laid the foundations for Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of "intersectionality" as a theoretical framework in 1989."<sup>15</sup> Dahmani shows how the Black feminist photography magazine *Polareyes* was an important "forerunner to intersectionality, in the way that it simultaneously addressed oppressions related to gender, race, sexual orientation and abilities."<sup>16</sup> These chapters contribute toward the historicization of this crucial term, and to our understanding of the legacy of women's thought and action from this period.<sup>17</sup>

In some instances—like the feminist presses *Spinsters Ink* and *Aunt Lute Books* described by Julie R. Enszer and the existence of groups like *Gay Student Services* historicized by Michael S. Hevel and Charles J. Thompson—the structures that were built in this period of emergency have lasted, despite the constant threat to such grassroots organizations under the growing threat of neoliberalism and institutionalized conservatism of the late twentieth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>18</sup> Some authors in this volume also acknowledge that, while certain tangible structures built in this period have since disbanded, the ideas and "theorization" of this period of feminist and queer activism have endured: this is put forward in Bentil's and in Tamar Holoshitz's chapters on the Black Women's Movement in Britain and on American reproductive rights advocacy,

respectively.<sup>19</sup> Our indebtedness to the period is clear from the chapters in this volume, which show how the period was not only one of immediate “fire-fighting,” but also of building lasting structures of resistance and the formulation of influential feminist, queer, and anti-racist thought that continues to resonate with a new generation of activists today.<sup>20</sup>

## History and Contexts

The activism this collection explores emerged from the productive, painful tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. The British Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) was influenced, both in its ideas and its organization, by the women’s movements of the United States. Both sets of movements took inspiration from the global radicalism of 1968, and the Black Power movement and the civil rights movement. Both sets of women’s movements stressed grassroots organization and undertook radical critiques of the social and political oppression of women. As in the United States, British feminists engaged in consciousness-raising, drawing on their personal experiences to derive political arguments—“the personal is political,” as the maxim popularized by American Carol Hanisch went.<sup>21</sup> But the emphasis on personal experience was also a weakness for the movement: as Black women and other women of color would point out, the British WLM privileged white experiences and often failed to take account of the systemic racism faced by Black women. However, Black women and other women of color played a formative role in many of its campaigns and intellectual work. They would form important autonomous organizations in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Southall Black Sisters was founded in 1979, setting up the Southall Black Women’s Centre in 1983, and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) was established in 1978. Although OWAAD dissolved in 1982, the organization had an enduring and important legacy. Any chronology of women’s struggle for liberation, then, needs to consider the 1980s: as chapters in this collection by Bentil, Dahmani, and Turner show, women’s demands for resistance and revolution had not dissipated in these later years, but were being led by Black women and other women of color. We suggest that the 1980s should be seen as a longer period than one demarcated by decade’s beginnings and endings, and by the entrance and retreat of political leaders: we argue that to understand the grassroots

activism of this period we need to encompass the late 1970s and look forward to the early 1990s.

The experience of being gay in the 1980s in Britain had been transformed—at least for some—by the earlier visibility, activism, and agitation of the gay liberation movement. The Gay Liberation Front—active between 1970 and 1973—was in part inspired by the Stonewall uprising in New York, highlighting the entanglements of British and American liberationist histories. The first Pride march in England was held in July 1972, just five years after the passage of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which decriminalized consensual homosexual acts in private between men in England and Wales. The Sexual Offences Act 1967 did not bring male homosexuality onto an even keel with heterosexuality across Britain, however; the age of consent remained unequal. Moreover, Scotland waited until 1980 to decriminalize homosexuality, and Northern Ireland followed in 1982. In its approach to homosexuality, the United Kingdom was not united: the four nations have their own histories.<sup>22</sup>

Legislative homophobia proved to be a major lightning-rod for gay and lesbian protest in Britain in the 1980s: Section 28, while not a focus of a chapter in this collection, formed the backdrop for some of the most memorable protests of the period. Other causes and experiences have been represented on film: in 2014, the film *Pride* brought attention to the interaction between gay liberation activists in London and the struggle of Welsh miners against Thatcher’s pit closures,<sup>23</sup> while the cruelties of AIDs in this period have been depicted in recent films including *120 Beats Per Minute* (2017), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), and *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), and most recently in the BBC series *It’s a Sin* (2021). Other activist experiences have been less well documented: one of the aims of this collection is to highlight these and to place their significance on the historical record.

Despite being portrayed in some historiographies as a period “between the waves,” the 1980s were also a time of constant political agitation from queer and feminist organizers in the United States.<sup>24</sup> The chapters in this book show that this was a period in which earlier won rights were defended, in which new groups mobilized over fresh attacks from the right, and in which queer and feminist organizations and theories developed that would influence activisms of the future. Feminist wave theory posits that the 1960s and 1970s saw what was called a “second wave” of American feminism emerge over a wide

range of gender equality issues, which then honed in on securing legal reproductive rights. According to this chronology, “second wave” feminist activism died down or descended into infighting in the 1980s as a result of the rise of the New Right, and was subsequently followed by a youth-centered “third wave” that emerged in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> This timeline skips past the 1980s as a time of intense and productive progressive political movements, and fails to include explicitly feminist work as a part of the AIDS activism of this era. In fact, this timeline partly inspired us to organize this very collection—both of us frequently had students, in American and British history, respectively, request further reading specifically portraying and analyzing the activism of this period in response to the renewed attacks on feminist and gay liberation goals under Reagan and Thatcher.

Some of the activism that began in this period has been well chronicled by historians, in particular the AIDS activist movement in the United States. Groups such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP fought for the Reagan administration to finally publicly recognize the virus, for the inclusion of women’s symptoms in the Centers for Disease Control’s official definition of illnesses related to the virus, and for research into antiretroviral drugs.<sup>26</sup> In addition to these moves at the national level, AIDS activists across the country built a wide-ranging, inclusive set of grassroots health care and community support networks, which helped center pleasure in safer sex, included lesbian sex practices in the understanding of how AIDS was transmitted, created HIV education, provided support for incarcerated people with HIV/AIDS, campaigned against dehumanizing portrayals of people with AIDS in art and in the media, and documented the experiences of AIDS activists through art, using emerging home video technologies to record and archive their fight, and the lives that were lost, amongst many other actions.<sup>27</sup> In this volume, Katie Batza’s chapter on the early response to AIDS in St. Louis, Missouri, shows how “the history of AIDS in the Heartland region challenges many of the paradigms about the epidemic put forth by the dominant historical narrative that focuses on the coastal cities like New York and San Francisco,” and that organizations in the region “emerged as some of the most transformational sites of activism as they provided desperately needed services while simultaneously challenging people largely unaffected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic to engage and invest in the epidemic morally, spiritually, and financially.”<sup>28</sup>



American activists in the 1980s reached across movements—many women involved in AIDS activist groups had been active in other feminist and queer organizations.<sup>29</sup> An earlier major strand of feminist action in the late twentieth century was the welfare rights movement. Black women-led groups fought hard in the decades preceding the Reagan administration's efforts to crack down on welfare, which blamed young Black and Latinx women for American economic decline.<sup>30</sup> These groups underlined the ways that welfare “was organized and funded in unfair and unequal ways and dependent on racial exclusions, ensuring that some of those who were entitled to benefits were not getting them.”<sup>31</sup> Further, Black and Indigenous women and other women of color in the United States in the early 1980s established a movement in feminist thought, in which they centralized anti-racist action within their feminism: this was, in fact, the first use of the term “third wave” in the United States.<sup>32</sup> Through their writings, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and other thinkers and activists in this era challenged the “white, middle-class, first world feminism” they had encountered in previous years of organizing, and articulated an “anti-racist, women-of-color-led feminism for the coming decade.”<sup>33</sup>

Even this brief overview of some of the many activities of queer and feminist organizers shows that this period of political, social, and cultural history should be the focus of further exploration.<sup>34</sup> This is crucial in order to understand the pivotal activist work that was started in this period, as resistance against intensified reactionary forces, and how it influenced the social movements of the decades that followed, including the anti-racist, feminist, and queer movements of today.<sup>35</sup> The chapters that follow shed light on feminist and queer thought and practice in this period, illuminating new facets of national and transnational debates based in the United States and the United Kingdom, and revealing underexplored, localized efforts of activists in both contexts.

## Frameworks and Historiographical Context

This collection is structured into sections around four critical themes: student politics and the body politic; anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-borders action; families, reproduction, and health; and grassroots images, speech, and power. It contributes to a vibrant scholarly conversation around

activisms in the post-war period.<sup>36</sup> In the United Kingdom, one of the most exciting areas of work is that which is uncovering the experiences of Black women and of communities of color in the 1980s. For example, Amelia Francis has used oral history to explore the role of gender in the Black Liberation Front and women in Black radical organizations; Sue Lemos has challenged the hegemonic whiteness of queer histories of 1980s Britain, noting the surge of LGBTQ+ activism by people of color in the early 1980s (“Perhaps 1981 could be characterised as our ‘Stonewall’ year,” she comments); Aleema Gray has developed a political history of the Rastafari community in England; Jessica White has argued for the importance of Black women’s centers.<sup>37</sup>

Outside this volume, historians have charted women’s involvement with other campaigns that resisted Thatcher. Natalie Thomlinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have recently pioneered work into the National Women Against Pit Closures movement.<sup>38</sup> Others have focused on women’s anti-militarism and peace activism.<sup>39</sup> While some agitated around national or local injustices, the 1980s were far from a parochial period for protesters, and in Britain and the United States, women protested nuclear weapons and militaristic foreign policies. Though the engagement of US anti-imperialist groups with US foreign policy is not explored in this volume, a number of chapters contend with the politics of borders and global solidarities from the perspective of activists in the United Kingdom. Charlotte Lydia Riley’s chapter in this volume explores the WLM’s engagement with the UN Decade for Women, arguing that they “both challenged and replicated the global power imbalances between the Global North and Global South, and specifically the position of women within this hierarchy of global power.”<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Jade Bentil’s chapter shows how the Black Women’s Movement’s “tireless campaigning against the exploitative use of the contraceptive injection Depo-Provera” in the United Kingdom and globally is just one way that they “demanded global liberation for Black women.”<sup>41</sup>

The rise of the politics of the New Right has been subject to historiographical interest. As such, there is a rich historiography of the 1980s in Britain that adopts Thatcher and Thatcherism as its lens.<sup>42</sup> The purpose of *Resist, Organize, Build* is different: it has as its focus grassroots activism. However, it is not the first scholarly endeavor to disentangle the political leadership of the era from broader social and cultural shifts. In 2014, Stephen Brooke argued that “an overemphasis upon Thatcher or overly identifying the 1980s with the person or her associated ideology

obscures a richer historical understanding of that decade, flattening out, rather than opening up our historical understanding of the 1980s.<sup>43</sup> More recently, historians have suggested that “Thatcher and Thatcherism were not inevitable, and were not the sole guiding force of or analytic framework through which we should understand the 1980s. There were other, longer, economic, technological, social and cultural trajectories that account for historical phenomena occurring during the decade.”<sup>44</sup> This collection is in harmony with this approach and centers activists’ social critiques and political activities to understand the period.

A large body of scholarship on social movements in the United States continues to grow. This collection is, therefore, joining a tradition of feminist and queer historical and theoretical scholarship on the activist cultures that have always been a part of the fabric of American life.<sup>45</sup> Laura Briggs’s *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* demonstrates this, tracing the activism of welfare rights organizers of the 1970s and the impact of restrictions imposed by Reagan’s neoliberal agenda, and then following these debates over reproductive labor up to the administration of Donald Trump. Premilla Nadasen’s work on feminist, grassroots organizing has recently included a monograph on the organizing of African American domestic workers, *Household Workers Unite*.<sup>46</sup> Other feminist histories have recently explored the decades-long movements of “race women” in the United States, the Black intellectuals whose work spanned from the late nineteenth century through the Black Power organizing of the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> In *Race Women Internationalists*, Imaobong Umoren follows the transnational activism of three of these women as they built global networks across borders and across liberation movements. Our collection has been inspired by these authors’ research to show the importance of transnational networks, communications, and collaborations, and to reflect new chronologies in the history of activism in the twentieth century.

Queer historical studies of the late twentieth century have also set the stage for this collection. There has been a move within queer histories of the United States to focus on activist interactions with the state.<sup>48</sup> The collection *Beyond the Politics of the Closet*, edited by Jonathan Bell, has continued this intervention, which traces the intertwined histories of gay rights movements and American politics since the 1970s, including local housing and health care politics and an important focus on the impact of the AIDS crisis on “racial divisions within sexual minority activism.”<sup>49</sup> Scholars, activists, and artists are also undertaking exciting new interdisciplinary research on queer activist histories of the late

twentieth-century United States both inside and outside of the academy. Che Gossett, for instance, connects grassroots histories of AIDS activism with ongoing grassroots activism in their writing, and the activist and filmmaker Tourmaline makes films and other artworks that delve into Black trans and queer American histories.<sup>50</sup>

Queer British history has also flourished. Recent work, including Brian Lewis's *Queer British History: New Approaches and Perspectives*, has demonstrated the richness of the modern field.<sup>51</sup> Historians have turned to broad and more bounded histories as a means of exploring LGBTQ+ pasts: Rebecca Jennings has set out a lesbian history of Britain, while Alison Oram has explored women's cross-dressing in modern British press and popular culture, and Chris O'Rourke has argued for the possibilities for queerness within cross-dressing films.<sup>52</sup> Other histories of queer Britain have asserted the importance of place, space, and locality: Matt Houlbrook has explored the relationship between London and its queer communities.<sup>53</sup> Our edited collection is attentive to the politics of place while seeking to identify connections and divergences among groups and moments across geographical locations.

### Arguments, Terminology, and Structure of this Volume

Our framework and choice of language—of a “long 1980s”—acknowledges that the ringing in of a new decade does not beget a new set of historical trends. “The long 1980s” acknowledges that the start and end of a decade does not dictate the start and end of activism. Using a decade as an organizing structure, however, recognizes the trends and aesthetics that are conjured in the public memory when a certain decade is invoked—one might look to Wayne Koestenbaum's essay titled “My 1980s,” a remembrance of “AIDS, wild art, and Reagan's America,” as an example of this.<sup>54</sup> Though the authors in this collection hone in on the 1980s as a period seen to be “between the waves” in feminist and queer activism, and which saw a unique set of challenges due to the racist, heterosexist governments in both contexts, many of the crises and movements explored here began in the late 1970s and fed into the early 1990s (and beyond): hence our term “the long 1980s.” Of course, doing such contemporary history presents its own challenges. As Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano note, recent histories face issues around methodology, approach, and source selection: it “talks back.” The

chapters in this volume deal with these challenges in different ways, and no singular approach was mandated by the editors.<sup>55</sup>

Some linguistic choices should, however, be acknowledged here. First, the contributors tend to refer to the movements they are discussing using the language and terms preferred by the organizations under discussion and individual authors note their personal approaches to language in their essays. The term “queer” has long occupied a contested position, first used as an insult but later reclaimed as a mode of self-description.<sup>56</sup> We have chosen to use the term “queer” for its expansiveness, whilst acknowledging that the turn toward reclaiming this term happened a little later than the period that some of the chapters cover. We use it in our title in recognition of the work undertaken to reclaim and mobilize the term, taking the position that, as Lewis has argued, “queer” is useful as a “big-tent term” and as a signifier that it “builds on a body of recent scholarship that differs in significant ways from the pioneering gay and lesbian history of the 1970s.”<sup>57</sup> Our use of “queer” also attempts to recognize the sexual identities of those involved in this era of activism that are not explicitly covered in the chapters of this book, though were undoubtedly present in this period of activism. The “queer” activism in this book does not highlight much of the important work of those challenging sexual binaries, including bisexual, pansexual, or queer activists not committed to one static sexual identity, which in some ways is reflective of the dominance of the terms “lesbian” and “gay” in organizing of this period.<sup>58</sup> However, while the work of bisexual activists did not arise in the work submitted to this volume, important recognition of activists who were not monosexual has been explored by Steven Angelides and Lilian Faderman, among others.<sup>59</sup>

Transgender and queer activists of color have been central to the fight for sexual and gender liberation.<sup>60</sup> Some of the work in *Resist, Organize, Build* does describe the importance of trans activism within the larger LGBTQ+ struggle. Hevel and Thompson’s chapter on the history of Gay Student Services at Texas A&M University describes the way that the organization was “advancing toward greater inclusion” in changing its name ultimately to “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Aggies” by 1997.<sup>61</sup> Nora Kassner’s chapter on queer foster families mentions the way in which Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services in Los Angeles “operated three state-licensed group homes” that each provided care for “between six and twelve queer and trans youth at a time.”<sup>62</sup> Flora Dunster’s contribution to *Resist, Organize, Build* discusses the themes of

the feminist sex wars as they played out in an underground publication, *Lesbians Talk*, which recognizes “lesbian solidarities past” and the work of trans activists of this period, working against reactionary sentiments from the right and from within certain feminisms.<sup>63</sup> While the vastness of trans and feminist resistance in this era across these two contexts could not be captured in this one volume, we hope that these chapters point readers toward further research on trans histories, by such thinkers such as Susan Stryker, C. Riley Snorton, and Che Gossett, and inspire further volumes on the work of trans activists of this era.<sup>64</sup>

Several themes emerged in the authors’ submissions to this collection and have fed into how we organized the sections. An important theme that emerges in the stories our authors tell is the importance of student activism in this period in confronting the manifestations of the New Right’s homophobia on campus. Two chapters make up this first section. Katherine Rye Jewell’s account uses American college radio to examine how queer activists worked both inside of and necessarily against the institutional limits they faced at their universities, while Michael S. Hevel and Charles J. Thompson’s chapter explores the fight that a group of activists took on at Texas A&M University in their endeavor to run an official gay student services on campus. These chapters further historicize the recent culture wars on American campuses and illuminate the longer story of student activism. The book then turns to the urgent anti-racist work happening in this period, which connected activists engaged in global liberation struggles. Jade Bentil’s chapter uses archival material and oral history interviews with members of the Black Women’s Movement to explore how Black women resisted the Thatcher government and challenged conceptions of nationhood in 1980s Britain. Charlotte Lydia Riley’s chapter uses the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*’s coverage of the UN Decade for Women conferences to challenge depictions of British feminism as parochial and to examine the extent and limitations of the WLM’s engagement with international gender issues. The third theme is that of continued reproductive rights organizing, which has been strongly associated with the preceding decade, and was necessitated by federal and local threats to the gains of these movements. The third section of this volume thus brings together writing on families, reproduction, and bodily health. This includes Nora Kassner’s microhistorical account of queer foster parenting activism in 1980s Los Angeles, which shows how queer organizations responded to a spike in homelessness under Reagan, and its impact on LGBTQ+ youth. Kate Turner’s chapter sets out how

the British Black Women's Movement situated mothering as a political activity and contrasts it to the politics of the family put forward by Thatcherism. The section contains Tamar Holoshitz's chapter on the significance of pro-choice legal activism in the 1980s. Her contribution demonstrates the importance of not portraying the period myopically as one of a series of increasing restrictions on access to abortion, as doing so obscures the work of feminist activists, and highlights ways that reproductive rights activists fighting in the current political climate can learn from the legacy of 1980s reproductive rights activists. Finally, Katie Batza demonstrates the importance of understanding the activist response to AIDS in religious and in rural communities, complementing analyses of AIDS that center on activism in major US cities.

Another key theme of *Resist, Organize, Build* is the ways that grassroots print cultures were used in this period to forge networks, confront the racist and heterosexist mainstream media, and create documentation of the voices of 1980s activists as a legacy for future generations. The fourth section therefore examines the development of grassroots images, speech, and power. Taous Dahmani examines *Polareyes*, a single-issue photography and text magazine produced by a collective of Black women in 1987 as a site of resistance and creativity, while Flora Dunster asserts the complexity of the sex wars in Britain, turning to the book series *Lesbians Talk Issues* to explore the feminist lesbian politics of the 1980s and early 1990s and to trouble the binaries constructed around the positions adopted during the "sex wars." Julie R. Enszer's chapter describes the importance of two queer feminist publishing houses in the proliferation of lesbian feminist work of the period, which enabled such critical theoretical writings as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* to gain circulation.

The chapters within this volume highlight not only emergent histories but emergent scholars—many of the authors in these pages are in the early stages of their career, conducting research that will come to be significant contributions to the fields in which they work. It brings together researchers based in Europe and the United States, and those who have had experiences working across these contexts. This is not intended to be an exhaustive collection of the feminist and gay rights activism of this period, but rather a snapshot of some of the exciting work being done in the field. The collection's audience is intended to be scholars, students, and communities interested in queer and feminist histories. It furthers the growing literature on this epoch by elucidating how marginalized communities in the United States and Britain fought

for their rights and those of others during a time of renewed conservatism in these nations.

These chapters tell the stories of previously underexplored groups, individuals, and movements of local, national, and transatlantic scales. In and across their various contexts, these activists fought against heightened violence and repression, and put in place alternative structures of community and care across their respective communities. The contributions to this volume depict the challenges and gains that faced activists working from seemingly disparate organizational frames. We hope you will find courage and hope in these historical movements as we forge forward as scholars trying to understand past resistance, and as feminist and queer activists in the present.

## Notes

1. Araba Mercer, in *Lesbians Talk Making Black Waves*, eds. Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), 53. This series is discussed in Flora Dunster's chapter in this volume.

2. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 345.

3. Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 70–71, 73. For more on the history of public discourse surrounding young women in the US culture wars from the 1980s onward, see Charlie Jeffries, *Teenage Dreams: Girlhood Sexualities in the U.S. Culture Wars* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022).

4. See D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 354, and Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 148.

5. See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), and Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

6. Margaret Thatcher, Remarks Arriving at the White House, 26 February 1981. [www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104576](http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104576)

7. See Jade Bentil, “‘We were fire-fighting against Thatcher and the system she was putting forward’: The Black Women’s Movement and the Boundaries of Nationhood in Thatcher’s Britain,” and Kate Turner, “Thatcherism, the Black Women’s Movement and the Politics of Motherhood in Britain,” both in this volume.



8. See Nydia A. Swaby, “‘Disparate in Voice, Sympathetic in Direction’: Gendered Political Blackness and the Politics of Solidarity.” *Feminist Review* 108 (2014): 11–25. For more on race in 1980s Britain, see also Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: race in 1980s Britain* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Simon Peplow, *Race and riots in Thatcher’s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Daniel Renshaw, “The Violent Frontline: space, ethnicity and confronting the state in Edwardian Spitalfields and 1980s Brixton,” *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018), 231–252.

9. See Julie R. Enszer, “The Business of Feminism Endures: Four Decades of Spinsters Ink and Aunt Lute Books Publishing Lesbian-Feminist Books in the United States,” in this volume.

10. Bentil, “We were fire-fighting . . .,” in this volume.

11. Bentil, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

12. Argued by Bentil, “We were fire-fighting . . .,” 94–96, and Taous Dahmani, “*Polareyes*: A Magazine by and for Black British Women Photographers as Site of Resistance in London, 1987,” 311–312, both in this volume.

13. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989).

14. Bentil, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

15. Bentil, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

16. Dahmani, “*Polareyes*.”

17. See Bentil, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

18. See Enszer, “The Business of Feminism Endures,” and Michael S. Hevel and Charles J. Thompson, “Aggies are *Not* Queers”: A History of *Gay Student Services v. Texas A&M University, 1975–1985*,” both in this volume.

19. See Bentil, “We were fire-fighting . . .” and Tamar Holoshitz, “A Framework for Choice: The Lasting Influence of 1980s Advocacy on Reproductive Rights in the United States,” both in this volume.

20. For more on the impact of Black women’s organizing in the 1980s on today’s “movements for social justice,” see Bentil, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

21. Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970): 76–78.

22. Exciting work is going on in this field. For example, an AHRC-funded project led by Tom Hulme and Leanne McCormick is examining sexuality in Northern Ireland from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

23. Academic work has also drawn attention to solidarities between miners and gay activists, and connections between London and the coalfields during the 1980s. See Diarmaid Kelliher, “Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984–5,” *History Workshop Journal* 77.1 (Spring 2014):

240–262, and Diarmaid Kelliher, “Contested Spaces: London and the 1984–5 Miners’ Strike,” *Twentieth Century British History* 28.4 (December 2017): 595–617.

24. For more on the problems of understanding US feminisms in waves, see Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” *Signs* 27 (Summer 2002), and *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). The contributors to the collection *No Permanent Waves* made an important intervention into thinking outside of the traditional wave chronology, and how troubling that timeline is critical in understanding the activism of those who have been marginalized within or excluded by those involved in mainstream feminist movements. See, for example, Whitney A. Peoples, “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms”; Marisela Chávez, “‘We Have a Long, Beautiful History’: Chicana Feminist Trajectories and Legacies”; and Leela Fernandes, “Unsettling ‘Third Wave Feminism’: Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect.”

25. An important recent historical study that disputes this characterization of the 1980s is Lorna N. Bracewell’s *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

26. For more on the work of AIDS activists, see Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), and Gina Corea, *The Invisible Epidemic: The Story of Women and AIDS* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

27. See Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Corea, *The Invisible Epidemic*; Nancy Goldstein, “Lesbians and the Medical Profession: HIV/AIDS and the Pursuit of Visibility,” in *The Gender Politics of HIV/AIDS in Women: Perspectives on the Pandemic in the United States*, eds. Nancy Goldstein and Jennifer L. Manlowe (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Deborah B. Gould, “Life during Wartime: Emotions and the Development of ACT UP,” *Mobilization* 7 (2002); Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Alexandra Juhasz, “AIDS Video: To Dream and Dance with the Censor,” *EJump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 52 (Summer 2010).

28. See Katie Batza, “Opening DOORWAYS and Closing Others: Tactical Deployments of Respectability, Religion, and Race in the St. Louis Early-AIDS Response,” in this volume.

29. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 157.

30. Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, 34–35. See also Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

31. Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, 35.

32. See Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, "Introduction," *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), cited by Catherine M. Orr, in "Charting the Currents of the Third Wave," *Hypatia* 12.3 (August 1997): 29–45, and Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?," 1063.

33. First quote is from Orr, "Charting the Currents," 29–45. Second quote is from Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?," 1063.

34. For more on the limits of wave theory and the importance of this period of activism, see Bentil, "We were fire-fighting. . . ." See also Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), which shows the importance of this kind of historical research in a study of a different decade.

35. For more on the impact of Black women's organizing in the 1980s on today's "movements for social justice," see Bentil, "We were fire-fighting. . . ."

36. The British WLM, for example, has seen its historiography flourish. See Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Eve Setch, "The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969–79,' *Twentieth Century British History*, 13.2 (2002): 171–190; Sarah Stoller, "Forging a Politics of Care: Theorizing Household Work in the British Women's Liberation Movement,' *History Workshop Journal* 85 (Spring 2018): 95–119; Sue Bruley, "Consciousness-Raising in Clapham: Women's Liberation as 'Lived Experience' in South London in the 1970s," *Women's History Review* 22:5 (2013): 717–738; Laurel Forster, "Spreading the Word: Feminist Print Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement," *Women's History Review* 25.5 (2016): 812–831; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Sue Bruley, "Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: A View from Some English Towns, c.1968–1990," *Women's History Review* 25.5 (2016): 723–740; Terese Jonsson, "The Narrative Reproduction of White Feminist Racism," *Feminist Review* 113.1 (July 2016): 50–67; Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

37. These scholars also represent the ways that historical research in this area is promoted outside the boundaries of traditional journals, and that early career scholars are turning to blogs and podcasts to share their work more expansively and inclusively. See Amelia Francis, "'No Liberation Without Black Women': Gender in the Black Liberation Front," *Women's History Network Blog*, 22 October 2018, [womenshistorynetwork.org/no-liberation-without-black-women-gender-in-the-black-liberation-front-by-amelia-francis](http://womenshistorynetwork.org/no-liberation-without-black-women-gender-in-the-black-liberation-front-by-amelia-francis); Sue Lemos, "'I thanked the ancestors it is not something you can box up neatly': Uncovering stories of

Black and Brown LGBTQ+ activism in post-war Britain.” *Queer/Disrupt*, January 15, 2021. [www.queerdisrupt.com/index.php/2021/01/15/i-thanked-the-ancestors-it-is-not-something-you-can-box-up-neatly-uncovering-stories-of-black-and-brown-lgbtq-activism-in-post-war-britain](http://www.queerdisrupt.com/index.php/2021/01/15/i-thanked-the-ancestors-it-is-not-something-you-can-box-up-neatly-uncovering-stories-of-black-and-brown-lgbtq-activism-in-post-war-britain); Warwick PG Podcast, “Queer(in)g History,” [soundcloud.com/user-627299331/queering-history](https://soundcloud.com/user-627299331/queering-history); Aleema Gray, “The Rastafari in Britain: Writing Community-Engaged History,” *History Workshop Online* (25 November 2019), [www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-rastafari-in-britain](http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-rastafari-in-britain). Also see Derek Bishton, “Aleema Gray on Pioneer Rastafari Filmmaker D Elmina Davis,” [www.derekbishton.com/aleema-gray-on-pioneer-rastafari-filmmaker-d-elmina-davis](http://www.derekbishton.com/aleema-gray-on-pioneer-rastafari-filmmaker-d-elmina-davis). Of course the academic journal article endures—see Jessica White, “Black Women’s Groups, Life Narratives, and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain,” *The Historical Journal* (2021): 1–21.

38. Natalie Thomlinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “National Women Against Pit Closures: Gender, Trade Unionism, and Community Activism,” *Contemporary British History* 32.1 (2018): 78–100.

39. See Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Elaine Titcombe, “Women Activists: Rewriting Greenham’s History,” *Women’s History Review* 22.2 (2013): 310–329.

40. See Charlotte Lydia Riley, “Spiritualists, Ideologues, Pragmatists, Feminists, and Women of All Descriptions: The British Women’s Liberation Movement, the UN Decade for Women, and Feminist Transnationalism in *Spare Rib*,” in this volume.

41. Benti, “We were fire-fighting. . . .”

42. See, for example, Robert Saunders and Ben Jackson (eds.), *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

43. Stephen Brooke, “Living in ‘New Times’: Historicizing 1980s Britain,” *History Compass* 12 (2014): 20–32.

44. Matthew Hilton, Chris Moores and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “New Times revisited: Britain in the 1980s,” *Contemporary British History* 31.2 (2017): 145–165, 146.

45. Including such publications as *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, ed. Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), and Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).

46. Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

47. See Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), and Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).