

## CHAPTER 10

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On April 14, 1973, radical feminist activist and writer Robin Morgan delivered an impassioned and incendiary keynote address at the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference. Critiquing the tendency of radical feminists to divide over questions of sexual orientation and the role of men in the feminist revolution, Morgan boldly claimed:

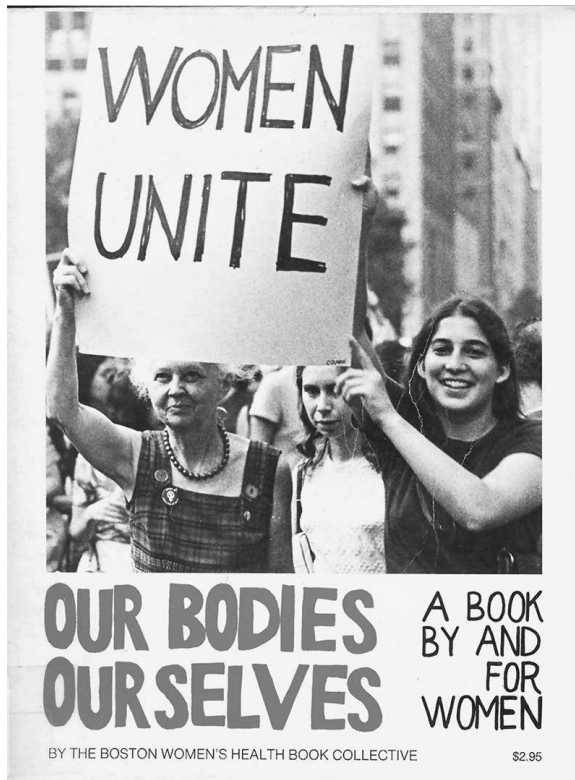
All women have a right to each other as women. . . . We have a right, each of us, to a Great Love. . . . By the right to a great love I don't mean romanticism . . . or cynical satire. I mean *a great love*—a committed, secure, nurturing, sensual, aesthetic, revolutionary, holy, ecstatic love. That need, *that right*, is the heart of our revolution. It is in the heart of every woman here today, if we dare admit it to ourselves and *recognize* it in each other, and in *all* women. (Morgan [1973] 1997, 433–434)

Two years earlier, in 1971, the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)*, the Boston Women's Health Collective's soon-to-be best-selling medical resource book, opened its preface with the idea that “love for ourselves and other women, both of which we have never been allowed to experience, begins to surface when we refuse to objectify ourselves any longer and stop depending on the nowhere identity we have been forced to subsist on for so long” (Boston Women's Health Collective 1971, 4).

Even earlier, in November 1969, during the same period that Morgan was participating in the New York Radical Women and the Boston Women's Health Collective was forming its first reading group, members of the newly organized Gay Liberation Front in New York City were writing and distributing their manifesto, in which they claimed, “Gay Liberation is a revolutionary homosexual group of women and men [who] are creating new social forms and relations, that is relations based upon brotherhood, cooperation, human love and uninhibited sexuality” (quoted in Altman [1971] 2012, 131). Finally, only a few years after Morgan's speech, in the fall of 1977, the members of the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist reading group and activist organization, proclaimed in their mission statement: “Above all else, our politics initially sprang from our shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable. . . . Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1983, 266–267).

Time and again across the span of the 1970s, feminist and queer activists and writers articulated common cause and a felt sense of collective bonding through the rhetoric of love, understood not as a romantic attachment to a single person but as a form of willful

## Chapter 10: Collectives



**Cover to the Boston Women's Health Collective guide, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973).** *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was conceived and written by the Boston Women's Health Collective, a feminist reading group that worked to make information about women's health public, accessible, and responsive to women's evolving needs. The book would become a national bestseller—with more than five fully revised editions in print—and remains a touchstone for women's health more than four decades since its initial publication. **OUR BODIES OURSELVES.**

self-valuation that, it was assumed, would ultimately extend to a wide range of others who shared one's identity and experience of oppression. This radical conception of love took many forms and was deployed for often competing agendas: for Morgan, "a Great Love" was a cosmic force binding all women together in a social and spiritual unity that, she imagined, would transcend women's differences; for the Boston Women's Health Collective, love for one's body could function as an antidote to the alienation from self encouraged by the medical establishment, which pathologized and degraded women's bodies; and for members of the Combahee River Collective, love was a "healthy" affective vehicle for valuing identities traditionally denigrated or oppressed by dominant hierarchies of power. Far from producing universal unity, love, for these latter two groups, allowed for a clear-eyed appraisal of, and substantive responses to, women's differences. In each of these contexts, however, love was reconceived as a force initially directed inward toward the self whose energies would ultimately flow outward toward many others, namely, in the formation of collectives. This chapter explores some of the central characteristics of 1970s feminist and queer collectives—organized groups of activists, writers, artists, and scholars invested in accomplishing shared political goals and enacting the ideals of gender and sexual freedom. These characteristics include the demand for autonomy from oppressive systems of sexist and homophobic power, the pooling of creative and material resources among women and queers, and the production of new political imaginaries, which involved the articulation of uniquely feminist and queer political and social values developed in concert with others.

Feminist and queer collectives were particularly powerful social forces in the 1970s, because they channeled the political values of movements for women's and gay liberation—including the overthrow of patriarchy, the breakdown of traditional gender roles, the invention of alternative kinship forms, and the elimination of sexual stigma—into everyday practices that could be enacted not only through one's political commitments but also in the way one lived, loved, and shared space with others. Collectives were one place where the feminist adage "the personal is political" took on its most visceral form: by willfully choosing to affiliate with presumably like-minded feminists, queers, and other gender and sexual outlaws, one was forced to negotiate new and unexpected interpersonal relationships, develop intimacies grounded in shared values, and articulate competing definitions of feminist and queer love, freedom, and kinship. The movements for women's and gay liberation that exploded onto the American political scene in the early 1970s were committed to fighting against the traditional structures of gender and sexual hierarchy:

they questioned the presumed superiority of men to women, and of heterosexuality to homosexuality; they fought to make visible the ways that women's bodies were economically and sexually exploited by a male-dominated culture; they uncovered the forms of violence and stigma used to denigrate sexual minorities; and they developed a wide range of political and social practices—from consciousness-raising groups to queer dance parties, from music festivals to underground sex clubs, from cooperative business ventures to collective living experiments—to combat these forms of oppression and imagine a different world more amenable to the freedom of women and sexual dissidents. Consequently, members of feminist and queer collectives in this period reinvented the meaning of *love*, moving from a traditional romantic attachment into a broad-minded idea of care for, and investment in, all similarly oppressed peoples.

### WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE?

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A collective is defined by a group of individuals acting in concert for the fulfillment of shared goals. The concept of a collective acknowledges the existence of individual agents but stresses their aggregate engagement as people “taken or acting together” for a common purpose. Although related to other conceptions of togetherness like gathering and community, collectives are distinct from these by the degree and scale of social bonds that define each. Collectives are more intentional than gatherings and communities, which tend to describe open-ended agglomerations of people or else tacitly assumed communal bonds based on region, neighborhood, or ethnic origin. In contrast, collectives are often composed of a delimited group of individuals who actively seek one another out and produce a defined framework within which to conduct particular kinds of social, political, and cultural work: this framework can take the form of a manifesto, a mission statement, a newsletter, a work of art, a business contract, or an anthology. These documents or art objects function as material expressions of a collective's shared values and goals by laying out key terms or concepts that magnetize the interests of collective members, and they articulate a commitment to pursue the collectively held ideals. Consequently, whereas a community's binding values tend to remain assumed or implicit, maintained through tradition or tacit knowledge of a group's communal history, collectives make explicit their claims to shared investments, desires, and political visions in the present. For example, the general residents of a city might be understood as a community, because they share a locale and, by default, participate in the historical development of that place and its people (in this sense we might speak of the Boston community). However, a collective is produced by the willful choice of all members to participate in a group that is specifically formed to respond to immediate social and political concerns and involves various instances in which the group articulates its purpose, values, and practices either in written form or through direct action. The Boston community, then, lies in contrast to the Boston Women's Health Collective, a group of women within the greater Boston community who intentionally gathered together beginning in 1969 to pursue their shared investment in gaining greater access to health information for women, which resulted in the publication of their collaboratively written book, *OBOS* (1971).

Finally, a collective can be distinguished from other forms of “togetherness” not only in terms of motive and scale but also by its double valence as an identifiable social body and an affective state, that is, a felt sensation or drive toward bonding with others that is captured by the term *collectivity*. *Affect* describes the body's sensory experience of the world and gestures toward the variety of feeling states or emotions that the body can experience. Collectivity can be

**Chapter 10: Collectives**

understood as the affective valence of a collective: the felt sense of, or desire for, collective belonging that both motivates the formation of a collective and animates its continued solidarity. It is for this reason that collectives, unlike other political or social formations, often negotiate questions of love, intimacy, kinship, and attachment. The felt sense of collective belonging can involve feelings of love for others with whom one has chosen to affiliate, or alternatively it can be the catalyzing force that transforms how one defines love and intimacy, making it possible to feel deep emotional and erotic bonds for many kinds of people whom one might have previously denied or remained distanced from on the basis of their sexuality, gender, race, or social class. For example, in “The Woman Identified Woman,” the explosive 1970 manifesto of the Radicalesbians, a feminist political collective that emerged early in the second wave of the women’s liberation movement, the collective’s founding members claimed:

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. . . . Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. (Radicalesbians [1970] 2000, 233–234)

For the Radicalesbians then, a central value of lesbian political collectives was their ability to produce spaces where women could reorient their social and sexual intimacies toward other women for their mutual political freedom. According to this logic, it was through collective practice that one’s political and affective life could be radically transformed, so that the desire for a different social world and the desire for new kinds of loving, kinship, and intimacy were seen to flow from one another organically.

## CONTEXTS FOR COLLECTIVES

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A number of historical factors made the collective an increasingly desirable social formation in the 1970s. Foremost was the destabilization of traditional modes of American community and belonging that defined US identity in the post–World War II period, including the nation, the neighborhood, and the family. As cultural historian Elaine Tyler May explains:

Immediately after World War II, stable family life seemed necessary for national security, civil defense, and the struggle for supremacy over the Soviet Union. For a generation of young adults who grew up amid depression and war, domestic containment . . . allowed them to pursue . . . the quest for a sexually-fulfilling, consumer-oriented personal life that was free from hardship. But the circumstances were different for their children, who broke the consensus surrounding the cold war and domestic containment. (May [1988] 2008, 216)

By the early 1970s, attachment to national belonging had been shaken by America’s failed military ventures in Korea and Vietnam, increasing distrust of the US government following the Watergate scandal (1972–1974), and a growing disaffection with the corruption of democratic institutions by corporate values. Similarly, the family, which had once been understood as the central social form grounding access to the American dream—including the promise of economic mobility, home ownership, and consumer citizenship alongside the affective bonds of marriage and child rearing—appeared in terminal crisis. The 1970s saw the highest divorce rate in US history, a women’s movement that radically

contested the traditional role of woman as domestic goddess, and a countercultural revolution that valued alternative living experiments (from communes to collectively run farms), new forms of self-actualization outside marriage and reproduction, sexual experimentation, and a refusal of the “square” and politically regressive traditionalism of the 1950s.

Feminist and queer collectives were the most visible of their kind in the 1970s, because they responded directly to this shifting array of human intimacies at varied scales of experience, from the immediate bonds of kinship and family to the social contract between citizens of the nation to the broadest sense of belonging to humankind; women’s and gay liberation were movements that concerned themselves with reimagining affective and erotic bonds when traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality were questioned or abandoned altogether. These movements created identity and affiliation out of that seemingly ephemeral thing called desire: desire for political freedom, for sensual pleasures, and for kinship and community outside all normative boundaries.

Feminist and queer collectives took numerous forms in the 1970s. Most documented are the political collectives that emerged out of the initial stirrings of the women’s and gay liberation movements between 1969 and 1972—among them Cell 16, the Redstockings, the Radicalesbians, the New York Radical Feminists, the Gay Liberation Front, and the Gay Activist Alliance—as well as intellectually driven reading groups, such as the Boston Women’s Health Collective, which first began meeting in 1969, and the Combahee River Collective, formed in 1974. Feminist and queer political collectives were intended to function as working groups of like-minded activists, scholars, and sometimes clinical practitioners who met to develop their political consciousness, draft statements of their collective beliefs and political goals, and strategize ways of directly transforming American society. Political collectives approached the idea of social and political transformation in a variety of ways, including direct-action activism, consciousness-raising, grassroots philanthropic work, the circulation of new kinds of political, medical, and cultural knowledge, and the invention of novel ways of relating to and being with other women and queers.

Fundamentally related to these groups were living collectives, cadres of feminists and queer activists and artists who shared communal living spaces as an experiment in practicing their radical political values at the level of the everyday. Collective living was an attempt to synthesize radical feminist and queer politics with daily interpersonal engagement, and it often functioned as a testing ground where members could explore whether or not their political values could genuinely translate to more ethical and mutually beneficial kinds of human interaction: this included reconsidering the power dynamics involved in traditional romantic partnerships, apportioning domestic chores in more egalitarian ways to break down domestic gender roles, and participating in consciousness-raising sessions and structured communal discussions in which members shared their thoughts and feelings on topics of shared concern for the purpose of gaining mutual understanding. John Knoebel writes about his experiences as a member of the first gay male living collective, the 95th Street Collective, in 1972:

We thought of collective living as sharing everything equally: expenses, housework, ideas, and feelings. We knew from consciousness raising . . . that we had to examine our experiences together in order to understand our oppression and accomplish change. . . . We knew that our oppression as gay people had been to live in a world totally defined by heterosexuals and that our collective would be a small world we would define ourselves. But these ideas were as yet only rhetorical and abstract. We had to test them out in the reality of gay men living together. (Knoebel [1972] 1992, 303–304)

*Chapter 10: Collectives*



***A meeting of the Gay Activist Alliance in their firehouse community center, June 11, 1971. The Gay Activist Alliance was one of the two most prominent political collectives of the Gay Liberation Movement (alongside the Gay Liberation Front). Members of the GAA helped to create collective meeting spaces for queers of all stripes where they could debate issues of shared political concern while also expressing their sexuality in a space of freedom and non-judgment. FRED W. MCDARRAH / PREMIUM ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES.***

As Knoebel suggests, living collectives were social laboratories for testing out emergent queer and feminist values in a visceral, felt way by living and being with other queers and women and collectively sharing the struggle to articulate a new way of life.

Finally, alongside political and living collectives, the 1970s saw an efflorescence of feminist and queer cultural collectives, both as shared entrepreneurial ventures and as artistic or creative working groups. The 1970s saw an explosion of women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) business collectives—including music production companies, underground magazines, and feminist bookstores and publishers—that sought to produce and distribute cultural products infused with the spirit of feminist and queer political values. Formed in 1973, the first lesbian feminist music production company, Olivia Records, released an inaugural mission statement that noted:

Olivia operates as a collective. That means there is no authoritarian structure; it is a feminist business both in its product and in the way it functions. The records made by Olivia all meet one criterion; they express some aspect of the new self-aware women's culture, and indeed, they often serve to help define the new culture created by women who are seeking to redefine themselves. (Quoted in Murray 2007, 270–271)

As this statement suggests, the founders of Olivia Records viewed their business model as an organic extension of their feminist and queer politics, so that the very structure of their

organization was built on ideals of nonhierarchical management, collective ownership of the means of production, and complete creative freedom.

Throughout this period, creative collectives working outside the entrepreneurial model also sprang up across the country: these included performance troupes like the legendary Cockettes (1970), a San Francisco–based collective of queer, hippie, glam drag performers who developed a spectacularly extravagant form of drag costuming alongside improvised performances that satirically poked fun at American heterosexuality and traditional family values; and artists' groups, such as Judy Chicago's Feminist Art Program at CalArts (1971), the first inaugural fine arts degree program to graduate a cohort of women artists producing distinctly feminist work, such as the collaborative project *Womanhouse* (this was an actual house in Santa Monica, California, renovated by Chicago's students, so that every room showcased a work of feminist art that interrogated the constraints of traditional domesticity). Much like living collectives, these groups infused their everyday, material creative practices with the sensibilities of emergent feminist and queer political ideals, developing new aesthetic strategies for articulating the experiences of women, queers, and all variety of sexual outlaws.

The distinctions between political, living, and creative collectives were rarely ever clear in practice, and each of these categories consistently overlapped with the others: political activist groups, such as the Gay Liberation Front, combined direct-action protests against homophobic political policies and institutions in New York City with cultural events like gay dance parties, drag performances, and movie nights; the Furies, the first lesbian feminist living collective founded in Washington, DC, in 1973, was primarily composed of lesbian writers who developed a distinctly lesbian poetic style to reflect their feminist political values in aesthetic form; and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (1980), the first feminist publishing house focused exclusively on supporting and circulating the writing of minority women, understood the creative work of its writers as a form of political activism. In each of these examples, politics, culture, and everyday life were understood as intimately tied together, nowhere more obviously than in collective practices; such practices had the effect of transforming traditional heterosexual notions of intimate love and attachment into a powerful love for one's own oppressed people and their collective flourishing.

Despite the extraordinary variety and number of collectives that formed around feminist and queer values in the 1970s, these groups shared key conceptual



*The glam drag performance collective the Cockettes pose for the camera, New York City, 1971. The Cockettes were a radical drag performance group founded by San Francisco emigrant George Edgerly Harris II (who took the stage name Hibiscus). This over-the-top, explosive, and campy troupe reinvented the culture of drag through improvised stage performances and raunchy, political satire that poked fun at American conventions of gender, sexuality, and normative family life. JACK MITCHELL / GETTY IMAGES.*

## Chapter 10: Collectives

concerns and organizational qualities. Members of any given feminist or queer collective saw themselves as part of a willed solidarity among a network of companions choosing to commit time, resources, and emotional energy to accomplish shared activist goals, bring into being or model a set of political ideals in everyday embodied interaction, and create distinct spaces where individual members could transform their relationships to the larger world. In this sense, all collectives functioned through three conceptual frameworks: first, they worked at the level of the subject by producing a variety of practices, such as consciousness raising, that might alter individual thought and produce new outlooks on the world shaped by feminist and queer values; second, collectives worked at the level of discourse, developing new kinds of language or ways of speaking, writing, and communicating about genders, sexualities, bodies, desires, kinship, and love that might provide a vocabulary for those invested in feminist and queer politics to articulate a renewed relationship to the world; finally, they worked at the level of space, by laying claim to actual material spaces—from bookstores to cafés to dance halls—where feminist and queer practices and ways of being could be collectively enacted.

These conceptual aspects of feminist and queer collectives were consistently apparent in the three central organizational elements of these groups, which made up the foundation of their structures, activities, and goals. The three principles were the value of individual and collective autonomy, or freedom from societal and political oppression; the importance of pooling resources, including sharing knowledge, skills, and financial assets in order to enrich the collective life of any given group and accomplish common goals; and the necessity of articulating new political imaginaries or aspirations for a world free from sexual and gendered oppression. Each of these pillars of collective practice was inflected by concerns over subjectivity, discourse, and space; together they provided a blueprint of how collectives, and the impetus toward collectivity, could be deployed to alter the very foundation of everyday life, so that feminists and queers might change the world simply by speaking and inhabiting it differently.

### AUTONOMY

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At the heart of every practice of feminist and queer collectivity in the 1970s was the value of autonomy. *Autonomy* took on multiple meanings in different contexts of collectivity, but it usually held two competing definitions: on the one hand, autonomy was conceived of as an expression of individual agency, denoting the ability of individuals to free themselves from the shackles of oppressive social systems and logics, including sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, and a range of social stigmas associated with gender and sexual nonconformity. For example, the various political collectives that emerged out of the women's liberation movement in the early 1970s developed the political practice of consciousness raising as a tool for promoting an individual woman's capacity to become aware of, and abandon, her investment in traditional gender hierarchies. Consciousness raising was first articulated as a political program by the radical feminist Kathie Sarachild in 1968 and later taken up by various strands of both the women's and the gay liberation movements; it involved small groups of women (and later queers and sexual and gender dissidents) meeting and sitting in a circle to discuss various aspects of their shared experiences of sexism. These meetings allowed individual women to articulate their lived experiences to others who could affirm similar experiences and collectively conceive of both interpersonal and political strategies for combating sexist logics.



In this sense, autonomy was figured as a project of subject transformation: it was fundamentally the goal of reorienting one's individual psychic investments in order to absorb feminist and queer worldviews, including turning to other women with the aim of producing new solidarities. This activity required a form of self-love, in which individual women understood their own experiences as valuable and worthwhile enough to share with others, and consequently gave recognition to other women as equally valuable human beings with rich experiences deserving attention. As feminist activist Pamela Allen explained of consciousness raising in 1969:

The group offers women a place where the response will be positive. "Yes, we know." "Yes, we understand." It is not so much the words that are said in response that are important; rather it is the fact that . . . someone listens and acknowledges validity of another's view of her life. It is the beginning of sisterhood, the feeling of unity with others. (Allen [1969] 2000, 278)

Such unity could be forged only if women first individually came to love themselves enough to give up time and energy to explore their lived experiences with others; in this sense, love was understood as a fundamental practice of recognition, that is, of recognizing value in oneself and others like oneself in the absence of that acknowledgment from a sexist and homophobic society.

This definition of autonomy as individual freedom from oppressive external influence through practices of self-love often stood alongside a more radical conception of autonomy as the figurative and literal detachment of distinct groups of women and queers from the broader American society. That detachment, whether performed through the creation of consciousness-raising groups, communal living experiments, or independent business ventures, involved producing a material distance between feminist and queer collectives and the primary social, economic, and political institutions that dominated American life. *Separatism*—the belief in complete detachment from heteropatriarchal society—became a central component of lesbian feminism in the 1970s. Lesbian separatists believed that sexism and homophobia ran so deep in American culture that women-identified women had to produce an independent, lesbian-ruled society with its own political and economic system. In her 1973 book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, writer and activist Jill Johnston developed a conceptual map of what such a society might look like, including the creation of a transcontinental network of lesbian farms and communes, a system of barter and exchange of goods produced only by lesbian craftspeople and artisans, and lesbian publishing houses circulating writing by lesbian authors. Although such visions might seem farfetched to us now, they were valuable creative experiments in thinking through how lesbians might find spaces more conducive to their mutual flourishing than the cities and towns where they experienced homophobia, sexism, and misogyny.

Notions of group autonomy like separatism involved a spatializing of individual transformation. As cultural historian Martin Meeker explains, "The lesbian-feminist network could be established through the interaction of close-knit and small-scale lesbian communities . . . linked with others through newspapers, magazines, newsletters, collectives, distribution networks, telephone calls, live music festivals, conferences, and pen-pal clubs" (Meeker 2006, 234). Such forms of communication also necessarily involved the invention of a new language or discourse to describe the distinctly feminist or queer networks and spaces they sought to produce. Terms such as *Lesbian Nation* and the *Amazon Network*, which were used to describe utopian separatist societies composed of lesbian feminists, gave

## Chapter 10: Collectives

names to both imagined places and growing networks of lesbian communication that could be inhabited by a range of potential lesbian participants. As the feminist group the Radical-lesbians declared in their 1970 manifesto, separatism required an extraordinary sense of self-love akin to that demanded by consciousness raising, in which women felt enough affirmation within themselves to be able to extend that kind of recognition and love to other women in an act of near-spiritual solidarity. Though often perceived as a negative refusal of the world conditioned by hatred, resentment, or rage, separatism held within it a radical concept of love not as a romantic bond between man and woman or even as an expected affective tie between mother and child but as a force of willed solidarity between women. As lesbian-feminist writer Charlotte Bunch claimed in 1972: “The lesbian is in revolt . . . because she defines herself in terms of women and rejects the male definitions of how she should feel, act, look, and live. To be a lesbian is to love oneself, woman, in a culture that denigrates and despises women” (quoted in Valk 2010, 228).

Alternatively, for business collectives, such as Olivia Records and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the value of autonomy lay in the ability of collective members to control all elements of the means of production for a variety of creative endeavors without the interference of white straight male managers who dominated mainstream business ventures. Feminist and queer businesses wanted to see what kinds of creative products might emerge out of companies dedicated to the interests, values, and worldviews of women and queers rather than a homogenous mainstream readership. As Barbara Smith said of the founding of Kitchen Table in 1980, “Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us.” She continued, “The founding [of Kitchen Table] was partially motivated by our need, as Third World women, to have complete control over both the content and the production of our words—control which is usually not available when working with feminist and alternative publishers” (Smith 1989, 11, 13). Such a view brought aspects of self-love into the orbit of business values, which underscored the need to extend care, investment, and nurture to the creative practices of one’s own oppressed and denigrated people; as Smith consistently stressed in her writing about Kitchen Table’s publishing vision, the press made decisions about what work to print based not on projected sales figures but on which texts would best uplift, inform, and nurture women of color in a variety of global contexts. Ultimately, then, autonomy mattered to feminist and queer collectives, because it held forth uncharted social, political, and creative possibilities for women and gender and sexual minorities when they acknowledged love of self in the face of countless sexist, racist, and homophobic logics.

## POOLING RESOURCES

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A second key element of feminist and queer collectives in the 1970s was the practice of pooling resources. Collectives were an effective social form for gathering up feminist and queer energies that were traditionally dispersed, suppressed, or altogether hidden from public view. By collecting individuals into communal networks of like-minded, if discordant, groups, collectives necessarily brought together an array of intellectual, material, and emotional resources in one place. This included medical knowledge, business acumen, creative training in particular arts, education in a range of fields, and skills in public speaking and facilitation. In some instances, these varied skill sets were seen as a potential source of tension within collectives, in that they highlighted members’ differences, produced insecurity about

uneven levels of expertise, and undermined the fantasy of a pure identity or unity among women or queers on the basis of their shared experience of sexual and gendered oppression. Simultaneously, different collectives stressed the importance of sharing varied kinds of resources. Consciousness-raising groups were committed to seeing women's emotions and lived experiences as a valuable resource that should be shared with small groups in the interest of growing awareness of women's oppression; the Boston Women's Health Collective, which started as a feminist reading group, began collating women's knowledge about their bodies, health regimens, and interactions with doctors in the interest of producing an accessible health guide for women and girls; and the students enrolled in Judy Chicago's Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the mid-1970s pooled their creative resources to learn how to build studio spaces, repair walls and floors, install windows, and develop skills in using a range of art materials, including metal, wood, and plastic. By and large, then, the pooling of resources was seen as a major asset to the political and creative projects of feminist and queer collectives as well as a way to address the various differences among members of distinct groups.

The successful pooling of resources required a movement from love of self, so powerfully articulated by the value of autonomy, to a love for all others who shared experiences of oppression on the basis of sex and gender. As feminist theorist Amber Musser explains of the Boston Women's Health Collective: "[The] criteria for participation in this collective was love for the body of the self and love for the bodies of other women. . . . Beginning with an exploration of the body's anatomy and finishing with the medical establishment and need for political change, the book moved from the internal personal to the external political" (Musser 2007, 97). For the Boston Women's Health Collective, the pooling of knowledge involved a conceptual leap from self-love to collective care enacted through the circulation of information about women's health. The collective initially began as a workshop at the first major women's liberation conference at Emmanuel College in 1969, where a group of participants met to discuss the topic "Women and Their Bodies." Galvanized by their first discussion, the group kept meeting independently and ultimately produced an extensive reading list and narrative accounts of individual women's experiences with medical and health concerns, including everything from birth control to managing illness to imparting reproductive knowledge to women and children. The collective began to organize the information it had amassed into a handmade booklet that, upon initial printing, became so widely circulated that it was soon picked up for publication by New England Free Press in 1971 and two years later by mainstream publisher Simon and Schuster.

From its inception, *OBOS* was a collaborative project that was a material manifestation of women's pooling of knowledge about their bodies, experiences, and knowledge. The book was also an ever-evolving project, responding to changes in feminist and queer political worldviews over time by including new sections in each edition that responded to such issues as lesbian health, artificial insemination, aging, transgender health, and HIV/AIDS. In this way, *OBOS* was not only the product of a collective but also took on the form of a collaborative dialogue both in its multivoiced structure (different sections were written and edited by different women) and in its evolving editions. Moreover, the very object of the collective's collaborative work, a health guide in the form of a book reprinted across more than four decades, was predicated on a sense of mutual care between the initial collective members and future generations of women.

Although *OBOS* represented the material pooling of knowledge into an actual product, a best-selling book, other collective ventures, such as the national network of feminist bookstores that emerged in the 1970s, provided physical spaces where such information

## Chapter 10: Collectives

could be discovered, disseminated, and discussed publicly. The first self-proclaimed feminist bookstore in the United States, A Woman's Place, was opened by the Information Center Incorporated collective in Oakland, California, in 1970. Like the many bookstores that would follow in its footsteps, A Woman's Place claimed space not only for feminist writing but also for feminist-inflected approaches to bookstore management: the owners made visible women's writing from a vast array of global contexts across multiple time periods; stocked feminist political, social, and scientific books; and collated lists of essays, books, and articles emerging from the women's movement and increasingly taken up by women's studies classes, which were a recently inaugurated feature of humanities and social science programs at major universities. As feminist historian Kristen Hogan explains, "The image of a woman looking not at shelves but at information postings presented the bookstore as a resource center, and lists of services identify the bookstore as a reference site similar to a public library; such emphasis on public learning situated the bookstore as a public women's studies classroom" (Hogan 2008, 600). The feminist bookstore, then, was the embodiment of a space that "collected" books, ideas, and disciplines alongside actual readers and booksellers in one location; in so doing, the feminist bookstore revised the sexist notion of a woman's *place*, understood as the socially expected position or role a woman was expected to inhabit in a patriarchal society, into a *woman's place*, a setting made for and by women for their mutual flourishing and edification. This echoed the intergenerational form of love enacted by the publication history of *OBOS* by investing deep value in the intellectual growth of future generations of girls and women who, as a result of access to spaces like feminist bookstores, might be galvanized by the resources they found there to promote the values of feminist thought and pursue their own professional and political aspirations unfettered by the psychological constraints of sexism and misogyny. Every location where women, queers, and sexual and gender dissidents met collectively could become a potential site for sharing ideas, learning, and growing with others so that autonomy could become the springboard for collective knowledge production, both fused together through the practice of love, intimacy, and care for other women and queers.

## POLITICAL IMAGINATION

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Neither autonomy nor the pooling of resources could have any meaning without a sense of the motive and purpose of such activity for women and queers. The final component of feminist and queer collectives in the 1970s was their fierce commitment to the production of alternative political imaginaries, or visions and programs for a politically transformed world. The sheer variety of collectives that appeared in this period attests to the vast range of visions feminist and queer activists and artists developed as they imagined the kind of world they wished to live in: these included feminist and queer utopias, a world without sexual or gender difference, the celebration of universal bisexuality, the complete automation of reproduction, the development of separatist enclaves and self-sustaining communes for women and queers, the revolutionary overthrow of patriarchy, and the basic goal of sexual self-determination. As we have already seen, these visions were theorized and enacted in often competing or incommensurate ways, so that feminist and queer collectives never composed a unified vision of what a different future should look like for gender and sexual outlaws. What collectives did share in this period was a commitment to producing narrative and aesthetic forms through which to articulate their ideals and values for a transformed world. That transformed world was almost always one that exhibited radically new forms of love, affinity, and alliance

outside traditional heterosexual coupling. For political collectives, the manifesto, a confrontational literary mode that allowed for the direct articulation of agendas for radical social and political change, proved a highly effective form for expressing both a sense of mission and a plan for revolutionary feminist and queer action. In such impassioned documents as “The Redstocking Manifesto” (1969), the Radicalesbians’ “Woman Identified Woman” (1970), the Third World Gay Revolution’s “What We Want, What We Believe” (1971), and “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977), feminist and queer activists and writers articulated specific demands, endorsed new political, social, and erotic orientations, and provided analytic tools for deconstructing and combating systems of sexist, homophobic, and racist oppression. Alongside print forms of political speech and analysis, organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front believed in the power of creating spaces for the freedom of sexual expression, including gay-themed dance parties and movie nights where participants could safely enact their sexual identities and intimacies among companions. For living collectives, it was the very practice of “hanging together” and exploring the possible outcomes of a collective vision in shared living quarters that contributed to the development of specific political programs for social change. And for creative collectives, it was the practice of making art together and sharing it with the world in the form of public performances and exhibits that helped materialize a feminist and queer political imagination in the realm of creative production. In all these instances, feminist and queer collectives ultimately used the foundational values of love of self and love of others to galvanize a broad-minded sense of love of the world, understood as an impassioned attachment to the rich variety of relationships that could be forged by unlike people around the globe.

For all its traditionally negative connotations, the meeting was arguably one of the most important social forms through which collectives articulated and argued over their distinct political imaginations. Meetings were intended to be places where questions of collective concern could be debated and where members were encouraged to engage directly with one another; it was hoped that they would be transformed by what they learned about themselves and others in the process. These gatherings expressed a love for the world, because they necessitated public dialogue about the kind of society that members wished to bring into being through their cooperative practices. Meetings could be anarchic, ill-managed, or simply unproductive, but even when they failed to produce shared ideals or resolution, they dramatized important themes for the struggle for gender and sexual freedom. Writing about the chaotic and freewheeling meetings of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in 1971, Dennis Altman stated:

Their meetings . . . are largely unstructured with a very heavy stress on personal declarations and revolutionary sentiment. . . . GLF defines itself as open, unencumbered by structure, and as a movement rather than an organization. Here, as in other features, GLF has borrowed consciously from the women’s liberation movement. There is a strong feeling in both movements that traditional rules and debate and procedure tend both to polarize opinion and to preclude the shyer and less verbally agile from full participation. . . . Thus devices are adopted like choosing chairmen or women by lot, rotating discussion around the room so that no one may speak twice until everyone has been heard, avoiding any formal motions in favor of a search for consensus, etc. GLF meetings, as a result, are often something of a cross between a Quaker meeting and an informal rap session, infuriating to those who want to “get things done” but important in raising the level of self-awareness and acceptance of those with less experience and less self-confidence. (Altman [1971] 2012, 134)

## Chapter 10: Collectives

Members of the Gay Liberation Front articulated their worldview less through any direct statement than in the actual form, or formlessness, of their collective meeting procedures. The efficacy of such formats was, of course, up for debate, and the Gay Liberation Front suffered from lack of organization, which led to the splintering of its membership into a variety of smaller collectives; yet the enactment of its political ideals in the practice of meeting was an experiment that allowed members to imagine the productive possibilities of abandoning traditional hierarchies and structures of power even at the level of institutional organization.

For other collectives, meetings were places to theorize concepts that might provide an effective analysis of the oppressive forces of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and homophobia while strategizing tactics for combating these interlocking oppressions. The Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist reading group formed in 1974, met for three years before writing down and circulating its Black Feminist Statement in 1977, a document now considered a foundation of black feminist thought. The statement accomplished three tasks: first, it valued the lives and experiences of black lesbians; second, it articulated a new concept of identity politics as a feminist and queer-inflected worldview that took into account individual identity as a shaping force in one's relationship to others; and finally, it offered up the concept of interlocking oppressions (later called *intersectionality*) to describe a political and intellectual commitment to address the multiple and overlapping experiences of oppression that different kinds of people experience based on their gender, race, sexuality, and class. Intersectionality functioned not only as a concept but also as an alternative political imaginary that could simultaneously account for women's differences and the experiences of oppression they may unevenly share. Feminist scholar Brian Norman underscores that although the statement writers spoke from their distinct position as black lesbians (whom they identified as potentially the most oppressed group in US culture), they repeatedly used a collective *we* to articulate an open-ended coalition of women across multiple differences. Norman explains:

The analysis of interlocking oppressions draws equally from an emphasis on lived experience and a desire for unity, both of which come out of women's liberation political sensibilities. . . . [The Combahee River Collective] sought to resolve a potentially incommensurate desire to speak only from particular experience while also working diligently to organize black women across potential lines of difference. . . . The "we" of the *Statement*, and identity politics generally, is understood to address particularity at the same time that it reaches for—and makes possible—larger collectives. (Norman 2007, 108)

Like autonomy and the of pooling resources, the articulation of alternative political imaginaries required individual members of collectives to see their distinct subjectivities as bound up within a larger revolutionary project, a collective "we" whose ultimate expansiveness could never be predicted. This was understood as a capacious, world-centered feminist politics that sought both to acknowledge the specificities of particular women's lives and to articulate love for all women as a revolutionary and transformative act. In their manifestos, statements, essays, activist work, and public performances, groups, such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Combahee River Collective, invented new concepts for analyzing systems of oppression and enacted imaginative uses of collective language to include even as yet unidentified allies in the radical feminist and queer cause.

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## Summary

Whither collectivity? A variety of historical and social circumstances placed limits on the longevity of feminist and queer collectives after the 1970s: interpersonal conflicts; the demands of everyday life, including making an income, supporting families, and simple political exhaustion; the resurgence of the Cold War in the 1980s; and the diffusion of feminist and queer values into the mainstream of American life, which allowed many to experience limited but powerful shifts in their sexual freedom without the demands of collective practice. Moreover, collectives' stress on individual transformation was often translated into a variety of psychologically inflected self-help regimens that were easily co-opted by a capitalist logic of self-actualization in the 1980s. In one sense, the value that many feminist and queer collectives placed on individual autonomy as a prerequisite for collective engagement was too easily translated into classically American notions of bootstrap individualism and self-fashioning, which led many cultural critics, such as Christopher Lasch and Thomas Wolfe, to misguidedly condemn women's and gay liberation as movements that promoted narcissistic forms of self-actualization at the expense of collective democratic life and the power of family ties to provide a stable basis for identity formation. As we have seen, nothing could be further from the truth. These movements and their collective practices expanded the very definition of kinship, intimacy, affiliation, and collective life in the modern United States through bold experiments in hanging together and loving one another beyond the limits of the heterosexual couple and the domestic ideal.

This fact is underscored by the powerful legacy of 1970s feminist and queer collectives, whose existence shaped the foundational values of some of the most radical groups of feminist and queer activists in the late twentieth century: this includes the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), formed in 1987; Queer Nation (1991), which pioneered new forms of confrontational direct-action activism while inventing safe-sex education; and feminist and queer artist collectives, such as Gran Fury (1988) and the Guerrilla Girls (1985), whose extraordinary visual advertising launched a radical critique of political, medical, religious, and cultural institutions that violently negated the lives of women, queers, and people living with HIV. Like 1970s collectives, these activist groups worked both at the level of the mind and at the level of the gut, articulating new forms of intimacy, love, attachment, and investment in response to such historical traumas as the AIDS epidemic, the backlash against feminism, the rise of neoconservatism, expanding mass incarceration, and the culture wars.

This legacy shows that collectives remain an exceptionally important object of study for anyone invested in radical politics and social change, because they are extended projects in collective action that synthesize individual transformation, knowledge production, and shared visions of freedom, arguably the three central components of democratic life. Collectives also dramatize the contradictions inherent in political engagement and the complex demands of negotiating competing, often incommensurate, goals for changing the world. Rather than abandon "the search for a Great Love" that Morgan so powerfully, if problematically, articulated in 1973, collectives ask whether or not many kinds of great love exist, what forging new bonds of intimacy might require, and what worlds those bonds can make.

## Chapter 10: Collectives

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