Shaping a Radical Politics:

Women's Organising in Britain, 1970-1983

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List of abbreviations

BBWG: Brixton Black Women's Group

BDC: Brixton Defence Campaign

BPOCAS: Black People Organisations Campaign Against Sus

CSU: Civil Service Union

IMG: International Marxist Group

FAS: Feminist Archive South

LSE: The London School of Economics

NWAF: National Women's Aid Federation

OWAAD: Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent

TGWU: Transport and General Workers Union

WLM: Women's Liberation Movement

Abstract

To date, there has been no sustained attempt to position women's organising in Britain between 1970 and 1983 within the history of ideas. This thesis offers the first, monograph-length intervention that treats this period of vibrant activism as a site of political theorising. Analysing five case studies, it shows that feminist activists during this period must be understood not merely as enacting a series of practical interventions, but also articulating theoretical insights. In doing so, this thesis makes four major contributions. First, through close archival analysis, it establishes feminist activism as a generative source of theory. Rather than treating theory and activism as oppositional, clearly distinct, or sequential, it argues – by example – that they were often simultaneous. Second, this thesis demonstrates the possibility – and necessity – of using archival materials to reconstruct major events in the history of ideas. This thesis foregrounds what it means to theorise with incomplete materials, while attending carefully to the traces left by women whose lives were structured around labour, care, and political struggle rather than the publication record. Third, this thesis foregrounds what Edward Said called history's 'disruptive detail' by repeatedly troubling dominant narratives of British feminism – narratives that have too often been white, middle-class, and London-centric. Instead, it spotlights the organising of Black women, working-class women, and women outside of the metropolitan centre. Fourth, this thesis offers intellectual histories of five cases in feminist history: the Night Cleaners Campaign, Selma James's intellectual history, the Bristol domestic abuse refuges, the Brixton Black Women's Group's anti-police harassment campaigns, and the Brixton Defence Campaign. By engaging seriously with these campaigns, it shows that they withstand – and indeed demand – prolonged intellectual and historical engagement.

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Introduction

In 1970, Suzie Fleming wrote: 'When people ask you what the Women's Liberation Movement is about, what people in the movement want, it's impossible to answer briefly'.[1] There wasn't, she went on, 'a single demand you can trot out, because we're not making simply a few specific demands'.[2] Rather, Fleming insisted, the Women's Liberation Movement was 'trying to define how people's lives could be different, and all the changes that are needed to bring this about'.[3] Fleming – who would go on to become a leading figure in Wages for Housework, one of the Women's Liberation Movement's most controversial campaigns – understood that disagreement was not a problem to be solved, but a condition of political vitality. Friction, debate, and competing strategies were all signs of a movement alive with the challenge and possibility of shaping a radical politics.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, feminists in Britain thought anew about what were then – and remain today – some of the central questions in political theory. Power, education, recognition, solidarity, autonomy, work, oppression – each became a subject of sustained feminist inquiry. The issues these questions raised were, they showed, often inextricable from topics less commonly treated by 'political theorists' in both academic and extra-academic contexts: sex, love, home, refuge, motherhood. But despite these innovative contributions,

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[1] Suzie Fleming, 'Women's Liberation', *Enough* 3 (1970): 7.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

references to the most ambitious campaigns from 1970s feminist history remain strikingly scarce in the academic literature on political theory. As Sophie Smith has pointed out, intellectual historians have a history of caring about grassroots theory, but they have been bad at extending this care to women.[4]

In the titles and abstracts of thirty-nine hegemonic Anglo-American journals of political theory, political science, political philosophy, and general philosophy, there is no reference to the Night Cleaners Campaign (c. 1970–1973), the Campaign Against Depo-Provera (1978-1983), the squatting of the Abasindi Collective (1980), Reclaim the Night (1977–1979), the Brixton Black Women Group's Anti-SUS campaigns (1977–1980), YBA Wife? (1975–c. 1984), the Grunwick Strike (1976–1978), Women's Aid (1974–present), or Rape Crisis UK (1976–present).[5] In fact, with rare exception – notably, the Wages for Housework campaign

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[4] Sophie Smith, 'Women and Intellectual History in the Twentieth Century, Part One: Rethinking the "Origins" of US Intellectual History', 2024, 439.

[5] For a more thorough review of existing literature on the Night Cleaners Campaign, see chapter one of this thesis; for the Campaign Against Dep-Provera, see Caitlin Lambert, '"The Objectionable Injectable": Recovering the Lost History of the WLM through the Campaign Against Depo-Provera', *Women's History Review* 29, no. 3 (15 April 2020): 520–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1695354; for more on Abasindi, see Diana Watt, *Catching Hell and Doing Well: Black Women in the UK - the Abasindi Cooperative* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2015); for more on Reclaim the Night, see Finn Mackay, *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); on the YBA Wife? Campaign, see Papers of Elizabeth Wilson and Angela [Weir] Mason, 'YBA Wife [Why Be a Wife?] Campaign, 1975-1984', 1984 1975, 7EAW/B, LSE Women's Library; for a complete collection of the Brixton Group's newsletter, see Milo Miller, Jade Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak out!: The Brixton Black Women's Group* (London ; Verso, 2023) and also see chapters four and five of this thesis; on the Grunwick strike, see Amrit Wilson, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (London: Virago, 1978); on Women's Aid, see Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement: We've Come Further Than You Think* (Policy Press, 2021) and also see chapter three of this thesis; on Rape Crisis, see Mackay, *Radical Feminism*. Journals searched: *Ethics*, *Political Theory*, *The Journal of Political*

– it might appear as though political theorists have little to learn from this period of intense and creative feminist critique.[6]

This thesis constitutes the first, monograph-length attempt to position women's organising in Britain between 1970 and 1983 within the history of ideas. Through the examination of five case studies – ranging from strike actions in the early 1970s to anti-police harassment campaigns over a decade later – it demonstrates that feminist activists during this period must be understood not merely as enacting a series of practical interventions, but also articulating theoretical insights. This thesis sheds light on texts and campaigns that shaped new desires and forms of political subjectivity; it is an act of recovery, sincere engagement, and critique. In doing so, it offers four major contributions to the intellectual history of women's organising in Britain between 1970 and 1983.

First, this thesis shows that when we turn to 1970s and 1980s feminist history, we find rich and abundant resources that address central themes in political theory. Over and again, this argument bears out in the archive. As this thesis demonstrates, when feminist

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Philosophy, History of Political Thought, Journal of Philosophy, The Journal of the History of Ideas, Contemporary Political Theory, Polity, American Political Science Review, Review of Politics, British Journal of Political Science, Perspectives on Politics, The Journal of Ethics, Politics, Philosophy & Economics, European Journal of Political Theory, Philosophy & Public Affairs, The Philosophical Review, The Journal of Moral Philosophy, American Journal of Political Science, Political Studies, Journal of Applied Philosophy, Philosophical Review, Noûs, Philosophy & Phenomenological Research, MIND, Journal of Philosophy, Philosophical Studies, Philosopher's Imprint, Philosophical Quarterly, Analysis, Analytic Philosophy, Political Quarterly, European Journal of Philosophy, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, Philosophical Perspectives, Philosophical Issues, Ratio.

[6] Alyssa Battistoni, 'Bringing in the Work of Nature: From Natural Capital to Hybrid Labor', *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (2017): 17; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Katrina Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework', *American Political Science Review*, 2022, 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000053.

campaigns from this period are reconstructed, we are faced with a vast – almost overwhelming – set of ideas and actions that sought to restructure the face of politics and usher in new ways of thinking and being. As it contends, the strategies and debates these activists navigated were sites of theoretical production.

Second, this thesis demonstrates the possibility – and necessity – of using archival materials to reconstruct major events in the history of ideas. As it argues, theory can be located in the traces left by women whose political thought was produced outside of the publication record. In using archival materials, this thesis foregrounds the contradictions that arise within and between incomplete texts, as well as the silences that are left in their wake.

As a third contribution, this thesis foregrounds what Edward Said called history's 'disruptive detail'.[7] As I will elaborate in this introduction, this thesis turns to places where activism was led by working-class women, Black women, and women based outside of London. The cases this thesis explores disrupt presumed hegemonies of feminist organising in the 1970s and 1980s – and calls for a plural and contested account of its political legacy. In doing so, it rejects a self-mythologising and self-aggrandising narrative of feminism. As it maintains, moments of contradiction and doubt were in themselves intellectually generative.

As a fourth and final contribution, this thesis enriches and contests histories of British women's activism through the reconstruction of five different feminist campaigns. It expands scholarly knowledge of the Night Cleaners Campaign, Selma James's intellectual history, the Bristol domestic abuse refuges, the Brixton Black Women's Group's anti-police harassment campaigns, and the Brixton Defence Campaign. These cases are ordinarily described in passing, if at all, within sweeping histories of feminism. Here, they are reconstructed in depth. This thesis shows by example that grassroots feminist activism is able to withstand serious and prolonged historical engagement.

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[7] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 240.

There were countless paths this thesis could have taken: other campaigns led by British feminists would have offered an equally productive starting point, including those led by the Southall Black Sisters (1979-present); the anti-Depo-Provera movement (1978-1983); the Abasindi Cooperative (1980-c. 1989); Big Flame (1970-c. 1984); YBA Wife? (1975–c. 1984); United Black Women's Action Group (1977-c. 1983); the Claimants Unions (1969-c. 1990); and Women in Media (1970-c. 1985). Given the vast gulf in theorists' engagement with women's organising from this period, the forthcoming discussion can only be a beginning. But this beginning, I argue, is enough to insist that 1970s feminism should be treated as a source of – and a resource for – political theory.

*

By way of orientation, this introduction begins with a brief history of women's organising in Britain between 1970 and 1983. With this groundwork laid, I set out the existing literature of the history of the feminist 1970s and 1980s. I then discuss the relationship between feminism and theory, before turning to some of the core methodological commitments and sources used in this thesis. I conclude with a chapter summary and a final note on method.

I. A history of women's organising in Britain, 1970 – 1983

To invoke Sheila Rowbotham, '[i]t is never very clear quite when history begins'.[8] Rowbotham's statement is both an observation – it is often exceedingly difficult to draw boundaries around movements – and a caution: by choosing a distinct starting point, we risk

[8] Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past Is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), xii.

imposing ideas about what, and who, counted as part of a movement.[9] Instead of offering one beginning then, it is worth turning to a collection of shifting events that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. From these events we can detect early indications of what would become a heightened energy or, as women frequently put it in the 1970s, an ever-rising feminist consciousness.

In the 1970s, women's organising in Britain emerged on a new scale, 'borne up' as Susan Watkins puts it in her formidable article 'Which Feminisms?', 'on a wider wave of struggle that infused its language and helped to shape its horizons'.[10] During the 1960s, this included anticolonial movements which swept across British-colonised countries in Africa and the Caribbean, with many movements securing independence during the decade.[11] In Northern Ireland, the ongoing colonial violence of British rule sparked widespread protest. By 1968, the Northern Irish civil rights movement had been formally established and marched from Coalisland to Dungannon.[12] And in the late 1960s, many women who would go on to be involved with women's liberation were already engaged in the organising of the anti-Vietnam war movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the British Black Panthers.[13]

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[9] Edward Said has also written of the difference between fixed and flexible beginnings – which he differentiates as 'origins' and 'beginnings'. See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta, 2012).

[10] Susan Watkins, 'Which Feminisms?', *New Left Review*, no. 109 (February 2018): 10.

[11] These countries were: Somalia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zanzibar, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, the Gambia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini.

[12] Marc Mulholland, 'A Heavy Load: The American Civil Rights Movement and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement', in *The Other Special Relationship*, ed. R. Kelley and S. Tuck (United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 111.

[13] Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (OUP USA: Oxford University Press, 2021), 25–27; Jade Bentil in 'Introduction', Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 3–4, 7.

As these struggles intensified, the decade saw increased sexual liberties for women in Britain. From 1961, access to the contraceptive pill on the NHS was introduced and, by 1967, the Abortion Act established broader access to abortions (though with some restrictive caveats remaining).[14]

Against this backdrop of insurrection and increased sexual freedoms, socialist and Marxist ideas became increasingly popular across British universities. The New Left, a largely student-led movement, sought out new alternatives to Stalinist communism on the one hand and the post-war Labour Party on the other.[15] Between 1960 and 1962, Stuart Hall acted as editor-in-chief at the recently established *New Left Review*; under his direction, the *Review* began publishing radical critiques of the reigning social order.[16] In 1966, this included Juliet Mitchell's 'Women: the Longest Revolution', which would be celebrated as a foundational text in the British Women's Liberation Movement.[17] Mitchell argued that traditional Marxist analysis must be expanded to conceptualise women's reproductive labour and role in the working-class struggle – and set out what would become an enduring relationship between feminist organising and the British Left.

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) as a formal entity emerged with greater definition in February 1970 at the first National Women's Liberation Conference.[18] Organised at Ruskin College in Oxford, conference sessions had to be moved to the Oxford Union

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[14] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 28–29, 82–83.

[15] Stuart Hall, 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review*, no. 61 (1 February 2010): 177–96.

[16] 'A Brief History of New Left Review 1960–2010', New Left Review, accessed 20 February 2025, https://newleftreview.org/pages/history.

[17] Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review* 1, no. 40 (1966): 11–37.

[18] On the use of the 1970 conference as an 'origin story', see Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 42–43.

to accommodate the unanticipated crowds that descended on the city.[19] At this first conference, four demands were proposed which would form some of the central commitments of the movement:

(1) for equal pay;

(2) for equal educational and job opportunities;

(3) for free contraception and abortion on demand;

(4) for free 24-hour nurseries.[20]

After the first conference, it was agreed that feminists should meet again. Nine more National Conferences would be held between 1971 and 1978.[21]

Over the course of the 1970s, much feminist theory and action occurred outside of the National Conferences – and outside of the WLM itself. There was, as women's liberationist Sue O'Sullivan put it, a 'proliferation of women's study groups', in which local chapters of the movement would meet to discuss classic texts in Marxism, feminism, and to engage in the work of consciousness-raising – the act of introspective engagement in which women theorised their own experiences.[22] The ideas of local groups were circulated in newsletters like the London Women's Liberation Workshop's *WIRES* (1975–c. 1985) and the Brixton Black Women's Group's *Speak Out* (1977–1983), as well as national feminist magazines like *Shrew*

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[19] Chandan Fraser, 'Taking Photos of the First Women's Liberation Conference', *History Workshop* (blog), 13 October 2021, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/womens-history/taking-photos-of-the-first-womens-liberation-conference/.

[20] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 112–13.

[21] On the final conference in 1978, see ibid., 31-32.

[22] Sue O'Sullivan, 'Passionate Beginnings: Ideological Politics 1969-72', *Feminist Review* 11, no. 1 (1982): 83–84, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1982.17.

(1969–1978), *Spare Rib* (1972–1993), and *Red Rag* (1972–1980).[23] Alongside the more overtly theoretical elements of women's organising, feminists were involved in multiple and varied practical actions, including supporting night cleaners in their fight for better wages and work conditions, the establishment of domestic abuse refuges from 1971, and the National Abortion Campaign which was launched in 1975.[24]

As much as the National Conferences were not the apex of feminist organising, they did serve a unifying purpose in the growing movement and a place to set out common demands. At the sixth conference, held in Edinburgh in 1974, two demands were added to the initial four:

(5) for financial and legal independence;

(6) for an end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality.[25]

At the 1978 conference in Edinburgh, a final demand was added:

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[23] For more on feminist print culture, see: Melanie Waters, '"Yours in Struggle": Bad Feelings and Revolutionary Politics in Spare Rib', *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (October 2016): 446–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2017.1301131; Victoria Bazin, 'Miss-Represented? Mediating Miss World in Shrew Magazine', *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (2016): 412–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2017.1301118; Sophie Laws et al., 'Writing Our Own History: Working for the Women's Liberation Movement: Starting WIRES', *Trouble and Strife* 1, no. 2 (1984): 48–55.

[24] For more on the night cleaners and refuges, see chapters one and three of this thesis respectively; for original papers on the National Abortion Campaign, see the folders 'Abortion and Birth Control', 1977 1971, Papers of Elizabeth Wilson and Angela [Weir] Mason, 7EAW/C/08, LSE Women's Library.

[25] The sixth demand was later split, with a right to a self-defined sexuality for all women being instead used as a caveat to the Seven Demands.

(7) freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status and an end to all laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women.[26]

At one level, the ability of a conference of thousands of activists – by 1977, there were 3,000 delegates – to establish a series of seven demands could be read as demonstrating an extraordinary level of consensus.[27] What this neat list of demands somewhat flattens, however, are the changing priorities and intensifying divisions within the WLM. The seventh demand, for example, passed under conditions of huge dissent, with the plenary in which it was voted on described by historian Jeska Rees as having 'descended into chaos'.[28] Ellen Malos, a member of the Bristol WLM, recalled her anxieties about securing the passage of the seventh demand, saying: 'we knew that if we weren't really careful, it would get blown out of the water, just because the feelings were running so high'.[29] The emotion of the tenth National Conference reflected stark and growing differences between members of the Women's Movement.

Feminist historians have demonstrated a certain preoccupation with dividing the WLM up into schema, with most identifying three major currents in the British context: socialist feminism, radical/revolutionary feminism, and liberal feminism (though women's liberationist Amanda Sebestyen has mapped thirteen different tendencies in the movement).[30]

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[26] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 113–14.

[27] Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: The Women's Liberation Movement in 1978', *Women's History Review* 19, no. 3 (2010): 345, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.489343.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Margaretta Jolly, Ellen Malos, 26 October 2010, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/06, British Library.

[30] For examples of this practice, as well as criticisms of it, see Mary Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three": The Development of Feminist Theory into the 1990s', *Women's History Review* 4, no. 3 (1 September 1995): 259–

As scholars like Eve Setch and Mary Maynard have pointed out, simplistic categorisations have obscured the nuanced perspectives and huge variations between feminists during this time.[31] Such categorisation also excludes feminists who did not identify with any particular category. But while these divisions have been shown by Rees, Setch, and Maynard to be overly simplistic, they do capture some of the major fault lines running through the WLM by the late 1970s.

In broad terms, socialist feminists held that the oppression of women must be understood through an analysis of capitalist exploitation. The role of unpaid, reproductive labour in servicing the capitalist economy was central to their analysis. A key ambition for many was to unite with the wider working class to challenge the contemporary economic order.[32]

Radical feminists, often positioned as at odds with the socialist feminist position, are typically characterised as primarily interested in patriarchal, rather than capitalist, oppression. They are associated with separatist tendencies in the Movement, including the exclusion of men from National Conferences and the advancement of political lesbianism. In 1977, a distinctive school emerged in the form of revolutionary feminism when, at the ninth National

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81, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029500200089; Maggie McFadden, 'Anatomy of Difference: Toward a Classification of Feminist Theory', *Women's Studies International Forum* 7, no. 6 (1984): 495–504, https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(84)90021-9; Jeska Rees, 'All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England, 1977-1983' (University of Westem Australia, 2007); Barbara Sinclair Deckard, *The Women's Movement, Political, Socioeconomic, and Psychological Issues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Watkins, 'Which Feminisms?'; Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 1989). For Sebestyen's schema, see Amanda Sebestyen, 'Tendencies in the Women's Movement: Then and Now', in *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year* (London: In Theory Press, 1979), 16–24.

[31] Eve Grace Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79: Organisation, Creativity and Debate' (Ph.D., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2001), 10–12, https://ethos.bl.uk/.; Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three"'.

[32] Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three"', 260; Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 338.

Conference in 1977, Sheila Jeffreys presented the paper 'The Need for Revolutionary Feminism – Against the Liberal Takeover of the Women's Liberation Movement'.[33] Often assumed to be an extension of radical feminism, though with some distinctive traits, revolutionary feminists understood violence against women as central to their oppression.

A third category, liberal feminism, can in contrast be thought of as primarily oriented towards changing major legal and political institutions to establish formal 'equality' between men and women. As Jeffreys has noted, 'there was not a strong tradition of "liberal feminism" in the [UK]'.[34] And yet, it is the demands of liberal feminism that have most visibly outlasted the feminist 1970s – embedded today in laws, institutions, and mainstream policy.[35]

What the picture of the 'big three' entirely underplays are the strong currents of women organising outside of the Women's Liberation Movement. This does a particular disservice to the organising of women of colour, who most often united under the political identity of 'Black' regardless of ethnicity.[36] While some of these Black women were members of the WLM, they also engaged in distinctive and separate actions.[37] Black women organised to disrupt deportations, to challenge the substandard education of Black children, and to protest

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[33] Sarah McNeill et al., 'Revolutionary Feminism: Statement from the 1st Year', 1978, 2232/1/box 64, Feminist Archive South.

[34] Sheila Jeffreys, *Lesbian Feminism: Hidden from History* (Routledge, 2018), 4.

[35] See chapter three for more on this in the context of domestic abuse policy. Susan Watkins has written about wider trends in feminism in a US context; we can draw clear parallels in the UK: Watkins, 'Which Feminisms?'

[36] Saffron Anant Madhav East, 'Antiracism in Southall, c.1968 – c.1982', *Doctoral Thesis, UCL (University College London)*. (Doctoral, UCL (University College London), 2024), https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10188748/.

[37] For a formidable overview of Black women's organising in this period, see Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

the over-policing of their communities.[38] They formed their own groups, including the Brixton Black Women's Group in c. 1973, the Manchester Black Women's Cooperative in 1975 (reformed as the Abasindi Cooperative in 1980), Awaz in 1977, the United Black Women's Action Group in 1977, and the Southall Black Sisters in 1979.[39] In 1978, prominent members of these groups came together to form the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), the first national Black women's organisation in the UK.[40] None of these groups were formally associated with the WLM, but all contributed to a vital tradition of Black women's organising in Britain.

That the work of these Black women is largely occluded from histories of women's organising in the 1970s replicates the exclusion of their activism from feminist discourse at the time. 'For too long', members of OWAAD wrote, 'the fact that as Black women we suffer triple oppression has been ignored – by male dominated Black groups; by white dominated women's groups; and by middle-class dominated left groups'.[41] The complicity of the 'white dominated women's groups' in the disregard Black women faced serves as a reminder, as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis wrote in 1983, of the ability of the oppressed to oppress: 'very often women themselves participate in the process of subordinating and exploiting other

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[38] Ibid., 73–74, 85–86. Also see chapters four and five of this thesis.

[39] Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*; 'United Women's Action Group - The United Black Women's Group', Google Arts & Culture, accessed 21 February 2025, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/united-women-s-action-group-the-united-black-women-s-group/RQEmVbPilLhtpQ.

[40] Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985), 164–74.

[41] Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) / Awaz, Brixton Black Women's Group & United Black Women's Action Group, 'Black Women Together: The Need for a United and Autonomous National Black Women's Organisation', *Spare Rib*, October 1979, 42.

women', they explained.[42] Black women were part of the WLM (though admittedly in a minority) and, as Brixton Black Women's Group and WLM member Gail Lewis recalls, they repeatedly insisted on the centrality of 'racism and anti-imperialism' and were 'trying to inject that into the wider feminist movement as an absolute central focus of struggle'.[43] To act as if these forces were not active in the 1970s negates their early and essential critique.

By the time of the 1978 National WLM Conference, the standard story is that the WLM's inability to deal with difference ripped irreparable fractures through the movement. Factional lines hardened, and divisions over the place of race, class, and sexuality became too deep to overcome.[44] Jeska Rees has done significant work in establishing the scope of disagreements between members of the WLM by 1978.[45] Rees contests the standard story that there was a dispute between socialist and revolutionary feminists which ultimately led to the demise of the movement – an argument that has laid blame at the feet of revolutionary feminists. While conflicts arose over the sixth demand – an end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality – Rees points out that these disagreements 'pre-dated the existence of revolutionary feminism'.[46] Other reasons for fractures ran through the movement and included, as Rees sets out, the way the WLM had outgrown its own structures. The format of the plenary, for example, in which thousands of women gathered to hear closing reflections and vote on resolutions, had become unruly and difficult to

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[42] Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Contextualizing Feminism: Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions', *Feminist Review*, no. 15 (1983): 71, https://doi.org/10.2307/1394792.

[43] Gail Lewis, interview by Marie Bernard, May 2009, 13, Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race, 2009-2010, ORAL/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[44] Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), 61–65.

[45] Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'; Rees, 'All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England, 1977-1983'.

[46] Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 351.

manage.[47] Members of the movement have also recalled a general reluctance to take on the organising of this huge event.[48]

A similar diagnosis has been given for the collapse of women's organising outside of the WLM. Members of the group Sisters in Study, for example, have described how 'differences between us became daggers of division' and led to the collapse of OWAAD in 1982.[49] Yet here, too, structural pressures cannot be ignored. If disagreement and difference formed the fracturing foreground of feminism, its background was a decade of severe underfunding, public expenditure cuts, and the looming intensification of free market economics under Thatcher – pressure that strained both the WLM and OWAAD alike.[50]

II. The historicization of women's organising in Britain, 1970 – 2025

The impulse to historicise women's organising in the 1970s occurred almost concurrently with the emergence of the organising itself. The first formal meeting of the WLM was envisaged as a women's history conference.[51] While the movement, just as this conference, diversified in its purpose, this early interest in historicization became a consistent preoccupation amongst feminist activists – including, increasingly, the historicization of their own origins. As Lynne Segal put it, 'the 70s were [...] when I thought most [... of being] a part of

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Sisters in Study, 'From the Inside Looking in: A Reappraisal of Heart of the Race', in *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, ed. Shabnam Grewal et al. (London: Sheba Feminist, 1988), 91–96; reprinted in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 313.

[50] Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s', in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990).

[51] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 26.

the making of history'.[52] As early as 1972, feminists were compiling writings from the movement in anthologies which were published with the intention of disseminating those ideas. Field-defining works in feminist history during this decade were also published, including Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and Fighting Against It* (1973) and Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (1978).[53] These texts also – and perhaps not coincidentally – created an impermeable record of their authors' own intellectual contributions.

The impulse to record and preserve the history of feminist organising continued into the early 1980s, when two sweeping histories of the WLM were published: Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote (both members of the WLM) penned *Sweet Freedom: the Struggle for Women's Liberation* (1982) and David Bouchier presented an early comparative account of the British and North American feminist movements in *The Feminist Challenge* (1983).[54] In 1984, what would become an enduring feminist praxis of interviewing 1970s feminists to document their memories of the period began with the feminist magazine *Trouble and Strife's* 'Writing Our

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[52] Margaretta Jolly, Lynne Segal, 25 August 2011, track 1, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/28, British Library.

[53] For anthologies, see Michelene Wandor, ed., *The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain* (London: Stage 1, 1972); Feminist Anthology Collective, *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1975–80*, Women's Studies Politics (London: Women's Press, 1981). For histories of feminism, see Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto, 1973); Wilson, *Finding a Voice*.

[54] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, Picador Original (London: Pan, 1982); David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983).

Own History' series.[55] In 1985, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe co-authored an essential history of Black women's activism entitled *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain.*[56] These texts have been accompanied by feminists' personal recollections in the form of memoirs and personal histories, works inflected by the weight of personal experience and ongoing political convictions.[57] The question becomes: can any of these self-produced histories sidestep the biases no doubt inherent to writing the history of oneself?[58]

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[55] For examples, Lynn Alderson and Sheila Shulman, 'Writing Our Own History: When Lesbians Came out in the Movement', *Trouble and Strife* 1, no. 1 (1983): 51–56; Laws et al., 'Writing Our Own History: Working for the Women's Liberation Movement: Starting WIRES'.

[56] Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London; New York: Verso, 2018).

[57] Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Beginnings of Women's Liberation in Britain', in *The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Stage 1, 1972), 91–102; Wilson, *Finding a Voice*; O'Sullivan, 'Passionate Beginnings'; Beatrix Campbell, 'A Feminist Sexual Politics: Now You See It, Now You Don't', *Feminist Review* 5, no. 1 (1980): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1980.9; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*; Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, *What Is Feminism?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Sue O'Sullivan, *Turning the Tables: Recipes and Reflections from Women* (London: Sheba Feminist, 1987); Pratibha Parmar, 'Other Kinds of Dreams', *Feminist Review*, no. 31 (1989): 55–65, https://doi.org/10.2307/1395090; Pratibha Parmar, 'The Past before Us: Twenty Years of Feminism', *Feminist Review* 31 (1989): 55–65; Michelene Wandor, *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London: Virago, 1990); Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman: And Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994); Jill Radford, 'History of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain: A Reflective Personal History', in *Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism*, ed. Gabriele Griffin et al., Feminist Perspectives on the Past and Present (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994); Zoë Fairbairns, *Saying What We Want: Women's Demands in the Seventies and Now*, ed. Helen Graham et al. (York: Raw Nerve Books, 2002); Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*, Main edition (London: Serpent's Tail, 2007); Jeffreys, *Lesbian Feminism*; Sheila Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s* (London; New York: Verso, 2021).

[58] Liz Stanley, 'Moments of Writing: Is There a Feminist Auto/Biography?', *Gender & History* 2, no. 1 (1990): 58–67, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1990.tb00079.x.

More recently, these accounts have been fortified with oral history collections, produced through interviews with women active in the 1970s. This includes the British Library's 'Sisterhood and After' project, the 'Do You Remembering Olive Morris?' collection at the Lambeth Archives, and the Black Cultural Archives' 'Heart of the Race' series.[59] Most recently, feminists have donated their personal collections of often extraordinarily well-preserved papers to libraries across Britain. The archives we encounter are invariably racialised, with several 'feminist libraries' overwhelmingly consisting of documents produced by white women. It has been the work of the curators of the Black Cultural Archives to assemble collections produced by Black women – in resistance to their archival exclusion.

What explains the degree to which these sources have been carefully created and preserved? In early liberationist journals and magazines, feminists described their frequent frustration when attempting to recount the history of women's activism from earlier decades.[60] To prevent the same fate befalling their own activism and theorising, feminists have assembled a record of their organising. As Maggie McFadden put it in 1984, 'Ever since the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the mid-sixties, women have been determined not only to resurrect our history, but also to document and save our contemporary experience, so that "never again" will we experience the numbing effects of a silent and monolithic past'.[61] Amia Srinivasan has described the 'intense anxiety about irrelevance and obsolescence' that

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[59] 'Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project', 2011, C1420/20, British Library; 'Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race', 2010 2008, ORAL/1/BWM 32, Black Cultural Archives; 'Do You Remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project', 2009, IV/279/2, Lambeth Archives.

[60] Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe describe this tendency in Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985), 1–3. They also set out their own Black women's history in response to the historic marginalisation of such accounts.

[61] McFadden, 'Anatomy of Difference', 496.

has shaped feminist historicising.[62] And, as Srinivasan notes, '[u]nder patriarchy women have every reason to be worried about irrelevance and obsolescence as they age'.[63]

Feminists' pre-emptive anxiety about being occluded from history was not, it seems, entirely misplaced. The sheer volume of material available to academics seeking to reconstruct activism in this period stands in sharp contrast to a paucity of academic texts taking 1970s British feminism as their focus. As Jeska Rees has pointed out, the gap is made 'all the more surprising' – and, we might add, all the less excusable – given the extensive documentation of 1970s feminist activism that took place.[64]

Existing scholarship on feminist organising in this period can be divided into four main sub-groups. The first consists of unpublished PhD theses, all of which have been produced in History departments; they range from histories with specific geographical focuses to those which cover topics like sexuality and class.[65] The second, and largest, category of

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[62] Amia Srinivasan, 'What Should Feminist Theory Be?', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 212 (2022): 56.

[63] Ibid., 49.

[64] Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 338.

[65] Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79'; Rees, 'All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England, 1977-1983'; Sarah Browne, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland' (University of Dundee, 2010); Anna Gurun, 'Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality in Britain and France, c.1970-c.1983' (University of Dundee, 2015), https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/8898076/Anna_Gurun_Thesis.pdf; Elizabeth Homans, 'Visions of Equality Women's Rights and Political Change in 1970s Britain' (Bangor University, 2015), https://pure.bangor.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/20570706/file; Jonathan Thomas Moss, 'Women, Workplace Militancy and Political Subjectivity in Britain, 1968-1985' (PhD, University of Glasgow, 2015), https://eleanor.lib.gla.ac.uk/record=b3153679; George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979' (Durham University, 2016), http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11430/; Emily Grace Flaherty, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1968-1984: Locality and Organisation in Feminist Politics' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), https://search.proquest.com/docview/2001126151; Jessica M. B. White, 'Race, Motherhood, and

academic texts is comprised of published historical accounts. The relative brevity of many of these accounts, given the vast scope they cover, means that the histories they reconstruct are cursory and sweeping.[66] In recent years, this trend is being somewhat reversed with scholars focusing on specific themes and trends within the Women's Movement.[67] Third,

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Multiculturalism: The Making of Female Identities in the British Inner City, c. 1970-1990' (United Kingdom, The University of Manchester, 2021); East, 'Antiracism in Southall, c.1968 – c.1982'. Of these texts, Browne, Setch, Rees, and Stevenson have since published, but only Browne and Stevenson have published a significant proportion of their material.

[66] Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s', in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990); Harold L. Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1999*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke : New York: Macmillan ; St. Martin's Press, 2000); George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350066625; Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (OUP USA: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[67] Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: The Women's Liberation Movement in 1978', *Women's History Review* 19, no. 3 (2010): 337–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.489343; Eve Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969–79', *Twentieth Century British History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 171–90; Sarah Browne, '"A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism": Women's Liberation in St Andrews, Scotland, c.1968-c.1979', *20th Century British History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 100–123, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwq058; Natalie Thomlinson, 'The Colour of Feminism: White Feminists and Race in the Women's Liberation Movement', *History* 97, no. 3 (327) (2012): 453–75; Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period? Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review* 22, no. 4 (2013): 643–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2012.751772; Nicholas Owen, 'Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *The Historical Journal* 56, no. 3 (September 2013): 801–26, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000611; Finn Mackay, 'Reclaiming Revolutionary Feminism', *Feminist Review* 106, no. 1 (1 February 2014): 95–103, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2013.38; Finn Mackay, *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Victoria Bazin, 'Miss-Represented? Mediating Miss World in Shrew Magazine', *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (2016): 412–31,

contemporary academics have contributed to the work of historical preservation itself in the form of anthologies of historic texts and oral history projects.[68] And fourth, a limited number of texts take the feminist 1970s as a source of theoretical production and intellectual engagement. In the field of political theory, recent work on Selma James and the Wages for Housework demand has commanded attention by scholars like Linda Zerilli, Kathi Weeks, and

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https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2017.1301118; Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Natalie Thomlinson, '"Second-Wave" Black Feminist Periodicals in Britain', *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (1 October 2016): 432–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2017.1301129; George Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and "Class Struggle": Gender, Class Formation and Political Identity in Women's Strikes, 1968–78', *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016): 741–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1132875; Jessica White, 'Black Women's Groups, Life Narratives, and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* 65, no. 3 (June 2022): 797–817, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X21000492; Jessica White, 'Child-Centred Matriarch or Mother Among Other Things? Race and the Construction of Working-Class Motherhood in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 33, no. 4 (1 December 2022): 498–521, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwac005.

[68] Heidi Safia Mirza, *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997); Margaretta Jolly, Polly Russell, and Rachel Cohen, 'Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 2 (2012): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.664902; Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*.

Katrina Forrester.[69] In the field of sociology, Finn Mackay has introduced feminist activism as a source of intellectual contribution.[70]

The handful of extant histories, both academic and otherwise, has enabled hegemonic narratives to emerge and dominate the discourse. To be clear, I take these sweeping histories to be useful – they provide a necessary overview of the period and the groundwork from which to build more detailed accounts. Their broad quality, however, invariably lacks nuance; this in turn has enabled the emergence of simplistic narratives about the Women's Liberation Movement and feminist organising more generally.

In the case of the British women's organising, three such reductions are worth pointing out. First, there has been a conflation of North American and British feminist histories, with presumptions that feminism unfolded in parallel ways across the Atlantic.[71] While there was certainly transatlantic intellectual exchange between feminists at this time, there are also ways in which British feminism is importantly distinct from its North American counterpart – not least in the way British feminism was intertwined with the British left.[72]

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[69] Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Beverley Best, 'Wages for Housework Redux: Social Reproduction and the Utopian Dialectic of the Value-Form', *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021): 896–921, https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2021.0052; Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'; Katrina Forrester, 'Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement: Selma James's Internationalism of the Unwaged', *Political Theory* 52, no. 4 (1 August 2024): 659–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231213663.

[70] Mackay, *Radical Feminism.*

[71] This is something Eve Setch discusses: Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79', 13–16. As examples of this, Setch cites Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge*, 56–58, 105; Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s', 193; Susan Bassnett, *Feminist Experiences: The Women's Movement in Four Cultures*, Routledge Library Editions. Feminist Theory (London: Routledge, 2013), 156, 166; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, 6–9, 10–12.

[72] Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79', 14.

Second, the British WLM is often characterised as a largely white, middle-class movement. Again, this reflects something superficially true: the WLM was, as Natalie Thomlinson has shown, dominated by white women.[73] But the hegemony of this narrative also obscures the work of countless Black feminists, including those organising outside of the WLM. To quote George Stevenson, it is 'patronizing towards the many working-class [and, we might add, Black] women who were engaged in the Women's Movement from the very beginning and were crucial in its creation and the form it took'.[74] This characterisation also obfuscates other sites of feminist organising that proliferated outside of the WLM.

A third risk that arises from the repetition of sweeping narratives is the reinforcement of the metaphor of the 'second wave'. It is hard to measure the pervasiveness of the metaphor of the feminist 'waves' and yet Clare Hemmings, in a broad survey of feminist journals, has found that it continues to frame and constrain the story of feminism with a hegemonic capacity.[75] Anecdotally, when I tell people that I work on women's activism in the 1970s and 80s the single most common response is: 'so, you work on the second wave?'.[76] For this reason – because it is the challenge I meet most often when I speak of my work – I spend the most time unpicking it. In a sense, this thesis has become an extended reply.

The metaphor of the feminist waves unfolds as such: Between the 1850s and 1920s, feminists rode the first wave, securing legal rights for some women, including the vote and

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[73] Natalie Thomlinson, 'The Colour of Feminism: White Feminists and Race in the Women's Liberation Movement', *History* 97, no. 3 (327) (2012): 453–75.

[74] Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain*, 2019, 5.

[75] Clare Hemmings, 'Telling Feminist Stories', *Feminist Theory* 6, no. 2 (1 August 2005): 115–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700105053690.

[76] The conversation tends to then unfold with these individuals interrupting me as I explain that the metaphor of waves is one that I find largely unhelpful and limiting. Amongst other things, it reveals the enduring – perhaps even growing – strength of the metaphor.

the right to own property. In 1970, after a period of relative inactivity, women rose up once more in a surge of energy and imagination. New defiance of patriarchal oppression was expressed, the Women's Liberation Movement formed, and a series of seven demands from contraception to equal pay were put forward. During this second wave, the WLM underwent eight years of blistering debate before, in the late 1970s, it met its own fiery end.[77] Divisions – between socialist and revolutionary feminists, over gender separatism, wages for housework, and sexuality – became too great for the Movement to bear and the WLM imploded entirely by 1978. This second wave was then superseded, in the late 1980s and 1990s, by a third: intersectional and social constructivist feminism erupted with the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Judith Butler. In this pivotal period, feminists inherited and improved upon the feminism of the second wave to form their own, distinctive analysis. Two notable peaks include when Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989 and when Butler introduced a post-structuralist approach to gender with the release of *Gender Trouble* in 1990.[78]

A host of feminist theorists have made extended critiques of the wave metaphor. Judith Roof, Robyn Wiegman, Clare Hemmings, Kathi Weeks, and Sam McBean have described it as reductive, truncating, and, as Lisa Jarvis has argued, a trope that invites 'intellectual laziness'.[79] It is my suspicion, however, that we have not sufficiently loosened the grip of this

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[77] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Next Wave (Duke University Press) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

[78] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 Article 8 (1989): 139–67; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York ; London: Routledge, 2006).

[79] Judith Roof, 'Generational Difficulties; or, The Fear of a Barren History', in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Devoney Looser (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

metaphor to ignore it. Part of the metaphor's enduring success is that it captures something trivially true, evoking, for example, the heightened energy of feminist activism in the long 1970s. As Melba Wilson has put it, 'It was a very vibrant time for the feminist movement, the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s,' before she adds: 'I say early to mid 1980s because by the end of the 1980s we damn nearly burned ourselves out with so much organizing and political work'.[80]

But while there are reasons to think that the metaphor goes some way in describing a real phenomenon, there are more reasons to treat the metaphor of the second wave as unhelpfully reductive. Women have an uninterrupted history of organising against their oppression; by artificially dividing this history into distinct periods, the metaphor treats the activism of individuals whose ideas are continuous with 1970s analyses, but which occurred in a different decade, as out of time and place. In part, this is because the metaphor is unspecific, relying on a shared language about feminist activity but failing to go any further in its explanation of what, exactly, counted as 'second wave' action. More specifically, it obscures women organising before the establishment of the formal WLM, including working class women. It also denies the contributions of Black feminists to the long history of thinking about the

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1997); Robyn Wiegman, 'Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures', *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 805–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2000.0053; Hemmings, 'Telling Feminist Stories'; Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Sam McBean, *Feminism's Queer Temporalities* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); Lisa Jervis, 'Foreword: Goodbye to Feminism's Generational Divide', in *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*, ed. Melody Berger (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 14.

[80] Melba Wilson, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Melba Wilson, born USA, interview by Kimberly Springer, Transcript, 13 August 2009, 1, Olive Morris Collection Deposited at Lambeth Archives by the Remembering Olive Collective.

interacting oppressions of gender, race, and class.[81] And, moreover, the metaphor artificially cuts short the activism of the 1970s, which I argue continued well beyond the final WLM conference of 1978.

What is needed to interrupt the metaphor of the second wave are nuanced accounts that embrace the messy, overlapping ideas and conflicts that have been generated in British women's organising. As I show over the course of this thesis, histories that have been previously limited to a few lines in a sweeping history can be expanded to become chapters rich with detail and theoretical analysis.

III. Feminism: theory and practice

Activists and scholars have had many ways of defining 'feminism' over its long history. In 1986, women's liberationist Rosalind Delmar declared the task of 'arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism' an 'impossibility'.[82] For the purpose of this thesis, however, I take scholar and activist Gail Lewis's definition to provide a useful starting point. In an interview for the 'Heart of the Race' oral history collection in 2009, Lewis explained that 'what makes something feminist is [...] that it's hooked to something that's transformative'.[83] On Lewis's account, feminism is both flexible and demanding. There are many ways, she concedes, of being a feminist – the method for transformation remains undefined – but as a minimally uniting principle, she insists that feminists desire and act towards a fundamentally

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[81] On the exclusion of Black and Chicana women in a US context, see Becky Thompson, 'Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism', *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 337–60, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178747.

[82] Rosalind Delmar, 'What Is Feminism?', in *What Is Feminism?*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 9.

[83] Gail Lewis, May 2009, 25.

altered future. As a feminist, Lewis goes on to say that she, 'wants to transform current dominant patterns of gender relations'.[84] As Lewis has consistently demonstrated in her activism and scholarship, to be a feminist is not to be at odds with engaging in other forms of liberatory struggle, including against racism, imperialism, capitalism, and heteronormativity. Indeed, Lewis has argued that such struggles are mutually necessary to achieve a transformation worth fighting for. But to be a feminist is to struggle against patriarchy.

Under Lewis's flexible definition, I take the focus of each of the five chapters in this thesis to be an important campaign in the history of feminism. The campaigners themselves may not have unanimously identified as feminists – as Sue O'Sullivan has pointed out, in the early 1970s 'feminism' was not yet a popular term, and this was especially the case amongst the Black British community.[85] Categorising campaigns as 'feminist' when they were not self-identified as such must be done with caution – not least on account of historical anachronism. In this thesis, I adhere as closely as possible to the terminology used by the actors themselves when turning to specific cases; where women refused the term, I do not label them as such.[86] But, like Lewis, I am anxious not to perpetuate the historic exclusion of Black and working-class women from perspectives on feminism in this period. To paraphrase Lewis, why give white women the term feminism, when Black women were also engaged in a battle for liberation?[87] Each of the campaigns I turn to was actively engaged in the fight against patriarchy, and as such holds an important place in the history of feminism.

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[84] Ibid.

[85] O'Sullivan, 'Passionate Beginnings', 71; Gail Lewis, May 2009, 13.

[86] For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 11–12.

[87] Gail Lewis, interview by Rachel Cohen, 15 April 2011, track 4, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/14, British Library.

Can feminism also be understood as a theory? In part, the answer depends on what we take a 'theory' to be. If a theory is a systematic account of how something works – in the case of feminist theory, we might think of it as a systematic account of how society functions under conditions of patriarchal domination – then for some feminists the answer would certainly be 'yes'. Feminists have set out detailed and comprehensive analyses of society and have self-identified their practice as such. In 1982, members of the Brixton Black Women's Group insisted that 'Feminism is the theory underlying the struggle against the systematic oppression of women based on sex'.[88] They went on to set out their theory of feminism, describing the 'many factors [– 'ideological-cultural, economic and political' –] which contribute to the oppression of women and maintain and reproduce our subordinate position'.[89]

But while some feminists have self-described their work as theoretical, for countless others the act of providing a systematised account of oppression was not the priority. Many feminists have explained that they didn't have the time to produce detailed analyses as part of their activist practice. For BBWG member Suzanne Scafe, this was true of the self-described theorists in the Brixton Group. Scafe described how the 'immense amount of work' and 'huge commitment' of campaigning 'really didn't leave us time to think about our original commitment to a black socialist feminist group'.[90] Similarly, the Scarlet Women National Editorial Collective (a group of socialist feminists producing a magazine out of the North

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[88] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism', *Speak Out!*, July 1982; reprinted in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 209.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Suzanne Scafe in Jade Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', in *Speak out!: The Brixton Black Women's Group*, ed. Milo Miller (London ; Verso, 2023), 373.

East of England) explained in 1979 that 'we had little time to think about or develop theory about what we were doing'.[91]

Just because feminists have at times been too busy organising to produce or document their ideas in clearly delineated ways, however, doesn't mean we should exclude them from our accounts of theory-making. Feminists, particularly Black feminists, have long argued that the distinction between theory and practice is itself artificial and serves to exclude the work of marginalised voices from standard disciplinary boundaries. As scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have emphasised, theory frequently emerges from lived experience, connected to the real struggle of oppressed people.[92] Black feminists, like Angela Davis and the Combahee River Collective, have further developed the concept of praxis, which speaks to the dynamic relationship between theory and practice; ideas, they argue, are put into action when individuals organise against their own oppression.[93] That action can then be reflected on and used to further refine the guiding theory.[94] Olive Morris – 1970s feminist, Black nationalist, and squatting activist – was described by fellow organisers as having 'shared with us the

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[91] Scarlett Women National Editorial Collective, 'Socialist Feminism: The Last 3 Years', *Scarlet Women*, July 1979, 4; quoted in Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 340.

[92] bell hooks, 'Theory as Liberatory Practice', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1–12; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[93] The Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement', in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Davis, for example, applies this concept in Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, An Open Media Book (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

[94] This idea built on Gramsci's notion of a philosophy of praxis, a term that emphasises philosophy that is grounded in human activity and in turn guides action – rather than mere concepts. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

vision of a society free from racism, sexism and the exploitation of man by man'.[95] Morris's vision – of a liberated world – is evocative of hooks's notion of theory as a form of transformative practice, evoking the hope for new futures and a desire to bring it about in the self and other.[96]

It is not my objective to discipline the activism of the 1970s and early 1980s to fit the confines of academic boundaries when I explore alternative ways of conceptualising theory. Rather, I hope to expand our political theory to include the disruptive thoughts and actions of activists.[97] This thesis, taking its lead from Sophie Smith, insists on 'the recognition that many of the texts produced by those associated with social and political movements [...] are rightly understood as political philosophy/theory'.[98] When we read the activist archive as a source of theory, we come to see it differently. The moments when hyper-exploited cleaners signed union slips become assertions that they were workers and deserved the solidarity of the working class; women breaking the law become legible as expressing a theory of the patriarchal state; and protests against the police teach us that for some people, the state cannot be a tool for liberation. The texts that feminists produced in the 1970s did at times present a systematic account of social order, but more often they were unrestrained and angry,

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[95] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Memories of Olive: A Very Strong and Fearless Black Sister', *Speak Out*, c 1980; reprinted in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 181.

[96] hooks talks about the impact of theory on her own life in hooks, 'Theory as Liberatory Practice'; for more on hooks's concept of transformation, see bell hooks, 'Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory', in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, Ma: South End Press, 1984).

[97] This is akin to Pineda's work. See especially Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2021), 18.

[98] Sophie Smith, 'Historicizing Rawls', *Modern Intellectual History*, 2020, 1–34, https://doi.org/10.1017/S147924432000044X.

generating reactions – outrage, sympathy, movement – and attempting to raise new levels of political consciousness.

A question remains about the motivation behind defining something as theory. The distinction of the theoretical/non-theoretical has been historically deployed to deny access for non-normative thinkers to elite institutions.[99] When I describe the activism of the 1970s as richly theoretical, this is not to attribute some kind of normative superiority to the category of 'theory'. But, as Sophie Smith has shown beyond doubt, it is to insist that women have been systematically excluded from standard histories of political thought.[100] Gail Lewis has described how Black feminists have been turned to as 'voices' of activism but have not been 'called out as voices and living examples of scholarship and theoretical development'.[101] 'We just weren't given that kind of recognition', Lewis has explained.[102] To assert that feminists in the 1970s were theorising is to contribute to a long history of women rejecting their exclusion from academic spaces and insist on the intellectually innovative value of their work. To name activists like Lewis as theorists is to recognise the conceptual analysis they have performed alongside, and through, their organising. It is to their exclusion that I attend.

IV. Methods and sources

[99] Smith discusses this tendancy in her two-part series Smith, 'Women and Intellectual History in the Twentieth Century, Part One'; Sophie Smith, 'Women and Intellectual History in the Twentieth Century, Part Two: Activists, Academics, and the Future', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 85, no. 4 (2024): 633–79, https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2024.a944581.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Gail Lewis, 15 April 2011.

[102] Ibid.

This thesis uses a case method, inspired by John Forrester's *Thinking in Cases.*[103] Forrester, drawing on the disciplines of law, medicine, and psychoanalysis, argues that case-based reasoning provides not just illustrative tools but can be foundational to understanding how knowledge is produced and organised. The case, Forrester argues, is 'singular' – 'every case is different', he writes – but it can also be used to think systematically about wider processes.[104] Each case is specific and should be taken as importantly independent. At the same time, when they are taken together, cases help to reconstruct a wider history – in this thesis, a wider history of women organising, theorising, and disrupting. Forrester describes the nature of the cases themselves as unfixed: the way they are used and interpreted can change over time to reflect a broader historical context.[105] This is a helpful perspective, I think, when dealing with histories that could be used to illustrate a number of points and taken in different, and equally productive, directions. While I have been struck by particular elements of each case, another researcher might do something quite different with them.

The five cases this thesis engages with were chosen with relatively little knowledge of what they would contain or reveal. My hope was to be guided by archival materials, and to limit my preconceptions as much as possible. I did, however, engage some loose criteria. For one thing, it was my hope to present a relatively diverse selection, both in terms of topics covered and their interacting concern for gender, race, and class. In the first, the Night Cleaners Campaign bridged WLM circles and women outside of the movement; it was led by working-class women, including Black working-class women. In the second, Selma James, a white Jewish activist, was guided in her activism by anti-imperialist, working class action, in which

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[103] John Forrester, 'If p, Then What? Thinking in Cases', *History of the Human Sciences* 9, no. 3 (1996): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/095269519600900301.

[104] John Forrester, *Thinking in Cases* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 127–28.

[105] Ibid, 87: 'another conclusion', he writes, 'is also a feasible option'.

she had been intimately involved for decades; her perspective was also at odds with many of the feminists in the WLM at the point at which we pick up her story. In the third chapter, we see the Bristol refuge movement which was, in a sense, directed by women from outside the movement: battered women demanded that domestic abuse be placed on the feminist agenda in the early 1970s. This case also takes us outside of the organising nexus of London. In case four, we turn to the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG), a self-described Black socialist feminist organisation. The BBWG was centrally concerned with the interacting forces of race, class, and gender. While some members associated with the WLM, others refused the label of feminism altogether. And in the final case, which centres the Brixton Defence Campaign, we see that the Brixton Black Women's Group were also consistently – and at times to their detriment – willing to organise alongside men.

Each of the five cases examined in this thesis find their beginnings between approximately 1970 and 1973. This time frame was selected for several reasons. First, these years mark a formative moment when feminist commitments were being articulated, contested, and tested through action, and often for the first time. In turning to organising both within and outside of the formal WLM during its early years, this thesis also demonstrates that the WLM did not hold an exclusive grip over what feminism meant during the period. Second, the early 1970s were a moment of remarkable intensity in feminist organising. There is an abundance of campaigns to study from these early years, and this thesis is in part a response to that abundance. Third, the campaigns studied did not unfold in isolation; they formed part of a shared political and discursive context. Members of the Night Cleaners Campaign, Wages for Housework, the Bristol movement, and the Brixton Black Women's Group attended the same conferences and contributed to the same newspapers.[106] Focusing on what was

[106] For example, the BBWG discussed their lack of support for Wages for Housework in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', *Speak Out*, c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group,

happening simultaneously reveals how strategies, concepts, and tensions circulated across different strands of feminist practice.

This thesis is limited to a study of five English cases, although it is described as a history of British organising. This reflects the terms used by activists at the time, and the fact that women from across the British Isles participated in the campaigns. Titling it as a British history, however, underplays the heavy focus on organising in England. Cases that centre Welsh, Scottish, and Irish women's activism would be a formidable expansion of this research.[107]

To reconstruct the organising of the five cases in this thesis, I conducted original historical work, including extensive archival research. The bulk of the archival sources I engaged in this thesis have come from the London School of Economics' Women's Library, the Black Cultural Archives, the Lambeth Archives, and the Feminist Archive South in Bristol. These materials have been supplemented with sources from the British Library, the National Archives at Kew, the Bodleian Library, and the Bishopsgate Library. I also drew on oral histories, including the 'Do You Remember Olive Morris? Collection', the 'Heart of the Race'

Speak Out!, 20.; as we see in chapter 2, James discusses the Night Cleaners in her 1972 paper 'Women, the Union, and Work'; that same year, members of the Night Cleaners respond to James, also see chapter 2; the Bristol movement discussed Wages for Housework, see Bristol Women's Centre, 'Enclosed Statement, Letter to Spare Rib', 20 November 1977, 1, Malos/2123/8/115, folder 5, Feminist Archive South.

[107] For existing published works that take their starting point outside of London, see Browne, '"A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism"'; Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period?'; Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland*; Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: A View from Some English Towns, c. 1968–1990', *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016): 723–40. Natalie Thomlinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite are currently working on a project 'Women and the miners' strike: Capturing changing gender roles in working-class communities in Britain after 1945' that focuses on organising outside of London.

series, and the 'Sisterhood and After' collection. In addition, newspapers and newsletters provided important context. This included periodicals produced by the activists themselves; I most extensively consulted *Enough* (the journal of the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement), *Spare Rib* (a national Women's Liberation Movement paper), and *Speak Out* (the Brixton Black Women's Group newsletter).

From these varied archives, I have utilised un(der)researched sources, including personal correspondence, legal documents, conference notes (both produced for a national audience and personal records), pamphlets, campaign materials, and meeting minutes, as well as films, oral histories, photographs, and annotated speeches. Together, these varied sources have enabled me to unravel activists' disagreements with a depth and insight that would have been impossible using published works alone.[108] For a significant number of documents, it was impossible to definitively determine the purpose of the text, given that no title, date, or author had been noted. This was a common practice amongst feminists, for whom singular authorship was often taken to express liberal concepts of ownership and incapable of reflecting the collective nature of feminist thinking. As Lewis has explained, 'you don't necessarily put your name to a piece of work, because it's a collective work'.[109] The lack of named authors also reflects the informal nature of these texts, which were rarely produced for the publication record.

Much like the authorship of the archival materials used in this thesis, the strategic purposes of the materials used is at times more or less explicit. The newsletter *Speak Out*, for instance, was a clear attempt at movement building, setting out the Brixton Group's history

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[108] Mia Bay, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Martha S. Jones, *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 4.

[109] Gail Lewis in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 356.

and strategic purpose, as well as advertising its active campaigns; in other cases, however, the strategic orientation of materials remains undefined, and it is only possible to make a best guess as to their original purpose. A paper might have been a means to think through a position; a flyer may have been an advocacy tool; some papers were perhaps intended for internal use within a group. In each instance of uncertainty, I treat the materials I use with a degree of ambivalence and disciplinary flexibility. But while many of the materials used herein have uncertain origins, what is clear is that feminists were taking the time to document and reflect on their ideas and campaigns. And even where the purpose of a text is ambiguous, its effect is now, in a sense, epiphenomenal: whether its intended impact was to share a new idea, or analysis, or to work out a strategy, its certain effect is that it enables the reconstruction of feminist history today and allows it to become a source of theory.

There are at least three ways in which this thesis turns to the activism of the 1970s as a source of theory.[110] This thesis moves between these three modes, at times doing just one or another, at others engaging all three. First, it comprises a work of original historical retrieval, treating the five cases as contributions to the history of ideas. In each chapter, this thesis reconstructs previously overlooked historical stories, contextualising, rebuilding, and organising the key ideological issues at play. From the London Night Cleaners Campaign to the Brixton Black Women Group, it shows time and again that the feminist past is full of largely neglected stories that reward a careful historical lens. In doing so, it shows that by reconstructing, contextualizing, and critically engaging with a more complex context and set of debates than have previously been recognised, we substantially enrich the history of political thought.

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[110] My thanks to Amia Srinivasan and Jeanne Morefield for challenging me on this point and offering their own helpful input on these distinctions.

A second way of using activism as a source of theory in this thesis is through exhibiting what Edward Said has referred to as history's 'disruptive detail'.[111] In works including *Orientalism* (1991) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said argues that small, often overlooked historical details – fragments of resistance, marginalised voices, or forgotten inconsistencies – can challenge dominant historical accounts.[112] In Said's case, stories that serve to legitimise imperial and orientalising narratives are exposed through disruptive details. His practice of historically informed destabilisation has been deployed by Robert J. C. Young, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Jeanne Morefield.[113] Joining these scholars, I show that dominant narratives of feminism in 1970s Britain are challenged by the voices of working-class women and Black women, as well as campaigns that at times failed according to their own aims.

Third, this thesis aims to theorise with and alongside activists.[114] Theorising with activists can be understood as revisiting historical moments in which alternative modes of

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[111] Said, *Orientalism*, 240. My thanks to Jeanne Morefield for drawing my attention to Said's use of the phrase.

[112] Said uses the phrase in ibid.; also see Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) for Said's discussion of Mansfield Park pp. 60-78.

[113] For an expansion and application of Said's disruptive method, see Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London ; Routledge, 2004); for an example of using 'disruptive detail' to disrupt the notion of how history itself has been told, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226240244; for examples of this in action, see Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory*, Modernity and Political Thought (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022); Morefield uses disruptive details across her works; for an explicit discussion of this phrase, see J. Morefield, 'Critique Is the World', *Philosophy, Politics and Critique* 1, no. 1 (2024), https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:7aeeceb0-0673-488c-a82e-f48f91fbfbef.

[114] Thanks again to Jeanne Morefield and Amia Srinivasan for their input on these modes of using activist history.

thinking and organising took place, taking this as an opportunity to reimagine them. As theorists have shown, what might appear inevitable or unchangeable can in fact be understood as contingent on things that happened in the past. To understand this can be a means to open up new horizons for political transformation in the future. This approach is comparable to the work of theorists like Kathi Weeks and Katrina Forrester on Wages for Housework; Mie Inouye, Brandon Terry, Tommie Shelby and Erin Pineda on the Civil Rights activism; and Adom Getachew on post-colonial movements.[115] Additionally, this thesis engages with a substantial and growing body of political theory literature that theorises alongside activists, including Humeira Iqtidar, Paul Apostolidis, Pablo Ouziel, and Farah Godrej.[116] As these scholars show, the lived experiences of activists and the intricate realities of political organising reveal the nature of activism itself – as a place of solidarity, exhaustion, and contradiction. The five cases explored in this thesis provide rich material for imagining alternative ways of thinking and acting.

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[115] Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'; Mie Inouye, 'Starting with People Where They Are: Ella Baker's Theory of Political Organizing', *The American Political Science Review* 116, no. 2 (2022): 533–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015; Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist*; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, University Press Scholarship Online (Princeton: University Press, 2019).

[116] Humeira Iqtidar, 'Justice Beyond Rights: Haqq and Global South Migration', *The American Political Science Review*, 2024, 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000972; Paul Apostolidis, 'Organizing the Fight against Precarity', in *The Fight For Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity*, ed. Paul Apostolidis (Oxford University Press, 2019), 0, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190459338.003.0007; Pablo Ouziel, *Democracy Here and Now: The Exemplary Case of Spain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); Farah Godrej, *Freedom Inside?: Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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I did not go to the archives seeking out a particular story. Instead, I went to listen, guided by what Sophie Smith calls 'Quentin Skinner's maxim': 'the intellectual historian is someone who "studies bodies of texts and aspires to understand them so far as possible in their own terms"'.[117] I began by identifying available materials related to a given campaign, for example, compiling all archival boxes on the Night Cleaners. I read through this material in its entirety, to gain a broad, intuitive sense of the terrain. As historian Joan Wallach Scott writes, 'The researcher surrounds herself with the whispering souls she conjures from the material she reads'.[118] Following this initial pass, I engaged in reflective analysis, listening for recurring themes, tensions, or strategies that seemed to demand further attention. I then returned to the material for a second (third, fourth), more intensive reading – focusing on the internal construction of the campaign, its political dynamics, and the themes that had begun to emerge. At this stage, I assessed whether the initial interpretive threads I had noticed were substantiated by the archival evidence. To invoke Gail Lewis, this process was akin to 'go[ing] into a site of activism, if you like, and hear[ing] and watch[ing] and observ[ing] and be[ing] part of the production of theory'.[119] It was this process that guided the chapters that emerged.

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[117] Quentin Skinner in Hansong Li, 'Ideas in Context: Conversation with Quentin Skinner', *Chicago Journal of History*, no. 7 (Autumn 2016): 119.

[118] Joan Wallach Scott, 'Epilogue: A Feminist Theory Archive', in *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Next Wave Provocations (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 145, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394730.

[119] Gail Lewis, interview by Rachel Cohen, 15 April 2011, track 5, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/14, British Library.

V. Chapter summary

Chapter one reconstructs the Night Cleaners Campaign, c. 1970–1973, a campaign that challenged members of the nascent Women's Liberation Movement to consider who should be at the centre of feminist politics. The Cleaners were committed to increasing the visibility of working-class women, and they insisted on building coalitions with trade unionists. The Night Cleaners Campaign is also, I suggest, a case for us to begin to consider the road not taken: the alternatives that were available to activists and institutions alike in the long 1970s. Unions, I argue, missed an opportunity to work alongside working-class women and address emerging conditions of exploitative labour in the twentieth century.

Chapter two turns to a paper, *Women, the Unions and Work… or What is Not to be Done*, presented by Selma James at the third Women's Liberation Movement Conference in 1972. *Women, the Unions and Work* has been treated as the moment that James launched 'wages for housework' movement in a British context. This, however, overstates the centrality of the 'wages for housework' demand at the time. In returning to and recontextualising *Women, the Unions and Work*, we see that James's intervention was first and foremost an appeal to the WLM. James argued that feminists must abandon their existing strategy of working with the male left – epitomised in the figure of the unions – and build an autonomous movement.

In chapter three, I pivot to the anti-domestic abuse movement in Bristol which, I show, was grounded in a radical argument against the heteronormative, patriarchal family. When abused women approached the movement and asked for help, the Bristol group's prior understanding of the family as a site of violence readied them to build the first refuges. As I show, women in the Bristol movement were interested in building a transformative politics, and they were initially willing to work against the state to bring this about. And yet as the decade wore on, they began to orient their strategy increasingly toward securing resources, both

financial and legal. I ask: how were the Bristol movement thinking about what it meant to work in and against the state?

In chapter four, the focus is shifted to the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG), a Black feminist socialist group. The origins of the BBWG predated 1970, but the group was formally established in c. 1973. Amongst other things, one of the central campaigns of the BBWG was against the over-policing of their community. The BBWG pointed out that police harassment took on multiple and often gendered forms. One of the major focuses of their campaigning, however, was against the stop and search ('SUS') laws which criminalised the Black population, especially young Black men. During their engagement in the Stop Sus campaign, the BBWG's gendered analysis, in at least their public campaigning, all but fell away.

Chapter five stays with the Brixton Black Women's Group and centres their work in the Brixton Defence Campaign. Their involvement was underpinned by the most radically anti-state position presented in this thesis. As the BBWG argued, the police and the state were synonymous – and neither offered a route to Black liberation. In the face of the state, the BBWG organised alongside Black men. This, in turn, led them to at times minimise their feminist position in the name of solidarity. Once more I ask: what if men had been willing to abandon their patriarchal perspective, rather than women repeatedly making concessions?

At the outset, it was unclear whether the five cases in this thesis would speak to shared themes. And yet, as it transpired, each had something interesting and distinctive to say about who feminists should organise alongside: men, the state, even each other. The Night Cleaners were determined to work with the unions. To their minds, building a united, unionised movement across the working class was essential to bring about an anti-capitalist movement capable of toppling the existing economic order. When Selma James launched what became the wages for housework movement in the UK, her activism was grounded in the opposite view: only an autonomous feminist movement, she argued, would be capable of utilising the energy of women to bring about lasting and transformative change. James was insistent that women's

liberationists must work independently of the unions, and she proposed demands that fell outside of union demands for a wage for the recognised worker. In the third chapter, the attention shifts from the relationship between feminists and unions to the question: can feminists work with the state? The Bristol movement were originally set in opposition to the state, even criminalised by the state in their activities. But, by the end of the decade, they accepted state help and domestic abuse had become a mainstream political issue. The organising of the Brixton Black Women's Group, however, is an argument against reading state involvement as overdetermined. Reconstructing their anti-police harassment campaigns, we encounter a decidedly anti-state position. The Brixton Group resolved to fight the excessive legalisation targeting their community and they insisted that the state as an institution was racist and could never be a resource for Black activists. We see the Brixton Group built on this position as they organised against the state in the wake of the Brixton Uprising. They encountered resistance from within their community when they tried to centre the experience and leadership of Black women. And to the BBWG's frustration, some Black men treated the demands of feminism as a threat to the unity of the Black community itself.

Another thread running through this thesis is the shared theme of women who believed they could change the world. For many of them, the prospects for total social, economic, and cultural transformation seemed like an imminent possibility. Fifty years on, these women have found their hope largely unrealised. The conditions against which they struggled – patriarchy, racial capitalism, heterosexism, imperialism – have yet to loosen their grip. This thesis extends a perspective that they couldn't have, to ask: why?

One way to approach this question is to examine another shared theme: the politics of refusal – and what we might think of as its opposite, concession. Across these cases, refusal emerges as a critical strategy: a refusal to subordinate feminist goals to union structures; a refusal to seek legitimacy through the state; a refusal to compromise in the name of unity. But refusal often coexisted with concession, negotiation, and partial incorporation. Much of the

feminist 1970s took shape in that unstable space – between the urge to reject and the pressure to concede.

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The tensions faced by activists – between solidarity and autonomy, hope and despair, refusal and concession – were sharpened by severe under-resourcing. What remains in the archive is rarely a manifesto or completed programme of thought. Instead, we find fragments, newsletters, notes in margins, and hastily prepared speeches, texts shaped by exhaustion and constraint.

As a final methodological suggestion, I propose turning to Audre Lorde's reflection on the difference between poetry and prose to reflect on the difference between activist and academic theory. For many feminists in the 1970s, there wasn't time to set out a clearly systematised account of politics in a way that resembled the standard tomes of political theory. This does not mean, however, that theory wasn't being produced. Women took the time to write down their ideas, to circulate them, to discuss and debate them. They published their work, often in internal newsletters, and they presented it at conferences and workshops. What it does mean, however, is that the theory they produced at times looks more like poetry than prose: it is often fractured, urgent, brief, and written on scraps of surplus paper. Lorde writes:

> Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. [...] As

we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women.[120]

What does it mean to read the activist archive like poetry? As the writer Hisham Matar puts it, 'poetry is words in action'.[121] The texts activists produced were rarely polished or conclusive: they were theory in action. Reading them poetically means recognising their provisional nature; activists were attempting to make sense of the world in a particular time and place. Contradictions arise within and between provisional texts, but these contradictions are not a threat. At times, it is within these contradiction that the most powerful theory lies.[122] To read archives like poetry is to be attuned to their silences – the times when it is unclear who is speaking, how a thought might have ended, or what the purpose of a text was. As Joan Wallach Scott writes, the good reader 'listens, too, for silences and omissions'.[123] These silences are not gaps to be filled in the pursuit of a singular truth, but moments where the ambivalence, hesitation, and complexity of activists' ideas make themselves known.

To read the activist archive like poetry is to engage in an act that is at once grounded and imaginative, solitary and collective. It asks us to read not only for what is said, but for what is felt, desired, and left unsaid. And it is to see, in scraps and glimpses of time, how activist theories can open up a world with more light and power than many reams of prose.

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[120] Audre Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

[121] Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men* (London: Viking, 2012), 57.

[122] My thanks to Jeanne Morefield for her notes on the generative potential of contradiction.

[123] Scott, 'Epilogue: A Feminist Theory Archive', 145.

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Feminism, Unionisation, and the Night Cleaners Campaign, 1970 – 1973

'And I don't know [...] why everybody remembers Miss World and they don't want, never remember the Night Cleaner's campaign'

Sally Alexander (2012) [1]

On 20 November 1970, members of the British Women's Liberation Movement disrupted the Miss World beauty pageant at the Royal Albert Hall in South Kensington, London.[2] Broadcast to millions internationally, this was a noisy, disruptive, and messy affair: women 'threw smoke bombs, flour, stink bombs, leaflets, blew whistles, waved rattles' from the balconies as they shouted, 'we are not beautiful, we are not ugly, we are angry'.[3] Their anger was directed at the objectification of women. 'It was also', women who participated in the protest wrote, 'a revolt against the safeness of our lives'.[4]

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[1] Sally Alexander, interview by Rachel Cohen, 7 February 2012, 54, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/45, British Library.

[2] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 94; Sally Alexander, 52.

[3] 'Miss World Flyer', 1970, 7SAA/2, folder 2, LSE Women's Library.

[4] Shrew Collective, 'Miss World', *Shrew*, December 1970, 17; as quoted in Victoria Bazin, 'Miss-Represented? Mediating Miss World in Shrew Magazine', 428.

Their protest has been described as 'kickstarting a feminist revolution', an 'iconic event [...] which signalled the arrival of British feminism's "second wave"'.[5] But after the protesting women had been removed from the building and the lights had been switched off, who was left to clean up the mess? The task almost certainly fell to cleaners, the vast majority of whom were women, and over half of whom were black, had recently migrated to Britain, were over sixty, and worked part-time.[6] While the WLM's anger took front and centre at the Miss World protests, we might ask: what would the cleaners have demanded that day?[7]

We don't have to look far for an answer. Ten days before the protest at the Royal Albert Hall in the nearby borough of Westminster, strike action against the Strand Cleaning Company had come to its dramatic end. From 3 – 10 November 1970, a group of night

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[5] Clara Michel, 'Unstoppable Voices: How the 1970 Miss World Contest Sparked a Revolution', Royal Albert Hall, 15 October 2020, https://www.royalalberthall.com/about-the-hall/news/2020/october/unstoppable-voices-how-the-1970-miss-world-contest-sparked-a-revolution/; Victoria Bazin, 'Miss-Represented? Mediating Miss World in Shrew Magazine', 413.

[6] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', *Socialist Woman*, 23 August 1971, 4, London Collection Pamphlets 44/33, Bishopsgate Institute; 'Why Should Women's Liberation Support the Campaign to Unionize Night Cleaners?', n.d., 7SHR/D/01, box number 8, LSE Women's Library; 'Report for the Workshop', n.d., 7SHR/D/01, Box number 8, LSE Women's Library; J. L. P. Drake and W. J. Skinner, 'The Forgotten Workforce: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry', November 1971, 5, JEGER/6/24, LSE Women's Library; Jill Sullivan, 'The Brush Off: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry' (Low Pay Unit, February 1977), 15, 7SAA/5, folder 2, LSE Women's Library based on a 1970 survey of pay and conditions in night cleaning.

[7] Siona Wilson also draws the Night Cleaners Campaign in contrast with the Miss World action in the opening of her chapter, but to different effect, using it to explore the contrast in aesthetic modes which took place across these two episode of activism. Siona Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production', in *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1–3.

cleaners formed a picket line following the dismissal of their colleagues, Lynn Gilford and Joan Treadgold.[8] On the protestors' view, Gilford and Treadgold had been fired as retribution for joining the Transport and General Workers' Union. Along with the immediate reinstatement of their two colleagues, the cleaners called for an increase in wages, union recognition for cleaners, and an end to all unfair dismissals.[9] Their protest was the first of many actions taken by the London Night Cleaners Campaign.

In this chapter, and for the first time, I move from the archive up to reconstruct the history of the London Night Cleaners Campaign. By 1973, the campaign had extended to Birmingham, Bristol, Coventry, Durham, Grimsby, Ireland, Lancaster, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, and Oxford.[10] Due to limitations of space and archival availability, however, this study is limited to the capital city. There has been no serious scholarly engagement with the London Night Cleaners' substantial (however incomplete) archives, despite this being the only route to piecing together the history of their grassroots campaign comprehensively or authentically. There is a broad awareness of the campaign in histories of the British Women's Liberation Movement, and the campaign is also mentioned by some scholars providing an

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[8] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 16.

[9] Ibid., 7.

[10] May Hobbs, 'Night Cleaners Bid for a Square Deal', *Morning Star*, 11 August 1972; Lynda Finn and Gavin Williams, 'The Durham Experience - Bureaucrats and Women Cleaners', *Solidarity Pamphlet* 52 (n.d.): 1–19; 'Night Cleaners Special', *Shrew*, December 1971, 9; 'The Cleaners Voice', n.d., 1–2, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, The Women's Library @ LSE; 'Cleaners Voice', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 5, The Women's Library @ LSE. This is regrettable – the Cleaners expressed the desire to 'hear news of how the campaign is going in other cities, not just London' in their national newsletter, *The Cleaners Voice*. 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, The Women's Library @ LSE.

overview of women's place in British trade union movements.[11] In almost every case, however, the Cleaners are confined to a couple of sentences or, at most, a handful of pages. The level of analysis in these accounts is superficial and claims made about the campaign are relatively speculative in nature. As I will show in this chapter, at times the archive bears these speculations out, but even in these instances the arguments remain reductive.

There are three exceptions to the general state of the literature. First, a vital source of information on the Night Cleaners Campaign has been penned by participants of the Night Cleaners Campaign themselves. In the form of personal recollections of the campaign, at times cross-referenced with the authors' own archives, these accounts have provided a critical starting point for histories of the campaign.[12] They are, however, unavoidably inflected with the weight of personal engagement and memory and straddle a middle ground between memoir and scholarship.[13] As such, they constitute critical sources of information that might be better thought of as part of the construction and creation of the Night Cleaners' archive itself.

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[11] Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976* (Dubin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1978), 182–83; Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 91–92; Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 340; Florence Binard, 'The British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s: Redefining the Personal and the Political', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 22, no. hors-série (2016): 4, https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.1688; Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds, 'The Women's Liberation Movement', in *The Stalled Revolution: Is Equality for Women an Impossible Dream?* (Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 97; Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, 26–27.

[12] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing in Britain from the 1970s: A Personal Account', *Antipode* 38, no. 3 (June 2006): 608–25; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 41–44, 47–49, 66–69, 84, 104–6, 108; May Hobbs, *Born to Struggle* (London: Quartet, 1973); Alexander, *Becoming a Woman*, 257–69.

[13] For criticism of the personal nature of such accounts, see Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', 337.

There is, second, a small but notable literature that focuses on two films, *Nightcleaners* and *'36 to '77*.[14] These experimental documentaries, produced by the Berwick Street Film Collective, follow the Night Cleaners Campaign (1970–1973) and the life of cleaner Myrtle Wardally (from c. 1970–1977).[15] The films are vital resources for histories of the campaign, containing footage of several major actions as well as interviews with cleaners and their supporters. The literature on the films, however, reconstructs the Night Cleaners Campaign's history only inasmuch as it illuminates the artistic contributions of the filmographic works – rather than as a subject of independent interest.

The most detailed history of the Cleaners to date, and the third exception to the general state of the literature, is a section of George Stevenson's (2016) PhD thesis that has since been edited for his (2019) book *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain*.[16] Stevenson draws much needed attention to the class dynamics in the Night Cleaners

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[14] Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury, eds., *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77* (London: Raven Row, Lex, Koenig Books, 2018); Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production'; Siona Wilson, 'From Women's Work to the Umbilical Lens: Mary Kelly's Early Films', *Art History* 31, no. 1 (February 2008): 79–102, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2008.00582.x; Melissa Gronlund, 'Nightcleaners', *Art Monthly*, no. 427 (June 2019): 38–39; Patrick Wright, 'A Passion for Images', *Vertigo*, Summer 1999, Interview originally broadcast as part of the Outrider series for Radio 3 on Tuesday 2 Feb 1999.; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory: Nightcleaners Recalled' ((originally published in Maria Ruido [Ed.] Plan Rosebud: on images, sites and politics of memory [Santiago])., 2008), http://www. workandwords.net/uploads/files/S._ROW-BOTHAM_NightCleaners_-_ENG_.pdf.

[15] For more on these films, see the pamphlet and booklet produced edited by Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury. Kidner and Sainsbury, *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77*. While we know that the filming of Wardally concluded in 1977, it is unclear exactly when she was first filmed. I suggest the earliest possible date was 1970 given that this is when contact was first made with the cleaners.

[16] Much of Stevenson's analysis was first published in an article in 2016. George Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and "Class Struggle": Gender, Class Formation and Political Identity in Women's Strikes,

Campaign, and his account prepares the ground for a more thorough analysis. Stevenson, however, does not reconstruct the campaign in detail. He overlooks key protests, including those at Companies House, the strike at Fleet Street, and organising that took place at the Shell Mex buildings. In fact, Stevenson only seriously engages with the (more successful) strikes supported by the Civil Service Union in August 1972. Stevenson's account is, at times and as I will show, overly simplistic and overly optimistic. In part, this may be because his source material largely consists of newspapers and newsletters published at the time; he cites just three materials from personal archives across his writing on the Cleaners.

In reconstructing the first archivally-based history of the London Night Cleaners Campaign, this chapter has at least two broader historiographical ambitions. First, I take this as an opportunity to contribute to the intellectual history of grassroots feminism. Amongst other things, when we position the Night Cleaners Campaign within feminism's intellectual history, we learn that several British feminists conceived of their work as entangled with working-class movements – and their activism as importantly distinct from North American feminism. Second, I contribute to the history of British labour movements, shedding new light on the ways in which unions neglected to support night cleaners in the early 1970s. The unions' traditional strategies – strikes at individual buildings, external union representation, and meetings held during the daytime – were inappropriate for the particular demands of contract cleaning. When the unions refused to adapt their strategies, they exhibited a short-sighted neglect that can only be understood in the context of hegemonic sexism.

1968–78', *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016): 741–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1132875; George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979' (Durham University, 2016), http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11430/; George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350066625.

This chapter proceeds in six parts. First, I offer an overview of the origins of the Night Cleaners Campaign in London which, I argue, were firmly rooted in the organising of working-class women. In part two, I consider whether the Night Cleaners Campaign can be properly thought of as a 'feminist' campaign. I show that while its members sought out grassroots, working-class leadership, the WLM played an increasingly central role in the organisation of the campaign. In part three, I turn to some of the Cleaners' key actions, starting with the strikes which took place in November 1970 which, I show, demonstrate that unionisation was the main strategy of the Night Cleaners Campaign, despite its costly nature. In part four, I reconstruct the Shell Mex strikes, contrasting the Cleaners' enthusiasm for unionisation with the unions own recalcitrance. I then turn, in section five, to the August 1972 Civil Service strikes. During this time, the campaign briefly gained momentum and union support. In part six, however, I read the collapse of the Night Cleaners Campaign as ultimately a failure of the unions – whose imagination and solidarity were fatally limited by their deep-rooted sexism.

I conclude that the Night Cleaners Campaign was a missed opportunity for the organised left. Instead of seizing on the cleaners' energy and challenging emerging labour conditions – including those that have become a central fight for precarious workers today – the male left held fast to traditionalism and suffocated a potentially vibrant alternative.

I. The working-class beginnings of the Night Cleaners Campaign

The Night Cleaners Campaign has often been remembered through its connections to the Women's Liberation Movement. Its origins, however, lie not within the middle-class spaces of feminist workshops or university halls. Instead, it was a response to the everyday realities of working-class women involved in the grinding work of night cleaning. In 1964, cleaners were earning anywhere between £9 and £14 per week for their work, well below

the national average of £17.62 for male manual workers.[17] Night cleaners were routinely given insecure contracts, meaning that they could be 'sacked on the spot', and were excluded from other benefits that permanent contracts offer, including notice periods and holiday pay.[18] Most night cleaners were bound to their jobs out of necessity; they were working to survive, 'to put [food] on the table, to clothe their children', and 'for food and rent'.[19] This exploitative labour was a means of subsistence. In contrast to the hyper-exploitation of the cleaners, the four major cleaning contractors made an annual profit of £2,797,100.[20] As May Hobbs, a key figure in what would become the Night Cleaners Campaign, put it, contractors drew profit out of workers 'like leeches that live on other people's miseries'.[21] Not from the outside, but from within this deeply exploitative workplace, cleaners started to organise.

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[17] On cleaners wages: Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 63. In Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 609, Rowbotham suggests that the cleaners wages were as low as £9. In London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 3, the cleaners wages were noted as being as high as £14. On national wages: Office for National Statistics, 'New Earnings Survey (NES) Time-Series of Gross Weekly Earnings from 1938 to 2017', 26 October 2017, https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/adhocs/006301newearningssurveynestimeseriesofgrossweeklyearningsfrom1938to2016/70d22c40.xls.

[18] 'Night Cleaners Note', n.d., 7SHR/D/01, LSE Women's Library.

[19] Clarke in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*, 16mm, colour, sound, 1975; Cleaners Action Group, 'Night Cleaners Appeal to the National Women's Conference of the Transport and General Workers' Union to Support Our Campaign for Unionization', March 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[20] Profit after tax. Civil Service Union, 'Evidence of the Civil Service Union to the National Board for Prices and Incomes Enquiry into Low Pay in the Contract Cleaning Trade', n.d., 1, JEGER/6/24, LSE Women's Library. Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874–1976*, 182. Stevenson makes a similar point in George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979', 46.

[21] May Hobbs, 'Night Office Cleaners', n.d., 1, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

May Hobbs was at the forefront of this battle. It is unclear exactly when Hobbs began organising night cleaners – by her own estimates, the date varies anywhere between 1962 and 1964.[22] By the late 1960s, however, we know that Hobbs had first-hand experience of the unsupported and hyper exploitative conditions in the night cleaning industry. When her colleague Effie was dismissed after joining the Transport and General Workers Union in c. 1962, Hobbs led night cleaners in Effie's building on a strike to demand her reinstatement – and for the general improvement to conditions in the industry.[23]

By the end of the decade, Hobbs had been fired and placed on a no-hire list.[24] This experience shaped her strategic outlook: if night cleaners were to campaign effectively, she argued, they would need allies beyond their own ranks. In a first attempt to find suitable coalition partners, Hobbs began by targeting trade unions – the traditional advocates of the British working class.[25] But by October 1970, Hobbs had 'accused the male-dominated union

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[22] Hobbs said she began the campaign '9 years ago' in 1971. 'Night Cleaners Special', 9. The same date (1962) was given in Sally Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', *Red Rag*, 1973, 3. She later reported that she started campaigning in 1964 in Hobbs, 'Night Cleaners Bid for a Square Deal'. Sally Alexander recalls: 'May [Hobbs] must have put in two or three years of hard consistent work on the go, with no money, no support' in 1973. Sally Alexander, 55. In Stewart Tendler, 'A Cleaners' Campaign', *The Times*, 21 August 1972, The Times Digital Archive, Tendler quotes the campaign as beginning in 1963 after an interview with Hobbs. Given that Hobbs joined the TGWU in 1962, however, I take it to be more probable that Hobbs began organising at this earlier date. Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874–1976*, 182.

[23] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 63–65. Also see May Hobbs, 'Raising Wages at a Stroke: The Night Cleaners', in *Are Low Wages Inevitable?*, ed. Frank Field (Nottingham: Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation for Spokesman Books, 1977), 43.

[24] Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874–1976*, 182.

[25] As the Cleaners Action Group put it in 1972, 'Trade unions are organisations of for and by workers, which means that trade unions are bodies made up of workers using their organisation to fight for better lives'.

of indifference regarding women cleaners'.[26] In response to the unions' 'indifference', her approach became increasingly wide-ranging; Hobbs sought out 'anybody' who would be 'willing to give up an hour of their time once a week' to help organise the cleaners in a bid to create a broad-based coalition.[27]

In September 1970, after reading about the Women's Liberation Movement 'in the press', Hobbs reached out to Anna Paczuska of the International Marxist Group (IMG) to help her rally the support of feminists.[28] Paczuska arranged for Hobbs to speak at a meeting of the Islington IMG Women's Caucus, where Hobbs made the case that the WLM ought to support the cleaners' struggle based on her two-fold assessment of feminist principles.[29] First, Hobbs was convinced that practise – applying ideas through action – should form the foundation of feminist struggle. As Hobbs put it, 'I don't think the Women's Liberation Workshop should be just talking. I think it should be an action workshop'.[30] Second, when Hobbs approached the WLM, she argued that the Women's Liberation Movement should work towards the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression, seeking 'equal opportunities with men, and nursery schools, and being able to get free pills and abortions'.[31] On Hobbs's view,

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Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972', n.d., 7, General Reference Collection YD.2006.b.1047, British Library.

[26] Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976*, 182.

[27] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 80.

[28] 'Night Cleaners Special', 9.

[29] Anna Paczuska, 'Letter to the International Socialists Women's Group', 15 September 1970, 7SHR/D/01, Box 8, The Women's Library @ LSE. Siona Wilson inaccurately suggests that Hobbs (whose name she misspells) only approached the WLM after the Miss World protests; as we see here, their relationship predates the November 1970 protest. Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production', 3.

[30] 'Night Cleaners Special', 9.

[31] Ibid.

'the average working-class woman' was an essential part of this picture, and their needs included better working conditions.[32] In building a movement that worked for all women, the night cleaners' struggle – seeking to reform an industry in which an estimated 88 percent of workers were women, and all of whom were working-class by virtue of their profession – was thus an obvious starting point.[33]

Sheila Rowbotham, who would go on to become a prominent voice in British feminism, was amongst those present at the IMG meeting after being specifically invited by Paczuska.[34] Her response was to mobilise support for the cleaners, initially by circulating an open invitation in the London Women's Liberation Workshop newsletter for a follow-up meeting to be held on 7 October 1970.[35] Rowbotham later described how 'a crowd of women and one man packed into [her] bedroom in Hackney, East London, to hear May Hobbs tell [them] about her efforts to organize cleaners'.[36] 'The Night Cleaners' Campaign', Rowbotham recalled of

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Jill Sullivan, 'The Brush Off: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry', 15; Union of Women for Liberation, 'On the Present Tasks of the Movement', 13 May 1971, 1, Marylin Porter/DM 2123/1/box 32, Feminist Archive South.

[34] Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing'. The letter was found in Rowbotham's archive; we can reasonably assume that this was the means of her learning about Hobbs's campaign. Anna Paczuska, 'Letter to the International Socialists Women's Group', 15 September 1970.

[35] Rowbotham references this letter, but I have been unable to locate a copy; it is not located in *Shrew*, the official Women's Liberation Workshop newspaper for September or October 1970, nor have I found it in Rowbotham's archive.

[36] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 80; Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 609; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 42.

that night, 'had begun'.[37] Hobbs's previously solitary struggle became part of a coordinated effort to improve the labour conditions of night cleaning, and gained the support of several key members of the British WLM.

The initial involvement of the WLM, however, was conceptualised in a supportive role. Workers, it was argued, should direct, organise, and lead their own movements. Many of the Women's Liberationists involved in the campaign had come to feminism through their activism in socialist and Marxist contexts, including the International Marxist Group. Their view that workers should lead the struggle aligned with Marx and Engels's insistence that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself'.[38] Related to this Marxist impulse, the Night Cleaners' commitment to grassroots leadership was rooted in the belief that only cleaners had the situated knowledge to successfully diagnose the problems with the industry and guide the campaign's strategic direction. As cleaner Jean Morement put it, 'only someone in [the building] can explain properly what goes on'.[39] With this in mind, the Night Cleaners 'took [their] lead from May [Hobbs]' and other cleaners like

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[37] Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 609. A similar argument is made in Sheila Rowbotham, 'Resonance: Nightcleaners', in *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77*, ed. Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury (London: Raven Row, Lex, Koenig Books, 2018), 23–40.

[38] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Letter to August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Wilhelm Bracke and Others', Marxists Internet Archive, September 1879, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79_09_15.htm.

[39] Jean Morement, 'Letter to Sally Alexander', 1 April 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library. Jean Morement's name is often spelled Moremont; given that the instances which Jean signed her own name – on a union slip and when petitioning Jack Jones in a letter – she uses the 'e' spelling, this is the version I have chosen. 'Jean Morement Union Slip', 15 June 1971, 7SAA/5, folder 3, LSE Women's Library; Night Cleaners on the Shell Buildings, 'Letter to Jack Jones', 20 April 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 3, LSE Women's Library.

May Videll, Jean Wright, and Jean Morement – whereas members of the WLM 'saw [themselves] as intermediaries'.[40]

Yet the Night Cleaners' commitment to grassroots leadership raises a further question: whose voices, and whose experiences, were prioritised to lead and shape the campaign? Historian Natalie Thomlinson has concluded that 'there appeared to be few Black women involved in the campaign'.[41] It is difficult to ascertain the exact racial makeup of the Night Cleaners in extant materials; for the sake of anonymity, cleaners outside of leadership roles were rarely named and identified. The closest the Night Cleaners came to a formally arranged leadership structure was the Cleaners Action Group, a title given to a shifting group of individuals.[42] The role of the Cleaners Action Group remained undefined, but it appears to have held a partly symbolic function, used to sign public announcements, and thereby signify a democratic, collectivised structure whilst protecting the anonymity of individual cleaners. From a historicization perspective, this anonymity poses challenges to ascertaining the exact membership of the Campaign itself.

Despite this general state of uncertainty, Thomlinson picks up on something important: there is a near-absence of named Black cleaners in extant materials and May Videll remains the only identifiable Black leader of the Night Cleaners Campaign.[43] In addition, and as Thomlinson notes, other leading members of the Night Cleaners Campaign like Jean

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[40] Sally Alexander, 54; Sally Alexander, 'The Night Cleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', *Red Rag*, c1974, Ban Archive; Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 612, 616; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 68–69.

[41] Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 51.

[42] Rowbotham, 'Resonance: Nightcleaners'.

[43] May Videll is the only named black leader in extant campaign materials.

Wright expressed explicitly racist views, speaking, for example, against inter-racial relationships in *Shrew* – and as Thomlinson notes, without editorial comment.[44]

Thomlinson's conclusion that the Night Cleaners was a largely white campaign, however, overlooks accounts to the contrary. We know that night cleaning was (as it remains) a highly racialised form of labour.[45] In the early 1970s, over half of night cleaners were Black and faced heightened victimisation, were given 'the worst jobs', and were made 'to put up with racism too'.[46] And, as Black women have attested, the Night Cleaners Campaign reflected this racial makeup. The campaign was described as an important site for Black women's activism in the early 1970s. As the anonymous authors of 'Black Women in Employment' wrote, 'In 1971 there was the Night Cleaners strike, where once again Black women were in the forefront'.[47] Others in the campaign also noted the presence of Black women, including Rowbotham who described 'a sizable minority [who] were immigrants from the Caribbean'.[48] We might not have the names of these women, but accounts of their participation encourage us to take seriously their commitment and activism.

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[44] 'Night Cleaners Special', 8; Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 51.

[45] Paul Apostolidis has a forthcoming book that discusses contemporary the racialisation of this labour. Apostolidis spoke at the Oxford Critical Theory Seminar about the contents of this book: Paul Apostolidis, 'Race, Dissociated Labour, and Social Reproduction in the Shadow of Amazon' (Critical Theory Seminar, Oxford, 21 February 2024).

[46] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 6; 'From One of Our Sympathetic Telephonists', *Cleaners' Voice*, n.d., 7SHR/D/01, Box number 8, LSE Women's Library.

[47] 'Black Women in Employment', n.d., 3, MCKENLEY/1/1/5, Black Cultural Archives. For other mentions of the contributions of Black women to the Night Cleaners Campaign, see Brixton Black Women's Group, '"... And What Did We Find?"', *Red Rag*, 1978; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 65.

[48] Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory', 8.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that Black women played a vital role in the Night Cleaners Campaign. Yet their relative invisibility in leadership structures and surviving campaign materials points to the ways in which racial inequality shaped both the organisation itself and its historical record. While the campaign was grounded in the experience and initiative of working-class women, it appears to have paid insufficient attention to which working-class women were empowered to lead and whose contributions were recorded.

II. Feminism and the Night Cleaners

While the Night Cleaners Campaign was grounded in the experiences of (some) working-class women, sustaining its activities over time increasingly required support from feminist activists. A tension common to much bottom-up organising became particularly stark: between members' desire to uphold a commitment to grassroots leadership and the difficulty of sustaining an under-resourced campaign on the voluntary labour of overworked people. In this context, WLM members – including Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander, Mary Kelly, Liz Waugh, and Lucy Waugh – came to play a central role in the running of the campaign, providing both administrative support and at times acting as representatives for the cleaners. But just as feminists shaped the Night Cleaners Campaign, the campaign also shaped the direction of British feminism.

In 1973, Alexander stated that 'The women's liberation movement was [...] de facto providing leadership'.[49] This was in part a pragmatic response to material conditions: night cleaners frequently lacked the additional hours required to conduct sustained advocacy work. In the words of Hobbs, cleaners worked in the night industry precisely because they 'can't go

[49] Sally Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', *Red Rag*, 1973, 6.

to work during the day'.[50] Expecting already over-worked night cleaners to launch a substantial campaign was judged to be unrealistic. In contrast to the cleaners, Alexander explained that members of the WLM 'were the people who had the time, and the telephones, [and who] could write letters and fix up meetings'.[51] As such, they were able to conduct the labour-intensive work of activism, work that became critical to the functioning of the campaign. As one WLM member acknowledged, 'without us it wouldn't get done'.[52] Writing to Alexander, Hobbs similarly noted that 'without people like you we would fail, just as we did 8 years ago'.[53]

The kind of labour that members of the WLM performed was often administrative. As the London Socialist Woman Group put it, someone had to perform the mundane work of leafletting, compiling lists of buildings to picket, contacting the cleaners, drawing up flyers, and providing the 'day-to-day support' of organising.[54] However unassuming, these tasks formed the bedrock of activism, the very type of labour – perceived as repetitive, quotidian, and menial – that the Night Cleaners Campaign was organised around.[55] The necessary if unglamourous work of organising was understood to be a form of leadership, in which care, patience, and subordination – all traits traditionally gendered as female – were practiced in

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[50] May in 'Companies House Picket, Transcript', n.d., 8, 7SHR/D/02, Box number 8, LSE Women's Library.

[51] Alexander quoted in Cynthia Cockburn, 'Night Cleaning - a Life on Four Hours Sleep' (unpublished, n.d.), 1, 7SAA/5, folder 2, LSE Women's Library.

[52] 'Night Cleaners Special', 10.

[53] May Hobbs, 'Letter to Sally Alexander', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[54] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 6. There was a similar dynamic in Norwich, where students supported the Norwich University cleaners 'The Cleaners Voice', n.d.

[55] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 42, 66–67. To see the original yellow and blue TGWU flyers, see: 'Transport and General Workers' Union Flyers', n.d., 7SHR/D/01, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

an attempt to facilitate grassroots organising. This leadership was not about agenda-setting and dominance. The campaign deferred to cleaners where possible. But administrative, deferential leadership was, nonetheless, essential.

The leadership the WLM provided, however, wasn't purely administrative. Feminists also came to act as representatives for the cleaners in interactions with union officials – a role that generated further tensions around voice and agency. In part, the WLM were put forward as representatives because night cleaners, as reported in a 1972 meeting, were 'still at a stage of being over-awed by the union officials and officialdom to the extent of being reluctant to contact them directly with their grievances, asking [members of the WLM] to do this for them'.[56] Hobbs was unimpressed by the cleaners' reluctance to represent themselves: 'The miners, carworkers, postmen and even the power workers never got their rights by being frightened', she said.[57] The notion that middle class voices were better able to represent workers' interests was something which undoubtedly provoked concern amongst feminists who subscribed to the Marxist doctrine of self-emancipation. As Alexander pointed out, however, there were real, strategic reasons for the WLM to represent cleaners' grievances. As she put it, union officials like Ferryman '[didn't] take complaints seriously when they [came] from the women themselves. He [thought that] without us [in the WLM] the women would give up'.[58] Perhaps the cleaners weren't simply 'over-awed' by officialdom; they may have judged that their complaints were, tactically speaking, better represented by the WLM.

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[56] 'Report of Activities at the Downstream Building, Shell, Since Last Meeting', 3 June 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 3, LSE Women's Library.

[57] May Hobbs in 'The Cleaners Voice', n.d., 1.

[58] Sally Alexander, 'Notes Titled "Night Cleaners"', 3 June 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

Despite the undoubtedly important role some members of the WLM played in the Night Cleaners Campaign, the Women's Movement was not overwhelmingly or unanimously engaged in the campaign – a fact that is liable to being overlooked. While a small group of committed feminists became crucial to its functioning, the Night Cleaners Campaign was never a central priority for the Movement as a whole. Art historian Siona Wilson has described the campaign as becoming 'one of the most significant activist campaigns in the early years of the British women's movement'.[59] Wilson rightly reflects the iconic status of the campaign, remembered by members of the Movement as something 'we were all aware of'.[60] The campaign was frequently mentioned at WLM conferences and in 1970s feminist periodicals, accounting somewhat for the frequency with which it continues to be mentioned (however briefly) in histories of the Movement.[61] But the frequency with which the Cleaners has been referenced – past and present – risks obfuscating the fact that the campaign began from material need and working-class action and was only ever supported by a minority of WLM members. As Rowbotham would put it, a 'small group' of the Women's Liberation Workshop had become 'mainstays' supporting the Campaign.[62] In early 1971, Rowbotham addressed the lack of support from the wider WLM when she wrote in an open letter to the London

[59] Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production', 3.

[60] Margaretta Jolly, Beatrix Campbell, 6 September 2010, 59, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420, British Library.

[61] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign'; 'Night Cleaners Special'; London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special'. Members of the campaign describe the experience of widespread media attention in 'Night Cleaners Special', 6. On contemporary mentions, see fn 11.

[62] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 84.

Women's Liberation Workshop: '[n]obody turned up to the meeting the Islington & Hackney Group held with May Hobbs about night cleaners'.[63]

And yet for members of the WLM who were actively involved in the Night Cleaners Campaign, it was formative to their burgeoning identity as feminists. Alexander described how this was 'the first time that Women's Liberation (at least in London) had been actively involved on an issue with working women'.[64] This early experience of centring working-class struggle and grassroots leadership was formative to her British feminist identity – even if the ambition for a genuinely grassroots-led campaign was at times limited by material conditions. As Rowbotham explained, the cause of night cleaning was chosen because members of the WLM 'wanted to involve working class women and do things about women's oppression rather than just discussing it'.[65] The authors of the article 'Why Should Women's Liberation Support the Campaign to Unionize Night Cleaners?' concurred, arguing that the campaign was an opportunity to 'put into practice' feminist goals.[66] While this wasn't strictly a WLM campaign, it did play a key role in shaping the WLM's evolving conception of feminism.

For Rowbotham, campaigns like the Night Cleaners also marked British feminism as distinct from North American feminism. Unlike in the US where consciousness-raising was increasingly popular, she argued that British feminists decided 'just talking about our own

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[63] Ibid.; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Letter to Women's Liberation Workshop', 1971, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

[64] 'Unnamed Note, Page Beginning "Because the Women's Liberation Movement Was and Is..."', n.d., 2, 7SAA/5, folder 2, LSE Women's Library; Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 3.

[65] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory: Nightcleaners Recalled', 7, http://www.workandwords.net/uploads/files/S._ROWBOTHAM_NightCleaners_-_ENG_.pdf.

[66] 'Why Should Women's Liberation Support the Campaign to Unionize Night Cleaners?'

feelings of oppression was not enough'.[67] It was this impulse, Rowbotham indicated, that led members of the British WLM to put themselves forward as 'willing recruits' for the Night Cleaners Campaign.[68] Many North American feminists would undoubtedly protest the characterisation of their activism as limited to consciousness raising. Rowbotham's observation, however, speaks to differences in the kinds of intellectual production were taking place across the Atlantic: where 1970 saw the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* in the United States, in Britain it saw feminists writing notes on organising and preparing to join the picket line.[69]

Members of the WLM also prioritised the Night Cleaners Campaign as a reflection on existing feminist analysis: that cleaning was a gendered form of exploitation.[70] Members of the WLM reporting on the campaign explained how cleaning was treated as 'women's work'.[71] In the Night Cleaners' Special for *Shrew* magazine (the national WLM newsletter, founded in 1969), the editors described how women are 'taught that they are [...] biologically suited to clean, cook, sew, type, serve, wait'; as Alexander put it, 'if you're a woman [it's] kind

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[67] Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory', 7.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Rowbotham, for example, referenced North American feminists including Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, Shulamith Firestone, and Betty Freidan in her 1972 book, Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London: Penguin Press, 1972). See Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Doubleday, 1970); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

[70] See, for example, the analysis of the Bristol WLM group in 'The Patriarchal Family', *Enough*, 1970. For more on this, see chapter three of this thesis.

[71] 'Report for the Workshop'.

of written on your body really, that [cleaning is] what you do'.[72] From Alexander's perspective as an anti-sexist activist, the Night Cleaners Campaign provided an obvious place for her to start challenging this assumption.

The false relation between women and cleaning, members of the London Women's Liberation Workshop argued, had long enabled the domination of women in the domestic sphere – including through economic exclusion. If women were 'natural' cleaners, the argument went, did they really need to be paid that much, if at all?[73] As industrial cleaning rapidly grew, the pre-existing feminisation of cleaning labour enabled it to be treated as 'an extension of housework'.[74] Cleaners' wages were frequently described as 'pin money': wages were treated as a mere supplement to the presumed primary (husband's) breadwinner wage.[75] The conflation of cleaners' wages with 'pin money' served a minimising effect, underplaying the importance of cleaning labour – both for those whose spaces were made clean and for the cleaners themselves, who used their wages for essential living needs. The Night Cleaners Campaign was at its core an attempt to overturn these sexist assumptions. As members of the group wrote: 'We don't work for pin money, but for food and rent'.[76]

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[72] 'Night Cleaners Special', 7; Victoria Bazin, 'Miss-Represented? Mediating Miss World in Shrew Magazine', 412; Alexander in Raven Row, 'Nightcleaners and '36 to '77 - Panel Discussion (2.30pm)', accessed 5 August 2023, https://open.spotify.com/episode/1NQOYMVpPnvjhQrHxg0ZgJ.

[73] Alexander in Raven Row, 'Nightcleaners and '36 to '77 - Panel Discussion (2.30pm)'; 'Why Should Women's Liberation Support the Campaign to Unionize Night Cleaners?'

[74] 'Report for the Workshop'.

[75] Sally Alexander, 'The Night Cleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 7. Stevenson has a brief discussion of this George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979', 47.

[76] *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*; London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 4.

For Siona Wilson, the WLM's feminist motivations stood in contrast to the cleaners' own impulses. As she put it, the cleaners' 'own investment in activism, unlike the feminist activists, [was] not driven by a feminist agenda'.[77] Wilson's analysis gets at something interesting – the boundaries of feminism itself – but her assessment is reductive on at least three fronts. First, the cleaners rarely identified as 'feminists', but they did organise as workers, as mothers, and as women. To assess the campaign on more than terminological grounds is to recognise that the cleaners' analysis was deeply rooted in an analysis of gendered oppression. Second, women's liberationists were not straightforwardly 'driven' to impose a 'feminist agenda' on the campaign. As we have seen, they attempted to avoid leadership out of fear of imposing their ideas on the cleaners (despite, at times, struggling to do so).[78] Third, Wilson's assessment underplays the ways in which night cleaners were understood – by both the WLM and themselves – to be impacted by more than sexist oppression. Cleaners were described by members of the WLM as an 'especially under-privileged [...] part of the labour force' that was 'doubly oppressed in class society'.[79] As one member of the WLM put it, 'If you're black, working-class and a woman, you lose out three times over'.[80] Feminists were certainly concerned with the effects of patriarchy on night cleaners, but also expressed concerns about the multiplicity of oppression in cleaners' lives – including racism, classism, and poverty.

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[77] Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production', 46.

[78] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 6.

[79] 'Why Should Women's Liberation Support the Campaign to Unionize Night Cleaners?'; Lancaster Socialist Woman Group, 'Lancaster Cleaners' Campaign' (Socialist Woman, August 1971), 18, 7SAA/5, folder 3, LSE Women's Library.

[80] 'Night Cleaners Special', 7. Florence Binard reads this to be a troubling comparison of gendered and racialised oppression: Binard, 'The British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s', 4. This, I take it, is a misreading of the quote, which instead argues that Black women have a particular (and particularly acute) experience of oppression.

The boundaries of feminism in this period were more porous and contested then Wilson allows: these boundaries were being actively negotiated, by both feminists and the cleaners themselves. Recognising this dynamic helps us to move beyond a binary framing of 'feminist' and 'non-feminist' activism, and instead foreground the ways in which the Night Cleaners Campaign became a site where the meaning and practice of feminism itself was being contested and redefined.

III. The consequences of unionisation

While the WLM became important coalition partners for the Night Cleaners Campaign, a central focus of the campaign remained the drive to unionise cleaners. This strategy would go on to define much of their activism. From the outset, the campaign 'almost immediately' began the task of persuading cleaners to join the Transport and General Workers' Union – a tactic that reflected both ideological commitments to working-class solidarity and pragmatic concerns about legal protections and organising capacity.[81] Unionisation, however, also came with significant costs.

On 3 November 1970, less than a month after the Night Cleaners Campaign assembled, the Cleaners formed a picket outside Sanctuary House in London.[82] As we saw in the introduction of this chapter, two cleaners – Lynn Gilford and Joan Treadgold – had joined the Union, and their employer, the Strand Cleaning Company, had terminated their contracts with immediate effect.[83] The manager reportedly 'turned round and said, you all think you're

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[81] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 3.

[82] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 81–82; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 47.

[83] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 16; Felicity Trodd, *The Red Mole*, 16 November 1970.

so clever [...] but [...] anyone that joins the union, we'll have out'.[84] In response, eleven cleaners went on strike, and were joined on the picket line by members of the London Women's Liberation Workshop, the London Socialist Women, the International Socialists, and the Camden Women's Action Group.[85] Six days later, cleaners working at Companies House, another building under the Strand Cleaning Company, joined the strike to also demand higher wages in their workplace.[86]

On 10 November, Gilford and Treadgold were reinstated by the Strand Cleaning Company and the picket line dispersed. The Night Cleaners celebrated what they took to be their first success, but the victory was short lived.[87] When Gilford and Treadgold were reinstated, they were transferred to a different building and contact with the pair was lost entirely.[88] The apparently benign stipulation that the cleaners work on new buildings 'had the effect of removing them from the campaign'.[89] On 3 December 1970, the situation worsened when the cleaners who had joined the strike at Companies House were sacked. The Strand Cleaning Company claimed they were moving from night shifts to evening shifts.[90] The cleaners suspected it was in fact a punitive measure to remove the striking cleaners from the building. Sure enough, in early 1971, Strand Cleaning Company reverted to employing night cleaners but did not rehire the original cleaners who had gone on strike.[91]

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[84] 'Tape 3, Meeting at May's House', n.d., 9, 7SHR/D/02, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

[85] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 7.

[86] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 82; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 48.

[87] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 7.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., 26.

[91] Ibid., 7.

This pattern of retaliation would be repeated in subsequent actions. In the spring of 1971, for example, cleaner May Videll was dismissed by the contractors of the Lutyens building in Moorgate, London.[92] Videll's employers claimed that she had engaged in 'abusive behaviour' and performed unsatisfactory work.[93] In this correspondence, the employers also made vitriolic racist remarks. Videll was clear that her actual 'offence' was joining the Transport and General Workers' Union. '[As] long as they know you're in the Union', she said, 'they try to push you around and give you the sack'.[94] The Night Cleaners organised a picket line outside the Post Office building on Fleet Street to demand Videll's immediate reinstatement as well as recognition of the TGWU.[95] In June 1971, fifteen cleaners associated with the strike were moved to different buildings, '[splitting] up members of the union in an attempt to break it'.[96] As well as diminishing the sustainability of union organising in the building, this was undoubtedly difficult to navigate for the relocated cleaners, who had 'chosen their place of work with some care'.[97]

As had become all too apparent, unionisation did not provide a straightforward solution to night cleaners' problems. Members of the Lancaster Cleaners Campaign summarised how 'Joining and becoming active in a union can lead to a consciousness of the conflicts in

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[92] In 'Night Cleaners Special', 2, the exact date is listed as 11 April. In a pamphlet handed out to TGWU members and reprinted in London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 27, it is listed as 13 April.

[93] 'Night Cleaners Special', 5.

[94] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 27. Interview with Videll in 'Night Cleaners Special', 5.

[95] 'Night Cleaners Special', 5.

[96] Ibid., 2; 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 2.

[97] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 4.

our society, but cannot by itself resolve them'.[98] Unionisation was proving to be a high-stakes approach, in which night cleaners were risking their already-precarious livelihoods. As Hobbs put it, they were 'threatened with the sack for even mentioning the union'.[99] Despite the great risks that cleaners were taking, the TGWU did not support the Cleaners' early picket lines, offer strike pay, or advocate for Gilford, Treadgold, or Videll.[100] In short, cleaners were putting their security on the line to join unions which withheld their support.

Why continue to unionise, given the high risks and inadequate backing this strategy posed? The choice was in part ideological. '[W]omen tend to look on joining the union as a personal commitment, a decision binding them to take action in solidarity', members of the London Socialist Woman explained.[101] For many cleaners, joining the union was not only a tactical choice but an expression of political solidarity. As Linda Frydd commented for the left-wing magazine *Red Mole*, for the Cleaners, 'unity in revolutionary practice is not just a phrase but can be realised'.[102] The implication was that the Cleaners' commitment to the unions was a theoretical and practical pledge to take action and unite with fellow union members. In a pamphlet addressed to TGWU members, night cleaners explained that they were 'fighting for all lower-paid workers', 'for all women workers', and 'for you'.[103] They

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[98] Lancaster Socialist Woman Group, 'Lancaster Cleaners' Campaign', 2.

[99] May Hobbs, 'Night Office Cleaners', 1–2.

[100] Sheila Rowbotham, interview by Rachel Cohen, 22 November 2010, 24, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement C1420/10, British Library.

[101] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 9.

[102] Linda Frydd, 'Women Night Cleaners Strike', *Red Mole*, 16 November 1970. As Stevenson has put it, they exhibited a 'commitment to a struggle that transcended their own'. George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979', 50.

[103] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 24.

understood themselves to be workers and situated themselves firmly in the wider working-class struggle.

The decision was also pragmatic. As cleaner Ann Burnett put it, 'if we let the Union go we wouldn't stand a chance'.[104] Without unions, Alexander explained 'the women [were] too frightened to organise this or any other action on their own'.[105] Their fear was in part a response to the publication of the Industrial Relations Bill on 3 December 1970.[106] As Alexander recalled, the Bill generated 'an atmosphere of urgency' on the left.[107] Once it received Royal Assent (something which would happen on 1 December 1971), only registered trade unions would have the legal right to organise industrial action.[108] As part of their early campaigning, the Night Cleaners demonstrated against the Bill's imposition. On 8 December 1970, they were amongst the first to protest the proposed action; at a rally on 12 January 1971, May Hobbs spoke in defence of union rights; by 21 February 1971, night cleaners had formed their own delegation in opposition to the Bill.[109]

For Hobbs, part of the motivation for protesting the Industrial Relations Bill was to avoid a situation in which 'If we come out on strike to better our pay and conditions [without union backing] we'll get fined'.[110] Given that the Cleaners had, up to this point, only gone on

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[104] Ann Burnett *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

[105] Sally Alexander, 'Notes Titled "Night Cleaners"'.

[106] 'Industrial Relations Bill' (UK Parliament: Hansard, 10 December 1970), https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1970-12-10/debates/8bf300d9-440e-4701-ba0e-63cdf9550ed5/IndustrialRelationsBill?highlight=industrial%20relations%20bill#contribution-2c2e6c62-4a07-4c2d-a070-6943ffade1d2.

[107] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 3.

[108] Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 197.

[109] 'Night Cleaners Special', 2.

[110] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 20.

strike without union support, all of their prior actions would have been considered illegal under the impending legislation and the leafleters would be 'liable to prosecution'.[111] And as the London Socialist Women's Group wrote, lower rates of unionisation amongst women, and the unions' reluctance to represent women once they were members, meant that '[the] Bill [would] hit women particularly hard'.[112] Some members of the campaign had a more positive outlook, hoping that new protections in the Industrial Relations Bill – including the illegalisation of the dismissal of employees over unionisation – would strengthen their campaign by reducing the potential repercussions of joining unions.[113] The overall extent to which most night cleaners were concerned with the Industrial Relations Bill remains unclear; Hobbs argued that 'Cleaners are the same as housewives,' that is, 'they're too tired and they haven't got time to read right through the Bill'.[114] What is clear is that under the impending legislation, unionisation was fast becoming a practical, if strategically complicated, necessity.

The risks were particularly high for black cleaners. Following the introduction of the 1971 Immigration Bill (first announced in July 1970 and made law in 1973), citizenship rights were granted according to what Ian Spender has called 'the essentially racially-defined categories of "patrial" and "non-patrial"'.[115] Under the legislation, 'non-patrials' who hoped to reside in the UK (and who tended to be people of colour) would now have to apply for work permits which, as Spender has explained, 'carried neither the right of permanent residence or

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[111] Ibid.

[112] London Socialist Woman Group, 'Support the Cleaners', n.d., 7SHR/D/03, folder 1, LSE Women's Library.

[113] Interviews with Cleaners 'Cleaners Voice', 2.

[114] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 20.

[115] Ian Spender, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997), 143; also see Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats* (London: Verso, 2019), 80–81.

the right of entry for their dependents'.[116] As the Immigration Bill passed through Parliament, migrant cleaners were kept in an institutionally sanctioned state of uncertainty – and one which was abused by employers. An anonymous individual writing to Cleaners Voice explained that employers would 'try to frighten [Black cleaners] by such remarks as "You will all be sent home when the Immigration Bill is passed"' and May Videll summarised the Bill as '[making] legal the discrimination which black girls already suffer' in the cleaning industry.[117] The Bill cast doubt over the ability of migrant cleaners to campaign safely: if they lost their jobs – a common consequence of union organising – they might also lose their legal status.

Members of the Night Cleaners Campaign wrote against the introduction of the Bill in pamphlets, expressing an anxiety that it would 'pressurise ['non-patrial' cleaners] into taking scab jobs for fear of deportation'.[118] Here, the concern appears to have been about the impact of the Bill on the sustainability of the Night Cleaners Campaign (taking 'scab jobs', that is, crossing the picket line to work while others remain on strike) rather than the dangers facing migrant cleaners themselves. This prioritisation highlights a tension within the campaign's solidarity politics: one in which collective action goals sometimes eclipsed the differentiated risks borne by the campaign's most precarious, in this case racialised, members.

On the one hand, cleaners were losing their jobs to join the union; on the other, the unions were neglecting to advocate for them. Yet despite these mounting risks and institutional failures, the Night Cleaners remained committed to unionisation as their primary

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[116] Spender, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*, 144; Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain*, 179–206.

[117] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 5.

[118] Ibid., 6. The Immigration Bill was seen as a threat generally to black women's rights to protest see 'Gerlin', September 1971, 13, Hope 7, Bishopsgate Institute.

strategy – an approach that would continue to shape both the possibilities and the contradictions of their campaign in the years to come.

IV. 'Beginning to lose faith in the union': the Shell Mex strikes[119]

Frustrated by the lack of active support from the TGWU, the Night Cleaners Campaign supplemented their strategy of unionisation with a call for greater autonomy within union structures. In 1971, the cleaners began to pursue one of their most ambitious goals yet: the creation of their own union branch. This formed the basis of the Shell Mex campaign, which was taken as a rare opportunity to build a critical mass of unionised cleaners while pressing for direct representation. The Shell Mex actions also revealed the depth of resistance within the union towards the cleaners' organising efforts.

In June 1971, Hobbs suggested that the Night Cleaners redirect their attention to two buildings that were part of the Shell Mex conglomerate, in part because the TGWU had previously expressed interest in organising at Shell Mex.[120] Hobbs hoped that the union would seize the opportunity to influence action in these previously un-unionised buildings.[121] The unusually high number of night cleaners working at Shell Mex also presented an opportunity for cleaners to establish their own union branch. The TGWU stipulated that fifty individuals from within one workplace had to be union members for an independent branch to be established. An estimated eighty cleaners worked across the two Shell Mex sites, the 'upstream' building on Eagle Street in Holborn (operated by Office Cleaning Solutions) and the

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[119] Shell Centre Cleaners, 'Letter to Churchouse', 17 July 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[120] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 4.

[121] Ibid.

'downstream' building in Waterloo (operated by the Pritchards cleaning company). It posed, Hobbs argued, a rare opportunity in night cleaning, a trade that was defined as much by its exploitative conditions as it was by its fragmented workforce.

The hope was that the TGWU would allow the Night Cleaners to form a separate branch or, failing this, assign them a union representative. When this did not immediately happen, the Cleaners began communicating with F. H. Sage, the secretary of the Domestic, Window and Industrial Cleaners Branch. The thought was that he might be able to represent unionised night cleaners. At first, the signs were encouraging. Sage appears to have been communicative: in August 1971, he assisted in administrative labour and sent letters on the Cleaners' behalf to union representatives, asking that they be made a separate branch.[122]

Four months later, in October 1971, the TGWU formally assigned two representatives to the cleaners' case, Wally Churchouse and F. T. Ferryman. Any expectation that this signalled a change in tides for the Cleaners quickly disintegrated, only to be replaced by a pattern of neglect and condescension that undermined the cleaners' own efforts. Alexander recalled how Churchouse 'seldom replied to letters or telephone calls, twice he did not turn up for meetings and specific requests for help on issues such as victimisation, unhealthy conditions etc were ignored'.[123] The Cleaners' frustration with the lack of engagement from the union was palpable in a letter written to their representatives: 'We are writing to you [Churchouse] and to Mr. Ferryman for the third time to ask for two meetings inside the Shell buildings [...] many of the women who joined the union in the last few weeks have not yet received their cards, nor met a union official, [and] they are beginning to lose faith in the

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[122] Sally Alexander, 'Letter to F H Sage', 27 August 1971, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library; F H Sage, 'Letter to Churchouse', 6 October 1971, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[123] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 7. Hobbs reported, he 'wouldn't even come down to a meeting' in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

union'.[124] On the rare occasions that Churchouse or Ferryman did attend meetings, they spoke over the cleaners; Churchouse interrupted a cleaner who was explaining her situation in the film *Nightcleaners*, saying: 'I don't think we want to talk about that kind of thing at the moment'.[125] His attitude, as Siona Wilson has put it, was shown in the film to be 'patronizingly paternalistic and dismissive of the women's efforts'.[126]

The union's neglect and indifference reflected a deeper structural divergence between traditional union organising models and the realities of night cleaning work. In Churchouse's words, night cleaners' needs were distinct from those of workers who were employed in what he called a 'normal factory'.[127] The 'routine [union representatives] go through naturally', Churchouse explained, was therefore unable to address the cleaners' conditions. The 'natural' routine, as he described it, consisted of taking action in a single location, or factory, to exert concentrated pressure on an employer.[128] Churchouse knew that this method was largely impossible for night cleaners, who were 'all [in] different companies'.[129] By his own assessment, this meant that 'no pressure' could be exerted on the companies through traditional union mechanisms.[130] 'I'm a Trade Union Official,' he said, 'I know my job'.[131]

In recognising the inadequacy of current trade union strategies, Churchouse inadvertently acknowledged something true: the conditions of night cleaning labour could not be transformed through traditional union methods. As Cockburn put it, the unions' '"negotiating

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[124] Shell Centre Cleaners, 'Letter to Churchouse', 17 July 1972.

[125] Churchouse in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

[126] Wilson, 'Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production', 9.

[127] Churchouse in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ibid.

structure" just didn't fit the needs of lowpaid, unskilled women night-workers in scattered jobs'.[132] The unions' methods were 'remote from the day-to-day existence of most of the cleaners', and members of the Lancaster Cleaners Campaign described 'the bureaucratic nature of the Trade Union organisations, the unwillingness of the officials to act, the red tape etc.'.[133] Evidently, however, this did not lead the Night Cleaners to judge the unions as fundamentally unable to cope with their situation. Instead, the continued application of the Night Cleaners Campaign to the unions indicates an underlying belief that it was Churchouse's imagination that was fatally limited when he concluded that the union was unable to represent the Cleaners. What was needed was for the union's own methods to be adapted.

Responding to the recalcitrant unions became a major topic of concern for the Night Cleaners. In March 1972, Jack Jones, General Secretary of the TGWU, claimed that two new union representatives – B. Fry and J. Lucas – were now responsible for the organisation of the cleaners.[134] These representatives rarely appear in extant records, but one letter from Lucas to Hobbs suggests they were unresponsive: therein, Lucas apologised for Fry's lack of communication and attention to the campaign (he was, Lucas wrote, 'indisposed').[135] In April 1972, the Night Cleaners' requests continued to be unmet, and they renewed their efforts to form a separate branch of the TGWU. In a letter to Jones, the Shell Night Cleaners wrote: 'we the undersigned as members of the Transport and General Workers Union, all being employed as night cleaners on the Shell buildings on the South Bank, London, SE 1., wish to

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[132] Cynthia Cockburn, 'Night Cleaning - a Life on Four Hours Sleep', 2.

[133] Lancaster Socialist Woman Group, 'Lancaster Cleaners' Campaign', 2; also see Sally Alexander, 'The Night Cleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 7; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 95.

[134] Jack Jones, 'Letter to Lena Jeger', 23 March 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 5, LSE Women's Library.

[135] J Lucas, 'Letter to May Hobbs on 18.10.72', 18 October 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 5, LSE Women's Library.

apply to form a branch of the Transport and General Workers Union'.[136] The union met this expression of organisational energy with silence.

In an unsigned letter, dated 6 July 1972, the Cleaners wrote to Churchouse and demanded a response to what had evidently been an ongoing attempt to discuss how the cleaners might 'set up as shop stewards'.[137] In their words, 'we need to talk to an official so that we can completely understand what such a position would entail'.[138] The Cleaners then wrote to Jones on 7 July 1972 with a renewed application for a separate union branch, emphasising that they had recruited the required number of union members to meet the threshold.[139] Finally, on 12 December 1972, the Cleaners petition appeared to have been met after 'an historic meeting took place in London to set up the first London Transport and General Workers' Union branch for cleaners', as reported in *Cleaners Voice*.[140]

What became of this independent branch? To the frustration of the Night Cleaners campaigners, it appears never to have been formally accredited. In January 1973, 'The Branch Committee [had] not yet been formed'.[141] On 13 July 1973, Hobbs wrote to Jones seeking further action: 'Last December it was agreed that there would be a special cleaners' branch set up to be looked after by Mr Churchouse […] The branch secretary was to be myself and we then waited for the appropriate papers and branch books to be sent to us. In fact, nothing has happened and we have not been able to contact anyone at the North West office to help

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[136] Night Cleaners on the Shell Buildings, 'Letter to Jack Jones', 20 April 1972.

[137] 'Letter to Ferryman', 6 July 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Shell Centre Cleaners, 'Letter to Jack Jones, Signed', 7 July 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 5, LSE Women's Library.

[140] W. J. Churchouse, 'Agenda for 12 December 1972 Meeting', November 1972, 7SAA/5, folder 3, LSE Women's Library.

[141] 'Cleaners' Voice, Number 1', 1 January 1973, 2, 7SAA/5, folder 5, LSE Women's Library.

us'.[142] The Cleaners resumed their petition of Jones to establish new mechanisms of democratic leadership, and Hobbs stressed the scale of the problem: 'This matter is extremely urgent. The cleaners are saying they will leave the Union unless something is done to sort out their branch and give them proper representation'.[143] When no response came, Rowbotham described a growing scepticism amongst the cleaners that was 'nurtured by the union's neglect'.[144] One of the most significant hurdles to their activism had become sections of the organised left itself.

V. The August 1972 strikes

The story of the Cleaners and the TGWU is one of failure: failure of recognition, failure of persuasion, and, ultimately, failure of inclusion. But in other contexts, the relationship between the Night Cleaners and the unions was more complex. The Night Cleaners' largest – and arguably most successful – strike, in August 1972, offers a revealing case in which union support played a crucial role, yet also generated new tensions around autonomy, visibility, and recognition. During this surge in activism, the cleaners came face to face with the opportunities and limits of union-backed action.

In the summer of 1972, night cleaners from three Civil Service buildings engaged in a strike that Hobbs referred to as their 'first big confrontation'.[145] The catalyst for this strike was a dispute concerning pay and conditions at the Empress State building in Fulham which

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[142] May Hobbs, 'Letter to Jack Jones', 13 July 1973, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[143] May Hobbs, 'Letter to Jack Jones', 13 July 1973.

[144] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 95. Also see Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 7.

[145] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 84.

was home to the Ministry of Defence. On 1 August, eleven cleaners walked out in protest against their employer, Cleanagents Limited.[146] They demanded a wage increase to £16.50 a week and the employment of additional staff to help manage the cleaning workload – just eleven women were cleaning the building's twenty five floors.[147] On 6 August, in a second wave of protest, an additional twenty cleaners who were fellow employees of Cleanagents and who worked at a second Ministry of Defence building – the Old Admiralty – joined the strike.[148] And a third surge in the strikes followed when, on 12 August, cleaner M. Creadley spoke to a reporter at *The Morning Star* about her experience of poor working conditions at a building on Horseferry Road.[149] After the article was published, her employer Industrial Cleaners Limited abruptly dismissed her. Twenty cleaners from Horseferry Road responded by joining the strike the following morning.[150] With fifty cleaners now on the picket line across three buildings, this was the largest Night Cleaners strike to date.[151]

Striking at government buildings brought with it two distinctive possibilities. First, it shed light on the government's responsibilities in the night cleaning industry (something we will turn to later in this section). Second, and perhaps most significantly, it meant the cleaners could join the Civil Service Union (CSU). In contrast to their earlier experiences with the TGWU, the cleaners now encountered a union that appeared more willing to engage and support their actions.

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[146] Cleaners Action Group, 'Night Cleaning Strike Report', n.d., 1, 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[147] 'Your Building Is Dirty This Morning', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library; Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 84; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 105.

[148] Morning Star reporters, 'More Cleaners down Mops to Join Strike', *Morning Star*, 8 August 1972.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Beatrix Campbell, 'Cleaners Strike after Supervisor Gets the Sack', *Morning Star*, 15 August 1972.

[151] Ibid.

Cleaners had joined the CSU as early as 1970: in February 1972, union representative Peter Gresham wrote to Sheila Rowbotham to explain that the union had been advocating for contract cleaners in government buildings for around two years under the advice of May Hobbs.[152] Gresham's letter raises questions about the state of internal communications in the Night Cleaners Campaign – why was Rowbotham unaware of the existing involvement of Hobbs with the CSU? – but it also reveals a marked shift in the Night Cleaners own prospects: a new level of communicativeness from the unions. Gresham wrote Rowbotham that he would be 'very pleased indeed' to meet with the Night Cleaners Campaign to discuss future actions.[153] In a second letter in May 1972, Gresham further informed Rowbotham that he had contacted Cleanagents on behalf of the Empress State cleaners to call for improved conditions in the building.[154] In both instances, Gresham demonstrated his readiness to advocate as the Cleaners' representative.

During the August 1972 strikes, the Night Cleaners experienced the previously latent power of unionisation. Within 24 hours of assembling on the picket line, the CSU 'made the strikes official' and as a result the striking cleaners received 'ten pounds a week strike pay'.[155]

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[152] Peter Gresham, 'Letter to Sheila Rowbotham', 7 February 1972, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Peter Gresham, 'Letter to Sheila Rowbotham', 2 May 1972, 7SHR/D/01, box 8, LSE Women's Library.

[155] There is some disagreement in the sources about the dates that the CSU recognised the strikes; the Morning Star reports official recognition as being conceded on 2 August 1972; the members of CAG and Berwick St Film Collective (who were present) have claimed recognition was granted in July. 'Union Recognises Cleaners' Strikes', *Morning Star*, 4 August 1972. Alexander dates it to 13 July, see Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 5. For quote, see Anon., 'Something to Smile About', *The Whip: The Civil Service Journal*, September 1972, 1.

This support was viewed by members of the campaign as critical to the success of the strike. Rowbotham has described how the Night Cleaners' morale was 'revived' by the Union's 'profoundly strengthening' support.[156] And '[b]ecause the cleaners' wages were so low', Rowbotham explained, when they offered strike pay 'this was equivalent to "wages for striking"'.[157] The official picket was observed by other members of the CSU and 'the print workers union (S.O.G.A.T.) and T&GWU gave official offers of support'.[158] As the Cleaners' Action Group put it, 'Beer, the post, bread, laundry, everything was stopped'.[159] This led to the rapid deterioration of conditions in the buildings and undoubtedly had a huge impact on the effectiveness of the action. Publicly, a second union official, Les Moody – who would go on to become the spokesperson for the campaign –, reassured the cleaners that the union's support was steadfast: 'we are prepared to picket until an office building is totally closed down to get a square deal', he told reporters at the *Guardian*.[160]

For the Cleaners, however, Moody's expression of dedication read as somewhat insincere – and underplayed the impact of night cleaners' own organising, which stood in contrast to the at-times lacklustre support of the CSU. The Cleaners Action Group emphasised that the Civil Service strike was coordinated by the cleaners themselves – 'The union hadn't decided they should strike, they [the cleaners] decided' – and Hobbs stressed that 'when the initial problem of inadequate pay and bad working conditions came to a head, the CSU officer

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[156] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 104.

[157] Ibid. For more on the implications of 'wages for striking,' see page 106.

[158] Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972', 2.

[159] Cleaners Action Group, 'Night Cleaning Strike Report', 1.

[160] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 104; Our own Reporter, 'Second Ministry Hit by Night Cleaners' Strike', *The Guardian*, 15 August 1972.

responsible for dealing with them was nowhere in sight'.[161] In an open letter published in August 1973 (in response to claims made by Moody that the CSU had effectively led the strikes), Hobbs revealed that the CSU were less than supportive: 'during the strike, the advice from the union to the cleaners', she wrote, 'was to go back to work while negotiations took place (with a company that did not recognise them)'.[162] In doing so, the Union demonstrated a failure to understand one of the central fights in the battle for night cleaners' liberation: recognition.

The unions had repeatedly and fundamentally misunderstood the importance of visibility in night cleaners' protests, the Cleaners explained. Night cleaning was, by design, 'invisible work', 'isolated, hidden, ignored by the day workers who simply take their labour for granted'.[163] Diurnal workers, as cleaner Editha put it, 'never see us', adding: '[t]o them we just don't exist'.[164] Working at night was not just a practical decision taken by employers to maximise the hours for which a labour force was available – though this was certainly part of the logic. Night cleaning was actively invisiblised because, another cleaner Mrs B. argued, it was 'the dirtiest work around'.[165] People simply did not want to see the women cleaning up after them. And for Hobbs, the invisiblisation of night cleaning affected the strategies that should be used to improve the industry.

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[161] Cleaners Action Group, 'Night Cleaning Strike Report', 1; May Hobbs, 'May Hobbs and the CSU', *New Statesman*, 10 August 1973, 188.

[162] May Hobbs, 'May Hobbs and the CSU', 188.

[163] 'Night Cleaners Special', 3; Rowbotham, 'Resonance: Nightcleaners', 24. Sullivan made a similar point in Jill Sullivan, 'The Brush Off: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry', 1.

[164] Editha in Cynthia Cockburn, 'Nightcleaning', *Knuckle*, 1975.

[165] Mrs B in 'Unnamed Transcript, Number 1 & 9', n.d., 7SHR/D/02, Box number 8, LSE Women's Library.

On Hobbs's account, the major front on which this struggle for recognition needed to be waged was to increase the visibility of cleaners' work. This, she argued, required the night cleaners to be physically present in protest. The Night Cleaners Campaign had long been committed to the fight for visibility. During their first strikes in 1970, the Cleaners had 'picket[ed] all night in freezing wet weather' from 9pm to 6am and were unseen by the majority of the diurnal workforce.[166] By the time they picketed on behalf of May Videll just six months later, the Cleaners realised that 'picketing was effective only if people could see [the Cleaners] and therefore they should picket a more obvious building during the day'.[167] The logic was the same in the case of the Civil Service strikes: Cleanagents was 'a company that did not recognise them', Hobbs explained, and so a picket line had to be maintained.[168] When the union advised against this tactic, suggesting that the Cleaners' demands could be won without a picket, the Cleaners ignored this advice. If they hadn't, Hobbs insisted, there would be 'no recognition on that site to this day'.[169]

While the Cleaners set the agenda for the Civil Service pickets, it was the CSU that became the main negotiators during the August 1972 strikes. At first, the negotiations seemed hopeless. On 8 August 1972, talks between CSU representative Moody and Cleanagents manager, Mr. Rhoda, had reached an impasse. Moody described their conversations as 'an exhausting, frustrating and completely unproductive exercise'.[170] As conditions in the buildings continuing to disintegrate, the Ministry of Employment came under mounting public pressure to 'end the strike which was now threatening to close the Empress

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[166] 'Night Cleaners Special', 5; 'Companies House Picket, Transcript', 6.

[167] 'Night Cleaners Special', 5.

[168] May Hobbs, 'May Hobbs and the CSU', 188.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Campbell, 'Cleaners Strike after Supervisor Gets the Sack'. Morning Star reporters, 'More Cleaners down Mops to Join Strike'.

State'.[171] In an unprecedented move, the Ministry intervened in the stalemate to establish a joint conciliation board.[172]

For the first time, the government had become involved in the Night Cleaners' strikes. The Labour Government had begun contracting out office cleaning in Civil Service buildings in 1968 and, by 1970, two-thirds of the government's cleaning operations were performed by contract cleaners.[173] As Drake and Skinner explained in a report on 'The Forgotten Workforce', the government had thus become 'the biggest single user of contract cleaning' in the United Kingdom with 'some 33% of the business of the major companies [...] carried out within the public sector'.[174] This, Drake and Skinner argued, endowed the government with a certain responsibility: 'the State is clearly in a position to exert considerable influence on the trade's practices by means of its role as a major customer', they wrote. [175] For Labour MP Lena Jeger, a key parliamentary advocate for night cleaners, the Government should use the 1972 industrial conflict to 'set an example' to the rest of the industry.[176] Moody agreed, arguing that, 'We don't expect the contractors to be enlightened'.[177] The implication was that the Government, unlike other contractors, should know what the working conditions were like in its buildings.

Moody further argued that when night cleaners received low wages, the government was liable for breaching its own 1946 Code of Industrial Practice Fair Wage Resolution. The

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[171] Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972'.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Jill Sullivan, 'The Brush Off: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry', 7.

[174] Drake and Skinner, 'The Forgotten Workforce', 15.

[175] Ibid.

[176] Linda Jeger in 'Notices of Questions and Motions, Number 162', 26 July 1972, 10031, JEGER/6/24, LSE Women's Library.

[177] Campbell, 'Cleaners Strike after Supervisor Gets the Sack'.

1946 Code was a legal commitment designed to protect fair wages for Civil Service employees. It committed the government to employing contractors who in turn employed their workers on terms as good as or better than those in the corresponding private industry.[178] By arguing that the 1946 Code applied to night cleaners on government buildings, Moody insisted that the cleaners were – albeit indirectly – Civil Service employees, and in doing so refused commonly held conceptions of contracted labour. When asked how many cleaners worked in government buildings, for example, Conservative MP Kenneth Baker responded that he could not say: calculations were 'based on a price per hundred square feet and not on the number of staff to be employed'.[179] For Baker, night cleaning was evidently a matter of economic rather than human cost. Moody refused this perspective when speaking to reporters, insisting that the Government bore direct responsibility for the kind of contractors they deployed. As he summarised, '[i]t's diabolical for the Government to do business with these people'.[180]

On 16 August, Moody and Rhoda were called to a meeting by the Ministry for Employment.[181] It is unclear exactly what was discussed in the talks (the Night Cleaners themselves were not given a seat at the table) but Rhoda agreed to meet the campaign demands, including a pay rise to £16.50 a week with an additional 50p night allowance for a standard week, a promise to end the victimisation of unionised cleaners, and an agreement to recognise

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[178] Beatrix Campbell, 'More Women Cleaners Join the Strike', *Morning Star*, 12 August 1972.

[179] 'Department of Employment: Written Reply', 18 April 1972, JEGER/6/24, LSE Women's Library.

[180] Morning Star reporters, 'More Cleaners down Mops to Join Strike'.

[181] Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972'; Martin Walker, 'Picketing Cleaners Win More Support', *The Guardian (1959-2003)*, 12 August 1972.

the Union.[182] The involvement of government actors no doubt contributed to one of the most comprehensive victories enjoyed by the Night Cleaners Campaign.

These gains, however, did not prove to be lasting. As Martin Walker at the *Guardian* foretold, 'The strikes have been settled, but the overall issue is still in doubt'.[183] The first setback came at the negotiation table, where improved conditions were secured solely for Cleanagents employees. Those employed at Horseferry Road under Gatlands Ltd. returned to work following the reinstatement of their dismissed supervisor, but with only the 'promise' of future negotiations – which, to their disappointment, never materialised.[184] The Gatlands cleaners returned to strike action.[185] Meanwhile, the twenty cleaners who had been on strike at the Old Admiralty building received 'notice to quit' almost immediately upon returning to work.[186] Cleanagents' contract at the building had expired and the twenty cleaners were not rehired under the new contract.[187]

These setbacks serve as a reminder that incremental gains from individual employers – the kind of gains that unions traditionally advocated for – could not achieve the systemic changes that night cleaners needed for sustained improvements in the industry. A final blow came when Labour MP Kenneth Lomas put forward a proposal to amend government cleaning contracts. The hope was to protect cleaners' right to receive a minimum wage of £14.25

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[182] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 84. Part of the original agreement document can be viewed in 'Agreement', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[183] Martin Walker, 'Office Cleaners Face an Uphill Struggle', *The Guardian (1959-2003)*, 18 August 1972.

[184] Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972', 2.

[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid., 4.

[187] Ibid.

an hour.[188] His suggestion was promptly dismissed.[189] Once more, the Night Cleaners were reminded that while individual strikes could yield local gains, neither unions nor the state were prepared to deliver the structural changes that night cleaners so desperately needed to alter the persistent conditions of their exploitation.

VI. Dissolution and the limits of the unions

By 1973, the Night Cleaners Campaign had all but collapsed. An exhausting cycle of lost victories was compounded by the structural and gendered limits of union support, which ultimately left the campaign without the resources it needed to survive. The dissolution of the Night Cleaners Campaign has often been read in the context of the campaign's thorny relationship with the unions. For Norbert Soldon, 'the union's bureaucracy' was to blame for the failure of the campaign; for Margaretta Jolly, part of the problem was that the TGWU was 'largely unsupportive of workers they considered unskilled and unorganised'.[190] These claims capture something true: the campaign was subject to extensive bureaucracy and the unions were largely unsupportive. But by framing the dissolution of the campaign in this way, they fail to note that the union's treatment was not just a routine feature of bureaucracy. It was a consequence of sexism.

Sexism was never far from the surface in the Night Cleaners' interactions with union representatives. As Rowbotham has noted, in an interview with the *Guardian* in 1972 Moody

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[188] Lomas's demand – £14.25 – was already significantly lower than what the CAG calculated as the rate of pay that would comply with the government's own 1946 resolution. By this standard, the rate of pay was calculated as £19.65 – the average rate paid for directly employed cleaners. Ibid., 4–5; also see Hobbs, 'Night Cleaners Bid for a Square Deal'.

[189] Cleaners Action Group, 'The Night Cleaners Strikes: August 1972', 4–5.

[190] Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874–1976*, 182. Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 92.

described the CSU's representation of the Cleaners as 'a labour of love'.[191] To this he added, 'In time and effort it costs us a lot more than the membership fees we get from [the cleaners]'.[192] In doing so, Moody both overplayed the role of the CSU – neglecting to mention that the vast majority of the 'time and effort' expended on the campaign came from within the Night Cleaners' own ranks – and indicated that the Cleaners' struggle held only a marginal status for the CSU. Moody implied that the Night Cleaners was a passion project for the union, motivated by 'love' rather than political urgency.[193] The implication was that the Cleaners' struggle did not comprise the core function of the union which was, purportedly, advocating for workers. As George Stevenson puts it, the cleaners were treated as '*women* before they were *workers*'.[194] Members of the Cleaners Campaign were aware of this dynamic, writing in an appeal to the Women's Conference of the TGWU that 'Most of all we want to be treated like other organized workers'.[195] The inability – or unwillingness – of the unions to recognise the cleaners in their capacity as workers was a direct consequence of sexist assumptions about women's work and its value.

For Stevenson, sexism was not a systematic failure of unions; it was a problem of 'local union branches'.[196] The London branch of the TGWU, Stevenson argues, certainly exhibited sexist attitudes but he claims that this differed from the experience of cleaners in the Durham

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[191] Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 615; Walker, 'Office Cleaners Face an Uphill Struggle'.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid. This is something Cathy Haw also noted in 1975 when describing the status of the cleaners as 'marginal' to the CSU. Cathy Haw, 'Nightcleaners Take Their Employers to Court', *Spare Rib*, April 1976.

[194] Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and "Class Struggle"', 747.

[195] Cleaners Action Group, 'Night Cleaners Appeal to the National Women's Conference of the Transport and General Workers' Union to Support Our Campaign for Unionization'.

[196] George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979', 52.

branch.[197] I cannot speak directly to the Durham experience (though I hazard his reading is generous); based on the London experience alone, however, Stevenson misrepresents the TGWU when he contends that sexism was a localised rather than institutional problem. For three years (eleven if we include the organising of Hobbs since c. 1962), the Cleaners were let down by multiple TGWU representatives – Churchouse, Ferryman, Fry, Lucas. The Cleaners knew their treatment was not due to routine union failure, and petitioned the highest ranking official in the TGWU, General Secretary Jack Jones, for an independent branch. The only way they could ensure their accurate representation, they argued, was to represent themselves. But their application to set up an independent branch of the union was repeatedly dismissed and never fully actioned, even when they met the requisite number of members. In short, the TGWU was shot through with a sexism that resulted in inaction.

Stevenson also exaggerates the support of the CSU which, he claims, was contrastingly forthcoming. While undoubtedly better than the TGWU, support in the CSU was limited. As Hobbs asked, 'Where was the union when the decision had to be made to mount 24-hour pickets [at the Empress State building] and woman them (men also helped) day after day'?[198] It was the cleaners, she emphasised, who called the strike, who struggled for every hard-fought win, who organised, who paid dues, and who risked their employment time and again to demand change. 'The union', she explained, 'came along only after our badgering them to get off their backside and do the job they were being paid to do'.[199] The vast majority of campaign labour was performed by the Cleaners themselves, Hobbs insisted, and what's more, they had to 'badger' the unions for representation – representation that, she pointed

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[197] George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 63.

[198] May Hobbs, 'May Hobbs and the CSU', 188.

[199] Ibid., 8.

out, should have been theirs by right as members of the union. The CSU was perhaps better at concealing its sexism than the TGWU, but their underlying attitude was strikingly similar.

The structural – or perhaps imaginative – limitations of traditional union strategy also proved inadequate in responding to the fragmented, unstable conditions of the night cleaning industry. As we have seen, the blanket application of traditional union strategy was no match for an industry designed around a complete lack of labour protections, short termism, instability, and offloading responsibility through outsourcing contracts. After months of campaigning in a particular building, hard-fought gains could be lost overnight when, as Jolly summarises, 'the cleaning contract changed hands and the new contractor was not bound to the terms of the previous agreement'.[200] As Hobbs put it, in night cleaning 'one victory does not win a war' and surviving these cyclic setbacks became a test of endurance.[201] Hobbs expressed a scepticism that long-term change could ever be achieved through the kind of piecemeal campaigning that the Night Cleaners performed. Individual victories, she knew, were limited both in terms of their own longevity and in terms of their ability to alter the conditions of the wider night cleaning industry. The 'war' could never be won by singular feats. Viewed in this light, the sustained refusal of sections of the left to adapt their methods and address the labour conditions specific to contract cleaning was key to the eventual exhaustion of the campaign. The unions' methods were not simply outdated; they were gendered, modelled on the full-time, male-dominated industrial workplaces that had long defined the unions' conception of 'organisable' labour.

This failure of the unions was compounded when cleaners as individuals became overexhausted by the triple demands of contract cleaning, caring for dependents, and activism. As Alexander put it, 'the cleaner's life is held in by time, exhaustion, and lack of money', the

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[200] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 91–92.

[201] Hobbs, *Born to Struggle*, 85.

consequences of which became painfully clear when illness slashed through the group.[202] Jean Wright, a prominent figure in the campaign, developed cancer as a consequence of her sleeplessness: 'the doctor has told her [it's] through the night work, that she's not getting enough rest during the day'.[203] Another member 'nearly had a breakdown, her doctor had to give her tablets [...] and he told her to give up the night work'.[204] '[M]y doctor has stopped me from my night job once,' a third cleaner recounted: 'he told me I'm not getting enough rest with all these children'.[205] Many cleaners continued to work against the advice of medical professionals because, a cleaner called Annie explained, they 'just [couldn't] manage without the money'.[206] Building a campaign around hyper-exploited labour meant that activism was in constant competition with physical, financial, and domestic needs. And without the material support of the unions to enable them to campaign in a more sustainable way, the consequences of exhaustion damaged the group.

For members of the campaign like Alexander, a solution to this could have been raising 'the money to support one or two cleaners while they worked on the campaign for a few months'.[207] The Night Cleaners had repeatedly turned to unions for these much-needed resources, warning the TGWU in 1971: 'We badly need money'.[208] To their frustration,

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[202] Alexander in *'36 to '77*, 16mm, colour, sound, 1978.

[203] 'Tape 3, Meeting at May's House', 11.

[204] Sheila Page in ibid., 10.

[205] Videll in 'May Videll Says No to the Gov'ner', *Shrew*, December 1971.

[206] Annie in 'Companies House Picket, Transcript', 7.

[207] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 6. Thomlinson comments on this as evidence that members of the WLM were at least aware of the class dynamics in the campaign: Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 50.

[208] From a reprinted flyer to the TGWU in 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 1.

however, the Night Cleaners Campaign '[did] not get a penny off the union'.[209] The unions were capable of funding activist projects. In October 1971 alone, TGWU accounts show that money had been allocated to strikes in road haulage, auto engineering, whisky distilleries, oil, and gas works.[210] But the type of projects that were successful in securing funding were all in heavy industry, construction, or factory work – that is, traditionally masculine trades. This funding pattern reflected a deeper structural bias, in which feminised work remained marginal in conceptions of industrial struggle. Meanwhile, the Night Cleaners were unable to move away from hand-to-mouth finances. Drastically underfunded and unsupported by the unions, the campaign attempted to finance its own advocacy work. When Hobbs attended a conference in October 1971, for example, she was funded by individual members of the London Women's Liberation Workshop who 'agreed to collect money so May could go'.[211]

By May 1972, the Night Cleaners agreed that it was 'imperative' they put finances 'on a stable footing' and the group discussed setting up 'P.O. Giro accounts', assigning Jean Wright to the role of treasurer.[212] There is evidence that a bank account was set up; in 1972 donations by postal order or cheque were to be 'made payable to: – "Cleaners Action Group"'.[213] Despite these attempts to formalise their funding structures, however, calls for

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[209] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 8; 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 1.

[210] 'Record of Industrial Workers Stoppages', October 1971, Transport and General Workers Union Collection, MSS.126/TG/969/C/3, Warwick University.

[211] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Letter to Women's Liberation Workshop', 1971; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 43. The Birmingham Conference of the Institute for Workers' Control conference occurred between 26-27 October 1971.

[212] 'Notes from Meeting of Night Cleaners Campaign Leafletters Held on 13.5.72', 13 May 1972, 2, 7SAA/5, folder 2, LSE Women's Library.

[213] 'The Cleaners Voice', 1972, 4, JEGER/6/24, LSE Women's Library.

donations became an anxious feature of campaign flyers – 'they need money', 'We keep going by donations off of all classes of people' – and their existing funding strategies – from jumble sales to appeals at union branches and leftist conferences – did not provide sufficient resources to keep the campaign afloat.[214] Cleaners, they knew, '[were] not in a position to save, and [could not] afford the loss of pay resulting from strikes, [and] victimisation'.[215] Without financial input from the unions, the campaign remained chronically underfunded, and the Night Cleaners were unable to fulfil even their basic organising needs. As Hobbs asked, 'What could we do without money, without even the money to pay the phone bill?'[216]

Things worsened when Hobbs, an individual who had dedicated vast amounts of unpaid labour to the Night Cleaners Campaign alongside caring for her four children, stepped down.[217] After spending years on no-hire lists, she explained 'I'm no cleaner no more' and therefore '[couldn't] be people's spokesperson no more – they've got to be their own'.[218] Hobbs evidently thought that her leadership no longer met the campaign's standards of grassroots, cleaner-led action. Hobbs may have also been responding to doubts that had surfaced within the WLM about her leadership. As writer and liberationist Anna Coote explained in

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[214] May Hobbs and Jean Wright, 'The Night-Cleaners and the Bill', n.d., 7SHR/D/01, box number 8, LSE Women's Library; London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 8; Sally Alexander, 'Untitled Note', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library; 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 1, 2.

[215] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 8; 'The Cleaners Voice', Spring 1971, 1. The apparent exception to this rule was when the CSU distributed strike pay in August 1972.

[216] Hobbs in Cynthia Cockburn, 'Night Cleaning - a Life on Four Hours Sleep', 8.

[217] Hobbs was active in the campaign up until June 1973. See Lindsay Mackie, 'Women Besiege Prime Minister', *The Guardian (1959-2003)*, 29 June 1973; Philip Howard, 'Suffragette Touch in Equality Campaign', *The Times*, 29 June 1973, The Times Digital Archive.

[218] Anna Coote, 'Woman's Guardian', *The Guardian (1959-2003)*, 19 July 1973. This article is reproduced in Kira Cochrane, *Women of the Revolution: Forty Years of Feminism* (London: Guardian, 2010), 16–21.

1973, 'radical elements of Women's Liberation do not want heroes and stars, and [Hobbs was] beginning to come in for a bit of criticism [...] for having "sold out to the middle class"'.[219] More sympathetically, Alexander argued that Hobbs was put under excessive pressure and that 'the strain of that responsibility was too much for one person'.[220] Either way, when Hobbs withdrew from the campaign, it was rendered unsustainable. This was undoubtedly painful for her: 'So the Cleaners Campaign is dead', she said, 'Don't you think I feel it too? It's killed me too'.[221]

What the loss of May Hobbs made all too clear was that mass campaigns such as the Night Cleaners were made precarious when held up by a handful of underpaid and overworked individuals. As Alexander put it, 'leadership and direction among the women themselves' could only be developed if positions in the campaign were financially supported.[222] The fact that the campaign was unable to fund these positions was, Alexander said, 'perhaps [its] most serious failing'.[223] Attempts to encourage cleaners to take on leadership roles were largely unsuccessful: 'nobody wanted to take on the responsibility', the leafleters recalled.[224] But while providing wages for cleaners to dedicate more time to advocacy would undoubtedly have increased their ability to take on leadership positions, the question of why the union representatives – who *were* being paid to represent them through night cleaners' own union dues – remains a live one.

The Cleaners took a chance on the unions, informed by assumptions about the kind of support workers ordinarily received, but as one night cleaner explained, it became apparent

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[219] Coote, 'Woman's Guardian'.

[220] Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 6.

[221] Cynthia Cockburn, 'Night Cleaning - a Life on Four Hours Sleep', 8.

[222] Sally Alexander, 'The Night Cleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 6.

[223] Ibid.

[224] Leafletters' Report 'Night Cleaners Special', 6.

that cleaners 'can't afford to take chances, put it that way'.[225] When the unions proved to be sexist and exclusionary, and in a context of otherwise limited material resources, the campaigners found themselves unable to start again. After three years of organising, the campaign was untethered from the unions which, night cleaner Mary reported, had 'lost contact'.[226] 'We were paying our dues – the girls were good payers', Mary explained, but when a fellow shop steward 'left and took the records with her' the remaining cleaners no longer knew where to send their dues.[227] The unions lapsed into their old silence and did not communicate. 'If they did', Mary insisted, 'my girls would join'.[228] In their neglect of the Night Cleaners Campaign, the unions failed individual workers. They also foreclosed their own ability to see what might have been possible if workers were properly unionised. The cleaners had taken a chance on the unions – but in the end, they were left to fight, and fall, alone.

VII. Conclusion: the road not taken

To question what might have happened had the unions supported the cleaners is ask about a road not taken. Sophie Smith has warned that this type of reasoning risks operating at the level of a trope.[229] As she points out, it is often used in an ideational mode, in which an alternative path is posited but there is no sense in which that alternative was ever really a possibility – at least in any immediate sense – because wide-scale, systemic change would have to take place first. I am in broad agreement with Smith's characterisation of the

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[225] 'Scab' in 'Companies House Picket, Transcript', 10.

[226] Mary in Cynthia Cockburn, 'Nightcleaning' (Spare Rib, unpublished article sent to Alexander to review, n.d.), 1, 7SAA/5, folder 2, LSE Women's Library.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Smith, 'Women and Intellectual History in the Twentieth Century, Part Two', 642.

ideational and unrealistic metaphor of the 'road not taken'. What is missing from her discussion, however, are those times in history when an alternative path has been a genuine option.

By 1973, the Night Cleaners Campaign had established extensive organisational links between social movements and networks of cleaners, and they had put the kind of infrastructure in place that, if materially supported, could have sustained a successful campaign. The cleaners were already doing the work of trying to extend the reach of the unions. They were asking to pay dues. And when night cleaners received strike pay from the CSU in 1972, their wages were already so low that Rowbotham described the minimal pay as akin to the women receiving 'wages for striking'.[230] Hobbs insisted that the cleaners would have been ready for action even without strike pay. 'If [Moody] thinks that the Fulham night cleaners would have packed it all in if they hadn't been given money that was theirs by right from the CSU,' she argued, 'then this really does tell us all more about his mentality and innate social prejudices than we should know'.[231] But what the notion of 'wages for striking' shows is that this was a feasible and practical opportunity for the unions to mobilise a workforce on mass at a relatively low cost.

If, as I suggest, unions supporting the cleaners was a real possibility – a road not taken –, why did they fail to take this path? For Hobbs, this came down to union leaders like Moody's own 'social prejudices'.[232] Union leaders failed to grasp the depth of the cleaners' commitment because their own sexist assumptions constrained what they imagined working-class women were capable of. As we have seen, the Cleaners repeatedly came up against unionists' failures of imagination, of interpersonal commitment, and of sexism. Their already-limited resources were depleted in this cycle of rejection, and eventually they were undone.

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[230] Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 104.

[231] May Hobbs, 'May Hobbs and the CSU', 188.

[232] Ibid.

This is not to suggest that the dissolution of the campaign was overdetermined, nor to undermine the Cleaners' short-lived victories – victories that were hard-fought and significant in their symbolic (if not substantive) effects – but it is a reminder that the night cleaners did not organise for short-lived victories. They organised to win.

To say the Night Cleaners Campaign failed is also not to say that the history of the campaign is unworthy of study, or a chapter in intellectual history that feminists ought not claim. Understanding why the cleaners did not win offers important lessons for labour organising today – particularly in sectors where gendered precarity remains entrenched. As Hobbs wrote in 1973: 'At times, our struggle has been a particularly lonely one but isn't there a saying about success having a thousand fathers but failure being an orphan?'[233] When we reflect on the state of gig work and short-term contracts in our own time and place, this campaign could be a source of insight. The Night Cleaners' history contains lessons about what effective organising might (or might not) look like among precarious workers today.

For one thing, the Cleaners' history warns against treating emerging labour relations, such as contract labour, as marginal just because they are unfamiliar. As Rowbotham would later put it, contract labour has since become 'an exploitative and short-sighted system of employment which [has been] massively extended worldwide'.[234] Labour relations experienced by night cleaners in the 1970s continue to play out in the inability of Amazon workers to join unions, the 24-hour shift of Uber drivers, and the ongoing precarity of night cleaning itself.[235] Viewed in this light, the campaign was a missed opportunity to intervene in what

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[233] Ibid., 189.

[234] Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organizing', 623.

[235] For more on this, see the engaged political theory of Paul Apostolidis, which has increasingly turned the condition of night time labour: Apostolidis, 'Organizing the Fight against Precarity'; Paul Apostolidis, 'Night Labour, Social Reproduction and Political Struggle in the "Working Day" Chapter of Marx's Capital',

have become hyper exploitative and entrenched systems of employment. This was somewhat foreseeable in 1969, when night cleaning was growing at an annual rate of ten percent.[236] If the unions had supported the Night Cleaners Campaign, would night cleaning and forms of adjacent labour have continued to expand at such a rate? Or might unions have developed new tools for tackling the specific challenges of precarious contract labour?

It is impossible to really know the answer to these questions. The only thing we can know for certain is what did happen: the campaign collapsed under the weight of exhaustion, financial precarity, and union neglect. Experimenting with the road not taken, however, can be a useful exercise, not least because exploring where the Cleaners did not go can help us to grapple with where we are – and how we got here.

European Journal of Political Theory, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851231219176; Apostolidis, 'Race, Dissociated Labour, and Social Reproduction in the Shadow of Amazon'.

[236] Jill Sullivan, 'The Brush Off: A Study of the Contract Cleaning Industry'; 'Office Cleaning', *Financial Times*, 26 April 1969, Financial Times Historical Archive.

-2-

Selma James, Autonomy, and the Prospects for Unionisation

'The debate on housework would never have come alive as it did if it had been confined to articles in journals'.

The Coast Women's Group (1976)[1]

'There are more ways than one in which the women's movement can be co-opted and be cut off from the possibilities of becoming an autonomous and revolutionary political movement'.[2] So began Selma James's paper, entitled *Women, the Unions and Work… Or What is Not to be Done*, which she presented at the 1972 British Women's Liberation Movement conference.[3] James's paper was a relentless critique of existing tactics in the Women's Movement in which she argued that feminists were erroneously adopting strategies employed by the masculine

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[1] The Coast Women's Group, 'What Has Happened to the Women's Liberation and Socialism Conferences?', June 1976, 1, 5WRR/B/02, LSE Women's Library. The Coast Women's Group was a North Tyneside faction of the BWLM. See George Stuart Michael Stevenson, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Intractable Problem of Class, c. 1968 - c. 1979', 236.

[2] Selma James, 'Women, the Unions and Work, Or…What Is Not To Be Done', *Radical America* 7, no. 4–5 (1973): 51, https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/08/14/selma-james-women-the-unions-and-work-or-what-is-not-to-be-done/.

[3] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work'.

working class, including unionisation. This, she feared, would undermine the Women's Movement's radical potential. The solution? To strike a new, autonomous path from the perspective of women. As part of this, James put six demands to her audience, one of which would come to define her politics: wages for housework.[4]

Over the past two decades, political theorists have paid increasing attention to the ways in which wages for housework offers a productive case to think through the value of reproductive labour, theories of freedom, and the role of demands in social movements.[5] But despite their substantial and novel contributions, these recent scholarly treatments have

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[4] Selma James, 'I Founded the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972 – and Women Are Still Working for Free', Independent, 8 March 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/international-womens-day-wages-housework-care-selma-james-a9385351.html.

[5] In 2005, Linda Zerilli was the first to place the Milan Women's Bookstore collective (an early, Italian wing of WfH) alongside well-known scholars like Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt to theorise the demands of freedom: Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. In 2011, Kathi Weeks used the WfH campaign as a case in thinking through the nature and practice of demanding: Weeks, *The Problem with Work*. Since the publication of these texts, WfH has continued to be used as a valuable interjection in conversations around reproductive labour, family abolition, and feminist strategy more generally. See Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018), 10, 29, 97; Beth Capper and Arlen Austin, 'Wages for Housework Means Wages against Heterosexuality: On the Archives of Black Women for Wages for Housework and Wages Due Lesbians', *GLQ* 24, no. 4 (2018): 445–66, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-6957772; Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021); Amelia Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*, Outspoken (Pluto Press) (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Best, 'Wages for Housework Redux'; Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'; Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Salvage Editions (London: Verso, 2022). Louise Toupin has also published an extensive history of wages for housework. See Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77* (UBC Press, 2018).

rarely dwelled in the less-than-certain origins of the demand itself.[6] This chapter is an intervention in histories of the British Women's Liberation Movement and James's own intellectual history, reconstructing a time before James's activism was synonymous with 'wages for housework'.[7] As I show, James first introduced this demand as part of a broader strategy to interrupt what she saw as the co-option of the WLM by the male left – epitomised in the relationship between feminists and the unions. Wages for housework thus understood was part of a wider attempt by James to harness women's anger and offer them a newly radical and autonomous direction.

In James's hands, autonomy became a strategic imperative. It meant organising independently of the male-dominated labour movement, whose structures, schedules, and ideologies routinely marginalised women's experiences. James also insisted on the need for feminists to progress analytical autonomy: to generate their own theories grounded in the realities of women's lives. For James, autonomy became both method and message, a way to resist co-optation and to build a politics rooted not in solidarity with the Left as it stood, but in refusal of its terms.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. In the first, I argue that *Women, the Unions and Work* was, primarily, an expression of James's strategic disagreements with the prevailing direction of the British WLM. To make sense of this paper, I situate it in relation to live debates amongst feminists in the early 1970s about unionisation, Marxism, and elites. In part two, I explore James's particular identification of the Night Cleaners Campaign, the subject of the previous chapter, as an illustrative example of what was 'not to be done'. I argue that

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[6] Weeks is a notable exception to this rule, see Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 128; in more recent work by Emilia Callaci, we also see an example of a scholar dwelling in this uncertainty.

[7] James described it as the demand which 'named her future'. James, 'I Founded the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972'.

the disagreement between James and the Cleaners was not just a fascinating aside in the tumultuous history of feminism.[8] Members of the WLM were coming apart on questions of strategy – namely whether to join forces with trade unions as a method of non-reformist reform. Reconstructing the debate that ensued further reveals the depth of James's own commitment to autonomous organising.

After establishing James's wider purpose with *Women, the Unions and Work*, in part three I turn to the wages for housework demand as it stood in 1972. While the demand was not the primary purpose of James's paper, this text was nonetheless the vehicle through which wages for housework was introduced to the British WLM. When we revisit this point in time, I show that wages for housework becomes legible as part of James's wider call for feminists to build autonomous action. In part four, I turn to her evolving endorsement of the wages for housework demand in the months that followed *Women, the Unions and Work*. In the wake of delivering *Women, the Unions and Work*, I argue that wages for housework emerged as a means to fulfil James's key strategic goal of autonomous organising.

As scholars have identified, the controversy surrounding James in the 1970s was, at least in part, about whether wages for housework was a regressive or implausible demand.[9] In 1972, I argue it was also crucially over questions of unionisation and autonomy. By entering debates before the wages for housework campaign was formally launched, these early divergences become clear as the contentious and foundational fault lines on which James would position herself for decades to come.

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[8] For the purposes of this chapter, I capitalise 'Cleaners' when referring to the members of the Night Cleaners *qua* campaigners, which included individuals who were not themselves night cleaners. When I use the lower-case 'cleaners', I am specifically referring to night cleaners *qua* labourers – that is, excluding members of the campaign who were not night cleaners themselves.

[9] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

I. A new direction

Women, the Unions and Work has been cast as the 'bombshell' that marked the introduction of the Wages for Housework campaign to the British Women's Liberation Movement, with James herself referring to it as 'the paper which 'named [her] future'.[10] In *Women, the Unions and Work*, James did explicitly put 'wages for housework' to the conference floor as the second of six demands. But when we return to the original text in context, we realise that, first and foremost, the paper was a critique of the then-current direction of the Women's Movement and a call for a new, autonomous direction for feminism. James was responding to live debates amongst members of the WLM about the place of unionisation, Marxism, and leadership in the burgeoning movement.

In the early 1970s, British feminism was compelled by strong socialist undercurrents, with many of the activists in the WLM having entered the movement through socialist and Marxist organising.[11] Deep ties continued to run between feminism and the British Left and there was broad backing amongst feminists at the time for the idea that working-class power was essential to the destruction of capitalism.[12] Unions, as a historic site of working-class organising, were widely regarded as a sensible tool with which to launch this revolution; as James observed, unions had 'become a symbol of this [working-class] power' and were being

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[10] Victoria Bazin, 'Red Rag Magazine, Feminist Economics and the Domestic Labour Pains of Liberation', *Women: A Cultural Review* 32, no. 3–4 (2 October 2021): 302–3, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1972651; James, 'I Founded the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972'.

[11] Rowbotham speaks of these currents throughout her book, including from page 1: Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 1.

[12] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 25–26.

conceptualised by many feminists as indispensable instruments of anti-capitalist struggle.[13] On a practical level, James recognised the advantage of using pre-existing tools compared to the untested and still unformed structures of feminist organising. 'Here', James summarised, 'is an institution already functioning and "experienced"' that '[did] not have to be built from the ground up'.[14]

Unionisation was indeed a popular feminist strategy, and yet feminists who worked within the unions were generally not uncritical of them. Socialist feminists had repeatedly expressed frustrations with the male left's failure to appreciate or acknowledge their labour and perspectives. As Sheila Rowbotham put it, 'the whole structure of the Unions, the formal constitution, the times of meeting are very alien and extremely inconvenient to most women'.[15] While the unions occasionally voiced support for women workers, this was unreliable and often belated. As Ann Burnett, a unionised night cleaner, put it, 'We didn't want [the Unions] to do miracles for us'.[16] The expectation was not necessarily that the unions presented a straightforward revolutionary force. Despite this, however, for many feminists the unions remained a promising means to building a unified struggle against capitalism.

But, James asked in *Women, the Unions and Work*, did the unions really offer feminists a practical and theoretically grounded path to liberation? In doing so, she aligned herself with a long history of Marxist thinkers – Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci – who were sceptical about the revolutionary potential of trade unions. In *Women, the Unions and Work*, James drew on the ideas expressed in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) in which he argued that a 'trade

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[13] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 59.

[14] Ibid., 65.

[15] Rowbotham in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

[16] Tendler, 'A Cleaners' Campaign'.

union consciousness' pacified potential revolution.[17] Unions focused on limited reforms based on a purely economic understanding of class struggle, Lenin reasoned, and thereby risked workers becoming focused on achieving minor concessions within the paradigm of capitalism – better working hours, higher wages – rather than achieving the overthrow of capitalism itself. Rosa Luxemburg had gone further in her 1899 text, *Reform or Revolution?* The unions, Luxemburg warned, were capable of securing temporary material gains but they ultimately operated within a capitalist framework.[18] Revolutionary struggle, she argued, would not come through the unions because ultimately, unions were propping up the very system they ostensibly struggled against. James joined in this historic scepticism, as well as aligning herself with autonomous Marxists coming out of the Italian Lotta Continua movement, who maintained the importance of challenging traditional vanguardist structures within the left.[19]

On James's view, it was a distortion to treat the union as the mouthpiece of the working class: '[The union] has exploited this image and this tradition so as to channel, direct and, where possible, smother the struggle', she said.[20] The unions, James argued, had rejected women from their structures, failed to recognise unwaged labour as the backbone of capitalist production, and were complicit in the maintenance of unequal pay and employment

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[17] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (London: Wellred Books, 2018), 33.

[18] Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*, Reprint of the revised Second Edition, 1908 (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 21–22.

[19] Emily Callaci, *Wages for Housework: The Story of a Movement, an Idea, a Promise* (London: Allen Lane, 2025). James also aligned herself, though perhaps unknowingly, with her British contemporaries when thinking about the implications of autonomous Marxism. Like James, Big Flame was a self-described 'revolutionary socialist organisation' operating out of Liverpool at the time, a group which also drew on the influence of Italian autonomism and were sceptical of unionisation. Big Flame, 'Introductory Guide to Big Flame Perspectives', July 1980, 1, leftove.rs, https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/CVH/2.

[20] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 59.

structures.[21] James criticised unions for mediating rather than advancing workers' struggles, 'demanding jobs' but failing to take the anti-capitalist action of 'disengag[ing] from exploitation' altogether.[22] A realistic assessment of union history, she thought, could only result in the conclusion that unionisation had inhibited working-class struggle and was a tactic that had to be abandoned.

Importantly, James's argument against the unions was also rooted in a feminist commitment to the destruction of patriarchy. For James, the unions had demonstrated a partial and sexist theoretical lens when they focused exclusively on the waged workplace. The unions, she said, insisted that the working-class struggle had to be 'through their definitions of the class, their orientations and their kinds of actions'.[23] James maintained that this analysis 'left us [women] out completely' because it ignored the many sites of women's labour that were unwaged.[24] 'Whether or not we're in jobs, most of us work like hell', James contended, 'The only thing is that we are wageless if we don't formally hire ourselves out to a particular capitalist and just work in our kitchens creating and servicing workers for the capitalist class in general'.[25] In short, core elements of capitalism's downfall could only be initiated when informed by a cohesive and complete analysis of its functioning, which in turn required an analysis of unpaid labour. Wage models assumed and thereby protected the very power structure – capitalism – that they purportedly rejected. For James, because women's labour was excluded from unions' analyses, unions were ultimately obsolete.

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[21] Ibid., 56, 57, 58.

[22] Ibid., 62.

[23] Ibid., 53.

[24] Ibid., 58.

[25] Ibid., 61.

The exclusion of women from unions' analyses was not merely a theoretical oversight. It was, James argued, a feature of how unions operated:

> The very structure of the unions puts women off. All those rules and regulations and having to talk at meetings and having meetings at night when we are putting our children to bed and washing up, often confirm to us that we are just not up to scratch. We know these feelings well. We formed a movement because of them.[26]

James reminded her audience that the subordination they experienced in the unions was an instantiation of the broader webs of patriarchal power against which they organised. Viewed in this light, she pointed out that 'racism and sexism are not aberrations of an otherwise powerful working class weapon'.[27] They were, by implication, the white, male left's *modus operandi*. As James saw it, reproductive labour purposefully kept women out of work and job markets systematically discriminated against people of colour. When the unions demonstrated inflexible structures and attitudes, they were working to maintain the privileges awarded to white men under racial capitalism.

As part of the Women's Liberation Movement, James argued that feminists needed to build 'our own analysis of women and therefore our own analysis of the whole working class struggle'.[28] Autonomy, she argued, required a focus on self-activity with members of the class organising themselves rather than following the direction of union leaders. In doing so, James invoked ideas that had motivated her activism for decades. In 1945, at the age of 15, James had joined the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a radical leftist group that maintained that

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[26] Ibid., 60.

[27] Ibid., 58.

[28] Ibid.

liberation could only be achieved through the self-mobilisation of oppressed people.[29] As historian Emelia Callaci has put it, the Tendency maintained that 'the downtrodden of the world did not need to be told what to think'.[30] In 1951, as part of the Tendency, James published *The Woman Question*, in which she contended that activists have to 'start from the position of women in the home for that is where the majority of women are, that is where the problem of women begins'.[31] (Therein, she also argued against becoming entangled in 'union politics'.[32]) Twenty years later, after consistently engaging in anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggles, James maintained this earlier argument: 'the autonomous politics of women's liberation', she told the feminists gathered at the WLM conference in 1972, was 'the only meaningful alternative' to the failing male left.[33]

When women took up their distinctive, autonomous perspective, James insisted that they would begin to see new actions available to them in the movement against patriarchal capitalism. 'If we begin to look with women's eyes,' James said, 'respecting what women do and not measuring them as men do, we will see a wealth of rebellion against and refusal of women's work and the relationships and roles they generate'.[34] James argued that women were already exhausted by tactics that didn't work and were taking the kinds of actions –

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[29] *Selma James*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtZ8xh7LBVM; C L R James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, ed. Paul Buhle (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013).

[30] Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 25.

[31] Selma James and Johnson-Forest Tendency, 'On the Woman Question: An Orientation', *Caring Labor: An Archive* (blog), 5 September 2010, https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/05/selma-jamesjohnson-forrest-tendency-on-the-woman-question-an-orientation/.

[32] Ibid.

[33] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 59.

[34] Ibid., 66.

rebellion and refusal – that could form the groundwork of a revived autonomous movement. Quoting from *Women and the Subversion of the Community* – a piece that profoundly affected her analysis, and explored at greater length in part three of this chapter –, James argued that '[women] have worked enough':

> We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors, typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of nappies, by hand and in machines. Every time they have 'let us in' to some traditionally male enclave, it is to find for us a new level of exploitation'.[35]

On James's account, women knew that work would not make them free; they had performed countless, repetitive tasks – both paid and unpaid – and exploitation, not liberation, was their experience. What much of the male left had misunderstood was that bargaining with capitalism – for better wages, for shorter hours, for more work – only reinforced the notion that there was no alternative. Women, James wrote, were recognising this and beginning to 'refuse the myth of liberation through work'.[36]

In the place of unions, James argued that the women's movement 'must organise that power [of the class]'.[37] This could be read as a reversal of her previous call for autonomous and unmediated class-led action. Was James invoking Leninist vanguard politics, suggesting that an elite group ought to develop and impose an external revolutionary consciousness? Were women this potential vanguard – seeing something about how capitalism worked that

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[35] Ibid., 63.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 60.

men were less likely to see? From this perspective, James's text spoke to a much wider debate within Marxist theory about the place of elites in revolutionary struggle.[38]

James – like Luxemburg and contra Lenin – was convinced that spontaneous mass action led by the class, and unmediated by elites, was the only revolutionary strategy. To make her case for a worker-led revolution in *Women, the Unions and Work*, James drew on contemporary social action, making reference to strikes led by miners, postal workers, street cleaners, electricity workers, night cleaners, and welfare claimants in Leeds, Dagenham, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Zimbabwe.[39] For James, the line between those cases that were successful and those that had failed was demarcated by the levels of involvement – or rather non-involvement – of the union. Read in this light, her call for the WLM to organise independently of the unions, and by extension leftist elites, was an argument that the WLM were not an external vanguard; rather, when they organised, this was 'the class' itself organising. On James's vision, working-class men could take their lead from women, but only if they were willing to subordinate their own partial vantage point to the more complete perspective of women.

James's insistence that feminists should lead a revolutionary struggle was in part a response to active concerns in the Women's Movement amongst some that their positionality as middle class was an inhibiting factor in their ability to lead working-class women in a revolt against capitalism.[40] James took these concerns seriously and recognised the substantial differences between women with 'wall-to-wall carpeting' and women who were working

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[38] In addition to Lenin and Luxemburg's analysis (see fn 17 and 18), Gramsci, for example, explored the notion of 'organic intellectuals' in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*; and Trotsky the notion of a revolutionary vanguard in Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (London: Union Books, 1999).

[39] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 54–56, 61, 66.

[40] This was a fear, for example, we saw expressed in the Night Cleaners Campaign in chapter one.

without wages.[41] She nonetheless implored feminists to cast aside their reluctance to organise: 'Guilt doesn't build a political movement; it inhibits and exhausts it. For guilt becomes sacrifice and sacrifice becomes either martyrdom or bitterness – or both'.[42] James resisted what she saw as a feminist – or, we might think, feminised – cycle of shame, sacrifice, and inaction. As we have seen, when the Women's Movement organised, James argued that this constituted the self-organisation of the class. Any guilt, then, was misplaced. As James would put it at the first WLM Conference, 'We ARE the working class!'[43]

James's entreaty against guilt, however, revealed her deeper anxieties: that the Women's Movement had the potential to become inhibited and exhausted. James, a seasoned activist, knew too well of the challenge posed by sustaining energy over extended periods of time. It was of utmost importance, she insisted, that the movement maintain the momentum that was currently driving action forward. And in 1972, James judged this momentum to be building: James was convinced that Britain stood on the brink of a profound social, political, and economic transformation.[44]

II. Resistance to James

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[41] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 71.

[42] Ibid.

[43] James quoted in Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 23; Callaci takes the quote from Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, 194.

[44] James's assessment of the current state of affairs in the WLM was not shared by all feminists. Jean Gardiner, for example, asked 'What kind of revolutionary struggle is it possible to wage in a period when the society is not itself at a revolutionary stage, when many people are aware of their exploitation but see no way of changing it?'. Jean Gardiner, 'Women and the Wage System', August 1973, 7SEB/A/07, folder 6, LSE Women's Library.

In *Women, the Unions and Work*, James insisted that 'The situation in this country is changing so rapidly, that every day more becomes possible'.[45] She pointed to the February 1972 miners strikes as a turning point. During these strikes, miners won a major pay victory after seven weeks of industrial action.[46] James contended that the strike had triggered a 'leap in consciousness' in the working-class.[47] Crucially, she noted, 'What distinguished the miners is that they didn't depend on their unions but on their own self-organisation and methods of struggle'.[48] This, for James, was a model of potentially revolutionary action: not bureaucratic negotiation, but autonomous collective refusal. And yet, James also feared this appetite for revolution was put at risk by current feminist strategy. In expressing this concern, she mentioned one campaign by name: 'The Night Cleaners', on James's assessment, 'were in the degrading position of having to embarass [sic.] the T & G (Transport and General Workers Union - ed.) publicly in order to get "taken in"'.[49] In doing so, James provoked a disagreement with the Cleaners that exemplified a fundamental divergence over feminist strategy.

By 1972, the Cleaners had come to exemplify the pro-union position in the WLM. Members of the Movement were brought into the Night Cleaners Campaign because of their backgrounds in union politics; the campaigners' earliest industrial action – between 3 and 10 November 1970 – was a protest against the dismissal of cleaners who had recently joined unions; and they had remained steadfast in their strategy of unionisation, even when faced

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[45] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 70.

[46] Jim Phillips, 'The 1972 Miners' Strike: Popular Agency and Industrial Politics in Britain', *Contemporary British History* 20, no. 2 (2006): 187–207, https://doi.org/10.1080/13619460600600748.

[47] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 54.

[48] Ibid., 54–55.

[49] Ibid., 56.

with a general inertia from within the unions' ranks.[50] By the time James spoke to the assembly at the 1972 WLM conference, the Night Cleaners had also gained special prominence in liberationist circles as a campaign worthy of strategic and critical engagement. The campaign was widely celebrated in national Women's Liberation newsletters, cited in histories of the Women's Movement, and had grown to include local groups in over eleven British cities.[51]

James, a participant at the first British WLM Conference and member of the Notting Hill Women's Liberation Workshop, was aware of this widespread endorsement.[52] Privately, she even expressed admiration for the Cleaners, writing to Dalla Costa and describing how 'The women in my group have grown enormously over the summer because they have been involved in the big strike of Night Cleaners'.[53] But publicly, she remained in opposition to the campaign. As James knew, the Night Cleaners had come to represent the pro-union feminist position to which she was fundamentally opposed. When James referenced the campaign in

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[50] London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special', 7; Sally Alexander, 'The Night Cleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', 3; Sally Alexander, 54. For more on this, see chapter 1 of this thesis.

[51] 'The Nightcleaners' Strikes: August 1972', n.d., Bishopsgate Institute; London Socialist Woman Group, 'The Nightcleaners Special'; 'Night Cleaners Special'; 'The Nightcleaners' Strikes: August 1972'; Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 41–49, 66–69, 84, 104–8; 'A Brief History of the Women's Liberation Workshop', 1971, 2, 7SEB/A/03, LSE Women's Library; Hobbs, 'Night Cleaners Bid for a Square Deal'; Finn and Williams, 'The Durham Experience - Bureaucrats and Women Cleaners'. Also see chapter one, fn 10.

[52] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 51. On participation in Notting Hill Women's Liberation Workshop: Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 86. On James's participation at Ruskin, see 'Photograph of Selma James at Ruskin College, March 1970', n.d., FORMAT/3/6/14/4, Bishopsgate Institute; Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 23.

[53] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 26 September 1972, 1, falodone 2, cartella 30, Archivo Mariarosa Dalla Costa, https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa/oggetto-considerazioni-proposte-otto-punti-principali.

Women, the Unions, and Work, she named some of her first interlocutors in the British Women's Liberation Movement.

That members of the Night Cleaners Campaign took note of James's intervention and continued to unionise is certain. In Sally Alexander's archive, a copy of *Women, the Unions and Work* is annotated with her handwritten notes.[54] On the back of the paper, Alexander wrote: 'Night-cleaners – circulate lists compiled by Mark'.[55] Sheila Rowbotham, another key figure in the Night Cleaners Campaign, responded to James in an article published for the feminist-socialist magazine *Red Rag* in 1972, the year in which she also helped organise some of the largest union actions launched by the Cleaners.[56] And when the International Marxist Group (IMG), elsewhere described as a 'dominating' force in the Night Cleaners Campaign, published a 24-page pamphlet in response to James, they used an image of picketing night cleaners on its cover.[57]

Given the Cleaners' negative experiences with the unions as we saw in chapter one, there is reason to think James might have found sympathy for her analysis amongst them. As members of the campaign noted in *Shrew* in 1971, within the Night Cleaners' own ranks 'Some

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[54] Sally Alexander, 'Notes on Women, the Unions and Work', n.d., 7SAA/5, folder 4, LSE Women's Library.

[55] Presumably, this refers to Mark Karlin, another participant in the campaign. Ibid.

[56] Cassandra Southwick, 'A Summary of Selma James's Pamphlet: Women, the Unions and Work', *Red Rag*, c 1972, Ban Archive. Red Rag was produced by a collective of socialist and Marxist feminists between 1972 and 1980. Its founders were staunch – though not uncritical – trade unionists. See Red Rag Collective, 'Declaration of Intent', *Red Rag*, c 1972, Ban Archive. On Red Rag, see Laurel Forster, 'Printing Liberation: The Women's Movement and Magazines in the 1970s', in *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade*, ed. Sue Harper and Laurel Forster (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 97.

[57] International Marxist Group, 'The Choice Before Us', n.d., McIntosh/1/7, LSE Women's Library. The image is of the cleaners at a picket outside the Empress State building, an action which occurred in July-August 1972.

people are very critical of unions. They say they are bureaucratic and only concerned to improve wages'.[58] Members of the Night Cleaners Campaign, however, did not react with sympathy to James's analysis; they were among the first to respond to her demands with criticism. This was because, I suggest, they had different assessments of the status of unionisation as a non-reformist reform.

'Non-reformist reforms', a term coined by Marxist thinker André Gorz, are those reforms that allow social movements to make immediate gains while contributing to a revolutionary future.[59] As Amia Srinivasan puts it, the difference between non-reformist reforms and merely reformist reforms is marked by 'which demands set the groundwork for the undoing of a system of domination, and which only secure the grip of that system by relieving its more egregious symptoms'.[60] Like Gorz and Srinivasan, James and the Night Cleaners asked: what type of reforms should feminists seek? And more specifically, what was the non-reformist potential of unionisation?

Sally Alexander, in an interview for the 1978 film *'36 to '77*, said:

> [We're] operating in a vacuum within Women's Liberation because there is no agreement [...] about strategy [...] One thing I think is important [...] in looking at reforms and preventing this paralysis, to some extent anyway, is to see it as a continual process – that particular reforms you make as a form of defence [...] will enlarge the scope in which you can struggle. And this is so clear in the cleaner's life, that the cleaner's life is held in by time,

[58] 'Night Cleaners Special', 2.

[59] Andre Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution', *Socialist Register* 5 (1968).

[60] Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 157.

> exhaustion, and lack of money. And therefore, the most basic demands like improved pay, more time to sleep, not to be tired, are very important to the cleaners even to begin with.[61]

At least three things mattered to Alexander in her assessment of what reforms could do. First, she indicated a concern that the Women's Movement was divided over its strategies for revolutionary struggle and therefore failing to act. Reforms, she implied, were able to break through this inertia by offering smaller, less controversial steps about which activists could agree. Second, reforms were defensive: they could protect vulnerable workers from the worst excesses of capitalism by helping to build better conditions for the already over-worked.[62] This was worth campaigning for in itself; it also meant that workers – well-rested and supported – were better placed to engage in more radical action and analysis. And third, Alexander viewed reforms as aligning with the necessary stages of struggle. Economic reforms were a 'beginning,' Alexander explained; elsewhere, she would describe them as 'the first tentative step' in struggle.[63] Such reforms might not in themselves undo systems of domination, but they were the foundation of such undoing.

For fellow Night Cleaner activist Rowbotham, the success of this undoing depended in part on how reforms were implemented. '[You] can't change capitalist society just by gradually piling up reform upon reform', she argued, insisting that activists must 'move between the particular, the immediate demand that comes out of the actual life as it's lived, and the vision of the future'.[64] Rejecting a linear picture of reforms producing significant changes

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[61] Alexander in *'36 to '77*. While the film was released in 1978, it was likely filmed before 1973 given that this is when the Night Cleaners Campaign collapsed. Berwick Street Film Collective, 'Night Cleaners Chronology - Rough Notes, Sun. 13 July 1975' (Raven Row, Lux, Koenig Books, London, 2018).

[62] Elsewhere she explained that this extended to her view of unions, which she considered 'defensive'.

[63] Sally Alexander, 'The Nightcleaners: An Assessment of the Campaign', *Red Rag*, 1973, 6.

[64] Rowbotham in *Nightcleaners (Part 1)*.

through an additive process, Rowbotham advocated for a continuous interaction between immediate demands and future visions. It was necessary, she thought, to have a plan for the revolution – otherwise, reforms could foreclose future possibilities.

On the face of it, Rowbotham's characterisation of the type of demands feminists must make bore a striking resemblance to that put forward by James in *Women, the Unions and Work*. James also argued that the movement needed to make demands which operated at two levels: 'demands', she wrote, 'must raise possibilities of new kinds and areas of action in each local situation from the beginning, and always keep the fundamental issues before our eyes'.[65] James described this as a 'tension': between local action and maintaining a movement with a much wider scope of concern.[66] As James would put it elsewhere in 1972, the question for transformative action became:

> what is the relation of women to capital and what kind of struggle can we effectively wage to destroy it? We must hastily add that this is not the same as asking: What concessions can we wring from the enemy? – though this is related. To pose the first question is to assume we'll win; to pose the second is to calculate what we can salvage from the wreck of defeat.[67]

James emphasised that aiming for local wins could not mean aiming for mere concessions. Non-concessionary wins needed to work to undermine the relation of women and capital itself.[68]

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[65] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 67.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Selma James, 'Introduction', in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, Third edition (England: Falling Wall Press, 1975), 5.

[68] For more on James's 'perspective of winning', see Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'.

But while James's, Alexander's, and Rowbotham's characterisations of the importance of making non-reformist reforms was similar, they came apart on the question of which type of reform unionisation was. For Alexander, unions were 'potentially revolutionary'.[69] In part, this was because unions were thought to foster solidarity. Where James called for the autonomy of women, Night Cleaners like Rowbotham insisted on the importance of solidarity across the working class. '[W]orking class women', she said, 'need class solidarity with working class men too'.[70] It was not enough, Rowbotham thought, to operate outside of the broader left if this meant denying working class women the tools, including the relationships, they required to sustain revolutionary action. For Rowbotham, this did not mean abandoning autonomy altogether; it was important, she stressed, for women to 'guard [their] autonomy'.[71] She also knew that the male left had historically tried to impose its own ideas about whose action needed protecting. And yet, Rowbotham contended, it was a mistake to conclude that the Women's Movement must abandon the left altogether. To do so would be to give in to the forces of capitalism that, she wrote, had 'forced [divisions] between us'.[72] Rowbotham argued that this would be counter revolutionary. 'Our strength [in the WLM]', she wrote, 'will depend on the strength of other movements, against imperialism, racism and class exploitation and our ability to unite with them'.[73] For Rowbotham, only the collective effort of a cross-cutting alliance could be effectively mobilising.

The charge that James was not thinking about the intertwined forces of sexist, imperialist, racist, and classist oppression when she delivered *Women, the Unions and Work*

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[69] Sally Alexander, 'Notes on Women, the Unions and Work'. Sally Alexander, 'Selma's Paper', 1972, 7SAA/5, LSE Women's Library.

[70] Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Carrot, the Stick and the Movement', *Red Rag*, c 1972, 4, Ban Archive.

[71] Ibid., 5.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

overlooked her lasting commitment to multiple-issue struggles. James was schooled in the anti-racist thought of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, she had fought alongside her colleague and partner C. L. R. James for West Indian Independence while living in Trinidad and Tobago, and from 1965 had taken on an active role in the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination.[74] In other words, by the time she addressed the WLM in 1972, James had been committed to a struggle against the interacting forces of race, gender, and class for over thirty years. When she argued for feminist autonomy, it seems more reasonable to assume that for James this was not at the expense of race or class or solidarity itself.

In fact, on James's view, feminist autonomy was a way of 'uniting what capitalism has divided'.[75] James argued that the unity of women was a basis for wider liberation struggles. As she put it, 'the power of women in the community [was] to struggle for their liberation and therefore to struggle for the liberation of the rest of the working class'.[76] James insisted that it was the unions, not she, that were failing to exhibit solidarity. The unions had systematically excluded women from the movement, 'as if there could be a generalised struggle without women, without men joining with women for women's demands'.[77] Further, the unions had driven splits between workers, 'fragmenting the class into those who have wages and those who don't'.[78] As James would put it, for the unions 'the "real" working class is white, male and over thirty'.[79] Rather than unite the working class, then, unions broke it apart.

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[74] Selma James, *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings, 1952-2011* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012), 1; Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, xix, 3, 5, 17, 18.

[75] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 69.

[76] Selma James, 'You Can't Make Ford Cars and Change Nappies at the Same Time,' The Power of Women and Revolutionary Change, c 1973, 5, WFH/3, Bishopsgate Institute.

[77] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 54.

[78] Ibid., 58.

[79] Ibid., 53.

Viewed in this light, James was not calling for women to abandon their interest in anti-capitalist struggle; she was calling for women to abandon the hopes of achieving feminist outcomes alongside men who refused to organise against patriarchy. The point was not to get often-reluctant men on side – though the implication was that the struggle women waged would benefit men – but instead about building an autonomous front for women.

In fracturing the working class, James argued that unions also bore responsibility for securing the grip of capitalism. Unions focused exclusively on the waged workforce and offered no analysis of the most exploited workers, including unwaged houseworkers.[80] The unions thereby protected the foundations of capitalism by operating according to its logic, and obscured alternatives to capitalism. This is not to say that the demands of waged workers were futile on James's account. She wrote that, 'there are times when we would be failing in our duty if we did not support and even encourage women to demand jobs'.[81] But, James went on, 'if we limit ourselves to this, if this is our programme and not just a tactic to help mobilize women in particular situations, all we are doing is organising women to be more efficiently and mercilessly exploited'.[82] When members of the WLM demanded jobs and unionisation, some women might be liberated from the home, they might even receive the wages they needed to survive, but ultimately their domestic exploitation was merely replaced with – or more likely supplemented by – workplace exploitation.

The Night Cleaners took a different view. Informed by their experience organising alongside working women, members of the Night Cleaners were quick to report that, contrary to James's claims, tactics like the refusal of work could not be taken by working-class

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[80] Ibid., 55–57; Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 157.

[81] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 65.

[82] Ibid.

women.[83] Members of the IMG pointed out that 'a night cleaner, for example, cannot say: "I refuse to go to work tomorrow"' because abandoning paid employment would imperil her dependents'.[84] As one cleaner had explained in the production of the film *Nightcleaners*, 'It means our livelihoods if they take the Union off us, doesn't it?'[85] The IMG echoed this sentiment in their response to James, arguing that a night cleaner would respond to her calls for refusal with: 'I can't give up work or the kids and I will starve'.[86] It was not just unrealistic to advocate for the refusal of work; it was dangerous. The IMG went on to explain that night cleaners would say: 'what I *can* do is to refuse to accept the bad conditions under which I work, and fight the employers with all the help I can get'.[87] Three things mattered on their analysis. First, cleaners' lives would be imperilled by the refusal of work and refusal was not, therefore, a real possibility. Second, and by contrast, unionisation was an already practicable strategy – it was part of the existing set of things cleaners *can* do. And third, workers needed all the help they could get to wage a fight against their employers. Once more, the worry was that James's demands risked an essential component of successful struggle: working alongside others.

James and the Cleaners both prioritised working women, they operated from similarly Marxist contexts, were deeply invested in anti-capitalist struggle, and held a fervent (though differently expressed) commitment to solidarity. They also, I suggest, both sought out non-reformist reforms that could alter conditions in the immediate moment and work towards a

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[83] Ibid., 63.

[84] International Marxist Group, 'The Choice Before Us', 10. Rowbotham similarly recalled asking, 'Removing your hands from the washing up might well be possible, but how were women to strike against their young children'? Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope*, 96.

[85] Cleaner in The Nightcleaners.

[86] International Marxist Group, 'The Choice Before Us', 10.

[87] Ibid.

better future. But James and the Cleaners came apart on which reforms fulfilled their not-dissimilar criteria for non-reformism, a debate that distilled around the question of unionisation. By reading James's paper in the context of these original debates, this divergence becomes clearer; so too does James's redoubled commitment to autonomous action.

III. *La Richiesta* for wages for housework

As we have seen, *Women, the Unions and Work* was not a paper about the singular demand for wages for housework but instead a wider call for autonomy set against the existing trend of unionisation taking place in the early years of the WLM. This paper was, nonetheless, the vehicle through which 'wages for housework' was introduced in the British context. Read with this broader lens, wages for housework becomes legible as part of a project for autonomous feminist action. But in March 1972, it was not a definitive demand – and was introduced with a certain ambivalence surrounding its own revolutionary potential.

In the place of unionisation, James put forward six demands in *Women, the Unions and Work*. On the face of it, three of these closely resembled the demands ratified by the WLM in 1971: the demand for equal pay, free contraception and abortion on demand, and free 24-hour nurseries.[88] When James called for free 24-hour childcare, however, she added that it should be 'community controlled'; when she demanded free abortion and contraception on demand, she framed this as part of a wider demand for 'control of our bodies', including the right to have children and freedom from the assembly line; and when it came to equal pay, James pointed out that this minimum wage must be 'of the highest grade'.[89] In each of these instances, James opened up the WLM's demands to become the basis of a movement that was

[88] Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 113.

[89] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 67–69.

independent: from the state, from the unions, from the control of men, and from poverty. In other words, they reflected her preoccupation with autonomy.

James supplemented these three altered demands with three new ones: 'the right to work less', 'an end to price rises' – from the perspective of women, she argued, inflation was as much of a problem as wage stagnation –, and 'a guaranteed income for women and for men working or not working'.[90] It was as part of this latter demand – for a guaranteed income for women and men – that James called for 'wages for housework'.[91]

The original demand for wages for housework read:

> WE DEMAND A GUARANTEED INCOME FOR WOMEN AND FOR MEN WORKING OR NOT WORKING, MARRIED OR NOT. If we raise kids, we have a right to a living wage. The ruling class has glorified motherhood only when there is a pay packet to support it. We work for the capitalist class. Let them pay us, or else we can go to the factories and offices and put our children in their father's laps. Let's see if they can make Ford cars and change nappies at the same time. WE DEMAND WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. All housekeepers are entitled to wages (men too).[92]

While the phrase 'wages for housework' would soon become iconic, it entered the British feminist stage not as a fully consolidated demand, but as part of a broader challenge to the structures of capitalist reproduction. James emphasised that the unpaid labour of houseworkers was a fundamental mechanism in the functioning of capitalism – houseworkers reproduced future workers, raising them and changing their nappies, and thereby released current waged workers to join the assembly line unencumbered by their children. But houseworkers were

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 68–69.

[92] Ibid., 67–68.

not singled out; rather, James's point was that houseworkers were an existing part of the working class that needed to be treated as such.

To fully grasp the status of wages for housework in *Women, the Unions and Work* – and James's evolving position in 1972 – we must turn to an earlier text with which James was deeply familiar at the time, *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale*. In June 1971, Mariarosa Dalla Costa presented an early version of this paper at a conference in Padova, Italy, at which James was in attendance.[93] James has recalled how she listened alongside ten other women as 'Rosa read her first draft'.[94] Dalla Costa laboured over this essay and, as historian Emilia Callaci has noted, made mimeographed copies, which she shared with James who in turn sent this 'through her networks'.[95] In January 1972, the first English translation – *Women and the Subversion of the Community* – was published in *Radical America*, a journal of substantial standing in the American New Left.[96] The *Radical America* version was translated from the Italian by James and Dalla Costa, and it was accompanied by an introduction by James (who would privately express dissatisfaction with this version, describing it as 'that masculinated RA

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[93] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale*, First edition (Padova: Marsilio Editori, 1972). I am extremely grateful to Dr Carole Irwin for her help with the translation of the Italian text, and for her generous discussion of its particularities. James's introduction was translated and attached in the second edition. https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa/oggetto-considerazioni-varie-persone-iniziative Callaci describes this encounter in Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 25.

[94] Selma James, 'Draft of Letter to A [Antonella]', falodone 3, cartella 78, Archivo Mariarosa Dalla Costa, accessed 27 June 1973, https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa/oggetto-riflessioni-vari-argomenti-lettera-allegata-tratta-questione-della-firma-potere-femminile-sovversione.

[95] Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 41.

[96] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', *Radical America* 6, no. 1 (February 1972): 67–102.

edition').[97] A month later, in March 1972, Dalla Costa revised *Potere Femminile* before publishing it in Italian, accompanied by an Italian translation of James's *A Woman's Place* (1952).[98]

The full extent of James's engagement with *Potere Femminile* remains uncertain. At the time of writing *Women, the Unions and Work*, James was 'clear that "the writer" [was] "the Dalla Costa"' and for this reason I take Dalla Costa to be sole author for the purposes of this chapter.[99] It is important to note, however, that James has since contested Dalla Costa's singular authorship, suggesting as early as June 1973 that Dalla Costa ought to 'eventually say something about [James's] role in the book'.[100] In 2012, James categorically claimed co-authorship, printing the text under her name – a move which Dalla Costa has since protested.[101]

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[97] Selma James, 'Letter to Suzie Fleming', 1972, 2, falodone 2, cartella 58, Archivo Mariarosa Dalla Costa, https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa/oggetto-indicazioni-politiche-considerazioni-libri-24-punti.

[98] In the amended version, Dalla Costa writes that the document was first drafted in June 1971. She signs the *Radical America* version in December 1971. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', February 1972, 98; Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 44.

[99] Selma James, 'Letter to Suzie Fleming', 1972, 3.

[100] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 27 June 1973, 1, falodone 3, cartella 78, Archivo Mariarosa Dalla Costa, https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa/oggetto-riflessioni-vari-argomenti-lettera-allegata-tratta-questione-della-firma-potere-femminile-sovversione; for more on the disputed authorship, see Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 201–2.

[101] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Mariarosa Dalla Costa Statement on "Women and the Subversion of the Community" and Her Co-Operation with Selma James (Part 1)', 27 March 2012, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f742fee4b017241942bdbe/t/568552a1c21b8690d5a58192/1451578017876/MARIAROSA+DALLA+COSTA+-+STATEMENT+ON+_WOMEN+AND+THE+SUBVERSION+OF+THE+COMMUNITY_+AND+SELMA+JAMES%E2%80%99+SEX+RACE+AND+CLASS%2C+THE+PERSPECTIVE+OF+WINNING+%282012%29.pdf. Selma James, 'Letter to Suzie Fleming', 1972, 3. 'Sex Race and Class, The Perspective of Winning'

In 1972, however, it is enough to note that James was an early translator, promoter, and arguably co-theorist of *Potere Femminile*'s core ideas. Her engagement with the text – including through its translation and circulation – therefore offers crucial insight into the theoretical underpinnings of *Women, the Unions and Work.*[102]

Potere Femminile is a text rich with analyses of why women's work has been systematically undervalued.[103] Dalla Costa contended that domestic labour has been portrayed as the 'natural' role for women.[104] As such, it constituted 'a personal service outside of capital', sustaining the myth that it was not a market good and therefore did not need to be renumerated.[105] But '[d]omestic labor', Dalla Costa quipped, 'is not essentially 'feminine work'; it was neither natural nor dispensable, she argued, but instead essential to the production of capital.[106] Importantly for Dalla Costa, the dependence of capital on domestic work extended beyond mere 'use value' – (the immediate value of the goods a worker has produced) – 'but is essential to the production of surplus value' (the profit which an employer makes from selling the goods a worker has produced).[107] Women's domestic labour directly contributed to the reproduction of the waged labourer, she argued, making domestic labour essential to the

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[102] Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 86–87.

[103] My thanks to Dr. Carole Irwin for her generous assistance in translation and discussion of this text.

[104] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion Of The Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, ed. Camille Barbagallo (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 36.

[105] Ibid., 23.

[106] Ibid., 28. Also see forward by Power of Women, '"Introduction", Britain and the Comitato per Il Salario al Lavoro Domestico Di Padova (Padue Wages for Housework Committee)', July 1975, 3, WFH/2, Bishopsgate Institute.

[107] Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 28.

production of surplus value.[108] The dependence of waged labourers on domestic labourers had been obscured, creating a false divide between the domestic labourer and the factory worker. Ultimately, both were workers and capital depended on both to function.

One of Dalla Costa's central ambitions for *Potere Femminile* was to unmask domestic labour as a form of work which bore no 'natural' relation to women. How to perform this unmasking? She argued that 'we refuse housework as women's work [...] We must get out of the house; we must reject the home, so we can unite with other women'.[109] The hope was that rejection would reveal housework to be neither a natural pursuit for women, nor dispensable to capitalist economies. In fact, without the daily reproductive labour of the domestic workforce, the entire economic and social system would collapse. Dalla Costa insisted that women should therefore reject work in all spheres – domestic and otherwise – to avoid replacing one form of subordination with another. As she put it, 'Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink'.[110]

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[108] For many Marxist feminists, this was a highly controversial interpretation of 'surplus value'. Kathi Weeks writes about this in Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 118–19. Also see Union of Women for Liberation, 'A Few Words Concerning "Theories" of Wages for Housework', 15 August 1974, 12, 7SHR/B/7, box 4, LSE Women's Library; Ruth Cohen and Caroline Freeman (Durham Women's Liberation Group), 'Our Politics; Our Organisation', 1975, 7SEB/A/01, LSE Women's Library; Caroline Freeman and Jane Tate, 'Class Struggle and the Women's Movement', c 1974, McIntosh/1/10, LSE Women's Library; Caroline Freeman, 'Notes to Socialists on Wages for Housework', c 1973, 2, McIntosh/1/6, LSE Women's Library. There are indications that James and Dalla Costa were ironing out confusion in their own views in 1972; in a footnote to the revised 1972 edition of WSC, they added: 'A clearer discussion of the productivity of the woman, both as related to her work and as related to her entire role, will have to wait for a later text, one which we are now working on'. Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 45.

[109] Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 34.

[110] Ibid., 28.

What, then, of the demand for 'wages for housework' in *Potere Femminile*? By 1975, the translated version of the text was already being claimed by members of the now-established wages for housework movement as '[the] first analysis' of struggles against housework.[111] More recently, Kathi Weeks has named *Women and the Subversion of the Community* as 'foundational' to the wages for housework campaign and Camille Barbadago has argued that it is 'widely acknowledged as being the spark that initiated the "domestic labor debate."'[112] As all these authors are right to note, *Potere Femminile* had an immeasurable influence on the campaign that would become wages for housework. But in framing the text as such, it is easy to overlook the fact that wages for housework was, in no uncertain terms, initially rejected by Dalla Costa. Foreshadowing early criticisms of the wages for housework campaign, she worried that 'wages for housework' would be misconstrued as 'as though we wanted further to entrench the conditions of institutionalised slavery that are produced with the condition of housework, and therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilising goal'.[113]

Whether 'wages for housework' was a demand at all in the original *Potere Femminile* text is up for debate. Dalla Costa described a wage for domestic work as a *richiesta*, a word most often translated to 'request'. 'Demand' is a reasonable interpretation, given that there is no definite Italian equivalent to 'demand' and *richiesta* is frequently used in its place (though the Italian *esigenza* would perhaps have offered a more obvious notion of demanding).[114] What matters here, however, is that a straightforward translation misses the historical context in

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[111] Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming, *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework, and the Wages Due* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press Ltd., 1975), 10.

[112] Camille Barbagallo, 'Introduction', in *Women And The Subversion Of The Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, ed. Camille Barbagallo (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017).

[113] Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 30.

[114] My thanks to Dr Carole Irwin for her insights in this discussion.

which wages for housework was first developed: in a language which did not contain unambiguous words for demanding.[115]

Despite this initial ambiguity, a growing momentum behind wages for housework was first indicated in a footnote James added to the English *Women and the Subversion of the Community* in October 1972 and to the Italian *Potere Femminile* in December 1972:

> Today the demand of wages for housework is put forward increasingly and with less opposition in the women's movement in Italy and elsewhere. Since this document was first drafted (June 1971), the debate has become more profound and many uncertainties that were due to the relative newness of the discussion have been dispelled. But, above all, the weight of the needs of proletarian women has not only radicalized the demands of the movement, it has also given us greater strength and confidence to advance them.[116]

The driving force behind this shift was judged to be a changing appetite in the movement for increasingly uncompromising demands. Debates were 'more profound', 'uncertainties […] dispelled', and demands 'radicalized'.[117] But even with this growing power, in 1975 wages for housework was still described in the text as 'only a basis, a perspective from which to start, whose essential merit is to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation

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[115] This runs contra to much of the discussion of wages for housework today, which centres of the way demanding differs from the equivocal nature of requests. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 131.

[116] The footnote from the 1972 English edition is reprinted in Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 45. For the Italian, see Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale*, Second edition (Padova: Marsilio Editori, 1972), 53. On James's introduction of the footnote, see Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 52.

[117] Dalla Costa, *Women And The Subversion*, 45.

to their material foundation'.[118] The *richiesta*, if now operational, remained far from a definitive demand.

That James had the broader analysis of *Potere Femminile* in mind when preparing *Women, the Unions and Work* is demonstrated throughout her paper. From her insistence that housework is work to her focus on the power of refusal, James made a case for demands that subvert 'what capital wants' – that is, women's submission to unpaid work which enables the waged worker to continue in his toil.[119] James quoted from *Women and the Subversion of the Community* to argue that, as part of the transformation of women's material and political subordination, '[t]he role of housewife, beyond whose isolation is hidden social labour, must be destroyed'.[120] In her view, privatised, domesticated, and feminised labour – labour that 'imprisoned [women] in a house' – had resulted in women's systematic neglect in the political sphere.[121] Refusing to do this work, she argued, would put an end to such obfuscation.

What emerges from this early reconstruction, then, is not a straightforward origin story for 'wages for housework' but a process of sharpening and reframing. Wages for housework did not arrive in the British WLM as a fully formed demand; it was put forward as one of six demands and shaped through transnational dialogue and theoretical ambivalence. Reading *Women, the Unions and Work* in tandem with *Potere Femminile* reveals the contested beginnings of a demand that would go from uncertain suggestion to unequivocal endorsement over the course of a few short months.

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[118] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, by Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Third edition (England: Falling Wall Press, 1975), 54.

[119] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 52.

[120] Ibid., 66.

[121] Ibid., 64.

IV. A shifted perspective

In the wake of *Women, the Unions and Work*, James began to consolidate and foreground wages for housework as the central demand of her feminist politics.[122] This shift did not mark a departure from her earlier strategic aims but rather a clarification of how best to achieve them. James's growing emphasis on wages for housework reflected her enduring commitment to feminist autonomy and her desire to confront both capitalism and the male-dominated left. By elevating this single demand, James sought not only to reveal capitalism's dependence on unwaged reproductive labour, but also to offer a kind of reversal: wages for housework exposed the reliance of capitalist systems on unwaged labour – an aspect of the demand that has been widely recognised in scholarly literature.[123] But what is often missing from these scholarly accounts is the way that wages for housework also carved out space for an autonomous feminist struggle beyond the union and the workplace. Wages for housework drew attention to what the unions refused to see – and, by implication, to what they were structurally incapable of addressing.

Unlike the despondent unions, wages for housework emerged as a demand that could build new publics organised around cross-cutting solidarity between the waged and unwaged – and across gender, class, and race. Once the multiple forces that kept the marginalised in submission had been exposed – including racial capitalism, but also systems of patriarchy that kept the unions in power – feminists would be positioned to offer a more comprehensive and revolutionary future. Feminists had to be ambitious, James argued, to enact a transformation capable of undoing of existing social relations. As James put it, they must make demands with

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[122] For more on the growing popularity of the demand from 1972, see Toupin, *Wages for Housework*.

[123] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'.

which 'the movement articulates in few words the breadth of its rejection of the oppression and exploitation of women'.[124] In just three words – wages for housework – exploitation could be exposed and refused.

But while James called for separation from the unions, her demands also divided the feminist movement. Many feminists saw in 'wages for housework' not a strategy of refusal, but a dangerous misstep. The unpopularity of James's strategic suggestions in *Women, the Unions and Work* amongst large factions of the feminist left offer an early indication of the divisive character of her leadership – a divisiveness that would go on to define James's organising for many of her critics.[125] The early disagreements James had with others in the WLM – over the status of wages for housework – could have become a basis from which James reconsidered some of her more contentious positions. Instead, they strengthened her resolve.

Feminists were quick to criticise wages for housework as a demand that had the potential to entrench women's roles in domestic labour. The IMG, for instance, argued that a housework wage would 'most likely result in providing a material incentive for maintaining the present role of the family'.[126] Their worry was that upon receiving a wage, women would be relieved of the burdens of being unwaged in a society that operated according to wage structures. This gave them less reason to protest housework and also cemented their entrapment in a cycle of wage dependence. 'Paying housewives' Delmar contended, 'would serve

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[124] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 67.

[125] Katrina Forrester, 'Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement: Selma James's Internationalism of the Unwaged', *Political Theory* 52, no. 4 (1 August 2024): 659–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231213663; Callaci, *Wages for Housework*, 202. On general reports of bullying (not directly by James), see ibid., 216.

[126] International Marxist Group, 'The Choice Before Us'.

merely as a new buttress to the patriarchal family', giving women even less reason to leave the domestic sphere.[127]

In March 1972, James could have responded that she was not interested in singling out housework as the only form of labour that was improperly waged. Wages for housework was part of a wider demand for a guaranteed income for all. But it was this wider demand that was, in turn, a problem for others within the feminist movement. How, they asked, could wages for housework operate as a specifically feminist demand if it was merely part of a demand that everyone be waged? For socialist-feminist Caroline Freeman, it was precisely because James demanded 'a minimum income for all' (rather than a housework wage) that the demand '[could not] serve the function of getting social recognition for housework'.[128] As Freeman saw it, making a universal demand for wages failed to operate as a specific challenge to the naturalisation of housework as feminised labour. Members of IMG concurred: it 'becomes a different demand, which cannot serve the function of getting social recognition for housework […] the granting of [the demand] would by no means do away with the oppression and exploitation of women'.[129] James was thus caught between accusations that singling out housework would entrench women's roles in the family and the criticism that failing to single out housework would have no specifically feminist upshots.

For some, including feminists in the IMG, the issue was also that the demand for a guaranteed income was 'not a revolutionary demand'.[130] They argued that '[its] apparent radicalness hides its lack of foundation', suggesting that the proposal lacked strategic and

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[127] Ann Foreman and Linda Simon, 'Wages for Housework, What It Is Based Upon and What Are It's Implications?', n.d., 5, 7SHR/B/13, LSE Women's Library; Rosalind Delmar, 'Sex, Capitalism and the Family', n.d., 2, MCINTOSH/1/7, LSE Women's Library.

[128] Caroline Freeman, 'Notes to Socialists on Wages for Housework'.

[129] International Marxist Group, 'The Choice Before Us', 12.

[130] Ibid.

theoretical plausibility.[131] It wasn't enough, they insisted, to offer an idealistic alternative; the IMG contended that if James's demands were scrutinised, they rapidly fell apart because they did not contain a workable theory of social change. A guaranteed income remained structurally dependent on capitalism and thus risked reinforcing the very system it sought to oppose. As the IMG maintained, a 'new social order cannot be built under capitalism bit by bit, here and there; it can only be built *after* the revolution'.[132] For the IMG, anything less than the abolition of capitalism could not be described as revolutionary.

Rowbotham, who was briefly involved in the IMG and worked alongside them on the Night Cleaners Campaign, offered what we might think of as a continuation of this thought: 'To say we want to work less confuses the present situation with a future socialist society and misses out the struggle in between'.[133] Rowbotham's view closely echoed Gorz's argument that when the left refused to ameliorate workers' situations for fear of making capitalism more bearable, they were at risk of building 'an impenetrable barrier [...] between present struggles and the future socialist solution'.[134] What James missed, Rowbotham argued, was that a 'struggle' would have to be undertaken to move from the current non-ideal order to the longed-for utopian horizon. James – with her uncomprehensive theory and push for urgent action – was trying to jump ahead. While James's impulse was understandable – who wouldn't want to skip the struggle? – it was judged by feminists like Rowbotham to be fatally unrealistic.

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 5.

[133] Rowbotham, 'The Carrot, the Stick and the Movement', 5. This is an accusation Ellen Malos also levelled in Ellen Malos, 'Housework and the Politics of Women's Liberation', 1978, 28, MCINTOSH/4/3, LSE Women's Library.

[134] André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 5.

Instead of conceding some of these perspectives, James redoubled on her commitment to wages for housework. If there was still uncertainty when James first put the demand before the British WLM in *Women, the Unions and Work*, her position quickly became pronounced and the demand was increasingly presented in isolation, no longer embedded in a guaranteed income for all.[135] For some of James's supporters this was, perhaps, a disappointment. H. Colombe, an early advocate for James, pointed out that when 'wages for housework' was part of a raft of demands it was protected from misrepresentation. As she put it, 'If the demand for wages for housework is isolated from the other demands [...] we will fall into a distortion that denies women any hope of gaining a new identity'.[136] But despite receiving these warnings, from both inside and outside of the wages for housework movement, James's insistence on the demand itself became increasingly singular.

Decades later, wages for housework would be revisited by feminist theorists not to affirm or dismiss it, but to ask what it made possible. Kathi Weeks 'creatively reappropriated' wages for housework to use the campaign as a case for political theorists to reflect on 'both the nature of demands and the practice of demanding'.[137] Wages for housework, for Weeks, was a demand which 'pointed in the direction of something different' and in doing so 'elicit[ed] the subversive commitments, collective formations, and political hopes that it appear[ed] only to reflect'.[138] This, Weeks argued, could serve as a starting point for theorists to contemplate 'a revised perspective and a very different demand': for a universal basic income that is 'sufficient, unconditional, and continuous'.[139] In doing so, we might think that

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[135] See, for example, a collection of James's later writings in James, *Sex, Race, and Class*.

[136] H. Colombe, 'Wages for Housework and Women on Their Own', 1973, 5WRR/B/01, box 1, LSE Women's Library.

[137] Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 114.

[138] Ibid., 131, 126.

[139] Ibid., 120, 138.

Weeks moved closer to, rather than further from, James's original demand for 'a guaranteed income for women and for men working or not working, married or not'.[140]

That James moved away from what Weeks has argued is a more plausible and promising demand can help us think about James's own shifting views. Weeks argued that 'one potential weakness' of the demand for a universal basic income is 'its gender neutrality'.[141] She went on: 'This raises questions about the capacities of basic income as both a feminist perspective and a feminist reform' and its capacity to 'make visible, and encourage critical reflection on, the position of women in the work society'.[142] Reflecting on the parallel concerns made by James's early interlocutors – that a guaranteed income for all risked gutting the demand of its specifically feminist slant – we might think that James pushed forward with wages for housework to avoid the criticisms Weeks would later identify with a universal basic income. James was convinced that the demands feminists needed to make should not be cooptable and should challenge the male left as well as the capitalist state. The charge that her demand was insufficiently feminist – levelled in 1972 – was one that James was likely to have taken very seriously, and perhaps explains why wages for housework was increasingly isolated from the wider demand for a guaranteed income for all.

James's strategic stance was formalised in reflections on the limits and purposes of demands composed by the Notting Hill Women's Liberation Group of which James was a member. In an introduction to *Women, the Unions and Work* published in *Radical America* in 1973, the Notting Hill Group made the underlying logic behind the demands clear:

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[140] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 67.

[141] Weeks, *The Problem with Work,* 147.

[142] Ibid., 129.

> They are not a statement of what we want, finally, to have. They are not a plan for an ideal society, and a society based on them would not cease to be oppressive. Ultimately the only demand which is not co-optable is the armed population demanding the end of capitalism. But we feel that at this moment these demands can be a force against what capital wants and for what we want.[143]

In other words, there were no demands – bar one, 'the armed population demanding the end of capitalism' – over which feminists could ensure total autonomy. But that did not mean that feminists should refrain from demanding altogether. Instead, the Notting Hill Group proposed naming what women wanted now. This was not, they implied, about working within constraints; plausibility was not the framework that James insisted upon. It was instead about an articulation of current desire, a process which, we might think, had the potential to activate a feminist consciousness – or, as Katrina Forrester has put it, a 'perspective of winning'.[144]

James's growing commitment to wages for housework was not a retreat into a single-issue feminism, nor a utopian fantasy. It was a calculated move within a broader strategy: to build a feminism that refused co-optation, rejected the marginalisation of reproductive labour, and insisted on demands that exposed the contradictions of both capitalism and the male left. The critiques she received clarified the stakes of her argument.

V. Conclusion: 'we are what is happening'[145]

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[143] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 51–52.

[144] Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'.

[145] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 27 June 1973, 1.

Women, the Unions and Work… or What is Not to Be Done played an undeniably important role in the emergence of the wages for housework movement, particularly in the British context. When we return to the time James first presented the demand to a British audience, however, we learn as much from its absence as its presence in the paper. That the phrase appeared just once in a paper that ran to almost 7,000 words has been largely overlooked in the literature that positions the text as foundational to the Wages for Housework tradition. This is not to say that *Women, the Unions and Work* should be excluded – or assigned a lesser role – in the history of the movement; rather, and as I have sought to demonstrate, understanding this text is key to understanding the development of the demand itself. When we fail to consider the broader context in which 'wages for housework' emerged, we risk missing essential aspects of its character.

Women, the Unions and Work was an expression of James's broader political impulses, it was an insistence that autonomy was essential to dismantling patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist structures, and it was part of a wider rejection of straightforward solidarity with the male left – who had failed, James pointed out, to offer solidarity in return. James's pessimistic assessment contrasted with the optimism of other feminists' accounts of the potential for unionisation and led to intense conflict in the Women's Liberation Movement. But James remained resolute in her belief that unionisation threatened to co-opt the movement and ultimately stifle its transformative potential. In the place of unionisation, she embraced demands that were not only radical but also risky, demands that challenged institutionalised notions of femininity and broke open coalitions. For James, these demands posed a direct threat to the patriarchal-capitalist order. Wages for housework embodied this dual nature: it exposed both capitalism's reliance on unpaid labour and the limitations of union strategies that focused exclusively on waged labour. And at its core, wages for housework was the naming of something women already knew they deserved.

I want to end by suggesting another reason for why wages for housework gained traction in the wake of *Women, the Unions and Work* which lies in James's broader vision for social movements. James was deeply invested in the ability of social movements to challenge the status quo and resist co-option by established institutions. Her concerns about feminist demands being diluted or absorbed into mainstream reformism persisted throughout her organising. This was a particular concern for James in the early 1970s. On James's view, women had been 'awoken' by the miners strikes and were 'not satisfied any more to stand aside and let the world go by'.[146] They were 'restless', she said, and eager to pursue strategies that were radical and disruptive.[147] James interpreted this mood as evidence that the conditions for revolution were emerging – and there was the possibility for feminists to seize the moment by advancing bold, uncompromising demands. In a letter to Dalla Costa in September 1972, she explained that 'This country [England] is moving so fast that now there are not one but two ears open for the kind of ideas which we represent'.[148] To harness and sustain this revolutionary mood, she sought to unsettle and provoke within the movement and beyond.

James was certainly provocative. In 1973, she described the 'violent reaction' she evoked after presenting *Women, the Unions and Work* at the March 1972 Women's Liberation Conference.[149] Writing to Dalla Costa in the wake of the conference, James remarked, 'Every publication now is either for us or against us, but cannot ignore us. We are what is happening in the women's movement'.[150] As James saw it, her ideas – for an autonomist women's

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[146] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 54.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 26 September 1972, 1.

[149] Louise Michel and Cassandra Southwick, 'In Defence of Feminism: A London Conference Report', 1973, WFH/3, Bishopsgate Institute. Southwick was a pseudonym used by James in the 1970s; see Delmar 2020.

[150] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 27 June 1973, 1.

movement that centred women's unpaid labour and eschewed the unions by insisting on demands that lay outside of their remit – had become a force with which everyone in the Women's Movement had to contend. After decades of activism, James was anxious that feminists were becoming 'cut off from the possibilities of becoming an autonomous and revolutionary political movement'.[151] In light of this, disruption was not just intentional but necessary.

The disruption James generated was not simply about wages for housework. In a letter to Dalla Costa in September 1972, James wrote: 'The whole of the left is mobilised against someone called Selma James who wrote a dastardly pamphlet [*Women, the Unions and Work*] criticising the poor unions'.[152] In October 1972, an anonymously produced pamphlet also described how the debate around James 'tended to revolve around the question of whether or not [to] work within trade unions, or whether or not to unionise women'.[153] But the very fact that one demand generated what we might think of as a disproportionate reaction – emerging as the most prominent amongst the six – marked it as the kind of reform that established an end to concessive politics. Wages for housework was never just a demand for economic renumeration. It was a criticism of the unions, and a radical disruption to the very foundations of labour, feminism, and the kinds of solidarity feminists should seek.

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[151] James, 'Women, the Unions and Work', 52.

[152] Selma James, 'Letter to Mariarosa Dalla Costa', 26 September 1972, 1.

[153] 'A Reply to Selma James', October 1972, 7EAW/E/02, LSE Women's Library.

-3-

Family Abolition and the Bristol Refuge Movement, 1970 – 1980

'Death to the patriarchal family and institutions, capitalist economy and the state'.

Monica Sjöö (1970)[1]

In March 1973, Ellen Malos donated the basement of her family home to the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement.[2] This single room became an extraordinary base for feminist organising: a place to debate sex, freedom, and strategy, to field calls from women in need of help and advice, to conduct pregnancy tests – queues for which would wind their way down the street – and to typeset newsletters.[3] Within weeks, it also became a place for women and children to take temporary shelter from domestic abuse. In 1973, there was almost no precedent for such shelters – the first British domestic abuse shelter had been established in Chiswick just 16 months earlier – and the Bristol group had little to model their practice on.[4] But

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[1] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', *Enough*, 1970, 21.

[2] 'The Bristol Women's Centre: Learning by Doing', n.d., Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[3] 'Bristol Women's House Project', n.d., 1, Porter DM/2123/1/32, Bristol Women's Centre 1973, Feminist Archive South.

[4] Zora Simic, 'From Battered Wives to Domestic Violence: The Transnational Circulation of Chiswick Women's Aid and Erin Pizzey's Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear (1974)', *Australian Historical Studies* 51, no. 2 (2020): 107–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1707243; R. Emerson Dobash, *Violence against Wives: A Case against the Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 1.

by the time survivors of domestic abuse approached them, members of the Bristol Women's Liberation group were already convinced that the nuclear family was a patriarchal institution that concealed violence. Equipped with this theoretical analysis, they were ready to identify domestic abuse and work towards its immediate redress. Their project, as I argue in this chapter, became part of a wider call for family abolition.

In recent years, feminist theorists – including Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Kimberly Tallbear, Helen Hester, Tiffany Lethabo King, Sophie Lewis, M. E. O'Brien, and Kathi Weeks – have increasing turned their attention to reviving the demand for family abolition.[5] Within these accounts, theorists have attributed much of the early, radical work of family abolitionist thinking to feminists in the 1970s.[6] As Weeks has pointed out, the long 1970s was a time of

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[5] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996' (Doctor of Philosophy, English in the Graduate School, Duke University, 2010), https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/2398/D_Gumbs_Alexis_a_201005.pdf; Kimberly TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Place of publication not identified: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism*, Theory Redux (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Tiffany Lethabo King, 'Black "Feminisms" and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family', *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 68–87, https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2018.0002; Susan Watkins, 'Which Feminisms?', *New Left Review*, no. 109 (February 2018); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2019); Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now* (London: Verso, 2019); Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Salvage Editions (London: Verso, 2022); M. E. O'Brien, 'To Abolish the Family', *Endnotes* 5 (2020): 360–417; M. E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (London ; Pluto Press, 2023); Kathi Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal', *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 433–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841.

[6] Kathi Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal', *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 433–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841; Tiffany Lethabo King, 'Black "Feminisms" and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family', *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 68–87, https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2018.0002; M. E. O'Brien, 'To Abolish the Family', *Endnotes* 5 (2020): 392;

immense literary productiveness, including no shortage of texts offering a feminist critique of the family.[7] Prominent US and UK feminists – Shulamith Firestone, Ellen Willis, Sylvia Federici, Audre Lorde, Maria Dalla Costa, Mary McIntosh, Michèle Barrett, Linda Gordon, Sheila Rowbotham, Hazel Carby, and Kay Lindsey – have all been associated with the history of feminist family abolition.[8] As contemporary theorists have identified, these feminists argued that the family conceals women's unremunerated and unrecognised labour whilst sanctioning those who fall outside of its heterosexist, nuclear boundaries. And as they saw it, the abolition of this oppressive system was a necessary step towards the liberation of all people.

What does it mean to describe something as an abolitionist project? Using Kathi Weeks's conception, it must have two essential qualities. First, abolitionist projects require a mindset that thinks in terms of 'systems [...] with a focus on social structures, including institutions'.[9] In the case of family abolition, this requires viewing the family not simply as a collection of individual relationships, but as an institution structured by wider social forces – including economic systems and state power – that govern care, dependency, and social reproduction. Second, an abolitionist project 'refuses reform as an adequate remedy'.[10] The

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Watkins, 'Which Feminisms?', 10–11; M. E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (London ; Pluto Press, 2023), 131; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 11–12.

[7] Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family'.

[8] For references to Firestone, Rowbotham, Gordon, Lindsey, McIntosh, and Barrett, see ibid., 437, 435, 440, 436, 434, 440 respectively; for Federici and Dalla Costa, O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 137–39, 247; for Lorde, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996' (Doctor of Philosophy, English in the Graduate School, Duke University, 2010), 14, https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/2398/D_Gumbs_Alexis_a_201005.pdf; for Willis and Carby, see Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 49–50, 70; 27–28.

[9] Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family', 434.

[10] Ibid.

family does not merely need to be altered, abolitionists argue; it needs to be completely dismantled. This could come in the form of a singular revolutionary action. But, for abolitionists like Weeks, it is more likely to consist of a long-term, political project through which care is transformed into something that is wide-reaching and untethered from biogenetic kinship relations. Only once the family is already redundant and alternative structures are in place can the family itself wither away.

In this chapter, I take up contemporary theorists' turn to the 1970s as an invitation for extended research into the history of family abolition at the grassroots. As a first contribution, I argue that in early papers produced by the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement, we detect a vision of a world free from domestic violence and familial domination, at times even encountering explicit calls for family abolition. As I show, the refuges they built – first in their own basements, then in council properties – can be understood as continuous with this existing theoretical commitment. These unconventional spaces posed a challenge to the assumption that the family was a site of safety – or the only viable option for organising social care.

The Bristol movement, however, should not be treated as a straightforwardly abolitionist one. Just as some members were explicit in their calls for family abolition, others expressed ambivalence about whether the family, in some altered form, could be admissible. At times, feminists also expressed considerable ambiguity, and even hope, about whether the family itself could deliver safety for women. But the fact of feminists' inconsistencies and their shifting views does not discount them from the history of family abolition. They are instead a reminder that when we describe feminists, sometimes anachronistically, as abolitionist, we must hold space for the ways that enacting theoretical commitments in applied settings affected what was deemed possible.

As a second contribution, this chapter traces the Bristol movement's shift from radical abolitionist demands to more muted requests for state funding. The practical challenge of

sustaining refuge spaces – and the threat of their closure – led activists to turn to the very institutions they once critiqued for financial support. Over time, and especially through affiliation with the National Women's Aid Federation, this strategy brought with it significant compromises: the embrace of hierarchical structures, the softening of abolitionist rhetoric, and a growing alignment with carceral approaches to justice. And while legal tools did bring resources and recognition, they also extended the power of the state into an area that had once been an exclusively feminist domain.

As a third contribution, this chapter contributes to the exceedingly limited scholarship on the British domestic violence movement. The only dedicated historical account of the British domestic violence movement is Gill Hague's *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, which Hauge herself describes as 'a condensed, broad brush-stroke book' that 'is not meant to be an academic work'.[11] As its title *History and Memories* suggests, it combines memoir and history, expanding the archive through personal reflection (Hague was herself involved in the domestic violence movement) alongside scholarly research. Other foundational feminist works, such as *Violence Against Wives* (1979) and *The Anti-Social Family* (1982), provide important perspectives, but are largely focused on sociological and policy frameworks.[12] This chapter is a small beginning in reconstructing the domestic violence movement with archival detail – and insisting on its significance to the history of ideas.

This chapter is organised in five parts. In the first, I reconstruct arguments for family abolition made by the Bristol Women's Liberation group in their workshop journal *Enough* (1970–1974). As I show, from its earliest days the group expressed fierce and vocal opposition

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[11] Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement.*

[12] Dobash, *Violence against Wives*; R. Emerson Dobash, *Women, Violence and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1992); Nicola Harwin, Gill Hague, and Ellen Malos, *The Multi-Agency Approach to Domestic Violence: New Opportunities, Old Challenges?* (London: Whiting & Birch, 1999).

to the family, including a particular anxiety about violence enacted in the private sphere. In part two, I argue that the rapid mobilisation of Bristol's feminists to build domestic abuse refuges can be understood as continuous with their existing opposition to the family. In turn, these refuges offered their own implicit critique of the patriarchal family and became a stimulus to think about the kind of freedom feminists should be fighting for. Part three traces the group's efforts to secure resources for their early refuges. As the movement grew, it became increasingly dependent on the state. And as I demonstrate in part four, as part of the National Women's Aid Federation, the Bristol group compromised some of its more radical horizons in order to secure these state resources. In part five, I examine the domestic violence movement's turn to legal repercussions. In doing so, we see that legislation provided real resources for survivors seeking justice; it also extended the reach of the carceral state into feminist politics.

I conclude by using the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group's analysis *In and Against the State* to frame the prospects for achieving abolitionist ends using the mechanism of a racial capitalist state. As the London Edinburgh Group warned, the tension between resources and the conditions placed on those resources led activists to make challenging, and often painful, compromises.

I. *Enough*: the case against the family

In 1970, the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement launched their flagship journal *Enough*. The topic of the first issue was 'The Father-Centred Family', and began with a pointed provocation: 'Refuge or prison?', the tagline glibly asked.[13] This set the tone for what would become a deep-seated preoccupation with the patriarchal family amongst the Bristol

[13] 'The Father-Centred Family: Refuge or Prison?', *Enough*, 1970.

Movement, 'the technical term', as one anonymous author would put it, 'for the father-centred, father-dominated family in which all property including the wife is in the name of the father'.[14] Across the six issues of *Enough* produced between 1970 and 1974, the Bristol movement expressed a conviction that the family was a site of violence and domination, the limits of which were drawn by capital, and the hegemony of which was reinforced by the state.[15]

At the time the Bristol feminists were writing, the family held unmatched ideological power. Marriage rates reached an all-time high in 1972 and heterosexual coupledom was treated as both normative and natural.[16] As the National Women's Aid Federation later reflected, 'Marriage is sold to us all from a very early age as a loving union between two people; the family unit as *the* natural way for human beings to live and reproduce'.[17] Val Greenwood, writing for *Enough*, argued that the family was treated as 'unalterable' – not because it was universally fulfilling, but because its dominance left little space to imagine alternatives.[18] The very intimacy that it appeared to protect was, in the eyes of these Bristol feminists, precisely what rendered it so coercive.

At the heart of these feminists' critiques, was the identification of a contradiction: the family was imagined as a source of love but experienced as a site of terror. For Greenwood, the family was presumed to provide relief against the daily grind of capitalism, 'a refuge of a

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[14] 'The Patriarchal Family'. p30

[15] 'The Father-Centred Family: Refuge or Prison?'; 'Mothers Alone', *Enough*, June 1970; *Enough*, 1970; *Enough*, 1972; *Enough*, 1973; 'E!No!Ugh!Gh!', *Enough*, 1974.

[16] 'Marriage and Civil Partnership Status in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics', Figure 7, accessed 7 June 2024, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/articles/marriageandcivilpartnershipstatusenglandandwalescensus2021/2023-02-22.

[17] "He's got to show her who's boss' April 1978 Spare Rib p15

[18] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', *Enough*, 1970, 5.

kind [… and] a place where the working class has stuck together'.[19] As such, 'the family becomes a powerful agent against change', 'precisely because', Greenwood summarised, 'it is the scene of intimate life'.[20] Who would want to dismantle the very thing that brings them respite, and that they associate with tenderness, privacy, and sexuality? And yet, Greenwood warned, '[m]ore violence both "criminal" and psychological is associated with the family than with any other social institution'.[21] Violence was not incidental in this context; it was an ingrained feature of the family. Jessie Stephen, a suffragette and long-time Labour party activist, pointed to the fact that 'most murders happen as a result of conflicts within the family'.[22] In contrast to the representation of the family as a loving sanctuary, Stephen identified that in the worst cases the family posed a lethal threat to women's lives.

Meanwhile, the family continued to be conflated with love and safety, indicating a dangerous disconnect. That relationships in the family were experienced as love was, for artist and liberationist Monica Sjöö, a sign of how bad things had become. Heavily influenced by Wilhelm Reich – a psychoanalyst described as a 'touchstone' for leftist feminists by historian Natalie Thomlinson – Sjöö contended that patriarchal family structures foreclosed the possibility of genuine sexual liberation.[23] For Sjöö, 'True sex can only exist, be experienced, between free and equal beings'.[24] For as long as patriarchy was the ordering mechanism of the family, she argued, possibilities for love and sexual liberation were foreclosed. For feminists

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[19] Ibid., 7.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 8. Like Sjöö, Greenwood was convinced that the function of the family 'is not the fulfilment, satisfaction, or security of those human beings who live through its bonds, but is an institution for their suppression and domination'.

[22] Jessie Stephen, 'Memories of Militancy', *Enough*, 1970, 29.

[23] Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 60.

[24] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', 24.

writing for *Enough*, the logic behind the illusion of the family as a site of love was fundamentally economic: 'a woman, working in the home for love, works there for nothing' and provides 'a cheap way of child-rearing sanctioned by the law', Greenwood wrote.[25] Domestic labour, masked as affection, underwrote a capitalist system dependent on unremunerated work. As an anonymous writer for *Enough* put it, under these conditions sex had become 'a mercenary act'.[26]

In the first issue of *Enough*, the editors published an abridged version of Canadian theorist Margaret Benston's 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation' (a text that, incidentally, went on to heavily influence Wages for Housework) and in doing so expressed a wider concern about the capitalist function of the family.[27] In the extract reproduced in *Enough*, Benston acknowledged that the family superficially served the 'satisfaction of emotional needs'.[28] On her account, however, this created layers of dependency. Benston identified that men relied on women to conduct emotional labour, alongside 'a huge amount of socially necessary production' in the household.[29] In turn, a second dependency arose over women's access to material resources. For the editors of *Enough*, women provided goods – sex, love, care – in exchange for an indirect, and highly insecure, portion of men's wages. Many women were thus 'utterly dependant financially on their husband's good (or bad) will', only able to

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[25] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 6, 8.

[26] Anonymous, 'A Letter to "Enough"', *Enough*, June 1970.

[27] Margaret Benston, 'An Excerpt from "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation"', *Enough*, 1970. On Benston's influence on WfH see, Toupin, *Wages for Housework*. Deep divisions cut through the Bristol WLM over the question of Wages for Housework. See Spare Rib Jan 1978 Bristol Women's Centre Statement, for example, on an extraordinary meeting called over the 'ongoing conflict'.

[28] Margaret Benston, 'An Excerpt from "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation"', 19.

[29] Margaret Benston, 'An Excerpt from an Article in "The Monthly Review"', *Enough*, 1970, 29.

access the resources they needed through an indirect wage.[30] This, they wrote, amounted to 'a life of enforced prostitution'.[31] A third dependency operating in the family was between men and their employers. When men had economic responsibilities, Benston explained, their need for employment intensified and the possibilities for striking or refusing work were significantly constrained.[32] Greenwood summarised the problem as such: 'The family is forced together by economic dependence [...] the man cannot leave his wife and children, nor they him, even though they may hate each other'.[33]

Children were also understood as subjects of domination within the family. Greenwood described the way that 'however warm it may be [the parental relationship] is one of despotism', in which children had no meaningful autonomy or possibilities for exit.[34] While women were positioned as primary victims of patriarchal family life, feminists did not excuse their position as potential agents of harm. Expressing a wider preoccupation in the Bristol movement, Lee Cataldi wrote that 'some women, pushed beyond breaking point, constantly shout at their children, others beat theirs up'.[35] At the extreme, Sjöö described how a mother might even succumb to 'strangling her children' as a response to her own oppression.[36] Sjöö depicted mothers taking 'revenge' against vulnerable subjects as a reflection of their own alienation: mothers were driven to violence by their own 'intolerable situation, alienated, neurotic, a living death, [...] castrated'.[37] Oppression, in other words, breeds the urge to oppress.

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[30] 'A Letter to Enough Continued: Editors Note', *Enough*, June 1970, 29.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Margaret Benston, 'An Excerpt from "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation"', 19.

[33] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 6.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', 22, 26.

[36] Lee Cataldi, 'What Does It Mean to Be Chained to the Kitchen Sink?', *Enough*, 1970, 3.

[37] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', 26.

What the despotic treatment of children concealed, once again, was the family's role in maintaining the workings of capital. As members of the Bristol WLM argued, 'One of the basic functions of the family [is] to ensure legal heirs to the father [...] for the sake of maintenance of his property'.[38] Regulating natality was an essential component in the maintenance of capital flows: through inheritance, wealth was concentrated in the hands of the bourgeoisie over time. Childhood was thus shaped by a deep and entrenched un-freedom: children were mandated to 'stay at home, do what their parents wish, have no power of any appeal, even'.[39] Greenwood concluded that 'Children must be, surely, one of the most supressed dependent and vulnerable social groups', caught within an economic order that both required and degraded them.[40] 'What is the value of a child?', Ellen Malos asked: 'Is it priceless or useless?'[41]

Those living outside the nuclear family felt its regulatory force most acutely. For the never-married woman, divorced woman, single mother, queer, non-nuclear, and non-monogamous woman, there could be no doubt that the family was a state-enforced tool for social regulation. As Sjöö remarked, women living outside of the family unit 'particularly vividly experience the sickness of our society and [...] are most victimised by our male-dominated phallus culture, capitalist economy'.[42] Rebelling against the traditional family form had serious economic and social repercussions, including the denial of social security payments, discrimination on the rental market, the regulation of contraception, denial of abortions, and limited legal rights over children.[43] 'Poverty', Pat Van Twest summarised, was treated as 'just

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[38] 'The Patriarchal Family', 30.

[39] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 6.

[40] Ibid., 7.

[41] Ellen Malos, 'Mother Alone', *Enough*, 1970, 19.

[42] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', 21.

[43] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 8. Sjoo 22-23; p4 issue 1.

retribution for overstepping these lines of respectable behaviour'.[44] The treatment of women outside of the hegemonic family had become a caution to all, Marylin Porter argued, as 'The network of social pressures, conventions and structures binds each of us to a narrow range of behaviour'.[45] As she went on to explain, 'Society controls us by conditioning us to accept our role, and by sanctioning any deviation from the normal pattern'.[46] The family, then, was not simply coercive for those within it. It served as a disciplinary ideal against which all other arrangements were judged.

To the Bristol feminists, this revealed the true scope of the problem: it was not any one family, but the family as an institution that posed a danger. As Greenwood summarised, 'the exploitation of [women] is always intimately related to the forms of social exploitation in society at large'.[47] To meaningfully change the position of women in society, the family could not be treated as a private matter. It had to be analysed – and dismantled – at a structural level.

For some, this meant demanding family abolition. Sjöö, for example, called for 'Death to the patriarchal family and institutions, capitalist economy and the state', placing the family at the centre of a wider demand for the foundations of economic and political life to be overturned.[48] In the first issue of *Enough*, Bristol's feminists reprinted a 1969 article from the socialist newspaper *The Black Dwarf* which named 'the revolutionary problem' as 'abolishing the family [...] the cause of violence, insanity and misery in its present form'.[49] For members

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[44] Pat Van Twest, 'A Book to Read: Mothers Alone', *Enough*, June 1970, 11.

[45] Marylin Porter, 'Paradox: The Plight of the Happily Married Woman', *Enough*, 1970, 30.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 8.

[48] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!', 21.

[49] Jessie Stephen, 'Memories of Militancy', 29. Extract taken from 'Dwarf Diary: Murder and the Family', *The Black Dwarf*, 1969, 12.

of the Bristol movement that ascribed to this view, the family was not just coincidentally violent; it was causal of violence and it needed, as such, to be completely dismantled.

Yet for other feminists writing for *Enough*, it was not self-evident that the family as a social institution needed to be destroyed. Pauline Fisher, for example, worried that the destruction of the family would constitute a loss for women. While she agreed that the current reduction of 'wives and mothers [...] to drudgery and poverty' necessitated an 'urgent [...] need for reform', this was the limit of her recommendation.[50] Fisher worried that '[if], in trying to find a solution, we try to evade the facts of nature by exploiting our own sexual potentialities, we stand to lose a lifetime's fount of love'.[51] Radical proposals risked the very things that Fisher thought feminists ought to be seeking: love, natural order, and freedom from exploitation. Things, in other words, that were the remit of the family once its proper function had been restored.

Fisher's representation of the family as a 'fount of love' was unlikely to hold water for most feminists in the Bristol group. For writers like Sjöö, Greenwood, and Porter, the 'facts of nature' about the family were better characterised as a state-sanctioned illusion.[52] That said, Fisher's insistence that feminists needed to think seriously about networks of care that could outlive the family was a shared one. Feminists like Greenwood, for example, at times insisted that the family must be abolished. 'Women can only be liberated along with men and children' she wrote, 'when the institution of the bourgeois family is literally destroyed'.[53] In the same text, however, Greenwood expressed an ambivalence about what a feminist future

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[50] Pauline Fisher, 'Fight for Freedom', *Enough*, 1970, 25.

[51] Ibid., 26.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 5.

might look like.[54] 'Many might choose to continue living in family situations' Greenwood suggested, before underscoring that 'all relationships would be more satisfying if [...] the legal and economic institution of the family were destroyed'.[55] Greenwood was at least open to the possibility that people would choose to continue to live in familial networks of care after the 'institution' of the family was destroyed. The point, she suggested, was not to dictate forms of life, but to destroy the legal and economic institution that coerced them.

For those feminists convinced by the need for abolition, how to go about it? The anonymous authors of 'The Patriarchal Family' called for 'new forms of community life; groups of men, women and children in new interactions with each other'.[56] For Sjöö, societies had to become female-dominated, with reproduction placed entirely under women's control. Men, if included at all, were to submit to women's maternal power.[57] Beverly Skinner proposed sex strikes: withdrawing sexual labour, the thought went, would reveal its importance for the functioning of society.[58] For Lee Cataldi, women needed to take the time to 'rage, talk, argue, think, make love'.[59] This, she wrote, was part of what it takes to 'change the world'.[60] Greenwood demanded state incomes be paid to women and children 'quite independently of their husbands' and parents.[61] Her hope was that this would result in women 'no longer being

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[54] Ibid., 9.

[55] Ibid.

[56] 'The Patriarchal Family'; Angela Rodaway and Lorraine Cross, 'Kibbutzim', *Enough*, 1970.

[57] Monica Sjöö, 'Womanpower!' Here, Sjöö referenced the radical vision of Valerie Solanas, who insisted that women could and should 'reproduce without the aid of males' – though she vehemently disagreed with Solana's move towards the technologization of reproduction.

[58] Beverly Skinner, 'Anyone Who Isn't Busy Being Born Is Busy Dying', *Enough*, June 1970, 34.

[59] Lee Cataldi, 'What Does It Mean to Be Chained to the Kitchen Sink?', 4.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Val Greenwood, 'Women's Liberation', 7.

treated as a cheap and expendable work force' and children having the freedom to make choices about their own futures.[62] And yet, Greenwood clarified, these proposals were only 'a small beginning'.[63]

The Bristol feminists were hesitant to offer a clear and cohesive blueprint for a family abolitionist future. Implementing each of these proposals would require a huge amount of work – 'a social revolution' – and yet their outcomes would not in themselves be revolutionary. The problem of the family, Bristol feminists understood, was highly intractable and it was difficult to imagine a singular way through. They were clear, however, on what needed to change: a world in which care is coerced, dependency is enforced, and violence is naturalised. For them, imagining otherwise was the first act of resistance. But the Bristol movement were not only theorising family abolition in the early 1970s. As soon as they established a physical base, they also began exploring practical alternatives to the current structure which organised care.

II. Refuges against the family

A permanent base was something the Bristol movement had long considered essential to the group becoming 'more effective in reaching women outside the movement'.[64] Inflation rates, however, were soaring, and the group could not afford to cover the rent of a private

[62] Ibid., 9.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ellen Malos?, 'The Politics and Policies of the Women's Centre', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

property.[65] It was not until Ellen Malos, a founding member of the movement, relocated to northern Bristol in 1973 that the group secured temporary security. Malos donated the use of her basement to the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement and the room – consisting of a single bed, a sink, and a cooker – became 'a co-ordinating centre, meeting place, and office for the group', a free pregnancy testing centre, and the host of the Gay Women's Group.[66] As members of the Bristol group recalled, '[The] movement has never been unified around one particular kind of feminism', and as such they welcomed various sub-groups of the WLM into the space.[67] In addition, a phone line was set up to offer 'support, advice and help' to women in the local community, and a distribution service for feminist literature was established.[68] The Bristol feminists named this multipurpose space 'the Women's Centre'.[69]

News of the Centre spread across the city, through advertisements on Radio Bristol, in the local press, and by 'word of mouth'.[70] As 'an ever increasing volume of letters and phone calls' came pouring in, more and more women contacted the Centre to seek help in cases of domestic abuse.[71] In response, the group repurposed what space they had and offered up Malos's basement as the first domestic violence shelter in the city. 'After a short time', members

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[65] 'Consumer Price Inflation, Historical Estimates and Recent Trends, UK - Office for National Statistics', accessed 17 June 2025, https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/consumerpriceinflationhistoricalestimatesandrecenttrendsuk/1950to2022.

[66] 'Bristol Women's House Project', 1.

[67] Ellen Malos?, 'The Politics and Policies of the Women's Centre', 1.

[68] 'Bristol Women's House Project', 1.

[69] 'Bristol Women's House Project'.

[70] Ibid., 1.

[71] Ellen Malos, 'Letter to City Planning Officer', 24 April 1974, 1, DM2123/8/115, folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

of the Bristol WLM said, 'the bed was used almost every night and we had a mattress on the floor as well'.[72]

From the first print run of *Enough*, the Bristol group had expressed opposition to the family. When they were approached by women experiencing domestic abuse, they had already diagnosed the family as an institution of domination structured by violence. Armed with this existing theoretical analysis, the battered women who approached the Women's Centre were immediately recognised as in need of urgent help and the Bristol WLM – who were eager to challenge the patriarchal household – were ready to take action on their part.[73] In 1973, the public discourse around domestic abuse was extremely limited. Intimate partner violence was not a widely recognised category of abuse; marital rape was still legal (it was only criminalised in 1991); and there were no existing domestic abuse shelters in Bristol.[74] Just a handful of domestic abuse services had been established across the UK.[75] When the Bristol movement recognised and took in women who approached them seeking shelter, then, their actions were subversive in more ways than one. The shelters they created targeted those at the sharpest end of abuse and demonstrated that the family had not, for these women, been a sanctuary. The creation of shelters was also an implicit contestation of the immutability of the hetero-patriarchal family; alternatives were shown to be possible. While the Bristol feminists were already ideologically opposed to the family, through the practice of building refuges their opposition became definitive.

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[72] 'The Bristol Women's Centre: Learning by Doing', 2.

[73] The term 'battered women' was the most frequent way of describing survivors in the 1970s. See, for example, NWAF, 'He's Got to Show Her Who's Boss', *Spare Rib*, April 1978.

[74] Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, 170.

[75] 'Care for Homes and Sanctuaries for Battered Women and Children', n.d., Malos 2123/8/116, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

By 1977, there were 77 women and 93 children living in Bristol's refuges.[76] Men were overwhelmingly excluded from these spaces.[77] The exclusion of men invariably imposed its own normative regulation on residents, barring friends and partners.[78] These refuge communities, however, also turned the patriarchal, male-dominated household on its head.[79] Within refuges, women described their experiences of benefitting from new and expanded networks of relations between women pitched outside of the nuclear family. One woman, speaking to a member of the Women's Liberation Movement in 1977, described living in a refuge as 'an ideal situation in an ideal world – when she had been married', she explained, 'she wasn't even allowed to have female friends, let alone lovers'.[80] Women's networks of care and support were at once practical and intimate, manifesting in relationships that blurred the boundaries of sex, love, politics, and protection. They were not unlike what American writer and activist Adrienne Rich described in 1980 as experiences of 'primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support'.[81]

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[76] 'Appendix A: Facts and Figures on Women & Refuges in 1977', 1977, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 6, Feminist Archive South.

[77] In rare cases, men were admitted as childcare workers in the early 1970s. In general, however, they were excluded. See 'Autonomy of Local Groups', n.d., 1, Malos/2123/8/114, folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[78] Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, 119–21.

[79] A parallel here can be drawn to the relationships between the women in Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). On Morrison and the communities that Black women built in her novels, see Lawrie Balfour, *Toni Morrison: Imagining Freedom*, Philosophical Outsiders Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[80] 'NWAF Conference: Sexuality Workshop', 7 May 1977, 2, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[81] Adrienne Cecile Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)', *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 27, https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0079.

But of course, refuges were not strictly homosocial; in fact, women residents were outnumbered by children. Just as they had expressed concern for the domination of children in the family, feminists asked: how can children's freedom be promoted in refuges? A founding goal outlined by the Bristol movement was to 'recognise and care for the emotional and educational needs of [...] children' who were fleeing domestic abuse.[82] While the immediate risk of patriarchal violence had been removed, they knew that the maternal domination of children had a historic precedent. Bristol feminists circulated notes produced by a refuge group in Acton, London, who wrote in 1977 that 'more emphasis [should] be given to discussion of [children's] rights and needs' at a national conference precisely because children were the resident majority.[83] While the Acton group eventually withdrew the motion – it was decided that the discussion required focused attention at the following conference –, feminists in Bristol shared a similar concern.

Kate Kay, secretary of the Bristol group and one of the first national coordinators at Women's Aid,[84] reflected on the need for children in refuges to be treated as autonomous agents. Refuges were closer to the kind of horizontal care structures that better served children's interests, Kay reasoned, even if children were not entirely autonomous within them. She also judged the communal environment to be a benefit for children, with older children often sharing in the caring labour of younger children and therefore developing a sense of mutual authority and leadership.[85] This, Kay indicated, was one indication that feminists had

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[82] Kate Kay, 'Bristol Women's House Project', 1975, 2, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[83] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Minutes of National Conference', 7 May 1977, 8, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

[84] Kay was a national coordinator from 1976-1978.

[85] Kate Kay, 'Secretary's Report', December 1975, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South; Kate Kay, 'Bristol Women's House Project', 2.

successfully nurtured an environment of respect and recognition – quite unlike the despotic treatment children could expect in the patriarchal family.

Refuges were, I have suggested, a contestation of the family as a sanctuary and a demonstration of an alternative. Their construction can be understood as organically family abolitionist: whether intentionally or not, refuges were subversive due to their structure and composition. But characterising refuges as part of the history of family abolitionism arguably risks imposing a utopian theory onto a distinctly un-utopian reality. The concern that feminists were motivated by an unwanted agenda was expressed in a paper circulated in the Bristol movement where it was stressed that 'you cannot demand that people live in communes'.[86] It was one thing, the authors suggested, to choose to enter into different living arrangements as a way to explore what life outside of the family might look like. It was quite another to enter a collective living arrangement as a route to survival when fleeing from domestic abuse.

Members of a national Housing Research Project, of which Bristol's Kate Kay was a founding member, discussed this caution further. '[G]roups talk about the benefits of communal living,' they noted.[87] But, they asked, 'how many women leave refuges having made a positive decision that this is what they want'?[88] Women fled to refuges as a form of escape, not out of a desire to experiment with non-traditional living structures. The communal conditions, homosocial environment, and subversion of hierarchy were all side-effects of an undoubtedly difficult choice to leave one's home in the face of violence. By focusing on the potential for refuges to enact family abolitionist goals, these origins are at risk of being

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[86] 'Organisation and Demands of the Women's Liberation Movement', n.d., 3, Malos 2123/8/116, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[87] Kate Kay, 'Secretary's Report', 2.

[88] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Housing Newsletter Number 3', February 1978, 3, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

overlooked. The conditions of refuges themselves are also in danger of being romanticised. In a report compiled by the Bristol group, members described refuges as 'overcrowded and overused', fraught with 'emotional tensions', and a place in which children 'especially [suffered] from insecurity and lack of space'.[89] In short, refuges were far from a family abolitionist utopia.

Intentionally or not, however, the refuge movement was subversive in its early days. And while it is important to note that the women who established these spaces were perhaps seeking safety from the patriarchal family rather than its imminent destruction, this does not discount them from the history of family abolition. When women left the patriarchal household and sought an alternative, they opened up new and alternative forms of collective living. And, as Kay put it in October 1975,

> the experience of the women [in the refuge] has demonstrated the invaluable benefits from living communally and offering mutual support and advice based on similar experiences. Above all the women have found that the most useful and necessary function of the Project, besides its protective nature, has been the opportunity it affords for them to talk and think about their lives, and make plans without the pressures of a violent relationship.[90]

For Kay, the original goal of refuges – as 'protective' spaces – was the underlying purpose of their existence. And yet, this was only the beginning of what refuges could facilitate for the women who lived within them. These spaces were upheld by channels of mutual support and communality. To use theorist Cathy Cohen's formulation, refuges were communities of 'non-

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[89] 'Battered Women Need Houses: A Report on the Housing Needs of Battered Women', n.d., 5, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 5, Feminist Archive South.

[90] Kate Kay, 'Secretary's Report', 2.

normative and marginal' women who had experienced domestic abuse and now occupied a social position that was outside of hetero-patriarchal, nuclear expectations.[91] And, as Kay described it, within refuges residents and non-residents alike were able to imagine different futures for themselves and struggle for each other's freedom.[92]

III. Out of the basement, towards the state

While the refuges that the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement built had a latent – and sometimes more explicit – family abolitionist potential, as the 1970s wore on this radical horizon became increasingly tempered by the need for resources. The facilities in Malos's basement could not sustain the demand from battered women for long and the room strained under the competing demands of the Women's Centre. One woman who stayed in the shelter for two weeks described having 'very little privacy' as well as 'the endless job of keeping her small child occupied and his fingers away from [the group's] files and correspondence in one rather crowded room'.[93] In November 1973, members of the group established the Bristol Women's House Project to discuss more permanent solutions.[94]

By December 1973, members of the Project met with local councillors, social workers, Housing Department workers, and health visitors, as well as charitable organisations like Shelter, Samaritans, St Paul's Advice Centre, and the 30 Brighton St Hostel to discuss

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[91] Cathy J. Cohen, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 438, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437.

[92] Here I borrow Lola Olufemi's expression 'experiments in imagining otherwise'. Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Maidstone: Hajar Press C.I.C., 2021).

[93] Bristol Women's Centre, 'The Need for a Women's House', n.d., 4, Porter DM/2123/1/32, Bristol Women's Centre 1973, Feminist Archive South.

[94] 'Bristol Women's House Project'.

alternatives to the basement shelter.[95] Meanwhile, as members of the group explained, 'The frequency and intensity of the demand [… for refuge spaces became] too great for us to continue'.[96] The tension between what the activists wanted to achieve in theory and what they were able to achieve in conditions of material constraint became clear. Without money or resources, there was no obvious path forward. As existing facilities were put under increasing pressure, the decision was taken in January 1974 to close the refuge in Malos's basement.[97]

At this early stage, the Bristol women's movement were already turning to the state as a source of potential resources. This might seem curious or even counter-revolutionary, given the group's own analysis in *Enough* that the capitalist state was heavily invested in maintaining the nuclear, patriarchal family. Feminists had attempted to be self-funded and when this failed, they considered sources of funding from outside the state (namely, charitable organisations). But the scale of the need for shelter spaces was so vast and the money available through these alternative routes was so limited that alternatives to state funding had proven unrealistic. The Bristol group were also aware of the challenges of operating independently of the state. As it transpired, the now-closed Women's Centre refuge would have been deemed illegal and forcibly shut down had it continued to exist.

In April 1974, Ellen Malos received a letter from the City Planning Office which informed her that a city councillor had reported the Women's Centre for breaching neighbourhood zoning laws.[98] The assumption was that the Centre was running at a profit, to which Malos expressed surprise. 'None of our activities are profit-making,' she explained, describing

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[95] Kate Kay, 'Bristol Women's House Project', 2.

[96] 'Bristol Women's House Project'.

[97] Ibid.

[98] L C Steers, 'Letter to the Occupier, 11 Waverley Road', 10 April 1974, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

how even the Women's Book service which sold feminist literature was not for profit.[99] Malos nonetheless completed a formal request for planning permission, signed by her husband.[100]

On 18 July 1974, Malos received further notice that her request had been denied.[101] The Women's Liberation Movement could continue to operate out of the basement until 31 December 1975, she was told, but after this point the use of the space had to be permanently discontinued.[102] The Planning Office argued it was 'likely to be detrimental to the amenities of the locality by reason of noise or by any other means', as well as 'prejudice the enjoyment by neighbouring occupiers of their properties'.[103] The Women's Centre, they had decided, was not a welcome neighbour.

In November 1975, the Maloses received further notice that an 'application' for an extension to the temporary permissions of the Centre had been rejected. If the original date for closure was overstepped, the council threatened to close their activities down.[104] Ellen Malos's response was incredulous: 'I find it difficult to understand your communication', she explained, given that '[n]o application for Renewal of Temporary Planning Permission for the use of the room in the basement […] has been made by us'.[105] But while the notice was

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[99] Ellen Malos, 'Letter to City Planning Officer'.

[100] Ellen Malos and John Malos, 'Application for Planning Permission', 24 April 1974, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[101] Bristol City Council, 'Notice of Decision No. 12708/74 Issued to J & E Malos', 18 July 1974, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Bristol City Council, 'Notice of Decision Upon Proposed Development', 19 November 1975, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[105] Ellen Malos, 'Letter to City Planning Office Department', 27 November 1975, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

perplexing, it also offers significant perspective on the challenge of working outside (or against) the state. Even if members of the WLM had tried to maintain a refuge without state support, the likelihood of this being forcibly suspended was high. The state had revealed its latent power, including its ability to regulate and suspend feminist projects that operated autonomously.

With the closure of their first refuge, the Bristol movement lobbied the state in earnest, demanding buildings in which they could establish domestic abuse shelters as well as the funds necessary to finance these projects. They knew that the state had not historically supported their activism and yet, embedded in structures of global capitalism, state control, and systematic patriarchal violence, the movement sought out funding for the immediate survival of refuges – and confronted the complexity that came with this decision. Redoubling their efforts to establish emergency accommodation, the project's primary strategy became applying to local authorities for properties.

It seemed likely that the Bristol movement would have early success when members of the Project were offered a house by the local Housing Department in February 1974.[106] The property in question, however, was quickly declared uninhabitable.[107] A cycle of applying for new properties began and the search for a shelter was passed between Housing Committees, Social Service Departments, and the Anglican Church.[108] Over 17 months, the Women's House Project was repeatedly offered substandard housing which would later be revoked.[109]

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[106] 'Background to the Women's House Project', c 1974, 1, Porter DM/2123/1/32, Bristol Women's Centre 1973, Feminist Archive South.

[107] Ibid.

[108] 'Background to the Women's House Project'.

[109] Ibid.

It was not until June 1975 that the Bristol Women's House Project secured three houses and became 'fully operational'.[110]

With the injection of funds and space, larger-scale refuges were established in the city. As the Bristol feminists were clear, however, retaining control of the refuges was a priority. The hope was to emphasise horizontal modes of organising, from which state agents would be excluded. Residents themselves, they insisted, should be the ones to 'run' the Women's House 'as far as possible'.[111] The long-term hope was that residents would be entirely responsible for the coordination of refuges: 'we all agreed that all refuges should eventually be run/organised (or whatever) by women who had lived in them', Sandra Hallas of Wandsworth Women's Aid explained in 1978.[112] In a c. 1980 press release, the Bristol group revisited this commitment, writing: 'A refuge is not a supervised hostel [...] the emphasis is on autonomy and self-help'.[113] The determination to self-organise was not without its own costs. 'It was very time consuming,' Malos recalled, to engage in the processes of collective organising.[114] But these costs were deemed necessary for a movement dedicated to working, as much as possible, to reduce external control.

IV. Money and the movement

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[110] Kate Kay, 'Secretary's Report', 1.

[111] 'Bristol Women's House Project', 1.

[112] Sandra Hallas, 'Paper for Discussion at "Women in Refuges Only" Workshop', May 1978, 2, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 5, Feminist Archive South.

[113] 'Bristol Women's Aid Moves to South Bristol as New Large Refuge Opens', c 1980, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 6, Feminist Archive South.

[114] Malos in Margaretta Jolly, Ellen Malos.

The number of refuges expanded at a rapid pace over the course of the 1970s and the newfound scale of the movement brought with it new possibilities, including to influence the national conversation on domestic abuse. Feminists decided to join up their demands and, in 1974, the Bristol movement became a founding member of the National Women's Aid Federation (NWAF), an organisation that separated into Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, Welsh Women's Aid, and the Women's Aid Federation of England in 1978 (the Women's Aid Federation of England is now popularly known as 'Women's Aid').[115] The NWAF's purpose was to facilitate the coordination of anti-domestic abuse campaigns across the UK but local groups were to remain at the core of refuge provision. The NWAF, the Federation emphasised, was designed to 'allow groups a strange and wonderful freedom – "autonomy"'.[116]

Despite a clear push towards autonomous local organising, as the 1970s wore on it became harder to draw a line between where the Bristol refuge movement ended, and the national refuge movement began. In part, this is because the two movements were not entirely distinct. The NWAF was designed to be a democratic structure, in which members had voting powers. And while members of Welsh Women's Aid explained that practicing democratic organisational tactics was difficult on a national scale – feedback mechanisms were, they said, 'clumsy and inadequate' – the Bristol group remained heavily involved in practicing

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[115] Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, 72; R. Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash, 'The Response of the British and American Women's Movements to Violence against Women', in *Women, Violence and Social Control*, ed. Jalna Hamner and Mary Maynard (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), 175.

[116] 'There Appear to Be Two Basic Aims behind Our Structure...', n.d., 4, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 5, Feminist Archive South.

their democratic voice and influencing the national conversation.[117] The degree to which the Federation could operate according to its stated objectives – including 'decentralisation, self-help and self-determination' –, however, was under pressure as the organisation became ever-larger.[118]

The NWAF struggled with its growing size. Initially a modest organisation, the network expanded at an unanticipated rate and, by 1977, it included 98 affiliated groups in England and Wales.[119] At national conferences, designated for gathering and sharing information across the organisation, participants recalled the challenge of communicating in a larger structure. As anonymous conference attendees wrote, they had 'very mixed feelings – boredom, despair, excitement, frustration, disagreement as well as interest and enjoyment'.[120] In order to cope with these communication difficulties, national co-ordinating groups developed to distribute the mounting tasks, including in Housing Committees and Finance Groups.[121]

This division of labour brought with it new anxieties over the leadership of the organisation. Members of the Federation described a 'vacuum of accountability' that was developing in the NWAF. Despite claims that power was concentrated in local organisations, it was feared that individuals were enacting undetected force at the national level – and that

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[117] Welsh Women's Aid, 'Structure/Purpose of National Women's Aid Conference', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

[118] Ibid.

[119] 'Whatever Happened to the Regions', n.d., Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South; 'Refuge Provision in England and Wales', Autumn 1977, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[120] 'There Appear to Be Two Basic Aims behind Our Structure...', 3; Welsh Women's Aid, 'Structure/Purpose of National Women's Aid Conference', 1.

[121] Kay in National Women's Aid Federation, 'National Conference, Leicester', 5 November 1977, 2, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South; Welsh Women's Aid, 'Structure/Purpose of National Women's Aid Conference', 4.

there was no way to intervene (or trace) this development through the disparate groups of the national organisation.[122] Welsh Women's Aid argued that this anxiety was in part because the non-hierarchical structures of the NWAF were unfamiliar. Members had 'been brought up to accept authority, hierarchies and centralisation' and this, they pointed out, made it difficult 'to do something very new, different and revolutionary'.[123] But despite offering explanations for this growing anxiety, in c. 1978 participants at a national workshop reported a persistent 'paranoia and hysteria'.[124] 'Who', they asked, 'holds the power-strings of the federation'?[125]

The growing power of the NWAF was reflected in the organisation's increasing success at securing grants and money. And money, members of the NWAF knew, 'makes a great deal of activity possible'.[126] New-found funds enabled the massive growth of refuges in the mid-1970s. This in turn meant that more survivors had a safe place to sleep, and more children could be raised away from the immediate threat of abuse. As members of the NWAF wrote, 'without resources our hands are tied, our capabilities diminished'.[127] It was, on their view, unrealistic to secure the same level of protection for survivors without state help.

The plan was never to give over autonomy in exchange for these resources. As the National Women's Aid Federation explained in 1978, 'we are not in any way asking for government or local authority provision of and control over the running of refuges'.[128] There was

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[122] 'There Appear to Be Two Basic Aims behind Our Structure...', 5.

[123] Welsh Women's Aid, 'Structure/Purpose of National Women's Aid Conference', 1.

[124] 'There Appear to Be Two Basic Aims behind Our Structure...', 5.

[125] Ibid.

[126] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Secure Funding for Refuges Now!', 16 May 1978, 4, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

[127] Ibid., 6.

[128] Ibid., 5.

an important difference, they argued, between accepting funds and accepting influence. In the NWAF's case, the hope was to extract much-needed resources from the state as a means to expand refuge provision and make the life of survivors more liveable without sacrificing their own principles.

But as the NWAF also knew, 'money brings its own problems with it'.[129] Considerable resources were sunk into what Bristol member Pip Smith described as a constant 'fight' for short-term funds.[130] As members of the NWAF reported, '[t]he financing of refuges is precarious, to say the least' and huge amounts of energy were directed away from the task of direct activism and towards the bureaucratic demands of applying for new income sources.[131] Careful accounting became necessary, with the newly established Finance Group describing how external accountability brought with it new layers of bureaucracy. The Finance Group knew 'how tedious this can be' but emphasised that 'there is no doubt that we are called upon to account to the DHSS and the tax office (possibly) for every penny that passes through our hands'.[132] When you accept money from the state, they indicated, you become subject to its protocols.

As much as members of the refuge movement claimed that their autonomy could survive external funding intact, they also knew that they were making a choice: between maintaining full direction over the organisation of their campaign and adhering to funders' demands to secure vital resources. '[T]he whole question of people providing funds', a participant at an NWAF conference wrote, is that funders feel 'that they have to have a say in how

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[129] Ibid.

[130] Pip Smith, 'Survival of the South Bristol Refuge', 1980, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 6, Feminist Archive South.

[131] 'Refuge Provision in England and Wales', 3.

[132] Finance Group, 'Feminist Finances?', May 1978, 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

a refuge is run'.[133] In a NWAF report, it was written that 'It is something of a truism to state that money is never made available without strings'.[134] Members of the network became all too familiar with 'contort[ing] projects to fit in with the various Government Schemes, all of which [were] short-term and unsatisfactory'.[135]

The project of applying to an existing scheme for funds was, they knew, different from designing a project and demanding it is funded. When the NWAF received a ring-fenced grant for £45,000, for example, members of the Federation described how this money had to go towards paying workers at the national level. This money could not be used for local refuges, 'however dire the need'.[136] In an instance like this, the choice to put local needs first was foreclosed. And even at a local level, and as the Bristol group experienced first-hand, external funding could come with unwanted constraints. The Bristol refuge, for example, received funds from a Housing Corporation with the stipulation that the funding could only be used on property matters. The group had wanted to use the money to furnish a playroom in the refuge.[137] In this way, funders intervened over which parts of the refuge project were strengthened. And the parts that they chose – central authority over local organising, properties over playrooms – reflected a very different set of priorities to those first set out by the refuge movement.

After some deliberation, the Federation introduced paid workers to manage and utilise the funding they had received – including Bristol's Kate Kay. This invariably created new hierarchies in the organisation which raised a particular set of anxieties for feminists who

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[133] 'NWAF Conference: Sexuality Workshop', 17.

[134] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Secure Funding for Refuges Now!', 5.

[135] 'Refuge Provision in England and Wales', 3.

[136] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Secure Funding for Refuges Now!', 4.

[137] 'Meeting with the Housing Corporation, London Regional Special Projects Team', c 1978, 3, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

worried about the hierarchies implied in wage structures. How were wages to be determined? Anne Littler from Nottingham Women's Aid described how, 'A considerable amount of time was spent at the first meeting of the [*'Employer/Employee'*] group trying to work out how we could adapt our feminist principles to a wages policy in Women's Aid'.[138] Questions included: 'Would everyone be paid equally or according to need'?[139] The NWAF questioned whether feminists ought to think about the way that flat wage structures were expected to support unrecognised dependents. There was also the question of how to manage differences that arose between paid and unpaid workers. Despite feminist protestations against the notion that wages determine value, the idea that waged work was 'the <u>real</u> work [*…*] while everything else is of lesser significance' was an experience that was reproduced in the Federation.[140] Unpaid workers, it was reported, overwhelmingly turned to paid workers to make decisions. Feminists described how 'the position of dependence of the non-wage-earning woman reinforces women's traditional passivity'.[141] This is turn led to an 'enormous responsibility' for paid workers, who expressed regret for the bifurcated system in which voluntary workers were apathetic or working equally hard for no salary.[142] On both counts, this was thought to endanger a feminist project of challenging traditional hierarchies.

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[138] Anne Littler, 'Report from the Employer/Employee Subgroup and Recommendations to Be Taken to National Conference in Cardiff', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

[139] Ibid.

[140] 'Whatever Happened to the Regions', 1.

[141] Tamar Kanet, 'The Kingsgate Place Women's Centre', 15 June 1973, 5, Malos 2123/8/115, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[142] Judi et al., 'Worker's Report for Leicester Conference', 4 November 1977, 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

For Jane, an attendee of the national Sexuality Workshop in c. 1977, this spoke to a bigger question: 'how openly feminist can NWAF be'?[143] After attending a meeting between the Council, Housing Department, and refuge residents in response to the discovery that two women in the refuge had begun a sexual relationship, Jane recalled anxieties about the funders' reactions. '[T]he refuge', she explained, 'was dependant on a council grant, [and] everything changed after this meeting'.[144] Jane went on: 'Even though the reaction of the authorities was quite liberal everyone got paranoid and the lesbians now feel isolated and unwilling to talk about themselves'.[145] In another case, a staff-resident relationship provoked fears 'on the grounds that the refuge would be closed'.[146] Setting aside potential objections to the relationship – not least questions of power when a paid worker sleeps with a resident –, the relationship was judged to be shameful because it was lesbian. Solidarity for those in non-normative relationships, it seems, was abandoned by feminists who prioritised the perceived expectations of their funders over sexually marginalised people. Such instances revealed how the radical critiques of the family in the early pages of *Enough* had become constrained by heterosexist norms in state-funded refuges.

Members of the Sexuality Workshop emphasised that this turn to acceptability politics should not be read as overdetermined. There was vast and underexplored potential for solidarity between non-normative and marginalised groups, they argued, pointing out that 'lesbians often endure the same kind of persecution' as survivors.[147] '[L]ike battered women,' they wrote, 'lesbians have few illusions about the limitations of "society's" concern for

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[143] Jane, 'National Women's Aid Conference - Sexuality Workshop', c 1977, 10, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

[146] 'NWAF Conference: Sexuality Workshop', 18.

[147] Jane, 'National Women's Aid Conference - Sexuality Workshop', 18.

women'.[148] When members of the refuge movement shirked lesbianism, on this account they favoured perceived legitimacy over a potentially radical horizon: a coalition in which women who lived in opposition to dominant norms could come together in mutual solidarity.[149] For at least some in the movement, the possibility of a more radical and, we might think, family abolitionist agenda was still live.

V. The carceral turn

As part of the domestic violence movement's general turn towards institutionalisation – which we might think of as the establishment of secure and embedded processes for responding to domestic abuse –, feminists became increasingly interested in legislative change. The Bristol group had attempted to 'educate the courts, public, media and police' about domestic violence since 1973, but it was not until 1976, after extensive campaigning by the NWAF, that the words 'domestic violence' appeared in UK legislation as part of the *Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976*.[150] The Domestic Violence Act served a symbolic function, explicitly recognising – at a formal, national level – that violence was a problem in the family. Bristol feminists argued that this legislation was a foundation from which

[148] 'NWAF Conference: Sexuality Workshop', 2.

[149] Cohen, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens', 438.

[150] Up until this point, there was no particular legislation relating to domestic abuse, though women were somewhat protected under general anti-violence laws. An exception to this is the 1895 Curfew on Wife Beating in the city of London, which made 'wife-beating' between 10pm and 7am illegal because of the disruptive noise it made. Domestic abuse would not be explicitly defined in law until the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act.

to establish domestic abuse survivors as 'a group with particular problems' before the law.[151] More substantively, the Act introduced new powers for survivors who wanted to obtain court orders against violent men with a view to 'prevent molestation or to exclude the man from the home'.[152] With this new Act in place, women now had a route to legal retribution against the men who had done violence to them.

In practice, however, a small number of women used the Domestic Violence Act. In a 1978 survey conducted by Women's Aid, only a third of survivors reported having taken legal action against their violent aggressors.[153] And of the third of women who did take legal action, just 37% were successful in securing exclusion orders, 62% in a power of arrest, and 79% in non-molestation orders.[154] Members of the NWAF described how survivors were 'often unaware, unwilling, or unable to seek help from solicitors and courts' because they knew that the consequences could be severe if they were unsuccessful.[155] 'Women are frightened to complain', they explained elsewhere, 'because of fear of repercussions once the police have left the home'.[156] Men routinely responded with violence against survivors who had reported their actions and, in the rare cases that legal protections were obtained, these laws were no

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[151] 'Notes on: Bristol Women's House Project: Why a House for Battered Women', 1975, 1, Porter DM/2123/1/32, Bristol Women's Centre 1973, Feminist Archive South; 'The Housing Needs of Battered Women', n.d., Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[152] Bristol Women's Aid, 'Press Release: Bristol Women's Aid Moves to South Bristol as New Large Refuge Opens', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/112, Folder 6, Feminist Archive South.

[153] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Domestic Violence Act – One Year On', 9 June 1978, 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 3, Feminist Archive South.

[154] Ibid.

[155] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Secure Funding for Refuges Now!', 1.

[156] 'Case for Homes and Sanctuaries for Battered Women and Children', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/116, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

guarantee of safety.[157] An injunction would do nothing, the NWAF reflected in 1977, to stop the men who would go to 'any lengths to "get" their woman'.[158]

While the law did not reliably result in convictions, it was systematic. Carceral frameworks rely on existing notions of who is the proper subject of violence and who is properly understood as a criminal. Poor women, women of colour, and immigrant women have historically known that the men in their communities are disproportionately criminalised, and that when men are arrested, women bear the economic consequences.[159] As members of the Brixton Black Women's Group pointed out in 1982, 'a black woman may think twice before she calls the police for violence done to her by a black man'.[160] As Black women knew – and as will be explored in greater depth in chapter four of this thesis – the consequences of calling the police into a Black domestic setting often resulted in the arrest of women themselves.

Legal codes like the Domestic Violence Act also exclusively applied to men who committed physical violence against a woman with whom he lived with as 'man and wife'.[161] The Domestic Violence Act assumed – and reinforced – the hetero-nuclear paradigm of which relationships warranted protection. Queer relationships were completely obscured from this framework (non-molestation orders were only extended to same-sex couples in 2005), and men who were subject to domestic violence by a person of any gender had no recourse to legal

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[157] Sarah Blandy and Hester Watson, 'Domestic Violence and Housing', n.d., 2, 4, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South. Emphasis original.

[158] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Domestic Violence Act – One Year On', 7.

[159] Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 159–61. Also see chapters four and five of this thesis.

[160] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 216.

[161] Kathy McCann, Pat Brown, and Sarah Blandy, 'The Monitoring of the Domestic Proceeding and Magistrates' Court Act 1978', c 1978, 2, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

action.[162] As members of NWAF pointed out, there was also 'no clear protection to women who have experienced mental cruelty or hidden injuries'.[163] In other words, survivors who opted into the judgement of the state were subjected to the limitations of a carceral imagination – one that could not conceptualise the thing from which they had survived. Queer, male, and non-physically abused survivors were made illegible in this framework.

Apparently undeterred by limitations revealed in the carceral system, the NWAF continued to pursue legal changes and in 1977 the *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977* was introduced as a 'direct result' of NWAF lobbying.[164] Up to this point, women who had fled violent domestic partners had not been classed as homeless because they were deemed to have a home, regardless of how unsafe that home was, to return to. Under the 1977 Act, the classification of homelessness was expanded to include persons unable to return to their home because of actual or threatened violence. Once officially classed as 'homeless,' battered women were able to apply for council housing and other social services that had previously only been available to people who fit a narrower definition of homeless. The Housing Act thus went some way in alleviating repressive policies that excluded non-normative women from state benefits.

But the Housing Act also created unforeseen problems for other unhoused people. In a separate clause, the Act created a new category of 'priority' for emergency rehousing, which included pregnant women and mothers.[165] The prioritisation of some unhoused people over

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[162] Pat Strickland, 'Labour Policy on Domestic Violence – 1999-2010' (Home Affairs Section, 22 May 2012), SN/HA/3989.

[163] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Domestic Violence Act – One Year On', 6.

[164] 'To Monitor or Not to Monitor?', n.d., Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[165] Bristol Women's Aid, 'Press Release: Bristol Women's Aid Moves to South Bristol as New Large Refuge Opens', 1. [In Act itself: violence: Section 1, clause 2(b) of Act and children: section 2, clause 1(a) and 2 and intentionality Section 3, clause 2(b) part (ii)].

others – including some battered women over others – established a clear hierarchy.[166] Survivors with children were pitched against those who were child-free, with the latter likely to be offered advice but not accommodation. The notion of priority thereby reinscribed traditional ideas about the sanctification of motherhood.

The Housing Act also introduced a new clause on the exclusion of persons who had made themselves 'intentionally' homeless.[167] Members of the Lambeth Women's Aid group were incredulous, pointing out that the framework of 'intentional homelessness' was 'unworkable'.[168] Intentionality was both impossible to ascertain, they argued, and imposed a binary categorisation on a complex issue. The NWAF were briefly reassured when an accompanying *Code of Guidance to the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act* was released, instructing local authorities that battered women in general 'are never to be considered intentionally homeless' and pregnant women in particular 'are never to be considered as having made themselves intentionally homeless by becoming pregnant'.[169] But the degree to which this Code was binding was undetermined, and the fact remained that all unhoused people now faced the burden of proving that homelessness was never their desired outcome – a clause left open to punitive interpretation.[170]

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[166] Scottish Women's Aid and National Women's Aid Federation, 'Housing Group Meeting', 19 November 1977, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[167] Ibid., 2.

[168] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Housing Newsletter Number 4', n.d., 1, Malos 2123/8/114, Folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[169] Scottish Women's Aid and National Women's Aid Federation, 'Housing Group Meeting', 2.

[170] The impacts of the Housing Act continue to affect vulnerable people today. While finishing this DPhil, I worked with Asylum Welcome, a charity based in Oxford. As I learnt, single men who have recently been granted asylum are rarely, if ever, deemed priority need and therefore must enter a discriminatory private

It might seem straightforwardly better to have domestic violence recognised in legislation as a way to enable survivors to convict their violent (ex-)partners and seek social security. For those who want to see the perpetrators of abuse in court, legal changes have been a vital step. But by advocating for the involvement of the carceral state on issues of domestic violence, feminists have also helped lay the groundwork for mechanisms that reify the power of the family, that categorise – on racial and economic lines – which women deserve state protection, and that channel the state directly into issues at the heart of a feminist agenda.

Why continue to campaign for what were at best limited solutions? In 1978, the NWAF summarised their position, writing that 'the passage of any particular piece of legislation is obviously an important first step but is by no means an opportunity to sit back complacently'.[171] Reflecting on the 1976 Domestic Violence Act, NWAF member Sara Blazey described how 'Women's Aid never saw the Domestic Violence Act as the long-term answer to women being beaten up but only as a short term measure to give immediate protection'.[172] The NWAF Housing Group described the Housing Act similarly as 'only a first step' in the fight for survivors' rights.[173] The anti-domestic violence movement wanted to offer solutions to women experiencing domestic violence within a deeply flawed system. These women, they knew, were already being sanctioned by the state. Measures like the Domestic Violence Act ensured that survivors were at least theoretically able to secure social and economic resources that they had previously been excluded from. Moreover, legal solutions were envisaged as a

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rental market; the clients I worked with were often struggling to find a place to live, but were unable to secure council properties due to their low 'priority' status. Many of them became homeless.

[171] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Domestic Violence Act – One Year On', 7.

[172] Sara Blazey, 'Usefulness of Injunctions', n.d., 1, Malos/2123/8/114, folder 1, Feminist Archive South.

[173] Scottish Women's Aid and National Women's Aid Federation, 'Housing Group Meeting'.

'first step' and 'short term measure'.[174] That is, they were only the beginning; the implication was that there would be more.

VI. Conclusion: *In and Against the State*

In 1970, the Bristol WLM was overwhelmingly critical of the family – to the extent that several members were actively calling for its abolition. These theoretical commitments prepared the movement to create some of the first organised shelters for the survivors of domestic abuse. The family, they argued, was no sanctuary, and women needed real alternatives when the sharpest face of patriarchal violence made itself known. It wasn't long, however, before the movement turned to the coercive apparatus of the state to meet its demands. By 1975, shelters had been established in properties funded by the state. By 1976, the national domestic abuse agenda was being directed by the NWAF, who were leading efforts to secure funding and legal rights for the survivors of domestic abuse. By the turn of the decade, the domestic violence movement had tempered its most radical horizons in the bid for professionalisation and calls for family abolition become harder to detect.

The tension between using the state's resources and maintaining key principles can be understood through the lens of the socialist London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group's 1979 pamphlet *In and Against the State*.[175] The London Edinburgh Group argued that navigating the tension between principles and resource needs was a problem common to groups across the organised left. 'Resources we need', they observed, 'involve us in relations we

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[174] National Women's Aid Federation, 'Domestic Violence Act – One Year On', 7; Sara Blazey, 'Usefulness of Injunctions', 1.

[175] London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State* (London: Pluto Press, 1980).

don't'.[176] As the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group knew, building transformative movements from within the capitalist system was a demanding task.

The London Edinburgh Group conceptualised the state on two levels.[177] First, they argued, the state is an apparatus, an institution that provides resources like healthcare, education, and prisons. The left understandably wanted to harness and distribute some of these resources. But when they did so, they became unavoidably involved with the state on a second and unwanted level. Because, the Group argued, the state also creates social relations through its policies. People are fragmented into groups – the dependent, the uneducated, the criminal – and when resources are needed, leftist groups are forced to navigate relations that choke the most marginalised.

In these circumstances, the London Edinburgh Group insisted, contradiction is unavoidable.[178] When movements like the WLM took things from the state, they risked reinforcing the very relations that they objected to. In the case of the anti-domestic abuse movement, hetero-patriarchal categories, for example, were strengthened by a project that was once set against them. And in addition, people were fragmented into groups that were in turn forced to compete for limited resources, including over categories of 'priority need'. The challenge, the London Edinburgh Group argued, was to acknowledge the contradiction between resources and relations, and transform the state from within. What this might look like, they suggested, was taking state resources whilst refusing or remaking the relations that they presumed.[179]

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[176] Ibid., 26.

[177] Ibid., 37.

[178] Contradication is a theme throughout the text, but for a summary see ibid., 63.

[179] Ibid., 47–48.

The domestic violence movement has managed to extract resources from the state in a sustained way. In 2023, there were 4,379 bedspaces in UK refuges.[180] Each of these bedspaces was hard fought and remains an essential reminder of the lasting contribution the movement has made to the UK's care services – and the lives of individual survivors. That this movement managed to acquire these resources in a hostile, masculine, and capitalist landscape was a result of effective campaigning, including the transformation of key social concepts, not least the family which had to become conceivable as a site of violence. Relations – that concealed the patriarchal workings of the state, including marriage and the private sphere – were broken open by the movement. From this perspective, resources were successfully extracted, and relations were refused.

But while the domestic violence movement subverted some relations, it reinforced others – and in doing so, its members grappled with exactly the kinds of contradictions the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group warned about. Solidarity with marginalised and non-normative women was at times shirked to suit the taste of funders; the movement questioned how 'openly feminist' it could be if it were to appear reasonable to the wider public; and, when the movement lobbied for carceral solutions, it introduced new limits on who counted as homeless, which relationships were recognised by the state, and which kind of survivor would get their day in court. The extension of carceral power in cases of domestic abuse strengthened and legitimised the state to intervene in cases of feminist justice.

The movement knew that accepting funding and legal changes implicated them in contradictory relations. Ultimately, they chose to continue the fight for these resources. The question of whether the movement had realistic alternatives to state involvement remains an open one. As the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group put it, 'It is no good discussing

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[180] 'Domestic Abuse Services', *Women's Aid* (blog), accessed 3 June 2025, https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-services/.

struggle as though we were fighting from a well-provisioned, well-armed position'.[181] Violence against women was endemic, as it still is, and the movement needed money to fight against it. And as we might recall, had the Bristol movement continued in its original attempt to operate autonomously as the Women's Centre, it would most likely have been shut down. Meanwhile, survivors would have continued to approach the Bristol WLM in need of routes out of violent homes.

What is at risk of falling out of this picture, however, is the way in which the NWAF itself became hegemonic in the anti-domestic violence landscape. Smaller groups struggled to compete for limited resources, and this had particularly severe consequences for non-affiliated, specialist services, especially those focused on service provision for racialised women. As Gill Hague writes, this has proven to be an enduring problem:

> Southall Black Sisters and others suggest that when service provision becomes all there is, and is cut off from the founding politics and belief systems, it is like the coming of a classic neo-liberal approach. [...] This means the advent of bitter competition for funding, target-driven marketisation and empire-building by some, leading to a loss of feminist solidarity, and cutback in the welfare state.[182]

The organisations that were most successful in securing funding were those that adapted to a capitalist market, she implies, operating according to a logic that favours depoliticised provisions. When one service claims to meet the needs of everyone and the other claims only to meet the needs of a particular demographic of people, it is the former that is judged to be more efficient, less threatening to a state that claims neutrality, and that ultimately receives

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[181] London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State*, 63.

[182] Gill Hague, *History and Memories of the Domestic Violence Movement*, 180.

the greater share. By complying with this system, 1970s feminists legitimised the uncoupling of patriarchal violence and material inequality that is, in turn, driven by class, race, and caste. And by engaging in competition, the capitalist state – which relies on the myth of an indiscriminate market – was legitimised while ruling hierarchies were protected. To paraphrase the Southall Black Sisters, feminists were thereby cut off from their principles.

In 1979, the year that *In and Against the State* was published, Margaret Thatcher would be elected Prime Minister on a staunchly neoliberal platform. She famously set out her position on alternatives to the family in 1987: 'who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families'.[183] Systematic critiques of the family as an institution and men as a class were completely foreclosed by her model. The neo-liberalisation of the domestic violence movement aligned with this much wider push towards individualisation.

Today, our national leaders pledge their commitment to the once-exclusively feminist cause of ending violence against women and girls, whilst also promising to 'put family first'.[184] Feminists would once have been the first to point out the contradiction. Domestic abuse, they might have said, is entirely unresolvable under current social relations, including the relations of the family. The family is structured around hierarchies that breed subordination, extract unpaid labour, and subdue men's feelings of powerlessness by offering them an outlet – a family – on which to inflict their anger. Viewed in this light, domestic abuse is not the family

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[183] Thatcher in Margaret Thatcher and Douglas Keay, 'Interview for Woman's Own ("no Such Thing [as Society]")' (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1987), THCR5/2/262: COI transcript, Thatcher Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document%2F106689.

[184] David Cameron, 'EU Speech at Bloomberg', https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg.

'gone wrong' but instead the family meeting its logical conclusion. It is contradictory, then, to attack domestic abuse while fortifying the family.

That feminists are not making this critique as loudly as they once did is a reflection of a movement that has 'walked back' its own potential to root out and abolish the family, as well as the abuse within it.[185] Just because demands have been walked back, however, does not mean that the Bristol movement should be excluded from histories of family abolition. Its beginnings were rooted in this theoretical commitment and the movement went on to work for family abolition in action. They also contributed to a wider movement of women who ensured that marriage is no longer above reproach and that there are real possibilities for survivors to escape domestic violence.

Instead of disregarding the parts of feminism that have been subsumed by a neoliberal logic, the movement must be retethered to its own history, including the struggle for family abolition. In doing so, it must risk the things that feminists were once willing to put on the line. Feminists might appear irrational if they call for family abolition.[186] Mainstream political parties overwhelmingly agree that domestic violence is a problem – since 1977, the words 'domestic violence' have appeared over 8,500 times in Parliamentary debates – but the call for family abolition is still treated as a fringe, if not unhinged, intervention.[187] In the face of this, however, feminists must consider the fact that 1 in 4 women and girls experience sexual abuse in their lifetime whilst 41 percent of boys and men between 16 and 24 report a positive view

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[185] Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family'; Lewis cites Weeks, see Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 49.

[186] M. E. O'Brien describes how the phrase 'family abolition' is treated as an 'ultra-left fantasy'. O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 5.

[187] To get this figure, I searched for the phrase 'domestic violence' on Hansard between 01/01/1977 and 18/06/2025, recording the number from Parliamentary debate references. Before this 48 year time period, the phrase 'domestic violence' appears just 20 times Parliamentary debates. 'Hansard - UK Parliament', accessed 18 June 2025, https://hansard.parliament.uk/.

of Andrew Tate, the influencer who refers to married women as their husbands' 'property'.[188] As Michelle Tea has put it, 'going totally fucking insane is a completely rational outcome for an intelligent woman in this society'.[189] Family abolition might seem like an insane demand, but as Bristol's feminists in 1970 once insisted, that doesn't mean that it's a bad one.

[188] Anki Deo, 'Plugged in But Disconnected: Young People and Hateful Attitudes' (London: Hope Not Hate, July 2024), 34, https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Plugged-in-but-disconnected-young-people-and-hateful-attitudes-hope-not-hate-2024.pdf.

[189] Michelle Tea, 'Foreword', in *SCUM Manifesto*, by Valerie Solanas (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2013), 8.

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Black Socialist Feminists: the Brixton Black Women's Group and over-policing, c. 1970 – 1980

'But what is it you are fighting against? I thought you were feminists. What's this about police brutality?'

Perminder Dhillon (1979)[1]

On 18 July 1983, in the West London Mozart Estate, seven Black women – Andrea Nicholas, Josephine Nicholas, Nazarine Nicholas, Cordelia Nicholas, Sandra Joseph, Patricia Joseph, and Josephine Tawia – were arrested, four of them in their own home.[2] In the events that led to their arrest, the police, in pursuit of a young man whom they allegedly saw entering Andrea Nicholas's home, demanded to be let in. But, Nicholas insisted, the women were alone; there was no man in the house. After the police failed to produce a warrant, she refused them entry. Over sixty policemen flanked by police dogs stormed the property, 'smashing doors down, beating-up the women and turning the house upside-down, even to the point of emptying

[1] Perminder Dhillon, 'They're Killing Us in Here', *Spare Rib*, 1979, 32.

[2] In this chapter, I capitalise the word Black in keeping with the usual practice of the BBWG. When quoting, I use the original capitalisation of the author(s).

draws [sic.]'.[3] Unable to produce the suspect, the police charged three of the women with obstruction and Actual Bodily Harm. The women became known as the Mozart 7.

The case of the Mozart 7 didn't appear in major national newspapers.[4] A photograph of a picket outside Marylebone Magistrates Court in defence of the Mozart 7 and a flyer in Suzanne Scafe's archive remain the major documentary evidence of the event.[5] For Black women living in Britain in the 1970s and 80s, however, the case of the Mozart 7 was paradigmatic of the kind of police harassment they experienced on a daily basis. As they knew, Black bodies were over-policed in Britain and Black women's bodies were no exception.

The Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG) became a leading voice in the contestation and disruption of police harassment, including in the case of the Mozart 7.[6] The problem of over-policing was judged to fit squarely within the group's politics, which spanned beyond a unitary commitment to Black radicalism, feminism, or a Marxist class analysis. Instead, the BBWG was a self-described Black feminist socialist organisation, and their vision for liberation was total. As an activist organisation, the BBWG were involved in multiple struggles, including the anti-SUS campaigns (1977 – 1980), the trial of the Lewisham 24 (1977), Black People Against State Harassment (1978), anti-'virginity testing' at Heathrow airport (1979), opposition to the 1981 census (1981), the Brixton Defence Campaign (1982-1984), and the defence of the Mozart 7 (1983). These campaigns were both distinct and interconnected: as discrete campaigns, they tell us something about the BBWG's techniques for framing

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[3] 'Defend the 7 Mozart Women', n.d., Scafe/3/2, Black Cultural Archives.

[4] Newspapers searched include: *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Mirror*, *The Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Express*, *The Financial Times*.

[5] Philip Wolmuth, 'Photograph of Mozart 7 Protest', Philip Wolmuth Photo Library, 8 August 1983, https://www.philipwolmuth.com/image/I0000tTII7dJDDFA.

[6] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 219.

different modes of harassment; taken together, they demonstrate a sustained commitment to dismantling white supremacist policing in Britain.

In this chapter, I reconstruct the Brixton Group's perspective on police harassment, including their involvement in the Scrap Sus campaign. In doing so, this chapter makes three major interventions. First, it contributes to a limited existing scholarly literature on the Brixton Black Women's Group. A handful of historical accounts are accompanied by even fewer treatments of the BBWG as a source of critical theoretical engagement.[7] The extant literature nonetheless forms an essential starting point for this chapter; of note is Milo Miller's 2021 PhD thesis which collates a history of the BBWG, with a particular focus on the overlap of their history with the British squatting movement.[8] In 2023, Miller collated and edited all five issues of the BBWG's newsletter, *Speak Out*, along with other writings produced by the group in a published collection.[9] This collection greatly expands the accessibility of what

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[7] Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000', *History Workshop Journal* 81, no. 81 (2016): 171–96, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbw002; Tanisha C. Ford, 'We Were People of Soul: Gender, Violence, and Black Panther Style in 1970s London', in *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*, ed. Tanisha Ford (University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 0, https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469625157.003.0006; Nydia A. Swaby, '"Disparate in Voice, Sympathetic in Direction": Gendered Political Blackness and the Politics of Solidarity', *Feminist Review* 108, no. 1 (2014): pp11-25, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2014.30; Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*; Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985*, Berkeley Series in British Studies 14 (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520293847.001.0001; Julia Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1998); Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*

[8] Milo Miller, 'Fairies, Feminists & Queer Anarchists: Geographies of Squatting in Brixton, South London' (PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2021).

[9] Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*

would otherwise remain largely archival sources. That said – and as is common across the chapters of this thesis – archival research has been necessary to produce a more comprehensive reconstruction of the BBWG's thought and history.

As a second contribution, this chapter insists on the place of the BBWG in the feminist 1970s. In the midst of the Brixton Group's organising, the question of feminism as a set of theoretical commitments was at times set aside in order to prioritise practical action. But at others, the BBWG presented rich theoretical analyses of patriarchy, and repeatedly contributed to a determinable field of Black British feminist thought. At the time the BBWG were operating, the label of feminism was highly politicised, and connoted with treating gender, above race or class, as the single and isolated issue on which all women ought to campaign. Often conflated with the Women's Liberation Movement, 'feminism' was criticised by many Black British women for not giving sufficient space to – or completely occluding – the experience of women of colour. For some, including some of the authors discussed in this chapter, these connotations were enough to abandon the label altogether. But for others, the conflation of feminism with the Women's Liberation Movement missed other active forms of anti-patriarchal activism taking place at the time, including their own.

As a third intervention, this chapter demonstrates how the Brixton Black Women's Group drew on their Black feminist perspective to open up new ways for thinking about the gendered consequences of police harassment. As the Brixton Group showed, police harassment against Black women often took on distinctive, sexist forms. Women were disproportionately sexualised by police; in national discourse, they were presented as the mothers and lovers of the harassed rather than the objects of harassment themselves; and women experienced policing behind closed doors, especially in their own homes. These forms of harassment were oftentimes less public – and received less attention – than those enacted against Black men, but they were nonetheless central in the construction of Black women as terrorised bodies.

Like many of the grassroots activist groups in this thesis, the BBWG's analysis and theoretical writing is not contained in published works that resemble traditional political theory. What we might call the Brixton Group's 'archive' largely consists of untitled, handwritten notes, papers for undetermined conferences produced on typewriters, articles in their newsletter *Speak Out* that are undated and rarely attributed to a specific author, and photographs, the captions for which contain question marks – whose face is this? – in the description. At times, the authorship of a paper is explicit – a letter bears a clear signature, or an article is penned by a particular group of members – but, more often, their authorship is either vague or impossible to ascertain altogether. Despite their uncertain beginnings, in most instances the materials used herein were found in works published collectively by the group or in BBWG members' personal archives. We can assert with some confidence that these archival materials bore some significance to the archiving individuals – given that they were deemed worth holding onto for fifty years and donating to libraries. This in turn suggests that those materials were to some degree influential on the BBWG's thinking.

In addition to BBWG members' archives, this chapter uses papers found in the archives of other Black activists, including Stella Dadzie. Dadzie was not a member of the BBWG. She was, however, a member of the United Black Women's Action Group (with whom the BBWG worked), a founding member of OWAAD (alongside BBWG's Olive Morris), and she wrote *The Heart of the Race* (alongside BBWG members Suzanne Scafe and Beverley Bryan).[10] Her archive therefore provides vital context to the BBWG's thought and practice.

The chapter proceeds as follows: in part one, I reconstruct the formation of the Brixton Black Women's Group. As I show, the Group came together as a response to the sexism

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[10] For more on the foundation of UBWAG, see UBWAG, 'UBWAG, United Black Women's Action Group: Who Are We?', n.d., Dadzie/1/1/11, Black Cultural Archives.

of the Black Power movement and the racism of the Women's Liberation Movement. They also, and as I argue in part two, joined a wider surge in Black feminist articulations offering a distinctive perspective on the situation of Black women. This distinctive perspective, I demonstrate in part three, enabled the BBWG to build an analysis of gendered police harassment. But when it came to practical application, and as I argue in part four, their distinctive analysis was at times sacrificed for campaigns that framed the contributions of women in terms of their relationship to men, and that marginalised women's leadership.

I conclude, in part five, by arguing that at every turn, the BBWG insisted on an integrated rebellion against white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism. But while they maintained this at a theoretical level, at times their feminist analysis slipped from their practice. This happened in part, as BBWG's Suzanne Scafe has reflected, under the pressure of organising. But despite recognising that theory and practice at times came apart due to material constraint, members of the Brixton Black Women's Group were seeking something more: the unity of theory and practice.

I. Historicising the Brixton Black Women's Group

In 1958, racial tensions erupted in the UK and permeated the national discourse. From Manchester's Moss Side to London's Notting Hill, white mobs led attacks on urban black neighbourhoods, shouting racist slogans, throwing glass bottles, and setting houses ablaze.[11] In May 1959, 32-year-old Antiguan Kelso Cochrane was 'lynch murdered' by a gang of white men, a crime that was dismissed by the police as a random act of violence.[12] Officers failed to

[11] Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: Tauris, 1988), 118–19, 114.

[12] Mark Olden, *Murder in Notting Hill* (Winchester: Zero, 2011).

follow significant leads in Cochrane's case – releasing the prime suspects within 48 hours – and his attackers were never identified.[13] In instances like these, white supremacy was experienced as overt violence. But racism in Britain was also, as South African activist and preacher Basil Manning maintained, subtly and systematically legitimated by the state. The 'reality', as Manning put it, was that Britain was riddled with 'institutional racism'.[14] In other words, racism was built into the fabric of Britain's major institutions – policing, healthcare, education – and it was not just a matter of interpersonal abuse.

Black activists developed new and increasingly coordinated ways to organise against racism throughout the decade and beyond. In 1959, journalist and visionary activist Claudia Jones organised the first Notting Hill Carnival to mark Cochrane's death, as well as to celebrate Caribbean culture and resilience.[15] In 1963, the recently established Conference of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organisations, a coalition of black groups, marched three and a half miles from Notting Hill to the US Embassy on Grosvenor Square.[16] The Conference, led by Jones and Pearl Prescod, was organised in solidarity with black communities in the United States who undertook the March on Washington three days earlier.[17] Marching from the

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Basil Manning, 'Racism – the Response of Community Work', in *Community Work and Racism*, ed. Ashok Ohri, Paul Curno, and Basil Manning, Community Work Series ; No. 7 (London ; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 7. Manning would go on to write an extensive review of the Sus law in Basil Manning, 'Suspected Persons', in *Images and Reflections Section 4: 'SUS' The Black Child and the Law*, ed. ACER Project, 1979.

[15] A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 11.

[16] Colin Prescod, 'The "Rebel" History of the Grove', Institute of Race Relations, 6 June 2019, https://irr.org.uk/article/the-rebel-history-of-the-grove/.

[17] For more on the US March on Washington, see William Powell Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights*, First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

historically Black neighbourhood of Notting Hill, the site of race riots, murder, and widespread arrests, also emphasised the distinctive experience of the Black community in Britain.

Black activists continued to seek out coordinated and radical action as the decade wore on. The Black People's Alliance – a coalition of over fifty Black Power organisations – was brought together in 1968; for Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the emeritus director of anti-racist thinktank the Institute of Race Relations, the Alliance represented 'a militant front for Black Consciousness and against racialism'.[18] Also in 1968, the British Black Panther Party was founded by Olive Morris, Darcus Howe, Obi Egbuna, and Linton Kwesi Johnson.[19] The Panthers championed Black Power in Britain, demanding racial justice, political empowerment, and an end to police brutality and systemic discrimination.[20]

Black women – including Jones, Prescod, and Morris – were central to this radical tradition, but within the wider Black movement their experience was often one of marginalisation. Women described feeling trapped in feminised positions, with would-be members of the BBWG reflecting on their 'roles for the revolution [...] as coffee-makers, cooks, fundraisers and, of course, willing sexual partners'.[21] 'We were expected', they recalled in 1982, 'to contribute to the movement but only in the way the black man said we could'.[22] Black

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[18] Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, 25. Under Sivanandan, the direction the Institute of Race Relations would be radically transformed from a white-led, establishment institution to an anti-racist think tank in 1972.

[19] The British Panthers were inspired by, but not formally associated with, their US counterpart.

[20] R. E. R. Bunce and Paul Field, 'Obi B. Egbuna, C. L. R. James and the Birth of Black Power in Britain: Black Radicalism in Britain 1967–72', *20th Century British History* 22, no. 3 (2011): 391–414, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwq047.

[21] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 218.

[22] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Features: The Myth of the Vicious Cycle', *Speak Out!*, July 1982. Republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 218.

women were denied strategic and revolutionary roles in the movement and treated as though they were limited to the sexual and reproductive servicing of men.

Undeterred by this patriarchal myth – or, perhaps, in defiance of it – three Panther women, Olive Morris, Liz Obi, and Beverley Bryan, set up a study group in 1970.[23] When describing the origins of their group in 1979, members recalled how: 'We were all frustrated by the failure of our [anti-racist] groups to take up issues which specifically affected Black women, or their tendency to treat us as minute-takers, typists and coffee makers, but hardly ever as political and intellectual equals'.[24] In part, and as members of the group would summarise elsewhere, issues affecting Black women were dismissed because 'it was felt that women's issues or "the woman question" was a secondary matter that could divide the struggle'.[25] The charge – of splitting the struggle – was frequently levelled at black feminists. Difference was represented as a threat to the unity of the movement. To extinguish this threat, Black men argued that women should focus their attention on a single-issue struggle and exclusively focus on race. When Morris, Obi, and Bryan established their own women's group, they effectively refused.

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[23] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Reviews: Black Britannica by David Koff', *Speak Out!*, c 1979. Republished in United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 82, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1058248.; Bean, 2009; Quashie, et al., 1990. BWGs were 'seemingly marked by their commitment to link theory and practice, often through the framework of Marxist or socialist feminism. The emphasis on education was demonstrated in study groups, where women read Marx and Engels. It was also confirmed in the newsletters, where books by such authors as Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Buchi Emecheta were reviewed'. Ibid., 82. For BBWG's Melba Wilson's take on Blacks Britannica, see Melba Wilson, 'Review: Films, Blacks Britannica', *Spare Rib*, September 1978, who criticises the film for having '[failed] to present a realistic picture of [Black women's] role in fighting racism'.

[24] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution', n.d., 1, Dadzie/1/1/2, Black Cultural Archives.

[25] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Features: The Myth of the Vicious Cycle'. Republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 226.

By September 1973,[26] that group was named the Brixton Black Women's Group and became an organising space for at least 40 members. This number is almost certainly an underestimate, given that individuals published collectively as the 'Brixton Black Women's Group' and did not keep membership records.[27] Between 1977 and 1983, the BBWG produced the newsletter *Speak Out*, which was replete with their distinctive theoretical analysis.[28] In an editorial published in c. 1977, the group described their purpose as an '[attempt] to study and analyse the situation of black women in Britain today', describing how they did this through 'hold[ing] joint meetings in order to discuss and exchange our ideas'.[29] Gail Lewis has described how the BBWG was initially 'a space in which women could meet together', and later became 'a Black women's organisation which foregrounded gender relations as being the object of political change'.[30]

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[26] BBWG, 'BWG Editorial: On Black Women Organising', n.d., 1, Scafe/3/2, Black Cultural Archives.

[27] The most comprehensive collection of names can be found in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!* They include: Sindamani Bridglal, Anne Chan, Ramani Chelliah, Donna, Liz Obi, Pat Gordon, Iyamide Hazeley, Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Amina Mama, Angela McNish, Liz Fajemisin, Sona Osaman, Suzanne Scafe, Farah Sharif, Rif Sharif, Dorothea Smartt, Neelim Sultan, Annette Blair, Marlene Bogle, Monica Dawkins, Sylvia Erike, Clover [Clovis?] Graham, Olive Morris, Caroline Redfern, Beverley Bryan, Takuma Ria Lawal, Gail Lewis, Monica Morris, Jocelyn Wolfe, Gerlin Bean, Melba Wilson, Joan Morris, Lindiwe Tsele, Claudette Williams, Kamedea Brown, Pat Adams, Olive Gallimore, Judith Lockheart, Vanessa, Glynis Neslen.

[28] For a complete, and rather extraordinary collection, of *Speak Out*, see ibid.

[29] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 17–18.

[30] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political', *Trouble and Strife*, Summer 1990; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 335.

As Milo Miller has put it, exact details of the BBWG's history 'remain elusive'.[31] However, as Miller shows, it is clear that the Brixton Black Women's Group first gathered at 121 Railton Road, an abandoned laundrette that had been squatted by Obi and Morris.[32] The BBWG later moved to 65 Railton Road – a property that became known as the Black Women's House – and eventually settled at 41 Stockwell Green.[33] As Akua Rugg recalled: 'Next to the Squatters' Union, there was the Black Women's house, and across the road, there was the gay centre [...] and then there was the Peoples News Services all in one little strip'; Tanisha C. Ford has further noted that the Panthers, during their short but vibrant lifespan, had a property just around the corner.[34]

From within this radical Brixton scene, members of the BBWG worked extensively with other Black organisers and were consistently interested in making broad alliances. The Brixton Group were involved in a variety of campaigns, including resisting the wrongful labelling of Black children as 'educationally subnormal', campaigning against the Sus law, refusing the inadequate housing available to Black renters, drawing attention to the violation of women's bodies in the Heathrow 'virginity testing' scandal, and protesting the indefinite detention of immigrants.[35] In 1978, they were also amongst those who built the first national organisation of Black women's groups: the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD).[36]

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[31] Miller, 'Fairies, Feminists & Queer Anarchists', 94.

[32] Ibid., 100–101.

[33] For a detailed account of their history of squatting, see Miller, 'Fairies, Feminists & Queer Anarchists'.

[34] Ford, 'We Were People of Soul', 136.

[35] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution', 2.

[36] For more on the history of OWAAD, including its formation, see 'OWAAD Draft Constitution'; BBWG, 'BWG Editorial: On Black Women Organising'.

OWAAD brought together some of the most influential Black women's organisations in Britain, including the Abasindi Collective, AWAZ, ELBWO (East London Black Women's Organisation), women in the Black Liberation Front, and UBWAG (the United Black Women's Action Group).[37] Within a month of being established, OWAAD met together for their first conference in March 1978. Over 300 Black women gathered in Brixton, where they discussed building 'an autonomous black women's movement'.[38] Members of OWAAD were active in political campaigns and shared poetry, literature, and friendship.[39] The coalition was as much a place from which to do the work of strategic organising as it was to grow and enrich solidarities between Black women and foster a shared sense of political identity.[40]

In the interests of uniting across difference, the OWAAD coalition employed a purposefully expansive definition of Blackness; in an introductory talk, it was noted that '[t]he term "black" can have a variety of definitions, and does not necessarily only refer to skin colour'.[41] OWAAD chose to include people of African and Asian origin in their organisation due to their 'joint historical experiences' of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy.[42] This was done at the prompting of Asian women, who contended that the original name 'Organisation for Women of Africa and African Descent' was too narrow. OWAAD promptly changed its name, without needing to change its acronym.[43] This demonstrated one of the

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[37] Stella Dadzie, 'History from 3rd Conf.', n.d., Dadzie/1/1/18, Black Cultural Archives.

[38] 'Newshorts', *Spare Rib*, June 1979.

[39] Ibid.

[40] OWAAD, 'Constitution of the Organisation of Women of Africa and African Descent', c 1978, Dadzie/1/1/4, Black Cultural Archives.

[41] OWAAD, 'Introductory Talk: Black Women in Britain', 18 March 1979, 1, McKenley/1/4, Black Cultural Archives.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, *The Heart of the Race*, 165.

founding commitments of OWAAD: for it to be 'the kind of organisation which we want and need' – namely, an organisation in which solidarity against racism and imperialism was broad-based and flexible.[44]

The Brixton Black Women's Group deployed a similarly expansive definition of Blackness in their own organising.[45] It is impossible to know the exact racial composition of the BBWG – the group did not keep this kind of information on record – but as Ford has identified, it seems likely, based on the named individuals we can identify, that the BBWG 'consisted mostly of women of Afro-Caribbean descent'.[46] There were, however, exceptions to this rule.[47] Importantly, as members stressed, to be Black on their account could at least in theory encompass the identities of all women of colour. In doing so, the BBWG joined a wider move amongst Black activist groups – including OWAAD – who described their Blackness as 'political'.[48] While recognising the distinctiveness of different cultures between people of Asian and Afro-Caribbean descent, this definition sought to encapsulate the way that a shared history of colonial exploitation could unite racialised people across ethnic difference.[49] As one anonymous author would put it, 'The very fact that Imperialism brought us here, and the

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[44] OWAAD Co-ordinating Committee, 'Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), Letter from OWAAD Co-Ordinating Committee', 30 March 1979, McKenley/1/7, Black Cultural Archives.

[45] This is something Milo Miller notes in Milo Miller, 'Editor's Preface', in *Speak out!: The Brixton Black Women's Group*, by Jade Bentil, Brixton Black Women's Group, and Milo Miller (London ; Verso, 2023), viii.

[46] Ford, 'We Were People of Soul', 154.

[47] Anne Chang, for example, was a prominent, Chinese member of the BBWG. Ibid.

[48] For a discussion of political blackness, and its hegemony in the 1980s, see Tariq Modood, 'Political Blackness and British Asians', *Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1994): 859–76.

[49] 'Loose Paper, "4"', n.d., Dadzie/1/1/32, Black Cultural Archives.

very fact that Imperialism is the major cause of our oppression, makes it impossible for us to organise to fight our specific oppression [...] Our struggle is the same one'.[50]

II. The Brixton Group and Black British Feminism

One of the defining characteristics of the Brixton Black Women's Group was their identity as Black socialist feminists. In 1982, the BBWG published an editorial entitled 'Black Feminism', a formidable piece of analysis in which they argued that Black women face a distinctive form of oppression.[51] Drawing on a long history of Black women theorising their experiences, as well as the Marxist tradition of the Panthers, the BBWG understood that they were oppressed on racial, gendered, and classed lines.[52] Like Claudia Jones before them (who wrote in 1949 that 'Negro women – as workers, as Negroes, and as women – are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population'), the BBWG maintained that, 'the status of black women places us at the intersection of all forms of subjugation in society'.[53] In 1984,

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'.

[52] For more on the importance of Claudia Jones in the formation of an anti-imperialist Black feminist identity, see Fisher, *What's Left of Blackness*, 65. On BBWG's descriptions of triple oppression, see Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) / Awaz, Brixton Black Women's Group & United Black Women's Action Group, 'Black Women Together: The Need for a United and Autonomous National Black Women's Organisation'; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Draft Aims and Objectives' (unpublished, October 1982). Republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 136, 250. On the Panther's 'broadly Marxist orientation', see Bunce and Field, 'Obi B. Egbuna, C. L. R. James and the Birth of Black Power in Britain', 394. On the BBWG's Marxist perspective, see Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985), 140–42.

[53] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 218.

they would set out their position in greater detail: 'As black socialist feminists,' they wrote, 'it is incumbent upon us to point out that women's oppression is inextricably bound up with the issues of race and class; and that it is right and necessary to tackle all three simultaneously, and with equal determination'.[54] Set against singular conceptions of oppression, Black socialist feminism was an insistence on an alternative: a simultaneous struggle.

In defining their activism as such, the BBWG set itself apart from the wider Black movement and the WLM. On the one hand, the BBWG faced Black activists who were arguing that 'for black women to speak out against sexist oppression causes division within the black community, because it takes time and energy away from the black struggle'; on the other, they encountered white feminists who were insisting that 'the oppression of women is the major and primary oppression in all societies'.[55] As Melba Wilson put it, the BBWG was formed in part as 'a reaction' to these trends: 'the racism in the white women's movement' and 'the sexism of Black men'.[56] In order to pursue their united aims, this meant the BBWG had to organise somewhat independently of the wider left. In the undated paper 'Women or Black People First?', the BBWG explained that 'We cannot merely work with Black organisations, since these are generally male-dominated and therefore ignore the issue of sexism. Similarly, we cannot rely on the white feminist movement, since this ignores the issue of racism'.[57] The BBWG had to build something new.

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[54] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women Organizing', *Feminist Review* 17, no. 1 (1984): 84–89, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1984.30.

[55] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 217, 219.

[56] Melba Wllson in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 330.

[57] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Women or Black People First?', n.d., Scafe 3/2, Black Cultural Archives.

At the time the BBWG introduced their perspective as Black socialist feminists, the WLM held a tight grip over the public imagination of what feminism was. In 1970, the group which would become the BBWG assembled in Morris and Obi's squat. That same year, the WLM gathered for the first time at Ruskin College. Even after the conclusion of the WLM Conferences in 1978, many of the institutions that had been built by the Movement – including Rape Crisis Centres, as well as legal and economic reforms – remained in place. As members of the BBWG put it, even as late as 1984 'to call yourself a feminist would be to associate yourself with the WLM – something the women had left or rejected'.[58] For the BBWG, identifying as Black socialist feminists was not an embrace of the WLM, but a deliberate redefinition of feminism that foregrounded race, class, and imperialism.

Gail Lewis, a member of both the WLM and the BBWG, described

> this funny divide, this funny notion that somehow black women's organisations were not part of the Women's Liberation Movement, with this funny racialised and racist divide between what constituted feminist activism and what wasn't [...] this whole idea that somehow our group [the BBWG] [... was] not deemed part of the Women's Liberation Movement.[59]

As Lewis observed, feminism was often conflated with the Women's Liberation Movement, obscuring the contributions of Black women. For Lewis, a self-described feminist, it was plainly false that the WLM had exclusive claim to the label of 'feminism'. Lewis said: 'it is important to make a distinction between feminism and the women's liberation movement'.[60] While some Black women were undeniably hesitant – or outright refused – to adopt the label,

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[58] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Politics = Black Feminism: Brixton Black Women's Group Talks about Its Part in British Black Feminism...', *Off Our Backs*, 1984, 14.

[59] Lewis, 2011, p. 108 quoted in Miller, 'Fairies, Feminists & Queer Anarchists', 107.

[60] Gail Lewis in '30. Gail Lewis Talks with Carole Spedding', n.d., Scafe/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

others like Lewis herself were attending WLM conferences and explicitly identified with the movement. The BBWG also discussed classic feminist texts associated with the WLM at their meetings, including those by Germaine Greer, Michelene Wandor, Robin Morgan, and Kate Millet.[61] The sharp distinction drawn between the ideology of the WLM and the BBWG was largely artificial.

The two did come apart, however, on the issue of race. As an unnamed author wrote in *Spare Rib* in 1982, 'Of all the racist oppressions that I have suffered as a result of the ideological/cultural apartheid in this country, none has been so painful as those inflicted by white feminists'.[62] For Black feminists Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist feminist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning'.[63] Instead of making way for Black women to carve out a position in the women's movement and describe their own experiences, many white feminists were excluding – and actively obscuring – Black women's voices.

This spoke, in part, to the reluctance of white feminists to identify their own role in racial domination. As Black feminist Hazel Carby famously articulated with the 1982 publication of 'White Women Listen!', 'White women in the British WLM are extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situation of being oppressors, as they feel that this will be

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[61] They discussed, for example, texts by Germaine Greer, Michelene Wandor, Betty Friendman, Robin Morgan, and Kate Millett. 'BWG Meeting - 3.5.78 (Ray's)', 3 May 1978, Dadzie/1/3, Black Cultural Archives.

[62] 'Racism in Feminism: Lonely Among the Feminists' (Spare Rib, n.d.), 58, Scafe/3/2, Black Cultural Archives. Note, this page was loose in Scafe's archive.

[63] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review* 80, no. 1 (1 July 2005): 45, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400220.

at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed'.[64] White women appeared to fear the uncomfortable truth that one could be both oppressed and oppressor.

Set against white women's reluctance, the BBWG formally adopted the label of 'feminism' when they published an editorial entitled 'Black Feminism' in the July 1982 edition of *Speak Out*. In it, they explained: 'Feminism is the theory underlying the struggle against the systematic oppression of women based on sex'.[65] The BBWG made clear that their analysis of gender was never at the exclusion of race and class. As they put it, 'women's oppression today is inextricably linked with the whole system of class oppression'; it was also 'impossible', they wrote, 'for us to consider the oppression of women separately from the international oppression by imperialism of our countries of origin and from our experiences, even here in Britain, of racism'.[66] Instead, it was necessary to centre multiple, overlapping issues. When the BBWG did start to explicitly self-identify as feminists, they also explained that they were laying claim to something that they had already been doing. As members of the BBWG put it, 'We were there as a woman's group, whether or not we were up front as a feminist group, even though I think we were always a feminist group'.[67]

In doing so, the BBWG located themselves within a wider surge of Black women who contested hegemonic notions of feminism in the 1970s and 80s. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective Statement defined Black feminism as 'the logical political movement to combat the

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[64] Hazel V. Carby, 'White Women Listen!', in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Hutchinson University Library (London: Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1982), 118. Also see Miriam Yagud, 'Letters: Racism', *Spare Rib*, August 1979.

[65] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 209.

[66] Ibid., 219-220.

[67] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Politics = Black Feminism', 15.

manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face'.[68] Four years later, in 1981, bell hooks insisted it was time for Black women to 're-appropriate the term "feminism," to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression'.[69] That same year, Angela Davis published the landmark *Women, Race and Class* and emphasised the interconnected nature of gender, race, and class oppression.[70] Alongside these North American thinkers, British women joined the movement drawing – and contesting – the limits of what feminist commitments could be.

A momentous issue of *Feminist Review*, 'Many Chants, One Voice: Black Feminist Perspectives' was published in 1984, the first of its kind to offer 'anthologies of Black women's writing' in Britain.[71] Writing for the issue, Amos and Parmar drew on recent feminist scholarship coming out of the US, citing hooks and Davis, as well as two field-defining anthologies – Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back* and Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's anthology *All the Women Are White,*

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[68] The Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement'.

[69] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981).

[70] Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (London: Women's Press, 2001).

[71] Valerie Amos et al., 'Editorial', *Feminist Review* 17, no. 1 (1 November 1984): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1984.17.

All the Men are Black, but Some of Us are Brave – that had recently been published.[7273] On the whole, these North American texts were regarded as being broadly relevant to the Black British experience. But there were also ways, Amos and Parmar argued, in which the Black British experience was importantly distinct. 'Although comparisons can be made between Britain and the USA', they reflected, '[…] it is important that Black women in Britain locate their experiences within the context of what is happening to Black people here'.[74] Amos and Parmar made a point of citing Black British feminists, including Gail Lewis, Hazel Carby, Vron (Veronica) Ware, and Parmar herself, as well as drawing on examples from British imperial history and interactions between Black feminists and the WLM. Joining these Black feminist voices, the BBWG ultimately concluded that feminism could be reclaimed if race, class, and imperialism were integrated appropriately.

Looking at these published works alone, however, does not capture the countless Black women who felt feminism – even when qualified as anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-classist – was irredeemable. Even within the BBWG, 'Not everyone who joined the group

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[72] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review* 17, no. 1 (1 November 1984): 4, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1984.18. Texts cited include Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Fourth edition. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, New Edition (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2015).

[73] Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar, 'Book Reviews', *Race & Class* 25, no. 2 (1 October 1983): 85–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688302500209; Michelle Parkerson and Barbara Smith, 'Interview: Some Place That's Our Own: An Interview with Barbara Smith', *Off Our Backs* 14, no. 4 (1984): 10–26.

[74] Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', 1 November 1984, 5.

did define themselves as feminist'.[75] The depth of antagonism towards the label of feminism was perhaps most explosively demonstrated in June 1982 at what would be the final conference of OWAAD. The organising theme for the conference was 'Black Feminism' and participants described how huge fractures were cleft between those who argued feminism was a salvageable political label and those who were adamantly against it. This debate has been cited by participants as one of the major factors in OWAAD's demise. In a 1984 article published for the American radical feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*, members of the BBWG reflected on the moment that '[w]e – the [B]BWG – came out as Black feminists' as the cause of 'a split between the Brixton BWG and OWAAD'.[76] The degree to which this split led to the ultimate collapse of OWAAD is unclear – other factors, including the place of lesbianism and systematic under-funding, are also cited as contributing to OWAAD's collapse – but the question of whether to define as a feminist organisation was evidently treated by some as the major threat to the unity of Black women's groups.[77]

After the collapse of OWAAD in 1982, an editorial was printed in the Black community newsletter *Grass Roots*, criticising the feminism of the Brixton Black Women's Group as divisive.[78] The BBWG responded by insisting that their feminism was in fact a unifying force. As they put it, under patriarchal capitalist systems, 'It is in the interest of all those oppressed people throughout the world, and black people in particular, to recognise this oppression and

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[75] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Politics = Black Feminism', 15.

[76] Ibid., 16.

[77] For an analysis of the breakdown of OWAAD, see Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: On Black Women Organising', *Speak Out*, 1983; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 261–67. For an earlier draft of this article, see BBWG, 'BWG Editorial: On Black Women Organising'.

[78] BBWG, 'BBWG, Statement in Response to Grass Roots Editorial', 1982; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 251–54.

work towards its overthrow as part of the struggle for total liberation'.[79] In doing so, the BBWG aligned themselves with Amos and Parmar who wrote: 'For us there is no choice. [...] Only a synthesis of class, race, gender and sexuality can lead us forward, as these form the matrix of Black women's lives'.[80] Despite revealing deep frustration with the wider and whiter feminist movement, they were insistent on the importance of a distinctly Black British feminist perspective. '[T]he way forward', Amos and Parmar wrote, 'lies in defining a feminism which is significantly different to the dominant trends in the women's liberation movement'.[81] The BBWG concurred: feminism needed to be done differently, but it still had to be done.

III. Feminism and over-policing

The BBWG's insistence on a Black British feminist perspective was not only theoretical – it shaped the very subjects the BBWG chose to confront. Their feminism emerged not in abstraction but in direct response to lived conditions, and among the most pressing of these was the escalating presence of police violence in Black communities. The BBWG, grounded in a Black socialist feminist perspective, demanded an account of how state violence was gendered as well as racialised.

By the late 1970s, the BBWG's insistence on connecting race, class, and gender found particularly urgent expression in the context of the criminalisation of the Black community. At the time, the field-defining research centre the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary

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[79] BBWG, 'BBWG, Statement in Response to Grass Roots Editorial'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 253.

[80] Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', 1 November 1984.

[81] Ibid., 17.

Cultural Studies (CCCS) had begun to document the political construction of crime, focusing on the racialised moral panic around 'mugging'.[82] Stuart Hall, director of the CCCS between 1969 and 1979, and others at the Centre argued that the media and state actors were actively manipulating statistics to make it appear as though new crimes – including 'mugging' – were exponentially growing, and disproportionately perpetrated by Black youth, particularly young Black men. By 1972, 'mugging' – first reported in the British press in 1972 after gaining traction in the United States – had come to be treated as one of the biggest threats to British civil order.[83] As community activist Cecil Gutzmore put it, this operated 'to persuade the public that "mugging" was increasing massively, that black youth were principally involved in such "mugging", and that the victims were mainly elderly white women'.[84] As historian Nydia Swaby has argued, this discursive shift reflected the state's ability to weigh in on what and who counted as 'Black'.[85]

Increasingly, to be Black was to be treated as a criminal – regardless of whether one had committed a criminal act or not. Given that the function of the police is to arrest criminals, the function of the police became to arrest Black people. This is not to say that police officers were innocent when they conducted arrests – police were not, as People Against Police Occupation put it in c. 1981, simply 'doing their job' when they behaved in a racist manner.[86] Indeed, police action is one of the mechanisms by which Blackness has been constructed

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[82] Cecil Gutzmore, 'Capital, "Black Youth" and Crime', *Race & Class* 25, no. 2 (1 October 1983): 14, https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688302500203.

[83] Ibid., 18.

[84] Ibid., 19.

[85] Swaby, '"Disparate in Voice, Sympathetic in Direction"', 13. Swaby is drawing on Mirza, *Black British Feminism*, 15.

[86] People Against Police Occupation, 'Only Doing Their Job?', n.d., Gutzmore/7/13, Black Cultural Archives.

as criminality: a function of the police is to produce and reproduce criminals. The police, People Against Police Occupation argued, 'are firmly on the side of those who oppress us'.[87]

The BBWG joined their voices with a wider concern expressed by the British Black community about the use of excessive police force and racial targeting of Black people. In a 1978 Police Liaison inquiry initiated by Lambeth Council – which included the Brixton area – it was written that for the Black community the police were 'an army of occupation'.[88] The description of an external force of domination invasively laying claim to Black-majority areas clearly resonated with activists, who repeated it in their descriptions of police relations.[89] Closely echoing this description in 1982, the BBWG would write, 'To be Black in Brixton means living under a state of siege', evoking a British Black community at war with a racist police state.[90]

The image of the 'Black criminal' was a disproportionately male one. Mavis Best (née Clarke), a prominent voice in anti-Black policing, recalled how before she became involved in activism, she '[didn't] even know anything about the police except the fact that they're beating up black men in the street which is a terrible thing'.[91] Best was not alone in her perception of police misconduct as an issue largely affecting men. In the Birmingham Centre's report on

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[87] Ibid., 3.

[88] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising', *Spare Rib*, June 1981; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 205.

[89] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 205; Gutzmore, 'Capital, "Black Youth" and Crime', 25; Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, 45.

[90] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 203.

[91] Mavis Best, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Mavis Best, interview by Ego Ahaiwe, 3 March 2009, 5, IV/279/2/7/1a/IV/279/2/7/1b, Lambeth Archives.

mugging, there was no detailed analysis of the effects of police misconduct against women.[92] The implication was that this was not an issue in which women had a particular stake. For some, this also meant it was not an issue on which feminists ought to act.[93] For the BBWG, however, such a conclusion was dissatisfying on two counts. On the one hand, it failed to treat struggles for Black and women's liberation as intimately linked. On the other, it missed the many and multiple ways in which women were directly (and indirectly) impacted by police misconduct.

Political theorist Shatema Threadcraft has written about the politics of death in the contemporary United States, describing the way that 'It is not obvious that those concerned with the forces endangering black women's lives must adopt a strict "what happens to men also happens to us" approach'.[94] I want to suggest that Black feminist activists in Britain were thinking about policing in a similar way during the 1970s. As the Brixton Group explained, policing went beyond 'hostile police on the streets': it did not always, they knew, fit the traditionally masculine arrest and incarceration paradigm.[95] Black women did at times experience more public forms of street violence – something the Brixton Black Women's Group were quick to emphasise in their account of the Brixton Uprising in 1982 (and as I explore in chapter five). But while the BBWG were concerned with these modes of police misconduct in their community, their analysis also shed crucial light on the gendered effects of police misconduct. Policing for Black women, they contended, also meant the indirect terrorisation of

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[92] Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Critical Social Studies (London: Macmillan, 1978).

[93] Recall, for example, the epithet of this chapter.

[94] Shatema Threadcraft, 'North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 566, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3961483.

[95] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 19.

mothers through the arrest of family members, the extension of police violence to the private sphere, and sexual abuse.[96]

Members of the BBWG were centrally concerned with the way that Black women were produced as anxious through the excessive policing of family life. The fear that children would be arrested was described by the BBWG as a core 'difficult[y] of bringing up a family in a racist society'.[97] As they implied, the constant psychological demands of anticipating the potential arrest of a child or partner was a particular and perverse aspect of state power that Black mothers had to navigate. It was, as the anonymous authors of 'Black Women and the British Law' put it, 'the Black woman [… who] does the worrying when her man, locked-up in jail, doesn't come home at night'.[98] The encroachment of state power into the domestic sphere was a less public element of police harassment but, as argued in a second anonymously authored piece, this harassment was nonetheless significant. Black women, it was written, 'have direct and first-hand experience of how it feels when our people become the victims of a racist Police Force, backed to the hilt by a racist State. Mother, sister, daughter, lover, fighter – we know how it feels!'[99] Notably, the authors emphasised that their experience was 'direct': while they might not always be the arrested party, their terrorisation was an identifiable consequence of police action. And what's more, they were part of the wider group of targeted individuals, not just secondary observers, personally experiencing victimisation by the police.

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[96] 'Scrap Sus Conference', 16 June 1979, Dadzie /1/1/38, Black Cultural Archives.

[97] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 19.

[98] 'Black Women and the British Law', n.d., 5, Scafe/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[99] 'Black Women & the Police & Criminal Evidence Bill', n.d., 1, Scafe/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

In order to understand the effects of policing on Black women, attention had to be shifted away from the policing of public spaces – police stations, court houses, prisons, the street – and towards the private sphere of the Black home. It was here, women argued, that less-public forms of harassment took place. The arrest of Black sons, partners, and friends frequently took place within the purportedly private sphere and had become a feature of Black experience. Within the home, the Brixton Black Women's Group argued, other state actors also took on policing roles: 'indifferent housing officers in the council, unsympathetic teachers in the schools and prying social security officers in our homes' would '[pass] judgement on a family situation with which they are completely out of tune'.[100] For Black women, even the 'welfare system' was frequently a site of punishment, including through the removal of their children.[101]

In 'Black Women and the Police and Criminal Justice Bill,' the authors articulated Black women's position with stark clarity: 'while the Englishman's home may once have been his castle, the black woman's home has always been open house to the local police, who have used any excuse – or none at all – to barge into our lives and wreak havoc'.[102] The authors laid out a challenge to assumptions about the kind of privacy the 'private sphere' affords. Far from being a sanctuary or retreat, the Black home existed as an 'open house' to police intrusion, effectively treated as continuous with the public sphere, and constructed as legitimately governed by the white state. The perpetual possibility of intrusions created a constant psychological burden for Black communities.

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[100] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'British Immigration Laws - An Attack on Black People', *Speak Out!*, c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 18–19; 38. The author also notes that West Indian homes are invaded and the adult inhabitants are forced to 'prove' they are a child's parents. 'Black Women and the British Law', 6.

[101] 'Black Women and the British Law'.

[102] 'Black Women & the Police & Criminal Evidence Bill', 2.

Police intrusion into Black domestic spaces was not merely a theoretical possibility – it occurred regularly in practice. And, as the authors of 'Black Women and the British Law' put it, 'It is the Black woman who has to put up with the constant police raids in search of her men'.[103] The BBWG described 'continuous raids on the homes of Black families' which targeted Black people 'suspected to be illegal immigrants'.[104] As Ford has summarised, '"Immigrant" became a euphemism for "black," a term the state used in policing its nonwhite subjects'.[105] The state, on her analysis, judged all Black residents to be potential non-citizens and used excessive force as a tactic for their intimidation and removal.

In May 1977, the threat of violence became a reality for countless Black women when a dawn raid was conducted in Lewisham, South London, ostensibly searching for young residents accused of 'conspiracy'.[106] Twenty one young people were arrested during the raid but, as Gutzmore pointed out in 1978, 'Was it fifty-nine homes that were raided last year in order to produce the famous "Lewisham 24"'?[107] The implications of Gutzmore's question are twofold. First, Gutzmore was clear that the criminalisation of this group of young Black people was manufactured by the police: they were 'produced' as criminal rather than innately criminal. Second, Gutzmore emphasised that the raid impacted three times as many families as the

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[103] 'Black Women and the British Law', 5.

[104] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Immigration', *Speak Out!*, c 1980; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 171. The searching of Black homes for 'so-called "illegal immigrants"' is also noted in is also noted in UBWAG, 'Letter from UBWAG', 6 April 1979, 1, Dadzie/4/3, Black Cultural Archives.

[105] Ford, 'We Were People of Soul', 126.

[106] Colin Prescod, 'Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign – a Report', *Race & Class* 58, no. 1 (1 July 2016): 94–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396816643046.

[107] Gutzmore quotes in ibid. Three young black people had been arrested at a protest in support of the then-Lewisham 21, making up the now-Lewisham 24.

number of individuals arrested – families that were in turn composed of untold numbers. The scale of violence against the Black community, Gutzmore implied, unfolded beyond direct arrest.

To take just one example, for Christopher Foster, who was granted bail as one of the Lewisham 24, the May 1977 raid was only the beginning. A second raid on his home took place during which his mother, Ada, and his sisters, Dawn and Claire, were present. The family suffered injuries by the police and were consequently hospitalised.[108] Ada and Dawn were each charged with assault and Christopher was charged with breaking his bail conditions.[109] And the Foster's case was not unique. In 1983, as we recall from the introduction of this chapter, the Mozart 7 were 'beaten up in their own home' and arrested after refusing entry to police officers who did not have a warrant.[110] In 1985, Cynthia Jarrett died from a heart attack during a police raid on her home.[111] Later that year, Cherry Groce was shot and paralysed by police officers in a raid searching for her son.[112] When Groce died in 2011 of kidney failure, a jury ruled that police actions from 26 years earlier had contributed to her death.[113] As each of these cases show, the injuries done to Black women were at times indirect

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[108] 'Lewisham Family to Sue Police', *The Guardian*, 19 September 1977.

[109] 'Lewisham Family to Sue Police - ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer - ProQuest', accessed 5 November 2024, https://www.proquest.com/hnpguardianobserver/docview/185951892/fulltextPDF/3866259C8F9F4BF2PQ/4?accountid=13042&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers.

[110] 'Defend the 7 Mozart Women'.

[111] Cecily JonesCecily Jones, 'Broadwater Farm Riots', in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford University Press, 2007), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780192804396.001.0001/acref-9780192804396-e-63.

[112] Ibid.

[113] 'Cherry Groce: Mum's Police Shooting "Robbed Me of My Childhood"', *BBC News*, 30 June 2020, sec. Home, https://www.bbc.com/news/53233573.

and therefore harder to measure than the injuries done to Black men – and often less than public. They were, nonetheless, critical to understanding the functioning of the police.

Another less-public dimension of gendered police misconduct was sexual violence. As the BBWG explained, 'Young Black women are strip searched for any offence', with agents of the state treating their bodies, much like their homes, as legitimate sites of policing.[114] This pattern of abuse reflected a broader historical context in which Black sexuality had been systematically misrepresented by white state actors as unchecked and dangerous, thereby legitimating violence against Black communities. As Ida B. Wells described in an 1892 US context, Black men have been systematically represented as raping white women to justify Black men's violent murder whilst simultaneously obscuring the widespread rape of Black women by white men.[115] The sexual power asserted by the state was similarly unmediated in 1970s Britain. As the anonymous authors of 'Black Women & the Police & Criminal Evidence Bill' would put it, 'intimate body searches' were 'carried out by force' against Black people.[116] Reflecting on the general state of relations, the BBWG wrote 'If you are a Black woman in confrontation with the police, you also have to contend with insinuations referring to Black sexuality'.[117] Sexual police misconduct, they went on, 'instils within [Black women] the knowledge that the police are not there to protect, but to irritate and intimidate'.[118] The

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[114] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 203.

[115] For more on Wells's work, see Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions; Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, N.Y.: Amistad, 2008).

[116] 'Black Women & the Police & Criminal Evidence Bill', 2.

[117] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 203.

[118] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women and Abortion', *Leaflet Distributed by the Brixton Black Women's Group*, c 1979; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 103–4.

systematic violation of Black women's bodily autonomy created a pervasive awareness that they were vulnerable to state institutions which offered them no protection.

By 1979, sexual abuse at the hands of state agents had gained national attention through feminist and mainstream coverage of the 'virginity test' scandal at Heathrow airport.[119] Hymen examinations – which were conducted as a proxy for determining sexual history – were being used to police the bodies of women migrating to Britain, especially women from India. The purported rationale was that if a woman had an unbroken hymen, she had not had sex, and 'she is considered unmarried and therefore a fiancee' of a British resident.[120] As notes located in Scafe's archive set out, the virginity tests represented a sexist and racist form of state control: '[the] whole sordid business is a crude and vicious way of keeping out Indian women now that the British government does not need Asian labour any more'.[121] On this analysis, Third World Women were subjected to sexual policing specifically because the state had deemed their labour superfluous, and their bodies unwelcome.

Members of the BBWG recognised the shared experience of sexual policing for women of colour and positioned themselves at the forefront of protests against the so-called 'virginity tests'. They participated at sit-ins at Heathrow organised by Asian women in OWAAD and the Asian women's collective Awaz.[122] The BBWG also joined Awaz, along with the Black Socialist Alliance and the Indian Workers' Association, to form the 'Committee Against Racist Immigration Procedures and Police Harassment', which organised a

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[119] Wilson, *Finding a Voice*; 'Immigration Tests in Britain', *Spare Rib*, April 1979; 'Harassment at Heathrow', *Spare Rib*, March 1979; Melanie Phillips, 'Virginity Tests on Immigrants at Heathrow', *The Guardian*, 1 February 1979, 186061949.

[120] 'Virginity Tests', n.d., Scafe/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[121] Ibid.

[122] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution', 2.

demonstration on 8 April 1979.[123] It was emphasised in an issue of *Spare Rib* that the demonstration was organised 'entirely' by Black women and thereby maintained their 'autonomy'.[124] Support – from Black men and white people – was welcomed, but these participants had to be 'prepared to take a lead from blacks'.[125] In recognition that this experience was distinctly theirs as Black women, the BBWG insisted that: 'it is those who are oppressed who are the best equipped to liberate themselves'.[126]

IV. Scrap Sus

While the BBWG drew out the gendered dimensions of police misconduct, their participation in broader anti-policing campaigns sometimes required them to work within male-dominated contexts. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the BBWG were involved in mainstream activism against police harassment that, as Natalie Thomlinson has noted, 'primarily benefitted men'.[127] In particular, the BBWG participated in efforts to draw attention to the intensive redeployment of section 4 of the *Vagrancy Act 1824* – a piece of legislation that was being disproportionately used against the Black population.[128]

The Vagrancy Act was grounded in the notion of 'suspicion' – under this law, a person could be arrested if they were deemed likely to commit an offence, even if no crime had been committed. This led to it being popularly known as the 'Sus' law in the 1970s. Despite this

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[123] 'Immigration Tests in Britain', 11.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 218–19.

[127] Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 85.

[128] For more on this, see fn 171.

modern rebranding, the application of Sus remained faithful to its 1824 origins.[129] If a judge believed the word of two witnesses – witnesses that could include the arresting officers – the accused could be sentenced to three months in prison as a 'rogue or vagabond' without a trial by jury.[130] If they received a second conviction under Sus, the charge was escalated to 'incorrigible rogue' and carried a potential sentence of up to 12 months.[131] At a conference held in 1979 to discuss the Sus law, it was pointed out that in practice 'policemen are always the only witnesses'.[132] And, as members of the BBWG reported, '[t]he magistrates nearly always believe the police'.[133] This structural bias had measurable effects: while 95% of those accused under Sus pled 'not guilty', 86% were ultimately convicted.[134]

The BBWG were undeniably preoccupied with the Sus law. Sus featured in seven out of the 55 articles published in *Speak Out* – appearing more than any other piece of legislation – and the BBWG also drew attention to the laws in articles they wrote for *Spare Rib* and *Red Rag*.[135] In this way, the group explicitly tied their public identity to protesting Sus. Reflecting

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[129] As noted in 'Scrap Sus Conference', 1. The original legislation can be found at: Section 4 'Vagrancy Act 1824', § 83 (1824), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/83.

[130] For more on the stipulations of the law, see Paul Boateng, 'Black Youth & The Law', in *Images and Reflections Section 4: 'SUS' The Black Child and the Law*, ed. ACER Project, 1979, 9–13.

[131] David McNee, 'The Suspected Person Offence, Section 4 Vagrancy Act 1824. A Paper Prepared for the Race Relations and Immigration Sub-Committee of the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons', February 1980, 2, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

[132] 'Scrap Sus Conference'.

[133] Waters, *Thinking Black*; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Scrap Sus Now', *Speak Out!*, c 1979; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 77.

[134] Basil Manning, 'Suspected Persons'.

[135] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'British Immigration Laws - An Attack on Black People'; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', *Speak Out*, c 1979; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Scrap Sus Now'; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Reviews: Black Britannica by David Koff'; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Background

on her activism within the BBWG, Melba Wilson recalls how campaigning against Sus was one of the major political struggles in which she participated, and a key part of the BBWG's agenda.[136] The repeated singling out of the law in the BBWG's work suggests that the campaign against it was essential to the group's identity as a Black feminist organisation.

The BBWG joined wider efforts against Sus when it joined the Black People Organisations Campaign Against Sus (BPOCAS). BPOCAS first came together in c. 1975, when parents in Deptford began to organise against the disproportionate arrest of their children.[137] The organisation put forward two demands: for the complete retraction of Sus and for 'an independent enquiry into black/police relations'.[138] These demands were accompanied by the insistence that Black youths 'should be treated as people, not as criminals'.[139] The campaign

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to the Cuts: It's Our Turn Again', *Speak Out*, c 1980; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: On Black Women Organising'; Southall Campaign Against the Police Bill, 'The Police and Criminal Evidence Bill: A Briefing', *Speak Out*, 1983; republished, respectively, in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 42, 72, 76–79, 100 154, 258–59, 270. Other Acts discussed in *Speak Out* include: the Child Benefit Act 1975 (also referred to as the Child Tax Allowance), which is mentioned three times; the Employment Protection Act, mentioned once; the 1971 Immigration Act, mentioned once; and the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill, mentioned twice. Immigration Acts are referred to generally, that is, not by name, in a total of six articles.

[136] Melba Wilson in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 328, 335.

[137] 'Scrap Sus Conference'. Mavis Clarke and Dean Huggins, 'The Scrap Sus Campaign', in *Community Work and Racism* (Routledge, 1982), 139. The first Scrap Sus Conference was in June 1979; the participants describe how 'a handful of black parents in Deptford' first met 18 months prior, putting the start of the campaign at January 1978. OWAAD suggested the start date was 1976, but given that the participants themselves agree it was 1975 this is the date that seems more likely.

[138] Clarke and Huggins, 'The Scrap Sus Campaign', 140–41; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Scrap Sus Now'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 79.

[139] Black Peoples Organisations Campaign Against Sus, 'Justice for All - Not Just for Some!', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

became a rallying call and, by February 1977, BPOCAS had expanded to become a coalition of over 50 black groups – including the Brixton Black Women's Group.[140]

In February 1978, BPOCAS was popularly known as the 'Scrap Sus Campaign' – at which point, a further 40 affiliations had been made.[141] Later that year, Scrap Sus joined seven other Black activist groups, including the Brixton Black Women's Group and the Asian women's collective Mukhti, to form the national organisation Black People Against State Harassment (BASH).[142] BASH aimed to 'support all Black campaigns, groups and organisations fighting state harassment of black people'.[143] One of BASH's key concerns was with the policies of Metropolitan Police Commissioner David McNee, who had been appointed in 1977.[144] McNee proposed extending police powers, including through granting police the ability to 'arrest and hold people for 3 days, *without charge*' and giving them 'greater powers to search people and raid their homes, *without a warrant*'.[145] BASH also called for an end to police harassment in prisons and undisclosed detention lengths, the use of Special Patrol Groups (sent to over-police majority-Black areas), and racism in the judiciary.[146] But despite

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[140] Clarke and Huggins, 'The Scrap Sus Campaign', 141.

[141] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Scrap Sus Campaign - Briefing Paper 1', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Support for Campaign Grows', *Scrap Sus Campaign News*, no. 3 (July 1979): 5.

[142] Prescod, 'Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign – a Report'; Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) / Awaz, Brixton Black Women's Group & United Black Women's Action Group, 'Black Women Together: The Need for a United and Autonomous National Black Women's Organisation'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 138.

[143] Prescod, 'Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign – a Report'.

[144] Ibid.

[145] 'Scrap Sus Conference'; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 78. Emphasis original.

[146] See, for example, 'Page 7', n.d., 7, Dadzie/1/1/32, Black Cultural Archives.

this wide agenda, BASH continued to list Sus as the first of several laws its members opposed.[147]

The Scrap Sus campaign's role in BASH was reflective of its broader politics which were consistently aimed at building national bonds of solidarity across the British Black community. In June 1979, the campaign united with the Indian Workers' Association in the first national demonstration against anti-Black state brutality.[148] Also in June 1979, with grassroots activist Mavis Clarke and lawyer Paul Boateng at its head, Scrap Sus organised their first conference.[149] The coalition organised multiple pickets and demonstrations to publicise their demands, raise the profile of police abuses in national media, and coordinate legal defences for those accused under Sus.[150]

Within the Scrap Sus campaign, women were overwhelmingly represented as the mothers of arrested children. Mavis Best (née Clarke), a founding member of Scrap Sus, described how she was convinced to join the campaign after being encouraged to 'do something about the police arresting our kids'.[151] It was from this perspective – as a mother of targeted children – that Clarke became essential in building the Scrap Sus campaign, approaching 'local

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[147] For the language of abolition, see Clarke and Huggins, 'The Scrap Sus Campaign', 142.

[148] Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, 47.

[149] Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), 'Campaigns: Scrap Sus Conference', *FOWAAD!*, 1979; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 110. Also see 'National Scrap Sus Conference', n.d., Dadzie/1/1/31, Black Cultural Archives.

[150] This includes an anti-sus picket organised in Tottenham on Thursday 11 October 1979 (the only year of the active sus campaign in which the 11th Oct landed on a Thursday was 1979). See 'Picket Tottenham Magistrate Court', 1979, Dadzie/4/3, Black Cultural Archives. Also see Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 205–6; Clarke and Huggins, 'The Scrap Sus Campaign'.

[151] Mavis Best, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Mavis Best, 5.

people, women, whose kids who have been picked up' to drive the action forward.[152] Organising under what Gail Lewis has elsewhere described as the 'banner of the maternal', Clarke rallied women to campaign against Sus by appealing to them as the terrorised mothers of Black boys.[153]

When Martha Osamor, another central figure in the campaign, was introduced to the first meeting of BASH by Colin Prescod, she was similarly represented as speaking 'from the position of a Black woman and a mother among other organised militant Black women'.[154] For Prescod, Osamor's maternity was amongst the first things – by implication the most essential or relevant things – that the conference should know when trying to make sense of her position in the campaign. In the series of workshops at the first Scrap Sus conference, Osamor chaired a session on 'Sus and the Black Family', once again reinstating the primacy of her maternal perspective.[155]

Framing the Black woman's role in terms of motherhood, Natalie Thomlinson has argued, was in part a way of legitimising Black women's presence in the Scrap Sus campaign. As Thomlinson has pointed out, their maternal identity meant that they had a personal stake in the abolition of Sus.[156] This framing, however, also had a limiting effect: it reinforced the idea that Black women were only indirectly impacted by over-policing, positioned as the caretakers of the arrested rather than as subjects of police violence in their own right. This framing was distinct from the BBWG's feminist analysis, which had insisted that the policing of Black communities was a direct attack on women themselves, even when they weren't

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[152] Ibid.

[153] Lewis quoted in Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 85.

[154] Prescod, 'Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign – a Report'.

[155] 'National Scrap Sus Conference Agenda', c 1979, Dadzie/1/1/31, Black Cultural Archives.

[156] Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 85.

arrested. In the Scrap Sus campaign, however, the specificity of Black women's experiences of surveillance and criminalisation were flattened into a narrative of maternal concern, in which women were fighting *for* their sons rather than also fighting *as* subjects of state violence themselves.

Despite the undeniable focus on Black men and boys in Scrap Sus campaign materials, there were clear gendered affects to the Sus law. As David Lane, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, noted, high-performing Black girls were reported by teachers as unable to attend evening tuition because their parents feared they would be 'picked up on "sus"' on their way to class.[157] At a time when white women were 'reclaiming the streets' to draw attention to male sexual violence at night, Black girls were unable to walk safely at night due to the threat of police violence.[158] The active presence of Black feminists in the Scrap Sus campaign is also evidenced in a take-down critique of the popular Black magazine, *Roots*, printed in the campaign newsletter. Members of the campaign wrote: 'In its short history [*Roots*] has dismissed the black feminist movement, idolized pimps and attempted to turn the clock back on progressive thinking in the black community'.[159] Here, the platform of the Scrap Sus Campaign was taken by Black feminists to publicly oppose sexist tendencies in the wider movement. But despite these glimpses of a feminist presence, references to the distinctive impacts of over-policing on the lives of Black women were largely implied or absent from the

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[157] David Lane in 'Examination of Witnesses: David Lane and Francis Deutsch, before the Home Affairs Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration', 13 March 1980, 78, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

[158] On the Reclaim the Night movement, see Finn Mackay, 'The March of Reclaim the Night: Feminist Activism in Movement' (Ph.D., University of Bristol, 2013), https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.627950.

[159] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Sus, Newsletter of the Scrap Sus Campaign', Spring 1980, 6, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

Scrap Sus campaign.[160] This was exemplified in the images used across the campaign's media which were, almost exclusively, pictures of young Black men.[161]

The dilution of the BBWG's analysis of gendered police misconduct was compounded by the marginalisation of Black women's leadership in the Scrap Sus campaign. Clarke described her frustration with the prevailing dynamic, noting that prominent male organisers 'think they knew it all', recalling how 'we had some real struggles with those guys actually'.[162] Her frustrations extended to prominent intellectual-activists, including Colin Prescod (the sociologist and once-Chair of the Council of the Institute of Race Relations), Alrick Xavier (Ricky) Cambridge (founder of the *Black Liberator*), and Cecil Gutzmore, (historian and Windrush activist).[163] The history of Black liberation, Clarke emphasised, has been intertwined with patriarchy. These dynamics were familiar; as it was put in the draft OWAAD constitution, 'Black organisations have always been male-dominated and they have always regarded the Woman Question as either "secondary" or totally irrelevant'.[164] When Black men personally gained from dominating conversation as if they 'knew it all', the Scrap Sus

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[160] Exceptions include when Black women were impacted as partners of arrested men; in these cases, however, the fact that women were being impacted directly are absent. For example, see ACER Project, ed., 'Bad Deal in Babylon', in *Images and Reflections Section 4: 'SUS' The Black Child and the Law*, 1979, 9–13.

[161] Black Peoples Organisations Campaign Against Sus, 'Justice for All - Not Just for Some!'; 'Forty Two Years Later It's Still Happening', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; 'Freedom for Black Youth and Others from Sus', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; 'Scrap Sus Now! National Conference Poster', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Sus Is Still Alive and... They're Still Kicking', n.d., RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

[162] Mavis Best, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Mavis Best, 10.

[163] Ibid., 4.

[164] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution', 3.

campaign collectively lost out – not least through forfeiting Black women's insight on the wide-ranging impacts of police harassment.

The internal antagonisms of the Scrap Sus Campaign were largely hidden from public view as the campaign gained ever-greater momentum. In Spring 1980, Scrap Sus reported having gained the support of the British Council of Churches, Labour and Liberal parties, and even some Conservative MPs.[165] Under increasing pressure, in 1980 the Home Affairs Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration set out to review the Sus law. As part of this, the Sub-Committee called for evidence, including from the Commission for Racial Equality, the National Council of Civil Liberties, and Met Commissioner David McNee.[166] But it was the Scrap Sus Campaign that 'was the first on an impressive list of organisations' to present its submission to the Sub-Committee.[167]

In a written statement, the Scrap Sus Campaign summarised: 'The view of the community is that Black youngsters are being unfairly picked on and harassed by the police, who see being Black and young as being synonymous with potential criminality'.[168] The document they submitted drew attention to the racialised nature of Sus convictions, and the 'nebulous

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[165] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Sus, Newsletter of the Scrap Sus Campaign', 6.

[166] 'Memorandum Submitted by the Commission for Racial Equality: Race Relations and the "Sus" Law', 13 March 1980, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; National Council for Civil Liberties and scrap sus campaign, 'Briefing Paper on an Act to Abolish the Criminal Offence of Being a Suspected Person or Suspected Persons (Abolition) Bill 1978', 14 December 1978, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; David McNee, 'The Suspected Person Offence, Section 4 Vagrancy Act 1824. A Paper Prepared for the Race Relations and Immigration Sub-Committee of the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons'.

[167] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Sus, Newsletter of the Scrap Sus Campaign'.

[168] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Evidence of the Scrap Sus Campaign to the Race Relations and Immigration Sub-Committee of the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons', n.d., 3, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

nature' of most charges.[169] Despite the posturing of Black men in the campaign, when it came for the Scrap Sus to give oral evidence in February 1980, it was Mavis Clarke alongside lawyer Paul Boateng who went forward to speak to the All-Party Sub-Committee.[170] The Sus law was, Clarke and Boateng insisted, being applied in a discriminatory way – presenting the case the Black community had been arguing for months through protests and awareness raising.

In gathering evidence, the Black British community put huge efforts into evidencing what they already knew: that Sus was being disproportionately used against Black people. The Commission for Racial Equality put forward statistics showing that across Met districts in 1978, 44% of all those arrested under Sus were Black individuals.[171] The rate in Lambeth, which included Brixton, were the highest: 77% of arrests were of Black people.[172] Meanwhile, as members of the Scrap Sus Steering Committee pointed out, Black people made up just 17% of the Lambeth population.[173] The racialised application of the Sus law was, they insisted, indisputable.

And yet, Metropolitan Commissioner David McNee argued to the contrary. McNee attempted to discredit the evidence put forward by Scrap Sus, saying that none of it 'would

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[169] Ibid.

[170] Mavis Best, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Mavis Best, 1. Anne Chang's name is, presumably, misspelt in the transcript as Ann Chan. P6 for select committee appearance description.

[171] 'Memorandum Submitted by the Commission for Racial Equality: Race Relations and the "Sus" Law', 76.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Scrap Sus Campaign Steering Committee, 'Let the Police Be Accountable!: Evidence and Recommendations to the Inquiry into Community/Police Relations in Lambeth', 4 February 1980, Gutzmore/1/5/1, Black Cultural Archives.

meet the minimum standards of academic research' (despite using some of the same statistics in his own submission).[174] Recognising the public outcry against Sus, he nonetheless proposed making procedural changes to Sus, updating the language to 'modern terms' and ensuring legal representation for the accused.[175] But while he was open to adaptations, he maintained that the Sus law was an essential tool in the Met Police's artillery and should not be repealed.

McNee's suggestion of mere amendments was treated with suspicion by the Scrap Sus Campaign.[176] As they put it, 'We will not be soothed by sweet talk from David McNee', before insisting that 'There is no substitute for total abolition'.[177] Caught between these conflicting viewpoints, the Chairman of Committee reflected: 'We are awash with statistical information. I do not think there is an ounce more that we need. The question is: How do we make a subjective judgement?'[178]

In July 1981, a subjective judgement was taken with the publication of the *Criminal Attempts Act 1981*. In the proposed legislation, and under advice from the Home Affairs Sub-Committee, the Sus law was revoked. The new Act was set to commence on 27 August

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[174] David McNee, 'The Suspected Person Offence, Section 4 Vagrancy Act 1824. A Paper Prepared for the Race Relations and Immigration Sub-Committee of the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons', 6, 8. McNee uses the same 44% figure in 1977.

[175] Ibid., 4–5, 10.

[176] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Evidence of the Scrap Sus Campaign to the Race Relations and Immigration Sub-Committee of the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons', 4.

[177] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Sus Is Still Alive and... They're Still Kicking', 2.

[178] Chairman of the Home Affairs Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration 'Examination of Witnesses: David Lane and Francis Deutsch, before the Home Affairs Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration', 80–81.

1981.[179] But before Scrap Sus could celebrate what was, on the face of it, a huge success for the campaign, they noted that a new clause had been introduced in its place: interfering with a vehicle 'with the intention' of committing a criminal offence became a prosecutable offence.[180] Legal experts dubbed this clause 'motor sus' and the National Council for Civil Liberties described the Act as 'Sus in disguise'.[181] In 1984, three years after the Vagrancy Act was revoked, it was superseded by the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984* which effectively replaced the original legislation.[182] The letter of the law may have been altered, but once again, the Black community was being stopped and searched – seemingly at random, but systematically for being Black.

V. Conclusion: the unity of theory and practice

Black feminism in Britain – and the field of Black Women's Studies more broadly – was a response, in part, to the exclusion of Black women's perspectives in the wider anti-racist

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[179] On 27 August date, Nicole M. Jackson, '"A Nigger in the New England": "Sus", the Brixton Riot, and Citizenship', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 8, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 158–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1027330.

[180] 'Criminal Attempts Act 1981' (King's Printer of Acts of Parliament), accessed 21 June 2025, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/47.

[181] Charles G Blake, 'Crime: The Criminal Attempts Act 1981', in *Law & Practice*, Legal Action Group Bulletin, October 1981, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives; National Council for Civil Liberties, '"Sus in Disguise" - Help Stop the Criminal Attempts Bill', 24 January 1981, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

[182] Jackson, '"A Nigger in the New England"', 169. See analysis in Southall Campaign Against the Police Bill, 'The Police and Criminal Evidence Bill: A Briefing'; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 270.

movement and the white women's movement.[183] Black feminists maintained that these movements were fundamentally limited in their refusal to confront the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class. For the Brixton Black Women's Group, a Black feminist perspective opened up new ways to think about oppression – including the ways that exposed how multiple forms of domination reinforced each other. This perspective in turn informed their analysis of the gendered consequences of police harassment. As the BBWG maintained, over-policing in the Black community was not only a matter of racial targeting, but also deeply gendered: Black women were disproportionately sexualised, subjected to invasive house raids, and targeted as mothers and lovers.

And yet, when it came to practical application, the BBWG's distinctive analysis was at times sacrificed. The group participated in anti-police harassment campaigns that framed the contributions of women through the lens of their relationships to men – and which did not draw sustained attention to gendered police misconduct. While a Black feminist analysis undoubtedly motivated women to organise on the issue of over-policing, the emphasis of campaigns like Scrap Sus remained focused on the position of Black men. The gendered dimensions of police power – so central to the BBWG's theoretical interventions – were largely side-lined in the broader movement's messaging and demands.

The willingness of the BBWG to unite with other Black groups can (and, I think, should) be read as exemplifying their capacity to make alliances across difference. The BBWG consistently participated in broad coalitions that won significant victories. But as Suzanne Scafe has reflected, the prioritisation of practical action – at times over theoretical consistency – was also an imperfect response to the pressure of organising. Activism took 'an immense amount of work and a huge commitment', Scafe explained: 'It really didn't leave us time to

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[183] Extracts from Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* were published in; Anne Hooyveld, 'Black Women's Studies', *Spare Rib*, November 1982.

think about our original commitment to a black socialist feminist group'.[184] The day-to-day reality of activism – the constant strain of police surveillance, the exhaustion of balancing political work with paid work and family care – left little room for sustained theoretical reflection. In other words, the BBWG's rich analysis of patriarchy, racism, and classism was at times neglected in the face of enormous practical challenges. The result was missed opportunities to challenge the specific ways Black women experienced gendered police misconduct.

As much as the BBWG's feminist analysis was sometimes neglected in the campaigns they supported, members of the group aspired to something else: the unity of theory and practice. This aspiration was embodied in the figure of Olive Morris, whose death at the age of 27 sent shockwaves through the BBWG. Morris has since become an emblematic figure in British Black women's history.[185] One of the founding members of the BBWG, Morris insisted on centring the manifold oppressions facing Black women, both in analysis and action. In Morris's obituary published in *Speak Out*, the BBWG wrote: 'Olive achieved what we would all like to achieve, and that was the unity of theory and practice. She shared with us the vision of a society free from racism, sexism and the exploitation of man by man'.[186] For Morris, it was not enough to theorise oppression; oppression had to be fought in the everyday moments of Black women's lives.

This commitment to political clarity and cohesion of theory and practice also shaped the reflections of former member of the British Black Panthers and Mangrove Nine activist, Barbara Beese. In January 1975, Beese spoke to the position of Black women in Britain. 'In

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[184] Suzanne Scafe in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 373.

[185] She has, for example, has the oral history collection 'Do You Remember Olive Morris?' dedicated to preserving memories of her, held at the Lambeth Archive.

[186] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Memories of Olive: A Very Strong and Fearless Black Sister'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 181.

the Black Women's Group', she warned, 'we stand in danger of becoming "just another women's group", facing similar problems of demoralisation, not learning from what has gone before us and not able to see in totality what is taking place with ourselves and other sisters now'.[187] What history shows, she argued, was that activists must resist the impulse to '[take] up issues instead of positions'.[188] Moving from problem to problem, as though each posed a discrete challenge, eclipsed activists' abilities to address systems of power. In the place of this fragmented and reactive approach, a cohesive political framework would enable Black women to enact revolutionary change in which systems could be overturned in their totality. '[P]olitical principles' and 'perspective', Beese wrote, 'can only come from the historical and present mass practice of black women'. In short, theory and practice had to evolve together and mutually interact, alongside a continual reflection on unfolding events.

The BBWG recognised that the unity of theory and practice was something to be worked towards amid setbacks and compromise. And their history – of visionary theorising, imperfect coalition-building, and persistent activism – offers important lessons for today. In contemporary movements that grapple with racism, sexism, and state violence, the BBWG's experience serves as a reminder of both the power and the difficulty of sustaining a complex and at-times unpopular analysis in practice. It also shows that when theory falters under the weight of urgent action, the aspiration for total liberation is put at risk.

In our own time and place, the Black community continues to live under the legacy of the Sus law. According to official government statistics, 'between April 2022 and March 2023, there were 24.5 stop and searches for every 1,000 black people in England and Wales' –

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[187] Barbara Beese, 'My Comments on the Discussion on Rape Are These...', n.d., 2, Scafe/3/2, Black Cultural Archives.

[188] Ibid.

compared with 5.9 white people for every 1,000.[189] The Runnymede Trust thinktank has further shown that 'Black children are 6 times more likely to be strip searched [than white children]'.[190] The legal mechanisms which legitimise the disproportionate stop and search tactics against racialised people today are the direct inheritance of the Sus law.

The persistence of racialised policing has rightly remained at the forefront of political concern; its legacy is unbroken. The insights Black women contributed – particularly around the gendered dimensions of police harassment – have, however, been largely ignored. As Shatema Threadcraft has shown in her discussion of necropolitics in the United States, the persistent marginalisation of Black women's experience has enabled the less public deaths of Black women to consistently 'receive less attention and activism' than the deaths of black men at the hands of the police.[191] Challenges we face today become legible as not merely a familiar cycle, but instead a continuation of unresolved issues – and ones that Black feminist thinkers and organisers identified decades ago.

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[189] 'Stop and Search', 3 July 2024, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest/.

[190] 'Runnymede Trust Response to the Strip Search of Children in England and Wales - Analysis by the Children's Commissioner for England', accessed 10 May 2025, https://www.runnymede-trust.org//news/runnymede-trust-response-to-the-strip-search-of-children-in-england-and-wales-analysis-by-the-childrens-commissioner-for-england.

[191] Threadcraft, 'North American Necropolitics and Gender', 555.

-5-

'Techniques of Survival': the Brixton Defence Campaign and the Brixton Black Women's Group, c. 1981 – 1983

'If they come for you in the morning, they will come for us in the night'.[1]

Suzanne Scafe (1981)

In January 1978, Margaret Thatcher, soon-to-be Prime Minister, gave an interview for the British current affairs programme *World in Action*.[2] '[P]eople', she argued, 'are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture'.[3] Broadcast to an audience of up to 23 million viewers, Thatcher signalled that under her leadership,

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[1] Suzanne Scafe, pp. Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Letter to Coral', c 1981, Gutzmore/1/2/2, Brixton Black Cultural Archives. Scafe is quoting from 'a leading black writer', namely James Baldwin. This quote is originally taken from a letter Baldwin wrote to Angela Davis in support of her release from Marin County jail, where she was held from 1970-1972 under charges of conspiracy to commit murder and kidnapping. James Baldwin, 'An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis', in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Y. Davis (London: Orbach and Chambers Ltd for the Angela Davis Defence Committee, 1971).

[2] Margaret Thatcher, TV Interview for Granada World in Action ('rather swamped'), interview by Gordon Burns, Granada TV, 27 January 1978, Thatcher Archive: Granada Transcript, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485.

[3] Ibid.

anti-Black police measures would continue apace.[4] Racial tensions were already simmering when Thatcher entered office in 1979; by the turn of the decade, they had reached a fever pitch. Under her first full year in office in 1980, police would record 25,113 'stop/arrests' in the Metropolitan district of Lambeth, which included the area of Brixton.[5]

Against this backdrop, Operation Swamp '81 – its name an echo of Thatcher's interview – precipitated one of the most violent battles between the police and the British Black community in the twentieth century. The Metropolitan Police operation was launched on 1 April 1981, and initially took the form of 'raids on premises and mass arrests' before the extensive deployment of the Sus law in Brixton.[6] The gap between the announcement of Sus's revocation in February 1980 and its actual repeal in August 1981 allowed this law to be used on an unprecedented scale one final time. Over the ten days of Operation Swamp '81, some 1,000 young people were stopped and searched; estimates of the numbers arrested varied widely, with some as high as 600 individuals.[7] Many of those arrested 'reported injuries, particularly to the head and face, at the hands of the police'.[8] Those who were released were, in the words of the Brixton Black Women's Group, 'sent on their way with a deep sense of

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[4] Peter Goddard, *Public Issue Television: World in Action, 1963-98* (Manchester: University Press, 2007).

[5] 'Recorded Stops in Brixton Division by Operation Swamp Officers: Appendix 1', n.d., HO/266/90, The National Archives, Kew.

[6] Waters, *Thinking Black.*

[7] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Boycott Scarman', c 1981, 1, Gutzmore/1/1/1, Black Cultural Archives; Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Donation Form', c 1981, Gutzmore/1/1, Black Cultural Archives; Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Handwritten Note on the Back of Meeting at Abeng Centre – Black People against State Harassment Flyer', 1981, Gutzmore/1/2/3, Black Cultural Archives; Abeng Centre, 'Centre News', June 1981, Gutzmore/1/2/7, Black Cultural Archives.

[8] 'Brixton Legal Defence Group', n.d., Gutzmore/1/4/1, Black Cultural Archives.

resentment'.[9] And the widespread enactment of Sus was what historian Nicole Jackson has called 'one of the, if not the most, important contributing factors to the 1981 Brixton riot'.[10]

As a first intervention, this chapter reconstructs a history of the BBWG's participation in the Brixton Uprising and their role in the formation of the Brixton Defence Campaign, a coalition of activist voices calling for an end to racist police misconduct. As Suzanne Scafe puts it, 'none of the women who were central to the concrete, material, everyday survival of the victims of state harassment have been asked to come and talk about their roles in the aftermath of the uprising'.[11] But as this chapter insists, when we listen to these women using archival materials and oral histories, it becomes evident that the BBWG were at the centre of the Brixton Defence Campaign.

But just as the BBWG were concerned with racism outside of their community, they were also deeply frustrated by the sexism within it. As a second intervention, this chapter draws attention to the often-uneasy relationships between men and women in the Brixton Defence Campaign. 'In many ways,' Gail Lewis reflected, 'the most fraught sorts of negotiations that we had to deal with were with the men involved in the Brixton Defence Campaign'.[12] As this chapter shows, the Brixton Black Women's Group faced accusations that any focus on gender in the campaign was a threat to the unity of the anti-racist struggle and therefore had to be abandoned. For members of the BBWG, this conclusion was profoundly dissatisfying; without an analysis of gender, the group argued that Black women's oppression could not be properly conceptualised, let alone overcome. Despite identifying the sexism of

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[9] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 204.

[10] Jackson, '"A Nigger in the New England"', 159.

[11] Suzanne Scafe in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 373.

[12] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 331.

the campaign to be a source of deep frustration, however, the BBWG continued to organise alongside men who refused to abandon their own patriarchal perspectives.

Why did the BBWG continue to organise alongside sexist men? As a third intervention, this chapter argues that the BBWG's concessions to sexist men were in part a response to the scale of threat represented by the white state. For the BBWG, racism, including police racism, was *the* existential problem facing the Black community. Understood in these terms, the struggle against the police was a struggle for survival. And the police were conceptualised as part of the state. When the police enacted racist violence, therefore, this posed a threat of incomparable scale to the collective survival of Black people. At times, the BBWG prioritised this collective survival over ideological consistency, and in doing so made difficult choices – revealing both the constraints placed on Black women's activism and the depth of their commitment to Black liberation in all its forms.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In part one, I make the case that the BBWG were essential to building the Brixton Defence Campaign. And yet, and as I show in part two, relationships between Black women and men became increasingly fraught in the Brixton Defence Campaign when members of the BBWG were marginalised on sexist grounds. This precisely demonstrated the need for a Black feminist analysis; it also raised questions about how feminists could productively organise alongside men who were not interested in dismantling patriarchy. As I show in part three, at times the BBWG were unable to resolve the contradictions that arose from organising with sexist men. But they continued to navigate these contradictions because anti-police harassment was understood to be a struggle for wider Black survival – a fight to which the BBWG were intimately committed. As I argue in part four, the BBWG judged the fight against racist policing to be a fight against the white state itself. I suggest that the BBWG's continued participation in campaigns that demonstrated patriarchal attitudes – including the Brixton Defence Campaign – was thus motivated by the belief that the police and the state were inextricably intertwined and posed an existential risk.

In concluding, I return to a question posed in the first chapter of this thesis: what of the road not taken? When the BBWG collapsed, it succumbed to forces common to grassroots campaigns: a profound lack of resources, disagreements over the potential for state funding to overcome these needs, activist burn-out, and inadequate solidarity (and even domination) from the male left. But what if, I ask, the supposed allies of the BBWG, namely other left activists, had amplified their Black feminist position rather than tried to diminish it?

I. The BBWG and the Brixton Defence Campaign

After ten days of mass intimidation and arrest during Operation Swamp '81, the Brixton Uprising erupted on 11 April 1981.[13] For two days, properties and vehicles were damaged and set alight, and 'bottles, bricks, and stones', as well as petrol bombs, were thrown at the police.[14] 'The destruction', historian Rob Waters has summarised, 'was dramatic'.[15] Official police reports recorded 279 police injuries and 118 civilian arrests.[16] In statistics produced by the BBWG-led Legal Defence Group which would be set up in the wake of the Uprising, it was reported that over 65% of those who would eventually be put on trial were Black, with almost 50% under 25 years old.[17] The BBWG described how 'fathers, brothers and lovers [...] were arrested', and countless others 'had to contend with their homes being broken into

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[13] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 204–5.

[14] Waters, *Thinking Black*, 175.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Brixton Defence Campaign', *Speak Out!*, July 1982; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 242.

and destroyed in the aftermath'.[18] The violent disruption to Black domestic life was, they pointed out, an important dimension of Swamp '81 tactics.

As the battle raged through the community, the Brixton Black Women's Group opened the doors of their Black Women's Centre to welcome members of the community and create a refuge from the police. As Amina Mama recalled, 'During the Brixton Uprising, we as the BWG gave people shelter'.[19] The police, Mama explained, were 'just mopping up whoever they could' and access to indoor spaces was understood to be a vital part of protecting the community from violence.[20] This intervention during the Uprising also gave an early indication of the kind of involvement that the BBWG would go on to have in the movement it precipitated: grassroots, innovative, and urgent.

In the wake of this violent confrontation, the BBWG became a leading member of the Brixton Defence Campaign, a resistance movement which crystalised around 'the mobilization of the black community to be fully involved in the legal and political defence of those arrested/charged/injured as a result of the Uprising'.[21] The same Black Women's Centre in which the BBWG had harboured those in need of protection during the Uprising became the BDC 'headquarters', and the campaign continued to meet there on a weekly basis until at least August 1981.[22] Campaign funds were initially handled by the BBWG, and the BBWG took a

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[18] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women Organizing', 88.

[19] Amina Mama in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 362.

[20] Amina Mama in ibid.

[21] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Letter Re: Brixton Uprising - Black Community Support', 29 June 1981, Gutzmore/1/2/3, Black Cultural Archives.

[22] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Letter from BDC', c 1981, Gutzmore/1/2/1, Black Cultural Archives; 'Minutes of the Brixton Defence Campaign Held at the Black Women's Centre', 5 August 1981, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Brixton Defence Campaign'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 242.

lead on evidence-gathering exercises as the BDC prepared its line of attack.[23] From the outset, members of the BBWG were central in the BDC's organisation. In minutes from one of the first meetings, held on 6 May 1981, members of the BBWG outnumbered all other individuals put together.[24] But within two weeks, the campaign had already expanded and the BBWG found themselves in a (still sizeable) minority.[25] The BDC had quickly become a coalition of anti-racist groups including members of the OWAAD, local youth clubs, and the Marxist anti-racist collective *Race Today*.[26]

A critical component of the BDC's agenda was conducted by the Brixton Legal Defence Campaign, a sub-group which assembled to provide legal support to those arrested.[27] In the first wave of cases tried in August 1981, the BDC had reported the conviction rate was almost 100%.[28] The Legal Defence Campaign set about trying to reverse these odds. The legal organisation was centrally supported by members of the Brixton Black Women's Group,

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[23] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Trade Union Resolution', n.d., Gutzmore/1/3/6, Black Cultural Archives; 'BASH BWG Meeting', 29 April 1981, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[24] At the 6/5/81 meeting, BBWG members were listed as: Pat A, Claudette, Gail, Monica, Beverly, Suzanne, Sinda, Dorann, Ramani (BWG and BASH); 8 others were present. See 'Minutes of the Brixton Defence Campaign Meeting', 6 May 1981, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[25] On the 20 May 1981 meeting, 7 members of the BBWG were present; 16 others (the BBWG still, however, represented the largest amount of members from a single organisation). See 'Present 20th May 1981', 20 May 1981, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[26] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women Organizing', 88; Suzanne Scafe in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 362.

[27] Ibid; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Brixton Defence Campaign'. Some hearings were deliberately scheduled for cities some miles from Brixton, apparently to hamper the scale of support.

[28] 'Brixton Legal Defence Group'.

including Clovis Graham, Suzanne Scafe, Monica Morris, and Gerlin Bean.[29] One of the core functions of the group became organising volunteers to attend and observe the court hearings. The Legal Defence Campaign published notes for these volunteers, advising them to collect the names of the accused, offer basic legal advice (including to plead 'not guilty'), and informing them of the process convicted individuals should follow in their bid to find legal representation.[30]

The actions of the BDC, however, extended well beyond legal advice. The campaign organised national conferences to discuss Swamp '81, its aftermath, and the wider police harassment that had precipitated it.[31] With a view to sharing its insights with similar causes across England, the BDC met with defence campaigns from across the country that had assembled in response to racialised police violence.[32] The BDC also hosted a day of international culture and political events to celebrate the Black community in the midst of ongoing assault.[33] These actions advanced the BDC's threefold demands: first, 'amnesty to those charged in connection with the Brixton Uprising'; second, 'an end to police lawlessness and brutality'; and third, to 'boycott the Scarman Inquiry'.[34]

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[29] 'Minutes of the Brixton Defence Campaign', 3 June 1981, 1, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[30] 'Minutes of the Brixton Defence Campaign', 10 June 1981, 4, Gutzmore/1/3/1, Black Cultural Archives; Brixton Legal Defence Committee, 'Notes for Observers at Courts', 5 May 1981, Gutzmore/1/4/4, Black Cultural Archives.

[31] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'All London Meeting', *Brixton Defence Campaign Bulletin*, n.d., Gutzmore/1/6/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[32] 'Report of All-London Organisations Meeting', n.d., Gutzmore/1/3/3, Brixton Black Cultural Archives.

[33] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Brixton Defence Campaign'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 242.

[34] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Resolution', c 1981, Gutzmore/1/1/4, Black Cultural Archives.

Lord Leslie Scarman, the judge who had presided over the inquiry into the 1969 Northern Ireland riots and the 1976-78 Grunwick dispute, was tasked with producing a government report investigating the causes and provocations that precipitated the Brixton Uprising. The BDC were immediately suspicious: 'If Scarman is interested in "civil liberties" it does not show in his reports on either Grunwick or Red Lion Square', they reported.[35] The group resolved to boycott the Scarman inquiry, and called for all members of the Black community to do the same.[36] One of the central motivations for the boycott was that the inquiry posed 'a clear and present danger to defendants yet to stand trial'.[37] As Scarman had conceded, evidence given in the trial could be used to further incriminate individuals.[38] Furthermore, the Scarman inquiry was undoubtedly designed to, as the BDC put it, 'give subtle legitimacy to the totally racist view – so dramatically put by Margaret Thatcher – that the Brixton Uprising was simply a confrontation between, on the one hand, fundamentally blameless forces of law and order, and, on the other, mainly black criminals'.[39] The courts were, they reminded their readers, an arm of the state. When Black people gave evidence in this context, the BDC insisted, they were 'HANGING the community by their actions'.[40]

As members of the BDC pointed out, Black actors had long warned that an uprising within the Black community was impending.[41] They repeatedly argued that only a radical

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[35] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Boycott Scarman', 2.

[36] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'The Brixton Defence Campaign Says - Boycott the Scarman Inquiry', c 1981, 1, Gutzmore/1/1/2, Black Cultural Archives.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'The Brixton Defence Campaign Says - Boycott the Scarman Inquiry'.

[39] Ibid., 3.

[40] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Brixton Defence Campaign Says: Boycott the Scarman Enquiry [Sic.]', n.d., Gutzmore/1/7/4, Black Cultural Archives.

[41] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Boycott Scarman', 2–3.

reduction in police violence could prevent such unrest. The BBWG had described the police as inflicting 'constant violence to the psyche of the Black community', asserting that 'racist and lawless policing practices against the black citizens of Brixton has brought the battle to the streets'.[42] Yet the unrest, they pointed out, was not solely the product of police brutality. These immediate triggers were underpinned by deeper, systemic issues and the BDC emphasised the broader context of entrenched racial inequality, economic marginalisation, and state neglect. At an all-London conference, they argued that 'Thatcher and her government are the real cause of the riots as they have condemned millions of people to the dole queues and they have helped to fuel the fires of racialism'.[43] As the BBWG put it elsewhere, 'It is impossible to name one British institution which does not practice racism!'[44] The Uprising, then, was a reaction to policing as well as a response to a broader landscape of structural injustice.

In 1979, BBWG member Gerlin Bean went so far as to warn Lambeth Council that they needed to dramatically transform policing in the area to avoid repercussions. Bean wrote to Councillor Ted Knight in her capacity as chairperson of the Council for Community Relations in Lambeth, saying: 'it must be stressed that the situation [between the Black community and police] is grave and deteriorating daily. Unfortunately, our methods of trying to bridge the gap through dialogue have failed because the police responded to our efforts with

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[42] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 204. Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 204; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Women and Abortion'; Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 104 & 202.

[43] Brixton Defence Campaign, 'All London Meeting'.

[44] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 72.

resounding contempt'.[45] Without rapid and significant changes to policing methods in Lambeth, Bean cautioned that the community would witness 'inevitable recriminations and violent confrontations which will inflict irrepairable [sic] damage to all our people'.[46] Bean also recommended a public inquiry into the state of police/community relations be conducted; this was completed and published in late 1980. As the BBWG pointed out, the inquiry 'clearly stated what was coming', quoting from the report: '*The police have got worse … retaliation must come as this is too much'*.[47] This unequivocal warning, the BBWG stressed, had been shared with state authorities '[f]ive months before the uprising'.[48] In other words, the Brixton Uprising was not only predictable; it was predicted.

After years of ignoring the analysis of Black activists, the Scarman report was released in November 1981. In it, Scarman conceded that 'racial disadvantage and its nasty associate, racial discrimination, have not yet been eliminated' in Britain, and were 'a potent factor of unrest'.[49] But, contradicting the analysis of groups like the BDC, he went on to insist that '[i]nstitutional racism does not exist in Britain'.[50] Scarman had access to records that exposed the systematic racism of policing, including a report that showed of the 145 complaints of

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[45] 'Letter to Councillor Ted Knight from BBWG Member Gerlin Bean in Her Capacity as Chairperson of the Council for Community Relations in Lambeth', 15 February 1979, 1, HO/266/90, The National Archives, Kew.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 206.

[48] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 206.

[49] Stephen Cook, 'Scarman Report into Brixton Riots Published', *The Guardian*, 26 November 1981, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/26/scarman-report-into-brixton-riots-published-archive-1981.

[50] Ibid.

racial discrimination made against police officers in the Greater London area between 1973 and 1978, none were upheld.[51] Despite the clear case set out by the BDC, some members of the Black community had submitted evidence to the inquiry, viewing it as 'an opportunity to the Black Community to draw to the attention of the world their sufferings and in particular their sufferings at the hands of the police.[52] This included a submission from the West Indian Standing Conference that confirmed 'from reliable sources that sergeants and constables do leave stations with the express purpose of going "n*gger hunting"'.[53] Scarman denounced these instances of police racism, but concluded they were ultimately unconnected and the force itself could not be described as racist. Despite having called on the Black community for evidence, he – as the BDC had predicted – treated it as incidental.

While the BDC as a group held a clear line in opposition to Scarman, subtle differences in the characterisation of the relationship between criminality and legitimacy emerged between members. When Cecil Gutzmore described the Uprising, he said: 'Nowhere can it be truly said to have been mindless or pointless violence – violence "for it's own sake" as it were. Everywhere it has been of a defensive nature,' he went on, 'being prompted and produced by the aggression of the state as expressed largely through lawless policing practices'.[54] Gutzmore made two distinct points: first, that all violence used by Black citizens in the

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[51] Complaints Investigation Bureau, 'Enquiry from Lord Scarman Regarding Complaints against Police 1973-78', 8 July 1981, HO/266/90, The National Archives, Kew.

[52] The Brixton Neighbourhood Community Association, The Melting Pot Foundation and The Brixton Domino Working Men's Social Club, 'Statement Issued on Behalf of The Brixton Neighbourhood Community Association, The Melting Pot Foundation and The Brixton Domino Working Men's Social Club', 15 June 1981, 1, Gutzmore/1/2/11, Black Cultural Archives.

[53] 'West Indian Standing Conference, Evidence to the Lord Scarman Enquiry in Two Parts, Ref: L81/1953/RDM', June 1981, 11, RC/RF/16/12, Black Cultural Archives.

[54] Gutzmore, 'Capital, "Black Youth" and Crime', 25.

Uprising was defensive; second, that the enforcement of the law had itself become lawless. The contrast between the quality of the actions taken by citizens versus the law spoke to Gutzmore's conviction that the citizens, on the one hand, acted with legitimacy, whereas the police, on the other, had made explicit their illegitimate wielding of power.

The BBWG saw things slightly differently: the Uprising was 'a legitimate opposition to racist policing', they wrote, 'and *not* mere "criminal acts"'.[55] The Brixton Group agreed with Gutzmore that the uprising was 'legitimate' – by which I take them to mean it was reasonable and defensible – but they also recognised that it was, at least in part, criminal (not 'merely' criminal, but by implication criminal all the same). As the Brixton Group knew, to be Black just was to be liable to being criminalised. Importantly, however, when activity was criminal, on the Brixton Black Women Group's analysis this did not mean it was necessarily indefensible. In a text produced in another campaign with which the BBWG were peripherally involved, the authors asked: 'Is it realistic to oppose all violence, if violence turns out to be the only way of bringing about a change in society?'[56] The legitimacy of the Uprising was underpinned by the fact that it was a response to oppression, rather than because it was in keeping with the law. In other words, it was criminal, but criminality was not at odds with legitimacy; even violence could be justifiable if it was part of the struggle against oppression.

II. Feminism and the BDC

What might appear to be minor differences in how the Scarman report was interpreted spoke to deeper rifts which emerged within the Brixton Defence Campaign. The challenges

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[55] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Brixton Defence Campaign'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 242.

[56] 'Religion Can Seriously Damage Your Health', n.d., 2, Dadzie/4/6, Black Cultural Archives.

of bridging substantial divisions between the various groups in the coalition was, BDC member Jan McKenley summarised, 'uneasy you know, it wasn't easy work'.[57] One of the primary causes of division within the campaign was over the place of feminism in anti-racist activism. In 1982, the BBWG described the way 'the issue of black feminism [is treated] as a cause of division within the black community', as if an account of liberation could only focus on either racism or sexism.[58] Olive Gilmore has remembered how 'Black men, those so-called political men, saw Black feminism as divisive, in the sense that it was splitting the movement'.[59] That Black men could be oppressed in a white supremacist society and simultaneously oppress Black women under patriarchy was, apparently, difficult for men in the campaign to accept. Instead, men argued that the anti-racist struggle could not afford to think about feminism – feminism would, they argued, divide the attention of the community rather than strengthen their analysis.

In practice, the issue for Black men in the Brixton Defence Campaign appears to have been less about adopting a Black feminist analysis – though they were certainly unwilling to do so – and more about Black women assuming positions of leadership. As the BBWG put it in an editorial for the US radical feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, women's contributions were 'marginalised in 1981'.[60] Even down to the location of the meetings, the men of the BDC demonstrated an anxiety about leading alongside women. As Gail Lewis recalled, 'we were

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[57] Jan McKenley, Heart of the Race, May 2009, ORAL/1/24, Black Cultural Archives. McKenley's own role within the BBWG is ambiguous – she reports becoming involved in the BDC because of BBWG's involvement but it is unclear whether she ever formally identified as a member of the BBWG.

[58] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 216.

[59] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 332.

[60] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Black Politics = Black Feminism', 16.

meeting on our territory [in the Women's Centre] and some of those guys felt extremely threatened'.[61] The space the BBWG provided, a physical manifestation of their leadership, was perceived by men as endangering their power in the coalition.

On 15 November 1981, the BBWG called a meeting to discuss relations in the BDC, at which Gerlin Bean took minutes. The BBWG were clear that 'Brothers [were] unable to cope with sisters because they took on prominent roles in the group and weren't submissive'.[62] As others in the BBWG put it, 'BWG women [were] seen as a threat – The sisters were not appreciated for their intellectual input'.[63] Face to face with the highly competent and experienced organisers of the Brixton Black Women's Group, men in the BDC reverted to sexist demands, including the subservience of women. It simply could not be conceived – or, perhaps, conceded – that Black women had something important to say about police harassment. Men's own sense of patriarchal power was prioritised over the efficient and internally liberatory functioning of the campaign and familiar trends of patriarchal mythmaking transpired: women's intellectual and strategic leadership was represented as purely administrative – or occluded altogether.

The BBWG continued to assert their leadership in the face of persistent sexism. BBWG member Suzanne Scafe stressed that the group's engagement in the campaign was not merely one of material resourcing. 'It wasn't just that we had the Centre', Scafe insisted:

> although men and women were involved in the Defence Campaign meetings, it was [B]BWG who led that campaign. We were the organisers, the strategists, and we were the ones who

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[61] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 333.

[62] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 15 November 1981, 1, Scafe/3/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[63] Ibid., 2.

made that connection with Brixton Law Centre and the Legal Defence Campaign, and organised the note-taking at the courts.[64]

On Scafe's account, denying the leadership of the BBWG in the Brixton Defence Campaign could only be interpreted as an obfuscation of their actual role in the campaign. The Brixton Group did conduct essential administrative work, Scafe noted – they coordinated note-taking and hosted meetings in their Centre –, but they were also a leading party in the intellectual production of the campaign. They were 'the strategists', the ones making decisions about the direction of the campaign, and, as she would go on, they also built essential connections through drawing on their 'experience in coalitional work [that] meant that connections were quick to make and easier to maintain'.[65] The legal wing of the coalition was driven by the technical experience of BBWG members, including the expertise of members like Clover Graham who became 'really important on the legal stuff'.[66] It was a straightforward denial to suggest that the BBWG were anything other than leaders.

That the BBWG positioned themselves as leaders in the Brixton Defence Campaign somewhat conflicted with their own preferences for non-hierarchical organising. In notes made in Scafe's archive, the BBWG described how the group tended to 'stray away from ideas of leadership: ideally, we should be decentralised, democratic and collectivist in our orientations and behaviour'. [67] But, as they went on, 'the view was expressed that this is possibly an ideal that we cannot/should not fulfill'.[68] Non-hierarchical organising was something to

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[64] Suzanne Scafe in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 362.

[65] Scafe in ibid.; also see Gail Lewis in Ibid., 354.

[66] Gail Lewis in ibid., 354.

[67] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Women or Black People First?'

[68] Ibid.

aspire to, but when faced with patriarchy from within their own ranks it became necessary to insist on their leadership.[69]

When Black women in the BDC refused to comply with the submission that was being imposed upon them, men in the campaign imposed the worst excesses of patriarchy. Members of the BBWG described how 'Brothers used sexual tactics to pick off individual sisters, [and] when this didn't work, they internalise it and became aggressive and abusive to sisters'.[70] Women in the BDC reported a sense of 'disrespect' for their 'political & personal contributions to the struggle'.[71] As Olive Gilmore reported, 'respect was missing in our disagreements with the men, and they were often quite dismissive of us in very derogatory terms, and they did not want to look at why they were behaving in those particular ways'.[72] Here, Gilmore makes two points: first, men were exhibiting deeply patriarchal behaviours; second, men's unwillingness to engage with the reasons behind their patriarchal behaviour limited their own understanding. In other words, men refused the very analysis – Black socialist feminism – that might have liberated them from their own patriarchal impulses. In its place, they allowed energy to be drained from the campaign and reproduced the kind of domination that they were purportedly struggling against.

This led, as Gail Lewis would put it in 1990, to '[s]ome of the sharpest contradictions that arose' in the history of the BBWG.[73] In November 1981, the BBWG described three major contradictions that had developed during the Brixton Defence Campaign. One, the

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[69] On the BBWG's leadership, also see Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985), 177.

[70] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 1.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Olive Gilmore in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 332.

[73] Gail Lewis in Ibid.

BBWG noted, was 'The contradiction between the men and women in BDC'.[74] Working alongside sexist men had led to conflict within the campaign: between those who insisted that a Black feminist analysis was essential to the liberation of the community and those who rejected this analysis in its totality. The BBWG's continual battle to assert their leadership within the campaign was undoubtedly a drain on its limited resources.

There were two further, and related, contradictions that occurred in the Brixton Defence Campaign according to the BBWG members assembled at the November 1981 meeting. A second was, 'The contradiction between theory and practice or more particularly the absence of any collective / group practice, especially by the sisters of BWG inside BDC'.[75] In their bid to rapidly organise, the BBWG had de-prioritised building its own unified front within the BDC. The BBWG had therefore fractured within the larger coalition, and the force of a Black feminist analysis had subsequently been diluted. This had led, they argued, to a sharp difference between the group's theoretical ideas and the practical actions they were taking. On the one hand, for example, they had reached the collective decision to insist that race, gender, and class could not be separated out in their analysis. On the other hand, they were individually participating in a campaign that tried to pull racism apart from other modes of oppression and denied their own feminist perspective.

A third contradiction, the BBWG explained, had arisen within the Black Women's Group '[b]etween certain individuals in the group and the position they hold vis a vis the rest of the other individuals in the group e.g. leadership'.[76] As much as the BBWG aspired to non-hierarchical organising, hierarchies had developed between members of the BBWG involved in the Brixton Defence Campaign, with some treated as leaders and others,

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[74] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 1.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., 2.

presumably, as followers. Expending energy on resisting the sexism of the men with whom they organised had led to the BBWG going some way in adopting the very structures – including hierarchy – that they would ideally have resisted.

As BBWG members reflected, the constant effort to manage or mitigate men's sexist behaviour redirected energy away from building solidarity among women and toward maintaining fragile coalitions with men. As Bean further summarised, 'what was important is that the women shouldn't allow [antagonism with men] to divide them – sisters shouldn't be the ones who always have to be conciliatory'.[77] In their bid to secure solidarity with antagonistic men, the Brixton Group was at risk of deprioritising the very solidarity that existed between them. The consequence was a quiet fracturing amongst those who, we might think, had genuine prospects for driving collective liberation.

III. The existential risk

Why, given the patriarchal currents flowing through the Brixton Defence Campaign, did the BBWG continue to organise alongside sexist men? In part, the answer lies in the immense personal and political pressure they faced from within the Black community. The accusation that Black women were splitting the struggle was familiar in more ways than one. This accusation was a charge they had encountered repeatedly – from the outset of the Black Power movement.[78] Indeed, BBWG members cited it as a reason for forming a women's group in the first place.[79] This accusation also came from within the same anti-racist movement that had shaped the political formation of several BBWG members. The Brixton Group's founding

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[77] Ibid.

[78] See chapter four, pp. 205-206.

[79] Ibid.

members, for example, met in the context of the British Black Panthers.[80] In other words, the BBWG were now being condemned by a movement they had helped build – as well as one that had demanded their silence in the past.

Perhaps the better question is not why BBWG continued to organise alongside sexist men, but why those men did not learn to organise without sexism. As Bean summarised at a BBWG meeting, 'when men undermine the work of women it was not the sole responsibility of the women to find ways to work out these contradictions or antagonisms'.[81] The implication was clear: men should reckon with their own patriarchal positions and take responsibility for the divisions they were creating. Why were women always the ones to make concessions?

When sexist men failed to abandon their patriarchal impulses, the choice to nonetheless work alongside them was, above all else, a strategic one. Gail Lewis described how the BBWG were engaged in several important fights and 'decided that we would work with, we would make alliances with people, as and when we could see they were fighting for those things'.[82] She went on, 'We acknowledged that alliances are not a matter of principle, alliances have to be strategic'.[83] When the men of the Brixton Defence Campaign espoused sexist views, the BBWG continued to work with them not out of ideological alignment, but out of practical necessity. While the BBWG were clear that men were responsible for the Brixton Defence Campaign's internal tensions, they were also clear that they could not afford to organise in total isolation.

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[80] Beverley Bryan in Bentil and Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Afterword', 339–40.

[81] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 4.

[82] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 331.

[83] Ibid.

This calculation was a response, in part, to the scale of threat posed by the racist policing of Black lives. As the authors of *Heart of the Race* – including BBWG's Beverly Bryan and Suzanne Scafe – wrote: 'If you're talking about racism, you're talking about survival issues. Black women have to put everything in that context'.[84] Racism posed an existential threat, and the struggle against it formed the foundations of Black women's work. The same theme recurred at the first conference of OWAAD where one participant described how: 'Our [Blackness] is our [strength] [because] as a result of being [Black] we have learnt the techniques of survival'.[85] Building coalition with outwardly hostile partners can be understood as one such technique of survival. As Bean recalled, 'These manifestations of Brothers and Sisters were ignored or taken lightly in the early days of BDC because of the nature and urgency of the work to be done'.[86]

Importantly, when the BBWG engaged in the BDC they were not facing a neat ideological dilemma between maintaining consistent principals and submitting to compromise. As they saw it, this was a fight in which they could either engage or risk the lives of themselves and those in their community. There was no ideal option. As Black feminists Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson wrote for *Feminist Review* in 1986, 'Cherry Groce and

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[84] Heart of the Race, quoted in Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 165.

[85] Stella Dadzie, 'When I Went to the First OWAAD Conference...', n.d., 3–4, Dadzie/1/1/12, Black Cultural Archives. I have attributed this to Dadzie, after finding it in her archive with her name at the top of the page. It is possible, however, that it was written by another participant at OWAAD. The amendments here are merely to edit the spelling of the words – the original notes are clearly a draft.

[86] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 2.

the family of Cynthia Jarrett are unlikely to have any illusions about "better" policing'.[8788] Referencing two Black women – Groce and Jarrett – who died during, or as a consequence of, police raids, Bhavnani and Coulson argued that Black women could not turn to the state as a refuge from male violence. It was the police force itself that was killing Black women.

On the BBWG's account, it was this existential struggle which set their activism apart from wider leftist movements of the time. '*This* is what the White left refuses to understand', the BBWG insisted in c. 1977: '[that] the greatest threat to Black people is the organised attacks, physical and psychological, by the British state'.[89] At a Socialist Feminist conference in 1980, Black women explained that 'survival issues [are] more important to third world women than to western feminists'.[90] While western feminists could centre demands like access to contraception and equal pay, Third World Women were caught in the struggle for subsistence. The white state was not simply negligent, and it could not be reformed: it was the greatest existential threat faced by members of the Black community.

Black women continued to organise alongside Black men in the hopes of building a broad-based coalition capable of confronting systemic violence. There were, however, certain trade-offs. '[As] long as women are oppressed and this oppression continues to be ignored,' the BBWG maintained in 1982, 'we cannot take our rightful place in the overall [anti-racist] struggle'.[91] Without an analysis of women's situations, the very frameworks essential to

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[87] Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, 'Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism', *Feminist Review* 23, no. 1 (1986): 90, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1986.21.

[88] Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 170.

[89] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 72.

[90] 'Socialist Feminist National Conference 1980', 1980, iii, Dadzie/1/1/31, Black Cultural Archives.

[91] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 220.

liberation could not be accounted for, let alone addressed. Just as the white left were ignorant of the needs of Black women, the BBWG summarised how 'black men [...] saw women's liberation (if they thought about it at all) strictly in terms of a minor side issue – "a white girl's problem"'.[92] This was undoubtedly frustrating for the BBWG, who insisted that race and gender had to be addressed simultaneously. Anti-racist and anti-sexist activism were not, they emphasised, mutually destructive but instead mutually expansive. It was patriarchal perspectives, rather than feminism, that endangered their activism.

Without a focused feminist analysis, however, the BDC was unable to conceptualise other existential risks within the Black community. The police were not the only force enacting violence against Black women, the BBWG explained, and this implicated members of the Black community. As they wrote, 'as Black women, we oppress each other – oppression does not always merely come from the state'.[93] The group were particularly concerned with the way in which Black women 'live a daily life of fear of violence from men, both inside and outside the home'.[94] The Brixton Defence Campaign did nothing to address the threat that men from within the BDC posed to their own mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, comrades, and friends. This was not, the BBWG made clear, to say that Black men were especially culpable of sexual violence. 'Sexual harassment, violence and the exploitation of women transcend class and race boundaries', they observed, setting themselves apart from a history in which Black men have been disproportionately accused of sexual violence.[95] But the Brixton Group were also clear that patriarchal violence was an urgent problem within the Black

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[92] Ibid., 218.

[93] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Women or Black People First?'

[94] Ibid.

[95] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 215.

community. And when a Black feminist perspective was denied in the BDC, this undermined their ability to address internal sexist tensions.

Black women knew that men within their community were responsible for violence. They also knew that the state offered no obvious route to recourse. As the BBWG wrote in 1982, 'a black woman may think twice before she calls the police for violence done to her by a black man'.[96] The BBWG set out a challenge facing Black women: men were liable to acting violently towards them, but when the state entered their homes, it was to intimidate rather than protect them from this threat. While the wider anti-domestic abuse movement, as we saw in chapter three, were seeking legislative changes, in Brixton carceral approaches were not judged to be a realistic path to protection. '[I]n cases of even the most brutal marital violence', the group explained, the police demonstrated a resounding 'reluctance' to intervene.[97] When faced with a choice between organising with men against the state or organising with the state against men, the BBWG took the decision to unite with Black men. This was, at least, a viable route to addressing one existential risk.

IV. The state as the police

The existential threat posed by the police was understood by the BBWG to represent the state in action. The BBWG's anti-police harassment work thus constituted one facet of a struggle of incomparable scale. On the BBWG's view, the police and the state were not distinct bodies – the group frequently moved between discussing the police and discussing the

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[96] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 216.

[97] Ibid., 215.

state, at times using the terms interchangeably.[98] This conceptual framing allowed the BBWG to situate their community's immediate experiences of police brutality within structures of state oppression, providing a broader theoretical foundation for their political resistance.

In the BBWG's 1982 *Speak Out* editorial 'Black Feminism', the group described the police as operating on two levels. The police could first be understood 'on an individual basis', they wrote.[99] 'The police' was not amorphous, they pointed out, but instead a force made up of individuals. And when the police *qua* individuals enforced the law in particularly vitriolic ways, they bore direct responsibilities for their actions. Second, they wrote, 'the police force is an arm of the state'.[100] In this way, they went on, the police constitute 'another tool by which all black people are terrorised and oppressed'.[101] When the police acted, they did so on behalf of the state, carrying out its functions and enforcing its laws. In this way, the many parts of the state – police, courts, teachers, regulatory agencies – worked as parts of a whole to carry out the state's unified ideological mission. From this perspective, the state was responsible for what the police, its own 'arm', were doing.

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[98] For example, see Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 209–20.

[99] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 214–15.

[100] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 214–15. Elsewhere, as part of the BDC, they would write: the police are 'the armed force of the capitalist state'. Brixton Defence Campaign, 'Scarman Is Out - Watch Out!', *Brixton Defence Campaign Bulletin*, n.d., 4, Gutzmore/1/6/1, Black Cultural Archives.

[101] Ibid., 215.

But can any metaphor – including 'arm' – express the true relation between police and state?[102] As A. Sivanandan would write in 1982, 'for the deprived, the state was the police'.[103] A metaphor, we might think, takes us one step further from understanding what is in fact an absolute relation. When the state is recognised as the police, and the police are recognised as the state, the distinction collapses entirely. From this perspective, when the police stop and search a young Black man on the street, when they invade a Black home, when they sexually assault a Black woman, this is the state in action. It is as a consequence of this absolute relation, and as Prescod put it in the 1978 documentary film *Breaking Point*, that the police 'can do no wrong'.[104] Only through understanding the nebulous nature of ultimately unified state action, Prescod implied, could the police's practice – and irreproachability – be made legible. When the state *qua* police officers executes actions that are deemed unlawful, the state *qua* courts can shift or reinterpret those laws to sanitise the action of the officer in question. In Prescod's words, when the police break the law 'it is the law that is wrong not them'.[105] The state, that is, moves to protect itself.

That the police and the state were indistinguishable did not, Black activists including those in the BBWG argued, excuse police officers from acts of violence. In fact, individual and institutional modes of violence were seen as interdependent. The BBWG described how 'When Black people look into the eyes of the police they see naked arrogance, fear and hatred'.[106] The eyes of police officers were not an abstract concept; they expressed racist vitriol in the real faces of individuals. But the eyes that Black people looked into were also

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[102] Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, *The Heart of the Race*, 165.

[103] Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, 49.

[104] Colin Prescod in *Breaking Point - the SUS Law and Black Youth*, 1978.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'The Brixton Uprising'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 203.

emboldened by institutionally sanctioned power – they were, in this sense, the eyes of the state. As the anonymous authors of the paper 'Racism and Sexism in Immigration Control' put it, 'Officials are not exceptionally racist beasts, though clearly some of them are. They are operating the wide discretion demanded of them in the administration of racist laws in a racist climate'.[107] On this analysis, police officers exhibiting racist actions were operating in ways that were mandated: imposing racist laws in a racist climate. The relationship between officer and state was thus mutually constitutive.

When the BBWG critiqued the police, they joined a wider argument levelled by Black activists against the institutionally racist nature of the British state. In 1981, anti-racist groups were especially anxious about the organised coordination of state surveillance. Concerns about the impending 1981 census, for example, were prevalent.[108] In a series of proposed changes, new questions were to be introduced to the census that measured race and ethnicity. In an anonymously authored paper, 'Have you Heard About the Headcount?', the fear was summarised as such: 'Forms of State harassment, like SUS and passport raids, political and police intimidation, control of the size of the black population through the use of dangerous drugs like Depo-Provera [...] will all be easier to implement once this massive and compulsory headcount in 1981 has taken place'.[109] Heightened surveillance, the authors worried, would further the oppression and harassment of the Black population in Britain, a worry stoked by other British policies that discriminated against Black persons. The Nationality Act, the so-called 'virginity tests' at Heathrow, and contraceptive control in the form of the

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[107] 'Racism and Sexism in Immigration Control', n.d., 6, Dadzie/1/1/32, Black Cultural Archives.

[108] UBWAG, 'Have You Heard About the Headcount', n.d., Dadzie/1/1/38, Black Cultural Archives; attributed to UBWAG, given article reprinted in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 116–18.

[109] UBWAG, 'Have You Heard About the Headcount', 2.

under-tested Depo-Provera injection (which was being disproportionately used against Black women), were all understood to be part of a systematic assault on Black people's lives.[110] This analysis was nowhere more explicit than in the unpublished 'Aims and Objectives' of the BBWG. Members stated that 'Black people are faced with institutionalised racism'.[111] In other words, and as the BBWG wrote elsewhere, the state 'creates conditions within which racism and sexism are reinforced and legitimised'.[112]

Focusing on the institutional racism of the state and police encouraged Black organisers to unify their own action. In a draft constitution for OWAAD, members of the organisation wrote: 'To be disunited, in the face of the State's concerted attacks on our rights, our status and our welfare, would be against the interests of all Black people, and can only serve the divide-and-rule tactics of those who oppress and exploit us'.[113] The threat of division in the face of the existential danger of the state was once more identified as counterproductive to the wider Black struggle. As Amina Mama would put it, 'Police brutality is less of a contentious topic [than abuse against women] within the black communities because it is an oppression delivered by the "Other" – in this case the state'.[114]

Looking at the common enemy, however, comes with its own risks. As Shatema Threadcraft has put it, when a focus on gendered harm is dropped, the risk becomes 'not

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[110] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 214.

[111] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Draft Aims and Objectives'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 249.

[112] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 214.

[113] 'OWAAD Draft Constitution'.

[114] Amina Mama, 'Woman Abuse in London's Black Communities', in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain*, by Winston James and Clive Harris (London: Verso, 1993), 130.

having the right kind of resources devoted to ending the things police disproportionately do to black women'.[115] In line with Threadcraft's analysis, when the anti-police struggle was flattened into a fight against the state, the BBWG's analysis of the gendered and less public forms of police misconduct were largely ignored by the BDC. The limitations of framing all violence as state violence was that it risked ignoring gendered harm.

While organising alongside men was understood by the Brixton Black Women's Group to be a necessary compromise in order to address the existential threat of racist policing, the group nonetheless recognised that they could have operated differently. Members of the BBWG expressed regret at the hastiness and lack of long-term planning that their involvement in the BDC had involved. 'It was [...] felt', members of the Brixton Group reflected in November 1981, 'that BWG as a group made a political mistake by entering BDC as individuals and not as mandated reps from BWG'.[116] 'Although this action was taken in order to facilitate quick decision making', they explained, 'the lesson for BWG is that we need to give some direction[al] support to sisters who participate in other groups'.[117] It would have been possible, they argued, and indeed preferrable, for the BBWG to retain their integrity as a coordinated group, jointly deciding on their position and acting as a collective. The implication was that this might have helped them resist the patriarchal tendencies of the campaign. As they pointed out, organising as a group was not unprecedented. '[In] the early stages of BDC', they recalled '[...] issues were brought back and discussed in BWG, sisters all acted in unison'.[118] By the end of 1981, however, the practice of joint deliberation had been

[115] Threadcraft, 'North American Necropolitics and Gender', 570.

[116] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 3.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 3.

all but abandoned. The BBWG even described how at times 'clear disloyalty was shown'.[119] The collective position of the BBWG was undermined by these moments of disloyalty; ironically, by focusing on what solidarity with sexist men could look like, the women at times lost sight of what solidarity with each other demanded.

Within the context of the Brixton Defence Campaign, the BBWG frequently focused on non-contentious framings, like state violence, over more controversial ones, like feminism. In 1982, in their editorial 'Black Feminism', the BBWG wrote: 'In Britain, we face institutionalised racist, sexist laws and practices, and male domination in the home'.[120] The reality they described was one in which wherever Black women turned, they faced oppression. The BBWG knew that this had led them to hold competing claims: that it was possible to be feminists and socialists and Black; that harassment could be both public and private; and that men could be bad, but still worth fighting with and for. Living with contradiction was sometimes judged to be the only way through.

V. Conclusion: the collapse of the BBWG

To revisit the Brixton Defence Campaign from the perspective of the Brixton Black Women's Group is, I suggest, to arrive once again at a road not taken. Returning to the framing posed in chapter one of this thesis, we might ask: was there a realistic and tangible path to an alternative outcome? In the case of the BBWG, is it so unrealistic to think that at least some of the division in the BDC could have been resolved had the men in the campaign acknowledged that patriarchy, as well as racism, was a problem? And what would have

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[119] Ibid., 2.

[120] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial', c 1977; reprinted in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 19.

happened had members of the Brixton Black Women's Group refused to compromise in order to get the work of organising done? History tells us that men have reliably not wanted to let go of patriarchy and that women have consistently conceded that position. As Olive Gilmore has put it, men 'would have to undo a lot of things to get it right,' and Black men, she said, 'were not prepared to do that'.[121] But to say that these men were unwilling to address their own patriarchy is not the same as saying that they could not have addressed it.

Instead of taking a road to dismantling patriarchy, sexism was maintained in the BDC and ultimately contributed to the campaign's collapse. This 'came to a head' when, in 1981, the BDC made a trip to Toxteth in Liverpool where an insurrection against police harassment had taken place in July 1981.[122] Gail Lewis recalled how throughout the trip '[Black women] still had to make it known that we had something to say; that we were not just the providers of space'.[123] The BBWG had tired of continually engaging in these acts of self-assertion, an exhausting cycle that occurred not just during the Brixton Defence Campaign but throughout the group's long history of engaging in the wider anti-racist struggle. In the face of this exhaustion, members of the BBWG explained that the Toxteth dispute 'led to the disfunctioning of [the] BDC'.[124] The BBWG refused the ongoing patriarchal assault, and as a consequence the BDC's leadership irreparably fractured.

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[121] OIive Gilmore in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 333.

[122] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 2.

[123] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 331–32.

[124] Gerlin Bean, 'Meeting of Sisters in BDC', 2.

The Brixton Black Women's Group outlived the BDC, collapsing in c. 1989.[125] The BBWG thus also outlived some of its closest contemporaries: the Panthers (which folded in 1973), the WLM (c. 1978), the Brixton Defence Campaign (c. 1982), and OWAAD (1983). As their longevity attests, an analysis that centres race and gender does not mean that activism is rendered unsustainable. Eventually, the BBWG nonetheless succumbed to the same kinds of dynamics that led to the demise of other activist groups: lack of funding, lack of external solidarity, and burnout.[126] As Melba Wilson put it, activist fatigue was the cause of their decline and 'by the end of the 1980s we damn nearly burned ourselves out with so much organizing and political work'.[127] Olive Gilmore recalled how 'some people were just physically exhausted'.[128]

For others, however, the decline of the BBWG can only be understood in the context of decisions made in the late 1970s when the group first accepted partnership funding for the financing of their Women's Centre. When the group accepted funding, Lewis has recalled how they became 'bloody managers, and this is what happens so often. You know, to get funding you have to meet certain criteria; to meet those criteria you have to adopt certain

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[125] Milo Miller, 'Editor's Preface', in *Speak out!: The Brixton Black Women's Group*, by Jade Bentil, Brixton Black Women's Group, and Milo Miller (London ; Verso, 2023), vii.

[126] As Tanisha Ford has summarised, the group was unable to withstand '(1) debates over state funding; (2) generational conflicts; (3) the need to address personal issues; (4) the rise of neoliberalism'. Ford, 'We Were People of Soul', 88–89. For a discussion of the experience of burnout amongst activists, see Hannah Proctor 'Burnout'.

[127] Melba Wilson, Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History Project Interview with Melba Wilson, born USA, 1.

[128] Oliver Gilmore in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 336.

structures, and to a great extent the structures dictate the relationships'.[129] There is a familiar ring to Lewis's observation: the adoption of external funding, as we have seen throughout the chapters of this thesis, frequently has a deradicalising effect. External funders often create additional administrative burdens, including reporting on project development and imposing conditions on spending.

I want to suggest, however, that the relationship between the BBWG and external funding was inflected by their assessment of the state as an existential threat. Olive Gilmore recounted how:

> There was also the issue of whether or not the group ought to accept partnership money (funding). As I remember it, the discussion was quite fierce and went on for weeks. In the end, it was agreed that we would, but Olive (Morris) also insisted that she be statemented as saying she did not want to be part of this, based on a political analysis of the state getting involved in the lives of Black people and buying them off.[130]

While there was much overlap between the collapse of the BBWG and the decline of the other activist groups explored in this thesis, for at least some in the BBWG external funding posed an utterly profound challenge. As Morris argued, the fear was that the state would infiltrate Black activism, 'getting involved' and 'buying them off'.[131] As we have seen, the state was judged to pose an existential threat to the life of the Black community. Viewed in this light, accepting funding from the state – the same state that imposed necropolitical power against

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[129] Gail Lewis in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 336.

[130] Oliver Gilmore in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 329.

[131] Ibid.

the people for whom Black activists were fighting to protect – becomes legible as a poison that can pollute, and entirely undermine, a campaign.

Morris's argument was never fully articulated; she died in 1979 at the age of 27 – before, that is, the Brixton Uprising, the Defence Campaign, or the collapse of the Brixton Black Women's Group.[132] But her refusal can be read as a tragic foreshadowing of the risks involved in aligning oneself with a force that has the potential to kill you.

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[132] Olive Gilmore in Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Writing Our Own History: Talking Personal, Talking Political'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 336.

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Conclusion

What happens when we consider feminist activism in the long 1970s as a source of theory? This thesis is, in essence, an answer to the question. Across five cases, I have shown that feminist activists during this period must be understood not merely as enacting a series of practical interventions, but as expressing theory in its own right. We have seen them grapple with live questions in political thought, from how to combine solidarity with autonomy, to the nature of the family and of the state. From this story, four, interrelated contributions emerged.

The first and most foundational contribution of this thesis lies in showing, via close archival work, that feminist activism should indeed be considered a generative site of political theory. Rather than treating theory and activism as oppositional, clearly distinct, or sequential, I argue – by example – that they were often simultaneous. Activists were producing theory not as an afterthought, but through their strategies, conflicts, and choices. This bears out over and again in the archive: leaflets, meetings, campaigns, and speeches were sites of serious strategic thinking, conceptual innovation, and social theoretic debate.

Second, and relatedly, this thesis contributes to feminist methodology in political theory. I read across genres – union slips, pamphlets, published texts, newsletters, oral histories, and meeting minutes – not only to reconstruct events, but to illuminate the concepts, tensions, and questions that shaped them. This method insists that theory can emerge from fragments, silences, and ambivalence. We can, I have suggested, 'read off' theory from this archival material. Here, I have suggested we might see a useful analogy with poetry (a form which, though not analysed here, was also a popular medium among feminists in the period).

Theory can be expressed, assumed, or implied in writing that neither offers itself explicitly as a theoretical treatise nor in all cases expresses itself in standard propositional form. In focussing on this material, this thesis foregrounds what it means to theorise with incomplete materials, while attending carefully to the traces left by women whose lives were structured around labour, care, and political struggle rather than the publication record.

Third, this thesis advances a recovery of history's 'disruptive detail'.[1] The dominant narratives of British feminism – narratives that have too often been white, middle-class, and London-centric – have been repeatedly troubled. The cases in this thesis spotlight the organising of Black women, working-class women, and women outside of the metropolitan centre. In doing so, they disrupt the presumed coherence of any feminist 'wave' metaphor and make visible the plural, geographically dispersed, and ideologically diverse nature of feminist thought in this era. The cases we have turned to do not fit into a self-mythologising and self-aggrandising narrative. They were messy, exhausting, and at times incoherent. And yet, these moments of contradiction and doubt were, as we have seen, in themselves intellectually generative.

And finally, this thesis offers an original and archivally grounded historical reconstruction of five feminist campaigns. From the Night Cleaners Campaign to the Brixton Defence Campaign, these histories have too often been summarised in passing or omitted altogether from scholarly accounts of this period of British history. When they are centred, each contributes not only to feminist history but also to the history of political ideas. By engaging seriously with these campaigns, I argue that they withstand – and indeed demand – prolonged intellectual and historical engagement.

The cases that form the substance of this thesis have each brought specific struggles and ideas to light. Chapter one opened with the Night Cleaners Campaign, a struggle that

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[1] Said, *Orientalism*, 240.

called into question the class composition of the feminist movement as it pushed for solidarity between WLM organisers and working-class women. This chapter argued that the campaign's coalition with unions was deemed to be a strategic necessity, but it also became a source of tension – revealing the fractures between the feminist movement and the male-dominated left.

Chapter two put forward a sharply divergent picture, turning to Selma James's 1972 paper that effectively launched the wages for housework movement in Britain. James explicitly rejected union collaboration and instead called for autonomous organising. On my view, her calls for autonomy prefigured key theoretical debates on social reproduction and feminist strategy that would underpin her activism going forward.

Chapter three explored the radical beginnings and eventual institutionalisation of the Bristol refuge movement. Initially grounded in a critique of the patriarchal family and the state's role in maintaining it, the movement later turned toward state funding and legal reform. This shift brought new dilemmas: how could feminists engage the state without being co-opted by it?

Chapter four shifted focus to the Brixton Black Women's Group, a socialist, anti-racist feminist collective. It reconstructed their campaign against police harassment which, I argued, centred the effects of gendered police misconduct. But while the group's theoretical commitments were clear, at times the BBWG sacrificed the unity of theory and practice in favour of broad-based organising.

Chapter five stayed with the BBWG, turning to their fraught involvement in the Brixton Defence Campaign. Internal conflicts in the campaign over sexism, solidarity, and leadership revealed the enormous strain placed on Black feminist organisers who sought to challenge both the state and patriarchal dynamics within the anti-racist movement. Caught between these currents, they chose to continue organising with men in the face of state violence, which they deemed to be an existential risk.

These five cases were chosen not with the expectation that they would speak to each other, nor that they would reveal the true history of feminist organising in the long 1970s. Five cases could not possibly capture the vast breadth and diversity of this period. This thesis is, instead, a history, or rather a collection of histories, that together contribute to the disruption of a singular story. There are many more such histories to be told – a trip to feminist archives reveals that there is no shortage of materials – and it is my hope that this thesis is just the beginning.

But while these cases were not chosen with the expectation that they would speak to each other, recurrent questions and themes did emerge. For feminists committed to multiple-issue struggles – anti-sexism *and* anti-racism *and* anti-capitalism *and* anti-imperialism – this included: how to organise alongside men who are actively uninterested in dismantling patriarchy? Whether in the trade union movement, refuge work, or anti-racist organising, women were consistently expected to bracket their radical feminism for the sake of a broader collective gain. Again and again, we see women being told that a feminist analysis put the movement at risk. And again and again, we see women making concessions.

What would it have taken for the male left to work through its patriarchal impulses? In 1982, Audre Lorde wrote:

> You do not have to be me in order to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.[2]

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[2] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), 66.

To be different, Lorde writes, does not mean to be divided, nor does it negate the ability of groups to join in collective struggle. On Lorde's account, it is in fact a strength to recognise and utilise difference.

Feminists themselves were culpable of seeking sameness – the story of marginalisation on the male left has its mirror. Within feminist histories, multi-issue struggles, especially those led by Black and working-class women, have often been neglected by the wider, whiter, middle-class feminist movement. The result has been a double erasure by some feminists: men within the left silencing feminist critique, and dominant strands of feminism erasing the complexity of feminist alliances.

The disruptive detail of this thesis, however, challenges singular stories about feminist history. While feminist history is replete with racism, there were also Black feminists, for example, who were determined to emphasise their multi-fold oppression. A wave metaphor which assumes black feminism was in some way sequential on a primarily white 'women's liberation movement' crashes and collapses against the simple fact of the BBWG's existence from as early as 1970 – around the same time as the WLM. Black feminists did not build their analyses on the shoulders of second wave white feminists, they theorised in tandem. Members of the BBWG had their own ideas about what their inheritance might include, citing Claudia Jones, Ntozake Shange, Buchi Emecheta, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth – a company of black, and predominantly North American, women – as theoretical interlocutors.[3] As Amos and Parmar noted in 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', Black British feminists often turned to Black American feminist texts as part of a transnational dialogue: 'The publication in recent

[3] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Review: Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman by Michele Wallace', *Speak Out!*, c 1980; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 192.

years of a number of books by Black feminists in the US mark[ed] the beginning of a systematic documentation of Black women's individual and collective histories', they wrote.[4]

But the BBWG and other Black feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s were also writing themselves into feminist history. To contain intersectionality within the third wave ignores the contributions of women in the 1970s to the long history of Black feminist thought. The BBWG articulated theory about the distinctive oppression that Black women face, putting it, in 1982, as such: 'the status of black women places [them] at the intersection of all forms of subjugation in society – racial oppression, sexual oppression and economic exploitation' – seven years before Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989.[5] As Clare Hemmings has argued, the denial of these contributions has enabled a 'subsequent textual and historical erasure or tokenization' of Black women from the history of feminism.[6] The disruptive quality of history can work towards combating this erasure.

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In Jeska Rees's moving piece on her experience of historicising the WLM, she discusses this distinctive period – in which researched and researcher can interact – as at times

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[4] Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', 1 July 2005, 46.

[5] Brixton Black Women's Group, 'Editorial: Black Feminism'; republished in Miller, Bentil, and Brixton Black Women's Group, *Speak Out!*, 218. 'Crenshaw', Natalie Thomlinson notes, 'simply put a name to an understanding of the way in which racial, gender and class oppression interacted that had been current in feminist circles, and particularly in Black feminist circles, since the 1970s'. Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993*, 18–19.

[6] Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 48. Also see Smith's discussion of the erasure of freedom struggle genealogies in Smith, 'Women and Intellectual History in the Twentieth Century, Part Two', 643.

an opportunity and at others a incumbrance.[7] Rees recalls the painful experience of her work being disputed by the very people she so carefully centres, including a particularly 'negative conversation where the value of my ideas [were] questioned'.[8] For all the careful archival work she did, there were others telling her that she was not there, and that's not how it was.

Rees contrasts the 'pessimism' of the subjects of her research with the relative optimism of the 'various academic assessors of grants and publications associated with that research'.[9] Evidently, there is an appetite, at least amongst some, for the kind of research Rees conducted. And yet, she has not published findings from her PhD since 2010.

Aware of this tension in my own practice, I have largely avoided interacting with members of the WLM outside of the archive. I did not plan to compile oral histories in the course of my research. One of my motivations was to use the rich archives already available, and to enter the archive on its own terms.

There has, however, been one exception.

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In October 2023, I presented my research at the London School of Economics' Women's Library. I had been invited to speak at an event at which Sally Alexander – one of the central organisers in the Night Cleaners Campaign, and a key figure with whom I engage

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[7] Jeska Rees, 'Taking Your Politics Seriously': Lesbian Feminism and the History of the Women's Liberation Movement in England', in *Sapphists and Sexologists: Histories of Sexualities*, ed. Sonja Tiernan and Mary McAuliffe, Histories of Sexualities ; v. 2 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009).

[8] Ibid., 186.

[9] Ibid.

in this thesis – shared her experiences of 'becoming an archive'. The opportunity was, I felt, too extraordinary to resist.

I decided to give a short reflection on the experience of handling Alexander's archival materials as an intellectual historian. Instead of discussing the arguments and content of my thesis, I described my encounter with dozens of union slips in the summer of 2022. Alexander had collected these slips as part of the Night Cleaners Campaign, and each was signed by a different cleaner in a declaration of her membership of the TGWU. If you let them, I argued, these slips become a challenge: do not bow to those who tell you that women's history cannot be told, that it has been lost or inadequately recorded. These slips were an insistence that women's history can be told with an incredible level of detail – down to the names of those who assembled on the picket line.

I described to the audience at LSE my experience of handling these little squares of yellow paper. I was moved, above all, by the handwriting. I read each slip in turn and imagined what it might have felt like to put a pen to that paper. What were these women doing when they signed union slips? On each, a woman had, with extraordinary boldness, signed her name. As I take it, when they did so they were making a series of assertions: we demand a place in the union because the union is the kind of place where we, as workers, belong. Our labour deserves protection, and we demand the solidarity of other workers. What's more, we will risk it all to make these demands because, as the cleaners knew too well, we are risking our jobs when we join the union. These women, women so in need of resources that they worked for impossibly long hours, put their livelihoods on the line for the solidarity and recognition they deserved.

Of all the academic conferences and workshops I have attended over the course of the DPhil, this talk was the most significant. It was critical that Alexander understand the care and seriousness with which I was treating her archive, the same care with which she had so thoughtfully preserved those union slips. I wanted her to know that I understood that those

picket lines were full of people whose lives and hopes and fears were overflowing. And while some parts of this history were untellable – I would never be able to convey the emotion of this archive, let alone the full vibrancy of the actions themselves –, I would tell what I could.

When I returned to my seat, Alexander turned to me. I was emotional as you spoke, she said. I had wondered what I was doing when I pulled those scraps of paper together. I had thought: what could someone possibly need these for? But now I know. This is why, she said to the room, we must compile our archives.

But, as Hazel Carby would have us ask, who are 'we'?[10]

A conversation began on that October afternoon about who should and shouldn't be included in the Women's Library archive. It centred on the question of whether trans women should be allowed to deposit their materials. What would happen, an audience member asked, if trans women approached the Women's Library and sought to include their papers? A policy needed to be developed. Would the Library face legislation if it tried to exclude them?[11]

The conversation on trans inclusion was effectively shut down when one audience member decried the fact that here feminists were, once again, 'talking about men' when they should be talking about women. The subject was duly dropped.

It is, quite frankly, absurd to imagine that the LSE Women's Library risks an inundation of trans women seeking to deposit their papers in the archive. But this absurdity makes it no less disturbing. It is unsettling to witness familiar anxieties about trans people's access to spaces – bathrooms, prisons, schools – now being projected onto the space of the archive.

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[10] Carby, 'White Women Listen!'

[11] To be clear, this was not the position of everyone in the room – a handful of people spoke to the topic – and it was not the stated position of the LSE Women's Library, which was not formally represented in the space. As such, it should not be taken to represent the Women's Library's own position but merely the position of some of the feminists in the space in their personal capacity.

And that feminist histories could be shaped by the ideological commitments and exclusionary impulses of some women who have been prominent feminist voices is historically limiting and politically chilling. When one group of feminists – particularly those with institutional power and resources – attempt to determine who counts as a feminist, or even as a woman, we are reminded of how easily the oppressed can reproduce the logics of exclusion.

Yet the impulse to control how one's history is told does not always emerge from hostility; it can also come from pain, from a need to protect something hard-won and long-ignored. Another audience member described a feminist who had left extensive notes on her archive, complete with instructions on how her materials should be interpreted. This protective impulse is understandable. For many, these archives document one of the most significant chapters of their lives – a period in which they gave themselves fully to the possibility of changing the world. And, as this thesis has shown, they did so while often being dismissed, diminished, or excluded from serious intellectual recognition. When the fight for liberation is also a fight for recognition, it is no wonder that letting go of the narrative can feel like a risk too great to take.

The desire to control the archive is also, perhaps, a response to the present moment. For those who once organised with such urgency and hope, it is undoubtedly disappointing to see the world fall short of the futures they dared to believe possible. The very forms of exploitation they fought to dismantle have persisted – and even intensified: a gig economy that thrives on precarity, wageless care work that remains structurally invisible, police forces that continue to enact racialised violence with impunity. Meanwhile, the trad wife movement grows and the rise of incel culture breathes new life into old misogynies, repackaged for an age of algorithmic radicalisation. All of this unfolds under the unceasing watch of the neoliberal state. When exploitation and misinformation abound, the desire to assert control over one's own narrative makes sense.

What did Alexander think of the impulse amongst feminists to control their archives? She shook her head: as a historian, she would never do this. Alexander insisted that when you hand your material over, you give up control – and you accept that there will be many ways to interpret your story.

Alexander's response is, I think, the right one. For a movement committed to critique, it is profoundly limiting to suggest that one group of people have an intellectual priority when it comes to the interpretation of history. The impulse to limit what can be said also inhibits the treatment of feminist history as a source of fruitful intellectual engagement. And what's more, I do not think that feminists should feel threatened by the inevitable friction of argument, nor the reinterpretation of their archives. Disagreement and diversity of thought have always propelled feminism. It is far from my intention to suggest that women active in the long 1970s should say nothing when they disagree with the way scholars are treating their work. This window – when researcher and researched can be in conversation – is a rare opportunity for call and response. But to insist that their activism be merely preserved but never interpreted is to strip it of its analytic power.

The distance of scholars who weren't there could even offer new vantage points, including on things feminists could not have comprehended while they were busy organising on the streets of London or Bristol, and things that were impossible to trace because they had not yet unfolded. Thanks to the meticulous preservation work of activists, we have the archival resources to trace the ideas and disagreements that shaped this period, down to a name on a union slip.

Historian Joan Wallach Scott has written of the paradox at the heart of feminist archiving: the desire of some feminists to control how their history is told is at odds with their core commitment to critique. 'I'd rather be dead than misread,' Scott writes – before

conceding that to put one's materials in an archive is to relinquish control.[12] As Scott observes, there is no singular truth to history. Scott does not, I take it, mean that there is no such thing as a better or worse history, or that there are no facts to be established. We can say with confidence, for example, that night cleaners formed a picket line in 1970, and that the Brixton Black Women's Group were leaders of the Brixton Defence Campaign. What Scott points to instead is the way that much of the detail of history is left to our imaginations. What actions meant – and what they teach us – depends on how we read, the questions we ask, and what we're ready to see. To be dead is to be misread perhaps. But to be read is also to be alive.

The history of feminism is not simply about preserving what was – it is to reckon with what might still be. This thesis has tried to meet the ideas of feminists with care and curiosity, asking not just what these women did, but what they were trying to imagine. In excavating their struggles, tensions, and contradictions, I hope to show that the archive is not a place of closure but of opening – a space where past ambitions can press up against present questions. If these histories can once again become sources of lively critique, then perhaps they can help us navigate the unfinished business of feminist transformation.

As Scott writes, part of 'the point was to insist [...] that these were not ephemeral moments but events, in Foucault's sense of the word – major discursive shifts with far-reaching and continuing ramifications'.[13] Feminist activists were not simply footnotes in history – they were theorists, strategists, and visionaries. And their lives and choices speak to us still, offering not blueprints, but possibilities. If we let them, and if we are let in, they might still teach us how to think – and how to fight.

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[12] Scott, 'Epilogue: A Feminist Theory Archive', 142.

[13] Ibid.

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