PART 4

Utopias and Dystopias

In July 1980, more than eleven thousand people braved the summer heat as they converged on a ranch outside of Rapid City, South Dakota. In the shadow of the Black Hills, the assembled crowds gathered over nine days with a major goal in mind: stopping the end of the world.

The Black Hills International Survival Gathering was a stunning example of the unexpected coalitions that had been developing in the Great Plains: Native Americans linking with white ranchers to protest resource extraction and treaty violations carried out by major corporations and their government backers. The gathering was organized by the Black Hills Alliance (BHA), which brought Lakota activists connected with the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council together with local ranchers and environmentalists. Dedicated to protecting the nearby Black Hills from uranium mining and toxic dumping, the gathering was further fortified by activists from the growing antinuclear and environmental movements. Camping on the land of a white farmer and BHA member, activists participated in workshops, listened to speeches, and voiced their support for Indigenous sovereignty, ecological sustainability, and energy alternatives.

Taken by the novelty of their approach, activists would later dub their coalition the Cowboy-Indian Alliance. The levity of the name notwithstanding, activists' purpose was serious: it was increasingly apparent that planetary survival itself was imperiled by the trifecta of environmental devastation, corporate greed, and US militarism. This trifecta was on full display in South Dakota: the Survival Gathering took place next to the Ellsworth Air Force base, and uranium mining on the land would enrich nuclear weapons as well as nuclear energy.

With its bold and broad appeal, the Black Hills International Survival Gathering suggested that many activists saw that the fate of the world was at stake. If communist and capitalist states had all failed to prevent the environmental and nuclear precipice, perhaps other forms of protest were needed to make possible a better world. With a shared emphasis on industrial development, both capitalist and communist states take the natural world for granted. Both frameworks also assume that nation-states are a necessary and desirable form of political organization. Indigenous cosmologies—which emphasize nonstate nationalism and see as primary the

interconnections between the earth, animals, and people—reject capitalism and exceed Marxism.

For many radicals, the crises of the time period also provided an opportunity to renew and revive alternate approaches. Such efforts at renewal were undoubtedly varied, in both attempt and execution. Some activists revised what had been done before, whereas others sought to chart paths well outside the conventions of American protest politics. Across this spectrum, activists adapted their approach in relation to the changing conditions. Their alertness took many forms: it included a greater appreciation of the natural world as the foundation of all things, as well as stronger emphasis on Indigenous sovereignty as a more harmonious and just approach than either a capitalist status quo or Soviet-style Marxism. For others, the political climate fostered renewed interest in anarchist and other decentralized forms of organization.

Section A, "Stopping the End of the World," illustrates the blend of critique and practicality that defined the movements themselves. Activists honed the techniques of nonviolent direct action through mobilizations against nuclear war, environmental destruction, and bipartisan budgetary priorities that enabled such crises. Drawing on multiple political traditions, they generalized their knowledge of civil disobedience and affinity group organizing into training manuals, a number of which we excerpt in this section. Protests at nuclear or military sites spawned long-term encampments, which, in turn, generated intense debates about leadership, decision making, and how activists should respond to the racist impacts of environmental devastation.

Pollution, deforestation, and other ecological ruin wrought the most damage on working-class communities of color and Indigenous communities, sparking the rise of a movement calling for environmental *justice*. While the conservationist movement focused on rural lands, environmental justice activists brought the fight to urban areas. The idea of environmental justice came into being when longtime community organizations began identifying the environmental impact of structural inequality. They also challenged the funding priorities, action strategies, and overwhelming whiteness of both large and grassroots environmental organizations. Their framework for justice was a challenge to both major corporations and the mainstream environmental movement.

The challenge that environmental justice activists posed to mainline environmentalism was a particularly powerful example of how radicals applied their core principles to a changing landscape. Political ideologies are always in transit, perhaps especially so in moments of upheaval. Section B, "Left Visions in Transition," assembles a series of attempts to articulate a political framework appropriate to the shifting ground of the time period. In particular, radicals grappled with two major tectonic developments. First, the waning of the Cold War dissolved a conflict that had defined the country for more than half a century. For decades, the positions of many American radicals had been refracted through the country's conflict with the Soviet Union and to a lesser extent China. Leftists, liberals, and conservatives each understood US interventions in the global South as proxy wars against presumed Soviet or Chinese allies throughout the Third World. Yet especially after 1989, the year Ger-

man citizens tore down the Berlin Wall and Chinese democracy activists squared off against government tanks, the specter of foreign communist influence no longer dominated US politics. The end of the Cold War bolstered a conservative triumphalism for unbridled capitalism, popular among both political parties.

Activists labored to articulate a world vision outside of traditional US political frameworks. While some organizations could not survive the change brought about by the challenge to communism, others were energized by it. Some radicals viewed this moment as an opportunity to articulate a new kind of politics that could attend to the failures of existing socialist states. Theirs was a vision of a small-*s* socialism that was antiracist, antisexist, anti-imperialist, and antihomophobic, as well as committed to grassroots democracy and transnational solidarity. Anarchism also saw growing popularity, as evident in the growth of civil disobedience and direct action as well as of groups pursuing autonomous political culture, aided by the increasing ubiquity of new media. The spread of these politics raised a series of questions. What role should electoral politics play in social change? How should progressives and leftists respond to the growing power of the right? What is the relationship between organization building and mobilization, and how can activists sustain momentum beyond moments of uprising? How should activists relate to the growing power of technology?

Asking these and other critical questions led many radicals to confront the origin stories and accepted political strategies of the United States. In particular, as the documents in the final section show, activists worked to transcend the individualism and isolation that grow out of settler colonialism. Section C, "Land, Decolonization, Interdependence," foregrounds Indigenous and other decolonial activism, which has often been distanced from even other aspects of left politics. The documents here highlight fundamental questions of sovereignty: who has the power to rule and what does that power look like? Reworking antiwar catchphrases such as "US out of Vietnam!," some Indigenous activists championed sovereignty by calling for the US to get out of North America. This effort was more than witty sloganeering. Indigenous groups pursued their own forms of sovereignty against the theft of Native land, language, and life. As the documents here suggest, Indigenous people continually asserted their sovereignty in the face of US militarism and corporate resource extraction. Black nationalists and Black farmers saw access to cooperatively owned land as an essential metric of racial justice. Meanwhile, the austerity economics that wreaked such havoc on urban communities of color also blighted many (largely white) rural areas—particularly farm areas in the Midwest and Plains states.

The Indigenous and Black nationalist emphasis on decolonizing land shifted the political center of gravity away from the country's conventional institutions. Seeking to extend such moves, some non-Native radicals proposed other alternatives to US sovereignty. Here, the influence of Indigenous politics joined with anarchist, feminist, surrealist, and ecological critiques of the US state, allowing activists to imagine other forms of social and political organization. Radicals developed theories, built coalitions, and crafted campaigns outside of traditional institutions. An example of the fruits of their labors could be found in what inveterate organizer Judi Bari described as the growing "feminization" of a radical ecology movement that had been

dominated by white men who romanticized a preindustrial past. Another iteration could be seen in feminist and queer activists' rejection of the use of the US criminal justice system as a solution to gendered violence or to homophobic and racist attacks. Here and elsewhere, US radicals confronted the entrenched power of settler colonialism and state violence, instead seeking to create forms of mutuality.

Demanding resolution to deep injustices at home and abroad, social movements responded to the changing context by asking different questions about the source of peril. Wedged between dystopian fears and utopian hopes, a variety of social movements sought to break through the stalemate of how protest was supposed to happen. Activists approached the social and environmental problems of the era with a resolve born of the belief that they were fighting to preserve the conditions of existence. The prospects of this activism were uncertain, with no guarantee of success. Yet there was hope too, for in its struggles lay the possibility for a brighter future.