

# NEW YORK HISTORY

FENIMORE ART MUSEUM  
AND THE  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK—  
COLLEGE AT ONEONTA

SUMMER/  
FALL  
2017

**98/3-4**

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# HISTORY

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We ask that authors submit articles electronically. Submissions as well as footnotes should be double-spaced. Provision and costs of images for articles are the responsibility of the author. *New York History* employs, with some modification, note forms suggested in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Submissions can be sent directly to Fenimore Art Museum Publications Department [publications@fenimoreart.org](mailto:publications@fenimoreart.org)

The journal will process submissions as quickly as possible, but three to six months should be allowed for a thorough reading. *New York History* does not pay for author's articles.

## Book Reviews

### ***Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism.***

By Tamar W. Carroll. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 304 pages, \$34.95 Paper, \$27.99 E-Book.

Reviewed by Ariella R. Rotramel, Connecticut College

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In her first book, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism*, historian Tamar Carroll draws upon organizational case studies to illuminate activists' efforts to empower marginalized New Yorkers as they claim their place in New York's social democracy (7). The groups that she focuses upon, Mobilization for Youth (MFY), the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW), and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!) take readers from the 1960s Lower East Side of Manhattan into 1970s Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and back into Manhattan as the AIDS crisis erupted in the 1980s. According to Mobilization for Youth's Marilyn Bibb Gore, "One of the greatest things that MFY did was help people learn to fight" (50). Her statement invites the critical question of what made it possible for everyday New Yorkers to take their place in social movements that shaped their city and beyond. Through these case studies, Carroll emphasizes New York's diverse activist history as the voices of African American, Puerto Rican, white ethnic, and gay and lesbian activists are highlighted throughout the book. As Carroll explores the tensions that exist within these communities, she emphasizes that the ability to embrace difference and conflict are at the heart of participatory democracy (20).

Carroll connects the histories she explores to the shifting political terrain of New York and the broader country as citizens demanded inclusion, accountability, and resources from their government and experienced back-

lashes to their efforts. Her study of direct action and community organizing across the groups articulates the issues and experiences of community members and activists on the ground. She is adept at using local histories to provide new insights for readers familiar with New York and social movements, while offering enough context for those less familiar with the period or city's rich history. Carroll presents the outsize role the city has played in the United States as it is held up both symbolically and politically as representative of the nation and simultaneously considered to be peripheral with its dynamic mix of social groups, wealth, and poverty (5).

Readers may be drawn to the book as the 2016 presidential campaign echoed its key themes, including references to "New York values," ACT UP protests of Donald Trump, identity-based attacks, and struggles in both parties over accountability to grassroots voters. All three organizations studied faced challenges as their work became increasingly politicized in their practice and opposition during their existence. Mobilization for Youth was accused of being a hotbed of communist activism, and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women received this challenge through lesbian-baiting and race-baiting. Meanwhile, ACT UP and WHAM! went toe-to-toe with the stridently anti-gay and anti-abortion Roman Catholic leadership in New York City. As the current political moment involves struggles over transgender rights, racial justice, and increasing restrictions on abortion access, *Mobilizing New York* offers readers a contextual history of how activists sought to confront injustice despite these barriers.

Carroll's argument is that identity-based activism can be a source of power for social justice movements. Rather than the common assumption that identity is divisive, she makes a compelling case for its efficacy. Carroll demonstrates that activists' deepening investment in identity politics was both intersectional and based in shared needs and/or politics. Thus identity politics provided a strong foundation to their social justice work rather than inhibiting it. Her over fifty interviews, in addition to her use of more than 150 existing oral histories and interviews, give a broad sense of activists' motivations and reflections upon their efforts (21). Petersen of Mobilization for Youth and then the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, reflects this sense as she recounts that during Mobilization for Youth's heyday, "You did it together. I mean we were working together . . . you felt you were actually really part of something, and that you

were building, and that the government of the country you lived in actually cared about this kind of work” (12). Carroll highlights these crucial moments of activist power along with the personal stories that are critical to a deep understanding of the growth of grassroots organizations. For example, ACT UP’s Patrick Moore’s search for a gay community brought him to New York. When he came across the infamous “Silence=Death” poster that became ACT UP’s iconic logo, “Suddenly, though I knew nothing about it, I felt intuitively that there was in fact a gay world that I could not only identify with but aspire to join” (17). The extensive and well-integrated use of activist voices confirms the veracity of Carroll’s key claims. Moreover, through their careful inclusion, she enacts her deep respect for the subjects of her study. Invoking both a sense of their exceptional characters and their grassroots origins, she frames the activists in this study as people “disguised as ordinary New Yorkers” who have fought for marginalized communities (21).

*Mobilizing New York* joins an increasingly dynamic set of works around New York City activism (Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945*; Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing*; Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*), as well as more broadly (Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation*; Nancy A. Naples, ed. *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*; and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era*) that are illuminating more fully the work of social movements from the 1970s to the present. Carroll’s book is notable for taking readers across contexts to understand why identity and space-based organizing has and continues to be potentially fertile for social change.

Carroll’s treatment of each case succeeds in leaving the reader wanting more, particularly in discussions of cases such as the Black Arts Movement. The chapters on the National Congress of Neighborhood Women offer new entry points into understanding how well-known practices like consciousness-raising were deeply meaningful and held potential for engaging difference and shared experiences by women. However, as the focal actor is Jan Peterson, readers may at times lose a sense of the importance of indige-

nous leadership as they read about her primary role. While Carroll does an excellent job of situating each case study in its political context and explaining how questions of identity play out, it would be helpful to provide more analysis of the differences in form and scale of the groups under study.

Overall, the activist groups at the heart of this book serve to introduce readers to the hard work of building multi-racial alliances during a period when poor New Yorkers were struggling for resources and often came up against racially-charged policy making. This book holds particular value for readers interested in finding inspiration as they seek to think through current social issues or engage in community-based organizing, and could be particularly useful for local or online reading groups. Other people may be drawn to the book's emphasis on making connections across communities, and the book would be valuable for readers invested in cross-cultural dialogue. This exciting new book offers a window into dynamic activism that helps readers not only understand the period, but to consider lessons for our contemporary moment.

### ***Saratoga Springs: A Centennial History.***

Field Horne, editor. Saratoga Springs, NY: Kiskatom Publishing, 2015, 404 pages, \$49.95 Cloth.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Redkey, Western Governors University

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**S**aratoga Springs, New York, is known internationally for its mineral springs, horse racing, grand Victorian resorts, and a critical battle during the American Revolution. Most histories of Saratoga focus on the Saratoga Springs of the summer and the Saratoga Springs of the distant past. While the authors of *Saratoga Springs: A Centennial History* do cover these topics, their goal is to help readers understand the city in its entirety. They write about the connective tissue of the city's government, schools, economy, and community. This is a history of the year-round city, not just the Saratoga Springs that appears in tourism brochures.

To do this they have organized the book starting with a general history of the city, from its origins to the present, then emphasizing several topics that are critical to understanding Saratoga Springs as a fully developed city. While integrating the highlighted topics into a single chronological narra-