THE RISING TIDE OF COLOR

RACE, STATE VIOLENCE, AND RADICAL MOVEMENTS ACROSS THE PACIFIC

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

in association with

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS
SEATTLE AND LONDON
Hypervisibility and Invisibility
Asian/American Women, Radical Orientalism, and the Revisioning of Global Feminism

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During the US War in Viet Nam, the Hanoi-based Viet Nam Women’s Union and the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Viet Nam both played integral roles in fostering a global women’s antiwar movement. Through meetings, correspondence, and the circulation of print as well as visual media, the two Viet Nam women’s unions (VWUs) actively nurtured US women’s interest in American foreign policy and military activity in Southeast Asia. Their ability to fuel a sense of moral outrage among women across national, cultural, racial, and class boundaries stemmed from a belief that all human beings, and especially all women, could share a sense of commonality and purpose. To convey this message, the VWUs reached out to women around the world and articulated a gendered critique of imperialism and militarism. Their efforts to promote an international antiwar movement was premised upon a belief in global sisterhood, projecting and cultivating a female universalism that simultaneously challenged and transcended racial and cultural divides.

This chapter revisits the concept of global sisterhood from a different vantage point. Studies on global feminism have noted the disproportionate power and the misperceptions of white middle-to-upper-class women from the “West” in shaping these international alliances. I examine instead how “Third World” women, both those from the global South as well as racialized women in the United States, fostered and deployed female internationalism during the “long” decade of the 1960s. In particular, I foreground the agency and perspectives of both Asian and Asian American women during the US War in Viet Nam. The political efforts of women from Southeast Asia resonated deeply with women of Asian
ancestry in the United States. Over the course of the war, Asian American women were rendered largely invisible in American social movement circles. Cast as the “model minority” by the popular media in the 1960s, Asian Americans generally came to represent a counterpoint to social activism, a minority group seemingly disengaged from politics altogether. Mirroring similar conclusions about Japanese Americans, for example, the *U.S. News and World Report* argued in 1966 that “at a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else.” For Asian American women, this image of the model minority was compounded by projections of hypersexuality and submissiveness. Asian American women were racialized and gendered as the antithesis of political activism.

In contrast to the invisibility and marginalization of Asian American women, Vietnamese women occupied highly visible and exemplary roles as anti-imperialist revolutionaries in global as well as US-based antiwar and women’s movements. The significant roles of Asian women within the international activist imaginary, which has yet to be fully recognized in the scholarship on radical movements, provides an opportunity to elaborate on a concept I call *radical orientalism*.

The activists who questioned the US War in Viet Nam wanted to name American policies and cultural practices as a form of imperialist domination, an effort to control governments, economies, and societies abroad in the name of modernization and democracy. These critics tended to distance themselves from what they perceived as the militaristic, materialistic, and racist values of mainstream US society. Instead, they wanted to identify with Asian people and with societies resisting colonialism (or formal control by another country) and neocolonialism (or indirect control). Consequently, these individuals ironically followed in an orientalist tradition of reinforcing a dichotomy between the East and the West, specifically between decolonizing Asia and imperial America. The radicalness of their orientalism stemmed from how they inverted and subverted previous hierarchies: American travelers idealized the East and denigrated the West. They turned to Asian countries and peoples for political, personal, and at times religious inspiration. Radical critics therefore replicated an orientalist logic that cultural theorist Edward Said identified, whereby the decolonizing East helped to define the identities and goals of activists in the West.
In addition to the hierarchical inversion, radical orientalism differed from dominant forms of orientalism in that Asian individuals actively shaped Western understandings of Asia. In Said’s critique of Occidental representations of the Orient, the East is inert and silent; instead, the West speaks for the East. Even in Vijay Prashad’s discussion of Western radical appropriations of Eastern philosophies and religions, Asian people and culture tend to be frozen in time, valorized for an essentialized “spiritual patina.” The perceptions of Western antiwar travelers, however, were not just their projections of Asia. Asian individuals, political movements, and nations cultivated connections with US activists of diverse backgrounds and interpreted decolonizing Asia for these visitors. These Asian representatives were political beings grounded in a particular historical movement for national liberation against the West, communicating their interpretations of their identities, histories, ideologies, and goals with activists from the West. In other words, the East and the West worked together to foster a radical orientalist sensibility.

The depictions of Vietnamese female warriors played a crucial role in this radical orientalist framework. They directly countered classical orientalist depictions of exotic, sexualized, and victimized Asian women. Instead, these Third World female liberation fighters served as models of revolutionary womanhood. In doing so, however, these radical portrayals reinforced an orientalist binary, in which the East again served as a mirror for Western self-definition. Now representing a contrasting image of revolutionary hope to oppressive gender roles in North American societies, Asian women helped female reformers in the “West” to redefine their aspirations and political goals.

There is a tension between radical orientalism, which posits a binary sense of opposition between the Orient and the Occident, and global sisterhood, which emphasizes the possibility of genuine dialogue and collective identification among women across various borders. I believe that this tension was a productive and generative one that allowed women of varying backgrounds from the West to develop a sense of sisterhood with women from the East. These global political alliances were inspired by heroic representations of Asian women’s anticolonial activism. In turn, these depictions of revolutionary womanhood both reinforced and challenged an orientalist logic. They fostered identification through an essentialized sense of East/West duality, but they also offered the possibility of Asian female agency and defiance. Radical orientalism
and global sisterhood were mutually imbricated, not polar opposites.

The productive tension between a binary sense of opposition between the Orient and the Occident and an identification with radical Asia was particularly acute for Asian American women. Because of their marginalization within American political movements, women of Asian ancestry in the United States aspired to connect with their revolutionary Asian sisters in Southeast Asia. Their sense of sisterhood both recognized the disparate subject positions of Asian and Asian American women yet was also premised upon a sense of commonality rooted in racial, gender, and political likeness. Inspired by these encounters, both groups of women formulated innovative critiques of war and colonization that foregrounded the experiences and bodies of Asian women in understanding US militarization and empire.

This chapter analyzes the efforts of Asian and Asian American women in fostering global sisterhood. Given vast cultural, racial, and political divides, the process of fostering a female internationalism relied upon face-to-face contacts between women of diverse backgrounds that would expand their political imagination and sense of communion beyond the nation-state. Actual encounters between Asian and American women provided opportunities for dialogue and for the recognition of each other’s humanity. In addition, the reporting of these encounters, which were circulated through articles, books, reports, letters, interviews, speeches, short stories, poetry, photographs, film, and artwork, helped to create a common language, a shared sense of time, and an internationalist commitment toward mutual responsibility.

The first section examines how the VWUs attempted to communicate their political message to various groups of American women’s activists, particularly those who identified as “traditional” maternalist peace advocates and as second-wave feminists. The second section reveals how the US War in Viet Nam shaped the political aspirations and identifications of “Third World” women based in racialized communities in the United States, illustrating especially how Asian American women came to be political activists and theorists of war, race, and gender. The third section focuses on the relationship between global sisterhood (which seeks to promote universal commonality) and radical orientalism (which fosters political communion through a recognition of binary difference). These layered efforts to promote an international women’s antiwar movement were not free of conflict or misunderstanding, but highlighting Asian and Asian
American perspectives offers an opportunity to reframe Western women’s peace activism as part of a global movement that emerged through dialogue and negotiation as well as through projection and romanticization.  

FOSTERING GLOBAL SISTERHOOD

In its campaign to promote a worldwide movement against the US War in Viet Nam, the Viet Nam women’s unions cultivated relationships with individual women and with female organizations from a variety of political leanings and backgrounds. Members of the VWUs invested personnel, time, and energy to establish relationships with women in the West through conversations, meetings, and letters. Their efforts to foster global sisterhood used multiple strategies rather than a uniform message to create overlapping and distinct international female constituencies. Specifically, the VWUs articulated maternalist gender equity, as well as gender separatist ideals. These messages appealed to women in the West who ascribed to diverse political beliefs and who came from varying class and racial backgrounds.

The earliest contacts that the VWUs had with women in the West were with maternalist peace organizations, such as the US-based Women Strike for Peace (WSP). Women Strike for Peace originated in 1961 with the efforts of predominantly middle-class and middle-aged white women to protect their families from nuclear annihilation. As historian and former WSP activist Amy Swerdlow explained,

On 1 November 1961 an estimated fifty thousand women walked out of their kitchens and off their jobs, in an unprecedented nationwide strike for peace. As a radioactive cloud from a series of Russian atom bomb tests passed over American cities and the United States threatened to retaliate with its own cycle of nuclear explosions, the striking women sent delegations to their elected officials.... They demanded that their local officials pressure President John Kennedy on behalf of all the world’s children, to end nuclear testing at once and begin negotiations for nuclear disarmament.

This initial strike eventually led committed women to form Women Strike for Peace. The members of the organization, as historian Andrea Estepa has argued, had “wide-ranging professional identities,” but they chose to
publicly identify themselves as “housewives and mothers.” These women proclaimed their right to condemn the threat of global and nuclear warfare based on the desire to protect their own and other people's families. In other words, they were not rejecting gender difference but embracing it to define a special role for women on the global stage.

These maternalist motivations for peace inspired WSP to engage with peace activism during the US War in Viet Nam and with Vietnamese women. Women Strike for Peace’s contact with the VWUs began in 1965, when two WSP members were among the first Americans to visit Hanoi after the commencement of the US bombing of North Viet Nam. That same year, a ten-person delegation from WSP met with representatives from North and South Viet Nam in Djakarta, Indonesia, to affirm women's unique abilities to cross Cold War barriers and foster peace. These political and personal relationships continued to develop as WSP sent international delegations to Europe, Canada, Cuba, and North Viet Nam throughout the remainder of the war.

The efforts of WSP would not have been possible without the VWUs, who initiated the invitation to WSP representatives to visit Hanoi and then met and corresponded with them around the world. In addition to these personal contacts, the VWUs also circulated print and visual materials to help Western women gain an understanding of how Vietnamese women both suffered from but also resisted colonialism and military aggression. One important example of this antiwar literature was Vietnamese Studies No. 10, a publication devoted to the topic of Vietnamese Women (hereafter referred to as VW). The 1966 booklet, published significantly in English in Hanoi, was presented to US visitors, both at international gatherings and during their travels to Viet Nam. The portrayal of Vietnamese women in this work, which numbered over three hundred pages, resonated with the political ideologies and sympathies of women from a variety of backgrounds in the West.

*Vietnamese Women* consisted of eight sections, with chapters on broad topics, such as “The Vietnamese Woman, Yesterday and Today,” as well as more intimate and localized portrayals of either individual women or women from particular villages or regions. The overall effect was to personalize and humanize women in North and South Viet Nam by providing a narrative of personal and social uplift through four historical stages: (1) Vietnamese women’s lives under patriarchal and colonial oppression under French rule beginning in the mid- to late nineteenth century; (2)
Vietnamese women’s efforts to challenge traditional gender roles through involvement in national liberation movements, first against the French and then against the United States; (3) the transformation of Vietnamese women’s lives through socialist reconstruction projects in the North after the end of the First Indochina War against the French in 1954; and (4) how the opportunities for improving Vietnamese women’s lives continued to be threatened by American imperialism and the Second Indochina War, which was being fought against the United States and the South Vietnamese government. Somewhat predictably, VW argued that the oppression of Vietnamese women, particularly for the vast majority who were members of the peasantry, was centrally connected to class and national oppression. For Vietnamese women to achieve liberation and equality, then, they had to not only struggle against patriarchal family and societal norms but also strive for national independence and socialist revolution.

The way this political message was conveyed, particularly through intimate portraits, appealed to Western women in various ways. For “maternalist” peace activists, like many members of WSP, the destructive effect of war on heteronormative family life in Viet Nam resonated strongly. Numerous portrayals of women in VW emphasize the temporary or permanent separation of husbands and wives, as well as mothers and children, because of war. The tragedy of war, then, was conveyed through the tragedy of heteronormative and maternal loss. One folksong quoted in VW expressed this longing between a young woman in North Viet Nam and her fiancé who departed to fight in the South: “Our destinies are bound together, I will wait for you/Even if I should have to wait a thousand years.”

The emphasis on family separation also was conveyed through other forms of communication. For example, Nguyen Thi Binh, who met with members of WSP in Djakarta and became one of the most recognizable Asian female figures in Western women’s political circles, came from a relatively elite and educated background. Unlike most WSP members, Binh became an authorized political leader, eventually serving as the foreign minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam and its chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks. Despite the disjuncture in status between Binh and most members of WSP, Binh sought to connect with maternalist peace activists through a language of sisterhood and motherhood. For example, in a fifteen-minute film produced for Women Strike for Peace in 1970, Binh explained,
I am so happy as a South Vietnamese woman and mother to have the opportunity to speak to you.... May I express my sincere thanks to the Women Strike for Peace for its contribution to the anti-war movements and its sympathy and support to our people, particularly the South Vietnamese women.... Our aspirations for peace are all the more ardent, for over twenty-five consecutive years now, our compatriots, we women included, have never enjoyed a single day of peace. Let me tell you that in my own family, several members have been killed while some others are still jailed by the Saigon regime. I myself have had not much time to live with my husband and my children. The moments my son and daughter were allowed to be at my side have become so rare and therefore so precious to them.

Binh’s emphasis on the destructive effect of warfare on family life both reflected the experiences of women in Viet Nam and also resonated with maternalist activists in the West who stressed the sanctity of motherhood and home life.

Given the emphasis placed on protecting the family, Vietnamese women’s resistance of colonialism and war, which necessitated transcending traditional gender roles and at times engaging in or supporting acts of violence, can be framed as heteronormative or maternalist agency. An imprisoned female revolutionary during the struggles against French imperialism wrote on her prison cell before she was executed:

A rosy-cheeked woman, here I am fighting side by side with you men!
On my shoulders, weighs that hatred which is common to us.
The prison is my school, its mates my friends.
The sword is my child, the gun my husband.¹⁴

In this poem, instruments of violence are equated with members of a heteronormative family, with the evocation of the sword as a child and the gun as a husband justifying the embrace of these objects as a means to fulfill traditional familial responsibilities. Given colonial and wartime conditions that did not allow for a peaceful existence of kinship units, the female warrior bore the responsibility of defending her home and homeland in order to become a wife and mother.

While this defiance of traditional gender roles in the name of maternalism might have struck a chord with “traditional” women’s peace activists
in the United States, the experiences and representations of Vietnamese women also offered a range of political possibilities for a diverse array of American women who initiated second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. For liberal feminists seeking access and equality in the realm of work and politics, the experiences of Vietnamese women during both the war and socialist construction offered insights into the process of renegotiating public gender roles. For example, *Vietnamese Women* began by noting that while “it is easy to inscribe the ‘liberation of women’ in the programme of a political party, it is much more difficult to get it into legislation, and more difficult still to integrate it into the customs and manners of the time.”

Significantly, the publication did not regard women in the West as the vanguard of change, stating instead that “at present, women in all Western countries are still asking for equal salary and wages with men.... And they are not to get it very soon.” Strikingly, the authors regarded women in the West as being engaged in a similar struggle and perhaps even falling behind the so-called Third World. *VW* documented at length the rights and advances women had achieved under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, such as suffrage, equal pay, and holding prominent positions of political and economic leadership. At the same time, the publication also frankly acknowledged barriers to greater gender equity, conveying both advances and challenges through individual stories and charts with clear quantitative data.

Other aspects of the Vietnamese analysis of women’s oppression and agency would have appealed more strongly to women’s liberation activists in the United States, who sought to identify and subvert the workings of patriarchy in all realms of life, not just in work and politics but also in the intimate realm of personal, familial, and sexual relationships. For example, Vivian Rothstein, an activist with Students for a Democratic Society before her involvement in the women’s liberation movement in Chicago, gained political inspiration to focus on female empowerment through her travels to Hanoi in 1967. Rothstein noted that her invitation to North Viet Nam was at the insistence of the Viet Nam Women’s Union, which at the time had a clear understanding of how women could and should perform important roles in political movements for social transformation. She recalled that in fact the North Vietnamese women had a greater understanding of women’s potential than she or her fellow male New Left organizers did. After all, the Hanoi-based VWU traced its history back to the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party in
In North Viet Nam, Rothstein observed how the women’s union sought to inspire and mobilize women. The organization had chapters at various levels, ranging from local villages to the national level and operating in schools, workplaces, health clinics, and government units. In all of these settings, the groups trained women for political leadership and advocated for their collective interests. Viet Nam Women’s Union representatives conveyed to their US visitors “how important it was to organize the women … and how powerful American women could be” as well. When Rothstein returned to the United States, she helped form the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, which she modeled on the VWU.

The Vietnamese women not only served as political mentors through their analysis and institutions, they also provided functioning examples of women’s communities. The Vietnamese organized all-female economic production teams, guerrilla units, and even regular military battalions while leading hybridized and improvised family structures in the midst of war. Although products of emergency circumstances, these practices nevertheless offered empowering demonstrations of how women, through separatist institutions, could transform the society around them. Finally, the emphasis on using the personal to offer political instruction, a strategy that the VWU used to mobilize the largely peasant constituency in Viet Nam, corresponded strongly to one of the key mantras of the women’s liberation movement.

As the Vietnamese effectively reached out to maternalist and feminist women in the West, tensions and disagreements also arose between Asian and American women. That Vietnamese women’s military feats in defense of their homes and villages often came at the expense of American lives likely gave pause to some women in the United States, particularly those who were committed to pacifism or who had family members serving in the military. Liberal feminists seeking opportunities to integrate into the existing social structure in the United States likely disagreed with the call for socialism, while the largely unquestioned heteronormativity embedded in maternalist politics frustrated American feminists striving for a more radical critique of sexual and gender relations. Despite the political differences between Indochinese and American women of varying backgrounds and beliefs, the face-to-face meetings, letters, and publications initiated by the VWUs worked effectively to foster political and personal connections with maternalist and feminist women’s activists in the West.
THIRD WORLD SISTERHOOD

The Vietnamese women engaged in struggles of national liberation served as role models and political educators not only for maternalist peace activists and second-wave feminists but perhaps most profoundly for “Third World” women in the United States. These racialized women of African American, Chicana or Mexican American, Latina, Indigenous, and Asian American backgrounds adopted the title “Third World” in the late 1960s to express solidarity with Third World peoples globally. Understanding themselves as internal colonial subjects, they allied with one another based on similar experiences of disfranchisement and marginalization within the United States. In addition, they identified with people in the Third World who were fighting for self-determination and national liberation from colonialism and neocolonialism. Furthermore, as women of color, they began in the mid- to late 1960s and 1970s to articulate an intersectional analysis of the social hierarchies that they experienced. They discovered and explored a connection to Vietnamese women because of their shared political analysis of overlapping oppression based on race, colonialism, class, and gender.

For example, Betita Martinez, a Chicana activist based in New Mexico who had political roots in the southern civil rights movement, visited Hanoi in 1970. Her sense of commonality with Vietnamese women was due not only to gender but also to what she perceived as a comparable colonized status. Likening the Vietnamese countryside to New Mexico, Martinez also observed how the vast majority of Vietnamese people were peasants, an identity celebrated by the Chicano/a movement. In addition, akin to Mexican American demands for self-determination and reclamation of their ancestral homeland of Aztlán, the Vietnamese were engaged in a struggle for political independence and defense against military aggression and ecological destruction. In Martinez’s eyes, both the Vietnamese and Chicano/as shared an indomitable sense of resistance: “The spirit of the people was like a force of nature itself, creating life in the shadow of death. The white people of the West with their unnatural soul and their unnatural weapons are a death people…. The Vietnamese are a life people [like Chicanos]. And anyone who thinks that a life people can really be conquered is a fool.”

For Third World women in the United States, the opportunity to interact with and learn from nonwhite female leaders was especially empower-
ing. After meeting women from Southeast Asia at a Canadian conference in 1971, Maria Ramirez and Nina Genera, two Chicana activists based in the San Francisco Bay Area, recalled that it marked their first opportunity to witness and interact with Third World women in the vanguard of an ongoing revolution. For Asian American women, this sense of racial as well as political identification was particularly acute. Largely invisible within social movement circles in the United States, they were able to find political role models through the hypervisibility of Vietnamese peasant women. Pat Sumi, a Japanese American antiwar activist who traveled with Black Panther Party leaders Eldridge Cleaver and Elaine Brown to North Korea, China, and North Viet Nam in 1970, explained,

Women in Vietnam have a tradition of being liberation fighters.... We met this seventeen-year-old woman. In her village there was an all-woman guerilla unit that shot down two American airplanes, while taking responsibility for the rice fields around the battery where the antiaircraft guns are. They produced more on that rice field than any other comparable plot in the village. And the whole group sang poetry and songs for us.

Although most women activists in the United States did not travel to Vietnam, they nonetheless would have been able to read similar profiles of Vietnamese women in movement publications.

Pat Sumi was not unique in her admiration of Vietnamese women. A significant number of Asian American women were among the approximately one thousand North American antiwar activists who attended the Indochinese Women’s Conferences (IWC), held in Vancouver and Toronto, Canada, in 1971. The IWC represented the first opportunities for North American women to have direct contact with their Asian “sisters”—women from North Viet Nam, South Viet Nam, and Laos, a country bordering Viet Nam that had become enmeshed in the US War in Viet Nam. There were 120 Asians from the United States and Canada at the Vancouver gathering, according to a Japanese American delegate, roughly half of the approximately 200 to 250 Third World women in attendance. Because Asian Americans resided predominantly in the US West, they likely attended in smaller numbers at the Toronto conference, which was intended for residents of the East Coast and the Midwest.

Asian American women who could not travel to Canada could read
extensive coverage of the IWC in the *Asian Women’s Journal*, a pioneering and widely circulated publication devoted to Asian American women’s issues. Originally issued in 1971, the same year as the conferences, the journal was eventually reprinted three times. It featured biographies of the Southeast Asian women who participated in the IWC as well as personal testimonies, poetry, and artwork by Asian American attendees, including an interview with Pat Sumi. Sumi had not only traveled to socialist Asia in the summer of 1970 but had also played a key role in organizing the IWC. And she represented Third World women, whose political trajectories and consciousness emerged out of racial liberation movements, in contrast to the white maternalist peace activists and second-wave feminists who were prominent in organizing the IWC.

Recognizing political differences among IWC organizers and participants, Sumi demanded separate meetings for women of color to engage with Indochinese delegates autonomously. “Since we have been denied an equal participation with white groups, we can only ask for equal but separate conferences,” she explained in a statement. “The possibility of a confrontation between Third World and white women’s groups at a joint conference would be disrespectful to the Indochinese women and would further reinforce the tensions that exist among North American women.” Sumi’s proposal received support from at least some white women. “Why should Third World women unify with white women who claim to recognize the need of self-determination for the Indochinese,” a contingent from Los Angeles argued, “but who do not recognize the right of self-determination of all peoples in this country, as manifested in the ‘small’ way of planning a conference for people instead of with them.”

As a result of this call for separate conferences, the IWC in Vancouver was divided into three sections: “old friends” or maternalist activists; “new friends” or women’s liberation activists; and Third World Women.

The IWC attracted the interest of Asian American women because female revolutionaries from Southeast Asia crystallized three main tenets of Asian American women’s emerging political identity—their racial, international, and gender consciousness. Donna Kotake, a Japanese American who attended the Vancouver conference, recalled the political inspiration that the Indochinese women offered. Raised in a farming community in the San Francisco South Bay and attending San Jose State University in 1971, Kotake was undergoing a political awakening. Growing up in the United States, she explained,
your whole identity was not Asian. Your identity was just, like, you wanted to be a white person.... So, to us at that point, ... identifying ourselves as Asian Americans, wanting to learn more about our own histories, and you know, being proud of the histories ... and I think really hooking up with other non-whites was a really big deal.... So, you know, there’s the identity going on as being Asian and there’s a third world coming, coalitions coming together, and there’s this international thing with Vietnam, and at the same time people talking about China and seeing what a shining example of, you know, what it could be like to be free, people who care about ... people and a country that provides ... for everyone. 

Kotake and other activists of her generation were discovering their racial identity as Asian Americans. Instead of desiring whiteness, Kotake recognized herself as a member of a resistant pan-ethnic group that had a distinct history and culture connected to Third World struggles in the United States and around the world.

Her political consciousness having been raised through the Asian American movement press and conversations with individuals such as Sumi, Kotake experienced a profound connection with the Indochinese women in Vancouver. They shared her racial and gender status and her anti-imperialist politics. When asked how the IWC influenced her, Kotake responded, “Just feeling the strength of the women and realizing how much women can do ... it really made me feel incredibly proud about being a woman.” Another Asian American woman who attended the conference emphasized that the presence of Asian female bodies enhanced the political message of the Indochinese delegates. She wrote, “Their physical presence had tremendous impact on the hundreds of Third World and white women. Here were six Asian women—physically small, sincere, friendly, often appearing extremely tired. Yet, whenever one spoke, it was with such clarity and with a background of personal involvement that the meaning of a people’s revolution became a reality.”

At the time of the conference, Asian American women were developing a gendered and racialized analysis of the war that emphasized the transnational connections between Asians in Viet Nam and those in the United States. Activist Evelyn Yoshimura articulated this perspective in an essay titled “GI’s and Racism,” which first appeared in the Asian American movement newspaper Gidra and was then reprinted in Asian American movement.
Women’s Journal. Yoshimura argued that the US military relied upon and reproduced racial hatred for Asians to motivate American soldiers to fight in Asia. By promoting the “view of Asian people as sub-human beings ... the U.S. military ... can instill the values and mentality that is necessary to become effective killers.” These racial attitudes, which were cultivated among US soldiers during basic training on the US mainland and then on military tours in Southeast Asia, were carried and reproduced back and forth across the Pacific.

The figure of Asian women played a central role in the racial education of US military personnel. As Yoshimura stated, US soldiers learned to regard “Asian women as a symbolic sexual object.” Through the systematic creation of red light districts in Asian countries where US troops were stationed, the US military institutionalized the practice of American GIs frequenting Asian prostitutes in what sociologist Joane Nagel calls the “military sexual complex.” Not limited to individual excursions, these practices became integral to military culture and discourse through ritualized retellings of these experiences. An Asian American Marine recalled of his boot camp experience,

We had these classes we had to go to taught by the drill instructors, and every instructor would tell a joke before he began class. It would always be a dirty joke usually having to do with prostitutes they had seen in Japan or in other parts of Asia while they were stationed overseas. The attitude of the Asian women being a doll, a useful toy, or something to play with usually came out in these jokes and how they were not quite as human as white women ... how Asian women's vaginas weren't like a white woman's, but rather they were slanted, like their eyes.

Such racialized and sexualized depictions of Asian women, used to foster male bonding among US soldiers, guided US military policies and practices in Southeast Asia—in the brothels and in the general prosecution of war.

The Indochinese women who traveled thousands of miles to meet women in North America bore witness to the US military sexual complex and the gendered effect of militarism. Among the six female delegates from Southeast Asia, women who either suffered traumatic abuse or who could testify to wartime atrocities tended to receive the most attention in activist publications. Dinh Thi Hong, for example, had a powerful
effect on conference attendees. A middle-aged housewife from South Viet Nam, Hong had not been politically engaged in the movement for liberation before she was imprisoned. Suspected of supporting the opposition to the South Vietnamese government, she was detained and tortured in a series of the regime’s most notorious prisons. In her autobiographical narrative, she recalled having “pins [planted] in my fingertips,” having “electrodes … attached to my ears and to my fingers, nipples and genitals … and tortured with electricity until I was unconscious.” In addition, her interrogators “forced water, lye and salt into my stomach and trampled on my stomach until I vomited blood and was unconscious.” Illustrating the visceral and sexualized nature of torture, Hong’s detailed account appeared in several movement publications produced by the New Left, Third World, and women’s organizations.

Such accounts of atrocities reminded North American women of the horrific nature of the US war in Southeast Asia and the particular effect it had on women. While many antiwar activists no doubt had absorbed similar information through movement publications, the effect of hearing these stories in person was much more profound. Furthermore, the IWC took place just after lieutenant William Calley’s conviction for his role in the My Lai massacre. On March 16, 1968, Calley had commanded one of three platoons that entered a village suspected of supporting the “Viet Cong” (Army intelligence had actually misidentified the village). In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive on urban military and political outposts throughout South Viet Nam, US soldiers became determined to hunt down and punish communist sympathizers. Practiced in violent search-and-destroy missions, the American troops executed over five hundred residents of My Lai in one day. They murdered women, the elderly, and young children, none of whom shot at the Americans. GIs also sexually tortured and raped women before executing them. A soldier recalled, “I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue, their hair, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it, and I just followed. I lost all sense of direction.”

After years of delay and deflection on the part of the US military, Calley was finally found guilty of mass premeditated murder and assault with intent to commit murder in March 1971. Although he would ultimately serve only a few months in military prison and a few years under house arrest for his crimes, Calley’s conviction made the My Lai massacre a focal point of the IWC in Vancouver, which convened only two days after the
verdict was announced. As asked repeatedly about Calley, the Indochinese
delegation used the occasion to highlight the level of violence and destruction
the US military committed everyday in Southeast Asia. Without
acquitting Calley’s role, Phan Minh Hien, a teacher and a representative
of the Women’s Union for the Liberation of South Vietnam, stated, “While
Calley is the person who gave the order, he was merely carrying out the
orders of the US administration.” For Hien, Calley’s crimes were America’s
crimes, since “the U.S. administration sent U.S. troops into Vietnam, ‘that
is why the U.S. youths commit crimes against our country … why the
Vietnamese people have to fight … and why U.S. youths get killed.’”

As the Vietnamese delegates explained how the US War in Viet Nam
depended on gendered and sexualized violence in Asia, Asian American
women emphasized the transnational nature of that violence. “We, as
Asian American women, cannot separate ourselves from our Asian coun-
terparts,” Evelyn Yoshimura argued. “Racism against them is too often
racism against us …. The mentality that keeps Suzy Wong, Madame Butterfly and gookism alive turns human beings into racist murdering sold-
diers and also keeps Asian Americans from being able to live and feel like
human beings.”

Harkening back to decades of fictive representations of
Asian women as available and vulnerable objects of Western military men
and US military campaigns in Asia, Yoshimura invoked a larger history of
colonial violence and racial subjection across the Pacific. As the appella-
tion Third World women suggested, racialized women in the United States
recognized how colonization and gender oppression operated in tandem
both abroad and at home.

RADICAL ORIENTALISM AND GLOBAL SISTERHOOD

The Indochinese Women’s Conferences provided an example of how ideas
and practices could critique and transcend national boundaries. The
political leadership of Indochinese women inspired an array of American
sisters—who identified themselves as maternalist, feminist, and Third
World activists—to combat American militarism and imperialism. Yet
even as these women forged international alliances, they also reinforced a
binary between women from the East and those from the West. The North
American attendees of the IWC tended to perceive Indochinese women
as either victims of war or revolutionary heroines, as a people subjected
to and resisting Western violence. In contrast, the women from South-
east Asia encouraged their audience to view everyone as equally capable of political activism. The tension between difference and commonality was nevertheless an enabling one that helped to forge an international sisterhood, predicated upon and in excess of a radical orientalist outlook.

The politics of rescue or a feminist orientalist outlook readily shaped the perspectives of some Western women. Following the IWC conferences, the newsletter for Women Strike for Peace, Memo, published a series of letters from its readers under the headline “They Must Be Saved,” a phrase that positioned North American women as the potential saviors of Asian women. Reinforcing this message was a widely circulated image among peace activists that appeared on the cover of Memo in December 1966. Featuring a Vietnamese mother holding a baby in her arms, the image portrayed the mother as utterly hopeless and forlorn. As she gazes down and away, three white angels descend toward her to offer solace, evoking the role to be played by women of the West. Published during the Christmas season, the Vietnamese Madonna image underscored a maternalist message, calling for the salvation of a fellow mother and, perhaps more importantly, her child, whose gaze connects directly with the viewer.
In contrast to the politics of rescue, a radical orientalist sensibility also shaped the perceptions of feminist activists from the West. Seeking to critique the militaristic West, American radicals followed in an orientalist tradition of demarcating a divide between the East and the West, specifically between decolonizing Asia and imperial America. By inverting previous hierarchies, however, they pursued a radical politics that idealized the East and denigrated the West. As targets of Western imperialism, racism, and sexism, Indochinese women represented the ultimate underdogs to the US military. Yet, by fighting against nearly impossible odds with a sense of strength, clarity, and unity, the Southeast Asian representatives reminded North American women what was possible both individually and collectively. Replicating and challenging an orientalist logic, the revolutionary East served to define the identities and goals of activists in the West.

Asian American women were particularly invested in this form of radical orientalism as a means to express their affinity with Asian female revolutionaries and to forge a revolutionary political agenda. In contrast to the relative invisibility and marginalization of Asian American women in movement circles, Vietnamese women occupied a hypervisible role as revolutionary leaders. A widely circulated image in US movement newspapers, including the *Black Panther* and *Gidra*, featured an Asian female peasant cradling a rifle in one arm and a baby in the other. Equally ready to engage in armed struggle and to nurture her child, indeed to engage in armed struggle to nurture her child, this figure embodied revolutionary womanhood and motherhood, conveying the interconnectedness of multiple liberations: by fighting for her family, her class, and her nation, the female Vietnamese peasant was freeing herself. If female peasants in an underdeveloped nation could defend themselves against the most technologically advanced and wealthy country in the world, what might be possible for activists, particularly Asian American female activists, within the United States?

The desire to view Asian female warriors as political role models was particularly acute as various identity-based political movements emerged in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In contrast to the divisions that fractured various women’s political communities in the West, the Southeast Asian women at the IWC stressed the need for self-sacrifice and alliances. Lacking the resources to fight a conventional war, the Vietnamese turned to guerrilla warfare, a tactic that necessitated
cultivating political support among the “people.” “Cadres must make the masses love them,” a representative explained at the IWC. “This is a question of principle. If the masses love the cadres, they will listen to what they say and give them protection.” That love, she continued, flowed from shared sacrifice. “That is why you must be exemplary,” she said. “You must be exemplary in sacrifices. You must be the first to give your life, and the last to get rewards.”

For the Indochinese delegates, the strategy of building a political base was applicable to struggles beyond armed conflict. In response to a question as to whether the antiwar movement should pursue violent forms of protest, the women from Southeast Asia explained that “Revolutionary force is in two parts: (1) political force and (2) armed force. When we say political force we refer to the consciousness of people…. You need this political force…. The force must be large and strong, of people determined and courageous, who can take repression. When one is killed or jailed, another takes the place.” Instead of recommending armed resistance for the US peace movement, the Indochinese women explained that they had no choice but to fight militarily. “We need military force to drive out the aggressors and take the power,” they stated. “In different stages of struggle, sometimes political force is to the forefront, sometimes military force. But always military force must be combined with political force.”

The military ought to be inseparable from the people, they argued, since “isolation in the fight is very dangerous.”

For the Indochinese delegates, the importance of cultivating broad political support extended beyond national borders. As members of the Laotian delegation explained, “The policy of the United Front … is to win more supporters and isolate the administration. It is a tactical policy, a policy of increasing our friends and decreasing the enemy.”

The Vietnamese delegates also shared that they had followed anti-war activities in Canada and the U.S.A. We have taken note of the demonstrations, petitions, and many other actions. They all help in our struggle against U.S. aggression. The most important thing is to mobilize larger forces to undertake these actions. If we are larger and more united, we can achieve greater success. We need unity and solidarity between the many groups…. As Ho Chi Minh said, “Unity, unity, larger unity; success, success, bigger success.”

The greater the difficulties, the broader must be the force in order to
defeat the enemy. The more we consolidate, the more we weaken and divide the enemy.56

The IWC provided a venue to articulate and pursue a common, transpacific struggle against US imperialism.

In response to the frustration expressed by antiwar activists that their organizing efforts achieved few results, the Indochinese counseled patience and persistence. The Vietnamese and Laotian delegates, regardless of their age, espoused a broader historical consciousness that recognized and built on previous generations’ struggles. The Indochinese encouraged their American counterparts to do the same, addressing a tendency among some young American activists to search constantly for new political ideologies, strategies, and identities. They explained, “We must also be prepared for all the struggles to take a long time. Actions must go on, but the results may not be seen for a long time.... We say to you: Be patient. Be flexible. Be vigilant. And wage a persistent struggle.”57

These words of advice led North American women to regard the Indochinese women with awe and to view themselves even more critically for their failure to create unity and commonality of purpose. As an Asian American delegate pondered in a poem about the conference

How can your people maintain such discipline, understanding and humanity?
One million soldiers have been killed or wounded
three million civilians have been killed or wounded
one hundred fifty thousand children are orphaned
fifty thousand people are imprisoned
thirty nine thousand women over the age of twelve are prostitutes.58

In the poem, the author expresses a sense of separation between the Southeast Asian women and herself (and presumably other North American attendees of the IWC) by asking how “your people” could endure and resist such violence and upheaval. Despite a sense of racial and gender affinity, she recognizes her subject position as a person of Asian ancestry in the West, geographically distanced from the direct site of colonial and military conflict. In addition, she ascribes an essentialized and romanticized identity to the Vietnamese, depicting them as a collective people suffering under and resisting American oppression.
The same poem, however, suggests that the Indochinese emphasized a collective identity that transcended orientalist binaries. The voice of an Indochinese woman responds to the question addressed to “your people” by stating, “For twenty five years we have been defending our land. What our fathers began we continue. What we do not finish our children will continue and even their children’s children until the enemy is driven out. / Until the People win. Until there is peace.” The evocation of “we” is a collective call, an open-ended coalition that included multiple generations of Vietnamese people as well as a broader international community of “the people” struggling for peace. Through their words and actions, the Southeast Asian women reminded their North American audience that the Indochinese, according to Asian Women’s Journal, “were not too different from ourselves as women. We need not have false feelings of inadequacy.” By working together, women around the world might achieve liberation and peace.

Although premised on a cultural binary between the East and the West, the radical orientalist rendering of Asian women as revolutionary warriors simultaneously fostered a sense of global sisterhood across racial, national, and political divides. Female internationalism from this angle helps us to reevaluate the concept of global sisterhood in two significant ways. First, in contrast to classical understandings of orientalism, which has regarded women in the “Third World” as oppressed recipients of Western benevolence and feminist rescue, radical orientalism showcased the agency of Vietnamese women in initiating international partnerships and serving as political mentors for women in the West. The VWUs certainly hoped that women from the West would help them end the war, but they also believed that they had a reciprocal and perhaps even greater ability to offer political instruction and guidance. Global sisterhood as a political strategy, in short, was not just imposed by the West but also crafted and promoted by the East.

Second, the political discourses that fostered global sisterhood in the IWC suggested that an international female political community need not hinge on a monolithic analysis of gender oppression across time and space. The political messages that Vietnamese women conveyed through face-to-face meetings and the circulation of print and visual media carried multiple meanings and inflections. Discussions of war and motherhood, the sexualized and racialized nature of violence, and women’s revolutionary potential spoke in different ways to different groups of women. For some,
the global dialogues affirmed a more universal understanding of women’s lives and experiences. For others, such as Asian American women, their connections were rooted more in a unique sense of difference based on racial, gender, and colonized status.

What emerged, then, was not “sectarian” identity politics, as is often charged against social movements of the 1960s, but a radical politics of engagement. Following her travels to North Viet Nam, Vivian Rothstein was most impressed by the VWU’s emphasis on organizing a “majoritarian” movement, characterized by efforts to build broad political consensus and coalitions. Literally engaged in a struggle for life and death, women in Viet Nam sought to cultivate the broadest range of allies possible. Global sisterhood, for them, was never about developing a rigid universal theory on women’s oppression. Rather, while recognizing the conflicts and disparities across geopolitical boundaries, the VWUs sought to involve women of varying backgrounds and political beliefs to engage and learn from one another’s ideas and experiences. It was a remarkable lesson in how those from the global South could provide leadership to those in the global North and how a global sisterhood might accommodate differences, foster dialogues, and generate political unity.


Canadian, and Vietnamese antiwar activists. The interviews were conducted in English, at times with the assistance of translators.


12 “Madame Nguyen Thi Binh Speaking to American Women,” transcript of film, October 1970, 1, Women Strike for Peace Collection (WSPC), Series A, 2, Box B, 2, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA.


14 VW, 33.

15 Scholars have been increasingly critical of the waves analogy, because this framework tends to privilege certain forms of white middle-class women’s activism as indicators of feminism. They also question differentiating distinct strands of feminism that emerged during this time period, such as liberal, radical, socialist, and lesbian. After all, individuals tended to evolve in their political understandings, participate in multiple organizations and collectives, and embrace diverse political views. However, some of these terms do capture key political distinctions, and Vietnamese women appealed to these diverse agendas among self-identified feminist activists in the West. Gilmore, Feminist Coalitions; and Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

16 VW, 3.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 307.


Lorenzo Oropeza points out that by 1960, 80 percent of Mexican Americans were living in urban areas. However, the Chicano/a movement was heavily invested in the symbolic identity of being “agricultural people tied to the land.” Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!,* 86.

“Viet Nam War—Why? Their People … Our People …,” *El Grito del Norte* 29 (Aug. 1970). Martinez also reported on the treatment of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam, and emphasized that these groups had the right to bilingual education. Lorenzo Oropeza makes a similar argument about the significance of the Viet Nam War for the Chicano/a movement.


Maria Ramirez and Nina Genera, interview with author, Chabot, California, February 27, 2007.


“We as Third World Women …,” n.d., Kathleen Hudson Women’s Bookstore Collection, F-111, Subject Files, Folder “Indochinese Women Conference,” Simon Fraser University Archives and Records Management Department, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

“Statement from a Number of the White Women in Los Angeles Who are Working on the Indochinese Women’s Conference,” 2, n.d., Kathleen Hudson Women’s Bookstore Collection, Subject Files, Folder “Indochinese Women Conference.”

Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*; Kotake interview.


Ibid.


Yoshimura, “GI’s and Racism,” 74.

The delegation from Southeast Asia consisted of three teams of two female and one male translator each for North Viet Nam, South Viet Nam, and Laos. A fourth delegation from Cambodia had intended to travel to Canada as well but was unable to do so. Vo Thi The (age fifty), a professor of literature at the University of Hanoi and an officer in the Viet Nam Women’s Union, had visited Canada previously in 1969. Given her seniority and experience, she served as an overall leader of the 1971 delegation. Nguyen Thi Xiem (age forty), a gynecologist and obstetrician, was the vice president of the VWU. Dinh Thi Hong (forty-six), a housewife, and Phan Min Hien (thirty-one), a teacher, represented the Women’s Union for the Liberation of South Vietnam. Two additional teachers, Khampeng Boupha (forty-seven) and Khemphet Pholsena (twenty-nine), represented the Laotian Patriotic Women’s Association. Each group was accompanied by a male translator: Nguyen Tri (forty-six), from North Viet Nam; Trinh Van Anh (thirty-three), from the South; and Soukanh Srithirath (thirty-four), from Laos. “The Indochinese Women’s Conference,” *Goodbye to All That* (newspaper published by San Diego Women), April 20–May 4, 1971, 3.


Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 4.


Yoshimura, “GI’s and Racism,” 76.


49 This image appeared in the *Black Panther* 20 (September 1969): 3; and on the cover of *Gidra* (March 1970), with an accompanying article on “Vietnamese Sisters,” reprinted from *Sisters United* 1 (January 1970): 10.


52 Ibid., 21.

53 Ibid., 23.

54 Ibid., 19.

55 Ibid., 19, 21.

56 Juanita Tamayo, “Tripping to Vancouver,” *Asian Women’s Journal*, 81. The poem was originally published in *Kalayaan*, a Filipino American activist publication.

57 Tamayo, “Tripping to Vancouver.”


59 Rothstein interview.