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Gender Politics, Draft Resistance, and American Resisters in Canada

An estimated 100,000 Americans, a majority of whom were female, immigrated to Canada between 1964-1973 in order to protest against the war in Vietnam or to avoid the draft. Historians have focused almost exclusively on men, their experiences as “dodgers” or resisters, and their participation in anti-war and draft activism.<sup>i</sup> This focus has marginalized the crucial roles that American women played in initiating immigration and in building community in Canada, as well as the sexual politics of draft resistance and activism. This article focuses on the gendered politics of draft resistance, and is part of a larger study which looks at how antiwar activism in Canada was a gendered social movement, shaped by nationalist tensions surrounding critiques of American political hegemony, and by the development of a Canadian women's liberation movement which critiqued the subordinate position of women within radical activism. Such a project is strengthened by a transnational approach which emphasizes the interconnected relationships between American and Canadian activists and feminists, yet still respects the independent nature of Canadian social movements in the sixties.<sup>ii</sup>

Antiwar protest, like most forms of protest in the 1960s, was generally understood to be a quintessentially male endeavour. This was particularly true within the draft resistance movement, which is not surprising, since only men could be drafted against

their will into the American military. Activism which focused on publicly (and illegally) burning one's draft card, or going to jail as a political statement left women in a supportive role, secondary to men. While some women enjoyed participating in draft resistance regardless, and made anti-draft and anti-war work their central priority, many felt that their secondary status was rooted in an underlying sexism which ultimately shaped all women's experiences in North American society.<sup>iii</sup>

Women's liberation was actually deeply connected to the work of antiwar organizing in the Vietnam era. The development of the women's liberation movement in Canada was connected to New Left and anti-war organizing, and while it is difficult to state whether there was a direct correlation between women's involvement in antiwar politics and the development of feminist consciousness, there is a rich, but ambivalent relationship between the two. In the language of the many manifestoes and memos of the late 1960s, radical women attempted to push their male colleagues towards an understanding of female subordination.<sup>iv</sup> The flourishing underground press of the sixties holds many examples where we can see the early women's liberation movement using the revolutionary language of the student and antiwar movements to critique the hypocrisy of male-dominated left-wing politics. Antiwar and activist women in both Canada and the United States made it clear that "left wing objectification is still objectification," as one woman wrote in 1969. The only way to reject such oppression was for women to embrace feminism, to be "love guerillas", reject marriage and "traditional gender roles" and "embrace complete autonomy and communal socialization of children."<sup>v</sup> The expectation that women in the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements would remain satisfied with their secondary status, making coffee and filing

papers instead of organizing protests and writing policy, led many women to publicly critique progressive men and to name that oppression as sexism. For example, the Montreal Pan Canada Deserter and Resister Conference in 1970 was largely devoted to a discussion of the continued tendency for women to do the “shitwork” for the movement, and to the characterization of women who accompanied male draft dodgers as “baggage brought by men.”<sup>vi</sup>

The problem was that women’s liberation was understood by many within the antiwar community as separate from and less important than ending the war in Vietnam. Antiwar groups debated allowing women women’s groups the right to march in their parades, for example. The Toronto Vietnam Mobilization Committee decided to allow groups such as women’s liberationists and ecologists into mass marches” but only if their placards were “related to the Vietnam war,” and only because the committee thought that they might draw otherwise non-politicized people into the anti-war movement itself.<sup>vii</sup> Yet preliminary evidence for Vancouver suggests that the majority of volunteers in antiwar groups were women, many of whom insisted that women’s oppression and the making of war in Vietnam were connected.<sup>viii</sup> For example, the broadsheet “Women United Against the War” written by Nancy Knox for the Vietnam Action Committee stated that Canadian women and Vietnamese women shared some similarities, noting that a “society oriented toward war and death, toward maximizing warmakers’ profits, is not a society which can met the real needs of human beings. Women suffer particularly from this evil, because we have been so long denied the realization of our human potential...”<sup>ix</sup> In addition, many of the leading activists in anti-war work in Canada were married couples. Women played important roles in distributing draft evasion and immigration

material, or in helping American immigrants find housing or employment. It was antiwar activist and feminist Naomi Wall who arranged for the publication and distribution of the infamous *Manual for Draft Age Immigrants*, and who set up a job program to aid male dodgers. But in a 1967 article in the *Globe and Mail* she was simply described as “Mrs. Martin Wall,” “wife of a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, who finds work for dodgers.”<sup>x</sup>

But tensions existed between feminist women as much as between antiwar activists and women’s liberationists. Earlier women’s peace groups such as Voice of Women (VOW) in Canada, and Women Strike for Peace (WSP) in the United States did not fit easily within the politics of the women’s liberation movement. For example, VOW groups in Canada developed boycotts of goods manufactured by companies who also built weapons in Vietnam, what they called a “buying with conscience” campaign, and they held public panels discussing how Canadian women might help support war objectors upon their arrival in Canada.<sup>xi</sup> VOW and WSP’s well-developed contacts in the global peace movement led to the Indochinese Conference held in Vancouver in 1971, where women from the United States and Canada intended to engage in dialogue with a group of female delegates from Vietnam. But the groups struggled to find a common women’s position on the war, and the delegates could not agree on a program or agenda. Tensions ensued, with women’s liberationists accusing VOW and WSP of being afraid to be publicly associated with more radical women and women of colour, and the conference devolved into arguments over whether women should prioritize ending the war, ending colonization, or ending women’s oppression.<sup>xii</sup> As one participant later

remarked, the conference ended up in a “who is the enemy game,” played with “much shouting and bitterness.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Tensions within the women’s movement also emerged alongside nationalist conflict between American and Canadian women. The Canadian-American border was “permeable,” allowing Canadian and American activists to move back and forth, sharing ideas, strategies, and even engaging in shared activism. For example, many Canadians went to the United States in the 1960s to organize African-American voters, join anti-war marches, or attend free speech rallies. As Americans moved north, many expressed longing and hope for a safer, kinder, gentler country.<sup>xiv</sup> As many Canadians pointed out, this glorified a country that had serious problems, including civil rights violations and the practice of segregation in restaurants, urban housing and movie theatres, extremely high levels of aboriginal poverty, and single mothers and children living in poverty. The influx of large numbers of Americans led to increasing tensions within the Canadian left, many of whom resented the media attention paid to Americans, and protested the Americanization of Canadian culture.<sup>xv</sup> In the case of the Indochinese conference in 1971, Canadian feminists accused their American counterparts of “US Chauvinism,” claiming they took too many delegate spots and knew nothing about Canadian politics and history.<sup>xvi</sup> Canadian women’s concerns about American women echoed those of women within the New Left in general; they accused American women of allowing Canadian women to get “stuck with all the shitwork” at events, for example.<sup>xvii</sup> These nationalist concerns would only continue to grow in the 1970s with the continued critique of American domination of Canadian culture and institutions.

### ***Bodies and Activism***

The immigration of Americans, so many of whom were seeking refuge in Canada, placed men's and women's bodies at the centre of antiwar activism and the politics of draft resistance.<sup>xviii</sup> Women's bodies and women's sexuality were often offered as the "reward" of activism for male radicals within the sexual revolution. When, for example, the *Globe and Mail* interviewed a group of young male draft "dodgers" in their hostel in Toronto, one man expressed his loneliness by remarking that what he missed most in Canada was "the girls." Clearly his was not the only complaint; to fix this problem, the Toronto Anti-Draft Program (TADP) held a party specifically for men to meet women. Their invitation read: "A revolutionary action group has been set up to round up girls-or bring your own."<sup>xix</sup> As the famous "Girls say yes to boys who say no" poster suggested, women showed their loyalty and commitment to radicalism, or showed that they were "hip," by freely having sex with men. As one Vancouver woman complained to the local newspaper the *Georgia Straight*, men "say to us...my first commitment is the movement, baby...it is your duty to the movement to screw with me..."<sup>xx</sup> The bodies of heterosexual women were also expected to serve men, by marrying dodgers or deserters in order to help them stay in Canada. In Vancouver in 1970, the *Georgia Straight* began publicizing the campaign of Mike, an American war deserter, who was seeking asylum in Canada. Desperate to find a "Canadian girl" willing to marry him as an "act of human kindness," Mike became increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of women to make this much-needed sacrifice. He publicly criticized Canadian women as "parasites" and hypocrites, especially the "politically aware, libertine, existentialist, hip, women's liberationist shit chicks."<sup>xxi</sup>

But the bodies of men were also at the centre of antiwar activism, because the category of masculinity itself was called into question by the act of draft evasion. The body of the draft dodger occupied a complicated space, and rested in a position of both masculinity and cowardice, which created a seemingly unsolvable paradox. Could a real man retain his masculinity by fleeing his country? Or was immigration to Canada a heroic sacrifice of home, family, and nation for a larger cause? Equating masculinity with the courage to fight, and feminizing resistance to military service as cowardice, has a long historical tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising that during the Vietnam era, the rhetorical battle over how to characterize draft dodging largely centred on arguments over the courage, bravery, and masculinity of draft resisters.

In leaving his country behind, the draft dodger was a coward to critics on the right, and a “cop out” to those on the left.<sup>xxii</sup> Many condemned draft resistance as the cowardly act of middle-class youth who fled and left the most marginalized to fight in their place. In fact, some prominent draft resistance advocates in the United States counseled a principled resistance based on challenging the criminal justice system. From this perspective, draft dodging was “running away” from effective political action; resisters with “real courage” remained in the United States and accepted the risk of jail.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Canadian observers called these men “cowards,” “slackers,” and a “passive breed,” or “[Z]ombies marking time, knowing that they are going nowhere, doing nothing.”<sup>xxiv</sup> To others, draft dodging was an easy way out of “the demands of citizenship.”<sup>xxv</sup> These criticisms were not wielded by conservative nationalists, and in fact were viewpoints often held by those who were at least somewhat sympathetic to

principled war resistance or even pacifist ideas. But for many, political change occurred through active engagement as a citizen within one's own country, and moving to Canada did not act to make significant political change in the United States.

For conservative Canadian nationalists, the judgment against draft dodgers was even more vitriolic. Most of the concern seemed to focus on the belief that such men were not just "slobs," and "slackards," but cowards who would "run out of Canada by the back door" if they were asked to uphold their masculine duty to defend the nation.<sup>xxvi</sup> This kind of rhetoric marked draft dodging as passive and apathetic, and the men who engaged in it as fundamentally emasculated. Hopefully, undertaking oral histories with men who chose to leave the United States for Canada will help to illuminate how individual men felt about such characterizations of draft dodgers, and how they negotiated the criticism from family, friends, and fellow activists in both countries.

Examining draft resistance within both a transnational and feminist perspective will hopefully deepen the story of 1960s activism. Gender politics, women's secondary status within anti-war activism, the growing influence of the women's liberation movement, and concerns over masculinity all shaped the experiences of men and women as they moved to Canada. The experience of draft and war resistance, and of immigration to Canada, was deeply shaped by gender. With America's ongoing "War on Terror" and NATO intervention in Afghanistan, the divisions in North American society over antiwar activism are still very much alive. Without historical attentiveness to gender, however, the 60s retains too mythical an aura, belying a far more complex movement and period of time.

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<sup>i</sup> Estimates on the number who arrived in opposition to the war vary. See John Hagan, *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3; 184. About 250 000 American immigrated to Canada in the period of the Vietnam war, though not all were war resisters. David Churchill, "An Ambiguous Welcome: Vietnam Draft Resistance, the Canadian State, and Cold War Containment," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 27/73 (May 2004), 3.

<sup>ii</sup> While the term draft dodger is contentious, it was the most commonly used term in the time period under study. However, I explicitly position draft dodging within the framework of war resistance, as most dodgers made an explicitly political choice to risk exile in protest against the war.

<sup>iii</sup> See Leslie Cagan, "Women and the Anti-Draft Movement," *Radical America* (Sept-Oct 1980): 9-11; Michael Foley, "The 'Point of Ultimate Indignity' or a 'Beloved Community?' The Draft Resistance Movement and Gender Dynamics," in *The New Left Revisited*, eds. John McMillian and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps the most famous American manifesto was the memo in 1965 by Casey Hayden and Mary King, "A Kind of Memo to Women in the Peace and Freedom Movements." Reprinted in Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, eds., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *Major Problems in American Women's History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1996), 443-444.

<sup>v</sup> Melody Kilian, *Georgia Straight*, 1969.

<sup>vi</sup> *Georgia Straight*, 1970.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Pedestal*, March 1970.

<sup>viii</sup> Vietnam Action Committee, Boxes 1-5, University of British Columbia, Special Collections.

<sup>ix</sup> Nancy Knox, "Women United Against the War," Vancouver Vietnam Actions Committee fonds, Folder 5-2, n.d., University of British Columbia Special Collections.

<sup>x</sup> Hagan, *Northern Passage*; *Globe and Mail*

<sup>xi</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 7 December, 1969; *Ibid.*, 25 April, 1968. See also Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>xii</sup> *The Pedestal*, v.3 n.5, May 1971.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Everywoman*, May 28, 1971.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hagan, *Northern Passage*; Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-1984* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

<sup>xv</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 17 February, 1968, 1; *New York Times*, 22 January 1969, 11. See also Ryan Edwardson, "Kicking Uncle Sam out of the Peaceable Kingdom: English-Canadian 'New Nationalism and Americanization,'" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, 4 (Winter 2002/3): 131-150.

<sup>xvi</sup> *The Pedestal*, February 1973; *Ibid.*, May 1971.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Everywoman*, vol. 2 n. 8 issue 19, May 28, 1971.

<sup>xviii</sup> This has happened in part because the military and the draft was a male sphere, and nominally heterosexual. Though see Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

<sup>xix</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 23 December, 1967, 1-2.

<sup>xx</sup> *The Georgia Straight*, December 20-Jan2, 1969, 12

<sup>xxi</sup> *Georgia Straight*, 1970.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History* (New York, Palgrave, 2005); Ian Lekus, "Losing Our Kids: Queer Perspectives on the Chicago Seven Conspiracy Trial," in *The New Left Revisited*, eds. McMillian and Buhle, 2003.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Michael Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); *Globe and Mail*, Scott Young, "How rigidity taints a free spirit," 27 March 1967, 3.; *Globe and Mail*, 16 February, 1968, 7; Doug Rossinow. *The Politics of*

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*Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). See also Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me up and Ship me Home* (Broadway, 1999). Apparently folksinger and political activist Joan Baez sparked some of this rhetoric by characterizing them as inauthentic activists running away from “real” political engagement.” Of course, this wasn’t surprising given that her husband David Harris went to jail for 3 years for draft evasion<sup>xxiv</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 16 February, 1968, 7; *Ibid.*, February 16, 1968; *Ibid.*, October 12, 1967; *Ibid.*, 27 March 1967.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Globe and Mail*, letter to the editor, March 6, 1968, 6.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 12 October, 1967.