

## Canada As Refuge: American Women War Resisters in Canada in the Vietnam War Era

NOTE: This paper outlines a new research project that is in its very earliest stages of development. I have not yet undertaken any substantial research related to this topic, so, rather than presenting any conclusions based on such research, this paper will set out the frame of the project, indicate some of the questions I will ask as part of this project, and consider the wider significance of this project.

This project examines the experiences of American women war resisters who immigrated to Canada during the Vietnam War era. Through my research, I hope to gain insight into questions of how and why thousands of women left their homes in the United States and what they did once they arrived north of the border. Most importantly, I hope to understand the ways in which these women negotiated their personal and political ideologies during and after this migration. This was a period when women's overt political roles were changing and conceptions of identity and constructions of gender were challenged; understanding how a unique group of women, facing enormous changes in their own personal lives, constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated their varied and shifting identities will contribute a great deal to the national and international literature on women, the Sixties, and the Vietnam War.

Canada was a favoured destination of American war resisters during the Vietnam War era because of its close geographical location, its similar language and culture, and its perceived neutrality in the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> As a result, approximately 40,000 draft-

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<sup>1</sup> As a number of scholars, including Charles Taylor, Victor Levant, and Douglas Ross, have shown, despite its supposed neutral status, Canada was intimately connected with the American war in Vietnam. The federal government promoted the U.S. position on various international commissions, publicly supported American war aims, provided military and political intelligence, and supplied arms and munitions manufactured in Canada for use by the American military in Vietnam. See Charles Taylor, *Snow Job: Canada, the United States and Vietnam (1954 to 1973)* (Toronto: Anansi, 1974); Victor

aged young men immigrated to Canada between 1964 and 1974. At the same time, however, women also immigrated to Canada as war resisters. While we have no accurate estimate of the numbers, a 1972 *New York Times* article believed that more women than men had come to Canada as part of this larger migration.<sup>2</sup> Despite this conception, little scholarly attention has been paid to these women war resisters. In explaining why women came to Canada, reflecting the sexist assumptions of the time, the *New York Times* article argued: “Some... were probably looking for husbands; others for the promised land.”<sup>3</sup> However, the story of women war resisters during the Vietnam War is much more complex. These women came to Canada for a variety of reasons, had different experiences during and after the immigration process, and negotiated their positions within Canada in significantly different ways than their male counterparts. Through this project I hope to gain greater insight into the experiences of these women war resisters, understand their evolving sense of identity as their lives shifted and changed, and explain how they contributed to the social and political history of North America at this time and since.

The scholarship that has emerged around draft dodgers, military deserters, and war resisters has focused primarily on the immigration policies and regulations developed to deal with this mass migration, the economic and social background of those who immigrated, and the support organizations created to ease the transition for those who

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Levant, *Quiet Complicity: Canadian Involvement in the Vietnam War* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1986); and Douglas A. Ross, *In the Interests of Peace: Canada and Vietnam, 1954-1973* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “They Joined Their Men in Canadian Exile,” *New York Times*, 14 June 1972, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Klemesrud, 52.

made the decision to move.<sup>4</sup> However, aside from an occasional mention of women war resisters,<sup>5</sup> little work has been done to examine the important history of women in this migration. On the other hand, scholarship in the fields of women's history and gender studies has long focused on the socially-constructed and shifting nature of gender and identity. Some of this work has revolved around the Sixties era, but women war resisters, negotiating a number of divergent identities, have thus far escaped attention.<sup>6</sup> My project draws upon this scholarship but redresses the existing gaps to better understand the central role of women in this enormous political migration and their evolving conceptions of identity.

In this project, I will examine the social, economic, and political circumstances and backgrounds of the women who came to Canada, their reasons for coming to Canada, and their involvement in making the decision to move. I will also analyze their role in

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<sup>4</sup> See, David S. Churchill, "An Ambiguous Welcome: Vietnam Draft Resistance, the Canadian State, and Cold War Containment," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* Vol.37, No.73 (May 2004), 1-26; John Hagan, "Cause and Country: The Politics of Ambivalence and the American Vietnam War Resistance in Canada," *Social Problems* Vol.48, No.2 (May 2001), 168-184; John Hagan, "Narrowing the Gap by Widening the Conflict: Power Politics, Symbols of Sovereignty, and the American Vietnam War Resisters' Migration to Canada," *Law & Society Review* Vol.34, No.3 (2000), 607-650; John Hagan, *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Renee Kasinsky, *Refugees from Militarism: Draft Age Americans in Canada* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976); and David S. Surrey, *Choice of Conscience: Vietnam Era Military and Draft Resisters in Canada* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> See, John Hagan, *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (and Alan Haig-Brown, *Hell No, We Won't Go: Vietnam Draft Resisters in Canada* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, & Lindsay Dorney, eds., *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993); and Constance Backhouse & David H. Flaherty, eds., *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

the social and political movements of the period, both in the United States and in Canada. I will then focus more specifically on identity: how these women viewed their nationality, as American or Canadian; how their identity constructions related to shifting relationships with male counterparts; and how changes in women's overt political roles and constructions of gender in the Sixties influenced women war resisters. On the whole, my research will examine the incredibly diverse experiences of women war resisters and how these women negotiated their evolving identities, especially as perceptions and images of the Vietnam War changed over time.

This project will require both archival research and an oral history project. I will examine the surviving archives of the various organizations related to war resisters in cities throughout Canada and the United States, including the Toronto Anti-Draft Program archives held by the University of Toronto, the *Amex* archives at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Nova Scotia Committee to Aid American War Objectors at Dalhousie University, the numerous collections related to war resisters at University of British Columbia, and the superb archival collection of radical social and political organizations held by McMaster University. In addition, I will consult the immigration and foreign affairs records, the RCMP files, and the numerous personal archival collections held at the Library and Archives of Canada in Ottawa. However, as women war resisters rarely appear in the written record, my research will centre on an oral history project that will target the women who immigrated to Canada during the period, seeking their personal reflections and interpretations. Oral history provides a useful avenue to discover the stories of groups and individuals generally absent from the written record and will allow me to delve into issues of memory as well personal and

political reconstruction. It will be incredibly difficult to track down many of these women, so I will rely heavily on advertising my project, part of the purpose of this presentation, and on the ability of women to identify others who might contribute to the project.

Overall, this project will contribute significantly to both the Canadian and international literature and to public debates. The Sixties, and the Vietnam War in particular, remains the subject of discussion, revision, and dissent and has a continuing legacy in North American society. As well, scholarship surrounding women and gender is becoming increasingly important, contributing a great deal to conceptions of identity and personal experience. An examination of this subject will add significantly to these debates. Through an examination of this enormous political migration, my work will enable a greater understanding of the intellectual, cultural, social, and political history of North America in the postwar period.