

**“Sweating and Uncombed:”
Canadian State Security, the Indochinese Conference and the
Feminist Threat, 1968-1972**

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Nearly 250 women drawn from women’s liberation groups across Canada gathered in Winnipeg from 18 to 20 March 1972 to discuss a variety of issues. Among their number was an informer employed by the intelligence branch of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), most commonly known as the Security Service, who had apparently journeyed to the capital of Manitoba from Hamilton, Ontario. A subsequent police report generated by her account contained dozens of names of those in attendance accompanied by biographical sketches. In their ranks was a young woman named Rita MacNeil described as “from Toronto Women’s Caucus (TWC). She’s the one who composes and sings women’s lib songs.”¹ Also relayed were the contents of meetings and speeches, often given to all female audiences, and even the social gatherings in which the informer, through salacious comments tinged with homophobia, revealed either her particular fixations or the details she believed her secret employers wanted to know: “One hundred sweating uncombed women [were] standing around in the middle of the floor with their arms around each other crying sisterhood and dancing. The church had banned

¹LAC, RG146, access request A2005-00441, RCMP report, 11 April 1972.

the ‘wine and cheese’ part of the party so they all got bombed on vodka. Two dykes had been imported from the U.S. to show everyone how it was done which they proceeded to do in the middle of the floor.”²

RCMP surveillance of this particular women’s event was not an isolated occurrence. The force had been spying upon women’s liberation groups and their activities since the late 1960s. Declassified documents show that the Mounties were as interested in getting their woman---in addition to their man. Indeed, the force was no stranger to two of the earliest women’s liberation actions to take place on Canadian soil. The RCMP spied on the Vancouver Women’s Caucus (VWC) and the 1970 Abortion Caravan, the group’s cross-Canada protest against the law regulating abortion.³ The following year, the Mounties surreptitiously monitored the Indochinese Conference in which both American and Canadian women’s liberation groups were involved.

Whereas the Abortion Caravan had drawn public attention to the lack of access to a legal abortion, the Indochinese Conference aimed to educate American and Canadian women about the impact of the war the American government was waging in Southeast Asia. In early April 1971, Women Strike for Peace (WSP), representing the American feminist contingent, and the Canadian organization, Voice of Women (VOW), brought to Canada six Indochinese women to discuss their wartime plight in two Canadian cities. Four of the Indochinese women came from North and South Vietnam and two were from Laos. The conference was held in two cities, Toronto and Vancouver, in order to

²Ibid.

³For more on this see Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt, “Staging Protest: The Abortion Caravan, Feminist Guerrilla Theatre and RCMP Spying on Women’s Groups,” Unpublished paper presented at “New World Coming: The Global Sixties Conference,” Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 13-16 June 2007.

accommodate the vast geographical distances involved. Cora Weiss, a housewife and long-time peace activist from the United States, greeted the Toronto crowd with the address, “sisters, friends and members of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]--yes, they are here,” before demanding that the American government take its troops out of Vietnam, free all political prisoners and end conscription.⁴

Weiss’s address would have been more appropriate had she substituted the RCMP for the FBI. The Indochinese Conference was of special significance to the RCMP, because unlike the Abortion Caravan of the previous year, this effort touched upon issues the Mounties could readily identify as important. The RCMP, an all-male police force with the exception of female clerical workers until 1974, viewed protest by women from a decidedly gendered perspective. In their world view certain types of masculine-style protest associated with Communism, trade unionism and the threat of physical violence received a greater level of legitimacy and thus represented a superior level of threat to the state. The Indochinese Conference was one such example.

The Indochinese Conference was not just significant to the RCMP, however. The conference itself offered a preview of what was to come in some ways for the women’s movement and the promise of the 1960s. Over the course of the Toronto and Vancouver meetings several major schisms rumbled through the conference, splitting women along the lines of race and class, ideology, generation, sexuality and even nationality.⁵ To a

⁴“Angry U.S. women use Canada as forum for their militant anti-war views,” *Globe and Mail*, 4 April 1971, in LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00200, Indochinese Women's Delegation to Canada, pt. 4, 000033.

⁵See Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “Global Sisterhood, the Anti-War Movement, and Radical Orientalism: The Indochinese Women’s Conference of 1971,” Unpublished paper presented at “New World Coming: The Global Sixties Conference,” Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 13-16 June 2007.

large extent the force's concerns about the potential for the women's movement to effect radical political change were dampened by the reality of the divisions on display. As Ruth Rosen notes in the case of the U.S., while state security did not necessarily create these underlying fractures, it did exacerbate "the movement's growing tendency to judge other women by examining the smallest details of their private lives. Fear of provocateurs paralyzed some protestors. Fear of agents and informers eroded trust. Given the widespread assumption of infiltration, feminists sometimes found it easier to accuse one another of being informers than to accept the inevitable differences among them that, even without the FBI, would naturally result in different feminist perspectives and different ideas of sisterhood."⁶

Rosen's statement does not cancel out the fact that Canadian state security was heavily implicated in the surveillance of the Indochinese Conference. The RCMP accorded a high level of attention to the event not because women were involved but rather because of the focus of the conference. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, the RCMP conducted surveillance on the anti-Vietnam War movement in Canada. It did so because of the involvement of Communists and the New Left in opposing the conflict but also because the war involved Canada's closest ally, the United States. Furthermore, the presence of large numbers of American war resisters in Canada fuelled Mountie interest. Much of the anti-Vietnam War movement had little to do with Canadian state security. Rather opposition toward the war in Canada was of far greater interest to the

⁶Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 260.

American government and to the FBI.⁷ The RCMP had long enjoyed a close relationship with J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Each police force stationed a representative at one another's headquarters and they regularly exchanged information. Lacking a foreign intelligence service, there was little Canada could offer the United States. Therefore, a clear imbalance in the intelligence relationship between the two countries existed. The one significant item that the RCMP for decades could and did offer the Americans was intelligence on the activities of Canadians and Americans within Canada.⁸ For example, in February 1967 the American Director of Security Intelligence, William Kelly, forwarded a lengthy piece of analysis to the RCMP liaison officer in Washington and to Moss Innes, the FBI's long-time representative in Ottawa. The document contained a general description of campus-related radicalism and warned that growing opposition to the Vietnam War was part of an effort to influence Canadian government policy toward the conflict. Mounted Police headquarters in Ottawa also passed on other general reports on the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements in Canada to both the FBI and to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).⁹

⁷Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: The RCMP's Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917-1997* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 160-1.

⁸Jeffrey T. Richelson and Desmond Ball, *The Ties that Bind: Intelligence Cooperation between the UKUSA Countries—the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (London 1990); S.W. Horrall and Carl Betke, *Canada's Security Service: A History, Vol. 2* (Ottawa 1978), 729-42; Len Scher, *The Un-Canadians: True Stories of the Blacklist Era* (Toronto 1992), 238-9.

⁹LAC, RG 146, vol. 2765, access request 93-A-00051, York University, Asst. Commissioner W.H. Kelly to R.C.M.P. Liaison Officer, Washington, 1 February 1967; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2664, file 98-A-00127, Protests and Demonstrations- Educational Institutions, pt. 2, Chisholm, Officer i/c 'D' Branch to Officer i/c VIP Security Section, Re: Cross-Canada Anti-War Conference, 7 October 1971; *ibid.*, Chisholm, Officer i/c 'D' Branch to Officer i/c VIP Security Section, Re: International Day of Protest, U.S. action in Vietnam, 1 November 1971.

The RCMP was and is tasked with investigating both criminal activities and threats to state security. In the aftermath of World War Two, the RCMP was formally organized into a criminal division that carried out regular policing duties and an intelligence branch, most commonly known as the Security Service, which handled matters related to espionage and subversion. Communication between the two bodies was often sparse.¹⁰ What drew the RCMP to second-wave feminist groups were not so much their challenges to the gender status quo but their presumed left-wing affiliations. The force first opened a file on “Women’s Liberation Groups---Canada” on May 13, 1969.¹¹ A few months later, a Mountie observed that “[d]uring recent months we have noted the emergence of Women’s Liberation Groups in Canada. These groups are being organized to publicize the role of women in society and to stop so-called exploitation of women.” While the commentator appeared to acknowledge that women’s liberation groups had a political mandate to better women’s lives, the RCMP remained on alert. The same report went on to suggest that the Women’s Liberation Group (WLG), a Toronto organization, may have been infiltrated by pro-Chinese Communists.¹² The force’s speculations had some foundation. Emerging as they did out of Old and New Left currents, many women’s liberation groups did slant left, resulting in the importance of socialist feminism in Canada.¹³

¹⁰Hewitt, *Spying 101*, 23.

¹¹LAC, RG 146, vol. 2974, access request A2004-00173, Women’s Liberation Groups Canada General, pt. 1, RCMP report, 13 May 1969.

¹²LAC, RG 146, vol. 2972, access request A2006-00164, Vancouver Women’s Caucus, pt. 1, RCMP report, 26 September 1969.

¹³Judy Rebick, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005), 18.

Targeting women's groups associated with the New Left was consistent with RCMP practices in the past. As Julie Guard and other scholars have shown, the Mounted Police had a long history of spying on women's groups connected to unions, ethnic minorities, and to the Communist Party of Canada.¹⁴ The common factor in RCMP surveillance on the Old Left was the real or suspected presence of Communists. Because of its decades-long concentration on Communism, the force initially viewed the rise in the 1960s of the New Left movements for civil rights, peace, Black power, Red power, student power, Quebec nationalism, workers' rights, gay liberation as well as women's liberation before during the Cold War, from the same it had used to understand the Old Left.¹⁵ New Left protestors' political diversity, relative youth and wide range of issues made little difference to the RCMP. The Mounties understood any organization associated with the New Left as part of a broad global coalition intent on taking down the government. Even the number of protestors involved was irrelevant because, as one 1967 Mounted Police report indicated, they were "integral parts of much larger, well organized

¹⁴Julie Guard, "Women Worth Watching: Radical Housewives in Cold War Canada," in Gary Kinsman, Mercedes Steedman and Dieter Buse (eds.), *Whose National Security? Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2000), 73-90.

¹⁵The FBI solicited advice on how to deal with the New Left from its regional branches. The Newark office remarked on the 'unique task' of curtailing the New Left. Holding up to ridicule was out because of the fondness of radicals for "nonconformism in dress and speech, neglect of personal cleanliness, used of obscenities (printed and uttered), publicized sexual promiscuity, experimenting with and the use of drugs, filthy clothes, shaggy hair, wearing of sandals, beads, and unusual jewelry." Eventually the office recommended the promotion of factionalism within the movement, the very factor that led to the disintegration of the New Left later in the 1960s. FBI Memo dated 27 May 1968 in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall (eds.), *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 181-2; Nelson Blackstock, *COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (New York 1976), 124; William C. Sullivan, *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI* (New York 1979).

international networks, which are dedicated to the overthrow of our system of democratic government...what they lack in numbers they make up in organization and dedication to their task.”¹⁶

In order to spy on women’s liberation groups, the RCMP used a combination of police surveillance and largely open sources, such as articles appearing in newspapers and magazines, pamphlets, newsletters, position papers, announcements and minutes of meetings from mainstream sources, women’s groups and left-wing organizations. Informers like the afore-mentioned example of Winnipeg were also critical to the process of providing first-hand information, including acquiring documentation, both public and private, put out by the groups being spied on. These informers would have been female when spying on closed door meetings of women’s liberation groups. At open door sessions they could have been either male or female.

Although the Mounties collected copious amounts of intelligence, interpreting it to gauge accurately the national security threat women’s liberationists posed was another story altogether. Espionage conducted on New Left women’s liberation groups proved to be a difficult assignment for the RCMP. Policing has historically been gendered male, with dominant values reflecting what one historian terms an “exaggerated masculinity.”¹⁷ The RCMP was no different. It was traditionally a hierarchically organized all-male police force that emphasized physicality; hence its recruitment of physically large men. Before 1974, the centenary of the force’s deployment to western Canada, women did work in the RCMP in clerical positions, but not as regular police officers. The Miss

¹⁶LAC, RG 146, vol. 59, access request 96-A-00169, pt. 1, Communist Activity Among Youth Particularly In The Educational Field, n.d.

¹⁷Greg Marquis, "Working Men in Uniform: The Early Twentieth-Century Toronto Police," *Social History* vol. 20 (1987), 270.

RCMP Pageant, a regular occurrence in the 1960s, perhaps best characterized the force's attitude toward women as ornamental.¹⁸ Even after joining the regular ranks, women still lacked acceptance. One retired Mountie's account of life on the force published in 1994 holds that female officers were not well liked and were denigrated by the ableist term "crip"---vernacular for cripple.¹⁹ Similar gendered language surfaces in surveillance reports from the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO). Fiona Capp notes the existence of a lexicon that includes repeated references to "penetration," as well as a discourse that "feminized" targets in an effort to disempower them.²⁰

In the vast majority of these cases, these targets were male. The Mounties' assessment of criminal activities and threats to state security reflected, like their language use, a highly gendered vision. The RCMP perceived *male* protest within the Old and New Left movements as a legitimate danger. This danger was associated with protest groups that were dominated by men and were organized around a cadre of leaders, that called for marches, demonstrations and strikes, supported better working conditions or higher pay or even the overthrow of the state and that sometimes resorted to physical violence.²¹ Women's liberation groups arising out of the New Left were women-only organizations that, more often than not, rejected standard conventions of leadership as elitist, turned

¹⁸For more on government beauty pageants see Patrizia Gentile, "'Government Girls' and 'Ottawa Men': Cold War Management of Gender Relations in the Civil Service," in Gary Kinsman, Dieter K. Buse, and Mercedes Steedman, (eds.), *Whose National Security? Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2000), 131-41.

¹⁹Robert Gordon Teather, *Scarlet Tunic: Inside our Cars -- Inside our Hearts. On patrol with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (Surrey, B.C.: Heritage House Publishing Co, 1994), 55-6.

²⁰Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled* (South Yarra, AU: McPhee Gribble, 1993), 50-3.

²¹For a study of traditional male protest and the violence associated with it, see Judy Torrance, *Public Violence in Canada, 1867-1932* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986).

public protest into playful performances, took issue not only with capitalism but also with sexism, racism and classism and transgressed traditional white, middle class femininity in both appearance and behaviour. Such women challenged not just the sexual, economic and political status quo, as had women previously involved in the Old Left, but also the very structure of feminine gender roles in society.²²

Although this challenge was profound and radical, it was not recognized as such by the RCMP.²³ The Mounties were more focused on the possibility that women's liberation groups could be a front for subversive left-wing activity, possibly connected to hostile foreign interests. The force continued to view women's liberation groups from a highly gendered Cold War perspective. As late as 1977, an RCMP assessment suggested:

Women's Liberation, like all other mass movements, is directed at, and appeals to the lower echelon of society (the worker, the disfavoured) and thus provides fertile ground for the left wing element in which to grow its [sic] revolutionary seeds and achieve its own ends. The movement is spotted throughout with red (from the executive down)...²⁴

Consequently, the Mounties were ill-equipped to deal effectively with women's liberation groups because their goal of gender equity, consensus-building style and bold theatrical content contrasted fundamentally with the more familiar forms of male protest.

It was these techniques of surveillance and underlying gender attitudes that would be brought to bear on the Indochinese Conference in Canada. The American and Canadian women had selected Canada for two main reasons: first, they believed that the

²²Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 227-260. See also Myrna Kostash, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1980), pp. 166-187 and Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 75-94.

²³The same observation has been made in regard to the surveillance of women's liberation groups conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States. See Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 260.

²⁴LAC, RG 146, vol. 2974, access request A2005-00441, RCMP report, 2 August 1977.

Canadian rather than the American government would provide visas to the Indochinese representatives; second they assumed that Canada was a safe site to meet to discuss the Vietnam War. This concept of safety was, of course, relative. Canada was safer in relation to the United States, given the latter's involvement in the Vietnam War as well as its use of aggressive policing against its own citizens. Canada was not safe, however, from the prying eyes of the Mounted Police. The Mounties had previously spied on Vietnamese visitors in 1969 when members of the Vietnamese Liberation Front visited Toronto and they regularly conducted surveillance against any manifestation against the Vietnam War.²⁵

Not surprisingly, the Indochinese Conference rang all kinds of alarm bells for the RCMP. Because the force consistently monitored conference preparations using informers and open sources to spy upon VOW, the VWC and the TWC, the RCMP was well aware of what was forthcoming. In January 1971, it reported on an appearance on CBC TV by Kay McPherson, a long-time peace activist and the conference organizer for VOW. The following month the RCMP obtained a letter from VOW's national office calling upon its members to write to Otto Lang, the Minister of Manpower and Immigration in the government of Pierre Trudeau, to ask that the Indochinese women get

²⁵LAC, RG 146, vol. 2783, file 96-A-00045, pt. 11, UBC, 20 February 1967; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2759, file 96-A-00045, pt. 5, William SPIRA, 17 November 1969; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2765, file 93-A-00039, pt. 1, Report of T.L. Beckett, 21 October 1968; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2756, file 93-A-00051, Report of Cpl. E.A.E. LaFontaine, 11 April 1967; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2763, file 96-A-00045, pt. 28, Vietnam Mobilization Committee, 4 December 1970; LAC, RG 146, vol. 773, file 98-A-00029, Brock University, Protests and Demonstrations Re: U.S. Action in Vietnam-Canada, 5 November 1968; LAC, RG 146, vol. 2762, file 96-A-00045, pt. 19, Vietnamese Liberation Front Representatives on Tour in Canada-January-February, 1969, 17 February 1969.

visas to come to Canada from 24 March to 7 April 1971.²⁶ The ultimately successful letter writing campaign may have been prompted by the refusal of the same minister to grant visas to a Vietnamese delegation that had been scheduled to attend an event in Windsor, Ontario in January 1971. Unbeknownst to the women, the Mounties had privately intervened with the minister to block the issuing of the visas.²⁷

Thanks to an informer or informers among the ranks of the organizers, possibly within the VWC, the RCMP was well aware of west coast arrangements for the conference. In the middle of March 1971, the Security Service in Vancouver rushed to Ottawa a report that included the names of the American conference coordinators, Judy Michalowski and Pat Brown Orne. Accompanying the report were copies of letters circulated at a meeting of the VWC just two days before the RCMP report that had been supplied to the Mounties by a “source,” police speak for an informer. While some of the documents forwarded to Ottawa, such as newspaper clippings, were marked as “unclassified”, any of the internal documents that might reveal the involvement of an informer in obtaining them received a “classified” rating. Finally, in a preview of things to come, the police noted that the report and accompanying documentation was “being expeditiously submitted to provide HQ with up-to-date information on the problems being encountered locally in regards to the preparation for the Indochinese Conference.”²⁸ Additional detailed information would follow in the subsequent weeks

²⁶LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00199, Indochinese Women’s Delegation to Canada—1971, pt. 3, RCMP report, 16 March 1971, 000044.

²⁷LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00199, pt. 3, John Starnes, Director of the Security Service, to Dr. R.M. Adams, Assistant Deputy Minister, Immigration, Dept. of Manpower and Immigration, March 17, 1971, 000039.

²⁸LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00199, pt. 3, RCMP Report, 16 March 1971, 000040-000046.

including one report on a benefit dance for the conference that was submitted "to show both the interest and the problems being realized by the VWC towards the visit of the Indochinese."²⁹

The coverage of the actual meetings in Toronto and Vancouver would be drawn from a variety of sources, particularly informers and open source material, such as newspaper accounts, as well as from direct surveillance. Often the police supplied a combination of all three. For instance, when the Indochinese delegation landed in Winnipeg at the end of March on their way across Canada the RCMP conducted surveillance at the airport, accumulated documents put out by local organizers, whose names were noted, and collected newspaper accounts of the visit.³⁰ Similar surveillance occurred at the airport in Vancouver on 1 April 1971 when the Indochinese women arrived there. The police report felt the need to describe the appearance of those in attendance.³¹

In referencing the "problems" the VWC encountered over the visit of the Indochinese delegates the police referenced what was readily available through the media and the accounts of the women involved in the events in Vancouver and Toronto. The police coverage of events in Vancouver was more comprehensive than in Toronto because the women had tighter security in place at the latter, including closed meetings, and for some reason Mountie informers were not present at the entire event. What he

²⁹LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00199, pt. 3, RCMP Report, 24 March 1971, 000016; Ibid., RCMP Report, 30 March 1971, 00007-000010.

³⁰LAC, RG 146, vol. 4451, access request A2007-00200, Indochinese Women's Delegation to Canada, pt. 4, RCMP Report, 5 April 1971, pp. 000025-6; Ibid., "U.S. Govt. Blamed for My Lai Deaths," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 31 March 1971, p. 000028; Ibid., VOW Press Release, 000031.

³¹LAC, RG 146, vol. 2974, access A-2004-00175, Women's Liberation Group Canada, pt. 9, RCMP Report, 22 April 1971.

RCMP did dutifully record what a few historians researching the conference have recognized: what started out as a display of sisterhood and solidarity quickly degenerated into fierce in-fighting.³²

Initially, matters went smoothly upon the 1 April arrival of the Indochinese women in Vancouver. American and Canadian delegates arriving to meet them were told to "look as straight as possible," not to carry any drugs and were warned about the "local pigs" in the form of the RCMP. The six women were billeted in a large house belonging to a VOW member situated in the Shaughnessy neighbourhood.³³ The VWC extended a hopeful greeting to the visitors:

as women [we] know that bombs, napalm, germs and chemicals cannot stop the liberation of the Indochinese people. While fighting for the right of self-determination, they are creating a new society. A society with basic securities--food, shelter, medical care---a society with childcare facilities, equal educational and job opportunities for men and women, is being created out of the destruction of the old.³⁴

The VWC went on to identify Canadian women's struggles with those of the Indochinese women:

³²For more on the conferences see Ian Lekus, "Out in the Cold: Lesbian Feminism at the 1971 North American-Indochinese Women's Conference," Unpublished Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, April 2008, http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p105805_index.html; Constance Backhouse and David Flaherty, *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1992), 54; Thomas E. Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 78; Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 65; Alma M. Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 72; Becky W. Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 145.

³³Personal interview with Margot Dunn, July 27, 2007.

³⁴Simon Fraser University Archives F-166-0-0-2, Articles by Anne Roberts, 1970, "Statement" n.a., n.d.

We too will have to fight. We must end Canada's crucial role in developing biological and chemical warfare used in Indochina... We must eliminate the massive unemployment in our society. We must end the racism that degrades and exploits natives and other minority groups. We as women must also demand equal job opportunities, free 24-hour daycare, good medical care, birth control information, and free abortion on demand. We are starting the struggle for a new society in solidarity with our Indochinese sisters.³⁵

This greeting is a good example of what Judy Tzu-Chun Wu has identified as the “radical orientalism” of North American women’s liberationists. They held Asian female liberation fighters to be “exemplars of revolutionary womanhood.” While this projection countered the standard orientalist view of Asian women as passive or exotic, it served to assist North American women’s liberationists in defining their positions and goals in relation to the “revolutionary hope” they perceived lived in the East. It also permitted North American women to imagine the existence of a global sisterhood that encompassed the diversity of women under an international umbrella of women’s liberation.³⁶

The dream of unity in diversity shattered quickly into fierce divisions among the hundreds of women attending the conference in Vancouver, including along national lines. Anti-American sentiment peaked on the final night of the conference when five Canadian women turned up to perform a “guerrilla theatre” skit to mock the American delegates’ domination of the conference. According to an account written at the time,

some Canadian delegates (and some non-delegates who had been involved with the conference)...felt that they were being shit on by the whole structure of the conference and by the attitudes of the other delegates. The position of the Canadians as janitors and shit-workers was evident from the beginning, as only thirty Canadian delegates were permitted to attend from all the Western provinces, as opposed to the approximately 400 (including 34 “Third World Women”) from the western United States area.³⁷

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Tzu-Chun Wu, “Global Sisterhood.”

³⁷Simon Fraser University Archives, F-166-0-0-0-4 Indo-Chinese Women's Conference Report, 6 April 1971.

Some Canadian women were annoyed at the heavy emphasis on security. One VWC attendee remembers that American women rocked by the spate of assassinations in their country during the 1960s feared that the Indochinese women would likewise be attacked. They wanted to carry weapons from Los Angeles for armed patrols in Shaughnessy. Shotguns in Shaughnessy struck local women as “so hilarious.”³⁸ However, many Canadian women saw the American activists’ behaviour as “a way for groups to flex their muscles and gain power positions at the conference.”³⁹ Equally annoying were some of the welcomes offered to the six Indochinese women by American delegates: “Welcome to our country” and “In this country, we ...”⁴⁰ that ignored the fact that the conference was taking place in Canada and not the United States.

The RCMP account of the Vancouver meeting appears to have largely come from someone in attendance. This version clearly shared the feelings of some of the Canadian women about the American dominance while also revealing, subtly and unsubtly, other prejudices:

[Deleted under Access to Information: The source reported that] the mood of both meetings was that there was not complete agreement ... Some women present were boldly displaying the publication “Lesbianism is Revolution”. [deleted under access: name of delegate] of Calgary appeared to have spent the afternoon with the Gay Liberation women. In the evening, she was boldly displaying a copy of “Lesbianism is Revolution.” Source also noted that earlier in the afternoon, she appeared to have been quite drunk. ... [Deleted under Access] approximately 400 individuals attended the Plenary meeting held during the afternoon of 2-4-71. The crowd was made up of many Americans, including many coloured people, some lesbians, and many

³⁸Interview with Margot Dunn, July 27, 2007.

³⁹SFU Archives, Anne Roberts Collection, F-166-0-0-0-0-5, Indochinese Women's Conference 3/3 1970-1971, Anne Roberts and Barbara Todd, "Murmuring after the Indochinese Conference," *Pedestal*, May 1971.

⁴⁰F-166-0-0-0-3 Indochinese Women's Conference 1/3 1970-1971 Kathleen Gough, “An Indochinese Conference in Vancouver.”

young "hippie" women. Copies of lesbian literature were evident everywhere. ... A W.Lib. [Women's Liberation] girl sang about freeing herself from the chains of being a wife. ... The odour of marihuana was definite as the evening progressed, and people smoked it openly. A Negro woman talked and sang against NIXON and U.S. imperialism. ... [Deleted under access: The source described the] scene as sickening and expressed the opinion that the Americans were particularly poorly behaved.⁴¹

The police report went on to note widespread schisms on display and that factionalism ruled overall.⁴²

In addition to the American-Canadian split detailed in the RCMP report, older women peace activists found themselves at odds with younger members of women's liberation groups. The former wanted to keep the conference focused on the war in Vietnam while the latter concentrated on the status of women in society. Tensions also erupted between "Third World women" and "white women." The Third World Women's Caucus of Los Angeles criticized the organizers of conference, arguing that it was white dominated and called for their own contact with the six Indochinese women to discuss their common experience of racism.⁴³ Dissent arose between lesbians and non-lesbians. The former wanted to introduce the notion of lesbianism as an important political option for women's liberation while the latter denounced this position as irrelevant to the conference. At the Toronto gathering, matters degenerated further. Fist fights occurred between some of the women attendees. Although there were caucuses for women of colour, African-American, Asian and Puerto Rican women criticized the dominance of

⁴¹LAC, RG 146, vol. 2974, pt. 9, Women's Liberation Group Canada, access A-2004-00175, RCMP Report, 22 April 1971.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³SFU Archives, Anne Roberts Collection, F-166-0-0-0-5, Indochinese Women's Conference 3/3 1970-1971 F-166-0-0-0-4 Indochinese Women's Conference 2/3 1970-1971.

white women. Lesbians protested the cancellation of a workshop on lesbian issues but were condemned for being disruptive when they wanted to discuss their exclusion.⁴⁴

The Indochinese conference, captured and archived in the RCMP files, showcases for historians the beginning of the end of the romance of global sisterhood. The ruptures that tore through the conference in Vancouver and Toronto signaled the development of feminist identity politics that encouraged separatist agendas and that questioned whether political unity among women was/is even desirable in both theory and practice.⁴⁵

Such existential concerns were not on the table for the RCMP. The Indochinese conference was significant to the Mounted Police because of Cold War, not identity politics. The conference generated police interest because of its connection to the American anti-war movement and because of the potential for that movement, operating in concert with Canadian peace activists, to influence Canadian foreign policy, thereby impinging upon American designs in Vietnam. In that sense the RCMP-FBI relationship paralleled that of American and Canadian feminists gathered in Vancouver and Toronto when it came to the exercise of American interests in Canada. Ironically, in expressing their resentment toward their American counterparts, Canadian women's liberationists at the Indochinese conference proved to be less subservient to American hegemony than their country's national police force.

⁴⁴Fistfights reported at feminists' peace meeting, *Toronto Telegram*, 12 April 1971. See also Lekus, "Out in the Cold'."

⁴⁵Mary Louise Adams, "There's No Place Like Home," *Feminist Review*, No. 31, (Spring, 1989), pp. 22-33.