

Current research project

**“Heroes, Havens, Cowards: Gender and the Politics of Draft Resistance in Canada and the United States**

In Vancouver, British Columbia in 1970, the local radical newspaper 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 seeming unwillingness of Canadian 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.”

The politics of antiwar resistance in 1960s North America were profoundly gendered, as Mike clearly understood. Yet historiographies of draft resistance, “deserters,” and anti-Vietnam war protest focus on either the heroic narrative of courageous men who fled the draft for the supposed “safe haven” of Canada, or conversely, the “cowardly” actions of mainly middle class youth who fled the draft, refusing to face criminal sanctions, ultimately leaving mainly young African-American and working-class men to fight and die in Vietnam. Approximately 100 000 male and female Americans left the USA during the period of the Vietnam war, and their stories are inextricably tied to emerging left-Canadian nationalism and anti-Americanism, and the transnational North American politics of resistance.

This project examines antiwar activism within the historical context of the emergence of the women’s liberation movement and student radicalism. Scholars in the United States and more recently in Canada have recognized the importance of gender in 1960s activism, yet few historians and social movement theorists have paid serious attention to the Vietnam draft and war resisters who immigrated to Canada. Additionally, most studies of the 1960s liberation and radical movements take the United States as the hub of radicalism, and the Canadian experience as derivative. This myth was developed and maintained in part by American activists as they took up residence in Canada, leading to tension and conflict, and playing a role in emergence of Canadian left nationalist politics that not only resisted the politics of American state imperialism, but also the imperialism of left wing American radicalism. However, historians have not yet directly studied how the draft resistance movement to Canada was a gendered social movement, nor have they paid much attention to the women who moved to Canada. This project looks at the process of immigration of individual women, but also at their connections with various social movements, especially the women’s liberation movement, and the role and the meaning of the border in their lives.

This transnational movement of ideas and bodies across borders means that the border was “real” and “solid” in terms of the draft and legal status, but also permeable in terms of intellectual exchange, activism, leadership and organizing. Studies that attempt to study the Vietnam era without this transnational perspective miss a central organizing factor of war resistance: the longing of Americans for a Canada that was a “haven from militarism.” Yet the very permeability of the border, which allowed for the immigration of many war resisters and deserters, was framed within the context of a growing anti-American sentiment, which ranged from a left critique of American dominance in

Canadian professions, to conservative concerns that youthful American “hippies” were just the kind of unpatriotic and degenerate immigrants that Canada should be turning away. In addition, Canadian and American feminists and antiwar activists shared ideas and organizational strategies, and met at conferences, protests and rallies throughout North America. The politics of women’s liberation and the development of radical feminist theory were deeply connected to student and antiwar activism in Canada, as they were in the United States. Yet Canadian feminists struggled with the same problems of American “imperialism” that paralleled a larger concern about American domination of Canadian organization, social movements, and institutions, as well as the subordination of feminist activists within the larger New left movement. Newsletters and newspapers document that Canadian feminists increasingly accused their American counterparts of “U.S. Chauvinism”: they took over too many delegate spots at conferences, left Canadians do all the “shitwork” at co-sponsored events, knew nothing of Canadian politics and history, and failed to comprehend that Canada was a “separate country” from the United States.

Antiwar protest, like most forms of social protest in the 1960s, was generally gendered male, and historians have replicated this paradigm. This has happened in part because the military and the draft was a male sphere, and nominally heterosexual. But access to women’s bodies and women’s sexuality were ways that male radicals reaped the “rewards” of activism, both in practice and in theory. Left activists combined burgeoning theories of sexual revolution with masculine rights to the bodies of women. *Girls Say Yes to Boys Who Say No* famously claimed one antiwar poster; or as one woman complained to the *Georgia Straight*, men in the movement “say to us...my first commitment is the movement, baby...it is your duty to the movement to screw with me.” The bodies of Canadian women were expected to play a supplementary and supportive role, for the “duty” to marry deserters and draftees was portrayed by alternative media as a political act. But this project proposes that gender instability underlined male radicalism, sexism with social movements, and draft resistance, because the category of masculinity itself was under question. Draft resistance created a seemingly unsolvable paradox. Could a real man retain his masculinity by fleeing the country, which many saw as an act of cowardice and was therefore marked as feminine? Or was it the ultimate heroic sacrifice, of home, family, nation, for the larger cause?

The experiences of American female immigrants have been marginalized by the almost total focus on men, yet preliminary archival work and oral history suggests that women often initiated immigration, were deeply critical of American foreign policy, actively sought contact with Canadian supporters, and were political resisters or conscientious objectors in their own right. In addition, the struggle to re-establish families, community, and work opportunities were often jobs that fell to women. Both men and women were motivated by anger at American foreign policy, outrage at atrocities committed by soldiers in Vietnam, and loss of hope in the democratic potential of America electoral politics

Deepening the story of gender and 1960s activism is crucial not only as a topic of historical study, but because it helps in identifying the politics of commemoration, or discovering what helps to shape what we memorialize as representative values or depictions of a given era. Memories of the 1960s as either characterized by individualistic, hedonistic, and unpatriotic youth, or courageous, committed, principled

resistance have profound political meaning in light of America's current "War on Terror," which has shown that the divisions in North American society over antiwar activism, support for soldiers and notions of "proper" patriotism are still very much alive. When, for example, town of Nelson, British Columbia proposed a peace monument to honour the contribution of draft resisters, the response was largely hostile. The city received thousands of email and letters from outraged Americans, who characterized resisters as dishonorable cowards and disgusting criminals. The letters written embraced the image of tough, masculine American patriots ready to "kick your [cdn] inbred ass." It is clear that the memories of the 60s still play a central role in any current attempt to re-energize a modern antiwar movement. Without historical attentiveness to gender, however, the 1960s retain a mythical aura and a simplistic narrative of heroism and haven, belying a far more complex movement and period of time.

#### Seeking Participants for Interviews:

Part of this project will consist of oral histories of men and women who immigrated to Canada to resist the Vietnam war and the draft. If you would like to share your story with me, please contact me via email: at [lcampbel@sfu.ca](mailto:lcampbel@sfu.ca)  
We talk in person, by telephone, or through email.

This project has been given clearance by the SFU Office of Research Ethics.