

Frazier, Jessica M.: *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4696-3179-0; XVII, 217 S.

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In *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War Era*, Jessica M. Frazier explores a compelling set of questions surrounding the topics of peace activism, women's transnational networks, and conceptions of feminism. Building on scholarship by historians such as Mary Hershberger and Judy Tzu Chun Wu, Frazier's work centers on American female peace activists' connections with members of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU) in North Vietnam and the Women's Union of Liberation (WUL) of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

The study is based on an extensive array of sources, including, but not limited to, archival material from 14 institutions, seven published oral history interviews, and 18 interviews conducted by the author herself. While most of the written sources are North American in origin, Frazier spoke to 13 Vietnamese women in person. Her attempt to highlight Vietnamese voices is one of the outstanding features of the book.

Frazier continuously draws attention to the agency of Vietnamese women who actively pursued, maintained, and considerably steered relationships with American peace activists. In this aspect she echoes historian Lien-Hang Nguyen who argues that North Vietnamese leaders sought to appeal to different actors within the global antiwar movement by adapting their rhetoric with regard to their audience.<sup>2</sup> By concentrating on Vietnamese agency, Frazier is able to prove the first of her two main theses: While relationships between U.S. feminists and women of decolonizing nations have traditionally been viewed as dominated by the former, she shows that connections between Vietnamese and American women were all but „clear-cut examples of U.S. women's cultural imperialism“ (p. 4).

The book's second main thesis is that transnational collaboration contributed to the

development of American feminisms. Frazier argues that for women of different organizations and backgrounds, such as white middle-class peace activists, women of color engaged in movements for civil rights, and white proponents of women's liberation, the exchange with Vietnamese women brought about new perspectives on womanhood and women's rights (p. 4f.).

The narrative entwines these arguments while following a chronological outline made up of six chapters: Frazier first concentrates on connections built on maternalist rhetoric (chapter one), then explains how a focus on motherhood as well as other notions of womanhood influenced activist diplomacy (chapter two). She demonstrates that a maternalist framework provided a tool for women of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, family statuses, and political convictions to portray themselves as a homogenous group (p. 37f.). Maternalism therefore functioned as an adhesive despite the fact that members of Vietnamese, American, and international women's organizations employed differing concepts of what it meant to be a mother.

The author weaves together insights from these first two chapters when she gets to the bottom of how the transnational partnership forged American women's feminisms in chapters three to five. Chapter three contributes to the existing body of research about women's activism in social movements and the question of how intersectional categories, particularly race, influenced their work and their perspectives.<sup>3</sup> While conceding that

<sup>1</sup> Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam. American Peace Activists in Vietnam, 1965–1977*, Syracuse, NY 1998; Judy Tzu Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road. Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era (The United States in the World)*, Ithaca 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Han-Ling Nguyen, *Revolutionary Circuits. Toward Internationalizing America in the World*, in: *Diplomatic History* 39,3 (2015), pp. 411–422, here p. 414.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us. An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*, Oxford 2006; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism. Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, Cambridge 2004; Becky Thompson, *Multiracial Feminism. Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism*, in: Nancy Hewitt (Ed.), *No Permanent Waves. Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, New Brunswick 2010, pp. 39–60.

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scholars who focus on the 1960s have addressed ideological connections between activists and organizations in the United States and revolutionary movements outside of it, Frazier sets out to explore “whether and how this connection shaped feminisms of women of color” (p. 55).

In search for an answer to that question, the author traces the case studies of Chicana activists Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez and Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez, Black Panther Elaine Brown, and Asian American activist Pat Sumi. Frazier’s decision to reference women engaged in mixed-gender organizations benefits her research in two ways: First, it resonates with scholarship on the women’s movement that incorporates a variety of women’s activism.<sup>4</sup> Second, the inclusion of these activists allows Frazier to depict how transnational connections shaped American women’s perspectives, not only on themselves and on their Vietnamese counterparts, but also on their communities and women’s roles therein. Frazier makes a strong case that for many non-white American women „Vietnamese women provided key examples of how they could challenge racism, imperialism, and sexism simultaneously“ (p. 78). Frazier’s commitment to an intersectional approach adds tremendously to the validity of her work. Therefore, it is all the more surprising that she does not mention native American perspectives. Those might have enriched the analysis, particularly when Frazier explains how Mexican American activists argued against American intervention in Vietnam on the grounds that they shared the experience of having taken their land away by the United States (p. 59f.)

Mirroring fractions within the larger women’s movement, the relationships between different circles of American activists who engaged with Vietnamese women were not always easygoing. Chapter four illustrates how white peace activists, white proponents of women’s liberation, and non-white members of Third World feminist groups clashed when they organized the 1971 Indochinese Women’s Conferences (IWC) in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada (p. 89). According to Frazier, IWC participants overcame national as well as social movement

borders and developed new perspectives on women, war, and peace (p. 97). However, the author’s thesis that the IWC provided the opportunity for participants to „discuss the interconnectedness of struggles against racism, sexism, and imperialism“ seems limited by the aforementioned communication problems among the groups of women (p. 98).

Chapter five reinforces Frazier’s argument that women’s transnational relationships during the war did not originate from an imperialist idea of ‘rescuing’ Vietnamese women from their own culture. Rather, American activists viewed U.S. intervention as the root cause of social issues in South Vietnam, whereas they idealized North Vietnamese society. Frazier follows individuals such as Women Strike for Peace and Church Women United member Anne McGrew Bennett who traveled to Vietnam in May 1969 and December 1970. During her journeys Bennett learned how political persecution, oppression of religious freedom, and sexual exploitation affected women during wartime, particularly in South Vietnam (p. 101, 111). The North, by contrast, functioned as an example of a peaceful society „where women could reach their full potential“ (p. 113). Voyages such as Bennett’s illustrate Frazier’s thesis that female American peace activists put women’s rights at the center of their critique against the war by criticizing political and social injustice in South Vietnam as consequences of U.S. intervention (p. 121).

When the United States left Vietnam in 1973, VWU, WUL, and American peace activists lost their common goal. In chapter six, Frazier reflects upon what this meant for established relationships between Vietnamese and American women. She concedes that while the U.S. withdrawal did not terminate these connections immediately, the way the women worked together was considerably altered (p. 140). American aid organizations started observing the „inner workings of Viet Nam“ and some American activists caused indignation among Vietnamese part-

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<sup>4</sup> Compare for example the contributions in the following edition: Nancy Hewitt (Ed.), *No Permanent Waves. Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, New Brunswick 2010.

ners by speaking out on human rights' issues (p. 140). Surprisingly, Frazier does not clarify whether this development marked a turning point in U.S. and Vietnamese activists' relations. It remains unclear whether the partnership started to resemble the concept of women's cultural imperialism that, as Frazier demonstrates earlier, did not apply during the war years.

The epilogue opens with the observation that, while memory of the war in Vietnam still divides American society, the (hi)story of women's transnational relations was one of coalescence. In an effort to emphasize the singularity of the women's collaboration to end the Vietnam War, Frazier takes a side blow on recent developments in American feminisms that led to, in her words, feminists lending „support for wars waged in such places as Afghanistan in the name of 'saving women'" (p. 145). This comparison seems rather incongruous, since the historical settings of these wars differ strongly from each other. Therefore, the subject would require a thorough analysis in order to draw any legitimate conclusions.

Despite some minor hick-ups, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War Era* presents a well thought out and engaging account of the transnational partnership that Vietnamese and American women forged to end the war in Vietnam. The study's biggest asset is the author's gift for biographical writing: She shines when she illustrates her arguments by uncovering stories of little-known activists' engagement. These peeks into various perspectives of female activists intensify Frazier's analysis and make for a compelling read. Her prose is precise and her main points are well-argued and easy to understand. *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War* will be of interest to anyone studying transnational activism, women's movements, or peace history.

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