Chapter Three:
Symbols of Solidarity: Revolutionary Vietnamese Women in Vietnam and Beyond

In the main stairwell of the Women’s Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam’s northern capital city, an elegant silhouette of a militiawoman stretches across four panes of glass (fig. 3.1). To see outside the museum, at the shaded courtyard and the boulevard beyond, one must first gaze at this ideal image of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman. With a rifle slung across her back, she pauses in her forward march, as though awaiting, or rather beckoning, those behind to join her. This silhouette was adapted and reversed from a famous photograph taken in the 1960s by Mai Nam (fig. 3.2), one of many made by communist photographers to depict women at war. By adapting Mai Nam’s photograph, the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), the organization that founded the Women’s Museum in 1987, offers a prism for understanding the modern nation: to view Vietnam properly one must recognize the role of women in national liberation. The museum’s rhetoric of transparency, however, belies the complex history of the symbol and its shifting meanings.

During Vietnam’s war against the US, the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese women was highly contested. Deployed by both the Communist and anti-Communist factions in North and South Vietnam, this symbol was used to support clashing political ideologies. It then proceeded to capture the interest of diverse viewers beyond the nation. This is not to suggest that the revolutionary woman is universal, for doing so risks reifying problematic claims about the “transhistorical” nature of visual culture.1 While this symbol was not unique to Vietnam—as a way of representing women, the symbol was pervasive in Cuba and Nicaragua, 2 among other
proxy sites of conflict during the global Cold War—it's localized framing requires that we attend to specific contexts.

In North Vietnam, the Young Pioneers, the Vietnam Women’s Union, and the Vietnamese People’s army mobilized photographers to document war efforts and shape an overall vision of socialism. The socialist-state run Vietnam News Agency (VNA) served as perhaps the most prolific producer of photographs of Vietnamese women. Under its aegis, photographers emphasized themes of collective struggle, strength, and resilience. Their work set out to glorify women’s contributions to the war, in accordance with the VWU’s “three responsibilities” movement, which entailed: recruiting soldiers; laboring at home, in fields, and on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (figs. 3.3-3.5). Women who served in this third capacity comprised the contingent of “long-haired warriors,” whom Hồ Chí Minh praised for their tenacity and patriotic fervor. These photographs were printed and circulated among communist fighters to reinforce socialist ideals of unified effort and shared objectives, and among peasants in order to explain the cause and recruit volunteers. Just as importantly, they were broadcast internationally to solicit sympathy and feminist solidarity from a wide array of actors, from anti-war pacifists to freedom fighters.

Meanwhile in South Vietnam, Madame Nhu also claimed the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman, by founding and leading the Women’s Solidarity Movement of Vietnam. She did so by drawing on a similar visual idiom of collectivity and unity, which she connected to a discourse of solidarity that converged with, and yet departed from, the version disseminated by her political rivals in the North. Ultimately, however, as will be explained further below, the northern version of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman as a symbol of socialism won out, and it was the VWU’s version of the symbol that circulated prominently outside Vietnam.
Given how contested this visual rhetoric was and how influential and durable it proved to be, I approach the visual representation of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman as more than just image, in line with theoretical approaches to photography as a cultural practice of geopolitical encounter and a labor of war, which need not result in or even involve an image object and which intersects with textual and other cultural practices. Instead, I explore the Vietnamese revolutionary woman as symbol, significant because of the social and cultural consequences that it can bring about. The symbol operates in a manner analogous to the “figure,” a concept that political philosopher Thomas Nail develops to expand on notions of personhood. According to Nail, the figure is neither a “fixed identity” nor a “specific person,” but can be understood as a “mobile social position” and “social vector.” When individuals position themselves in relation to a figure, their sense of selfhood is shaped by it. The symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman is meant to conjure a collective, a sense of solidarity made legible to individuals when they position themselves in relation to, and in ostensible alignment with, the symbol and its associated ideals.

Other scholars have associated symbolization with objectification, depoliticization, and a lack of female agency. For example, Elizabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad have lamented the difficulty of pinning down the precise role of Vietnamese women during and after the war, observing that: “Women in Vietnam, at their most objectified, were rendered as symbols: of revolutionary resistance, of the Third World, and perhaps most commonly, of a separatist force within the larger struggle against US occupation.” Mary Ann Tétreault adds that the symbol’s flexibility and ambiguity poses challenges to the task of historical interpretation. These critics decry the proliferation of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman as symbol, lamenting that
symbolization obscures the active role she played. But symbolization does not necessarily entail depoliticization. During the war, a key role for Vietnamese revolutionary women was as symbol.

Emphasizing women as symbols does not necessarily diminish their political potency, nor dismiss the extensive contributions and sacrifices of Vietnamese women. Instead, symbolization for these women was a pivotal tactic for asserting cultural influence. Indeed, the “revolutionary Vietnamese woman” was a multiform category, which different groups, including the Vietnamese state and women’s movements independent from the state, sought to pin down for their own ends.

This chapter traces the emergence of this symbol and the routes of its transpacific circulation, with a focus on the contest for control over its meaning among opposing groups in Vietnam and its subsequent appeal for members of the North American women’s antiwar organizations, namely Women Strike for Peace (WSP), Voice of Women (VoW) and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). These organizations were especially responsive audiences for VWU outreach activities, despite the contradictions in their positions with respect to war, which few, if any, members of these North American women’s activists noticed. I contend that this disregard amounts to a form of misrecognition, an unwitting but occasionally willful misunderstanding of the significance of the producer’s intended meaning in favor of viewers’ sensibilities and priorities. By misrecognition, I do not mean to imply that there is a single “correct” essence of Vietnamese revolutionary womanhood. On the contrary, my aim is to emphasize what Anna Tsing theorizes as “frictions” in her ethnography of postcolonial Indonesia. The concept of frictions denotes discordances and misunderstandings which may be counter-intuitively generative. Here, I examine the potentially productive misunderstandings between a socialist way of seeing in Vietnam and a broadly Leftist sensibility that developed in
markedly disparate contexts, even as adherents pledged solidarity with the antiwar cause. Through an exploration of the symbol’s varied permutations, I explain how the revolutionary Vietnamese woman contributed to socialist ways of seeing, demonstrating how these socialist ways of seeing transform in response to diverse contexts. Charting the transpacific circuits of influence helps reveal the many ways that the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman was produced and consumed, and how in the course of visual exchange the symbol became a key arsenal in the warring visions of opposing—and allied—sides, which conscripted the cause of women’s emancipation for competing political objectives.

The symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman exemplifies “parallax vision,” historian Bruce Cumings’s term to denote how ways of knowing shift depending on one’s viewing position. These dissimilar perspectives produce diverse permutations of this symbol. Notably, photographers, artists, and radical newsletter editors represented the revolutionary Vietnamese woman in varied ways: as girls with guns; as militarized mothers representing a martial maternalism; as, at times, glamorously arrayed but more often than not humbly garbed peasant warriors and diplomatic representative (in the case of Nguyen Thị Bình); and, finally, as mothers who posed simply and conspicuously without guns. What accounts for these diverse permutations and who was responsible for shaping them? What were the cultural politics of the production and circulation of this symbol? To what extent did this process establish solidarities and how did misunderstandings complicate this objective? I contend that, rather than sabotaging solidarity, misrecognition shored up sisterhood, expanded socialist ways of seeing beyond the Vietnamese context, and stretched the concept of “socialism” to accommodate gendered objectives that did not wholly fall within the scope of the Vietnamese photographers who produced this symbol, which subsequently took on forms that diverged from the VWU’s designs.
Gendered Visions of Modernity in a Divided Vietnam

Despite being deployed abroad as a means of expressing parallels and solidarities, the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman laid bare ideological differences even within Vietnam, not least of which were tensions between socialism and women’s emancipation. In Vietnam, which from 1954 to 1975 was partitioned into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, this very symbol became the means for opposing administrations to vie for the mantle of national liberators and champion of women’s rights. As noted above, the Vietnam Women’s Union in the North was especially concerned with shaping this symbol to suit its purposes and did so by elaborating on women’s collective contributions to revolution. And yet, given the significance of collective struggle as a socialist virtue, the composition of some of these photographs might at first appear odd, for they feature a single Vietnamese revolutionary woman removed from the company of her comrades. As we saw earlier, the Hanoi Women’s Museum opted to represent this symbol as a singular presence (fig. 3.1), adapting Mai Nam’s iconic photograph by cropping out the second person that appeared in his original print (fig. 3.2).

Despite the isolating effect of this excision, its seeming contradiction can be resolved when we consider that the photograph implies the presence of others. After all, visitors are encouraged to look at, and in this process, presumably, to see and sympathize with her accomplishments. The visual idiom of singularity did not necessarily emphasize the individuality of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman. Rather, this visual idiom gestures towards collectivity through an implicitly expansive notion of singularity. Specifically, the decision to frame this symbol in a singular way is consistent with the VWU’s broader strategy of exalting select
revolutionary women as exemplary fighters in propaganda pamphlets, also called “emulation” tracts, designed to recruit more women in solidarity with the cause of anti-colonial struggle.

Perhaps the most visible model of exemplary collectivism, which is to say a singular revolutionary whose contributions laid a path for others to follow, can be seen in the representation of Nguyễn Thị Bình, particularly in her carefully composed performance of femininity while negotiating the Paris Peace Accords on behalf of the Communist-sympathetic Provisional Revolutionary Government-National Liberation Front (PRG-NLF). Although she was nervous about appearing before the press, Nguyễn Thị Bình understood the importance of appearances. “After all,” she reminisced, “a gentle, petite woman from a land where war raged had stood before them, speaking with reason and feeling. Indeed, our first steps had created sympathy among the press.” Madame Bình presented herself to be seen, playfully responding to clichés about the so-called Orient (as evident when she described herself as “gentle” and “petite”). Significantly, Madame Bình also appeared in public at these talks wearing ao dai, the traditional Vietnamese dress, as a gendered display of nationalism (fig. 3.6). In Vietnam, revolutionaries expressed their discipline in plainer style, with the peasants’ signature black pajamas and checkered scarves. Madame Bình was well aware that her self-consciously feminine demeanor enabled the PRG-DRV delegates to appear as progressive compared to the exclusively male representatives of the Republic of Vietnam, with their overt masculinity. Her counterparts at the negotiating table failed to realize that, by sitting cozily with the all-male delegation of American diplomats, they projected an old-boys’ club cronyism.

Although the connection between socialist liberation and female emancipation first emerged in the Soviet and Chinese revolutions, Hồ Chí Minh expressed his commitment to women in several speeches. For example, at a 1959 Cadres’ meeting, convened to debate the
merits of a draft Law on Marriage and the Family, Hồ Chí Minh declared that, “[w]omen make up half of society. If they are not liberated, half of society is not freed. If women are not emancipated only half of socialism is built.” The passage of this Law in 1960 attested to the Vietnamese Communist Party’s protection of women's rights, by abolishing concubinage, forced marriage, and child marriage. In a speech for the Vietnam Women’s Union on the organization’s twentieth anniversary, Hồ Chí Minh expressed how “deeply grateful [our people are] to the mothers in both South and North Vietnam for having given birth to and bringing up the heroic generations of our country.” He pointed proudly to a tradition of women and revolution in Vietnam extending two thousand years back to the rebellion led by the legendary Trung sisters against the injustice of Chinese colonialism. Madame Binh’s presence at the talks seemed to bring to fruition this socialist promise of women's emancipation.

By presenting herself as determined yet vulnerable, Nguyễn Thị Bình sought to represent Vietnamese women more generally, as part of an overall “people-to-people” strategy that opened up the diplomatic front to complement the military front. “This new diplomatic front,” she declared, “could enhance our influence on international and US public opinion, isolate the forces of aggression, and provide effective support for the battlefield.” Such a strategy both affirms and refines the principle of armed propaganda that the Viet Minh resistance introduced during the First Indochina War against the French. In his book, People’s Army, People’s War, legendary general Võ Nguyên Giáp asserts that, by armed propaganda, "we had not to attempt to overthrow the enemy, but try to win over and make use of him.” With the Second Indochina War, or American War, the communist strategy, adapted from the example set by Chinese advisers, expanded. It became imperative to win over not just enemies but also to attract friends, most notably members of the North American women’s movement.
Yet the Communists were not the only ones to claim women as allies and to broadcast their vision of the revolutionary woman, which they cast in the mold of the revered Trung Sisters, the national heroines that Hồ Chí Minh celebrated. Madame Nhu projected a competing version of this figure within Vietnam, asserting that the Vietnamese women of the Saigon-based Republic of Vietnam could defend the nation against communism and foreign corruption. Specifically, Madame Nhu expressed her commitment to this vision of militarized motherhood by advancing the cause of the Women’s Solidarity Movement of Vietnam (WSM), a South Vietnamese paramilitary organization that she founded in 1960 and headed to oppose socialism.

Madame Nhu was a powerful and polarizing leader, who performed a version of revolutionary femininity markedly dissimilar from that of Madame Binh. In contrast to Madame Binh’s modesty, Madame Nhu favored a more risqué style of ao dai, which Saigon-based intellectuals worried bore the taint of foreign influence (fig. 3.7). Yet Madam Nhu was aware that her detractors, whom she labeled “traditionalists,” blamed her for the immodesty of Vietnamese fashion. She defended herself by declaring that her intent was hardly “to launch a cosmopolitan fashion, and less to encourage extravagant attire” that were “fanciful” and “alien” but instead to feature designs of “ancient Vietnam….and which are still common among the tribes of the Highlands.” Traditionalists revered áo dài as reflecting a distinct Vietnamese national identity. This dress, however, has evolved over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to incorporate foreign fashions. Despite the disavowal of external influence, the áo dài exemplifies an invented tradition.

In the early nineteenth century, áo dài, a type of dress worn by both men and women, consisted of a loose-fitting tunic split into two panels and worn over trousers. The way that men and women wore the tunic, whether hung loose or knotted together at the ends, varied according
to region. In the early twentieth century, Hanoi artist Nguyễn Cát Tươn, also known as Le Mur, made a splash with his version of áo dài for women. Adapted from French fashions, Le Mur’s design cut the tunic to fit tightly to bust and torso, thereby showing off feminine frames without exposing much flesh. Indeed, a high collar hid the neckline entirely. Fashionable Vietnamese women embraced this style as a modern version of the áo dài. In their eyes, it was no less a national dress for all that it adapted the figure-hugging lines associated with French tailoring. By the 1960s, the increased presence of American advisers and soldiers, particularly in the southern capitol of Saigon, brought greater urgency to the issue of foreign influence as the injection of billions of US dollars in aid encouraged corruption, created a market for prostitution, and stimulated a black market of illicit goods, drugs, and services.

One can see signs of this influence in Saigonese fashions; women adopted elements of risqué western dress, of which the miniskirt was perhaps the most scandalous. (Here, the contrast to the US, where the miniskirt connoted countercultural values, is striking). Accordingly, the hemlines of the áo dài inched higher, while stiff mandarin collars that hid the neckline disappeared altogether, with Madame Nhu favoring the new designs. Though the traditionalists gossiped about Madame Nhu’s áo dài, their disapproval was hardly a trivial matter; as the First Lady, Madame Nhu symbolized South Vietnam through her comportment and dress. When magazines remarked on her open-necked áo dài, they also embarked on gendered speculation of just how open she, and by extension the Diem regime, was to American influence. When Madame Nhu insisted that the open-neck hearkened to folk traditions, she sought to quell this speculation, deflecting attention by disavowing western sensibilities and insisting on the local origins of her signature áo dài.
By the time Madame Binh entered the world stage as a prominent revolutionary and political leader at the Paris Peace Talks in 1969, the significance of áo dài was well established. It was a sartorial sign that, for better or for worse, stitched women to nation. Depending on who was looking, the áo dài modeled a modest and dignified socialist statement or a more modern, salacious South Vietnam. Like Madame Nhu, then, Madame Binh deliberately crafted this sign for her purposes and to claim the mantle of modernity; in her more modest rendition, Madame Binh embodied a vision of gendered nationhood—and revolution—whose plainness contrasted starkly with Madame Nhu’s grandeur.

Madame Nhu sought visibility in other ways, by taking advantage of the attention afforded by the western press to project her vision of Vietnamese modernity for local and international spectators. In 1962, LIFE magazine featured a child at play with First Lady Madame Nhu. In this photograph, Madame Nhu and the child point toy pistols at each other. More than her acclaimed beauty, the photograph stands out because of its theme of militarized motherhood—the very theme that would also be forcefully taken up by the Vietnam Women’s Union and the NLF-PRG, her ideological opponents. While this photograph is playful, Madame Nhu took her self-presentation of militarized motherhood seriously, even presenting her daughter Lê Thúy a pistol as a gift on her eighteenth birthday.

Madame Nhu also expressed her commitment to this vision of militarized motherhood by promoting the Women’s Solidarity Movement of Vietnam (WSM), a South Vietnamese, anti-communist paramilitary organization that she founded and headed (Fig. 3.8). Established with much fanfare in 1960, the WSM’s main objective, outlined in its charter, was to “become a force on which the Nation can count and which the Nation must take into account.” To be eligible for the WSM, women had to be between 18 to 50 years old, and willing to undertake seventy-two
hour training sessions at Quyết Thắng (“Determination to Win”) Training Centre, located just outside Saigon. Training for these women consisted of military drills, marches, and some first aid, after which the paramilitary group was dispatched to provide protection and assistance at strategic hamlets, an unpopular program of land removal meant to destabilize communist guerillas. Madame Nhu believed that peasants in these hamlets would welcome paramilitary women as warmly as they greeted her, but as the American Ambassador wryly noted, she overestimated her own popularity. A state department brief notes that hamlet chiefs coached peasants prior to her visits; moreover, her “cool” and “aloof” manner alienated locals. American observers, who watched the emergence of the WSM carefully, doubted that her paramilitary organization would be any more effective than she was in cultivating warm relationships with locals.

In contrast to the singularity that comprised part of the visual rhetoric of collectivism associated with Vietnamese socialism, however, Madame Nhu sought above all to represent the WSM as a tightly unified mass as part of her vision of republicanism. Accordingly, press photographs of the WSM captured the women in military formation, in training and at drills (fig. 3.9). Aligning herself with this discipline, Madame Nhu had herself photographed at target practice, in a now famous image (fig. 3.10). The image of disciplined military formation marks her understanding of solidarity; through the appearance of women in line in defense of the republic, Madame Nhu projected a sense of firm resolve. The overall picture of the WSM that Madame Nhu sought to orchestrate was a proto-feminist formation in which she strove to wrest the moral authority of women’s emancipation from her opponents on behalf of the Government of Vietnam. However, for all that these movements were designed to communicate the unity of
its members, their highly coordinated and synchronized quality belied the organization’s internal divisions.

The Women’s Solidarity Movement accepted volunteers from all classes. One recruit was Thang Thị Út, a member of the Republican youth, an organization loyal to the Diem regime. The twenty-two-year-old was among a group of cadets who gathered together in Phước Tây province to celebrate Hải Ba Trung Day, in honor of the Trung Sisters, the very heroines that Hồ Chí Minh claimed as forebears of the communist Vietnam Women’s Union. Participants at this event were attacked, however. After the event, a truck transporting the girls of the Republican youth home struck a land mine. As the damaged vehicle careened toward a nearby military outpost, guerillas shot at the trapped passengers. Út was one of two people killed. According to a press story about the ambush, the young woman, who was about to marry and start her own family, was cut down on the cusp of womanhood. As narrated by the Diem-controlled South Vietnamese press, the attack on Út and her female companions was nothing less than a betrayal and perversion of the very tradition of revolutionary womanhood that Hải Ba Trung Day was meant to commemorate. In this way, Madame Nhu claimed her Women’s Solidarity Movement as the true inheritor of the Trung Sisters’ legacy.

A year before unveiling the Women’s Solidarity Movement in 1960, Madame Nhu sought to demonstrate her leadership on women’s rights by introducing the Family Code, a set of laws that she pressured the South Vietnam Assembly to pass. Saigon elites found Madame Nhu’s stance tough to swallow, gossiping that, at best, the Code evinced the Catholic prudery of the Diem regime, and at worst, served as a vehicle for a petty personal vendetta against her brother-in-law, who was about to abandon her sister. (She punished them by blocking their divorce.) In fact, the Family Code was groundbreaking legislation that preceded by a full year the
Communist Party’s Law on Marriage and Family, offering the very landmark reforms—prohibiting polygamy, outlawing arranged marriages, and curtailing grounds for divorce—that would be lauded in the other Law. Nevertheless, Madame Nhu’s Family Code proved to be unpopular. Although she hoped to demonstrate the sincerity of her desire to emancipate women through her paramilitary organization, from the outset the Women’s Solidarity Movement of Vietnam required more force to make an impact. Indeed, some of Madame Nhu’s policies suggested her commitment to the cause of women’s emancipation was, at most, half-hearted. For example, she announced that pregnant WSM members would be granted unpaid maternity leave of two months and re-assignment to other, less physically strenuous tasks, her desire to be scrupulous with the budget or at least seen to be so, outweighing any consideration of compensation.

The public nevertheless harbored suspicions of incompetence and malfeasance. On August 20th, 1962, Francois Sully sparked controversy with a story he published in Newsweek, entitled “Vietnam: The Unpleasant Truth.” The story criticized the Diem regime for its ineffectiveness in the war and included a photograph of WSM volunteers completing the paramilitary training program, captioned “Female Militia in Saigon: The Enemy has more drive and enthusiasm.” In a letter sent to the editors of Newsweek the following day, WSM members protested that, “Newsweek is supposedly an organ of information and its correspondent in Vietnam must be well aware that day in day out, in uniform or not, arms at hand or not, the women of Vietnam are second to none and especially to the enemy in drive and enthusiasm—above all when the fight for the survival of our nation is concerned.” Irate, they demanded Sully’s immediate expulsion from Vietnam. The story mocked the recruits’ patriotism and
punctured Madame Nhu’s buoyant vision of the WSM as revolutionary women fighting for nation and family.

Though Sully appealed, the Diem regime authorized this decision, and he became one of among just a handful of journalists to be expelled. Sully was a cautionary example to other correspondents of the costs of criticizing the Government of Vietnam and a reminder of the limits of press freedom during the war in Vietnam. His expulsion counters claims about the unrestricted access that journalist had at this supposed golden age of print and televisual media. The symbol of the militarized revolutionary woman, as mobilized by Madame Nhu, may have seemed so innocuous as to be ineffectual, at least for Newsweek. Yet this symbol served as a lightning rod for debates on freedom versus censorship; with the freedom granted by the US peremptorily removed, or so it seemed, by the South Vietnamese government. Behind these deliberations lurked the even more troubling concern about the relationship between the Diem regime and the US. At this moment, the shaky nature of the American alliance with the Diem regime prompted US analysts to chafe under the “uncomfortable predicament” imposed by the “scarcity of acceptable alternatives” for leadership in South Vietnam. This predicament was only exacerbated by Madame Nhu’s rhetoric, which a US diplomat sardonically described as “highly readable and frequently vitriolic.”

Like her counterparts among the VWU, who cast their net wide for allies around the world, Madame Nhu appealed for support. Though she particularly sought sympathy from among overseas Vietnamese, she also welcomed foreign women as “associate members.” This is why the organization’s name was changed from the Vietnamese Women’s Solidarity Movement to the Women’s Solidarity Movement of Vietnam. Nonetheless, a major problem arose from Madame Nhu’s very approach to “solidarity.” For Madame Nhu, there were clear limits to
solidarity; significantly, she stopped short of ceding national objectives to larger international organizations. Specifically, the WSM “would count on the broad reciprocity” of allies in other nations, who would, she declared, exchange “a community of ideals and objectives, though each organization is able to keep its complete independence and implement the common rules of approach in its own national field of activities.”

In another article, she explained how her approach differed from others that put their energy into a “single international committee,” which she dismissed because it “usually serves only to keep international contacts but is in general ignored in the national life of the member countries.”

She rejected approaches to solidarity that folded national groups under the umbrella of international organizations lest they lose the specificity of struggles for independence. Solidarity could strengthen the movement, she admitted, but only if the organization’s objectives remained central. A form of solidarity that lost sight of nationalist concerns might as well not be solidarity, according to Madame Nhu.

Photographs of the WSM, in emphasizing the martial choreography and uniformity of women in formation expressed a vision of solidarity between Vietnamese women in spite of American imperialism, even as the administration Madame Nhu represented was propped up by American advisers.

Just outside Saigon, the Quyết Thắng Training Center was the site where cadres participated in marches and drills, and learned how to shoot, to defend against an enemy raid, to administer basic first aid, and to draw on Aikido for self-defense. On August 3, 1963, Madame Nhu addressed a group of cadres who were about to complete their training at the center, with these rousing words, “Place your confidence in us and I assure you, the women of Vietnam will always inspire respect – at most, envy, but never pity, the less contempt.”

The press, invited to come along and document the splashy proceedings, duly filed their stories, taking care to
illustrate their accounts of the training with the photogenic militarized women. Madame Nhu’s many detractors, however, claimed that the symbolism she so carefully crafted lacked substance. According to Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Mai, a member of Saigon’s elite, women joined the league lest their husbands, who were bureaucrats in Diem’s administration, lose their jobs. For Mai, fear and intimidation stitched the movement, not into a durable bond of solidarity, but rather into a frayed semblance of cohesion that was quickly unraveling.

In November 1963, a CIA-backed coup, led by General Dương Văn Minh, resulted in Madame Nhu’s exile to Europe after the assassinations of her husband and brother-in-law. In its heyday, Madame Nhu boasted that her Women’s Solidarity Movement included more than a million members and claimed that its Training Center had to turn away volunteers for lack of space. By 1964, South Vietnam shook as one administration after another toppled in the violence of successive coups. By then, whatever semblance of cohesion the Women’s Solidarity Movement had established through the force of Madame Nhu’s personality had thoroughly dissolved. Thus, when other movements abroad invoked the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman, they did so by taking up the VWU—that is, the communist—version of this symbol, and not the splashy parades and training exercises staged by Madame Nhu and her paramilitary women’s organization. Today, hardly anyone remembers the existence of South Vietnam’s Women’s Solidarity Movement.

The competing versions of the symbol of revolutionary women within the divided Vietnam lays bare the contested terms in which women and revolution came into visibility. Ironically, this symbol signified, depending on which group in Vietnam invoked it, socialism and its opposing ideology, republicanism. In Vietnam, the category of woman is “disorderly,” according to anthropologist Ann Marie Leshkowich, who contends that the invocation of
“woman” sparks fierce debates on nationhood and modernity—and, we might add, solidarity. Given this context, in which the production of the symbol of revolutionary Vietnamese woman exposed competing visions of modernity, whether socialist or republican, it is hardly surprising that its meanings acquired further complexity through the circulation, remediation, and reinterpretation of this symbol, or, more accurately, the North Vietnamese iteration of the revolutionary women, the version that triumphed with the collapse of the Diem regime.

On October 14-17, 1967, four years after the dissolution of the WSM, the Council for the International Democratic Federation of Women adopted a “Resolution on the Vietnam Problem” at a conference in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where the idea for the first North American conference involving Vietnamese women as delegates was hatched. This resolution called on all women “to show the greatest material and moral solidarity with the Vietnamese people and, in particular, with the women of Vietnam”—by which was meant North Vietnam. If the absence of any references to the WSM in antiwar archives tells us anything, it is that the North American women’s organization pledged solidarity, not with Madame Nhu and her movement, but instead with her opponents among the VWU.

Transpacific Allies: Motherhood and Militarism, 1965-1975

As early as 1965, as US military involvement in Vietnam escalated with Operation Rolling Thunder, the symbol of Vietnamese women struck a resounding chord among prominent US activists from organizations within the women’s movement. Representatives from antiwar organizations, most prominently Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and Voice of Women (VoW), traveled to Vietnam at Hanoi’s invitation to see the impact of the war firsthand. During these exercises in “radical tourism”—Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s evocative term for the excursions, though
they also involved liberal and not only radical activists— the visitors met with groups who were affected by the violence, including embattled women who shared their tales of suffering and endurance.

These tours were also photographed. In 1972, displays of the ruins of Bach Mai hospital, in North Vietnam’s capital city of Hanoi, provided a persuasive rejoinder to the US military’s denials that civilian sites were bombed. The presence of Vietnamese photographers implied that it was not enough for visitors to witness; they had to be seen doing so (fig. 3.11). Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, who led the Hanoi-based Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), assured activists he understood that the visitors lacked influence over Washington and the Pentagon. The highly visible nature of these encounters, however, suggests that the DRV hoped that activists could shape public opinion, if not sway official policy. Because these northern guides showed sites to sympathetic international visitors that revealed the war's brutal impact on the most innocent—particularly on women and children—the tourists came away with the impression of Vietnamese misery in the face of unjust aggression. Vietnamese photographers and their international guests collaborated in producing a picture of women at war by dwelling on their suffering. This overall picture emphasized motherhood and family, themes meant to tug on the heartstrings of visitors, many of whom were also wives and mothers. In this context, the Vietnamese hosts drew on a maternal discourse to nurture a sense of sisterhood; women were revolutionary when they mobilized as mothers. A newspaper, published in English by the VWU, marked the occasion of International Children’s Day by conveying this emphatic message: “In the name of all Vietnamese mothers, we extend our sincere gratitude to mothers and children-loving people the world over for their support of our just struggle. This support contributes to drawing closer the day when the innocent children of Vietnam will again know peace and
happiness.” The VNA International Service reinforced this familial appeal, proclaiming that, “The Vietnamese women have become a shock brigade of the international movement of women and children.”

This appeal to universal experience accords with what Elizabeth Armstrong describes as a solidarity of commonality, which is based on human rights. Armstrong distinguishes this approach from what she describes as a solidarity of complicity, defined as a stance of resistance to oppression and power imbalances between women, particularly those that arise through colonial violence. Armstrong’s framework for solidarity sheds light on the VWU’s strategy; the organization sought solidarity of commonality when it emphasized the human rights of mothers to nurture and protect their children from the violence of war. For the VWU, solidarity of commonality offered a promising step toward encouraging North American women to engage in solidarity of complicity, which required a deeper commitment to anticolonial resistance.

When their tours wrapped up, the visitors returned to the US and Canada where they participated in speaking tours across North America, occasions that enabled them to show photographs that they had taken or been given and share stories about their journey. For example, issues of Vietnamese Women Today are included in the papers of US feminist Charlotte Bunch, a prominent Women Strike for Peace (WSP) member. Published by the VWU, this illustrated pamphlet includes photographs credited to Mai Nam and other communist photographers, which presented a different side of women’s roles during the war than the ones the activists encountered on their tours.

In contrast to images of suffering victims that these visitors saw in Hanoi, the pamphlets featured workers and warriors who exemplified the militarism of Vietnamese women, a reversal of the VNA strategy of appealing to pacifism and a seeming affront to antiwar sensibilities. How
did antiwar activists reconcile what they saw, the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman as a girl with a gun, with what the liberal feminists of this movement believed about the moral rectitude of pacifism? How could solidarity of commonality, based on human rights, be established in the face of this symbol of violence?

Although the liberal members of the North American women’s movement during this period were aware of this martial strand of Vietnamese revolution, they chose to overlook it in favor of a message they found more palatable. Several contradictions were at play here. On the one hand, the martial form of the symbol captivated the popular imagination, no doubt because of taboos about representing American women as warriors. (During this time, American women served in the military primarily to provide care as nurses or secretaries and were not permitted to carry or fire weapons.) On the other hand, this martial vision of revolution posed a problem for a prominent liberal wing of the North American women’s movement. The fact that Vietnamese women went to war unsettled liberal beliefs about women’s ostensibly “natural” pacifism, which members of the radical Left were also starting to unsettle. Sociologist Jennifer Carlson refers to this liberal belief as an ideological “pacifist presumption” that blinds proponents to women’s decision to take up arms in defense of “martial maternalism.”

Undeterred by these discordances, almost immediately after the first contingent of foreign visitors to Hanoi returned to the United States, WSP members sought to bring this message of solidarity with Vietnamese women to North America. Organizers began planning an international conference, with the WSP in collaboration with Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Voice of Women (VoW), and the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), an official arm of what today is known as the Vietnamese Communist Party. The conference provided a means for Vietnamese women to tell their stories directly, to enrich the
secondary accounts provided by North American visitors to Vietnam, at the same time that it offered opportunities to broadcast their image further, through carefully orchestrated performances of revolutionary femininity and through the production of images of this performance.

This planning culminated in the 1969 arrival of a delegation of Vietnamese women from the North and the liberated areas of the South, including Madame Nguyễn Ngọc Dung (Executive, Student Liberation Movement), Madame Lê Thị Cao (Teacher, Catholic Member of National Liberation Party), and Tri Văn An (interpreter). This delegation embarked on a whirlwind tour of sites in Canada. Besides, organizers reasoned, the State Department would almost certainly reject the delegates’ visa applications, since they hailed from countries with which the US was at war, albeit undeclared. So, although Canada played only a minor role in the global Cold War, its proximity to the US, its seeming innocuousness, and its appeal as a haven for American draft dodgers, made it an ideal base to broker peace. Organizers accordingly selected sites close the US border so that American participants could easily join the events, namely North Hatley, Quebec (close to Vermont), and Niagara Falls, as well as Toronto, where a conference on women took place at the University of Toronto. Toronto was an ideal venue, moreover, because many draft resisters established themselves there at the time, making the city a hotbed of Left activism.

Niagara Falls was especially important, because it enabled the organizers a chance to stage a spectacle meant to dramatize what WSP leader Cora Weiss called a “border incident,” with Vietnamese delegates on the Canadian side of the border and busloads of Americans on the US side. Spectacles, however, require an audience; Weiss and her fellow organizers were disappointed by the limited press coverage of the event, and had to settle for stories affirming
the ideal of transnational harmony that they placed in movement newsletters. A group of American women marched across the Rainbow Bridge, symbolically overcoming the physical, psychical, and ideological distance between the US, Canada, and Vietnam. Likewise, photographs of the delegation returned to this theme of motherhood. Significantly, one of the most prominent American participants at the conference, Jane Spock, a passionate antiwar activist who offered an apology to the Vietnamese delegates on behalf of the US, was continually identified, as was then customary, as the wife of Benjamin Spock, a pediatrician and best-selling author of books on childcare who was also a prominent member of the movement. Indeed, photographs of the tour captured the Vietnamese visitors regarding and embracing the children of participants and exchanging photographs of these encounters (fig. 3.12).

Although the WSP deliberately invoked this maternal discourse, it was hardly forced on the delegation. The Vietnamese visitors were not just aware of the terms on which their appeal for solidarity would be most sympathetically heard; they also self-consciously adopted these terms. Significantly, in her plenary address at the 1969 Toronto conference, Madame Dung drew explicitly on maternal rhetoric to connect to her audience, explaining that:

Our love for our children have [sic] helped us to do the things that seemed to be impossible to do. The whole population in the country have [sic] praised our women because they have done everything that seemed to be impossible. We have come here with some feeling of the Vietnamese wives and mothers’ love for children. We think American mothers have the same feeling and that feeling gives the same strength as we have.50

Following the success of this tour, members of the WSP began planning for a follow-up event consisting of a more ambitious set of back-to-back conferences, raising funds through a
collection drive and donations. This second conference took place in 1971, in Vancouver and Toronto, sites that were selected to accommodate participants from both coasts. Unlike the 1969 conference, for the 1971 events the WSP and VOW collaborated with different women’s groups, including Third World, Bread and Roses, black radicals, and Canadian site volunteers, among many others, in organizing the dual events. That this collaboration was less than harmonious attests to the difficulty of achieving solidarity—a problem that the delegates themselves faced.

At this later conference, the Vietnamese women were to share the stage with representatives from Laos and Cambodia, a gesture intended to highlight two intersecting forms of solidarity, between Indochinese women and between these women and their North American allies. At the same time, an inter-Asian framework offered insight on the war as a battleground that conscripted more than just American and Vietnamese people. Part of the global Cold War, this proxy conflict spilled beyond Vietnam’s borders and extended into neighboring Laos and Cambodia. By emphasizing Indochinese solidarity in this way, the organizers acknowledged the political groundwork that Southeast Asian women had already laid out independently from, even as in so doing they sought allies among, North American women.

Ironically, the North American conference participants’ eagerness to proclaim alliances with Southeast Asian women obscured the delicate grounds of inter-Asian solidarity. Tellingly, the fact that Cambodian delegates were forced to withdraw from the conferences due to logistical problems (the official explanation) that most likely arose from political turmoil in their country further exposed the fragility of their alliance.51 In 1970, as organizers were putting this event in motion, a coup resulted in the removal of Prince Sihounak as Head of State in Cambodia, an event widely seen as a turning point in the Cambodian Civil War, which ultimately led that same year to the proclamation of the Khmer Republic led by Lon Nol.52 The circulation of the symbol
of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman cannot be disentangled from the broader global Cold War context. Impacted by the global Cold War’s geopolitical realignments, the framework for Indochinese women’s solidarity was shifting and, at best, unstable (no less than it was for the delicately negotiated alliance between the VWU and North American liberal feminists). Moreover, although the delegates momentarily found common ground, it was not on equal terms; the admission card at the Vancouver conference featured a reproduction of Mai Nam’s now famous photograph of a Vietnamese militiawoman as emblem of the overall proceedings. This decision reveals a visible hierarchy, with the Vietnamese delegates receiving greater attention than their fellow Laotian participants. Indeed, the spotlight on Vietnamese women overshadowed Laotian and Cambodian perspectives so much that participants hardly seemed to miss the third group when its representatives were forced to drop out.

For their part, numerous groups from within the North American women’s movement were drawn to the symbol of the revolutionary woman. These groups included not just the more established VoW and WSP, but also organizations that pioneered intersectional approaches between gender, race, class, and sexuality, including such organizations as Third World, the Chicana/o labor group, Bread and Roses, and the Black Panther Party, among others. So important was the image of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman for the second conference that she was the very currency on which fund-raising efforts were based: organizers sold copies of a blown-up portrait of the most famous revolutionary leader, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, for $2 (fig. 3.13).

In her role as an internationally recognized leader, Madame Binh sought indirectly to avoid tensions by reconciling the Vietnamese women’s vision of revolution, which allowed for violence, with the pacifist maternalism emphasized by the liberal wing of the North American
women’s movement. In a film distributed by the WSP, Madame Binh told her audience to “please take the place of the Vietnamese mothers and wives who are faced by the sight of their homeland devastated each day by thousands of tons of bombs, and who undergo themselves unspeakable suffering and hardships together with their relatives and dear ones.” Despite her considerable political power, as Foreign Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) who negotiated on its behalf at the Paris Peace Talks—a position of leadership that, alongside that of Nguyễn Thị Định, founding member of and general in the National Liberation Front, surpassed any public role that North American women held at the time—she broached the promise of revolution by invoking a now familiar maternal rhetoric. Just as importantly, the liberal women’s organizations that turned to Madame Binh for inspiration expected her to voice this maternal rhetoric, as they did when it came to the Vietnamese delegation that visited Canada. In short, for Madame Binh her experiences as a mother strengthened her revolutionary resolve, or so she suggested in her carefully pitched message. Madame Binh ended her address to the WSP, however, with a less palatable message to her pacifist audience: “I am sure that you will do just the same as we are doing now.” Though she did not explain exactly what it is that Vietnamese women are doing, there is little doubt she alludes to their militarism. For Madame Binh, militarism and motherhood went hand-in-hand: motherhood, whether its promise or actuality, compelled women to go to war. No one exemplifies this martial maternalism more vividly than Nguyễn Thị Út, the quintessential woman with a gun profiled in communist propaganda documents as an exemplary revolutionary worthy of emulation. In a photograph displayed at the Women’s Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, she is portrayed flanked by her children, nursing her child with one arm, and with the other arm, brandishing a rifle.
Although Madame Bình’s own wartime contribution was as a diplomat rather than a soldier, her sacrifices cannot be discounted. Madame Bình’s work for the PRG took her away from her children, from whom she would be separated for years at a time. She asserted, however, that she willingly endured this hardship for the sake of family and nation. Although her “nom de guerre” of Bình (her real name is Nguyễn Châu Sa) means peace so as to underscore her diplomatic role, she nevertheless did not eschew war as a means toward a revolutionary end. Madame Bình tenderly wrapped the message of military necessity in the soothing folds of maternity, even as she insisted that these conditions where not mutually exclusive as the pacifists would have it. As historian Helen Anderson puts it, Vietnamese women were “fighting for family.”

Yet the coalition of women’s movement members organized the 1971 Indochinese for purposes, which, significantly, were allied with and yet distinct from that of Madame Bình. And within this coalition, trouble was brewing. WSP historian Arlene Eisen admits that, “Some of us who participated in the anti-war movement tended to romanticize aspects of the Vietnamese revolution. We created an image to meet our own needs...to confirm and legitimize our feminist goals.” Meanwhile, the Vietnamese delegates also had their own reasons for participating, which did not harmonize with their hosts’ designs. In a memo to her co-organizers, WSP representative Trudi Yung conveyed the concerns of Phan Thị An, the head of the Vietnam Women’s Union in Hanoi, as well as the objectives that this organization prioritized. In the memo, Yung noted that Phan Thị An “wanted to make sure we understood that although they were very happy to talk about the struggle of women and their role, they wanted us to keep in mind the framework of ending the war, and that we should be thinking about women’s liberation in relation to this goal.” This brief note suggests that members of the Vietnam Women’s Union
understood the significance of women’s emancipation for their allies among the North American women’s movement—and perceived how their own goal of national liberation contrasted with that of their sisters, even as they sought to align these two objectives. Between 1965 and 1971, the liberal wing of the North American women’s movement shaped the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman into a maternal form compatible with its pacifist mission.

At the same time, paradoxically, North American feminists found the revolutionary Vietnamese woman a compelling symbol because it provided cultural capital for women’s emancipation, a cause that was then more reformist than revolutionary, according to Agatha Beins. In her study of feminist periodicals published in the US, Beins shows that, at times, the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman illustrated stories as a means of countering New Left and mainstream discourses that trivialized the women’s movement. By incorporating this symbol into newspapers such as Distaff, Sister, and Ain’t I A Woman, these organizations “appropriated the bodies of radical others, romanticizing and exoticizing women’s lives and struggles,” to confer substance and edge to the journals’ respective concerns. The cause of feminism, dismissed by misogynists in the New Left and by the mainstream media alike as insignificant became revolutionary by association with the antiwar cause and through solidarity with the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman. Put simply, Vietnamese women lent a revolutionary luster to the cause of North American women’s emancipation. This function helps explain how textual explanations of the symbol, which emphasized seemingly universal themes of maternal care, complemented rather than contradicted the visual form of this symbol, which militarized motherhood. Textual interpretations of the symbol of revolutionary Vietnamese women helped render the violence palatable and more serviceable to the needs of North American feminism movements.
As radical voices within the women’s movement in North America gained prominence, the militaristic thread of revolution would take on greater significance, though for reasons that were, ironically, no more congruent with Vietnamese goals for national liberation. Though radical feminists in North America sought inspiration in the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman, this did not mean that these Western-based feminists championed the VWU’s goals. And yet, though they vied for the meaning of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman so that this competition amounted to a warring vision, these organizations in the US and North Vietnam managed to establish an uneasy form of solidarity.

Meanwhile, the events meant to solidify solidarity for the anti-imperialist struggles ironically exposed rifts within the women’s movement, which would widen from the mid- to late 1970s. Radical feminists who expressed gestures of solidarity during 1971-1975 broke ranks with the predominantly pacifist women of the liberal wing of the movement, who first advocated on behalf of Vietnamese women's liberation, by embracing the militaristic aspects of revolution. This is not to say Vietnamese women invented this figure of martial maternalism; in the case of the Black Panthers, African American men and women portrayed themselves with guns as a visually powerful rhetoric of violence, part of a strategy to express dissent against state violence. At the same time, black radicals, situating their antiracist activism as more than just local politics, aligned their antiracism with Third World anticolonialism. Illustrations of revolutionary Vietnamese women, drawn by well-known artist Emory Douglas, appeared in the Black Panther newsletter. These illustrations attest to the international context with which black radicals construed their struggles. Indeed, Vietnam Pictorial included on its 1973 cover a signed photograph one of the most famous of these activists, Angela Davis, meeting with a young revolutionary recruit, a decision that suggests that the Vietnamese consumed images as avidly as
they produced them (fig. 3.14). Moreover, this cover reveals the North Vietnamese state’s sophisticated understanding of the international context of black radical activism across dispersed sites. Signed by Davis in red, looping cursive, the photograph includes a dedication: “In the spirit of our eternal unity and our determination to bring U.S. imperialism to its knees throughout the world,” which she apparently wrote from Berlin, where she was then based—a location that gestures toward other circuits for visual exchange. (In addition to the transpacific route that I trace here, another crucial circuit appears to be the Eastern bloc.62) Intriguingly, the inclusion of the photograph of a meeting between a revolutionary Black woman and a youthful recruit on the cover the DRV’s flagship illustrated magazine signifies intergenerational and inter-racial solidarity. When it comes to the symbol of the revolutionary woman, Vietnamese editors understood that it was not enough merely to be seen. They also had to look and position how they saw in relation to a “socialist” perspective, which was not necessarily congruent with what I have been describing as socialist ways of seeing Vietnam.

At the Indochinese Women’s Conference in 1971, however, a different contest took shape. Feminist historians have documented the grievances that groups committed to lesbian, antiracist, and labor activism launched against the predominantly white organizers, whom they accused of restricting access to the Vietnamese and Laotian delegates.63 Black Power groups demanded more time with the delegates; Third World groups insisted on a media blackout, for fear of state infiltration and surveillance; lesbian collectives laid out many of these charges in their Fourth World Manifesto; the Canadian site committee attacked the American members of the WSP as cultural imperialists; and in Vancouver, yet another group staged a piece of guerrilla theatre that enacted these critiques.64 Amidst the din of all these dissenting voices, it is easy to forget why, exactly, they had bothered to gather together. Yet despite their rancor, each of these
groups wanted to claim the symbol of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman for their own cause, but not necessarily for the purposes of national liberation that the delegates themselves advocated. Although organizers of the Indochinese Women’s Conference strictly limited visual coverage of the event to Third World activists, who raised the alarm about potential state infiltration, an attendee named Jean Hobson managed to get her picture taken with some of the Vietnamese delegates. When she later went on to make an ultimately failed bid for local office in Palo Alto, California as head of Venceremos, a Chicano political organization, her campaign newsletter featured a photograph of her posing with one of the Vietnamese delegates. Although this delegate does not bear arms in the portrait, Venceremos clearly sought to associate its radicalism with the militarism implicit in the revolutionary women’s commitment to people’s war and total war. Through her visual association with Vietnamese revolutionary, Hobson sought to legitimize the militancy of Venceremos. That is, the Vietnamese revolutionary woman became an emblem for radical movements with their own political aims; she helped usher in a Third World sense of solidarity and further nuance the concept of global sisterhood. The Indochinese Women’s Conference in 1971 was organized to build transpacific solidarities. But, as with the earlier conference in 1969, these solidarities were laid, more often than not, on the shifting yet fertile grounds of projection, misinterpretation, and reinvention—a set of productively varied visual exchanges that I describe here as “misrecognition.” By invoking the concept of misrecognition, I do not mean to suggest that the VWU’s version of this symbol offers the true essence of Vietnamese revolutionary women, but rather that this version was seen and also not seen by feminist allies in North America, who reinterpreted this symbol for different purposes.

Beyond the US, the symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman also proved useful in signifying revolution more broadly in accord with local concerns, as evident in the visual
connections drawn with allies such as Cuba. Notably, Palestinian resistance groups adapted this symbol to promote their cause, according to Evyn Lê Espiritu. Whereas in 1971, the spotlight shone on Vietnamese delegates at the Indochinese Women’s Conferences in Canada sidelined the Laotian representatives, Palestinian freedom fighters saw in the international fascination with the war in Vietnam an opportunity to attract attention to their then less visible struggles. In the case of the Iranian revolution, feminists adapted this symbol of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the end of the American war in Vietnam, Donya Ziaee points out, but ultimately abandoned it, after realizing that socialists in Iran only paid lip service to the cause of women’s emancipation and in ways that desexualized feminist activists. Socialist ways of seeing, as broached through Vietnamese eyes, only briefly resonated with Iranian socialism before feminists rejected this incarnation of the revolutionary woman as inadequate for representing their political struggles. Although this brief summary provides only a rough sketch of the dispersed routes that this symbol traveled, the two examples from Iran and Palestine gesture toward its influence beyond the immediate cause of national liberation in Vietnam, beyond, even, the end of the war in Vietnam. The rapprochement between these women’s organizations in North and Central America, the Middle East, and doubtless other sites further afield, challenges the critical commonplace that insists on recognition as the basis for coalitions and considers misrecognition to spell its end. As these examples show, rather than sabotaging solidarity, misrecognition operates as “friction,” in Anna Tsing’s sense of the term, as the basis of solidarity, though the exact type of solidarity, commonality or complicity, was often uncertain. In the hands of activists championing causes that, in some cases, had taken up anticolonial resistance in different ways than in Vietnam, the figure of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman helped bring “local” concerns to public light and international attention,
though in contexts where gender and sexuality were defined in ways far removed from the Vietnamese context.

As symbol with multiple permutations, the revolutionary Vietnamese woman, then, emerged from different parts of Vietnam and circulated beyond Vietnam in the name of solidarity in a manner that sought affiliation and yet provoked tension with US models of feminist activism—but also independent from these other models. The story of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman and the transformation of this symbolic figure as she traveled internationally offer salutary lessons about feminism and internationalism. Studies about struggles for women’s rights tend to unfold “under Western eyes,” according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who coined this memorable phrase in her famous critique of the dominant perspective’s myopia, which she excoriates for erasing the specificity of local struggles and the agency of Third World women.68 One might say that Western eyes find what they are looking for; in the case of the liberal members of the North American women’s movement, members saw in the revolutionary Vietnamese woman the opportunity to shape this symbol in a way that advanced and legitimized their pacifist platform. Tracing the transpacific circulation of this figure, however, illuminates the subtle yet substantive ways that Third World women looked back, shaping this figure in full understanding and strategic anticipation of possible misrecognition. A triangulated perspective provides the means to take up Elizabeth Armstrong’s call for a new chronotope of women’s internationalism, one that takes account of multiple routes of projection and influence.69 This perspective attends not only to how Western eyes saw, but also how Third World women presented themselves and how they wished to be seen.

National Liberation and Postwar Women’s Emancipation
The Vietnamese communist party was ultimately able to shape the most influential version of this symbol of the revolutionary woman, despite or rather perhaps because its version was flexible enough to absorb and work with the challenges posed by misinterpretation. In Vietnam, through the auspices of the VWU, the state continues to claim the legacy of women’s struggles—to render orderly what Ann Marie Leshkowich describes as the “disorderly” category of Vietnamese woman—through memorials that emphasize the strength and resilience of the militarized mother, a particularly potent version of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman. In 1994, the state began recognizing women’s sacrifices, by selecting elderly women for distinction as Heroic Mothers. Women who had lost two or more children to the war were honored and awarded modest monthly pensions.

In the Hanoi Women’s Museum, display cases feature honorific portraits that, in effect, deify these Heroic Mothers (fig. 3.15). In the Southern Women’s Museum, in Ho Chi Minh City, a plaster statue repeats the theme of militarized motherhood that photographs made during the war introduced: an unnamed heroine carries her child while balancing on her rifle, which she has placed firmly on the ground (fig. 3.16). The rifle is the base that enables her both to balance herself and bear the weight of her child. Motherhood, the statue suggests, can best be defended through militarism. At the same museum, another statue stands at attention with her rifle at her back and children in her arms (fig. 3.17). In the north, at the Hanoi Women’s Museum, a statue in the main entrance further glorifies this theme with a gilded statue of a mother and child, this time rendered in larger-than-life size proportions, a magnification of earlier photographic visions (Fig. 3.17). Another major difference is that we see no sign of a rifle. Indeed, the rifle is unnecessary, for the gold statue celebrates women's liberation on the occasion of revolutionary
victory. The struggle for women’s rights seems to have ended with the successful liberation and reunification of the nation.

Whereas, during the war, the communist party rallied women by promising to champion their rights, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the name of the reunified state established in 1976, subsequently boasted the fulfillment of this promise. This triumphant message, however, is belied by persistent inequalities at all levels: economic, political, educational, and social. In her landmark oral history of the women who fought in the war, Sandra Taylor details the ways that the communist state reneged on its promise of women’s rights. These women, who fought for the ideal of family and for their chance to nurture their own families returned to find themselves unmarriageable and thus deemed of low social status, whether because they were past childbearing years or because they were physically scarred from the war. Women contributed much and sacrificed even more to the people’s war. Yet the problem, according to Taylor, was the very framing of the revolution as a people’s war, which absorbed the fight for women’s rights so that victory in the former enabled the Vietnamese state to cease—and attempt to foreclose further struggle—in the latter. In 1995, Madame Binh addressed an audience at a three-day workshop on women, and stated bluntly, “Equality of women has basically only existed in documents.” During the war she was the proud embodiment of socialist progress on women’s emancipation only to be disappointed by substantial setbacks after the end of the war. Though she was the most prominent PRG leader, the state disregarded her fourteen years of experience in diplomacy, instead granting her the post of Minister of Education, because women presumably have a “natural” aptitude for nurturing young minds.

To this day, according to historian Nhung Tuyet Tran, there is no Vietnamese word for feminism, though there are terms for principles such as gender equality, rights, and so on.
According to Nhung, the state has co-opted women’s rights, in effect, declaring them as objectives already achieved and not goals to work toward. I would also add that the state has done so by reproducing and, in effect, sanctifying the symbol of the revolutionary woman, at least in her incarnation as maternal symbol of the triumphant merging of socialist revolution and women’s liberation. Today the struggle for these rights continues, though there is little sign of that in state-funded museums. If, during the war, the symbol of revolutionary Vietnamese women held out the hope for advancing these rights, now the state has thoroughly absorbed this symbol as evidence of progress, which, in fact, has yet to be fully realized. Instead, the state has reshaped the symbol of revolutionary women in the postwar years as part of a rhetoric of progress promised to women during and ostensibly achieved because of the war. To judge by the statues that have taken up the visual narrative that war photographs left off, this progress is so great as to obviate the need for militancy at all; no longer do girls or women bear arms. The state narrative instead extolls their liberation and so these official symbols depict a “post”-revolutionary period as a mother bearing a child in her arms. Having successfully fought for family, as the historian Helen Anderson puts it, the state now represents the fulfillment of Vietnamese women’s emancipation as a celebration of family. A socialist way of seeing revolutionary women entails, then, overlooking the revolutionary promises made in her name and image.

Notes to Chapter Three

1 See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999). For critiques of this claim about visual culture’s transhistorical qualities, see Xiaobing Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Andrea


4 Sandra Taylor surmises that the term was first used to describe Madam Nguyễn Thị Định. See "The Long-Haired Warriors," ft 22, 187; 182. Another reference to the origin of the term can be found in Định’s memoir, *No Other Road to Take*. However, Mary Ann Tétreault writes that the Diem regime coined the term "the long-haired Army." See *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World* (121).

5 Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).


8 Tsing, *Frictions*.


13 Transcript of Ho Chi Minh’s address to the VWU Meeting, October 1966.

14 Đính, *No Other Road to Take*, 150.


16 Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, “Law and Harmony” (Hoover Institute, Stanford University).

17 See, for example, a well-known LIFE magazine cover featuring Madame Nhu. [http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19630809,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19630809,00.html) Accessed May 30, 2018.

Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, “In the Face of Hate,” *Vietnam Courier*, March 21, 1963. The cadres were to receive a pay of 1800 piastres per month, which American intelligence officers considered high in contrast to the 900 piastres that Self-Defense Corpsmen received, but which Madame Nhu thought to be a modest amount in defense of the republic. Given widespread perception that corruption was rampant during the Diem regime, Madame Nhu’s bean counting was meant to allay suspicions about how her pet project was to be funded, and to legitimize this project as a fully autonomous and cost-effective national defense strategy.

20 Department of State Dispatch, July 15, 1960. A Department of State representative later commented that, “By nature Madame Nhu does not mix easily with the common people. For example, in the afternoon of March 22, she distributed prizes to a number of women and girls, but her manner was rather cool and aloof and unlikely to win political support for herself or the Ngô family (Despatch No. 437, March 22, 1961), 3.

21 According to John J. Heible, “At any rate, the short 76 hour training course and the lack of weapons for the new group seem to foreshadow a record of ineffectiveness for the women in the face of any Viet Cong threat. It would probably be more useful to spend the time and money in orienting them on some subject as first aid.” John J. Heible, American Consul, August 6, 1962.

22 “First Lady Leading Movement in Defiance of Viet Cong Terrorism” (Hoover International Archives).

23 In this regard, she was progressive on women’s rights, though in an inconsistent way that lagged behind the Vietnamese Communist Party. When she banned nightclubs, the press mocked her Catholic prudery. But, shortly after the Diem regime fell [with the CIA-backed assassination
of her husband and brother-in-law], her fears about the moral costs of US support seemed to be realized. By 1963, Saigon had plunged into militarized decadence with flourishing bars, nightclubs, red-light districts, and a thriving sex industry that exploited the desperation of impoverished women. Transcript of Madame Nhu address to WSM, Aug. 3, 1963, Dept. of State telegram.

24 In comparison, the practice of paid maternity leave did not become enforced in US federal law until 1993, with states presiding over cases. By contrast, in Canada, the federal government amended the Canada Labour Code in 1971, to protect maternity leave benefits.


27 Department of State Outgoing Telegram, June 9, 1962.

28 Department of State Telegram #214; Aug. 29, 1962.


30 Nhu, “In the Face of Hate.”


There is no question that this number is inflated. Ambassador Joseph A. Mendenhall noted that, “While there is….a theoretical possibility of a Woman’s Paramilitary Force of 216,000, practical difficulties will probably prevent there being more than a few thousand in existence by the end of 1962.” Department of State, Foreign Dispatch #346, February 23, 1962. In “Stimulated Apostles of Peace,” Madame Nhu claimed that there were 1,127,000 active members, “in addition to an infinite number of associate members” (March 1963).


Nhu, “Stimulated Apostles of Peace.”

Tzu-Chun Wu, Radicals on the Road. The term “radical tourist” is not wholly accurate, however, as some of the visitors were more liberal than radical.


40 Armstrong, “Before Bandung.”


42 See, for example, Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

43 At the same time, on the radical Left, images of women as warriors would have been somewhat familiar, given, for example, the vaunted status of women in the Cuban revolution, the fame of militant activist Angela Davis, and the notorious activities of the Weathermen, which suggests they would not have found the Vietnamese symbol of the revolutionary woman to be as discordant as the peace activists did.

44 Although Jennifer Carlson’s study of the reasons that conservative Caucasian women embrace guns focuses on the current context of so-called postfeminism in the US, this fundamental tension between pacifist presumption and martial maternalism resonates with the earlier Vietnam-war period. See Jennifer Carlson, Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On women and militarism, see Cynthia Enloe, Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

45 The Vietnam Women’s Union took several different forms in the course of the twentieth century. The organization traces its origins to the Anti-Imperialist Women’s Association, which emerged in 1930; became the Democratic Women’s Association in 1936; the Liberation Women’s Association in 1939; and the National Salvation Women’s League in 1941 before merging with other groups to become what today is known as the Vietnam Women’s Union in

46 See, for example, Robert Teigrob, *Warming up to the Cold War: Canada and United States’ Coalition of the Willing, from Hiroshima to Korea* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Reginald Whitaker and Steve Hewitt, *Canada and the Cold War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2003).


48 Cora Weiss’s letter to NCC on behalf of the NY Steering Committee, May 6, 1969. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.


50 A transcript of Madame Dưng’s speech can be found in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
American organizers who offered this explanation for the absence of Cambodian delegates, did not, however, elaborate on the nature of these problems.

Though the Cambodian delegates did not appear to provide a clear explanation for their withdrawal from the conference, the organizers delicately worded notes suggest that this context was the likely cause.

By the mid-1970s, the communist bloc had started to unravel, with border skirmishes between Vietnam and Cambodia intensifying into outright war that would culminate in the Vietnamese invasion of Phnom Penh and overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in December 1978.

Excerpted transcript of Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình speaking to American women from an October 1970 film made available through Women Strike for Peace, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.


See Swarthmore College Peace Collection.


63 See, for example, Mary Ann Tétreault, “Women and Revolution in Vietnam,” in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*, ed. Mary Ann Tétreault (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 111-136. For a comprehensive history of maternalism as a discourse among female antiwar activists, see Amy Swerdlow, “‘Not My Son, Not Your

Arguably, the harshest indictment of the conference can be found in a document titled “The Fourth World Manifesto.” In this document, the unnamed author, who aligned herself with a group called the Autonomous Women’s Liberation Movement, insisted, “We do not feel that we have to concede to these women [the organizers] the title of anti-imperialist since we strongly feel that they themselves are acting as colonial-native (female) administrators for the male-defined Left in relationship to other women – in this case especially to Women’s Liberation women.” Fourth World Manifesto, p. 1. Schlesinger Library.


Phu, Espiritu, and Ziaee, “Vietnamese Revolutionary Women.”


Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War.*


Anderson, “Fighting for Family.”