

Women Against Imperialism Oral History Project Statement

The Women Against Imperialism Oral History project historicizes the work of Women Against Imperialism (WAI), a grassroots activist collective whose work exemplifies both feminist coalition politics, and radical reinventions of subjectivity that can be produced in social movements. Active in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area from 1981 until 1996, this group of self-identified anti-imperialist women emerged from the women's caucus of the Bay Area chapter of the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee—itsself an outgrowth of the Weather Underground Organization. WAI worked within and between a diverse array of revolutionary internationalist, antiracist, and feminist movements to create hundreds of political events, including meetings, study groups, marches, demonstrations, campaigns, and cultural projects. To forge connections with women's organizations in liberation struggles across the decolonizing world, WAI created local and regional networks, and traveled internationally, making deep and lasting relationships, and forming models for enacting solidarity. In doing so, they produced a transnational web of relations that included anti-imperialist activists from Palestine, Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Philippines, Central America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and beyond.

Their work was local and regional, as well as global. In partnership with related feminist, antiracist and anti-imperialist groups, they organized International Women's Day demonstrations each year in San Francisco; offered support for political prisoners in the U.S.; campaigned against the repression of political dissent and the expansion of incarceration and criminalization; supported and promoted movements for decolonization and racial justice regionally and nationally; performed direct action at U.S. military sites, state offices, and corporate outlets; mobilized in collaboration with ACT-UP and related radical queer organizations; helped to start the San Francisco Dyke March; and vigorously participated in the feminist politics of securing and defending abortion access, promoting women's health initiatives in a reproductive justice framework, while formulating coalitional lesbian feminism. In short, the legacy of their work is momentous—and yet, like many other anti-imperialist feminist projects—it is almost entirely absent from historical records of feminist, queer, and related social movement activism.

This oral history project is dedicated to the former members of Women Against Imperialism and their fellow travelers, to the social movements from which this group emerged and those to which it contributed—it is meant to honor the past of these movements, to fortify their present, and to inspire and help to shape their future. Grassroots social movements take great effort to invest in the study of activist history and in producing lived relations with liberatory movements from the past, in part because such movements are often excluded, marginalized or mischaracterized in official histories. Such movements tend to lack the resources to produce and promote knowledge of their past in the public sphere. Indeed, the histories of such

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movements are under constant threat of erasure, while the movements themselves are mobilized under duress. Responding to this pattern, the Women Against Imperialism Oral History Project restores an archive of anti-imperialist feminism, asserting value and visibility for a politics that flourishes even while it is under attack, revealing a history which is understudied and which is often overtly or covertly censored.

Drawing on participants' recollections, this work explores public protest, intra-group and cross-movement dynamics, internal organizational structure, lived experience, and the sphere of the intimate—including the horizontal relationships, experiences of homemaking, and childrearing practices enacted in WAI and Prairie Fire, contextualized in the socioeconomic conditions in which they took shape. WAI activism was produced through networks of relation, as members brought ideologies of socialist politics and lesbian feminism “home” through practices including collective housing, painstaking negotiation of “chosen family,” shared childrearing organized through “childcare teams,” and commitment to caregiving, including eldercare and sick care in the AIDS epidemic and other public health crises. Their feminist praxis was shaped by transnational and transregional processes in tension with local circumstances. Their recollections, as gathered in this oral history, suggest possibilities for transformative, embodied practices that prefigure more just and liberatory arrangements of social life.

In addition to providing a resource for scholar-activists, this archive contributes to the academic study of social movements, and asserts the importance of the knowledge produced by these movements for the contemporary study of society. As an academic resource, the archive produced through this project contributes to numerous fields for critical study, including transnational American Studies with an emphasis on cultural studies of social movement history, and the growing field of scholarly investigation into late 20th century antiracist and transnational feminisms. Through the method of oral history, this project is a resource for the analysis of feminist politics that emerged in the U.S. and transnationally in the late 20th century, emphasizing the oscillation of feminist rhetoric between the famous feminist merging of the “personal” with the political, and the production of models of antiracist and anti-imperialist feminisms that propose global visions of equality and liberation—of justice, and just peace. Indexing the meaning of internationalist solidarity and anti-racist, anticolonial politics to U.S. feminisms, the oral history of WAI helps scholars to theorize the relationship between identity politics, or “politics of location” as feminist activist practices and theories; raced, gendered, and sexual social formations; and antiracist, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist feminist “freedom dreams.”