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“Gita and Betty: An Internationalist Love Story”

Elisabeth Armstrong

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Love e3 Primitive Accumulation

By 1948 the central offices of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) had been running for over two years. Located in Paris, the post-war global city for antifascist organizing, WIDF staff enjoyed support from the pro-communist (PCF) government. By 1950, France’s central government had changed, their welcome worn thin. French police arrested Eugenie Cotton, the president of WIDF, for advocating that women should tear up their sons’ enlistment papers to fight against the Vietnamese liberation movement. By January, 1951, the WIDF offices moved to Berlin – the Berlin of the state-socialist German Democratic Republic, where WIDF stayed until 1991.

“It seems they are quite the aristocracy over there in Berlin,” wrote Gita Bannerji on July 1st, 1954.¹ Gita was a communist party member from India who worked at WIDF’s central offices between 1948 and 1952. Gita wrote her letter to another staff member from these early years: Betty Millard, a communist party member in the United States, who worked alongside her in Paris from 1949 to 1951. “But we may be pleased to remember that we did the primitive accumulation part,” Gita wrote. “Now we are again engaged in primitive accumulation.”² Gita’s primitive accumulation, along the grain of Rosa Luxemburg’s use of the term, described the process of creating value from something in its raw, unrealized form. In jest, Gita flipped the term on its head. Rather than referring to the profits capitalism requires from commodifying non-capitalist land, resources, and labor, Gita imagined a communist primitive accumulation that built valuable revolutionary movements from peoples’ scattered struggles against their oppression. Left feminist activism, that created movements in Paris, Kolkata, New York, to name just a few locations, built the women’s movement in these years.

Gita and Betty met at a WIDF conference in Budapest, Hungary, but they became close friends while working together in Paris. They shared a wry sense of humor and a keen eye for the absurd that emerges in Gita’s letters to Betty, and in Betty’s diary entries. They wrote to each other from 1950 until the 1980s. Their friendship, built from shared ethics and imaginary of what could be, reveals a largely unsung love story on the communist left. The love story between comrades in struggle is one vital piece; but the more poignant aspect is less triumphant, perhaps less instrumental in its telling. They gave each other joy, with the intimacy of their friendship in Europe. Their affection for each other lasted decades after they returned to the politically hostile soil of their countries of citizenship. They were lucky enough to have both kinds of love that sustained their activism; that is, their primitive accumulation, through fierce headwinds and devastating losses.

¹ Gita Bannerji, Letter to Betty Millard, July 1, 1954. Elizabeth Millard Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, US. Hereafter cited as Millard Collection, SSC.

² Ibid.

While in Paris, Gita and Betty supported the activism of WIDF's member organizations and their ninety-one million members and their organizations. Gita worked as part of WIDF's anticolonial International Preparatory Committee to build women's organizations in colonized regions of the world. She played a key role organizing the 1949 Asian Women's Conference, held in Beijing. Betty was the editor of the CPUSA journal *New Masses* for four years before arriving in Paris. For WIDF, she edited the English-language edition of its *Information Bulletin* that publicized international, regional and national campaigns for women's emancipation. Like Gita, Betty also created the scaffolding for WIDF's internationalism by collecting and sharing information about ongoing local campaigns of its member organizations for the *Bulletin* and their powerful solidarity campaigns. WIDF's primitive accumulation plumbed the soil of internationalism after the destruction of a planetary war. Gita's and Betty's work for WIDF strengthened old values of common worth, not as a hidden ore below humanity's surface, but as an affirmed commonality of vision and purpose. Even in the four years when WIDF was welcome in Paris, this work was hardscrabble in the wreckage that a fascist war left behind: of broken lives, destroyed communities, distrust and ongoing colonial occupation.

In 1950, both Gita and Betty coordinated WIDF's first international campaign for peace in Korea. Gita attended campaign organizational meetings across Europe, and Betty wrote press releases and speeches. WIDF framed the campaign in two ways. First, WIDF described women's activism as it forged a solidarity against US-led imperialist aggression, led by women from Korea, but also women from other colonized countries. Second, WIDF framed the campaign as a maternalist fight led by all women from imperialist and colonized nations against the use of their sons and husbands as cannon-fodder for war. The World Peace Council, co-founded in 1947 by Eugenie Cotton and other WIDF members, joined their campaign against the NATO forces and US military attack on North Korea to demand peace, self-determination, and an end to American occupation of the region. Working alongside their allies and state-socialist governments around the world, WIDF ultimately lost the campaign for a quick end to the assault. The occupation of South Korea remained in US-friendly governments and even to this day, with US military bases in the country.

The first UN-backed invasion began in April, 1950 when the United States launched a military attack on North Korea that continued for the next three years. By the end of the conflict, over 3 million Koreans were killed. In North Korea, civilians were half of the two million people killed. Over these three years, American planes dropped 635,000 tons of bombs and 32,557 tons of napalm on the country.³ By 1952, no military targets remained, but the onslaught continued until 1953. The WIDF campaign against the Korean War spanned women's activism around the world to frame peace as a women's issue. In the words of historian Suzy Kim, "socialist internationalism in the context of a global peace movement facilitated a productive understanding of *difference* – whether gendered, racial, ethnic, national or any other – toward a 'transversal' politics of solidarity as seen during the Korean War."⁴ The creativity and care of this transversal politics of solidarity was not enough to convince the

³ Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013): 244.

⁴ Suzy Kim, "The Origins of Cold War Feminism During the Korean War," *Gender and History*. 31:2(July 2019): 461.

United Nations to end its support. It was not enough to prevent breaking Korea into two antagonistic countries, to the enduring loss of them both.

The campaign against the Korean War was in full swing when both women returned to their homes in 1951. Without breaking stride, they carried their internationalist commitments back to their communist-led movements. Gita plunged into the activism of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS), the leftist women's organization in West Bengal, India; and Betty joined the American Women for Peace (AWP) in the United States. Both returned to fiercely creative left feminist movements and hostile central governments. In India, leftist women and men overturned old feudal orders through demands for universal land reform. Peasant women in remote areas in the states of Telengana, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Maharashtra attacked patriarchal relations of power in their demands for equal rights to own property, fair wages, literacy, an end to dowry payments, and the right to control their sexual autonomy.⁵ The CPUSA in the United States, in 1945 had returned to its radicalism of earlier decades, with black liberation, workers' movements and women's emancipation again at center stage.⁶ Charged with revisionism after he closed the CPUSA as a political party, Earl Browder was expelled in 1946. William Z. Foster returned to reconstitute the Party. In 1947, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Claudia Jones headed the newly-reconstituted Women's Commission. They fought black women's triple oppression in racially segregated job markets. Jones in particular emphasized the development of black women's leadership in all leftist struggles.⁷

Moneyed, powerful interests sought to muffle the revolutionary creativity of these movements in India and the US. As Gita Bannerji joked, their work of primitive accumulation in Paris gave organizational form to shared ideals and disparate contexts around the world. Organizing to build socialism, with women's equality and justice at the heart of this vision, simply continued after they returned to their homes of origin. Gita and Betty wrote letters to each other for decades after spending those two years in Paris building WIDF together. They lived far apart geographically, never meeting again, but shared common ideals through their very different struggles. Their affection for each other and sense of humor about their lives refused to dim, even in the face of the growing hardships of anti-communism. Their relationship reveals the beating heart of long-term activism; the love that crosses the significant differences of their lives and experiences. To fight another day requires more than shared ideals among activists.

Gita's letter to Betty written in 1954 spurs two questions for this essay. How do you build a feminist people's movement for revolution grounded in a nation-state that doesn't want you there? And how do you build this movement alongside someone who's halfway around the world? Movement-building – or in Bannerji's terms, primitive accumulation – developed during the forties and fifties through WIDF's centrifugal energy of an international organization. But the creativity and vitality came not from the central offices in Paris, but from the varied struggles waged in colonized, postcolonial and imperial contexts.

⁵ Renu Chakravarty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*. (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980).

⁶ Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

⁷ Cristina Mislán, "Claudia Jones Speaks to 'Half the World': Gendering Cold War Politics in the *Daily Worker*, 1950-1953," *Feminist Media Studies*. 17:2(2017): 281-296.

International organizations like WIDF meant little without the bullets taken by its members, and the campaigns launched by its affiliated women's groups that they won and lost and won again.

Gita

In 1948, at the age of twenty-six, Gita Bannerji left Kolkata for Budapest to attend WIDF's second world congress of women. In 1948, Kolkata was a city that seeded revolt spilling beyond the confines of independent India to revolutionary movements across Asia. The World Federation of Democratic Youth held their Asian convention in Kolkata in February, 1948. Students from Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar and elsewhere demanded an independence not just from colonial occupation, but from capitalism itself.⁸ WIDF's plans to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Kolkata later that same year fell through. Nehru's Congress Party members agreed to cancel the gathering – another anti-colonial conference would be too disturbing to the status quo.⁹ They believed the new government was too fragile to withstand a sustained contest of its leadership. In 1948, the Congress Party banned the Communist Party of India (CPI). Leaders went underground, but continued to meet. As in colonial times, jails became cells for organizing as much as confinement.

Soon after, the leftist women's movement in West Bengal linked to the CPI, the Mahila Atmarakshi Samiti (MARS) also moved into hiding. Regional and national leaders were imprisoned or driven underground, moving constantly from house to house to escape arrest.¹⁰ The rural movement integral to MARS activism called Tebhaga was also on the watchlist. In the Tebhaga movement, waged farmworkers and small-landholding peasant women and men sought basic human rights: fair land practices, and an end to the feudal tributes of forced labor (*begar*) and the sexual control of rural women. Violent police repression, that included widespread rape of rural women, sought to crush the uprising that united peasants and agricultural workers of all backgrounds, Muslims and Hindus, *adivasis* (indigenous) and Dalits (oppressed castes).

MARS, Gita's member organization in WIDF, developed powerful strategies to organize the "*sarbabara*" – or 'those who've lost everything.' Members of MARS mobilized mass public protests of women seeking redress on their own behalf (Chakravorty, 1980). They built leadership at local and regional levels among the most oppressed women. They developed the signature petition to represent the numbers of women who supported their demands and give heft to cross-class campaigns (Sen 2003). Perhaps most revolutionary of all, they listened to dispossessed women.

Rural landless women and urban, resettled refugees from India's partition violence were two central bases for MARS' membership. Demands for affordable food, clothing and housing combined with a focus on women's economic independence to imagine women's future

⁸ Larisa Efimova, "Did the Soviet Union Instruct Southeast Asian Communists to Revolt? New Russian Evidence on the Calcutta Youth Conference of February, 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 40:3(2009): 449-469.

⁹ Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Signs*. 41:2(2016): 305-331.

¹⁰ Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*. (Kolkata: Stree, 2001).

independence from need. MARS propaganda – its songs, plays, pamphlets and speeches, explained women’s basic survival issues through an analysis of regional class conflict and capitalism’s global imperial war.

The story of Pratibha Ganguly and her comrades has the contours of an archetype of struggle. One afternoon in April, 1949 the members of MARS gathered with their children in Kolkata.¹¹ They used a technique they’d mobilized during the famine in the early forties. A large group of women marched peacefully in public streets to government offices. Their demands were also common ones: the release of political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned without charges, and basic amenities of food, clothing and work. In 1942, they faced the British colonial government. In 1949, they addressed the Congress Party. This time, instead of being beaten, jailed and roughly dispersed as happened in 1942, the police fired on the protest and killed five people: four women and one child. Pratibha was one of the women who died. The novelty of women’s public protest shifted from a shocking sight of women filling the streets to a body count. Women protested their living conditions of impoverishment, and demanded their rights. Women died. After this, MARS joined the CPI underground. For the next two years, the women of MARS blended into their surroundings to carry on organizing in secret.

As a member of MARS and the CPI, Gita also lowered her profile. She took a slightly different route from many of her comrades, and traveled as one of two Indian delegates to WIDF’s 2nd Congress in Budapest, Hungary, in 1948. She first met Betty here, and didn’t return to Kolkata until 1952. With the support from her party, the CPI, Gita joined the central offices of WIDF in Paris in 1949. Gita, alongside the Secretary of WIDF, Lu Cui, shouldered the logistics, outreach and communication for WIDF’s mandate to support women’s anticolonial organizing. Lu Cui’s work involved considerable travel to colonized regions of the world to develop WIDF’s contacts with local organizers, and support their activism. Between 1949 and 1952, Gita mostly traveled within Europe. As her letters attest, she, quite literally in some cases, represented the anticolonial struggles around the world to internationalist allies.

Betty

Betty Millard was an editor of the CPUSA journal *New Masses* for four years, between 1943 and 1947. She was from a wealthy, white, conservative family from Chicago. She graduated from Barnard College and first learned about Marxism while in London, England. After her return from England in 1940, she joined the CPUSA. She lived in New York City, with its active resurgence addressing civil rights issues, and to a lesser extent, women’s issues. Spurred by the formation of WIDF in Paris in 1945, the Congress of American Women (CAW) formed as its national affiliate in 1946. Millard attended the founding meeting of CAW, alongside many other CP members, including Claudia Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn who led the CPUSA’s Women’s Commission. Millard wrote articles for the CAW newsletter, developed letter campaigns, taught in the Marxist schools and researched critical questions of women’s emancipation. She fought for consultative status in the United Nations

¹¹ Sonali Satpathi, “Mobilizing Women: The Experience of the Left in West Bengal, 1947-1964,” PhD, History, University of Calcutta, 2013.

for WIDF and for CAW. In the face of women's retrenchment from living wage jobs in factories, the struggle against male chauvinism was one aspect of the struggle to secure women's equal rights and pay. Leftist women's activism during the period after the war was led by a theory of black women's "triple oppression," first developed by Louise Patterson in the 1930s.¹² Leadership by black women in leftist politics grew, with campaigns that linked anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant violence to male supremacy and violence against women.

Betty Millard worked closely with Jones, who pushed her to better theorize the relation of anti-racism to anti-male supremacy. In her journal, Betty wrote about a public meeting where she described WIDF's second international women's congress in Budapest that she and Pearl Laws, a member of CAW and the National Negro Labor Council, had attended. "Claudia had me on the carpet in a nice way about the state and the Negro woman."¹³

Jones read a draft of Betty's influential article, *Woman Against Myth* first published in two parts in *The New Masses* in December 1947 and January 1948. The essays commemorated the one-hundred year anniversary of the Seneca Falls declaration and *The Communist Manifesto* published the same year in 1848. Her letter to Betty outlining her critique before the articles' publication also had her on the carpet in a nice way:

Does not this inferior status [of women] stem now as in the past primarily from woman's relation to the means of production? Surely if this is granted, then such must be the base and premise of your opening theme. Without this, the article is stilted, extremely feminist in outlook...My opinion is that you should be more assertive, not asking simply why the history of the woman's battle for equality no longer seems to have meaning for any of us, but rather, such a history has new meaning for today, because of what we fight, because of efforts to win women for reaction (against) fascist ideology, etc.¹⁴

Jones' comments situated leftist women's activism in the conservative atmosphere after the war – where in dominant ideology, women's equality seemed to have already been won. She stressed the internationalism necessary for women's activism in the struggle against fascism, at home in Jim Crow United States, and abroad with the retrenchment of colonialism. Millard did not take Jones' advice. Rather than begin with the anti-fascist challenge faced by women of the present, she addressed the conservative gender and race mores of the moment.

Jones also pushed Millard to draw out her comparisons between anti-Black violence and systemic racism to women's oppression. She wrote, "your analogy to Negro oppression is overdone. An example of this is your reference #3 to 'a deadlier kind of lynching' to describe women's oppression. This is an oversimplification to say the least."¹⁵ Jones' refusal to equate the deathly boredom of "thirty-eight million American housewives" to lynching pushed

¹² Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1; Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹³ Betty Millard, Journal entry dated February 3, 1949, Millard Papers, SSC.

¹⁴ Claudia Jones, letter to Betty Millard, November 11, 1947, Millard Collection, SSC.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Millard to edit her article, though she did not drop lynching as a metaphor for women's oppression. Instead, these confined housewives faced "a quieter, more veiled kind of lynching" in the final article.¹⁶ The addition of an orientalist metaphor of veiling to describe the hidden quality of women's oppression exacerbates the unspoken address to *white* middle and working class women. Lynching, as Millard knew well, was not a metaphor for all women in the United States during the 1940s; it was a white supremacist form of terror for black women and black men.

Additionally, Jones suggested another change in the articles. She identified the similarity of male supremacy to white supremacy: both shared an ubiquity under imperialism as the highest form of capitalism. For male supremacy, she wrote, women are "oppressed regardless of class (except for the top few) by imperialism."¹⁷ Jones' internationalism in this formulation addressed women in the US and outside of it. Imperialism, she argued, didn't play favorites among women. It wrested profits from women's unpaid labor and underpaid work as part and parcel of the theft of primitive accumulation. Imperialism as a system exploited all women; that is, "except for the top few."

Millard added the issue of "rape as a form of violence practiced against women" to illustrate how women's oppression intersected with anti-Black racism – systemically and specifically:

But it (rape) is a criminal act of a special kind – an anti-woman act—just as the other two (anti-Black and anti-Semitic attacks) are crimes of a special kind. The lynching of a Georgia Negro is the violence expression of a pattern of white supremacy; rape is a violent expression of a pattern of male supremacy, an outgrowth of age-old economic, political and cultural exploitation of women by men. When a Negro woman is raped by a white man these two aspects of our society merge.¹⁸

In 1948, only a month after the publication of "Woman Against Myth," CAW joined an international campaign for Rosa Lee Ingram, a black woman who killed a white man in self-defense in Americus, Georgia. The campaign included the vast web of WIDF's global outreach for the sharecropper Rosa Lee Ingram and her two sons – to protest the all-white jury that determined her guilt in one day. The case, as historian Dayo Gore describes it, "pushed front and center black women's experiences with sexualized racial violence and provided an implicit and at times explicit validation of a black defendant's use of deadly force in defending her own life."¹⁹

A year later, Claudia Jones' published a rebuttal to Millard's essay that defined black women's triple oppression as the reason for their heightened importance to revolutionary movements.²⁰ Claudia Jones elaborated on Patterson's argument about the exploitation faced by black women; as women, as African Americans and as workers. Jones also drew on the return of Marxist theories of "Black self-determination" that saw the black industrial

¹⁶ Betty Millard, "Woman Against Myth," *New Masses*. December 30, 1947, 7.

¹⁷ Jones, letter to Betty Millard, November 11, 194, Millard Collection, SSC.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*. (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 76.

²⁰ Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of Negro Women!" *Political Affairs*. 28:6(June 1949): 51-67.

proletariat as a site for especial militancy.²¹ Jones argued that these conditions sharpened black women's revolutionary potential, since they lived on the cutting edge of American conditions of oppression.

Jones and Millard shared a commitment to systemic anti-racism and anti-sexism, a commonality that animated their dialogue in letters, in public talks, and in pamphlets. In the archival records of their interactions, the tone of their comments are direct, respectful but not exactly warm or even friendly. Their clearly stated disagreement over Marxist theory did not require intimacy or love between Millard and Jones; but it did rely upon their shared political project of anti-capitalism.

Budapest, Hungary, 1948 e3 Beijing, People's Republic of China, 1949

Gita and Betty first met in 1948 at WIDF's Second International Women's Congress held in Budapest, Hungary. They also both attended the Asian Women's Conference held in Beijing, P.R. China in 1949. The Congress in Budapest brought members to assess their activism since its founding three years earlier. The decision to focus on women's anticolonial activism in 1946 expanded their founding commitment to anti-fascism.²² WIDF explicitly added anti-racism and anti-colonialism to its commitment to fighting fascism. Women from the US delegation and women from the Indian, Vietnamese and Chinese delegations sought this clarity from WIDF's inception. In this sense, they adhered to a definition of fascism honed in the 1930s.

Marxist theorist Rajne Palme Dutt, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, defined fascism as an integral ideology of capitalism.²³ Fascism maintained capitalism in the face of revolutionary upheaval. It intensified the dictatorship of capitalism and the repression of the working class. Fascism also concentrated each imperialist block into a single economic and political unity. War only solidified the antagonisms and contradictions within imperialism. Dutt also characterized fascism as a movement through its actors: "Fascism, in short, is a movement of mixed elements dominantly petit bourgeois, but also slum proletarian and demoralized working class, financed and directed by finance capital, by the big industrialists, landlords and financiers, to defeat the working-class revolution and smash the working class organization."²⁴ What made fascism specific, in Dutt's analysis, was the willingness to use violence and illegal methods for capitalist ends.

WIDF members from around the world sharpened a gendered analysis of fascism during these heady years from 1945 to the mid-1950s. They mobilized women's socially-dominant role as mothers and maternalist rhetoric to attack fascism. But anti-fascism in their

²¹ Claudia Jones, "On the Right to Self-Determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt," *Political Affairs*. 25:1 (January 1946): 67-77.

²² "The Situation of Women in Colonies, Discussions on Racial Discrimination," *Bulletin d'Information*. 9-10 (October-November, 1946): 7. Vivian Carter Mason, the US representative to WIDF from the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Jeanne Merens, a communist and founder of the Algerian Women's Union and Jai Kishore Handoo, member of the Women's Committee of India League in London developed early materials for the WIDF executive committee meeting focused on anti-colonialism and anti-racism.

²³ Rajne Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*. (San Francisco: Proletarian Publisher, 1934): 92.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 102.

publications also emphasized women's willingness to fight, physically and militarily, against fascist violence. WIDF's public materials used the terms of maternalism not as a biological destiny, but as a social role that anti-fascist, anti-racist and anti-colonial women shaped rather than simply inhabited. The campaigns WIDF led, for example, in Netherlands against loading weapons shipments to arm the Dutch counterinsurgency in Indonesia, placed women on the frontlines of violent police repression.

Both Gita and Betty gave reports about the conditions of women in their countries. In addition, Gita contributed to the central document presented at the Budapest gathering, "The Women of Asia and Africa."²⁵ The report began with a quotation from the United Nations Charter, Article 73 about "non-self-governing territories" that affirmed "that the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount, and accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories," with cultural rights and self-government upheld. The photo after this declaration showed the severed heads of anticolonial insurgents on stakes. Underneath was the caption, "Here is how the colonialist countries respect the charter of the United Nations which they signed."²⁶

The report mentioned the invitation from MARS to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Kolkata, India. It included the negative responses from Sarojini Naidu and other Congress Party members, but announced that the conference planning was still active. Not until early 1949, when the leaders of the All China Democratic Women's Federation and the Chinese Communist Party, assured of their impending victory against the Guomindang, invited WIDF to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, People's Republic of China. Held in December, 1949, both Gita and Betty attended. Betty attended as a fraternal delegate from the US, alongside Eslanda Robeson and Ada Jackson. She also participated in her capacity as secretary of WIDF central offices. Gita was on the Asian Women's Conference organizing committee, spending over a month in China beforehand to prepare for the gathering. She also attended as a delegate. Due to the hostile political climate in India, she used a pseudonym, Mira Mitra, for her speech about children's conditions in India.

Notably, the Asian Women's Conference consolidated a transversal strategy for women's internationalism in the fight against fascism.²⁷ The conference resolutions drafted two parts to this strategy, one for women from colonized (and recently independent) countries, and one for women from imperialist nations. In Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, women fought imperialism and feudalism with renewed unity in their struggles. To do so, they should organize "the masses of women, help to educate them and defend their basic rights!"²⁸ For women in imperialist countries, the internationalist strategy developed in the Asian Women's Conference was related, but not identical. These women's activism should be rooted in an ethical and personal refusal to be accomplices in murder: "Do not permit our sons to kill each other! Stop colonial wars! Insist that your governments recall the troops

²⁵ WIDF Preparatory Committee for the Conference of the Women of Asia, *The Women of Asia and Africa*. (Budapest: WIDF, 1948).

²⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁷ Elisabeth Armstrong, "Peace and the Barrel of the Gun in the Internationalist Women's Movement, 1945-1949" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*. 18:2(2019): 261-177.

²⁸ "To Our Sisters, the Women of the Countries of Asia." *Information Bulletin*. 4:7(1950): 9.

from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaya, Korea.”²⁹ This linked strategy mobilized rather than ignored or universalized the differences in women’s activism around the world. Internationalist women shared their commitments to anti-fascism, anti-white supremacy and anti-colonialism; but their conditions of struggle were specific. This strategy dispensed with allies in struggle to create accomplices in the fight against colonialism, fascism and racism.

In her diary about the Asian Women’s Conference, Betty jotted notes about the film shot during the six days of the conference. On December 17, 1949, Millard described a “...chilly film taken to replace those burned up. Will falsify history considerably – will convey impression the Presidium listened to speakers which was seldom the case. Will also seem the very gay conference since we found our own histrionics amusing...”³⁰ Two films were created about the conference: one by the Chinese and one by the Russians. However, the footage taken over the six days of the conference burned. The day after the conference ended, it was hastily re-shot. A letter by Gita to Betty provided a more light-hearted assessment of the two films. She described watching the Russian version in Budapest, Hungary almost a year after the conference. “Yesterday I went to a movie to find you in various moods – mostly laughing. It was the Soviet version of the Asian Women’s Conference...on the whole it was better than the Chinese version and the particular attraction was the Iranian and Indian delegates shouting “Van Sui” which I recognized very much.”³¹

International conferences, like the one held in Budapest, allowed local leaders from around the world to discover for themselves the complex linkages between women’s struggles around the world. Each meeting was filled with women’s conjunctural analyses of their countries. These reports developed a shared understanding of how to understand the events of the day. Regional gatherings, like the one held in Beijing, also allowed WIDF to build allied women’s organizations where they barely existed before, such as in Thailand and Malaysia. In other cases, it fostered the consolidation of myriad women’s groups from different localities into a national organization, such as in Indonesia and Vietnam. But the simple enjoyment of each other’s company, of finding the languages to communicate was also political.

Paris, 1949-1951

While working in the central offices of WIDF in Paris, both Gita and Betty began their correspondence with each other. Gita and Betty attended the WIDF executive committee meetings in Berlin, GDR, held in February, 1951. They shared in WIDF’s decision to send an investigative team to Korea to report on the military onslaught and the effects on North and South Koreans. After the meeting, Betty returned back to Paris and Gita stayed for a few more weeks in Berlin. On March 5, 1951 Gita wrote to Betty about her train journey with the East German WIDF contingent to Warsaw, Poland to attend a WIDF-sponsored rally for peace, as part of the “Hands Off Korea” campaign. Gita wrote that she was sure her adventure would make Betty “green with envy” as she sat in Paris editing WIDF’s *Bulletin Anglais*:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Millard papers, SSC.

³¹ Gita Bannerji, letter to Betty Millard, Budapest, September 4, 1950, Millard papers, SSC.

I never knew the German women possessed as loud voices as the Bengalis and Americans or could speed up their speech like the French. Four of those German women – extremely friendly and delightful --- four among the 91 million front ranks, kept up a non-stop conversation for 4 hours while the rather bewildered Bengali – also a front member of a more colonial order tried to catch a bit of sleep... At the stroke of twelve, suddenly the noise increased a thousandfold and in spite of the gradually developing deafness of the Bengali type, her eardrums seemed to be on the bursting point!

Gita's inability to rest on the overnight journey was compounded when five other men carrying bottles of vodka entered the compartment to jumpstart a party.

Peeping through a buttonhole, I beheld the following spectacle: in front of me (the compartment by the way, was 6 x 3 feet in size) a pug-nosed, bald-headed, perpetually smiling man; next to him one of the 91 millions (members of WIDF), squeezed like a tomato in a sandwich; next, another stub-nosed, toothbrush-moustache, bald-headed Pole holding a vodka bottle near Elli's unwilling mouth...³² They pushed me and thrust the vodka bottle to my horrified mouth, making me reflect a little bit on the inferiority of the European civilization!! I shouted "Dormir" in pure French because I couldn't really remember any other language and shut my eyes as tightly as possible. In a little while the room became dead quiet and a load fell on my side. "Hai ah" I shouted and found this giant, bald-head sleeping comfortably on my side smelling of vodka and on hearing me shout punched me affectionately!

The train journey ended with Gita's glasses broken after wrestling to avoid a hug.

On arriving, one of the toothbrush types thought of making up with an Asiatic type by asking for my Mao Tse Tung [Mao Zedong] badge, which I immediately gave him, fearing being vodka sprinkled. With the greatest passion he threw his arms around me and in the process of his trying to launch a toothbrush kiss and me trying to avoid it, a "crack" was heard leaving my spectacles a little damaged which resulted in the blindness of my right eye... Well, Bettuska, would you ever again travel by plane? I would never. Life would be much uninteresting in contrast in such 12 hours – wouldn't it?!!

Bannerji's racialization of her journey multiplied and refracted through her telling: to be a "Bengali type" sent up ethnic codes of regionalized India. These regional types are colonial, since they were constructed and mobilized in the divide-and-conquer techniques honed by the British, as well as national, since they continued to have characteristic typecasting within India after independence. The "Asiatic type" she references carries a racism that crosses the globe and does not rely on overt colonialism for its violence. "European civilization," while intrinsic to the colonial rationalization of manifest destiny, in Bannerji's story is synonymous with alcoholic sexual harassment endemic to colonizing countries. The cacophony of languages with exclamations in French and Hindi, embedded in German, Polish, and English, adds yet another layer of discomfort through humor. Her final riposte, of always traveling by

³² Elli Schmidt, President of the Democratic Union of German Women.

train, never plane, embeds a class analysis in her tale. The bourgeois manners of plane travel would have shut down the possibility of mayhem altogether. The humor of Bannerji's storytelling to Millard relied upon a shared critique of colonialism and male supremacism, without a doubt. But her humorous indirection also relied on a deeper level of intimacy; one of shared sensibility and knowledge that the humor in its complexity would be understood.

Hands Off Korea campaign, 1950-1953

With Gita's vision blurred in her right eye and a perpetual wink to gain some vision in her left eye, the Congress for Peace gathering began in Warsaw, Poland. The international peace movement against the bombing of Korea by US and NATO forces was the central topic. Gita described her role as one "of a more colonial order" through the parochial but deeply felt solidarity of WIDF's Polish delegates:

In the meantime, all the Polish women present at the Congress wanted me to be a Korean. This led to many tears and embraces, very touching, but it left me a bit shy on account of taking all the courageous fight of the Koreans on me.

This form of parochial solidarity was not Gita's first experience with it. A year earlier Gita added a personal note to Betty that she attached to a WIDF report she wrote from Budapest, Hungary. The "Asiatic type" that Gita references becomes quite literally her type, since she is interchangeable with a Korean woman.

You may call me an imposter or whatever you like but the fact is that the Hungarians insist on my being a Korean and I like it or not I am a Korean in Budapest. But thanks to the People's government I have not yet encountered the inevitable questions in regard to jungles – snakes and tigers. It is wonderful to see how much they are propagating for Korea. Everywhere, in streets, in colleges, in cinemas one would find "HANDS OFF KOREA" posters. I wish Pak Den Ai [Pak Chong-ae] and the other Korean comrades could see all of this. (September 6, 1950)

Betty wrote to her mother about meeting Pak Chong-ae, a committed anti-colonial leader in North Korea who was the chair of the Democratic Women's Union of Korea and served on the WIDF Executive Council since 1948. "I have a Korean friend, Pak Den Ai, when I first met her in Budapest we could only smile and shake hands and talk sign language – by the time we met in Peking I had learned a few words of Russian and she of English – now in Helsinki we know a little more and we're old friends."³³ They first met in Budapest at WIDF's second international congress, then renewed their friendship on the train from Moscow on their way to the Asian Women's Conference in Beijing the following year.

By 1951, these interpersonal linkages proved pivotal in the campaign to oppose the NATO and American military campaign against Korea. At the invitation of Pak Chong-ae and the Korean Women's Democratic Union in January 1951 to witness the carpet bombing and ground troop assault, a WIDF fact-finding delegation of twenty-one women from eighteen countries traveled to North Korea in May, 1951. They filmed what they saw and the women

³³ Betty Millard, letter to her mother (copy), April 2, 1950, Millard collection, SSC.

they met. Their report, *We Accuse!* was issued in five languages, English, French, Russian, Chinese and Korean. As the campaign rippled outward, it was translated into twenty languages.³⁴ *We Accuse* galvanized women's organizations around the world to oppose the US military occupation of Korea.

In Beijing at the Asian Women's Conference in December, 1949, Pak Chong-ae described South Korea as a site of occupation with its American-backed strongman, Syngman Rhee. She explained the imperial significance of Korea for US domination of the Asian region beyond Japan. Korea's importance intensified after the Communist Party of China defeated the Guomindang in China's civil war. Her report described the US occupation by proxy:

Our partisan units (in South Korea), fully supported by the people gave won brilliant victories in battle. That is not all. The inner organization of Syngman Rhee's puppet army has begun to disintegrate. Opposing the traitorous policy of SYNGMANN RHEE (sic), soldiers have courageously revolted, and joined the people, fighting with the guerillas.³⁵

North Korea and South Korea became separate states in 1948. Border skirmishes began with the formation of border between them along the 38th parallel north. Women and men joined the self-defense units in North Korea that fought off cross-border skirmishes, as well as looting and arson of food supplies.³⁶ Suzy Kim described the frustration of people living along the border. "One peasant woman in her late forties complained that the guard units had no countermeasure despite the kidnapping, claiming she would join them 'if they would be willing to go kill 'em.'"³⁷ WIDF's multiple international conferences, the meetings that delegates held with local clubs after they returned home, and the publication of WIDF's conference reports allowed internationalist women to frame their knowledge of the world from the perspective of leftist women's struggles.

Korea as a theater of war was not a conflict of Soviet aggression, nor of North Korean intractability as US media portrayed it. Pak Chong-ae's, as a North Korean communist feminist, provided a very different analysis. Beginning in 1945, the US forces occupied Korea against their own independence declaration. The US-NATO forces did not act in self-defense to repel an attack from North Korea. Pak Chong-ae reminded her audiences that the war began with imperialist attack on an independent nation. North Koreans, and some South Koreans fought an anti-imperialist war that sought to end the neocolonial occupation of the region by the United States.

We Accuse, WIDF's report, detailed with devastating specificity how American and UN forces tortured eleven-year-old girls, buried the people of entire villages alive, and raped women until they died.³⁸ They submitted their report, with its graphic and well-documented testimony

³⁴ *We Accuse! Report of the Commission of the Women's International Democratic Federation in Korea, May 16 to 27, 1951.* (Berlin: WIDF, 1951).

³⁵ Pak Chong-ae, "With the total support of the peoples... We are fighting to unify our entire land under the People's Republic of Korea," *Information Bulletin*. Special Issue (April 1950):37,47.

³⁶ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013, 243.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *We Accuse!* (Berlin: WIDF, 1951).

of chemical and biological warfare, to the United Nations. As a result of their opposition to the Korean War, they lost their consultative status to the UN, a status not returned until 1967.³⁹ The women who visited war sites, spoke to women and wrote the report lost their jobs, faced other retribution such as imprisonment, but no one recanted the truth of their findings. *We Accuse* fueled the global peace campaign to rally against the war crimes committed in Korea in contravention of the Hague and Geneva conventions.

“Hands Off Korea!” read the posters on the streets of Hungary and Poland. “Germany No Second Korea!” was one slogan in East Germany. Another poster was more visceral: “Vermin Infestation. Korea is a warning! Fight for peace against the criminals of humanity.”⁴⁰ Giant fleas with the faces of Truman, Churchill and Adenauer crawled toward the poster’s viewer. The name of the campaign in the Soviet Union was “Struggle for Peace!” Millions of signatures were collected on petitions against the Korean War around the world. American women launched a letter writing campaign to President Truman demanding the release of WIDF’s report to the American public.

International Women’s Day became the touchpoint for anti-imperialism in the women’s movement beginning in the late 1940s. Claudia Jones, the chair of the CPUSA Women’s Commission, and close comrade of Betty Millard wrote numerous articles against the bombardment of Korea in her column “Half the World” in the *Daily Worker*. The US government arrested her three times between 1950 and 1951; under the Smith Act (the Alien Registration Act) and the McCarran Act, that required communist organizations to register with the US Attorney General.⁴¹ She credited her speech (published soon after) written for International Women’s Day titled “International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace” as the reason for her first arrest.⁴² In 1953, Claudia Jones contested her imprisonment to the US Court:

Will you measure, for example, as worthy of one year’s sentence, my passionate adherence to the idea of fighting for full unequivocal equality for my people, the Negro people, which as a Communist I believe can only be achieved allied to the cause of the working class? A year for another vital Communist belief that the bestial Korean war is an unjust war? Or my belief that peaceful coexistence can be achieved and peace won if struggled for?⁴³

Betty

Betty returned to the maelstrom of U.S. anti-communism in April, 1951. Immediately on her return, the government revoked her passport. In 1950, the United States government banned

³⁹ Taewoo Kim, “Frustrated Peace: Investigatory Activities by the Commission of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in North Korea During the Korean War.” *Singkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*, 20:1 (April 2020): 84.

⁴⁰ Young-Sun Hong, *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 54.

⁴¹ Denise Lynn, “Claudia Jones Against the Korean War,” *Black Perspectives*, September 23, 2019. <https://www.aaihs.org/claudia-jones-against-the-korean-war/>, last accessed June 13, 2020.

⁴² Claudia Jones, “International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace,” *Political Affairs*, 29:3(1950): 32-45.

⁴³ Claudia Jones, “Speech to the Court, February, 1953,” *Thirteen Communists Speak in Court*. (New York: New Century Publications, 1953): 121.

the Congress of American Women as a subversive organization and it disbanded. Two internationalist women's organizations emerged in its place – one was the interracial American Women for Peace and the other was led and organized by African American women, Sojourners for Peace and Justice.⁴⁴ In her first letter to Gita after she returned, Betty described her dispiriting observations of US complacency, "...it's indisputable that the American people are being bought off by the relatively much higher standing of living resulting from the impoverishment of the rest of the world... People don't like the war but they're not doing much of anything to stop it. After all, they think, if there weren't a war there would be a depression, and they like a depression even less. They have no idea what American troops have done in Korea and simply don't believe it when told."⁴⁵

Betty's analysis fueled her activism. She fought for the re-instatement of WIDF's consultative status in the United Nations.⁴⁶ She sought to launch a women's magazine in support of left feminist movements, building on the range of contacts with feminist editors around the world linked to WIDF. That effort failed, but she began editing another journal called *Latin America Today* in 1953, a position she held until 1956. She also wrote the press release for *We Accuse* for the American Peace Council. In it, she mobilized the strategy solidified in the Asian Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1949. She demanded that ordinary Americans must take responsibility for US militarism and oppose the war from their opposition to their nation's crimes. "The report is an indictment of US brutality and sadism towards the Korean population without precedent in history. Everywhere the Commission went they were surrounded by people who wanted to tell them their personal experiences of families tortured, buried and burnt alive, beaten to death, children bayoneted. They repeatedly asked witnesses: "Are you sure it was US rather than Syngman Rhee troops who committed these acts?" The answer came again and again: "There were only Americans in this district. They did it."⁴⁷

Years later, Betty Millard reminisced about the importance of her years in France to her own acceptance of her sexuality as a lesbian. She wrote about her years in the 1930s and 1940s when she worked with a therapist in New York to change her sexual attraction to women.⁴⁸ The therapy did not erase her desire for women, and her diary mentioned "boring" dates with men.⁴⁹ Her time in France and her travels around the world provided knowledge about alternate social fabrics that celebrated homosexuality for women and for men. In one short journal entry from Beijing in 1949 she notes the ubiquity of men's physical contact with each other, particularly holding each other's hands.⁵⁰ She stopped the therapy after she returned to New York. She was not open about her relationships with women, however, until many years later.

⁴⁴ Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*. (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 85-87.

⁴⁵ Betty Millard, letter to Gita Bannerji, May 30, 1951, Millard collection, SSC.

⁴⁶ Betty Millard, letter to Marie-Claude Valliant-Courtier, May 15, 1951, Millard collection, SSC.

⁴⁷ "APC Bulletin," handwritten notes, Elizabeth Millard collection, SSC.

⁴⁸ Lisa Springer and Betty Millard, "Why Aren't You Angrier about Homophobia?" in Lisa Springer, Anna Bondoc and Meg Daly (eds.), *Letters of Intent: Women Cross the Generation to Talk about Family, Work, Sex, Love and the Future of Feminism*. (New York: Free Press, 1999): 130-137.

⁴⁹ Betty Millard, 1949 Diary, Elizabeth Millard collection, SSC.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Gita

When Gita returned to India in 1951, MARS and the CPI were legal, but still targeted by the government. Tebhaga as a revolutionary peasants' movement had been largely crushed, but MARS remained vibrant in rural and urban areas across West Bengal. They continued to organize rural people from across West Bengal in cross-caste, cross-community and cross-religious leftist movement. Gita moved to the rural heartland of militant jute mill workers, an area called Budge Budge in 24 Parganas. Her brave comrade Pratibha Ganguly had been a beloved communist organizer in Budge Budge, trudging daily through the marshy ground of rural localities during monsoon rains to talk with peasant women. Between 1947 and 1951, eleven thousand peasants and activists had been arrested in 24 South Parganas alone.⁵¹ When Ganguly died in the women's march for peace and rights in 1950, she left tracks and networks that Bannerji followed.

Alongside women from 24 South Parganas, Bannerji opened a school for women and girls in Pratibha Ganguly's name. At first the school failed, since both the Muslim and Hindu women in the area said they were too busy to attend. They did not think that the school met their needs. Even after scouring the region, only two women joined the school. In response, MARS organizers developed specialized outreach methods for women of different ages: literacy for girls and young women, skilled work like midwifery, sewing and handicrafts for women, and organizing training for older women whose children had grown.

By 1953, the school gained the enthusiasm of women, young and old, who enrolled their daughters. Older women used their organizing skills to open new MARS chapters across the region. Middle-aged women opened women's work cooperatives, and schools. Young women created groups for teen girls (*Kishore bahinis*). The membership of MARS burgeoned in West Bengal, through its proliferation of schools, job-training sites, and self-help initiatives. They still fought for women's right to live free from violence. They still confronted the state for its neglect. But they also built the strength of women to live independently, a strength taught by local. Bannerji's school in Budge Budge became a model for radical women's education and proliferated. Survival could foster collectivity and local women's leadership. The schools used survival to develop women's structural analyses of poverty and capitalism. They gave local roots to internationalist answers of peace and anti-imperialism.

Gita and Betty

In the thirty years of correspondence between Gita and Betty that followed after they left WIDF's central offices they celebrated Gita's four adopted children, they shared radical publications, they sent medicine for malaria, and voiced their heart-break over the execution of the Rosenbergs.

The train journey from Berlin to Warsaw returned in Gita's mention, this time through the lens of nostalgia. In her first letter to Betty after landing in Kolkata, she announced her sudden marriage to a well-known revolutionary poet and communist Subhas Mukhyopadhyay. "I am so anxious to know your reactions on this. Subhas (my husband) felt

⁵¹ Statistics are from the CPI newspaper *Swadhinata Patrika* cited in Satpathi "Mobilizing Women: The experience of the Left in West Bengal, 1947-61," Ph.D. Dissertation, Calcutta University, 2013, 202.

a bit jealous of you when I told him how all of you kissed me on all occasions and even men with moustaches embraced me.”⁵² The love within the movement, and its showering of affection stayed uppermost in Gita’s memories of this time.

She also returned to what she calls the glamour of WIDF. Like Betty, Gita’s passport was seized by the government as soon as she returned. In 1953 she wrote to Betty during WIDF’s Third International Women’s Congress held in Copenhagen, Denmark. Neither could attend, but each of their national delegations were large and enthusiastic:

I feel a pang near my heart remembering the good old days. Remember being photographed in Berlin every two minutes? Imagine the Congress in Denmark. Click, click – click, click – the cameras go. I am here in this remote jungle in a hut beside a ditch. You are somewhere in Latin America may be.⁵³

Love is part of the story of women’s anti-imperialist solidarity. Under the hawk-eyed watch of their anti-communist governments, both communist feminist activists continued their fight to demand all the rights necessary to thrive. Both women continued to aspire to a world without imperialism, one built by solidarity, love, hard work and revolutionary patience. Both women fought for socialism through the 1940s and into the 1950s as “whole-timers” (in the lingo of the CPI). They were full time activists who worked for their Communist Party. This period, whether in India, in the United States or in France did not have to be an anti-communist era. The glamour of this period, as we look back, was its revolutionary potential: landlordism *could* have been abolished with the uprising of peasant women and men in the Tebhaga movement. The eradication of white supremacy and its noxious lived effects was not a lost cause. Marxist feminists like Gita and Betty organized together and apart for a socialist future, refusing to hand over history’s arc of justice without a fight.

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⁵² Gita Bannerji, Letter to Betty Millard, October 24, 1951, Millard Collection, SSC.

⁵³ Gita Bannerji, Letter to Betty Millard, June 6, 1953. Millard collection, SSC.

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