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## ***Research Note: Racism, Colonialism and Transnational Solidarity in Femi- nist Anti-Nuclear Activism***

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**Abstract:** This short article introduces my research into the ways in which racialised and colonial hierarchies have been reproduced and/or contested within white-dominated, western, feminist anti-nuclear activism during the Cold War – particularly in efforts to forge relations of solidarity with activists in the global south. After establishing why this topic should be investigated, the article briefly reviews relevant literature that could structure such an investigation before introducing *the* British-based network that is the basis of my research project, *Women working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific* (WWNFIP). I offer a preliminary discussion of the network’s newsletter archive, focusing on representations of the identities of both British participants and the Pacific women whose struggles they sought to support. Once completed, this research will offer a fuller picture of Cold War-era western feminist anti-nuclear activism as well as being of wider significance for contemporary debates about decolonising solidarity in peace and feminist movements.

### **Introduction**

Feminist anti-nuclear activists have resisted the acquisition, testing, storage and legitimisation of nuclear weapons and the expansion of the nuclear energy industry, along with the disposal of nuclear waste, at many sites around the world (see my overview in Catherine Eschle, forthcoming). They have done so in part by deliberately politicising and reconstructing gendered identities, power relations and symbolic systems, and for this they have garnered significant and ongoing attention from feminist scholars. In contrast, the ways in and extent to which feminist anti-nuclear activists have challenged or perpetuated the racialised and colonial identities, power relations and symbolic systems of the global nuclear order have been much less studied - particularly in the mainstream of this scholarly literature, which is focused on Cold-War era feminist activism in the West.

This neglect is highly problematic. The intersectional and decolonial approach to gender analysis pioneered by black and third world feminists (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, 2016; Kimberle Crenshaw, 1989; María Lugones, 2007) has long demonstrated gender does not operate in a vacuum, but is expressed through and stratified by other forms of power and social identity, including race and coloniality. On this view, the gendered reconstructions of Cold War, western feminist anti-nuclear activists must have been shaped by, and responding to, contemporaneous geopolitical and white supremacist hierarchies. What is more, the serious possibility that activists *actively reproduced* these hierarchies is raised, if indirectly, by the sustained critique of white dominance and west-centrism in feminist theory and practice (e.g., Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1988; bell hooks, 1987; Alison M. Jaggar, 2005; Miriam Cooke, 2002) as well as by the parallel if more intermittent claim that Cold War western peace movements have on occasion instituted racial exclusions (e.g., Vincent J. Intondi, 2015) and reiterated colonial discourses of national and racial supremacy (e.g., Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 1984: 16; Frank Parkin, 1968: 106-8). Certainly, it cannot be assumed that Cold War feminist anti-nuclear activism was intrinsically racially inclusive and anti-colonial.

In that light, my current research project enquires into the degree to which feminist anti-nuclear activists integrated an analysis of race and colonialism into their critiques and tactics, if at all, and whether their reconstruction of gendered subjectivities reflected or reconstructed racialised and geopolitical hierarchies. It delves into the case of one near-forgotten British-based network, Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (WWNFIP). Emerging out of Greenham Common peace camp and active from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, this network of women from across the UK sought to build a transnational solidarity politics with women in the Pacific region, in part by issuing a regular newsletter. By analysing the discourses about the global nuclear order and about British and Pacific women activists circulating in and through this newsletter,<sup>1</sup> I hope to offer a fuller picture of the ambiguities and potential of Cold war western feminist anti-nuclear activism. Given the growing pressure within feminist academic and activist circles to decolonise our ways of thinking about and practicing transnational solidarity (e.g., Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003; Margaret A. McLaren, 2017),<sup>2</sup> such an investigation could have wider contemporary resonance (see, for instance, Sara Salem, 2018).

In the remainder of this short article, I review the literature that is shaping my enquiry before introducing WWNFIP and discussing my preliminary analysis of its newsletter archive.

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<sup>1</sup> The newsletter is archived at Glasgow Women's Library, <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/>.

<sup>2</sup> The call to "decolonise" transnational feminist solidarity has been growing apace over the last year (see, for example <https://fb.harvard.edu/event/decolonizing-feminism-transnational-solidarity-for-gender-and-racial-equality/> and <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/decolonising-feminist-knowledge-reflections-on-research-and-curriculum-tickets-60276833632#>), in no small part due to the student movement to "decolonise the academy" that began in South Africa and spread to ex-colonial centres (see <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20160524135416842>).

### **Gender, race and colonialism in feminist anti-nuclear activism**

The scholarly interest in Cold War western feminist anti-nuclear activism continues to grow (see Eschle, 2017), focused particularly on the ways in which this activism both drew upon and reconfigured gendered roles, transforming the lives of individuals and challenging gendered hierarchies and heterosexual norms (e.g., Sasha Roseuil, 1995, 2000; Louise Krasniewicz, 1992; Anna Feigenbaum, 2010, 2015; Dagmar Wernitzing, 2018; Alison Bartlett, 2016). Some analysts have sounded cautionary notes about activist assertions of essentialist linkages between women and peace, which may romanticise motherhood and potentially reify repressive gender roles (e.g., Alison Young, 1990; Christine Sylvester, 1987). My previous research has sought to demonstrate that gender identities in anti-nuclear activism are not fixed but shift over time and space; that the boundaries between essentialist and feminist discourses and practices are often unstable; and that the political effects of motherhood-based activism in women's lives and more generally are context-specific and unpredictable (Eschle, 2017, 2013; see also Tina Managhan, 2007). Whatever the political verdict, there is wide agreement in the literature that gender been key to the political appeal and effect of Cold War western feminist anti-nuclear activism, and that a gendered lens is essential to understanding it.

Very little of this work brings race and colonialism into the picture, however. Of the handful of exceptions, one is a contemporaneous, activist-oriented pamphlet by Wilmette Brown (1984). Highlighting the interplay of racism and patriarchy in constituting the military-industrial complex and the nuclear state, Brown argues that the Cold War antinuclear movement in the UK must tackle both power relations, by incorporating the autonomous organising of women of colour and foregrounding the structural economic issues important to them (in her telling, military spending, housing conditions, welfare rights, wages for housework).<sup>3</sup> Sasha Roseuil's analysis of what she calls "the Kings Cross affair" (1995: chap.5) at Greenham Common peace camp provides a second example. This is a reference to the efforts of the Wages for Housework campaign, based at the Kings Cross women's centre in London, to pursue Brown's critique by instituting her leadership at the camp. Roseuil is both critical of this campaign as an "entryist" attempt to subvert Greenham and dismissive of its effects, given the camp's decentralised structure. While this critique has justification and is widely shared, Roseuil doesn't explore whether Brown's critique had purchase and might have been met more effectively in other ways. Taken together, these two pieces indicate that racialised hierarchies were a significant site of struggle within British Cold War feminist anti-nuclear activism.

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<sup>3</sup> In the final pages, Brown praises what appears to be the start of the WWNFIP in this regard, and particularly its campaign against uranium mining in Namibia and Australia as offering "something which Black women can connect with" (Wilmette Brown, 1984: 88).

More positive readings can be glimpsed elsewhere, as in Catia Confortini's analysis of debates within the organisation Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), from the 1940s to 1970s. Confortini shows (2012: chap. 3) how WILPF shifted over those years from appeals to legal instruments and a faith in scientific rationality (because of which it supported the development of "peaceful" nuclear power) to a critique of the economic structures underpinning the arms race and a position of scepticism toward scientific progress (as a result of which it developed a more thoroughgoing anti-nuclear position). This was, for Confortini, in part the result of ongoing encounters between the white, western leadership and women from the Eastern bloc and Third World, as well as of pressure from African-American members who "highlighted the connections they saw between racial relations in the United States and international tensions that contributed to a continued arms buildup" (Confortini, 2012: 53). These women seemed to have gained influence despite their small numbers and persistent marginality within the organisation (Joyce Blackwell, 2004). An increasingly radical critique of colonialism – one that led to an understanding of its structural violence and an acceptance of the inevitability of armed struggle against it – was also part of WILPF's trajectory during this period (Confortini, 2012: chap. 4). Here, then, is an example of Cold War western feminist anti-nuclear activism in which racial hierarchies and colonial divisions were actively reflected upon and contested, at least to some degree.

The final example is Alison Bartlett's (2013) multi-layered re-telling of the Cold War women's protest at Pine Gap nuclear monitoring installation in the Australian outback. Bartlett notes that the protest included anti-racist training and was led on the first day by indigenous Aboriginal women from the local area and beyond, thus indicating that contestation of racial hierarchies among the women present, at least to some degree, was a conscious, organised strategy. However, this is not Bartlett's focus. Her argument is rather that the predominantly white activists, by virtue of their membership of settler society, were able to draw on, expose and undermine the dominant white imaginary of Australia's "red centre" as a wild, empty space to be tamed only by white, male heroic acts (exemplified by the military). While Bartlett's narrative is highly sensitive to the specificities of place and time, it also points to the more general importance of Whiteness as a symbolic system in the maintenance of the global nuclear order, and concomitant denigration of indigeneity - as well as to the crucial role in that order of land dispossession through internal colonisation in settler societies.

In sum, most scholarship on Cold War-era western feminist anti-nuclear activism has failed to consider the intersections of gender with racialised and colonial hierarchies in the maintenance and contestation of the global nuclear order, but these few texts offer tantalising glimpses of possible lines of enquiry. To develop these moving forward, I will need to mine other fields of literature that foreground race and colonialism as political problematics. I am thinking particularly of work on feminist anti-nuclear activism in the global south, such as that on and by feminists opposed to the Indian nuclear tests of 1998 (Runa Das, 2007, 2017; Geeta Chowdhry, No date; Amrita Basu and Rekha Basu, 1999); postcolonial research on the global nuclear order and "nuclear desire" (e.g., Shampa Biswas, 2014; Kabwo

Koo, 2017); and scholarship on “nuclear colonialism” and its resistances (e.g., Anne Sisson Runyan, 2018; Vincent Intondi, 2018; Robert Jacobs, 2013; Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke, 1992). Defined as “a system of domination through which governments and corporations disproportionately target and devastate indigenous peoples and their lands to maintain the nuclear production process” (Danielle Endres, 2009: 39), the notion of nuclear colonialism illuminates how processes of domination are pursued internally, within nuclear states, as well as externally, and are underpinned by a racist imaginary that positions non-white and especially indigenous people as inferior or invisible. The concept has been widely deployed to make sense of the coercive and extractive policies of nuclear states in the Pacific, among other places (Anaïs Maurer, 2018; Julia A. Boyd, 2016; Nic Maclellan, 2005; Michelle Keown, 2018). As Teresia K. Teaiwa has vividly shown (1994), gender and race are intimately interconnected in the construction and contestation of nuclear colonialism in the Pacific, and key to the establishment of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement in the region. Greater attentiveness to these interconnections, and to perspectives from the Pacific, will clearly be crucial in helping to illuminate the contours, constraints and potential of the transnational solidarity politics of the WWNFIP.

In the next section of this article, I introduce this network and my preliminary research into it.

### **Women working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (WWNFIP)**

Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific emerged from Greenham Common peace camp in 1984. In the newsletter, one of the founder members Zohl de Ishtar, describes how the network was “born in a bender”:

It was March 1<sup>st</sup> Nuclear free and Independent Pacific Day, 1984, and we had a party at Green Gate to celebrate the strength of our Indigenous Pacific sisters. This wasn't the first ... We'd linked with Aboriginal and other Australian women on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1983, when women gathered to protest the US base at Pine Gap ... but this party was to be the birth of a network of women working for the Pacific.

It was a great party.

(WWNFIP newsletter 1991, issue 24: 18).

The network sought to raise awareness in the British peace movement about nuclear testing and connected issues in the Pacific region and, in particular, to build solidarity with women in the region. It crystallised into a steering committee of six to ten women that met regularly – several times a year – in different parts of the UK, with occasional much larger meetings of the wider network, into the late 1990s.

The women's network linked up with the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement mentioned in the first section. Emerging from a conference held at Suva in 1975, the NFIP formulated its aims most forcefully in a charter issued from a conference at Vanuatu in 1983, in which the link between anti-nuclear activism and the struggle against colonialism was crystallised (Teaiwa, 1994: 99; NFIP

movement conference, 1983). Roy Smith describes the NFIP as a “loose coalition of pressure groups with individual campaigning agendas but a broad consensus of opposition to ongoing nuclear colonialism and nuclear activities in the region” (1997: 3); “support from and for women’s organizations” in the region was an essential element of this coalition (Teaiwa, 1994: 103). Moreover, according to Smith (1997: 31-2), and as referenced in the WWNFIP newsletter, the NFIP was supported by solidarity groups in several European countries. Participants sought to raise money for Pacific-based campaigns, disseminate NFIP arguments to a wider, western audience, and put pressure on western-based companies and governments implicated in uranium mining and nuclear testing and dumping in the region. WWNFIP was a part of this wider support network.

WWNFIP focused particularly on building solidarity with indigenous women from the Pacific region. It organised several speaking tours of such women, in March and November 1985, March and September 1986, April/May 1988, November 1990 and November 1996. The women – who came from Saipan, the Northern Marianas, Belau, Rongelap and Tahiti as well as New Zealand/Aotearoa and Australia – spoke at Greenham Common peace camp, at an anti-dumping convention and a major feminist conference in Brighton, and at local anti-nuclear groups across the country – as well as elsewhere in Europe. Speeches and papers from these tours were published in a book *Pacific Women Speak – Why Haven’t you Known*, later expanded and republished as *Pacific Women Speak Out*, part-funded by WILPF (de Ishtar, 1998). WWNFIP also funded the attendance of some Pacific islander women at the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. In addition, it sent two of its key organisers in the UK on a tour of the Pacific in order to research the situation first-hand, with their work eventually published as *Daughters of the Pacific* (de Ishtar, 2003). In parallel, they aimed to nurture connections in the region, by visiting the homes of the women who had come to the UK, and others in their communities, and by representing WWNFIP at the NFIP convention in Manila (WWNFIP newsletter 1987, issue 8: 5).

Most importantly for my purposes, WWNFIP issued a regular bulletin about events in the Pacific region and UK resistance activities, that appears to have been published from 1985-1999 with at least 43 issues.<sup>4</sup> This publication changed significantly in form and frequency over the years, from a hefty, hand-decorated “zine”-style bulletin,<sup>5</sup> with significant content produced by British members and sourced

<sup>4</sup> The first newsletter in the Glasgow Women’s Library archive is issue 3, published early 1986, which indicates the first two were the preceding year. The last one in the archive is issue 45, published in June 1999. I have been unable to confirm at the time of writing whether or not this is the final issue. The archive is not catalogued: for each quote from the newsletters below, I provide the year of production, issue number and page number.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Feigenbaum describes “zines” as “often handwritten or made up from collected bits of typed out text. They frequently contain poems, song lyrics, political rants, drawings, cartoons and cuttings from other print media such as newspapers, magazines and different newsletters. Zines vary in form and layout, generally resisting standardization and rejecting columnar formatting and standard type-sets. Although there is no agreed upon single definition of a zine, paper zines are generally considered to be made by an individual or small group of people outside of an institutional context... a space in which creators and audiences can actively employ and generate collective languages.” (Anna Feigenbaum, 2013: 6). The newsletters produced at Greenham Common peace camp are

directly from Pacific women, to a slim-line, more formal and standardised “newsletter” by the mid-1990s, intended as a clearing house for information culled from Pacific-based publications. By this point, WWNFIP had largely stopped functioning as an UK-wide organisation of activists who met regularly at different places around the country and coordinated a range of activities; a rump of London-based activists remained, who channelled their efforts into the newsletter (WWNFIP newsletter 1992, issue 25: 12-13).

At the time of writing, I have read through the archive in its entirety, taking notes on format and content in order to orient a future, more systematic and detailed, discourse analysis. My notes as they stand map the main protagonists and places discussed, indicate how the global nuclear order is analysed, and record initial impressions of how British activists depict themselves and their actions, and also how they represent Pacific islander women – and in what ways and to what extent these women are enabled to represent themselves. It is important to stress that these notes are sketchy and incomplete, and that I have not yet undertaken the systematic coding that would enable me to develop more detailed claims and substantiate them in confidence. On that understanding, I limit myself at this stage to two tentative and broad-brush arguments about the newsletters.

The first is that a critique of colonialism, and of the racial hierarchies upon which it was built and through which it was justified, is front and centre in the WWNFIP newsletter. Indeed, the concept of “nuclear colonialism” is often deployed, as evident in the cover image from the seventh issue that reproduces a design by Melanie Earle<sup>6</sup>, see Image 1 below. Nuclear colonialism is analysed in the newsletter in various ways: it is pathologised as “a disease” (1988, issue 13: 3), linked to Christian ideas of moral superiority (1987, issue 9: back page) or seen more conventionally as a form of direct and more subtle forms of control by an external country (1998, issue 42). Whatever the details, it is clear that WWNFIP understands nuclear politics in the Pacific region as a problem of colonialism, and insists that the anti-nuclear struggle must also be anti-colonial. In this, WWNFIP reflects the position of the original NFIP movement, as made clear in the latter’s charter, in which the struggle for independence from French, British and US rule is positioned as key to the struggle against nuclear weapons and nuclear testing in the region. It remains to be seen whether the WWNFIP rendering of nuclear colonialism brings gender into the picture, and/or diverges from that of the NFIP in its details.

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analysed by Feigenbaum as a kind of “proto-zine” and it is likely that this style and ethos was carried into the WWNFIP endeavour.

<sup>6</sup> The colour image can be seen (and purchased) in internet: <https://yorkshirecnd.org.uk/shop/postcards/nuclear-colonialism-melanie-earle/>



Image 1: Nuclear colonialism in the Pacific (WWFNIP newsletter 1987, issue 7: cover page)

This brings me to my second tentative and broad-brush claim about the newsletter, which is that it represents – or rather actively seeks to construct – anti-nuclear activists in terms of resistant and decolonial subjectivities. Looking at how Pacific islander and indigenous women are represented, there seems to be a sustained effort to allow them to speak for themselves, to reproduce their own words – whether campaigning speeches, press-releases or poetry – alongside photographs of them and their own artwork, see Images 3, 4 and 5 below for examples. Moreover, while the general suffering of Pacific islander and indigenous people through nuclear colonialism is emphasised, along with the gender-specific violences and health problems faced by the women of the region, the language of victimhood is sharply counterpointed by the insistence of Pacific islander and indigenous women themselves that they are agents of change, and pioneers of anti-nuclear politics. The images below reinforce this point, or see, for another example, the speech of Lijon from Rongelap during the March 1986 tour of the UK, in which she insists that she doesn't want people to feel sorry for her:

I have come all the way here for you to see yourself through me, as I have all this experience. It is already a fact for my people back home. I want you to see your future, what it is going to be, through me... We don't know what our future is going to be. Maybe there is only the



choice to live in our contaminated land and die. But we don't want our friends and neighbours around the world having the same problem that we are facing. It's about time that someone who has experience of this terrible thing stands up... We have to look forward

(WWNFIP newsletter 1986, issue 4: 6).

In such ways, I suggest, Pacific Islander and indigenous women are presented to the readers of the newsletters not only as subjects of resistance but also as experts and teachers from whom the British activists should learn. This actively undermines the racialised colonial hierarchy in which the “native” is positioned as not only passive but ignorant and in which the transmission of expertise runs from North to South.

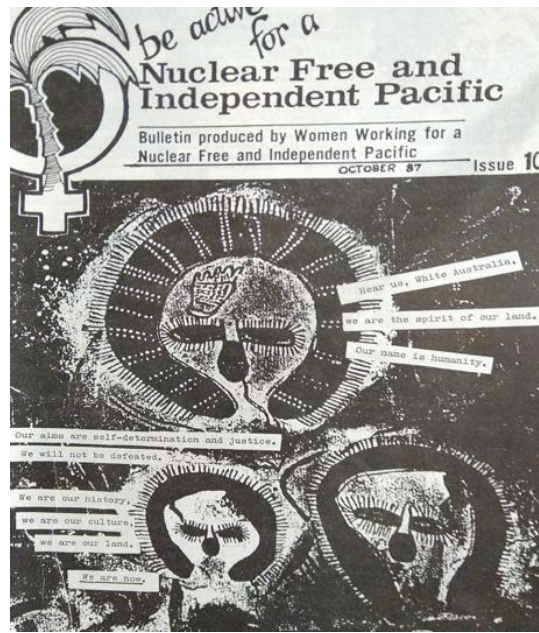


Image 2, “Hear us White Australia” (WWNFIP newsletter 1987, issue 10: cover)

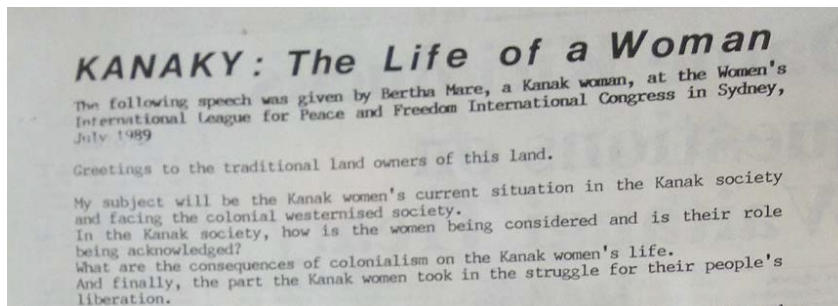


Image 3, “Kanyak: the life of a woman”, Bertha Mare at the WILPF Congress Sidney, July 1989 (WWNFIP newsletter 1989, issue 18: 8)

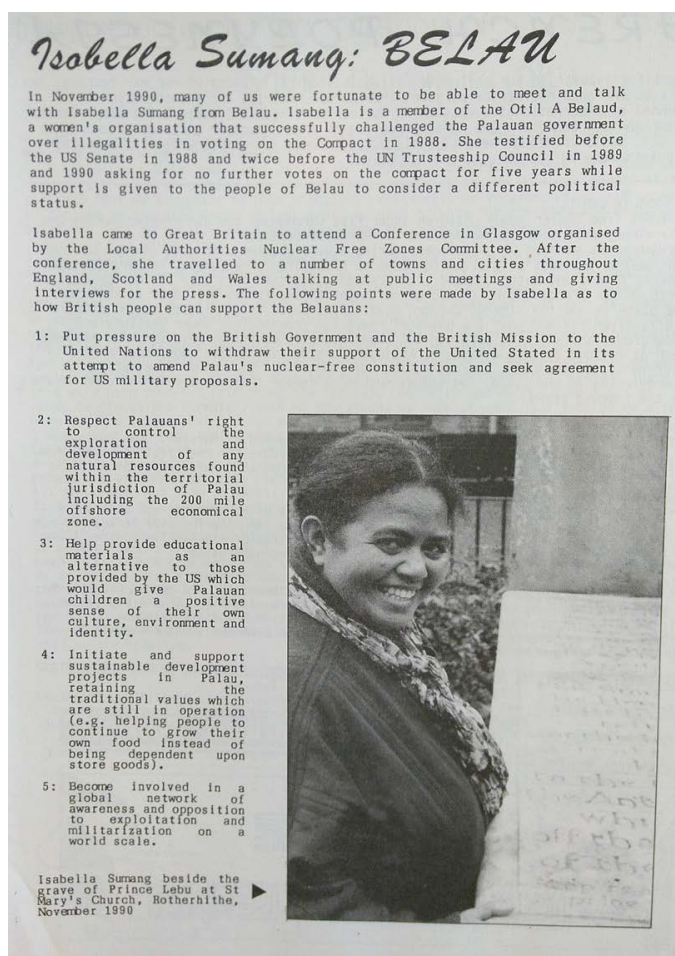


Image 4, "Isabella Sumang beside the grave of Prince Lebu at St Mary's Church, Rotherhithe, November 1990" (WWFNIP newsletter 1991, issue 22: 3)

In parallel, there is some effort to rework the identity of British-based women in the network in relation to these constructions of Pacific Island and indigenous women. Most obviously, readers are consistently interpellated as activists, challenged to pursue the cause of Pacific women at home in the UK through the "action alerts" that pepper the newsletters. More than that, the Whiteness of most of the British-based members is sometimes acknowledged, and there is occasional discussion of how white women need to feel responsibility or even guilt for their structural privileges without being immobilised by it, and while still being able to take action against the causes of it. See image 5, for example. Or as de Ishtar reports from an NFIP conference, "There was a lot of guilt tripping being inflicted by some Indigenous and a lot of guilt tripped non-Indigenous, mainly whites... In some cases, non-Indigenous were told not to speak... If you're non-Indigenous and want to work with Indigenous there's a certain amount of that you've got to be able

to take” (WWFNIP newsletter 1988, issue 11: 21). In such ways, the positioning of network members in colonial and racialised hierarchies is at least partially acknowledged, along with a requirement for action against those hierarchies.

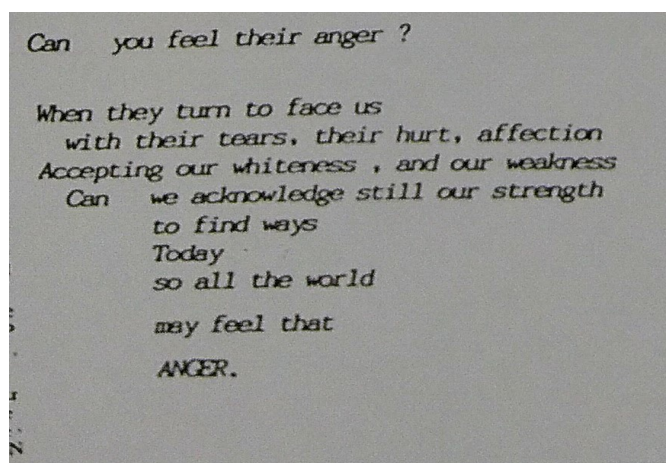


Image 5, “Feel their anger”, poem excerpt, no named author, Greenham Common women’s peace camp 1 March 1986 (WWFNIP newsletter 1986, issue 4: back cover)

## Conclusion

In sum, my initial reading of WWFNIP’s newsletters indicates that an analysis of race and colonialism was critical to its understanding of the global nuclear order. Moreover, this was reflected in the effort to represent both the British-based members and the Pacific islander and indigenous women with whom they worked in ways that challenged and subverted racialised and geopolitical hierarchies between these two groups. This was contrary to my initial expectation, given the widespread critiques of the ways race and colonialism are erased from second wave western feminist discourses and practices.

I do not mean to sound complacent, however. I need now to do a significantly more sustained and detailed analysis in order to draw out the inner workings of these discursive constructions – and to think through their undoubted contradictions and discrepancies. For example, I wonder if there is a degree of romanticism – and even primitivism – in the association of indigenous women with closeness to nature and to “Mother Earth” in the newsletters. I also want to pay closer attention to those moments when the effort to pinpoint the specificities of White western women’s privileged position in relation to Pacific islander and indigenous women is undermined by constructions of unity or “sisterhood”. On this point, I note the language of kinship and the beatific imagery of interpersonal connection in the poem “To All My Sisters” by de Ishtar: “I can feel the women, you/reaching through me. /Myself a channel/I see their hands, your hands .... Extending, extend-

ing/outward/to touch each other/Extending into that which is my now, my presence” (WWNFIP newsletter 1987, issue 8: back cover). Here it is not only geopolitical distinctions, but the very boundaries between physical bodies that appear to be dissolving.

Having sounded these notes of caution, it remains a fact that the WWNFIP did explicitly engage with and seek to contest the contemporaneous racialised and colonial hierarchies shaping the global nuclear order. This case study thus has the potential to add significant complexity to dominant understandings of Cold War-era western feminist anti-nuclear activism, and perhaps of second-wave feminism more generally. I hope that further investigation will also point to some interesting lessons – in terms of both potentialities and pitfalls - for contemporary debates about decolonising transnational feminist solidarity. In such further work, a fuller theoretical and methodological engagement with the literature on feminist anti-nuclear activism in the global south, with postcolonial critiques of the global nuclear order, and with the wide-ranging literature on nuclear colonialism, particularly in the Pacific region, will surely be crucial.

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