“Nation-izing” Coalition and Solidarity Politics for US Anti-militarist Feminists

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This essay argues for including “nation” as an essential analytical category alongside race, class, and gender, in order to understand more fully the inextricable links across and within nations, and how we, as US-based feminist scholar/activists working to end militarism and generate genuine security for all people and the planet, can be in solidarity with our comrades outside the United States. My observations derive from 25-years of experience working with feminist activists and academics from and in countries outside the US. In a way, I am looking at “home” from far away.

Socialized as a child in Japan, I first glimpsed another culture after arriving in the US as a 10-year-old. I explained the new, unfamiliar, and strange experiences, people and language to myself as “America”. Experientially I understood country and cultural differences, but nation as an analytic category did not occur to me until almost 35 years after my first encounter with the United States. The ideas in this essay pertain both to white women and to us women of color, who consistently do not interrogate nation when analyzing social phenomena and interacting with those from outside the US. We women of color are not off the hook. We are inextricably linked to the US state, whatever our locations within this country, albeit in complicated ways. An intersectional analysis is useful in identifying and understanding this complexity. Within the domestic context, many of us experience the punitive and oppressive aspects of nation based on race, class, gender, or sexuality, for example. However, this essay focuses on the part of the analysis we often forget: our dominance related to US nation and state in the context of transnational feminist coalition and solidarity politics.

I begin my story in the Republic of Korea in 1994. I was a Fulbright research scholar trying to discover and understand Korean people’s perceptions of and experiences with African Americans before they migrated to the States. At the time, the tensions that had existed since the mid-1980s between immigrant Korean merchants and members of African-American communities in US cities had escalated into outright violence. Two notable examples were the “Red Apple incident” where African-American community leaders boycotted the Korean-owned Red Apple grocery store in New York City and other similar stores in most NYC boroughs, and the killing of Latasha Harnins in Los Angeles by Soon Ja Du, a convenience-store owner (Okazawa-Rey and Wong 1997; Park 1996). So, with research question and methodology in hand, I was ready to pursue my investigation as an African American woman wanting to understand an aspect of my people’s oppression.

Arriving in Seoul, I was shocked by two realizations. First, although I did not speak Korean, I was able to communicate in day-to-day interactions with older Korean people in Japanese, my first language. They had been forced to learn Japanese as part of the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945) and were still able to communicate in that language. Also, I learned about the
presence of US military bases and installations, which numbered over 100 at the time. Yongsan Army Base occupied a central section of the capital city of Seoul. I tried to imagine a foreign base in downtown Washington, DC!

Later, I learned that because I had a US passport I could go to the DMZ to look around, while Korean people could not. Obviously, I could not cross the DMZ, a sealed border, but I could join USO-sponsored tours for US citizens. Throughout my time in South Korea, incidents like these—encountering remnants of the 35-year Japanese occupation, and evidence of the US military presence post World War II—made me reflect on what it meant to be connected to Japanese imperialism through my mother’s lineage and my birth in Japan, and also to be tied directly to US imperialism and occupation of South Korea through US citizenship and my father’s ancestry. Also, I came to realize the continuities of occupation: Yongsan Army Base, the headquarters of the US Forces in Korea, had been the headquarters of the Japanese Imperial Army until 1945, when Japan was defeated and forced to withdraw from Korea. Until these experiences, I had an understanding of race; I understood class; I understood gender. However, I had no awareness of the category of “nation” and its salience in understanding historical and contemporary social and political phenomena.

Even after I became aware of race, gender, and class, nation was not part of my thinking until I was confronted with it in South Korea. Anyone who studies structural inequalities and related socio-political categories knows that those in dominant positions rarely see the categories that give us dominance—whether based on gender, race, class, or other forms of inequality. The internalized dominant categories (and related realities we experience) are just the water we swim in, the air we breathe: normalized and made invisible. We are not aware of and rarely have to think about our relationship to dominance.

In this essay, I discuss what it means for US feminists to live and work “in the belly of The Beast”, which is based on militarism, genocide, slavery, racism, and misogyny. This is particularly salient in the current political climate when the Beast has reared its destructive head dramatically, even more than in recent times, and in ways specific to this historical moment. I argue that this means understanding the place we stand, and also the implications of this for feminist, anti-militarist praxis, both inside and outside the academy.

Awakening to an Understanding of “Nation”
The experience of awakening to the salience of nation as an analytic and experiential category is neither easy nor inevitable for us, as I see from my own life. It was brought home again recently in my undergraduate class on global feminisms. After our first discussion about militarism and neo-liberalism, a student came to me in tears, saying: “You know, I had no idea. My father was an executive at United Technologies and that made it possible for me to attend this very expensive college.” This exchange, along with numerous others with students and colleagues during the past decade, has made me question what kind of awakening we—the people most directly connected to US state and corporate power, and often invoked as “The American People”—need in order to understand the worldwide role of the US military. This involves US responsibility for starting wars and armed conflicts, and also the transmission of
militarism as a system of institutions organized around nationalism (“national security”) as well as gendered, raced, and sometimes eroticized/sexualized relations of domination and subordination. For example, the torture and abuse of Iraqi men at Abu Ghraib prison by US military personnel included two women, one an abuser and the other her commanding officer. Militarism always sees violence as a way to supposedly resolve conflicts, which always requires the presence of an “enemy.”

At a more personal level, the notion of an “enemy” is comforting to many because it helps to explain some disturbing aspects of our lives as members of US society. This is apparent in people’s reactions across the country—and across the spectrum of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality—in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and in the current immigration “debates.” Moreover, nation is a key mobilizing force that drives moves towards conflict and war, as governments, mainstream media, and political groups invoke ideas of national identity and patriotism. The notion of “national security” is used to justify military build-up against supposed threats, however vague, and is very difficult to challenge without being dismissed as disloyal. Deeply held national ties may hinder coalition building in different settings. US feminists, for example, who may be very progressive on most issues, may still have national attachments that undermine transnational solidarity work.

What is the significance of becoming conscious of our national location in activism and research? Through my work in the International Women’s Network against Militarism (IWNAM), 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize, now Peace Women across the Globe (PWAG), and the Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) in Palestine I have come to understand several things regarding our position as feminist anti-military activists in the US.

Linking Domestic and Foreign Policy
First, we must make connections between US domestic policy and foreign policy. The dominant US policy framework separates the two, the here (domestic) and there (foreign), as if they are separable. In the IWNAM, US members have made the relationship between the military industrial complex and the prison industrial complex more visible. For example, we focused on how the prohibitive cost of higher education and the lack of livable wages and meaningful employment, due in large part to deindustrialization, have reduced the options for young, working-class and poor people, especially men and women of color. These factors have compelled them to join the military as perhaps the only viable alternative to minimum wage, service-sector jobs or participation in the informal, often illegal, economy. If one examines these systems separately, it is not possible to see, for instance, that military expenditures (over $700 billion in FY 2019) and expenditures for prison staffing, maintenance, and services (costing states over $33,000 annually per prisoner, on average) take away from funding for education including university education and vocational education post-high school. Military industries
are profitable for manufacturers and investors, but do not produce as many jobs as other forms of public investment since much military production is automated and capital intensive. Wage rates in military industries are not much more than in service-sector jobs (Uchitelle 2017). Moreover, military industries rely on massive government subsidies, which is another drain on funding for “domestic” spending. Hence, the “poverty draft,” a term that gained currency in the 1970s, is still a useful concept to name how “the enlisted ranks of the military are made up of young people with limited economic opportunities” and that “financial hardship drives many to view the military's promise of money for college as their only hope to study beyond high school” (Mariscal 2007).

*Militarism Supports Transnational Capitalism*

Second, we need to understand how the US military and militarism more generally support transnational capitalism, especially the role of US transnational corporations in extracting raw materials, subcontracting labor, land-grabbing, and developing monocultures like palm-oil production, to benefit investors and consumers. For people in the United States, this means the availability of relatively inexpensive consumer goods. Those in affected countries, usually in the Global South, pay the price: workers laboring in sweatshops and other unregulated workplaces, the destruction of the natural environment, and displacement of indigenous peoples, with women suffering the effects the most.

In addressing these issues, many of us join and form coalitions and alliances and work with our counterparts in other countries to challenge both military and corporate power, which are often intertwined.

Recognizing Ourselves in Coalitions

The analytic category of nation can help us to see and understand what it means to be in transnational coalitions and alliances as people from dominant nations. What if, in those coalitions, nation was a lens in our theorizing and praxis? In the remainder of this essay I explore the following question: What would it mean to be part of transnational feminist work and organizing and recognize ourselves as both connected to and also complicit in and benefiting from US foreign policy and neoliberal economic policy?

In conceptualizing such a coalition I am reminded of the article by Bernice Johnson Reagan, a classic in US women’s and gender studies courses, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” based on her workshop presented at the West Coast Women’s Festival in 1981. Looking 20 years into the future, Johnson Reagon admonished women to understand the true nature of a coalition—as a place of struggle to create change with and alongside the “Other,” including those in dominant positions, and with those unlike any group who may be in the center at any given moment. For example, she challenged Black women to struggle with white women and reminded Black women that Black womanhood is not simple and monolithic, as we sometimes assume in our Black-women only spaces. Moreover, she challenged women to struggle in coalition with those who may be against us, not just building coalitions among those like ourselves demographically and politically.
Johnson Reagon’s discussion is situated in the US context. It deals with 1970s-1980s US women’s movement politics, and pushes her audience/readers to rethink familiar categories, our assumptions about insiders and outsiders, and notions of safety and comfort in spaces that she described as a “barred room”. This she defined as a “space that is ‘yours only’—just for the people you only want to be there”. She warned that such spaces are illusory. “Even when we have our ‘women-only’ [music] festivals, there is no such thing...we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place. There is no place you can go and only be with people who are like you. It’s over. Give it up” (Johnson Reagon 1983, p. 357). She criticized both Black women and white women: the former seeking safety through connections among Black women, and the latter who are in a “barred room” due to White supremacist histories and social structures.

For present purposes, I draw on Johnson Reagon’s critique of white women in their barred room, though an imperfect analog, to show a dynamic between US feminists and feminists from other countries, especially those of the Global South.

If you’re white in the barred room and if everybody’s white, one of the first things you try to take care of is making sure that people don’t think the barred room is a racist barred room. So, you begin to talk about racism and the first thing you do is say, “Well, maybe we better open the door and let some Black folks in the barred room.” Then you think, “How we gonna figure out if they’re X’s or not?” because there is nothing in the room except X’s. You go down the checklist [of “X-ness”) and say, “If we can find Black folk like that, we’ll let them in the room.” You don’t really want Black folks, you are really looking for yourself with a little color to it (Johnson Reagon 1983, 358).

What if, in the current historical moment, when the US state and its proxy corporations are wreaking havoc globally (with regional autocratic counterparts, as in the Philippines), we US women of color and white feminist activists—“transnational feminists”—are doing what Johnson Reagon’s white women did? What if we are saying to ourselves: “We’re not US-centric and nationalist.” “We’ll invite international women who can communicate in English.” “We need international participants who get race” (i.e., the quintessentially US Black-white racial paradigm as the global racial paradigm). “We can teach what real organizing is” etc. In so doing, are we inviting “folk” into our US-centric spaces, looking for ourselves, or those with only a little “non-Americanness”?

What if we are seen and experienced by our would-be comrades in the Global South as the ones against them in those spaces—transnational conferences, gatherings, actions—that are analogous to the “women’s music festival” spaces Johnson Reagan described? What if, despite our intentions to be “good Americans,” structural inequalities and other barriers separate and divide us in ways that we, the dominants, do not recognize? What kinds of coalitions are we forging, who will participate in creating them, and how? How should we construct coalitions like the kind described by Johnson Reagon: places of struggle and growth, not an (illusory) apparently comfortable place we can call “home” as transnational feminist anti-militarists? This
brings me to the kind of feminist solidarity that could be created if we “nation-ize” our work and relationships.

Being in Ethical Solidarity
I consider ethical solidarity a necessary stance for activists located in the North. This means that we members of a transnational coalition identify what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) called a “common context of struggle”. It means recognizing the Global South in the North and the Global North in the South, as well as understanding South/North divides in terms of the social and economic policies that oppress and marginalize people and the systems, institutions, as well as the structures created and maintained to support those policies. As we work to name the context through feminist lenses, we must examine the histories of colonization and colonialism, imperialism, and the Cold War, and their impacts in specific locations. This includes the construction of genders and social, economic, and political structures and relations. Those of us from the North must think about working “upstream,” that is addressing the sources of the myriad global problems that emanate from the United States. For example, we must understand our relationship to the dominant power that affects a particular situation, for example US elected officials or the Defense Department rather than seeing our work primarily as “saving” poor people. This moves us away from the temptation to think that women facing violence and destruction as a result of the US military presence and military operations need to be saved by us. Or that we could save them.

Further, ethical solidarity means recognizing and confronting the forces that disconnect people in and across locations. One of the most insidious is what is commonly referred to as “invisible power.” This is the power of ideology (individualism in the US), dominant narratives (“that’s human nature”), and internalized domination (“we know better/best”) that often catch us unawares, because this kind of power is naturalized and these assumptions are deeply embedded in all of us socialized in dominant US culture.

Finally, ethical solidarity is generative. It is “what needs to be done...[it] unifies us and encourages [us] to act. It binds us more deeply and more permanently than the fear of enemies” (Tischner 2005, p. 38). It moves us beyond simply being the Opposition in struggles against militarism. In this sense, one of our critical responsibilities is to envisage a world that is genuinely secure for people and the natural environment, not just to challenge state-based ideas about national security.

How Do We Fully “Turn the Century”? The subtitle to Bernice Johnson Reagon’s article was “Turning the Century”. What if we have not quite turned the century politically, although it is already 2019? I extrapolate from what Johnson Reagon warned against in 1981 and give three examples of what still blocks us from making this turn.

- Believing that the conditions we face as people of the US are the most important and that they “must be changed or else,” a kind of “American exceptionalism” that permeates even progressive and feminist thinking at times.
• Taking ourselves too seriously—arrogance and egotism—that what we “have to say is special and others have to hear it” because we are from the United States.

• Being short sighted and seeking quick results from which we, the current actors, can benefit. Immediacy and speed are quintessentially US cultural tendencies as demonstrated, for example, in self-improvement advertisements, or “fast” products like food and fashion. We tend to deal with each latest crisis as if it were completely new and disconnected from other crises. We assume that if we work with the “correct” analysis and responses, the crisis will be addressed quickly, and once and for all.

Infusing a deep understanding of the analytic category of nation into transnational feminist coalition work and being in ethical solidarity, I believe, will enable us to make connections between struggles “here” and “there,” and will humble us because of and despite our relationship to structural power. Most of all, understanding that militarism and militarization were not created overnight and that the “post” of colonial, imperialism, and Cold War has not yet been realized will help us to see the long term nature of our work, so that, as Johnson Reagon argued, “most of the things that (we) do, if (we) do them right, are for people who live long after (we) are long forgotten” (p. 385).

Practicing the principles described in this essay is not easy or simple. During the 20-year existence of IWNAM, for example, we have recognized that US members should address government officials over US military policies in the Asia-Pacific region. But we continue to face challenges and obstacle in doing this. We have held numerous meetings with partners and sent updates and requests to elected members of Congress to support the Okinawan people’s movement to stop the construction of new facilities for the US Marines at Henoko, for example. This base expansion into the ocean will destroy the fragile ecosystem and jeopardize people’s livelihoods. Officials are too invested in supporting US “national interests” to challenge government policy. For many people in this country who we seek to engage, the problems of US militarism in Okinawa are too far away geographically and conceptually. Most of our actions have not been met with any genuine intention to change the status quo. Even seemingly smaller tasks, like securing entry visas for women from the Philippines to attend International Network meetings in the US, have been a major obstacle and have meant that women from the Philippines are prevented from attending IWNAM gatherings in the US or US territories like Guam, for example.

Not Just for US Feminists

I have focused on activists living and working in the United States in this essay. However, the considerations that I raise here also apply to women in other dominant nations such as Japan, Great Britain, and other European countries. This concept of nation-izing applies to women in these former colonial powers and current dominant nations who are engaged in anti-militarist struggles. We do not need guilt, pity, or do-gooder intentions as we seek to make ethical connections with people in the Global South. Incorporating the category of nation into our theorizing and activism gives us a solid place to stand in terms of understanding our responsibilities to all who are on the receiving end of the projection of (our) dominant nation’s power.
Notes

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