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## **A Conversation about the Future**

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Esther Cooper (left), Alice Dritz (middle), Vidya Kanuga (right)  
World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY), First Congress, London, November, 1945

Esther Cooper is mid-sentence in the photograph with her eyebrows slightly raised. More than that, she's deep into an idea, a vision, an analysis and Vidya Kanuga leans towards her looking directly into her eyes, mouth relaxed, with her hand extended, palm up, toward her. There's a third person in the photograph, Alice Dritz, who looks away. Her distraction takes her out of the photograph almost, which is strange since Alice also stands close to Vidya and Esther. But it's as if neither notice her, since their conversation is so deeply with each other; and thus, perhaps, Alice's attention wanders. What matters most is the conversation and the focused intimacy in their expressions – they met to build another world – a world without fascist terror, without racism and without colonial occupation.<sup>1</sup> They met for the first and only time in November, 1945 in London, England at the founding convention of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. A conversation assumes a shared language at the very least, whether of gesture, attention, or common goals. But even in

<sup>1</sup> The photograph was first published in the conference report. See "Forward for our Future!: Official Report of World Youth Conference, London, November, 1945," Fraser 1984, James H. and Sibylle Fraser Collection, MS 655, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, US.

1945, even among allies, the meaning of words like fascism and solidarity; militarism and peace; freedom and tyranny had to be made on the floors of these revolutionary conventions among people far from home.

This photograph was included in the official record of the conference, "Forward for our Future!" It begs the question to us, its viewers, today: What must it feel like to stand in the ashes of war that spanned the globe, wrenching the lives of the majority of the people on the planet, cutting short the lives of millions of others? As we stand in our own rubble of wars that never end even when the media declares them finished, or obscures that wars of economic blockade, military occupation or aerial bombing exist right now. What does this memory about a conversation mean for us now as we refuse to accept the differential injuries of our lived violence? Vidya, Esther, and Alice collaborated on a systemic analysis of their moment. At this gathering, with other young people's movements around the world, they linked racism to colonialism to fascism. Vidya and Esther added patriarchy as integral to the war and violence capitalism relied on to reproduce itself. They enacted their analysis differently; Vidya established global movements and Esther built her local one.

Vidya Kanuga traveled from Sheffield where she had been studying medicine to attend the conference – she first came to England in 1938 to pursue her education. Vidya had joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, as it was then called, in 1942, and was a leader in the Federation of Indian Students. Throughout the war, Indian students fought British colonial occupation as integral to their opposition to fascism. They built a global opposition that included African students and Caribbean students from the colonies. Esther Cooper was a member of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and traveled from Birmingham, Alabama. She was the executive secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a group that led the most radical direct action, grassroots organizing of young people against Jim Crow racism in the southern states during the war and afterwards. Scholars like Dayo Gore and Erik McDuffie highlight the pivotal vitality of Black feminist leadership that emerged from the Communist movement in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – a movement that included Party members and fellow travelers.<sup>2</sup> McDuffie uses this photograph of a conversation between Esther Cooper, Alice Dritz, and Vidya Kanuga to illustrate the importance of Black feminists to the internationalist movement to end oppression and exploitation worldwide.

The official conference report retains the conflict and the hope of over four hundred delegates and another one hundred fifty observers. Youth from occupied countries refused to declare any victory over fascism throughout the reports. During a floor discussion at the second plenary, one Nigerian delegate referred to as G.K.J. Amachree reminded the young people, "racial discrimination existed not only in Germany and Japan, but was also practiced by the United States, South Africa, Great Britain, Belgium, etc."<sup>3</sup> Since racism was endemic to the nations declared the victors of war, students alongside Amachree declared, the struggle

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<sup>2</sup> Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For a more detailed discussion of Vidya Kanuga and Esther Cooper's interactions at the 1945 founding conference, see Erik McDuffie, "'For full freedom of...colored women in Africa, Asia, and in these United States...' Black Women Radicals and the Practice of a Black Women's International," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender and the Black International* 1:1(2012): 1-30.

<sup>3</sup> "Forward for our Future!" 51.

against fascism was not victorious. Amachree linked racism to apartheid to Jim Crow to colonialism to fascism in his invocation of nations; systemically, they could not be disentangled.

Vidya Kanuga was the secretary of one of four commissions, called “The participation of youth in the construction of a stable and lasting peace.” As she said on the floor of the convention, “(t)he freedom and self-determination of all colonial peoples is necessary for the maintenance of peace and for world economic reconstruction. Youth of the world must support the just struggles of the colonial peoples for their rights.”<sup>4</sup> The struggle against war, the struggle for peace was economic and required the rebuilding of more than Europe due to the ongoing material theft of colonialism. Perhaps Esther approached Vidya after she spoke at the convention, since her movement also disrupted the social fabric to refuse Jim Crow segregation and its inhumanity. Perhaps Esther Cooper brought her insights to these expanded notions of “peace” that retained armed struggle within them. Rather than one side of a war, fascism for both Cooper and Kanuga was an ideology embedded in capitalism, a particularly wretched tool to shore up a broken, dying system.

Vidya and Esther were both in their mid-twenties – not “youths” exactly, but young and ready to face the reconstructive possibilities of their scorched-earth moment. For Vidya Kanuga, as for many progressive and communist young people, the war felt unfinished, held at bay in places like England, perhaps, but ongoing elsewhere. She described the urgency of this moment in her memoir. In her words, refusing fascism, warmongering, and colonial bondage required a global unity of purpose, one she described in the third person of the World, even as it was her own:

Never again would they permit another monstrous war to take such a toll in human lives, to destroy the treasures created by youth’s creative labor over centuries and to darken the future of young generations to come. Never again would they permit such a senseless waste of young energy and young lives for the selfish interests of a handful of imperialist warmongers. Never again would fascism be allowed to raise its ugly head in any corner of the globe. They declared their solidarity with all peoples living in colonial bondage and affirmed their will to work together in friendship and cooperation to ensure a happy future for coming generations of youth.<sup>5</sup>

What does this memory mean for us now as we imagine our future? Where is the future that they dared to imagine? These two young people who met for the first and only time at the London WFDY gathering took different paths, but both were catalysts for far-reaching demands to dismantle old oppressive relations and ways of being in favor of a radical vision for movement and freedom.

Vidya Kanuga stayed in the international scene for several more years, until she returned to India in 1949 where she moved to Kolkata in Bengal, far from her home city in Maharashtra. After the London conference, she went to internationalist youth, student, and women’s conferences, as a delegate who represented the

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<sup>4</sup> “Forward for our Future!” 58-9.

<sup>5</sup> Vidya Kanuga later took the last name of her husband, Sunil Munsli. Vidya Munsli, *In Retrospect: War-Time Memories and Thoughts on Women’s Movement* (Kolkata: Manisha, 2006): 69.

voices and hearts of many others in her movement, as a worker in the international central offices to create linkages among many different young people around the world, and also to organize other international conferences for young people fighting imperialism. Esther Cooper organized closely to organize popular front movements that organized communists together with liberals in neighborhoods, towns, and cities to advance far-reaching goals for another world.

After the founding of WFDY, Esther returned to her movement on the knife's edge of racist oppression. She organized among ordinary people and built coalitions with more reformist organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to build a united front against the racist fascism that structured the USA. In the Southern Negro Youth Council, she orchestrated labor struggles among domestic workers and tobacco workers, the organized refusal to accept segregated buses and restaurants, and the demands for citizenship rights against poll taxes at voting booths. These varied campaigns were coordinated with this larger aim to dismantle cultural, economic, and civic racial apartheid, and were later known as the civil rights movement. All dangerous work, particularly in small localities like Birmingham, patiently dulled the well-honed blade of American racial capitalism.

Cooper had tried to attend the next communist-led conference that was held the next month in Paris, to found the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF); but the US government denied her a visa to travel to France. The sustenance of her conversations in London, one witnessed by this photograph, suggests why another leftist conference – this time one of leftist women from around the world – was one too many for the US officials in the State Department. But if they sought to drain her energy, they failed. Her comrade from the CPUSA and in the SNYC, Thelma Dale, did attend and brought back her conversations, her lessons from that gathering. Vidya Kanuga also attended the WIDF founding conference – this time she represented not the Indian students in England, but the ten thousand female students who were members of the communist-led All-India Student's Federation. The British colonial government made sure that passports and visas were impossible to come by, so no one from India was allowed to attend. Vidya went in their stead.<sup>6</sup>

Paris, Vidya remembered, had its coldest winter in years, so she kept her overcoat on throughout the meetings. Together, with comrades from Vietnam and North Africa, they successfully joined forces in Paris to demand a women's internationalism that recognized the fight against colonialism, racism, and imperialism as integral to the fight against fascism. Vidya remembered the moment:

What did we Indian delegates say in our report to that first WIDF Congress? We spoke of the effects of two centuries of British colonial rule and its dismal record of impoverishment, illiteracy, incredibly high rates of infant and maternal mortality. When we said that more than six out of ten children born in Calcutta and Bombay slums never reached their first birthday, those present could hardly believe us. They shuddered to hear Ela Reid describe the Bengal famine which had taken the toll of over three million lives in 1943. We told them of the part Indian women had played in the struggle for independence and above all, stressed that neither equality nor women's rights could have any

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 74.

meaning for us until our country became free from the British yoke. The few other delegates who had come from colonial countries – Algeria, Morocco, etc. – also spoke in a similar vein. There were also some young Vietnamese girls, students studying in Paris, who attended the Congress and distributed pamphlets among the delegates describing the struggle of their peoples against Japanese fascism and French colonialists. In those days, most of us knew of their country only as French Indo-China. Vietnam was a new and unfamiliar name in the geography of 1945.<sup>7</sup>

In part because of the US State Department's surging anti-communism, Esther Cooper went back to Alabama after the conference in London, but not before she spent six weeks traveling in the Soviet Union. Her experiences, in Erik McDuffie's words, "convinced her as never before of the importance of appreciating women's issues in a global context and in forming transnational political coalitions with women across the world."<sup>8</sup> The localized struggles she organized in Birmingham resonated in those wider movements, not simply as one site for international solidarity, but intrinsically, since they refused the same systems of exploitation and oppression.

In part because of the British government's terror of anti-colonial communist militancy, Vidya went further abroad to join the international communist movement. After Paris, she worked at the central offices of WFDY that soon moved its headquarters from Paris to Prague to evade the rise of anti-communism in France. It is no accident that Vidya's name, albeit spelled in various different ways, emerges in the secret service accounts of the United States and England from this time.<sup>9</sup> While Vidya worked in Prague at the central offices of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, the communist international organization lit a spark for the anti-imperialist movement. Delegates like Suripno, an Indonesian communist who joined the Communist Party of Holland, founded Surapati during the war, an armed, anti-fascist resistance force of Indonesian students that stole its weapons for anti-fascist resistance from the occupying German forces in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> Suripno worked for the International Union of Students, also located in Prague. Together, these two international networks fired up the conference for youth and students of South-East Asia hosted in Calcutta in February, 1948.

The conference title said it all: "The Conference for Youth and Students of South-east Asia Fighting for Freedom and Independence." For the revolutionary movements in Vietnam and in Indonesia, this conference

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Erik McDuffie, 2012, 15.

<sup>9</sup> CIA Information Report, "The Women's International Democratic Federation in the Far East," April 18, 1949. CIA-RDP82-00457R002600450010-7. Approved for release, September 19, 1999; Colonial Office, "Co-ordinating Council for Colonial Student Affairs," March 16, 1949; Women's International Democratic Federation South East Asian Women's Conference, KPM/SB/4671/08, Special Branch files, Calcutta Police, Kolkata Police Museum Archive, Kolkata, India. The National Archives, London, UK, Accession Number, CO 537/4381.

While Vidya's name is not mentioned in the Indian Secret Service documents, their offices describe the Calcutta conference with horror. Thanks to Suchetana Chattopadhyay for sharing the Women's International Democratic Federation files with me.

<sup>10</sup> Dutch DocuChannel, "Indonesians in the Dutch Resistance Against the Nazis," February 25, 2021, Facebook page, accessed July 10, 2021. The contingent was named after an Indonesian hero.

marks the turning point from armed negotiation with colonial powers to an outright refusal to recognize their validity on any terms.<sup>11</sup> The demands of radical youth and students erupted in Calcutta, as they advocated armed takeovers to end colonialism around the world. One month later, in March, 1948, communists led an insurrection in Burma (now Myanmar); in June, Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore); in September, Indonesia. The demands of anti-colonial youth and students were never tame. In 1945, they sought the release of political prisoners held in India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. By 1949, the Colonial Students Affairs council demanded the end of colonial rule: "Withdraw! Indonesia for the Indonesians, Holland for the Dutch."<sup>12</sup>

If Esther Cooper and Vidya Kanuga met for the first and only time in London in 1945, their impassioned conversation remembered by a photograph holds their stories of visionary activism together. Their story is not a blueprint for our own. History never is. We must answer for ourselves what kinds of gatherings will forge our own shared understanding of how this world allows violence to seem inevitable if it is recognized at all. What are the concepts we need to dismantle the status quo and make better common goals? If we attend conferences and do not represent organizations with two hundred or twenty thousand members, why not? An emancipatory language is built from the aspirations of people, from their struggles. Whether our practice is localized or taken farther afield, our gatherings should clarify what must change. Even in the face of utter environmental depletion, these conversations can give us the courage to imagine another future.

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<sup>11</sup> Ruth McVey, "The Calcutta Conference and the Southeast Asian Uprisings," Interim Report Series, Modern Indonesia Project, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1958; Tuong Vu, "'It's Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colors': The Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:3 (October 2009): 519-542; 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 (October 2009): 449-469; Larisa Efimova (with an introduction by Ruth McVey), "Stalin and the New Program for the Communist Party of Indonesia," *Indonesia* 91 (April 2011): 131-163.

<sup>12</sup> National Union of Students, "Co-ordinating Council for Colonial Students' Affairs," letter to solicit support for a demonstration for "Indonesian freedom and (to) show their solidarity with the Indonesian youth struggling against colonialism," written by Mina Sen, Secretary, January 11, 1949. The National Archives, London, UK, Accession Number, CP 537/4381.