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Cassandra's Question: Do Women Write War Novels?

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> I do not wish to close the frontiers of life upon my own self. I do not wish to deny myself the expansion of seeking into individual capabilities and depths by living in a space whose boundaries are race and nation.
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston

The "woman's war novel" has ordinarily seemed "a contradiction in terms."[1] There has always been a heroic male literature of war—an *Iliad* or a *Ramayana.* No other genre is so highly gendered. The exploits of men in the formation and defense of a people or nation, though they may provoke the "tears of women," do not justify their tales.[2] The Great War intensified this exclusion of women from the canon of war literature. The way the "dying lines" of war have been drawn exposes the operation of sex and race in the construction of nation.

Canonical interpretation has held that mass conscription created a new kind of artist: a "soldier-poet" who recorded his "direct experience" of a new and barbarous technology. With a typical stress on composition at the front, Patrick Bridgwater asserts, "From winter 1914 onwards most war poetry worth the title has been anti-war poetry written by poets in the line of death."[3] Critics have focused on the writer, understood to be a gifted veteran who responded to the test of his masculinity by shaping realist texts about the trenches, blood brother-

[1]Cyril Falls, *War Books: An Annotated Bibliography of Books about the Great War,* intro. R. J. Wyatt (1930; rpt. London: Greenhill, 1989), 268.

[2]See Nancy Huston, "Tales of War and Tears of Women," *Women Studies International Forum* 5 (1982): 271–82.

My thanks to Claire Tylee, Jane Marcus, Gisela Brinker-Gabler, Marie-France Doray, and Françoise Thébaud for sharing titles, texts, and ideas with me.

[3]Patrick Bridgwater, *The German Poets of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 1. Despite this simplification, Bridgwater offers deft readings of German soldiers' poetry. The conventional view is reproduced in countless anthologies and critical works. See, for example, Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War,* 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980).

hood, and political disillusionment. An "event" became identified with a genre and with the construction of a sexed subject; the "reality" of the war and its authoritative representation were pinned to concepts of masculinity.

This generic complex in turn helped define notions of modernity and modern national literatures, from which women would be implicitly excluded. In his 1990 study of the period Samuel Hynes generalizes, "A nation at war *is* a male nation." The art of this particular war was, it seems, also male: "The artist is not separable from the soldier." Men's direct experience of the Battle of the Somme made it necessary and possible for them to find, Hynes argues, "a new style for a new reality."[4] Indeed, when the war broke out, conservative and avant-garde thinkers alike expected that it would purge nations and literatures of fin-de-siècle effeminacy. In the event, the encoding of the war and its representation as supremely masculine was undercut by the complexity and range of men's self-gendering in wartime, traced by Paul Fussell and Eric Leed.[5]

One of the problems in defining war fiction as a genre turns on the vague central term, *war*, itself a highly gendered concept. An identification of war with the trenches precludes literature about the home front, about the economic impact of war during hostilities and after the armistice, or about rape and prostitution as seen from the perspective of women. Just as epithalamia written by men may embed different narratives of union and loss from those written by women, so may narratives by men and women about war examine different aspects of social violence.

To oppose the "battlefront" to the "home front" erases our knowledge that where the front is, there often are also homes and women. The military, according to Cynthia Enloe, must "constantly redefine 'the front' and 'combat' as wherever 'women' are not." As the nurse Ellen La Motte ironically explains in her sketch "Women and Wives," "the words home and wife were interchangeable," by contrast to any "women" at the front, who (like the homes) were "all ruined." Commonplace definitions of war draw a gendered boundary "dividing the

[4]Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 88, 199, 167, 191. On the masculinist definition of modernism, see Shari Benstock, "Expatriate Modernism: Writing on the Cultural Rim," in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 20–22; and Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[5]Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

protector from the protected."[6] This ideological system reinforces women's traditional roles; it does not readily account for women's multiple wartime activities or their firsthand experiences at the front.

This conceptual frame has filtered histories of the material and symbolic impact of the war on women. During 1914–18 "manpower" shortages forced several warring states, albeit reluctantly, to coordinate women's industrial work and to establish military auxiliaries for medical, clerical, and relief work.[7] To this end official propaganda called on women to assume "for the duration" public roles previously played by men. Yet propaganda from both the right and the left simultaneously thrust women back into stereotypical roles centered on maternity and the hearth. Thus, sexual boundaries were both blurred and reinforced.

Social territory in turn affects the hierarchy of genres within which male and female artists are supposed to operate. Lines from the "front" take precedence over those from "behind." As Virginia Woolf puts it: "The values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. . . . Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. . . . This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop."[8] Since women are symbolically barred from those wartime arenas designated as historically significant, it follows that a second boundary is drawn that relegates women to lesser genres. Although Cyril Falls grudgingly includes a few women in his bibliography of World War I books, he maintains: "Really, it is not the place of women to talk of mud, they may leave that to men, who knew more about it and have not hesitated to tell us of it."[9]

Nonetheless, women did write about the war, and in great variety.

[6]Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto, 1983), 15; Ellen La Motte, *Backwash of War: The Human Wreckage of the Battlefield as Witnessed by an American Nurse* (1916; rpt. New York: Putnam, 1934). See also Sara Ruddick, "Pacifying the Forces: Drafting Women in the Interests of Peace," *Signs* 8 (Spring 1983): 472; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); and Margaret Higonnet, "Not So Quiet in No Woman's Land," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 205–26. The coalescence of battlefront and home under enemy occupation is described in painful detail in Marguerite Yerta, *Les six femmes et l'invasion, 1914–1916* (Paris: Plon, 1917).

[7]There is no comparative history of women's mobilization in World War I, but see Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914–1918* (London: Fontana, 1977); Françoise Thébaud, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14* (Paris: Stock, 1986); and Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jensen, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Weitz, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[8]Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; rpt. New York: Harvest, 1957), 77.

[9]Falls, *War Books*, 282.

They corresponded to contradictory ideological messages and to a diversity of material experiences that spanned domestic comfort far from the front as well as the ravages of life in occupied zones of Europe and Africa, where some women were deported for forced labor and prostitution, others driven into exile from homes that had been reduced to rubble. Some, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, became nationalist propagandists in 1914; many embraced the nation's need for their services with the kind of enthusiasm or pride recorded by Vera Brittain, Gertrud Baümer, and Colette.

Other distinguished women artists, including Annette Kolb, Käthe Kollwitz, Virginia Woolf, and Anna Akhmatova, were led by varied motives such as divided national allegiances, war work, personal losses, socialist activism, or pervasive cognitive dissonance to record critical reflections on wartime representation. The civic disabilities of women are, of course, underscored in wartime by the symbolic linkage of nationalism to sexuality. The contradictory wartime discourse on gender, which could at need distinguish a "motherland" from a "male nation," afforded special ironies for writers concerned to locate a voice as "women" in the male-identified genre of war fiction.[10]

To date there has been little critical work on European women's contribution to the literature of war, almost none of it comparative. Indeed, the Great War has attracted few comparative literary studies even of men's literature. Most simply juxtapose interpretations of canonized texts from countries that fought on the Western Front, or they coordinate descriptive summaries around stock motifs such as the description of the trenches, attacks on civilian profiteers, pilgrimage, or martyrdom.[11] Yet this "World" War engulfed Europe, as well as many client states and colonies around the globe, thirty-eight nations in all; it touched every class and many races; in its very diversity it serves as a hinge among literatures.

Women remain outside the scope of critics working on male writers. George Parfitt notes that "a number of novels about the war . . . were written by women, and these also have been largely ignored." He concludes: "A woman should . . . make a study of these and other war

[10]See Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–18; and Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet, "The Double Helix," in Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines*, 31–47.

[11]See Holger Klein, *The First World War in Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Bernd Hüppauf, ed., *Ansichten vom Krieg: Vergleichende Studien zum Ersten Weltkrieg in Literatur und Gesellschaft* (Königstein: Forum Academicum, 1984); Frank Field, *British and French Writers of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Elizabeth Marsland, *The Nation's Cause: French, English, and German Poetry of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1991).

novels by women."[12] Paul Fussell sums up the widely shared view that women were victims, not writers: "Why haven't more women written good "war poems"? From Homer's Andromache to Vera Brittain . . . bereaved women, next to the permanently disabled, are the main victims in war, their dead having been removed beyond suffering and memory. . . . Yet the elegies are written by men, and it's not women who seem the custodians of the subtlest sorts of antiwar irony. That seems odd, and it awaits interpretation."[13]

In her introduction to the first international volume on women writers and World War I, Dorothy Goldman surprisingly concurs with Fussell and Hynes. Like them, she offers a narrow, materialist, and historically simplistic reason for excluding the work of women: "If most women's war poetry is poor," it is because as noncombatants they lacked "the catalyst which the experience of the War provided in forcing more shocking and brutal forms of expression." She observes that women novelists as a rule do not describe warfare, and concludes that this "admission of women's inexperience . . . carries the clear implication that war is not a sphere which women writers can inhabit imaginatively."[14] Even so acute a feminist critic as Sandra Gilbert is made uneasy by women's accession to protected positions of power during the war; she treats Willa Cather and Edith Wharton as custodians of patriotism and self-interest, and implies that nurses question the war because of survivor's guilt.[15] We may ask whether it is not only women's voices but also their subtle "antiwar ironies" that have been lost.

From the 1920s to the 1980s women's writing about the war was generally deprecated. The plot of Wharton's novel *A Son at the Front* "is never really able to grapple with the realities of war, in an authentic manner," according to Philip Hager and Desmond Taylor likewise, Marcelle Capy's description of the disintegration of a French village is "plotless." Cyril Falls finds Clara Viebig's story of women in wartime Berlin, *The Daughters of Hekuba*, "sordid" and its characterization "neu-

[12]George Parfitt, *Fiction of the First World War: A Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 136.

[13]Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atomic Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 137. Susan Schweik has responded to Fussell in *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 293–94.

[14]Dorothy Goldman, introduction to *Women and World War I: The Written Response* (New York: St Martin's, 1993), 7, and " 'Eagles of the West'? American Women Writers and World War I," ibid., 195.

[15]Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," *Signs* 8 (1983): 422–59.

rotic."[16] Although he devotes several pages to Rose Macaulay's *Non-combatants and Others,* Samuel Hynes slights it as "not a 'war novel' " but "more like an ironic essay than a novel," and quotes a review in the *Nation:* "What surprises us is that a woman and not a man should have written 'Non-Combatants,' because the 'ethos,' the stamp and tone of 'Non-Combatants' is not feminine, but masculine. Most thoughtful people would, we think, acknowledge that the spectatorial point of view, with its concomitants of irony, detachment and critical analysis, is more often discovered in the authors than the authoress." Hynes thinks that the particularized details provided by Macaulay, who worked in 1915 in a military hospital as a nursing aid for the V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment), "confine" her imagination.[17] Whereas critics praise the "terribly realistic" scenes and bitter humor of men such as Henri Barbusse and the surgeon Georges Duhamel, Mary Borden's powerful sketches of work in a French mobile hospital are dismissed as "almost inconceivably horrible," inferior in charm and philosophy to the "gallant" mockery of Paul Alverdes's *Whistling Room.*[18] Not only must the woman writer always be measured against a male analogue, but her very right to realism is questioned. With surprising unanimity critics have dismissed women's writings about the war as inauthentic, neurotic, or unfeminine.

At the same time, the reviews provide inadvertent clues to women's experimental play with war fiction (plotlessness, sordid realism, ironic detachment). Some of the best feminist critics have begun to study English and American women's writing about the war, especially that of prominent figures such as Woolf, Wharton, Brittain, and H.D.[19] By and large, however, women from the Continent, Africa, or Asia who wrote about the war remain unknown and out of print. For a depressing explanation we may turn to Agnès Cardinal, who writes in her study of French women: "As far as I am able to ascertain, these novels are now unknown in France; and since it is unlikely that they were widely

[16]Philip E. Hager and Desmond Taylor, *The Novels of World War I: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1981), 166, 230; Falls, *War Books,* 300.

[17]Hynes, *War Imagined,* 126, 130.

[18]Falls, *War Books,* 267.

[19]In addition to Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart," see Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Jane Marcus, "Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War," in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation,* ed. Helen M. Cooper et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 124–67; Nosheen Khan, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (London: Harvester, 1988); and Janet Montefiore, " 'Shining Pins and Wailing Shells': Women Poets and the Great War," in Goldman, *Women and World War I,* 51–72. Two important anthologies are Catherine Reilly, ed., *Scars upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1982); and Gisela Brinker-Gabler, *Frauen gegen Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1980).

read at the time of their publication, I have not taken them into consideration in my argument."[20] Many women simply disappear behind the men in their lives: Claire Studer Goll's poet-husband, Yvan, is far better known; Dr. Tatiana Alexinsky's husband, Grigori, continues to be remembered for his political roles; Svarnakumari Devi's younger brother Rabindranath Tagore attempted to suppress her writing: "I have given her no encouragement but have not been successful in making her see things in the proper light."[21]

One problem in searching for the "lost voices" of such women writers is to locate a touchstone that will define a genre without imposing an artificial unity specific to one class or culture. It is important to cast a net widely, in order to recognize disparate ways of representing war. Some of the most interesting fictions engage in "sorties": they cross literary and ideological boundaries. Not all these sorties are as dramatic as those of Radclyffe Hall's heroines Stephen Gordon and Miss Ogilvie, who both leave England to drive an ambulance on the French front, and leave the constraints of heterosexuality for lesbian relationships. But a number of texts develop common narrative strategies to test the sharp social lines drawn by war. They split up the narrative structure in order to resist a unitary value system and monolithic representation of women's lives.

A second, more difficult problem is to explore comparative questions raised by women's writings. A preliminary composite of the platitudes generated in propagandistic writing on all sides would not be difficult to compile, but the existing historical evidence does not permit a contrastive analysis that fully distinguishes one writer from another, or one cultural image of the war from another (indeed, this undertaking is not yet fulfilled for men's writing). The war catalyzed expressions of nationalism by women of very different political positions. Writing strategies are intimately related to the institutional mechanisms for eliciting or silencing responses to the Great War; those mechanisms depend on the geopolitical context, as well as the gendered rules of genre.

Not until the 1970s, for example, were conditions ripe for a Nigerian woman to write a narrative about the impact of this conflict on a colony. Buchi Emecheta's *Slave Girl* has escaped the net of conventional study

[20]Agnès Cardinal, "Women and the Language of War in France," in Goldman, *Women and World War I*, 166. Cardinal focuses primarily on Colette. In the same collection the historian Jan Bassett presents the fiction of an Australian jingoist (" 'Untravelled Minds': The War Novels of Mabel Brookes," 113–27).

[21]Quoted in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India, 600 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1991), 1:238.

because it encodes a vision of the war from the other end of the imperial telescope: the deadly transmission of influenza by British troops is perceived as a poison gas like that used by the "Germanis"; the economic ripple of the war touches off a women's market strike after a postwar poll tax has been levied to pay off British war debts. Such calamities do not fit the model of a war defined through death at "the front." The economic gamble of the war and its costs to the colonies do not qualify as the text of a war novel.

In oral form, however, such calamities already figured in a dramatic song composed by Beti women from Cameroon about their experience of the war—a form that is even less likely to enter histories of literature about the Great War than Emecheta's novel. The Beti had been faced with the choice of staying in Yaoundé, besieged by the British in December 1915, or of fleeing to the island of Fernando Po with the Germans and Atangana Ntsama, the wealthy principal chief who orchestrated an exodus of fourteen thousand Beti soldiers and members of their families. The women sing in a dialogue, "Hé, Atangana Ntsama, the war is over! the cannon are broken." But why should they leave possessions behind? One group sees as many goods as in a market: "Such riches. I should take some!" The other group responds, "You others, move off, what are you doing there?" and boasts that they have marched through, loyal to the Germans, "without taking anything." Cast as a dramatic debate over the impossible loyalty of the colonized, this poetic commentary on the women's search for stability and survival in a wartime economy continuously shifts in meaning. The war is "over," yet divisions within the people continue; the riches of the community are abandoned or plundered, while the military's promises of future rewards are unreliable, or indeed unfounded.[22] The divided structure of the song reinforces a sense of individual difference and dignity without resolving the political issues.

Even though it is isolated in the repertoire of war texts, this song and other texts previously left at the margins of history can help readers to negotiate past limited, stock conceptions of war in order to unsettle representations of women and of this event. Textual "sorties" engage the boundaries drawn between battlefront and home front, war and peace, public and private, white and black, nation and people, men and women. By mining such boundaries, these texts explode the narrow conceptions of war on which their own exclusion from the literature of

[22]Cited by Frederick Quinn, "The Impact of the First World War and Its Aftermath on the Beti of Cameroun," in *Africa and the First World War*, ed. Melvin E. Page (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 176.

war has rested. Their displacement of stock conceptions becomes apparent both in the transposition of motifs and in narrative structures.

When writers such as Richard Aldington, D. H. Lawrence, Ernst Jünger, or Henri de Montherlant drew a line between the "front" and civilian life, they often attacked the "enemy" at home: parasitical women such as the notorious jingoist poet Jessie Pope or white-haired male capitalists profiteering from the blood sacrifices of soldiers. A number of women pick up this contrast but give it a particular twist.[23] They echo their assignment to the domestic front, but they also undercut this distinction by reconsidering the locus of destructive forces and the hierarchy of gendered wartime values.

One of the most conspicuous examples is Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), of which Hynes writes that it "did not try to imagine war itself."[24] In order to represent the rupture wrought by the war, Woolf presents two days at the Ramsay family's summer house, separated by several years; they bracket a brief section titled "Time Passes," during which the house falls into decay, and a cleaning woman prepares for their return. On the margins of these material transformations the war takes place, and Mrs. Ramsay and her daughter Prue both die.

We catch sight of these deaths and of the war in literal brackets: while the phallic charwoman struggles against dust and decay, the "cleansing" sacrifice of life is made (an ironic allusion to Edmund Gosse), and Andrew Ramsay is killed. The apparent arbitrariness of these parenthetical references challenges us to seek a connection to details such as Mr. Ramsay's obsessive recitation of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Paradoxically, by calling attention to the superficial lack of continuity in her plot, Woolf points to underlying systemic manifestations of a patriarchy that kills, not only in the public but also in the private realm. When Mrs. Ramsay wards off her husband's pessimistic weather forecast, gives her child the Army and Navy Stores catalogue to cut up, or drapes her shawl over the horns that threaten her daughter Cam's sleep, she symbolically challenges a phallic cult of death. The juxtaposition of Andrew's and Prue's deaths blurs the sharp gender lines of canonical war literature. In the profusion of darkness that engulfs the house, the night, and all of Europe, it is too dark to see the future; one cannot tell sea from land or distinguish "This is he" from "This is she."[25]

[23]Here my readings often differ from those of Sandra Gilbert, whose landmark study "Soldier's Heart," confined to British and American women, stresses their sense of empowerment by the war and guilt at survival.

[24]Hynes, *War Imagined*, 345.

[25]Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1955), 194,

Continental women's texts also interpret the war through an analysis of its operation at the homefront and its impact on a community of women. The striking structural feature of Clara Viebig's *Töchter der Hekuba* (1918), however, is not a binary contrast but its mosaic of character portraits, a technique also used by the Italian novelist Matilde Serao in *Mors Tua* (1917, published in English as *The Harvest*) and the French journalist Marcelle Capy in *Des hommes passèrent* (1930, *Men Pass*). Whereas sexual hunger in men's novels about the war is often taken to indicate the protagonist's manliness and the writer's realism, Viebig's portrayal of "the hunger of women not only for food but for men" was condemned by a reviewer as "sordid."[26] In fact, Viebig does portray six women's growing realization of their hunger for a freedom of expression both sexual and social, in a world where they are left on the margins. She weaves a tale of shifting relations among women from different classes under the economic impact of the war. The facade of normalcy cracks, and with it the unified narrative breaks up. Thrust by the war into increasingly "sordid" economic conditions, two of the women go mad, and one commits suicide. In Viebig's militarized Germany, to believe in the return of the men—that is, in the end of the war—is a sign of dementia.

Female hunger for meaningful work is the theme of a sharply etched 1930 socialist novel by Meta Scheele, which satirizes the hypocrisy of a warmongering and nationalist German middle class. Scheele follows two sisters in *Frauen im Krieg* (Women in war), a technique that allows her to contrast women's conservative and radical reactions to the upheavals and deprivations of war. Her primary focus is the wartime development and alienation of Johanna, who becomes a nurse, awakens to a lesbian encounter, and joins the suffragist movement; her fiancé, Klaus, unable to make the transition from the realm of death to postwar society, commits suicide (a theme in Cather's *One of Ours* and in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as well). Johanna's elder sister, Elise, by contrast, is seduced both literally and politically by a "foxy" opportunist who at war's end abandons the propaganda unit he had led to become head of a workers' group and local government. Through her split narrative structure Scheele explicitly confronts us with women's multiple political choices and makes it clear that women "act" in wartime, even though they may not have the vote or the right to serve in the military.

One form of action—and an instance of antimilitarist body speech—

199, 201, 189–90. Woolf's strategic ruptures may help us to understand Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922), which has often been thought to fall apart at the middle.

[26]Cited in Falls, *War Books*, 300; Clara Viebig, *Töchter der Hekuba, ein Roman aus unserer Zeit* (Berlin: Fleischel, 1918).

is the women's strike, which takes women workers and working-class wives emphatically into the public. Wartime strikes, as Marc Ferro notes, are a little-studied phenomenon, and women's involvement in strikes remains a particularly blank page.[27] One of the few traces of that involvement is Berta Lask's brief 1929 story "Frauen im Kampf: Eine Erzählung aus dem Weltkrieg" (Women in battle: a story of the World War), which recounts the virtually silent alignment of a group of women against strikebreakers. In a play on militarist vocabulary, Lask describes these wives of striking harbor workers as gathering in "troops," and alludes to a soft call, a brief greeting, a piece of bread shared, while they "keep their word." As the strikebreakers approach, the women form a chain, a "front" aligned against the "Front," without speaking a word, until a curse ignites the women's anger. They shout: "You cabbage heads, you jamshitters, we'll teach you to put us out. Everywhere they are on strike. The war must stop. The men must come back. We want bread." Even when the police appear, the women do not yield. Struck in the mouth by a saber, their leader rouses herself to cry "Strike!" Lask's narratorial reticence contributes to the effect of her concluding line: "It took a long time, before the police were through with them."[28]

With its forceful puns, Lask's story addresses one of the most censored kinds of battle within the war, the battle on the home front of socialist workers, many of them women, against the war. Repressed as they happened, these strikes have also been omitted from the canonized literature of the Great War, with its cult of the battlefront. Lask reminds us that working-class women have not enjoyed the luxury of the private sphere, and their mouths have been bloodied to prevent their entry into the public sphere of politics. She shows us that political unanimity in support of the war was built, in Germany and elsewhere, on the violent suppression of dissent.

When they set their novels at the home front, Viebig, Scheele, and Lask, like Woolf or Cather, deliberately remind us that war is a national activity that destroys behind the lines as well as at the front. Men die in combat, of course, often significantly at the unseen margins of these texts. But men *and women* also conspicuously die away from the front—of the flu, of hunger, or in childbirth. They may die because profiteers create shortfalls of medicines and rations, stockpile food, provide in-

[27]Marc Ferro writes about the militancy of women workers, which catalyzed the revolution in Petrograd in March 1917, in *The Great War, 1914–1918,* trans. Nicole Stone (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 171.

[28]Berta Lask, "Frauen im Kampf: Eine Erzählung aus dem Weltkrieg," in Brinker-Gabler, *Frauen gegen Krieg,* 230–32.

adequate equipment. Through the motif of suicide Scheele, like Cather and Woolf, challenges the identification of violence with virility. Suicide and self-wounding began to appear in the latter half of the war in men's novels, where they usually figure either martyrdom or personal incapacity. Given an emphatic position in certain women's texts, often in a penultimate scene that demystifies the heroic closure of war rituals, suicide can figure war as a mechanism of castration and autodestruction.[29]

By drawing group portraits Viebig and Scheele deliberately complicate our vision of women's relation to the wartime economy and ideology, as exploiters and exploited. They show women who defend the social rules that confine women and send young men off to kill, as well as those who evade the social script. By dividing their narrative focus and multiplying "plots," they suggest that war is about neither individual heroism nor communal suffering in combat but about the erosion of individual rights for the many and the assumption of political or economic power by the few. To rewrite the scene of war in this way necessarily entails rewriting the genre of the war novel. Through their political analysis of the boundary between battlefront and home front, such texts interrogate the more enduring boundaries drawn between public and private, between men's world and women's world.

In order to confront the censorship of critiques of the war, many women appear to have turned to another genre, the semifictional, semitestimonial sketch, whose broad dissemination calls for closer scholarly study than is possible here. One cliché of literary history is that men write epics while women keep diaries; men in the academy have painted large historical frescoes, while women amateurs have created intimate watercolors and family portraits. Women's sketches of a world-historical event break down such oppositions. A large body of fragmented narratives cast as feminine journalism or as professional records of work in mobile hospitals or casualty clearing stations appeared during and after the war in England, France, Germany, Hungary, even Russia. These texts contest the assumption that women cannot "see" war. In their testimonial form as well as in their signatures (Dr., Sister, V.A.D.), they claim the authority of the real. Their fragmentation assimilates them to the context of newsmagazines, where some of them first appeared, such as the reportorial sketches by Rebecca

[29]I develop issues raised by the territorialization of death in wartime in my essay "Women in the Forbidden Zone," in *Death and Representation,* ed. Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 192–210.

West, Colette, Claire Studer (Goll), and the socialist journalist Marcelle Capy. At the same time, compression may also inscribe the interruptive routines of work punctuated by the arrivals of wounded men. The aim of many sketches was to convey the truth about war to a civilian public; ironically, their very concern for truth has led to their disparagement and disappearance as occasional literature. By contrast, Barbusse's *Under Fire,* an autobiographical work composed out of fractured bits drawn from his diary, has been acclaimed as a "novel."

When a woman enters a field hospital, she enters an in-between zone, both of the war and not of it. Wartime nursing is an ambiguous domain, quasi-domestic and maternal but in the public service. It is a role that calls on women to care for men as well as to cure them. Should a nurse restore a man's ability to fight and wound others, or should she as a nurse-writer try to cure society of the disease of war? A feminist-socialist vision was recorded by Dr. Tatiana Alexinsky, who described her hospital train staffed by women and running between various cities and the front as "a truly feminist train."[30] Alexinsky criticizes czarist elitism and medical hierarchies of power that impede scientific objectivity and proper care of the wounded. Her pared style catches the intonations of peasants, cross-dressed female volunteers, and aristocratic relief workers. Her low-key irony conveys the contradictions of her own position, caught between socialism and nationalism, between medicine and a military operation.

The finest exposition of such contradictions can be found in Mary Borden's *Forbidden Zone* (1929), named for the shifting location right behind the troops where no civilians (and certainly no women, except nurses or prostitutes) were supposed to be found. Borden exploits the irony of her position in a militarized zone, in violation of gender dichotomies. As a nurse with the French medical corps, she transgresses the boundary between women's domestic roles and their wartime occupations. Borden translates the whole machinery of war into the language of the housewife. Stretchers are pulled out of ambulances "as loaves of bread are pulled out of the oven." Borden writes about "mending" men's bodies so that they can be returned to the trenches. "Just as you send your clothes to the laundry and mend them when they come back, so we send our men to the trenches and mend them when they come back again." The sinister note lies in the prearrangement; housekeepers do not prearrange rips. "It is all carefully arranged. Everything is arranged. It is arranged that men should be broken and

[30]Tatiana Alexinsky, *With the Russian Wounded* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1916), 11.

that they should be mended."[31] To domesticate war this way is a "conspiracy." In a closed economy of injury and cure there is no escape except death. Far more dramatically than Woolf, who ironically juxtaposes the "cleansing" of a decaying house with the propagandists' motif of "cleansing sacrifices" required to put Europe back "in order," Borden here transposes normalizing metaphors of domesticity in order to mine the concepts of normalcy and non-war in which war itself is anchored. Her sortie across the linguistic boundary segregating men's world from women's world exposes not only the complicity of women propagandists who domesticate war, but also the false political distinction between war and peace.

If one way to recognize the magnitude of women's implication in the First World War is to examine texts that sprang from women's experiences in occupied villages or medical facilities "at the front," another approach is to recognize that "home" does not always mean Surrey, Lower Saxony, or Kansas. In recent years an effort has been made by historians to acknowledge the impact of the war on Africa and ANZAC nations and to explore its interweaving of nationalism and racism. Unfortunately, this effort has borne little fruit in literary criticism, which remains firmly Eurocentric, white, and predominantly male in its focus.

One little-noticed feature in those women's writings that deliberately decenter the war is the suggestion that the European war and colonialist violence are interlocking systems. In several of the texts cited here—Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* Scheele's *Women in War,* and Capy's *Men Pass,* for example—the theme of imperialism is a red thread tracing awareness of a political displacement that women share with people from the colonies. The irony of colonials fighting under strange skies for their oppressors was not lost on women such as Capy or Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who helped organize Negro women's war work in the face of color bars to service in white Red Cross units. In Dunbar-Nelson's play *Mine Eyes Have Seen,* the question is asked why an orphaned young black man should serve a "nation that let my father's murder go unpunished."[32] The problems of "making a man" of oneself, of maintaining family loyalties, of resisting leaders who carelessly throw men's lives away all dissolve in the face of the irresistible call to prove that the race is equal to its demands for citizenship. For Dunbar-Nelson that ambiguous position in this era of nationalisms is complicated by both race and gender.

[31]Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1930), 125, 124. See also Marcus, "Corpus/Corps/Corpse."

[32]Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *Mine Eyes Have Seen,* in *Crisis* 15 (1918): 271.

In order to address the intersection of nationalism and imperialism even more directly, we may turn to "The Mutiny" (1919), by a Bengali woman, Svarnakumari Devi. Svarnakumari, a politically active reformer and sister of Rabindranath Tagore, was a delegate to the Indian National Congress in 1889–90 and for thirty years editor of *Bharati*, a Bengali literary journal. She juxtaposes the 1857 War of Indian Independence ("the Mutiny") with the Great War in a witty response to British nationalism from the perspective of a colonial ally whose war efforts are exacted without political reward and whose own nationalism must be firmly repressed.

Amid after-dinner chitchat among a group of Englishwomen, the nameless Bengali narrator reflects on history and the present war. Her dark reflections frame a lighthearted tale told by her English hostess about fears of native atrocities in the decades following "the Mutiny." As a young woman, Mrs. A had once been frightened by the racket of firearms going off at midnight, only to discover the next morning that a conflict had arisen between police and domestic sepoys sent to guard her—a case of overzealous guards (rival lovers of her ayah) whose outburst was "exaggerated a hundredfold by my wild imagination and fears."[33] Mrs. A's self-mocking tale-within-the-tale underscores the misreading of "dreadful" natives by implanted colonists.

The theme of one culture misreading another dominates the Bengali narrator's thoughts about Indian history, as she looks out from the veranda at the harbor. In the distance lie the island forts of the famous "pirate" Angray, who terrorized English, Portuguese, and Moguls alike. Responding to the label "pirate," she asks, "In the days when might was right, what chief, or ruler, or founder of a dynasty was not a robber or a pirate?" (227). How one reads Angray's actions or the 1857 War of Independence (when the Rani of Jhansi cross-dressed to lead her soldiers on the field of battle) depends on one's own political site.

When the other women chat about "the great war" and boast of military superiority to the French and Germans, the narrator feels silenced. Silence and self-division are the lot of a colonial, who has no nation of her own. She may feel pride at the victories of British troops including sepoy regiments (whose devotion to their British leaders is the focus of another story by Svarnakumari). But a wartime atmosphere makes any Indian boast of military accomplishment suspect: "If I dressed my views would they be appreciated? Most probably not. Now

[33]Mrs. Ghosal (Srimati Svarna Kumari Devi), "The Mutiny (A True Story)," in *Short Stories* (Madras: Ganesh, 1919), 337; subsequent references are cited in the text.

is a time of misunderstanding and is not mere suspicion positive proof against lifelong loyalty? Then who knows what next—indictment or internment?" (229).

Svarnakumari expands the political import of her double story in two ways, as a story of race and a story of gender. Thinking to herself, the narrator ponders the irony of her situation as a colonial, deprived of "the simple rights which loyal citizens expect" (229). "We are not treated as equals," she reflects (230). That inequality has been driven home precisely by the nationalist feelings aroused by the war, to which she as a subaltern has no right or access. "Never before had I been made to feel my racial inequality in my intercourse with English people. . . . Today, these expressions of a woman belonging to a free nation made me feel myself an utter stranger" (231). As an Indian, she feels that Occidentals interpret "our loyalty and self-sacrifice as cringing, dog-like virtues" (230).

Her fears are confirmed by the cultural imperialism of another guest, Mrs. B., who mocks the two sati pillars in memory of Angray's wives. Sati had been banned by the British in 1829. When the narrator praises the divine courage and love of suicidal women, Mrs. B's curled lip speaks eloquently: "To allow oneself to be burnt alive and not to have the power to utter a word! That is your courage! To be trodden under the heel of subjugation and feel it to be the happiness of virtue" (231). Oblivious to her own exclusion as a woman from masculine company by the British after-dinner ritual, Mrs B. identifies the culturally alien woman with the political impotence of a colonized people. In these very years Gandhi would seek political power by linking the nationalist movement of passive resistance to the "natural" female virtue of "silent suffering."[34]

As the narrator continual reminds us, and as the nested frame structure of the story underscores, cultural values are contextually bound. Sati may horrify an Englishwoman, but the fearless acceptance of death by sepoy volunteers gratifies her. The closing lines of the story announce the arrival of Indian troops in France who have "thrown themselves into the thick of the fight." Not only the French but the English government "has been touched by this enthusiastic self-sacrifice."

Svarnakumari's story points to a parallel between women's politically extorted contributions to the war effort and those of colonials. Her own political dislocation, which places Indians at a mythic "no place," enables her to interrogate nationalism without renouncing pride in her

[34]See Ketu Katrak, "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha,' and Representations of Female Sexuality," in Parker et al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, 398.

people. By contrast to the European texts under review here, the blurring of gender lines in this text throws into primary relief racial and imperialist boundaries. With remarkable intricacy the story dignifies self-sacrifice as an attribute of women as well as soldiers which may acquire the power to define a culture. By stressing the constant process of cultural translation and redefinition, the story raises the possibility that the sepoys' sacrifices may be absurd: they may go unrecognized. India will not be granted autonomy in reward for its sacrifices. We will forget that the Great War reached all the way to Bengal.

National memories and literary histories alike are tools of cultural construction that serve, however inadvertently, political goals and reinforce assumptions about gender and citizenship, in the republic of letters as well as in the nation. For Woolf the point may be precisely the failures of memory, the gulf cut between the official text of war and the broken cups and lives that record war's manifold shocks. For Svarnakumari Devi the dialogue between national memory and nationalist military history brings into play all the hypocrisy of European imperialism; tacitly understood behind the occluded contribution of Indian sepoys is the cultural imperialism that denigrates all Indians as self-sacrificing, effeminate subalterns. A nationalist Bengali woman has no secure site within such cultural discourses.

In retrospect, we may understand better the erasure of women from the history of war literature, even by so astute a critic as Paul Fussell. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that many of these forgotten texts are about *women.* The a priori identification of war with masculinity symbolically exiles women from war fiction. One way to respond to this exile is to fold war back inside a domestic frame, at the risk of creating a text unrecognizable as a "war novel." Thus, in several of these texts a split narrative structure juxtaposes the lives and deaths of women with the lives and deaths of men. Matilde Serao alerts us to the possibilities of writing against the grain by dedicating *The Harvest* "to the unknown mother." Many texts by Continental women depict violence against women as part of the official war. Mosaic structures permit some writers to differentiate among women's modes of implication in war. They may draw ironic strength from responding to the overdetermined yet highly contradictory, obscurantist wartime discourses on femininity.

Similarly, texts that deal with male protagonists, but at the home front, have been occluded by literary history. Although the very term *home front* was used to foster the belief that "battles" had to be won by civilians as war became "total," in a hierarchy of fronts home remains

at the bottom. In texts written as early as 1916, some women began to invert that hierarchy and to ask whether men sacrificed by the thousands are not at the bottom of a system in which the real decisions are being made by protected politicians. Ellen La Motte and Svarnakumari Devi satirize a "juggernaut" of war requiring human sacrifices that must be at once mystified and emptied of political power. Displaced from the "center" of the trenches to the "margin" of the domestic economy, the violent deaths of soldiers are assimilated to other kinds of institutionally ratified death.

The contradictory discourses of war invite ironic structures: bracketed war scenes, divided narratives, and multiple protagonists offer narrative "sorties" to escape ideological confines that are hallmarks of the genre. Precisely when women writers undercut the stock binary gender representations of war, their work became illegible as "war fiction." For to erode the borders between the realms of men and women, between public and private, is to erode the distinction between war and peace. Although grounded in actual experiences of medical "horror" in some cases, and focused on the *Realpolitik* that sends men to slaughter, the texts discussed here have seemed "unrealistic" and "sordid" to readers who expected to find a primary focus on the filth and terror of the trenches, set off from the realm of women.

Comparative study can begin to reveal how women's war fictions both participate in and resist the discursive gendering of war. It reveals the different ideological obstacles that confront women from Britain, Germany, or India. Once critics recognize inflections by race, class, and political condition, they can recuperate savage ironies in voices (of men and women, of Ibo and Bengali) that custodians of a narrowly defined male record could not hear.