



# WRITING IN NO-MAN'S LAND: WOMEN, WAR, AND LITERATURE

## ESCREVENDO NA TERRA DE NINGUÉM: MULHERES, GUERRA E LITERATURA

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**RESUMO:** A relação entre a guerra e as mulheres se caracteriza pela exclusão destas, que, relegadas às margens dos sistemas de poder e governo, são historicamente privadas de participação em decisões, ações e representações referentes a conflitos. Este artigo discute a desestabilização desse quadro, que Adrienne Rich descreve como "a ideia arcaica da mulher como *'front doméstico,'*" em face das guerras totais e movimentos feministas do século XX. Propõem-se, além disso, novas maneiras de se pensar o lugar divergente a partir do qual as mulheres escrevem a literatura de guerra e contribuem para aquele desmantelamento. Finalmente, apontam-se traços remanescentes da ideia denunciada por Rich que, sugerindo a reprodução de hierarquias dentro da área da literatura de guerra escrita por mulheres, sinalizam a necessidade de ampliar as fronteiras desse campo e de seu estudo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** literatura escrita por mulheres; literatura de guerra; teoria e crítica feminista; marginalidade.

**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between war and women is characterized by the exclusion of women, who, relegated to the margins of the systems of power and government, are historically deprived of participation in the decisions, actions, and representations related to conflicts. This article discusses the destabilization of this view, described by Adrienne Rich as "the archaic idea of women as a 'home front,'" in face of the total wars and feminist movements of the twentieth century. It also proposes new ways of thinking the divergent place from which women write war literature and contribute to that dismantlement. Finally, it points out remaining traces of the idea Rich denounces, which suggest the reproduction of hierarchies within the area of the literature of war written by women and indicate the necessity of expanding the borders of this field and its study.

**KEYWORDS:** women's literature; literature of war; feminist theory and criticism; marginality.

In her 1984 talk “Notes towards a politics of location,” Adrienne Rich asserts the place from which she speaks. The location she underlines is not only Europe, where her words are spoken, or the United States, where they were thought, but a metaphorical position of intersection of her gender, American citizenship, upper-middle social class, Jewish ethnicity, white skin, and homosexuality. In this line of reasoning, Rich advocates a feminist theory and critical practice that, conscious of women’s different positionalities, avoids the reproduction of patriarchal models of oppression. Her claim that “bodies have more than one identity”<sup>1</sup> is fundamental to the development of the politics of location, locational feminism,<sup>2</sup> and contemporary cartographies of subjectivity. In this essay, however, I return to “Notes” for a related but less explored critical insight, which leads to an investigation of the relationship between women and war. From this point of departure, I critically revisit the history of that relationship and offer a reading of the much-discussed space of no-man’s land as the place from and out of which women write war literature.

Rich lists among the patriarchal and militarist values repeated through generations “[t]he valorization of manliness and masculinity,” and “[t]he archaic idea of women as a ‘home front’ even as the missiles are deployed in the backyards of Wyoming and Mutlangen”.<sup>3</sup> One can argue

that, for her, militarism and, by extension, war are historically related to male maintenance of power and to a consequent marginalization of women, placed literally and figuratively away from the center of action, negotiation, and representation. This marginal position, or the “idea of women as a ‘home front,’” however, does not implicate that women have not suffered or participated in wars, for that center, after all, cannot exist without its margins.

Even when overtly excluded from politics, decision-making processes, and battles themselves, women played valuable roles in wartime national mobilization, offering emotional motivation and comfort to male combatants, supplying military and food industries, supporting the state economy by working in factories, providing for the household, and caring for the injured. All such functions considered, one can understand the archaism of the “idea of women as a ‘home front’” as a historical obfuscation of patriarchal society to acknowledge that the homefront is also a front, as much a part of war as the battlefield. To Rich, as I see it, the pervasiveness of war and the absurdity of denying it become most evident in the contemporary world. After the total, global wars of the 20th century, the threat of nuclear holocaust, and the constant menace of terrorism, the rhetoric of fronts, of a gendered, or even spatial, distribution of war, begins to crumble.

1. RICH. *Notes towards a politics of location*, p. 215.
2. For discussion on locational feminism, see Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Mappings: feminism and the cultural geographies of encounter* (1998) and “Locational feminism: gender, cultural geographies, and geopolitical literacy” (2001).
3. RICH. *Notes towards a politics of location*, p. 225. Rich refers here to the American state of Wyoming and the German city of Mutlangen as bases where the U.S. Forces stationed missiles during the Cold War against the USSR, as part of a strategy of deterrence. According to Donald Mackenzie (1993), “[b]y 1967 [...] 1,000 Minuteman ICBMs [International Continental Ballistic Missiles] and 54 Titan II ICBMs [...] sat in underground silos dispersed, miles apart, over nine Air Force reservations in Montana, the Dakotas, Missouri, Wyoming, Arizona, Kansas, and Arkansas” (161). Wyoming still houses its Air Force reservation. The town of Mutlangen, on the other hand, has promoted historical tourism in the once military site since 2007.

But the antiquity, in Western societies at least, of the comprehension of war as a male practice and of women as homely spectators and instigators,<sup>4</sup> leads one to ask of historical texts to what we can attribute that cultural belief. To discuss that, it is important to first clarify the definition of war. In his defense of the overlooked and underappreciated human potential for peace, Douglas P. Fry (2007) considers different understandings of war because, to him, “[d]efining war so broadly as to encompass a plethora of individual and group conflict behavior [...] can facilitate making the claim for the universality of war,”<sup>5</sup> against which he argues. After reviewing Keith Otterbein’s (1970) proposal that warfare is “armed combat between political communities” and Bobbi Low’s (1993) assertion that “war – lethal conflict – is older than humanity itself,”<sup>6</sup> Fry favors Roy Prosterman’s (1972) idea that war is:

A group activity carried on by members of one community against members of another community, in which it is the primary purpose to inflict serious injury or death on multiple nonspecified members of that other community, or in which the primary purpose makes it highly likely that serious injury or death will be inflicted on multiple nonspecified members of that community in the accomplishment of that primary purpose.<sup>7</sup>

This definition is less generalizing because “it clearly excludes individual homicides and feuding and, consequently, clarifies that *war entails relatively impersonal lethal aggression between communities*”.<sup>8</sup> However, it is still controversial because it implicates, for instance, that conflicts between rival criminal gangs in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, which often involve a good portion of the community, are wars, a conclusion usually opposed by scholars of the field.

In a debate about the impossibility of reducing war to a neither broad nor restrictive single statement, Luiz Gustavo Leitão Vieira (2013), for example, argues that “organized violence is not necessarily war.”<sup>9</sup> The formulation Vieira prefers to adopt throughout his study is adapted from Robert O’Connell (1995), who establishes “a set of characteristics that delimit what we should understand as war [...] a ‘defining structure’”.<sup>10</sup> This model of war consists of premeditation and planning, origin in collectivity, leadership, willingness to engage in warfare, and result. Vieira admits that wars do not necessarily involve all the components of O’Connell’s structure, for they may vary culturally, and that the model fails to account for human emotions, irrationality, and imponderability, inherent, in his opinion, to warfare. Nevertheless, he considers that set of characteristics useful and reliable as “elements outlining a theoretical formulation towards a definition of war”<sup>11</sup> because they

4. For an instance of the literary representation of the notion of women as homely spectators of war, see British poet Siegfried Sassoon’s “Glory of women” (1918), which expresses bitterness towards women’s patriotic support of war and their safety, in contrast to the horrors suffered by men: “When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run, / Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood. / O German mother dreaming by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud.”
5. FRY. *Beyond war: the human potential for peace*, p. 16.
6. FRY. *Beyond war: the human potential for peace*, p. 14-15.
7. Prosterman. *Surviving to 3000: an introduction to the study of lethal conflict*, p. 140.

8. FRY. *Beyond war: the human potential for peace*, p. 17.

9. VIEIRA. *A escrita da guerra: areté, nóstos e kléos na análise de narrativas de guerra*, p. 26. In the original: “violência organizada não é necessariamente guerra.” This and subsequent translations from Vieira (2013) are mine.
10. VIEIRA. *A escrita da guerra: areté, nóstos e kléos na análise de narrativas de guerra*, p. 26. In the original: “características que delimitem o que devemos compreender como guerra – o que ele chama de ‘estrutura definidora.’”
11. VIEIRA. *A escrita da guerra: areté, nóstos e kléos na análise de narrativas de guerra*, p. 27. In the original, “elementos balizadores de uma formulação teórica para definição da guerra.”

are present in accounts of current as well as ancient conflicts, even those prior to the creation of nation-states and modern armies, such as the Trojan War.

To my purpose of seeking in history explanations for the cultural belief in the nonparticipation of women in wars, O’Connell’s defining structure of war, adopted here as brought by Vieira, offers important insights. Of all its components, willingness, or the readiness to “engage in actions of certain duration [and] that implicate risks”<sup>12</sup> is the only that often includes women. Premeditation and planning, collective origin, and leadership involve, in turn, the high ranks of the military and politics, fields from which women tend to be excluded in peace and wartime.

Surely enough, if we look thousands of years back, into the beginnings of civilization, we find a gendered distribution of tasks in human settlements that attribute to men, because of their greater body proportions and strength, the functions of protecting the group against the most various threats, hunting, and handling heavy work, all of which could involve tools or weapons, if available. But Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida (2015) draws attention to the manner that scenario is appropriated throughout time to serve “the perverse logics of biological determinism,” a discourse in which:

[M]en, for their physical constitution and strength, would be in a position of superiority, acting as providers of the family and agents of the public sphere. Women, on the other hand, would be relegated to private spaces for their maternal role and supposed physical fragility, exercising activities strictly linked to the domestic zone, such as housework and child care.<sup>13</sup>

From primitive warriors to the “agents of the public sphere,” therefore, men have dominated the processes involved in the structure of war. It would, however, be uncritical of contemporary readers of poststructuralist, posthumanist, and postmodern theories, to continue to attribute to “an essentialist view of sexual difference”<sup>14</sup> the maintenance of patriarchal power through the centuries. War is believed to be a male activity because it originates in structures traditionally controlled by men, and because it retroactively enforces male supremacy and patriarchal values as one of its results. Women are not alienated from wars because they are peaceful, nurturing, and feeble. They are, in fact, archaically idealized as a homefront because they have been historically denied participation in politics and public affairs, a point central to Virginia Woolf’s feminist reflections on war in *Three guineas* (1938), on which I comment in the next section.

Paradoxically, almost as ancient as the marginalization of women from centers of power and wars are the earliest

12. VIEIRA. *A escrita da guerra: areté, nóstos e kléos na análise de narrativas de guerra*, p. 26. In the original “se engajar em ações de certa duração que implicam em riscos.”

13. ALMEIDA. *Cartografias contemporâneas: espaço, corpo, escrita*, p. 20. In the original: “a lógica perversa do determinismo biológico... os homens, por sua constituição e força físicas, estariam em posição de superioridade, atuando, assim, como provedores da família e como agentes na esfera pública. Em contrapartida, as mulheres estariam, então, relegadas ao espaço privado por sua função maternal e suposta fragilidade física, exercendo atividades estritamente ligadas ao plano doméstico, como o cuidado com a casa e os filhos.” This and subsequent translations from Almeida (2015) are mine.

14. ALMEIDA. *Cartografias contemporâneas: espaço, corpo, escrita*, p. 20. In the original: “uma visão essencialista da diferença sexual.”

myths and accounts of their direct or indirect participation in those conflicts from their peripheral position. Denise Borille de Abreu (2008) traces such participation back to the mythological Greek goddesses who intervene in the course of war, as represented in Homer's *Iliad*. Thetis, Achilles' mother, for example, is placed in an "unparalleled position," as "intermediary between soldiers in the battlefield and the gods,"<sup>15</sup> and exercises her influence on Zeus in behalf of the Trojans, on her son's request. The goddess of love, Aphrodite, on the other hand, protects Paris, the seducer of Helen. Abreu argues that another important woman in this mythological world is Penelope, the Queen of Ithaca. Her role is closer to the "women as home front" than Thetis's, for she remains at her palace in charge of domestic chores. However, her ingenious stratagem of undoing by night her daytime weaving of Laertes's burial shroud, to put off her second wedding, demonstrates agency and subtle power over her own fate during and after the war. Moreover, from both myth and history, Abreu cites the Amazons, a tribe of women warriors in ancient Greece, as the heading of a "long outline of women who played an outstanding role in wartime."<sup>16</sup> They are followed, when one turns to British history, by women like Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, and Florence Nightingale, respectively, in the 15th, 16th, and 19th centuries. Those women's celebrated deeds suggest the existence of nameless, but similarly important others, and

help unsettle patriarchal assumptions about gender roles in war and peacetime.

This questioning of patriarchal, essentialist definitions of gender roles becomes more evident, as Rich states, with the emergence of total wars in the 20th century because of a notorious wartime change in women's condition, which makes explicit their significant participation in such conflicts. The wartime inversion of gender roles is one of the central issues in Abreu's discussion. She believes that the representation of women in war has evolved from myth, as considered above, to silent victims, and from those to proactive members of society. She also argues that these shifts in representation are motivated by actual social changes in women's status. Prior to World War I, for example, women did not do military service, and they were expected to be "merciful, caring, nurturing, and pure [...] in association with the Virgin [Mary]".<sup>17</sup> This image, appropriately defined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) as "the angel in the house",<sup>18</sup> placed women in the position of helpless objects of protection, and patriotic supporters of the nation in war.

Women were forced out of that role "to join the workforce in order to replace men who were drafted into military service".<sup>19</sup> They had to leave the private space of the domestic sphere to occupy farms, factories, and commerce.

15. ABREU. *No woman's land? Women's writings and historical representation in World War I*, p. 20-21.

16. ABREU. *No woman's land? Women's writings and historical representation in World War I*, p. 24.

17. ABREU. *No woman's land? Women's writings and historical representation in World War I*, p. 10.

18. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *The madwoman in the attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*, p. 17.

19. ABREU. *No woman's land? Women's writings and historical representation in World War I*, p. 11.

Of course, a concession must be made that those new functions were still an imposition of a patriarchal system of government in total war, compelling its citizens, often through patriotic fallacies, to contribute to the national effort. Nevertheless, outside the house, women encountered possibilities. As political activists, ambulance drivers, nurses, journalists, and factory workers, they became wage-earning women. The earning of their livings empowered them because their existence was no longer contingent on a man's wage. Once achieved, such status would not be easily given up. It turned into a reason for rivalry between women and returning soldiers, who had to compete with them for work, and felt emasculated by the changes in gender roles, on top of their often-damaged condition. It also motivated women's movements in their proactive fight for equality of rights.

A hundred years after the end of World War I, however, there are still cultural traces of Rich's "archaic idea of women as a home front" and of Almeida's "essentialist view of sexual difference" in the way we regard the relationship between women and war. Ifat Maoz (2009), addresses, for instance, what she calls "the women and peace hypothesis" in her analysis of the effects, on Israeli-Palestinian peace transactions, of the national identity and gender of a negotiator offering a compromise proposal. Her findings confirm

that the social belief in a "tendency of women to hold more peaceful and compromising attitudes than men"<sup>20</sup> grants them a more favorable reception of proposals. Galia Golan (2011) aptly advises her audience, nevertheless, that this must not be "the often-held discussion on [...] whether or not women are more peace-loving than men",<sup>21</sup> but, as I see it, an effort to acknowledge how those women appropriate the stereotypical image historically associated with them to minimize and prevent conflicts. Nonetheless, continued questioning of such fixed, essentialist notions of identity and gendered functions in either war or peace is necessary so that people may, for example, educate themselves not to accept, and to help reduce, the prejudice and abuses women suffer in military careers.<sup>22</sup> This way it will finally be possible to read women's writings on war for their literary value, since such a wide participation in conflicts would not go unwritten.

#### OF/OFF NO-MAN'S LAND: WOMEN IN WAR LITERATURE

The title of this essay, "Writing in no-man's land," refers to a space whose literal and metaphorical meanings are relevant to the study of war and its representations, especially those produced by women. "No-man's land" acquired its contemporary connotation mainly because of World War I. Before that, according to historian Joseph E. Persico (2005),

20. MAOZ. *The women and peace hypothesis? The effect of opponent negotiators' gender on the evaluation of compromise solutions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, p. 519.

21. GOLAN. *A gender perspective on security*, p. 42.

22. Kirby Dick's 2012 documentary film *The Invisible War* denounces, according to the numbers of the U.S. Department of Defense, that 3,230 women and men serving the military reported sexual assault in the fiscal year of 2009. The Department, moreover, admits that, considering that as much as 80% of survivors of such abuse tend not to report, the estimated number of service members attacked in 2009 could rise to 16,150. Among the various reactions to the film is the creation of the national organization Protect Our Defenders (POD), dedicated to offering support to victims, and to ending, through policy reforms, advocacy, and public education, the epidemic of rape and sexual assault in the military.

“[t]he term was believed to have been used [...] to define a contested territory”, and, in its first recorded usage dated from 1320, to denominate “a dumping ground for refuse between provinces and fiefdoms”.<sup>23</sup> Within the model of trench warfare of the Great War, it signifies “the terrain between enemy trenches”,<sup>24</sup> controlled by neither part and disputed by both. That land is often represented, in art and history, as a devastated place, where corpses of soldiers rot in the mud and rain, among remnants of civilization.<sup>25</sup> The expression, and variations such as “no-woman’s land,” serves as title to various articles, movies, and books, among which is Gilbert and Gubar’s 19th and 20th-century historiography of women writers, compiled in three volumes: *The war of words* (1988), *Sexchanges* (1989), and *Letters from the front* (1994).

Gilbert and Gubar appropriate “no-man’s land” as a metaphor for the 20th-century literary and institutional scene, which they see as “a vexed terrain,” where “armies of men and women [...] clash by day and night”.<sup>26</sup> To the authors, this “battle of the sexes” is related to the diversification of women’s social roles in World War I, after which “the rise of the New Woman was not matched by the coming of a New Man but instead was identified [...] with a crisis of masculinity that we have imaged through the figure of the no-man”.<sup>27</sup> The “no-man” is the disillusioned homecoming

soldier, the wounded, and the shell-shocked, often unable, or unwilling, to return to life as it once was. Gilbert and Gubar thus disturbingly suggest that “the Great War [...] allowed at least women to profit from male pain”<sup>28</sup> because it helped create conditions for them to claim their place in the public sphere, which, as the expression “no-man’s land”, literally read, implies, no longer belonged to men.

As much as I admire Gilbert and Gubar’s work in defining the place of the woman writer in the last century as one of empowerment, I am skeptical towards their view of no-man’s land as a metaphor for an even dispute between men and women, especially in relation to the literary scene. This preoccupation is shared, according to the authors themselves, by “nineteenth and twentieth-century women writers [who] have been far less confident of women’s victory”<sup>29</sup> in the battle of sexes. In this sense, I would like to propose other readings of “no-man’s land” that regard it as a figurative space for women’s writings of war, and women’s literature in general.

One reading considers that no-man’s land is an area between enemy trenches to suggest its understanding as a liminal space, a space “in-between”. Homi Bhabha (1994) regards “in-between” as a space of the marginal, of the limiting, an interstice bridging opposing parts, where difference is acknowledged and articulated. If one takes into

23. PERSICO. *Eleventh month, eleventh day, eleventh hour: armistice day, 1918 World War I and its violent climax*, p. 68.
24. PERSICO. *Eleventh month, eleventh day, eleventh hour: armistice day, 1918 World War I and its violent climax*, p. 68.
25. For artistic representations of no-man’s land, see, for example, the paintings “We are making a new world” (1918), “Wire” (1918-1919), by Paul Nash, “Over the top” (1918), by John Nash, and “Paths of glory” (1917), by Christopher Nevinson.
26. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *The war of words*, p. xiii.
27. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *Sexchanges*, p. xii.

28. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *Sexchanges*, p. xvii.

29. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *The war of words*, p. 66.

account, as in the introductory section, that women are relegated to the margins of Western warring societies, one may begin to see these societies' liminal space of no-man's land as metaphorically populated by women. In this sense, when women represent war, they write from that paradoxical place of multiple (non-)belonging. This position might be the one to which Woolf (1938) refers when she states that "if you [brother] insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood" that, because that country has historically denied women the same rights as men, "as a woman, I have no country [...] As a woman, my country is the whole world".<sup>30</sup> In this passage, Woolf underlines the alienation of her sisters from the war-making political centers, also locating women in the margins, and, as I suggest, in that in-betweenness of no-man's land.

To the entrenched soldier, no-man's land is a place of danger and fear. Persico well illustrates that sensation through a Lieutenant of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment's memories of a raid. The Lieutenant reports that "[t]he party waited in brittle silence, during which 'tiny noises are magnified a hundred fold [...] a very ominous sign'".<sup>31</sup> This atmosphere of suspense and terror is, moreover, magnified by the anticipation of confrontation with the enemy: "My heart thumps so heavily that they must hear it, my face is covered with cold perspiration [...] I have one solitary

thought: I am going to kill a man [...] and the thought makes me miserable and at the same time joyful".<sup>32</sup> The conflicting misery and joy the Lieutenant describes can be associated with the dynamics of abjection: an oscillation between repulsion and attraction. No-man's land lures the soldier for its promise of the overwhelming thrill of facing death. The filthy sight of decomposing, dismembered bodies and waste, however, strongly repels them. Almeida adequately remarks that, to French poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva, "the abject is fundamentally associated with the feminine, and the maternal element".<sup>33</sup> The relationship of the abject to no-man's land, on the one hand, and to the feminine, on the other, supports, in my view, the possibility of reading that space as metaphorically connected to women, and as the position from where they write war.

Aside from a field for a battle of the sexes, or a space of in-betweenness and abjection, I believe it is possible to read no-man's land, in its relation to women's writings, as a non-place, or a de-place.<sup>34</sup> A de-place is what I understand as the antithesis of an acknowledged space. It is denial, silence, suspended existence. This view is inspired by one of Gilbert and Gubar's own descriptions of no-man's land as "a land that was *not*, a country of the impossible".<sup>35</sup> It draws from the acoustic similarity between "de-place" and "displace". Displacement is an important word here because

30. WOOLF. *Three guineas*, p. 108-109.

31. PERSICO. *Eleventh month, eleventh day, eleventh hour: armistice day, 1918 World War I and its violent climax*, p. 69.

32. PERSICO. *Eleventh month, eleventh day, eleventh hour: armistice day, 1918 World War I and its violent climax*, p. 70.

33. ALMEIDA. *Cartografias contemporâneas: espaço, corpo, escrita*, p. 103. In the original: "Para Kristeva, o abjeto é fundamentalmente associado ao feminino e ao elemento materno."

34. The concept of de-placement came to my knowledge during Elena Isayev's lecture "Unmapped world: meshworks rather than nation states," at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, on 5 April 2017. In the occasion, she discussed that, in a speech recreated by ancient historian Livy, the dictator Camillus, returning to a war-torn Rome after exile, expresses greater fear of de-placement (erasure, inexistence of his beloved city) than of displacement (moving elsewhere as long as Rome stood).

35. GILBERT AND GUBAR. *Sexchanges*, p. 267.



it is, spatially and socially, one of the main effects of war on women's subjectivity. It is also relevant here because, as much as it may imply movement forced upon the subject, it also suggests a degree of trespassing, transgressing the physical and social borders the displaced subject crosses. In this sense, when I argue that women write from the deplace of no-man's land, I do not mean to pessimistically sentence their literature to remain enclosed within that space. On the contrary, despite the thick barbed wire and enclosing silence and denial, women's writings have and will continue to transgress such borders, in a movement off and, one might say, beyond no-man's land.

Although the focus of this essay is the literature of war produced by women, I see the space of no-man's land, as I have been discussing, as a metaphor for the place from/off which women have historically written, whether they represent war or not. As a matter of fact, silencing and denial from a male-centered publishing industry and criticism are among the main difficulties Gilbert and Gubar (2007) name to now celebrated authoresses such as Mary Wroth, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and George Eliot. The lives and works of Behn, the Brontës, and Eliot are, in fact, much earlier mentioned in Woolf's *A room of one's own* (1929), helping support her thesis that basic material conditions, namely,

five hundred pounds a year and an undisturbed room of her own, are requirements for a woman to write good fiction. Such conditions allow for a state that Woolf calls "freedom of the mind", that is, the ability to "think of things in themselves",<sup>36</sup> "or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes".<sup>37</sup> The woman of letters Woolf pictures is financially independent from men and family, and, thus, able to devote time and effort to her production, itself unconstrained by economic subordination and paternalistic influence. However, aside from materialism, this "intellectual freedom" is affected by education. In discussing this matter, Woolf often lends a resentful tone to her text, for, to her, while men were entitled to the best education in England, women usually received faulty instruction. Either she did not see herself as a counter-example or she thought she could have received a better education if she had been born a man.

In a collection of women's texts on the Great War, Margaret Higonnet (1999) revisits the relation between women's education and writing: "[w]e continue to encounter the thesis that women's domestic condition, their lack of education, and their education in femininity prevented them from recording their experiences or reactions to public events, especially 'war'".<sup>38</sup> Like Woolf, Higonnet acknowledges women's deficient intellectual instruction

36. WOOLF. *A room of one's own*, p. 47.

37. WOOLF. *A room of one's own*, p. 77.

38. HIGONNET. *Lines of fire: women writers of World War I*, p. xxii.

as a hindrance to their literary production. However, the previous quote also suggests that she sees that “lack of education” and “education in femininity” as a common “thesis,” or argument, for leaving women’s effective writings out of a male-centered tradition, which is valued, in turn, as elevated, elaborate, and authentic. As a matter of fact, among the challenges shared by women’s literature in general and women’s literature of war, it is the question of the authority of “authentic” experience that mostly draws my attention, especially because this idea remains strong, even with the increasing recognition of women’s representations of conflicts.

Within the field of literature of war, the authority granted to male writings seems to be based on the already discussed “archaic idea of women as a home front.” In this line of reasoning, since men experience the “reality” of the battlefield, their representation of war is the reliable, realistic account of those who had been there. In contrast, women’s writings have frequently been distrusted, for how could women narrate experiences they would not have lived in the safety of the homefront? As I have argued in the previous section, the notion that women do not face wars is fallacious because, although excluded from the centers of war-making power structures, they have historically played important roles from their marginal position. However, just as such

participation is often unacknowledged and forgotten, so are, according to Higonnet, women’s testimonies and reactions neglected in bibliographies and official archives of war, for institutions and earlier historians and critics tended to narrow the whole of the event of war to combat. This restricting and exclusionary practice, nevertheless, is not yet, unfortunately, left in the past. The contemporary scholar of war, Samuel Hynes (1990), for instance, argues that “[t]here is nothing like a war for demonstrating to women their inferior status, nothing like the war experiences of men for making clear the exclusion of women from life’s great excitements”.<sup>39</sup> In this biased and war-glorifying passage, Hynes also reduces war to firing lines, and seems to disregard its extensive effects, a position somewhat contradictory to a scholar who devises the notion of the “myth of war”. “Combat,” Higonnet reminds us, “is not the sum total of ‘war’”.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, each of the several forms of experiencing war discussed so far should allow for its account to be seen as “authentic,” regardless the gender of whoever lives or writes them.

What is most intriguing about the authority derived from experience is that, while it remains a question that women writers have to confront, that has pointedly not been an issue to male authors who did not live through war. Higonnet points out that “Rupert Brooke, usually thought to be a

39. HYNES. *A war imagined: the First World War and English culture*, p. 88.

40. HIGONNET. *Lines of fire: women writers of World War I*, p. xxi.

41. HIGONNET. *Lines of fire: women writers of World War I*, p. xxiii.

‘war poet,’ died of disease before he ever saw combat”.<sup>41</sup> Stephen Crane, in turn, was born six years after the end of the American Civil War. Yet, *The red badge of courage* (1895) was received with acclaim. These observations suggest that it is the maintenance of a gender-based literary hierarchy, in which men’s texts are superior to women’s, rather than the actual need for battlefield experience, that underlies the depreciation of women’s literature of war as inauthentic, unrealistic, and faulty. They also indicate that it may be imagination and empathy, more than authentic experience, that allows men and women to write good literature of war.

This notion of the valorization of works of imagination in the face of accounts of “real” experience escalates towards the turn of the 21st century. Scholars such as Hayden White (1978), Linda Hutcheon (1988), Higonnet herself, and writers like Tim O’Brien (1990) and Ian McEwan (2001) call into question, through a critical view of historiography and the production of historiographic metafiction, the possibility of authoritative claims to truth in the discipline of history and so-called factual accounts. They assert the common textuality of both fiction and history, and level these discourses, disclosing how narratives we consider authentic reports of experience are, in fact, inevitably articulated through what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls “the logic of fiction”.<sup>42</sup> That is, every story is inescapably intertwined with a

subjective perception of reality and ordering of events, with the imprecision of memories, or our inability to face them, and with the limitations and arbitrariness of language. In this sense, the view of authority and authenticity of “a true war story”,<sup>43</sup> to use O’Brien’s celebrated phrase, is undermined, for the benefit of a supposedly more democratic and inclusive field of war literature.

Our postmodern and contemporary comprehension of the inconsistency of notions of authority and authenticity in war literature, however, does not erase women’s long-lasting struggle against them. While some women authors supposedly agree that male experiences and, thus, representations of war are more valuable than their own,<sup>44</sup> others address this matter ironically, and demur while seeming to assent. A case in point is Edith Wharton’s “Writing a war story” (1919), a narrative of pretty nurse Ivy Spang’s failure in composing “a good stirring trench story”<sup>45</sup> for a magazine during World War I. Throughout the tale, Ivy strives against her (mis)conceptions about literary aesthetics, and wonders: “how could your reader know what you were talking about when you didn’t know yourself?”<sup>46</sup> However, as Ivy is at last humiliated for a story she does not even create, but adapts from a soldier’s recorded account, Wharton discloses her critique: not against women authors’ assumed incompetence, but toward men and their literary

43. O’BRIEN. *The things they carried*, p. 64.

44. Hynes (1990) claims that the war writings of Rose Macaulay, Rebecca West, May Sinclair, Cynthia Asquith, and Enid Bagnold express women’s feelings of inferiority in face of male experiences, and their “guiltiness of being alive and well” (88).

45. Wharton. *Writing a war story*, p. 248.

46. Wharton. *Writing a war story*, p. 249.

42. Rancière. *The politics of aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, p. 35.

hierarchy, dependent more on fallacious ideas of authentic experience, authority, and subordination of women than on writing skills.

In addition to authors who either openly or ironically criticize patriarchal constraints to women's works, other women writers manifest their disagreement by increasingly taking up the pen and representing war in spite of the harshness of their reception. As a result, especially after the two World Wars of the 20th century, a web of relations is delineated between women's new social roles, their writings of war, feminist mobilizations, and the destabilization of essentialist assumptions about gender, conflict, and literature. The wars had created conditions for women to leave the private sphere of the house and occupy public spaces. The diversification of social roles, the possibility of some financial independence, and the glimpse of careers unrelated to femininity and motherhood are among the achievements motivating more women to write, including about war. Evidence of such intensification and gradual valorization of women's writings is found in anthologies and studies of war literature. *The Cambridge companion to war writing* (2009), for instance, proposes a chronology of the wars of humanity that also includes the estimated year of appearance of the major works discussed in the volume. Although the first entry dates from as far back as the 12th century

BCE, with the song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21, women only figure in the list in 1773, with Phillis Wheatley's poems, discussed in terms of the tensions contributing to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Along with Wheatley, only two other women have works considered important to the war literature of the 18th century: Anna Seward and Susanna Rowson. Even though that number begins to rise regarding the 19th century, with five highlighted writers, it is in the 20th century, mainly after 1918, that it reaches its peak of sixteen admittedly great works on war by women writing in the English language.

Among those sixteen female names, some are consensually recognized as producers of major literary representations of war in the English language by other anthologies and historical collections. Rebecca West's *The return of the soldier* (1918), Wharton's *The Marne* (1918), and Elizabeth Bowen's *The heat of the day* (1949), for example, are referred not only in *The Cambridge companion to war writing*, but also in Gilbert and Gubar's "Soldier's heart: literary men, literary women, and the Great War" (*Sexchanges*), and in Gill Plain's "Women writers and the war," within Marina MacKay's *The Cambridge companion to the literature of World War II* (2009). Wharton is moreover included in Higonnet's *Lines of fire: women writers of World War I* for her short fiction "Writing a war story", while Bowen is praised by Plain

for *The demon lover, and other stories* (1945) as well. In addition, Gilbert and Gubar, Higonnet, McLoughlin, Plain, and Daniella Gioseffi (2003) acknowledge Woolf for her essayistic and literary writings on war, such as *Three guineas*, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *Between the acts* (1941). The first three scholars also acclaim Vera Brittain's poems and her World War I memoir *Testament of youth* (1933). Among all those scholars, however, only Higonnet and Gioseffi pay tribute to women writing in languages other than English, such as Romanian Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and German-Dutch Anne Frank. Perhaps as an effect of those groundbreaking examples of women's literature of war, contemporary research on the textual representation of 20th-century and 21st-century conflicts is also attentive to relevant works by women. Tom Burns's yet unpublished study on the literature of the Vietnam War, for instance, considers Mary McCarthy's *Vietnam* (1967) and *Hanoi* (1968), Pamela Sanders's *Miranda* (1978), and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In country* (1985) relevant to the cultural legacy of that conflict, which may also include memoirs such as Lynda Van Devanter's *Home before morning* (1983), and Winnie Smith's *American daughter gone to war* (1992).

At this point, it is important to reflect upon how acknowledging the substantial development of women's literature, in general and of war, in the 20th century, as influenced by

conditions experimented in wartime, is different from saying that wars allowed women "to profit from male pain".<sup>47</sup> A nation at war imposes its needs upon its citizens, particularly those excluded from decision-making processes, and summons their best efforts, often through the rhetoric of fear and patriotic love. When women performed male functions in wartime, therefore, it was not because they were at last acknowledged as equals, and could deliberately take up positions left by men, but because their country compelled its entire people to be subordinated to its total war machine. Of course, some degree of empowerment was accomplished, and concessions had to be made to renegotiate women's place in society.<sup>48</sup> However, the situation I describe here differs from Gilbert and Gubar's view of an even battle of the sexes over the public and literary arena of a "no-man's land". We should remember that European colonies also fought wars to gain "freedom" in the aftermath. However, that does not mean that those new-born "nations" became politically, economically, and culturally independent overnight. As a matter of fact, some of those countries still confront local and international issues as a lingering effect of the dominant presence of the colonizers. Analogously, even the unprecedented number of postwar women writers would, as some still do, face the difficulties and retaliations of disrupting a field whose aesthetics and canon were defined by and for male masters.

47. GILBERT AND GUBAR, *Sexchanges*, p. xvii.

48. According to Higonnet (1999), an example of such concessions is "[t]he number of nations that eventually granted female suffrage when WWI was over (Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Great Britain, Lithuania, Turkey, and the United States, among others)," which "confirmed these women's sense that their contributions had earned them fuller participation in the rights of citizenship" (xx).

As arduous as it is, the disturbance of the patriarchal cultural tradition is a political function of women's literature of war that inserts it within feminist thought. I have mentioned that feminist movements draw strength, in the 20th century, from women's increased presence in the public sphere of work and power, which is, at least in part, influenced by their roles in wartime, to mobilize activist struggle for suffrage and other rights. This feminist consciousness opens a favorable space and audience, even if constituted only by peers, for women to be visible, to speak and be heard, to write and be read. In turn, in the specific case of women's writings of war, their literary production has, since then, retroactively fueled feminist philosophy and critical theory and practice through the challenges it raises to essentialist assumptions about gender, conflict, and literature.

Those writings undermine, for instance, the "archaic idea of women as a home front," by denouncing women's wartime conditions and sufferings. A case in point in contemporary Jewish literature is Miriam Katin's (2006) graphic memoir *We Are on Our Own*. While the protagonist's husband is away serving the Hungarian army, she and her daughter are not home safe, but in a continuous escape from a war that follows them everywhere, in the form of the Nazi persecution of Jews, Soviet air attacks, and officers

and soldiers' sexual abuse. Similarly, in a turn to the literature of the Iranian diaspora, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) reveals how the Iran-Iraq War provides the Islamic Republic with a patriotic justification to coerce women to behave according to its standards, even as their roofs are blown off by bombs in the middle of the night. At the same time that they expose the contradictions of "women as a home front," narratives as such help distrust the view of the authority, authenticity, and exclusivity of male accounts of war. In this sense, they raise, in literature, the claim for equality heard in women's rights demonstrations, strikes, and institutions of education. However, in relation to such ideas, a question lingers to be examined. I have stated that the value derived from the so-called authentic experience of war is an obstacle against which women authors *still* struggle. That is, however, not solely due to a comparison to the male literary oeuvre, but because of a noticeable reproduction of notions of authority within women's literature of war, which leads to the question: how does equality work within this field?

A negative viewpoint on this question is provided by a review of anthologies and research on women's literature of war. In an attempt to increase visibility to women's works and conditions, and as a means to attest women's participation in wars, those studies frequently focus primarily on

life writing and on the autobiographical aspects of texts. That is the case, for example, of Higonet's *Lines of fire*, and of both of Gioseffi's collections, which dedicate shorter sections to fiction than to diaries, memoirs, letters, interviews, and journalistic reports. In other instances, the preference for life writing is often due to a sense of the ethics of representation, that is, of a restricting notion of how, and by whom, the horrors of war are to be portrayed. Moreover, the editorial market often privileges "authentic" narratives because, like televised coverage of conflicts, they appeal to the public's desire for "true" information and experience. In all cases, one may observe the internal and contradictory re-inscription of hierarchies women's writings have sought to unsettle.

The notion of authority in war literature derives, in my view, not solely from the gender-biased, widely accepted fallacy of authentic experience, but also from the location from which one recounts that experience. It is said, in a sentence commonly attributed to former British prime-minister Winston Churchill, that "history is written by the victor"; apparently, so is literature. The greatest war writers of the 20th and 21st centuries are British or American. By contrast, German literary production on World War II, for instance, was censored and discouraged for decades. In this context, authors of diverse linguistic backgrounds have

originally composed and published their works in English to attempt to enter that Anglophonic field and editorial market. In this sense, to conduct research on narratives by more peripheral women writers, of often marginalized cultures, ethnicities, classes, and nationalities, regardless of whether they claim to write fact or fiction, is to challenge hierarchies based on gender and other coordinates of identity in literature. Ex-centric women war writers need to be given a space to speak, so that they too can transgress the borders of no-man's land. This acknowledgement and valorization of positionality and difference is, perhaps, among the main challenges and tasks of the contemporary scholar of the literature of war written by women.

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