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Introduction

Although for decades women's roles in and responses to war were largely ignored by historians and political scientists, the last twenty years have witnessed a spate of publications by historical and cultural scholars investigating the history, representation and aftermath of wars from a feminist or gender studies perspective (Fell, 2008). This is, in part, a result of changing historical realities. As Armelle Le Bras-Chopard notes in her chapter, women are increasingly implicated – and, indeed, targeted – in modern warfare: 'le paradigme classique de la guerre qui en faisait un monopole masculin, se trouvait subverti dans les conflits les plus récents, par l'implication de plus en plus massive des femmes, et comme victimes et comme combattantes, qui brouille les repères classiques entre civils (dont elles étaient jadis "l'archétype") et forces armées.' It is also a result of the influence of feminism on academic research. An orthodoxy amongst feminist scholars since the 1980s has been the necessity of rewriting the history books that have excluded women's experiences, of 'deconstruct[ing] the [literary] canon by demonstrating how much valuable writing by women was produced, and how it can alter our perceptions of conflict' (Smith, 2004, p. 4). The chapters in this volume, originally delivered as papers at the ninth Biennial Women in French Conference held in Leeds in May 2006 entitled 'Les Femmes et la guerre', form part of the broader feminist project to recuperate forgotten or neglected female voices. In so doing, the contributors play an important role in (re)circulating women's 'war stories', revealing in their very multiplicity the fallacy of generalising and reductive statements about 'Woman' and war. This volume brings together scholars from different academic disciplines – history, sociology, politics, literary criticism and gender studies – who explore the impact of war upon women in French and francophone societies. Considering

conflicts from the French Revolution to the Rwandan massacres, the contributions examine the diverse effects of war upon women, as well as their equally diverse responses.

From the perspective of the French state, the contribution of women in wartime has been consistently limited to a number of stereotypical key roles (and, in this sense, France is no different from not only her European neighbours, but Western civilization in general). While mothers are expected to willingly sacrifice their sons and wives their husbands for the greater cause of fighting for the beloved *patrie*, French women's duty has been to ensure the smooth running of the home front in the absence of their husbands, brothers and fathers, as well as to continue to nurture future citizens in their role as mothers. Of course, in reality women have frequently been political or military actors in conflicts, especially in the twentieth century. As Ayelevi Novivor's final chapter on women's testimony of the Rwandan genocide tragically confirms, this is firstly the case in terms of women's role as victims – particularly of rape – in conflicts. Secondly, it is evident in women's combatant roles, which challenge the traditional dichotomy of passive female civilian and active male soldier. Several contributors to this volume focus on the cases of exceptional women who have crossed the gender divide in order to take up the role of *combattante*, whether as fighters for the royalist cause in the Vendée during the French Revolution (Mary Ellen Ross), as members of the British Special Operations Executive, supporting the French Resistance during World War II (Leigh Whaley), or as participants in the Algerian War as members of the FLN (Kamila Aitsiselmi). Yet, as the contributors show, while these exceptional women may be accepted and even celebrated as war heroines while the conflicts are raging, they are frequently treated with suspicion and hostility in peacetime. Thus, Mary Ellen Ross points out that two of the *combattantes* that she focuses on – Renée Bordereau and Françoise Després – attempt to excuse their adoption of a military role in their memoirs by citing the death of their male relatives as a motivation for their mobilisation, thereby offering a justification for their decision as women to take up arms. Leigh Whaley's study of the recently released files of SOE agents Odette Samson and Andrée Borrel reveals that Samson (who, unlike Borrel, survived the

war) was obliged to provide documented evidence of her bravery as a Resistance fighter who had not spoken under torture, as her claims were viewed with scepticism in the post-war period – particularly by the British press, who commented critically on her decision to leave her children with her husband when she was parachuted into France. Finally, Kamila Aitsiselmi uses the case-study of Algerian women to illustrate in her chapter how ‘dans le rapport hommes/femmes, la guerre représente un moment particulier, en rupture et sans liens avec l’avant comme avec l’après’. Accordingly, ‘les Algériennes n’ont eu alors accès que pendant quelques années à la vie publique, en jouant un rôle important aux côtés des hommes’. If French and francophone culture is not averse to exploiting the acts of heroism of exceptional female *combattantes*, then, this tends to be seen as a temporary phenomenon that must not have repercussions for post-war gender roles.

Not all women, of course, transgressed traditional wartime roles in order to take up arms for their country. A few women continued to resist the very idea of war, and campaigned for the pacifist cause. While these women were often accepted in peacetime – given that patriarchal discourse tends to view pacifism as women’s ‘natural’ tendency – they were vilified in wartime, as Isabelle Vahé’s chapter on Jeanne Mélin, a socialist, pacifist and feminist during World War I, demonstrates. Mélin was made subject to both criticism and surveillance by the authorities during the conflict, and risked the fate of a sister pacifist feminist, Hélène Brion, who was imprisoned in 1918. Other women accepted the authorities’ call to serve their nation in suitably ‘feminine’ ways more readily. But, as several chapters in this volume reveal, the apparent acquiescence of ‘ordinary’ French and francophone women in relation to government wartime propaganda often masks other agendas. Nancy Sloan Goldberg’s investigation of the activities and writings of Marguerite Borel during World War I, for example, shows that although she played a vital role in organising the French female workforce, founding the largest female recruitment centre, her 1918 novel, *Le Survivant*, attacks a failure on the part of returning soldiers ‘to understand the sacrifices, ingenuity, and endurance required of women suddenly transformed into heads of households.’ Although Marbo wholeheartedly supports the war effort, then, she uses her novel

to speak out against nationalist gender clichés, insisting that ‘for the good of France, the men would have to accept the loss of their past power and authority and should join with these newly formed women of the future to rebuild a nation scarred and devastated by war.’ Marbo’s response to war is similar in some senses to that of journalist Odette Oligny, whose World War II propagandistic editorials are analysed in Béatrice Richard’s chapter on French Canadian women’s responses to propaganda. Oligny’s column offers a fascinating window onto the concerns and political stakes of French Canadian women’s participation in the war effort. But Richard suggests that, more than this, the column passes on a feminist message encouraging women’s independence and emancipation from social convention. Richard concludes that Oligny is not a ‘simple perroquet de la propagande’, but rather attempts to exploit the opportunity offered by the war for her own political and ideological ends. Siobhán McIlvanney also discerns an underlying feminist subtext in her study of women’s journals published during the Revolutionary period. She demonstrates that although the publications do not have the advancement of women’s political rights as a stated goal, they nevertheless aim to raise ‘readerly awareness of women’s current social – and sexual – roles and opportunities’ or to validate ‘female readers’ desire to increase their knowledge of certain subjects independently’, and can thus be understood in a broader sense as both political and feminist.

The chapters discussed thus far have tended to have an historical focus on the experiences and responses of French and francophone women – whether as ordinary citizens, as victims, or as exceptional female *combattantes* – to a number of different conflicts. Another major contribution by women to our understanding of war, however, comes in the form of literary texts. Female-authored autobiographical texts function as vital evidence of women’s particular experiences of conflict, providing a gendered perspective on the testimony of trauma – a key research area in the humanities in recent years. Nicole Thatcher’s chapter on French women’s World War II memoirs finds points of correspondence in the memoirs of three very different women – both *résistantes* and *collaboratrices*. Thatcher reveals that what unites their autobiographical writings is their literary response to the trauma – albeit trauma on very different scales – that the

women suffered as a result of the war. Their texts bear the trace of their traumatic experiences not only in the subject-matter of their narratives, but equally, Thatcher argues, ‘au niveau de la structure donnée à leurs témoignages où il s’exprime à travers des procédés narratifs: absence de chronologie, utilisation de retours en arrière, hétérogénéité des textes et écriture fragmentée.’ Ayelevi Novivor also finds similarities in terms of structure, imagery and chronology in her consideration of the traumatic testimony produced by francophone women in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. Novivor argues that it proved impossible for these women to turn to pre-existing literary models to represent an experience that was itself without precedent: ‘Il n’existe aucun récit de type linéaire, sans rebondissements, hésitations ou contradictions. Les témoins qui n’ont jamais été confrontés à cette situation discursive par le passé, sont obligés de construire un modèle de récit inspiré par le contexte immédiat.’ Jimia Boutouba’s chapter on the autobiographical text by French Algerian writer Tassadit Imache, *Une fille sans histoire*, also points to the difficulty of expressing the traumatic experiences of the past (in this case the Algerian war, and in particular the events of 17 October 1961) within the confines of a literary text. However, Boutouba equally underlines the importance of the existence of such texts, which function as a means of speaking out against the silences and gaps of ‘official’ versions of history. She comments that Imache’s text, and others like it, should be viewed as ‘highly political commemorative performance[s] that [...] fulfil what Jacques Derrida describes as “l’autre devoir de mémoire”’.

It is not just autobiographical testimony, moreover, that seeks to fulfil the ‘devoir de mémoire’ referred to in Boutouba’s chapter. This is also the goal of certain fictional texts, such as the representations of the Algerian war to be found in the corpus of Assia Djebar, which form the focus of Désirée Schyns’ chapter, and in novels by Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar, which are examined by Kathryn Jones. In the case of Djebar, Schyns shows how in two of her recent texts the author represents scenes of torture from the perspective of the victim, a shift from her earlier accounts, which tend to represent torture more obliquely. For Djebar this forms part of an ongoing project to use her literary texts as a means of shedding light on the many untold stories – particularly women’s stories

– that have been obfuscated by French imperialist discourses. Importantly, however, Djébar is keen to underscore the role of fiction, and of imagination, in her own representations, a strategy which reveals the extent to which her fictional work is interested in the limits of representation itself. Jones' exploration of Huston and Sebbar's novels concentrates on these authors' desire to engage in a *travail d'examen* and a *travail de vérité* regarding France's colonial history. Her chapter examines the ways in which the texts turn to World War II as a point of comparison in order to highlight the silence and lack of commemoration that characterises attitudes to the Algerian War in France, and in particular to the events of 17 October 1961. For Jones, the authors use historical comparisons as a lens which magnifies the absence of official recognition and remembrance of the Algerian War in 1990s France.

A distinction referred to by many contributors is the important shift that takes place between fiction produced during or shortly after conflicts, and that produced in subsequent decades. Angela O'Flaherty's analysis of the wartime short stories by Edith Thomas and Elsa Triolet reveals how the representations of the *résistantes* they contain were necessarily constrained by the short-term goals of their texts – which were, at least in part, intended as recruitment vehicles – and by the expectations of their readership. As O'Flaherty concludes: 'In these short stories, Thomas and Triolet [...] attack, albeit subtly, a number of negative stereotypes, presenting readers instead with capable, intelligent and committed women. Yet, at the same time, they create female protagonists who continue to operate within a male environment and according to male rules, batting their eyelashes and staying quiet when required.' Similarly, Helen Vassallo argues that Simone de Beauvoir's Resistance novel, *Le Sang des autres*, is also, inevitably, a product of its time. By placing it side by side with Régine Deforges' more recent popular novel *La Bicyclette bleue*, Vassallo demonstrates the extent to which Beauvoir's heroine conforms to the genre of romance as much as to that of committed novel. Equally significant, however, is the way in which Beauvoir makes her heroine function as an embodiment of the nation, her death and ambiguous characterisation reflecting the uncertainty of France's future at the time of the novel's composition. While novels written during conflicts may lack the focus of

later works on wars' meanings, consequences and commemoration, they provide valuable insights into the disorientating trauma, identity crises or ethical uncertainties that war and its immediate aftermath bring about.

In conclusion, the chapters in this volume reveal that, as we look back over the centuries to different conflicts, from the Revolution to the Rwandan massacres, French and francophone women have offered an important and sometimes overlooked perspective on the ethical justifications for and social consequences of war. These women provide us with a rich literary and historical legacy in the form of fiction, journalism, diaries and letters, a legacy that all too often has remained in the margins and footnotes of historical and critical accounts of francophone philosophical, cultural and political responses to war. This volume succeeds in bringing some of these sources to light. Together, they form a fascinating account of women's complex relationship to war.

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