

May 2009

Book Review: War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives

Anjali Nath

Melissann Herron

Kirstin Oesterle

Esther Rothblum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nath, Anjali; Herron, Melissann; Oesterle, Kirstin; and Rothblum, Esther (2009). Book Review: War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 304-307.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/20>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives.

2008. Karen Alexander and Mary E. Hawkesworth (Eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Endnotes, bibliography and index included. 445 pp. \$29.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Anjali Nath, Melissann Herron, Kirstin Oesterle and Esther D. Rothblum¹

It is difficult to think of any area of the world that has not been recently involved in war. The Middle East. The U.S.-Soviet Cold War. The World Wars. Countries that have border skirmishes over contested land; nations with centuries-old ethnic strife; civil wars over land, access to oil and other resources. Coups, assassinations of world leaders. Struggles for independence from colonizers, from Apartheid, from occupied territories. Nations alleged to have weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons. Prisoners of war, political prisoners.

War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives, edited by Karen Alexander and Mark E. Hawkesworth, consists of an impressive breadth and depth of case studies demonstrating that war and terrorism are contingent upon gendered and racialized processes, as they contextually construct and evolve new understandings of the role of social location in armed conflict. Various chapters cover wars and terrorism occurring in Sierra Leone, Somalia, Algeria, South Africa, Morocco, Palestine, Israel, Basque Country, India, Pakistan, Australia, the United States, and among the Kurdish diaspora in Turkey. In addition, there are chapters that cover the International Court of Criminal Justice and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which deals with women's experiences in war.

The co-editors are an illustrious duo—the senior editor and editor-in-chief of *Signs*, the premier academic Women's Studies journal. In fact, this anthology is a reprint of articles from several recent issues of *Signs*. These essays highlight how media images of war are overwhelmingly of men, shown in actual combat—marching soldiers, young boys throwing hand grenades, suicide bombers, and fighter pilots. As Carrie Hamilton states in “Political Violence and Body Language in Life Stories of Women ETA Activists,” “violent bodies” are usually described as male (137). Women are rarely shown unless they are grieving widows. Yet women have always been involved in war—as medical staff, ambulance drivers, spies, code breakers, radio operators, clerical workers, prostitutes, wives, mothers, survivors of rape and torture, and also as soldiers in combat. This stereotype is beautifully challenged in the title of Aaronette White's chapter (61): “All the men are fighting for Freedom, All the Women are Mourning their men, but Some of Us Carried Guns.”

This recognition of gendering as a fundamental component of war, militarization, and terror is further articulated in “Negotiating Silences in the So-Called Low-Intensity War: The Making of the Kurdish Diaspora in Istanbul” when Cihan Ahmetbeyzade defines the “event/narrative” as “a narrative production of history marked by gender differences” (256). Thus Kurdish women in exile in Turkey emphasize Kurdish traditions as a way of “coping with their violent displacement” (261). She writes: “This tension of

¹ Anjali Nath, Melissann Herron and Kirstin Oesterle are graduate students in the Women's Studies Department at San Diego State University, and Dr. Esther Rothblum is a Professor of Women's Studies at the same institution.

being in both places, home and away from home, enables members of this community to claim and maintain the identity of a minority nation in exile” (262). Whereas Kurdish men tend to reminisce about the physical beauty of Kurdistan, women remember the violence and terror.

Using the narratives of women who have survived war and terrorism in “Negotiating (In)Security: Agency, Resistance, and Resourcefulness among Girls Formerly Associated with Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front,” the authors effectively show how women were able to negotiate through the patriarchal hierarchy of forced conscription in the RUF rebel army in Sierra Leone in order to survive. In this chapter, Myriam Denov and Christine Gervais share narratives of women and girls who found ways to resist gender insecurities through creating solidarity with the other girls. In order to escape daily physical and sexual brutality from male members of RUF, some girls participated in extremely violent acts in order to be “promoted,” some excelled at gendered roles, such as cooking, cleaning, etc. in order not to be forced to fight, and some aligned themselves with high-powered men for protection. Denov and Gervais write that “Although men have been perceived as the primary agents of war, women have been rendered largely as silent and invisible victims” (35). They, along with others throughout the book, challenge the binary formulation that men are aggressive, violent, and brutal, while women are peacemakers, victims, wives/mothers, or helpers of men who are the “true participants in war” (35). This analysis contributes significantly to problematizing cultural feminist assertions of women as inherently more passive and peaceful than their male counterparts. Denov and Gervais also examine how resistance sometimes contextually requires acting in opposition to other women. “This demonstrates that while the young women acted in solidarity in some moments, in others, they were in conflict and competition in their strategies of survival and resistance”(51). This smashing of the global sisterhood myth is extremely important to acknowledge and frequently ignored or glossed over within feminist analyses. Sexual violence against women in war areas is also covered by other authors, such as Aaronette White and the editors.

Aaronette White’s analysis of Frantz Fanon’s psychological take on war calls into question the idea of violence as a “good” means of resistance (Fanon, 1961). Also, her assertion regarding the intersection of masculinity and militarization is well-taken: “Masculinist notions also serve as powerful tools for making men into soldiers because military forces encourage aggressiveness and competitiveness while censoring emotional expression and denouncing physically weak soldiers as effeminate” (70). White also historicizes the role of armed women in many anticolonial struggles, explaining that women first trained in anticolonial armies were not included for reasons of equality or feminist consciousness but rather because of necessity (73). She explains:

In contrast to Fanon’s claims about revolutionary violence as a cleansing force, war is a dirty business and a gendered business. Rather than serving as a transformative, humanistic force, in many contexts violence functions as a degenerative force. The trauma and humiliation caused by debilitating violent acts left many women soldiers serving in anticolonial forces feeling unworthy of any recognition, much less mutual recognition. (78-9)

White’s analysis that anticolonial warfare works to restore dignity to colonized men because it restores traditional norms of masculinity but violates gender norms when

women participate is excellent. Because of this violation, women frequently lie about participation to avoid censorship or exclusion from society. As a result, with few exceptions, female revolutionary, “makers of history,” to borrow Fanon’s term (Fanon, 1968), have been pressured to disappear from history (80).

Hawkesworth illustrates in “War as a Mode of Production and Reproduction: Feminist Analytics” that “sexual violence against women has increased since the war against apartheid ended, suggesting gendered continuities between conflict and postconflict situations that are masked by constructions of peace as the absence of war” (13). As violence continues in South Africa, violence also persists in other post-war countries. In Part II of this book, the authors explore different feminist interventions, looking at their sustainable and problematic consequences. Hill, Aboitiz, and Peohiman-Doumbouya suggest that Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is essential in order for the cooperation between the United Nations and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and others to continue moving forward to “ensure that women are included at every level of peace and security” (217). Farr also offers suggestions for future activism, such as how to ensure that all women are included in the DDR process (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) (224). Furthermore, in “Women’s Advocacy in the Creation of the International Criminal Court: Changing the Landscapes of Justice and Power,” Spees argues that the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the International Criminal Court itself are critical for an “international framework of accountability” (200).

The systemic victimization and erasure of women’s conscious political agency during wartime and armed conflict are also explored in “Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death: Media, Gender, and Performance in the Case of the Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers.” In this chapter, Dorit Naaman states: “With regard to Western media, my aim is to show the constructed nature of the label *terrorist*, especially as it stands in stark contrast to the highly coded and constructed label *woman*” (114). She claims that the term *terrorist* is as constructed as the term *woman* and makes connections between the two. Rather than states of being, she says, that both “represent ideological expectations of performance” (114). Naaman describes how Western media, hard pressed to explain the phenomenon, resort to individual, personal interpretations—a female suicide bomber’s infertility, her husband’s affair, mental illness. In contrast, the Arab word *shaheeda* (martyr) is not as incompatible with notions of womanhood. “Although suicide bombing is met with ambivalence in the Arab world, it is nevertheless understood as an extreme means derived from an extreme situation” (117). This analysis illuminates the confounding nature of female suicide bombers (116). While the media assume religious and political ideology is behind male suicide bombers’ actions, they search for personal reasons when examining these actions by women. For instance, they posit that women are infertile and therefore feel that their lives are worthless, rendering invisible mothers who are also suicide bombers. The discussion is, hence, very gendered. “A woman as a suicide bomber seems so oxymoronic that an individualized psychological explanation for the deviation must be found” (116). On the other hand, in “(En)Gendering Checkpoints: Checkpoint Watch and the Repercussions of Intervention” Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir write that Israeli discourse masculinizes female Palestinian suicide bombers. This allows them to separate those who arouse fear and those for whom they feel compassion, which,

in turn, allows for “superimposition of humanitarian discourse onto the reality of occupation” (166).

While previously discussed essays have insightfully tackled the varied processes of gendering that occur within war zones and during conflict, racialization is also discussed in this anthology as a quintessential aspect of war and terror. “The Politics of Pain and the Uses of Torture,” by Liz Philipose, explores the racialization of war and terror tactics through a comparison between the U.S. legacy of lynching African-Americans and the current circulation of photos depicting torture of Abu Ghraib prisoners. The use of photos from these acts is a way to move them “beyond the confines of terrorism studies to occupy the public imagination” (398). Philipose asserts that the function of racialization is to justify domination by whites. She states, “gendered and sexualized violence is used as part as the racializing process that turns someone into an abject racial object” (404). Where whiteness is seen as humanness, other races are seen as “lacking” Others. She writes “Within racialized regimes of looking, moral judgment is confounded as victims are turned into suspects and the perpetrators of violence are depicted as righteous agents” (395). According to Philipose “Both [Abu Ghraib and lynching photos] serve as spectacles of power within a racial order, visually demonstrating the power of the torturer to turn subjects into objects” (399). Philipose additionally discusses the connections Americans often make between Islam and terrorism. To many Westerners, a terrorist *is* a Muslim, a dangerous stereotype which ignores that Muslims are but one kind of terrorist and, within Islam, are a minute group that does not represent the one billion Muslims worldwide.

Overall, the anthology succeeds as a compilation of articles that effectively serves to change one’s consciousness by reexamining war and terror through a gendered and racialized lens. These analyses provide a serious challenge to canonical works on warfare and statecraft that leave aspects of social location uninterrogated. *War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives* is particularly strong in considering war and terror throughout the world rather than focusing only on one region or prioritizing the perspective of a certain group of feminists while objectifying others.

Works Cited

- Fanon, Frantz. 1968. *Black Skin, White Masks*. MacGibbon and Kee.
 Fanon, Frantz. 1965. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: HaperCollins.