

insurgent feminisms— women writing wars: mapping gendered trauma, un/learning generative utopias and the intersectional imperative

Anastasia Christou

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The politics of oppression in everyday life and connected resistance practices of the oppressed require conceptualisations that are inclusive, and as such call for the intersectional imperative to be agenda-setting in social-contemporary and historical social-justice research. In times where posthuman subjects of knowledge are constituted through the transdisciplinarity of knowing subjects as relational, embodied, embedded and affective entities, the field of critical posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019) is one that can offer a sharp analytical lens on how war and trauma are explored as affective assemblages (Christou, 2022).

Hence, this piece is a 'polemic-political' intervention in situating civil war studies writing by women as the preamble heuristic first-level contribution to developing gendered and subsequent intersectional theorising on trauma, offering generative utopias in producing public histories. The piece reinforces recent scholarly attention to intersectionality as an approach that matters for all social movements—both as an analytic and as a political strategy (Roth, 2021)—and, in currently mapping inclusivity to public history, a key element to ground its development across spatial and temporal theoretical tools.

In seeking gender justice, the approach to inclusivity involves an imperative to intersectionality so other 'minoritised' groups and their values *matter* in shaping experiential analyses to bridging academic and activist interventions and seeking more communities of practice to emerge as possibilities for change. Thus, linking the materialities and embodiments of practitioner and activist work with transformative feminist and intersectional scholarship is the nexus that brings the nodes of theory, practice and activism together to set out an agenda for researching, writing and addressing trauma. This is exemplified in the concluding section.

Prior to the conclusion, this intervention has two key sections: the one following situates gendered trauma as a process of unlearning in order to co-produce possibilities of generative utopias, taking memory in its intersectional context as a new sociological imagination; the second section then links these insights to the work of women scholars writing about war to make key arguments about the conceptual and political value of such interventions as a blueprint for future work in trauma and (civil) war studies.

situating gendered trauma in un/learning generative utopias

Setting on a path towards a gendered generative utopia through theorising Foucauldian-genealogical, feminist, queer, postcolonial and decolonial approaches to trauma requires unlearning and an interrogation of the un/learning of trauma as a starting point (see, for example, Njaka and Peacock, 2021).¹ More specifically, it requires a trauma-informed approach to identifying and unlearning internalised misogyny, which is part of the trauma women experience in (civil) war contexts but which is often not written about, unacknowledged, and given neither space nor importance. It is also important to proceed with an intersectional understanding of gendered violence as that which embraces multiple strands of oppression and exacerbates such experiences for particular groups. This unlearning is necessary in order to resist rigid understandings of trauma and to combine a feminist mnemonic storytelling with an intersectionally driven sociological imagination.

To highlight misogyny and the experiences of women does not mean to erase the violence of those who self-identity as LGBTQIA+, but rather it destabilises the masculinist, male-centred and male-focused conceptualisation of suffering and trauma in war contexts. Unpacking these arguments can be quite challenging. On the one hand, there are existing claims that masculinity is 'culturally antecedent to war', with ethnographic studies showing 'that socialization for military masculinity is pervasive ... but variable in what masculinity means, and if and how women participate in war' (Ferguson, 2021, p. S108); yet on the other hand, 'researchers also acknowledge that men and boys are frequently victims of sexual violence in conflict along with women and girls, who remain the group that is disproportionately affected' (Touquet and Gorris, 2016, p. 36). Furthermore, while increased awareness might lead to a slight increase in gender-neutral and inclusive definitions in legal and international policy terms, evidence shows the

¹ There is a wealth of works that link intersectional assemblages with power; however, here I want to make the specific bridging of understanding war as a permanent basis of all institutions of power, embedded within societal relations and deciphered by historical analysis (Foucault, 2004 [1997]) with cultural modes of regulating affectivities and dispositions of how violence is framed (Butler, 2009; Christou, 2022). In this way, critical epistemologies (Lugones, 2010, 2016 [2008]) that produce situated knowledges (poststructuralist/queer/feminist/post/decolonial) can include potentialities to grapple with subversive possibilities (Athanasidou, 2020) and the performative modalities of everyday survival resistance that produces the racial, queer, gender melancholia as part of dealing with social pathologies (Muñoz, 2019) as 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011) indelibly marked by classed, gendered, racialised and sexual subjectivation. What is at stake in the arguments within these works is maintaining agonistic political potentiality while unsettling critical reflections of the uncomfortable notions that embodied and situated subjects emerge within those violences. The political aesthetics of war and the affective configurations within are all possibilities for reimagining futurities of resistance through chronopolitics of affectivity (cf. Baker, 2020). Thus, to avoid an impasse, reimagining insurgency as shaped by feminisms, gendered trauma and the unlearning of generative utopias through intersectionalities of affect is the pathway suggested.

continuing influence of gendered stereotyping and exacerbated cultural stigmatising within society (*ibid.*). This highlights the need for a feminist framing to trauma-informed positionalities that rejects the essentialisms of historical, social and culturally gendered trauma and instead puts focus on those emerging within intergenerationally embodied experiences.

A set of interconnected historical, political and economic shifts intensify racialised, gendered and class disparities leading to the retrenchment of multiple freedoms through the dismantling of the welfare state, the social wage and the broader 'liberal-pluralist distributive order'. In this context, neoliberal and imperial policies can be understood through the 'state effect' of securitised states which construct cultures of fear, surveillance and hyper-protection that paradoxically trigger further insecurities, threats and fears, which are deeply impactful in curtailing freedoms and creating inequalities at material, affective and embodied levels. Such shape-shifting neo-imperialisms, and the necropolitics of carceral capitalisms with the military-industrial complex at its core, are keywords of contemporary governance appropriated in vast domains of shirking further welfare and humanitarianism, expanding militarism and criminalisation of those othered (cf. Williams, 2015; Whitehead, 2018; Kapoor and Narkowicz, 2019). Beyond this, the state dehumanises also in the production of 'exceptional citizens' who are seen as allocated responsibility for national securitisation in the absence of the state's dismantled social safety net and at the expense of its gendered, classed, ethnicised and racialised subjects. Within this context, we see the proliferation of further gendered violence, femicide and sexual violence, while intersectionally informed trauma and (civil) war studies continue to be limited, if this work continues at all (cf. Clark, 2016).

When we talk about generative utopias here, 'utopia' is understood in the way that Ruth Levitas (2013, 2017) advances as a method (not plan) and as a process (not goal) for transformed futures. This aligns with generative politics as integral to what Ruy Llera Blanes and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (2021) term 'utopian confluences'. The latter are understood as globally different sociopolitical and conceptual movements that express transformations and generative socialities; #MeToo would be one social movement that fits this definition, where speaking publicly (e.g., on social media) about experiences of sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture is a way not just to draw attention to the magnitude of the problem but also and primarily to give voice and empowerment to sexually assaulted people while generating empathy, solidarity, strength in numbers and visibility (cf. Karayianni and Christou, 2020). Thus, we shift into a conceptualisation of generative utopian praxis as political intervention, beyond the heuristic operationalisation to concrete performativities of resistance with discomforting further spaces of violence as actual potentialities for intersectional mobilisation as activism in everyday life.

Storytelling gives voice to 'different forms of individuation' (Thirangama, 2013, p. 19); it highlights 'that the ruptures of war produces [*sic*] individuation in unexpected ways', which 'explicate[s] the experiences' of women 'as an illustration of the contraction and expansion of particular possibilities of selfhood in the midst of political' possibilities (*ibid.*). Reframing the storytelling of war by women, valuing the raw emergence of insurgency that storytelling carries, and placing storytelling not in the margins but at the centre of understanding warzones facilitates a 'meticulous language of witnessing' (Shringarpure and Cantelli, 2023). This is what Bhakti Shringarpure and Veruska Cantelli have urged for in their editorial work through a decade of writing and publishing for *Warscapes* magazine (collected and published in the large volume, *Insurgent Feminisms: Women Write War* [2023]). Shringarpure and

Cantelli's (*ibid.*) immersive reflections are anchored not in nationalist war narratives but in bringing together the voices of women telling their stories of war as an affective and traumatic burden, which renders conflict in a radically different way and has created a new paradigm of war writing. For instance, Malek Abisaab and Michelle Hartman's edited collection, entitled *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts* (2022), utilises narratives of women's lived experiences, and through their stories the women's voices are restored from being silenced and excluded; they are remembered and rendered important. Approximately three or more decades following the civil war that unfolded in Lebanon, women's stories uncover truths and depict the cultural and social herstories of women's labour, as well as war impacts on women activists and artists. Here, the personal remains political and offers a feminist angle through a storytelling framework and a story-making epistemological and ethical stance.

The next section situates how writing wars through an intersectional lens brings this operationalisation into focus.

women writing wars through an intersectional lens

Feminist conversations on peace are not uncomplicated. Histories of contestation and violence, even with the universal pursuit of peace, necessitate an intersectional approach to account for the co-constitution of social categories and intersections of structural oppressions (Smith and Yoshida, 2022). Peace pursuits reflect not just a singular and monolithic notion: along with feminism, these processes require the politics of recognition of which social categories and structural oppressions we are addressing. So, when we address how peace can be achieved during war that emerges as concurrent violence to settler colonialism, then we are addressing the complexities of both these entangled oppressions (refer to Christou, 2022 for case study discussions that exemplify these issues in Indigenous and Palestinian communities).

Aligning to an 'intersectional survivor-centred' approach (Stavreska, 2019), the importance of inclusive and holistically informed rights-based policy and analytical framings is that they can build positively towards equality, justice and peace solutions. Thus, centring structural inequalities with intersectional inclusivity gives voice to survivors of violence and pays close attention to embedded power entanglements as to how those voices are focused in the articulation of such violences.

At the same time, historical violence, in the case of civil wars, should also be contextualised within historical trauma that links the temporalities of generational trauma with the narratives of generations engaging with re-engagement through the embodied act of narration. This can be seen as diffractive 'wound on words' (Schmukalla, 2024) when ruptures emerge even in discourse. And, it is here that through overturning how we write about war, through the sensual and embodied terms aligned to feminist, intersectional and decolonial framings, we can also engage in 're-membling' (Pandit, 2023) as gendered activism to conceptualise representations of war in new epistemic and political transformations. These are necessary conditions to imagining inclusive reconciliations for transgenerational healing while understanding people's struggles as always different and not rigid.

Another central angle in reforming research and writing from an intersectional lens on gendered violence and civil war memory and trauma is a focus on how spatio-temporal diversities of intergenerational 're-membering' can shape contemporary understandings of regional histories and political identities in divided societies. By extension, this key focus will unveil the boundaries of historical 'trauma', its gendered nature and the vitality of historical memory in understanding contemporary local and global issues. This is a dual-intensity research approach in the vitality and energy of a critical and comparative lens in order to ascertain both similarities and differences across chronological, spatial and temporal contexts and within generational diversities. Here, the focus is on not just the nation-state as territorial signifier, but rather the historical parameters of such cultural geographies that intend to broaden the understanding of factors contributing to trauma and memory in order to draw attention to cultural practices, creativity and meaning production as central to identity construction. Such a methodological design situates storytelling experiences of lived life and entanglements of emotions and national histories of conflict and division as reflective avenues to understand reconciliation efforts of public space, through learning from communities as social action. It also views research through oral histories as a collaborative pedagogical architecture to further enhance community–university partnerships.

This kind of research also explores gender as a social structure from individual, interactional, institutional and intersectional perspectives and through gender scripts and gender schemas that participants live with. The methodology of storytelling privileges local diverse knowledge, voices and experiences through a critical inquiry that renders research both moral and political. It seeks to build connections with local communities in learning to co-construct knowledge that is ethical, performative, transformative and participatory. Committed to a dialogical approach to community self-determination and cultural autonomy, such research involves disruptive ethnographically driven fieldwork which can enrich research and data gathering in a participatory design setting. Engagement with these topics brings forward invisible local perspectives, is community inspired and attempts to reconfigure public history from the grassroots. The community research approach offers new representational angles for the re-evaluation of public history as a political project dedicated to the goals of social justice and equity.

However, this kind of scholarship entails ethically sensitive aspects, particularly as it inevitably includes participants who have experienced historical trauma, but also might involve working with vulnerable and differently minoritised participants who might have experienced generational trauma. At the same time, by working within community-based partners and being directly and actively involved in local communities, scholars of generational trauma can also have access to organisations that offer professional counselling and support, to ensure that mental health support is in place if needed in the context of such projects. Such research is committed to the empowering and supportive dimensions of engagement with publics, and this aspect can only strengthen efforts for justice-driven, rights-based, equity-enhancing healing and reconciliation.

concluding thoughts: on praxis as a polemic-political intervention

Praxis is aimed as much at critical (self-)reflexivity as it is invested in epistemological transformations to combine with theory in order to enact a practice for societal change and transformation. Praxis here also aims to build transnational/transdisciplinary ecologies of knowledge through a shared process to open dialogue, mutual learning and embracing pluralistic ways of knowing through conversations that both Global South and Global North scholars partake equally. Beyond the academy, in order to translate political discourse as a project for inclusion and change, it matters how we capture women's war stories and how wars are written by women in actually capturing women's experiences. A praxis approach will seek to set agendas to shift public discourse of who writes war stories, from what position, and as a result influence through that a gendered trauma-informed and intersectionally situated writing on wars. Such an approach will provide a space for the voices of women and women writers, while cultivating ongoing Global South and Global North scholarship relationships of mutual accountability with these objectives.

This contribution aims to synthesise these mappings where I hope to have shown the multiplicity and complexity of political discourse practices, which are instructive to understanding women writing wars and also contribute to wider political discourse studies. This piece also joins ongoing conversations on histories of colonialism and coloniality, which continue to shape wars and relevant heuristic concepts such as centre/periphery/subalternity/provinciality/emancipatory/margins, etc., to engage with knowledge ecologies that identify critical epistemological projects as generative utopias. As such, it aspires to become a spark towards a polemic-political intervention: 'The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot. And then, just possibly, it goes home, or on' (Lorde, 1984, p. 620). The plurality that I attempt to demonstrate here is an indispensable element of utopian thinking as an important way of theorising gendered trauma, demonstrating that distinctions around explicit intersections of women's experiences and writings can make sense of these connections.

author biography

Anastasia Christou is Professor of Sociology and Social Justice at Middlesex University, London, UK. She is also a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, an academic activist, a trade unionist, feminist and anti-racist. An interdisciplinary critical scholar whose work is fully immersed in the humanities, social sciences and the arts in the pursuit of a public sociology that is relevant, meaningful and transformative, she extensively researches, publishes and teaches on issues of identity, emotion, inequality, intersectionality, ethics, decolonial and feminist pedagogies, social justice and exclusions as regards gender, class, sexuality, race and ethnicity in migrant, minority, youth and ageing groups. She has engaged in multi-sited, multi-method and comparative ethnographic research in the USA, the UK, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Cyprus, France, Iceland and Switzerland, and has recently been engaged in collaborative research in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, as well as with communities in Israel and Palestine.

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