GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The media gendering of war and conflict

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This issue was born out of a merger of intellectual as well as personal drive to try and make sense of the gendered way wars and conflicts worldwide are being presented to us via the media, national and transnational alike. Many of us on the editorial board of *Feminist Media Studies* agreed that there is no other issue more pressing and urgent for inquiry. Violent conflicts taking place currently in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, the former Yugoslavia, to name but a few, as well as events such as the September 11, 2001 attacks on the USA, the bombings of Madrid and London transportation systems, and suicide bombers in Israel, have all been at the center of world media attention. The sad truth is that war and conflict are an everyday reality for many women, men, and children all over the globe. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security states that, "Most of the victims of armed conflicts are civilians, especially women and children, who become refugees in their own countries." The Security Council's decision also affirms the significance of women's ongoing contributions to "the prevention of conflicts and in their peaceful solutions," and calls for their "equal participation and full involvement in every effort towards peace and security."

Despite acknowledgement by the UN, world media portrayals of war and conflict remain heavily dominated by patriarchal and colonial logic. It is mostly men who perpetrate the violence, organize a violent response, and present the media stories about it. With very few exceptions, women are cast mostly in the role of passive victims. No wonder then, that the few women who appeared recently on the global screens in relation to current conflicts (e.g., Jessica Lynch who was rescued by the US military from captivity and Lynndie England who was involved with the tortures in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) flared so much of our public as well as scholarly imagination.

Many women's movements seek to be included in the public discourse and to offer alternative perspectives on issues of war and peace that challenge the dominant social order connecting patriarchy and political violence and relegating women still to the private sphere. However, voices that might begin to challenge the dominant hegemonic militarized masculinity (to echo Carol Cohn's words 1987) are mostly perceived as irrelevant or illegitimate to the central debates surrounding violent conflicts, and therefore are excluded. In my own country, Israel, for example, content analyses of media, suggest that women's voices are especially ignored when they develop a rival approach to the crisis; or even worse, when their criticism is represented as a form of a double treachery—both to the collective nation under threat, as well as to the social order within it, as is the case with "Women in Black." Several women's peace movements in Israel have been trying to break the spiral of silence through discursive processes of reframing perceptions of the essence of the Arab-Israeli conflict itself as well as its possible solutions. Thus, the "Four Mothers" movement was accused of "subversively" recruiting the power of motherhood to promote

withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 1999 (Dafna Lemish & Inbal Barzel 2000). "The Fifth Mother," a more recently formed group, advocates changing the nature of the militaristic, male dominated conflictual-discourse with a slogan "War is not our language." Media coverage worldwide suggests to us that Israel is by no means a unique case.

As feminist researchers we have been asking ourselves many unsettling questions, such as: In what ways do patriarchal and colonial discourses shape public knowledge of war and conflict—their circumstances, consequences, and possible resolutions? Do women journalists offer different frames and perspectives, and are they more attracted to the practices of peace journalism that is oriented towards concern for people and solutions, rather than to elites and their victories (Johan Galtung 2005)? What forms of masculinity and femininity are typically represented in war stories and how are they conflated with issues of race and class? What is included in the portrayals of the victimization of women, for example, war crimes of a sexual nature, war-related slavery of girls, bereavement? What form of agency is assigned to women as fighters in armed forces, as activists in peace movements, as political leaders? Are the portrayals of suffering by women, and children, in war and conflict exploited by the media with the view to increasing audiences and, if so, what are the wider social and political consequences? How do audiences make sense of gendered representations of war and conflict?

Our call for papers must have been timely and touched upon a raw nerve, as it elicited close to fifty paper proposals from researchers and activists in fifteen countries. Twenty-five full paper submissions were received. We regret that we could only include five articles in this issue out of this rich selection. Consequently, this special issue is but one additional effort at untangling many of the questions arising from the intersection of war, gender, and media, and as such, it complements, for example, the recent issue of *Women & Language* (Anita Taylor & M. J. Hardman 2004) that was devoted more specifically to gendered language and war.

Following our mandate, this issue provides a platform for discussions across media genres—including the news, documentaries, docudramas, computer-games, Internet forums—from various dimensions—from media production, to texts, and to audience reception. The five articles draw upon rich resources of feminist and gender-sensitive critique and diverse approaches to produce engaging and challenging analyses of the discussion of war and conflict in the media. They represent contributions from three countries (Israel, The Netherlands, USA), relating to cultures shaped by the three major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), and range from texts circulated globally that present transnational concerns to a discussion of very specific and local case studies.

Carolyn Byerly's essay, that opens this issue, focuses on the discourse of dissent expressed primarily on the Internet in response to the official discourse in the weeks after 9/11. She finds that this oppositional discourse was politically progressive; representative of women, men, as well as people of color; and decidedly anti-war in its sentiments. Moreover, the themes and arguments discussed (e.g., that women should help determine a response to the crisis, that the US government should pursue justice under international law) may be linked to a longer history of social critiques and political movements, led by feminists, peace activists, and those who advance economic justice. The essay locates the post 9/11 oppositional discourse and the political events associated with it within a larger historical framework, thus enabling the analysis to follow threads of intellectual and rhetorical continuity over time.

The next two contributions focus on women in combat. Stacy Takacs examines how the rescue of Jessica Lynch was constructed by several docu-dramatic television programs in ways that cohered with and helped to naturalize the Bush administration's aspirations of global hegemony. She argues that assumptions about gender and race have structured the discourse of national security advocated by the Bush administration. Depictions of the rescue not only remasculinized the US military; they reconstructed national identity in gendered terms by linking security to military aggression against Arab "others." Further, she suggests that because they have reinforced the Bush administration's own race and gender hierarchies, these docudramas have helped manufacture popular consent for aspirations that appear necessary and beneficial as well as policies that might otherwise be questionable.

Claudia Herbst investigates how portrayals of women in digital media, such as encountered in computer games, inform contemporary gendering of violence. In particular, her analysis focuses on computer-generated iconography that depicts women as combative, indestructible, and dispensable. These games appeared, coincidently, with the Iraq war and the threat-infused climate of a post 9/11 world. She argues that the gendering of violence plays a salient role in the debate over women's integration into the military, a highly contested topic during times of war. She notes that the virtual heroine of gaming makes her entrance at a time when gaming companies cater to military interests, and the US armed forces are unable to meet recruiting quotas. Thus, this essay points to the symbiotic relationship between gaming companies, military recruitment, and training efforts, and critically investigates women's portrayal as tough combatants in this context.

The two final contributions probe two local case studies in depth. In doing so, they give us unique insights into the roles women may be playing in presenting a rival perspective on violent conflict. Marc de Leeuw and Sonja van Wichelen analyze the short film *Submission*, made in The Netherlands by the Muslim politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. They argue that *Submission* not only reframes and reduces Muslim women to a stereotypical oriental-Arabic and exotic imaginary, but also reproduces the proverbial "clash of civilizations" where backward Islam is once again juxtaposed against the Enlightened West. Further, they contend, that the replacement of Hirsi Ali's actual blurry life-story with the construction of Hirsi Ali as an authentic victim, a "liberated convert," a whistleblower, and an "expert," appears crucial for the sudden popularity of Hirsi Ali's anti-Islamic statements. The authors conclude that in the post 9/11 climate, in a destabilized Dutch political landscape, *Submission* and the ideological messages inherent in Hirsi Ali's public statements, evoke not only a conflation of the "war on terror" with anti-Islamic sentiments, but also enhance hostility towards religious and ethnic minorities.

Finally, Anat Zanger focuses on the relations created between the camera and the woman filmmaker as she observes, documents, and intercedes in the turbulent reality of military conflict in Israel over the course of the last decade. In pointing out the unique situation of Israeli women in war, the article analyzes four contemporary Israeli films. Working against the "political dichotomy of borders," the feminine presence in these four texts emphasizes the fuzzy edges of national and gender identity. The women directors invade border areas in the films examined here, expose the borders' weak points, and challenge their impermeability. Like the ancient myth of Pandora, "female curiosity" exposes areas of "non-knowledge" and non-understanding, and hence functions as a sign of anxiety. As such, the films discussed here expose the dynamic built into the feminine

gaze and the tension it creates in border zones and military territories by the very presence of the camera.

In closing, recall that it is our enormous privilege to be able to discuss these issues while so many others around the world are currently immediate victims of violent conflicts. This is clearly among the most difficult challenges to feminist scholarship's commitment to making a difference in the real world. We hope that reading through these pages and engaging in a critical analysis of the current practices of our media will serve as a constant reminder of our mission.

"Seek peace, and pursue it." (Psalms 34/15)

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Thanks to the Reviewers

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