Stories told and untold: Re-Gendering the First World War through Centenary Narratives.

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Abstract

Women's stories of war in the twentieth century challenged classic (masculinised) war narratives and recorded women's varied roles and experiences of war. For this inscription, writers often adopted and adapted the form of the short story, a genre which has been judged particularly suited to transitions and shifting subjectivities. The final decades of the last century also brought considerable blurring of genres, a transgression of the divide between the critical and the creative, the verifiable and the fictional. This chapter looks at the volume *1914—Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict between Life and Art*, edited by Lavinia Greenlaw in 2014, and discusses the hybrid texts from this collection of narrative essays that are written by women (Ali Smith, Kamila Shamsie, Elif Shafak, NoViolet Bulawayo, Xiaolu Guo, Jeannette Winterson), particularly those by authors usually categorised as British: Smith, Winterson and Guo. Their critical narratives of war, in dialogue with past and present voices, reveal crucial shifts in twenty-first century thinking on war, subjectivities, and writing, greatly influenced by an increased awareness of planetarity, and expressed through a skilled empathic use of the short story form.

Keywords: women, war, voice, Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson, Xiaolu Guo

War narratives have traditionally been fundamental in the construction of collective identities. Imperial wars, civil wars, liberation wars, even wars fought for relatively unclear reasons, mould —and are moulded by— national discourses, and condition communal attitudes towards those designated as outsiders. In their most conservative versions, war narratives constitute exaltations of patriotic feeling and often foreground a barbaric enemy, even while unfolding the suffering of battle. As Carol Cohn has argued, there is "an old story about war," one in which warfare is "a quintessentially masculine realm," where men make decisions, fight, die, "protect their helpless women and children" and continue to exercise power when the war is over. In this "old story," women are absent or marginal, since they symbolically

represent the alternative to battle, “a place of love, caring, and domesticity… all that is good about the nation which their heroic fighting protects” (Cohn 1). This “old” gendered pattern continues to underlie many narratives, despite the critiques and alternative knowledge rendered by the twentieth century in the areas of scholarship, public opinion and artistic expression which have transformed the general perception of past and present wars. The realities of war are complex, and their literary accounts are, in their turn, as varied as the historical conditions and stances of the authors and nations from which they stem. In Britain, as in other Western contexts, a growing body of writing has recorded and analysed a more nuanced narrative of the realities of war, one that distinguishes between types and contemplates historical settings, that travels beyond the battlefield to include the lives of those absent from it, those who return home wounded or traumatised (Mayhew; Achter), all those whose destinies are forever changed by a social disruption of dramatic consequences. The “old” gendered conception of war, its bond to normative masculinity, meant that war narratives by and about women were slower to surface or, when made public, were often neglected. Recent scholarly work, however, not only recovers narratives by and about women, but also employs a perspective which allows the foregrounding of women’s wide-ranging experience of war (Higonnet *Behind the Lines*; “Another Record”), both as active participants and as objects of a violence too often silenced (Cohn, Cockburn).

Perhaps because the twenty-first century began with episodes signalling the danger of war in home territory, the British commemorations of the centenary of the First World War, opening in 2014, were especially charged with political meaning. The anniversary prompted discussion of a struggle won at a bitter cost, and in times anticipating the decline of the British Empire. It also inspired creative writing and collective projects which evidence the change of thought produced in the intervening century, not least in matters concerning Empire, world view and gendered relations. My object of analysis here is a collected volume,

1914—Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict between Life and Art, edited by Lavinia Greenlaw and published in 2014, within the five-year *14-18-Now* arts programme.[1] Greenlaw commissioned ten texts by authors from countries which participated in the First World War, asking them to write in response to *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves' famous "bitter leave-taking of England" (Graves xv), his autobiographical essay on the suffering and incompetence of the War, and on post-conflict reinforcement of pacifism, social equality and atheism. The contributions written by women, most particularly those by Ali Smith, Xiaolu Guo and Jeanette Winterson, for whom Britain is birthplace or adoptive country, will constitute my main focus. These three authors occupy relatively peripheral positions in the geo-psychic map of British literature, while very centrally discussing aspects of British culture. My analysis will pair their relatively ex-centric and critical war narratives with the alleged liminality of the genre of the short story, reading their hybrid texts, which move between essay and story, between fiction and auto/biography, within the context of the twenty-first century perceptions of war, gender and art.

The First World War did in fact have its own female chroniclers in the genre of the short story. The quintessential Modernist practitioner of the form, Katherine Mansfield, who felt that artists would be traitors if their expression went unaffected by the war, left emotive accounts of the absence and loss experienced by civilians, albeit in the oblique manner of a "covert war writer" (Edwards 50), through disruptions of form and language. A similarly powerful but oblique treatment of war is present, for instance, in Virginia Woolf's stories.[2] This indirect technique may be considered the war mode of Modernist writers, a style later to be analysed as mirroring the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Raitt and Tate; Higonnet "Authenticty"). However, and despite its *avant garde* artistic relevance, this was not the only approach to the First World War in narrative written by women. Some authors challenged taboo subjects, as Radcliffe Hall did in "Miss Ogilvy finds her place," where a

woman is finally able to adopt a role fitting to her transgender desires by becoming an efficient ambulance commander. Discarded after the war is over, the story turns to fantasy and she morphs into an ancient Briton, shifting from "she" to "he," in a trespassing of genre boundaries by Radcliffe which parallels the transgression of the story's character. "Miss Ogilvy…" is one of the iconic stories inscribing the diverse manner of women's participation in war, a subject re-examined later in the century by authors like Sylvia Townsend Warner, and by scholarly works such as those by Angela K. Smith (*The Second Battlefield*; *Women's Writing*), Margaret Higonnet and Jane Potter.

This broader knowledge on women and war, built up throughout the twentieth century, is part of the inherited wisdom of contemporary writers, as proved by the recent collective volume *War Girls: A Collection of First World War Stories through the Eyes of Young Women*, also published in the anniversary year of 2014. Bringing together nine established authors of young adult fiction, the stories look at women's war lives, mostly away from the battlefield but in a variety of roles that show courage, passion and love amid loss and grief. Sometimes inspired by historical characters like Norah Neilson Grey, the Glasgow artist who volunteered as a nurse (Breslin's "Shadow and Light"), Helen Zenna Smith, writer and ambulance driver (Burgess's "Mother and Mrs Everington"), or the more collective experience of women artists-entertainers (Doherty, "Sky Dancer"), nurses, waitresses, spies (Hooper, "Storm in a Teacup"), and the two million "spare women" left behind by men who went to war (Nicholls, "Going Spare"; Geras "The Green Behind the Glass"), this is a lively, documented and enlightening collection of narratives. The fact that these stories about women's agency in the "Great War" were still received by readers with surprise ("like no other WW1 fiction I have read before," Erica; "makes us see the First World War in a totally different light," Scribe) attests to the endurance of the "old story," even while their content

shows the extent to which women's involvement in war affairs is now exposed and recognised.

A decade into the current century, Britain faced preparations for the 2014 centenary of a war that now had almost no survivors. The crucial role played by the UK in the First World War, strongly conditioned by its imperial habits, left a deep trace in the country's history; this so called "war to end all wars" left millions dead and the nation bankrupt, while those who made and traded in weapons amassed a huge fortune. The cost, even for the winners, was incalculable, in deaths, in wounded and traumatized survivors, in social disruption and lost human potential. Not surprisingly, the commemoration of the start of the war in 2014 generated a heated debate in the UK. In the face of a Prime Minister (David Cameron) intent on strengthening British nationalist feeling, who compared the occasion to the Royal Jubilee, pacifist platforms like *No Glory in War* (http://noglory.org/) collected news countering official triumphalism and presented information on less known or publicised aspects of the "Great War." This website published an open letter against bellicism, signed by British writers, film makers and public figures. The letter (http://noglory.org/index.php/open-letter), which begins by describing the First World War as "a military disaster and a human catastrophe," opposed Cameron's commemorations, aimed at stressing the "national spirit" and led in part by military authorities. In contrast with this patriotic celebration, signatories of the letter foregrounded the lucrative impulse and territorial power struggle behind a war which left sixteen million dead and twenty million wounded. They suggested that the anniversary be used "to promote peace and international cooperation." While official acts returned to the "old story of war" underlining heroic feats and war tactics, part of British society read this official commemoration route as a strategy to justify current militaristic interventions. They responded critically by organizing alternative movements which might help to grasp the lessons of this distant war for the present, and where the world of arts and

literature played a prominent role. Carol Ann Duffy, Poet Laureate, contributed to the *No Glory* website by signing the letter and producing three poems on the "Great War": "An Unseen," inspired by Wilfred Owen, "The Christmas Truce," on the moment when soldiers from both sides stopped the battle on Christmas day, and "Last Post," a homage to the only two remaining survivors of the First World War. It was in this climate that poet Lavinia Greenlaw coordinated the publication of a collective volume, *1914—Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict between Life and Art* (2014), by inviting ten international writers to discuss the subject of artistic identities shaped by conflict (8).[3]

While the massive territorial and social change brought about by the Second World War has been extensively dealt with in recent fiction from and about the former colonies of the British Empire,[4] the First World War had not produced such proliferation of "the Empire writing back to the centre" (Ashcroft *et al*; Rushdie) in contemporary terms. This gap may have suggested one of the key principles guiding Greenlaw's collection, that of including a spectrum of the nations involved in the war. Her appeal to writers from different origins aims to represent at least a fraction of the international actors in the First World War, which despite its common denomination, is often taken to have occurred exclusively between European forces. As she explains in the introduction, the selection aimed to palliate general unawareness "of the true extent of global involvement that political repercussions, complex allegiances and colonial grip incurred" (8). In today's Britain, while the Gallipoli massacre of young Australian and New Zealand soldiers is renowned and mythologized, other transnational human contributions are far less visible. The website *No Glory* reproduced an article published by *The Observer* on 23 August 2003 headlined "A more inclusive story from the trenches: the role of non-European troops in the First World War," which stresses how "a combination of deliberate exclusion and accidental myopia dramatically shrunk the First World War. Rather than the kaleidoscopic, multiracial, global conflict that it was, it became a

monochrome European struggle.” Some texts in Greenlaw’s anthology stem from this same impulse to correct such amnesia.

The reach of the editor’s invitation, to writers across nationalities and to six women (out of a total of ten contributors), is already a signal of the century of distance from 1914, which has resulted in a different sensibility towards imperial power, the interdependence of the world and women’s public roles. The female contributors are Ali Smith (UK), Kamila Shamsie (Pakistan/UK), Elif Shafak (Turkey/France), NoViolet Bulawayo (Zimbabwe/USA), Xiaolu Guo (China/UK) and Jeannette Winterson (UK). Two are contingent residents in London (Guo, Shamsie), all live in the West, but only Smith and Winterson are British-born, in arguably peripheral parts of the UK, Scotland and Northern England respectively. Their texts, therefore, set out from a gendered, decentred standpoint not coincident with the official war narrative.[5] Some also clearly stand between genres, despite the fact that they are responding to an essay form (Graves’ admittedly also idiosyncratic text). Although commissioned by the editor to meditate on art and war, on the gap between past and present and on the tensions between life and art, the contributors chose forms that move freely between essay, auto/biography and fiction writing. In particular, the two texts I will discuss in more detail, Xiaolu Guo’s “Coolies” and Ali Smith’s “Good Voice,” are narrated in the form of stories, notwithstanding their incursions into history, life writing or journalistic prose, and their effective deployment of a first person authorial persona.

Susan Lohafer maintains that the relationship between fiction and non-fiction (the imaginary and the verifiable) finds its most interesting and frequent performance on the borders between the short story and the “artful essay,” as well as in their reception by readers. This firm conviction led her to carry out a formal analysis of what she terms “micro-markers of storyness” (108-120). Hybrid genres are of course hardly new in the practice of literature, but postmodern theory and writing, as well as twenty-first century transmedial growth, have

accustomed readers to a more intense practice of genre hybridity, in parallel with the enhanced physical and symbolic border-crossing which is one of the defining characteristics of the era. Creative writers produced abundant ficto-essays near the end of the twentieth century and in first decade of the twenty-first.[6] In different degrees, the contributors to *1914—Goodbye to All That* offer texts that shuttle between essay and story, with Ali Smith and Xiaolu Guo's leaning most clearly towards story structures.

One of the most striking contributions to the collection, Xiaolu Guo's "Coolies" follows a historical tract rarely discussed in talk of the "Great War." The world-view of this multimedia artist, born in China in 1973,[7] is enriched by a personal history of dramatic life shifts, having moved successively from rural to urban China, from a suffocating Chinese artistic environment to a freer Western one that she embraces without relinquishing her critical outlook and cultural in-betweenness. "Coolies" combines her interest in the effects of history on individuals, her ability to imagine and empathise with their fate, and her documentary talent and versatility, which allows her to gauge East and West with admirable fluency. The title of the story anticipates a deceptively familiar reference to a colonial Indian word and concept,[8] soon to be questioned by the tale. Guo's narrative rescues one of those groups omitted from the official accounts of the "Great War," the 100,000 Chinese peasants recruited to the British Army to dig European trenches:

> The coolies of China went everywhere. They built the railways that crossed the American Wild West and went from the Arctic to Siberia; they worked in Peruvian silver mines and Trinidadian sugar plantations. You can find evidence of coolies in the museums and histories of almost every country in the developed world. Yet there is one particular group of coolies who have been long ignored and almost entirely forgotten: the 100,000 contracted to the British Army during the First World War and sent from east China to the ashes and mud of the European trenches. (126-27)

Brought to France under deception, put to work in the trenches in a regime of slavery, many died from forced labour and racist abuse. Guo's text inscribes these naïve economic migrants, most of them thoroughly ignorant of this geographically distant war, and does so by using the symbolic force of the defining term *kuli*, a Chinese word which (unlike its English counterpart) lacks any negative connotations: "Historically, the majority of Chinese have been labourers. The Chinese believe that hard physical work can keep one alive, therefore 'coolie' is a neutral term. In the West, however, 'coolie' carries all the negative connotations of imperialism and exploitation," those derived the near-slave circumstances of colonial workers (126). In China, we learn, *kuli* means "bitter labour" or "bitter strength", with bitterness viewed as a healing, necessary taste; physical labour keeps humans alive. Historical records, however, reveal that the 32 camps of the "British Chinese Labour Corps" established along the Western Front were sites of death and racist mistreatment, as is crudely described in the documents quoted:

> A diary published by a British lieutenant, Daryl Klein, entitled *With the Chinks,* records what he calls the "Sausage Machine" training centre where the Chinese were taught drill. He writes: "There is a rivalry among the officers in regard to the number of canes broken on the back, legs and shins, not to speak of the heads, of the defaulters." For crimes such as gambling and fighting, transgressors were punished by anything from docked pay to imprisonment of between three and fourteen days. If a coolie fell ill, his wages were immediately stopped. (129-30)

War documents record 2000 deaths at the front, but suspected figures are closer to 20,000; causes of death are not documented. Guo's author-narrator describes, in the first person, a visit to Flanders, crossing the Channel to accompany a friend, Li Ling, to the cemetery of Noyelles-sur-Mer, the site of 842 tombstones bearing Chinese names along with the number

assigned to each worker, a demeaning practice born from Western inability to distinguish one Chinese person from another. Against the odds, Li Ling locates her great grandfather's tomb, surprisingly dated 1919:

> So he died here not during the war but *after* the war! "How?" I ask Li Ling. She doesn't know. Did he die from a random explosion during mine clearances? Or from starvation? Or was he killed for desertion? There is no clue. Only some blackbirds flapping their wings in the distance. Then, beside Li Changchun's Corps number, I see this phrase: *Faithful unto death.*
>
> I look away. I can't bear the hypocrisy let alone the indifference with which this phrase has been foisted on this man. My eyes wander along the rows of Chinese names. The inescapable wind buffets the graves, otherwise there is silence. I look back. Li Ling is carefully placing her bunch of yellow chrysanthemums on her grandfather's tomb. (134-35, emphasis in the original)

The combined pathos and poetic tone of this narrative ending confirm the fictional structures of the text against the essayistic historical fragments quoted earlier. In other sections, a combined autobiographical and historical narrative underlines the situatedness of diverging readings of history: far from representing heroic mementoes, poppies in China are reminders of a shameful past, the Opium Wars during which the British Empire deliberately distributed and promoted opium among the Chinese to secure huge economic and strategic benefits: "My teacher was very clear: 'How to understand British history? Two things—they invented Capitalism and they forced opium on China.' Any Chinese who went to school in the '70s and '80s would have been taught these two facts" (131). Guo's East and West differ in their perception of wars and commemorations. For a Chinese person, the key date in the early twentieth century is 1917, the October Revolution and the advent of Communism. To

the ordinary Chinese, "war means above all massacre. The most infamous example is perhaps the An Lushan Rebellion, during the Tang Dynasty, which left 36 million dead. Some historians believe this to have been the largest atrocity in human history in that one-sixth of the world's entire population at that time was lost" (131); in more recent times, the devastating Rape of Nanking (December 1937) left behind "a city of corpses" (131). This stunning death toll and the generalised ignorance of such events in the West, where the author-narrator is expected to be conversant with European history, puts into perspective the ground still to be gained in reciprocating world knowledge.

Guo's story combines a search for the life of an individual, a friend's late grandfather, with the act of restoring into history the lives of the thousands of Chinese dead or enslaved in the fields of France, a deed of memory and reparation. Deploying narrative strategies of historical research, journalistic reportage and personal memoir, the text crucially pivots around a symbolic linguistic issue: the term *kuli*, which constitutes the title and the concept which encapsulates the meanings and cultural contradictions of the compelling multi-layered story. "Coolies" is a historiographic postcolonial narrative with a difference. China is not officially a former colony, part of the usual migration routes from the British Empire, but the story clearly interpellates a colonial European memory. It begins by subverting colonial knowledge itself, questioning our accepted version of the origins of the word *coolie*, to extend its application to a shameful (hence conveniently forgotten) case of exploited labour during the First World War, tangentially reminding us of the equally shameful Opium Wars. In so doing, it takes readers beyond the usual territory of English language writing, yet paradoxically it does so from the capital of the UK, the multicultural, vibrant London, albeit one currently swept by the uncertainties of Brexit.

This transnational, language-inflected angle on war is at the core of other contributions to the volume, which thus confirm the critical context of Guo's and Smith's stories. "Coolies"

deals with three themes that recur in *1914—Goodbye to All That*: war as lucrative and colonial (against official narratives of inevitability); the urgency of historical memory, and the links between peace, freedom and creativity. If Guo explains her exile as the consequence of stifling censorship in China, Kamila Shamsie, NoViolet Bulawayo and Elif Shafak describe their writing as inextricable from the turbulent history of their countries, which have moved from colonialism into complex internal and geostrategic struggles. Shamsie's "Goodbye to Some of That" (27-40) traces how she came to "link Pakistan and its politics to memory and narrative" (33), her "personal Origin Story" inspiring all her early Karachi fiction. Equally tied to national politics is her first memory of experiencing empathy, an essential writerly skill, during a childhood visit to a relative under house arrest. Her later work on the Second World War with non-Pakistani protagonists breaks this "homecoming" writing habit, but continues to explore conflict and memory. Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo, in her heart-felt bio-historical manifesto, "Clarity" (91-107), singles out the courageous act of fellow artist Owen Moseko, who publicly broke the official silence on the massacre of the Mdebele (1983-87), as a turning point in her own writing, leading to her adoption of Bulawayo as a memorialising penname, and her decision "never to choose silence" (100). Her text stresses language's symbolic power and defines her own writing as a "love-letter" to her people from the diasporic distance of the USA, blissfully connected through the Internet. Equally focusing on memory and language, Elif Shafak's "In Search of Untold Stories" (75-89) conveys the cultural loss suffered by Turks after their Ottoman language was banned by Ataturk, whose modernising frenzy deprived his people of reading the texts of their past. Shafak's writing strategy therefore includes the use of recovered Ottoman words together with the oral tales of women, the "bearers of memory" and "custodians of cultural continuity" (84). In relation to the First World War, she quotes the striking image passed on by her grandmother describing soldiers "frozen to death, hundreds of them trench after trench, still standing, like trees of ice"

(80). The finding or recovering of voices, cracking those silences, is a running theme in the collection: "In the land where I come from silences are telling, weighty. There is more discontinuity than continuity, more amnesia than memory" (Shafak 77).

This paradoxical chorus of silences and lost voices has poignant expression in the structure of Ali Smith's markedly "storied" contribution to the volume, "Good Voice" (9-26), a dialogue between a writer and her father, a Navy man in the 1940s and the son of a First World War veteran, and who, despite being dead, proves a flippantly belligerent interlocutor. The story condenses many of Smith's vintage narrative pleasures: a refusal of categories and linearity, the unpredicted juxtaposition of words, sources and perspectives that suggest an unresolved story, multiple stories, to be completed by readers. Like other Smith texts (such as, relevantly, "True Short Story") "Good Voice" includes a narrator-character ambiguously identifiable with the author. Within this dialogic frame, the narrator is seeking inspiration to write on the First World War and the father acts as a memory bank, silent about his own combat experience, but providing the daughter with episodes from her own formative years: "doing" the Great War at school, joining the anti-nuclear movement, being chosen for school commemorations. The dialogue unravels her learning of the official and the alternative story of war, against the silence on her father's and grandfather's war traumas or her mother's life when she also joined the war, in the WAF.

In the opening of the story, the narrator shares with her father the surprising discovery that, in the First World War, a voice bank of British and Irish accents was collected, ironically, by a German linguist who traversed the prisoner of war camps, recording and thus saving accents that otherwise would have been lost forever. The century-old voices of those prisoners, now available through the internet (and more fully from the British Library), become part of the growing choir of voices contained by the story, those of war artists and troop entertainers like Gracie Fields, whose songs the father favours; those of the War Poets,

rising from their texts in a school anthology, as they used to rise in her teenage nightmares in the form of a mudman from the trenches; those of the old school exchange girls from Germany, nonplussed at their classmates' taunts about Nazis; contemporary pacifist songs, Boy George and Culture Club singing "The War Song," Marianne Faithful singing "Broken English"; These remembered, recorded and spectral voices inhabit the story, as the narrator-author explores perspectives on the "Great War." In a random Internet search, she finds a photo of

> *Austrians executing Serbs 1917. JPG.*
>
> *Description: English: World War 1 execution squad.*
>
> *Original caption: "Austria's Atrocities. Blindfolded and in a kneeling position, patriotic Jugo-Slavs in Serbia near the Austrian lines were arranged in a semicircle and ruthlessly shot at a command.* (13)

In another search, she discovers that the Scottish Highlands had the highest casualty rate per capita in Europe.

Throughout this extended enquiry, father and daughter engage in a singing duel: "My father starts singing when he hears the word song. *Oh play to me Gypsy. That sweet serenade*" (11). He punctuates the story with his versions of Gracie Fields and other patriotic (and patriarchal) Second World War love songs. The daughter counters by singing Culture Club's "War is stupid, people are stupid," to the father's disdain. In a parodic version of the "flyting" tradition going back to Scottish *makars*, bards who contended in witty invectives, father and daughter compete in singing arguments that not only display their differing perspectives on war, but also on sexuality and gender. The father, whose singing is meaningfully described as "wildly out of tune" (11), suggests that Boy George might have benefitted from war; the daughter reminds him of Wilfred Owen's homosexuality. Whether the spectral father's thinking can be affected retrospectively remains uncertain, but the

daughter's glimpse into the horrors of war does finally translate into emotion, after she extracts all the phrases she has underlined over the years in her old war poetry anthology, to form an impromptu concrete poem, a collective found poem on the pathos of that "Great War,"

> Consciousness: in that rich earth: for the last time: a jolting lump: feet that trod him down: the eyeless dead: posturing giants: an officer came blundering: gasping and bawling: you make us shells: very real: silent: salient: nervous: snow-dazed: sun-dozed: became a lump of stench, a clot of meat: blood-shod: gas shells dropping softly behind: ecstasy of fumbling: you too: children: the holy glimmers of goodbyes: waiting for dark: voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn: a god in kilts: God through mud: I have perceived much beauty: hell: hell: alleys cobbled with their brothers: the philosophy: I'm blind: pennies on my eyes: piteous recognition: the pity war distilled: I try not to remember these things now: people in whose voice real feeling rings: end of the world: less chanced than you for life: oaths Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice: many crowns of thorns: emptied of God-ancestralled essences: the great sunk silences: roots in the black blood: titan: power: in thirteen days I'll probably be dead: memories that make only a single memory: I hear you still: soldiers who sing these days. (24-25)

This exercise conjures her old nightmarish "man of mud and sadness" who rises "like a great wave, like a great cloud much bigger than the earth," speaking "with all the gone voices. He is a roaring silence" (25). The roaring silence of the execution photograph, where the men are "shooting people so close to them that they could have reached forward and touched them without even moving their feet" (25. The roaring silences of war. The daughter's sudden tears of understanding move the father to insist on uplifting songs in his Gracie Fields *falsetto*

(emphasis mine). But the cross-purpose exchange between the two trails to an end, the father leaving with his out-of-tune Gracie Fields, the daughter retorting Marianne Faithful, whose "Say it in broken English" closes the story, dubiously granting the daughter the last word.

Ali Smith's fondness for the concentration of the short story form is well known, and her pastiche technique grants this story a capacious inclusion of past and present voices, together with their verbal and non-verbal exchanges on war, love, non-binary gender and the breaking of masculinist codes, as well as on the victims (and perpetrators) of these. "Good Voice" was reproduced, a year after the publication of this volume, in Smith's collection of short fiction *Public Library and Other Stories* (2015), on the one hand demonstrating the contingency of genre categories; on the other confirming the unclassifiable nature of Ali Smith's texts. Just as her Weidenfeld lectures, published in *Artful* (2012) blended fiction (and a ghostly presence) with critical theory, this story complies with the essay function, unearthing data and reflecting on them in authorial voice, without renouncing the efficacy of the short story's intensity to stimulate the imagination and elicit empathy.

In contrast with Smith's metaliterary opening piece, Jeanette Winterson's contribution, which closes the collection, is clearly inclined towards the essay form. "Writing on the Wall" (157-171), a meditation on the value of art and creativity, takes us back to the industrial revolution and, quoting statements that could have been made in the present, compares the current climate of growing social inequality and uncontrolled capitalist development to that ruthless past. She reminds readers that in Marx's view, "Socialism was needed to provide for man's animal needs (food and water, shelter, safety, health, rest, a clean environment), so that man might have leisure to supply his human needs," and that those human needs are "Love and friendship, family life, education, intellectual pursuit, sport, enquiry, curiosity, books, music, art in all its changing shapes and forms. … the common denominator is creativity"

(158-9). Arguing against utilitarian education, which breaks the creative continuum we inhabit from childhood, she exposes the claim that art is an elitist activity as a new myth, used to justify withdrawal of funding: "it's a mass-culture myth, and it suits the true elite of the world who has no interest in democracy or in human potential. The elite of the world depends on cheap labour, mental lethargy, depression so deep that change seems impossible, and strict segregation of entitlement" (160). In contrast, she points out, "we can always afford a war" (161). In a modified version of the famous First World War memorial slogan "Lest we forget," she argues, with Adrienne Rich, that "the danger lies in forgetting what we had" (167), forgetting our acquired human rights. The essay conducts a historical tour through past moments of support for learning and the arts: the first public library in the UK, created in her home town, Manchester, in 1852; the growth of public libraries (294 by 1900); Andrew Carnegie writing in *The Gospel of Wealth* that "Man does not live by bread alone… there is no class so pitiably wretched as that which possesses money and nothing else" (Winterson 168); Maynard Keynes persuading the British government after the Second World War to accept paintings for the National Gallery in lieu of payment from France; Engels looking at factories in Manchester and writing in 1844, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* that their exploitative horror is "what happens when men regard each other only as useful objects". As counterforce, Winterson defends that "the creative continuum recognizes human beings as much more than useful objects" (170).

Winterson's analysis of war, economy and art is upheld by recent social research. Many studies of masculinities prove how governments that concentrate funds on war, deviating them from social issues, leisure and art, are closely associated with militaristic masculinities and male bonding practices.[9] As Cynthia Cockburn demonstrates, war and gender relations are mutually shaping. In pre-war periods or times of perceived danger, patriarchy and nationalism are exacerbated, decisions masculinised and a high percentage of

the Gross National Product goes to reinforcing armies and training children for roles of protecting family and so-called national honour. Cockburn maintains that gender power relations (masculinities) fit especially well into the *root* causes of war as described by Brian Foggarty, that is, those predisposing a society to belligerence [10] Gender relations and masculinist values (including economic decision-making) need to be challenged in order to avoid war, as campaigns like *No Glory* are aware. The unquestioning of binary gender identities (Smith), the ignorance of the past (Guo) and the loss of the humanising creative continuum (Winterson), can lead to a passive acceptance of such a pre-war economy. War narratives that examine gender relations, whether academic or creative, contribute to valuable knowledge of how conflict is produced and managed.

The war stories by Ali Smith and Xiaolu Guo discussed here differ in thematic focus and in narrative strategies, displaying authorial (and autobiographical) traces that identify them as the work of their unique creators. This of course is equally true of the remaining texts in Lavinia Greenlaw's volume and of those in the anthology *War Girls*. Yet it is also a century-old truism that writings, as Modernist Virginia Woolf put it, "are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of the thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (Woolf 85). In terms of later critical formulations, they are the product of intertextuality, but I would like to underline here two essential features of this collective aspect of writing: on the one hand, the importance of accumulated, shared knowledge, built through academic and non-academic research, and disseminated through a variety of conduits, which include literature; on the other, the singular efforts of the authors here discussed to foreground, through their fictional strategies and skills, that diverse "mass behind the single voice" which makes up their stories.

The contemporary narratives we have been examining benefit from the expanded

knowledge accumulated in the past century on war, women, global relations, post/colonial analysis, gender and queer theory, a knowledge transmitted and accessed, as the stories show, through the enhanced connectivity and mobility of the information age. They show the shifts taking place in the twenty-first century, changes in paradigm from globalisation to planetarity [11] from dual male/female patterns of sexuality and gender to non-binary subjectivities transcending categorisation. These new perspectives, characterised by open-endedness, multiplicities and potentialities, but also by a strong ethical component, could not have developed or continue to develop without memory and the restorative salvaging of the voices and stories omitted by the dominant, unifying discourses of power.

The texts collected in *1914—Goodbye to All That* strive to bring those "voices of the mass" into their texts, more fully aware of who this "mass" may have been, with an ear more attuned to differences — in class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, exclusion, strangerhood— that were not articulated, or generally foregrounded, in the otherwise path-breaking writing of the Modernists or in British war literature of the early twentieth-century. The approach taken in these centennial writings is explicitly intersectional and inclusive, more prone to border-crossing in both national and literary terms. The proverbially liminal short story form, in its easy intersection with the essay, allows writers to pose direct questions in authorial voice while juxtaposing the fictional resources that recreate voice and subjectivity, that are able to bring characters alive (even spectrally from the past) in order to provoke empathy. Ali Smith has repeatedly declared her passion for the form of the short story, for its poetic concentration and the brevity that she claims forces us to face mortality (Smith, Interview with Arifa Akbar). Both her story, "Good Voice," and Guo's "Coolies" foreground a (mass) mortality whose ghosts return in different guises to teach us about being human. Through the essayistic, transmedia investigation of data and evidence, and by engaging our emotions through the recreation of human voices, the stories are able to convey the depth and variety of the lives

affected by the First World War, and to expose the underlying gender structures.

These tales of the First World War, investigations which unearth shameful episodes of wartime racism and the inhumanity of battle, which challenge the gendered, root causes of war, cannot but suggest alternative readings of contemporary conflicts. They do so by exploring history and the complexities of language, trusting creative writing to communicate beyond the merely rational. The stories confront indifference and cultural amnesia, looking back from these centennial moments which, as Winterson reminds us, require collective action to challenge the patterns of a pre-war economy, to salvage our human side in times when "the writing on the wall" does not predict a peaceful future of egalitarian access to knowledge, humanity and creativity.

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[1] The *14-18-NOW* project can be found at <https://www.1418now.org.uk>. It presents itself as "Extraordinary arts experiences connecting people with the First World War" and is till going strong in 2018, the year of the centenary of the armistice. Among other activities, it coordinates a celebration of the centenary of women's vote, achieved on 6 February 1918, with the event *Processions* planned for June 10 in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast. Former actions include the very successful installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* by Paul Cumming and Tom Piper that "planted" 888,246 ceramic poppies at the Tower of London.

[2] After the Second World War, Rosamond Lehman will also portray women's alternative lives in households without husbands and fathers, watching young men leave for the front; and Elizabeth Taylor, in "The Devastating Boys," leaves a memorable account of the miscommunication between working class, mixed-race children and the affluent families who host them temporarily.

[3] Some of the authors also participated, in July 2014, in a public debate and book presentation within the "Great War" cultural events organized by the British Library, and in a further event in Edinburgh. Information about *1949—Goodbye to All That* related activities appears at https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/goodbye-to-all-that/

[4] The list of novels would be interminable. *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy, and *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith, are among the already classic millennial novels written by women and returning to World War Two, from the UK with a broader territorial reach, the Caribbean and South Asia featuring in both. In former colonies, Simone Lazaroo's *The Australian Fiancé* (2000) moves between Singapore and Australia, as does Hsu Ming Theo's *Love and Vertigo* (2000), to mention only a brief sample.

[5] This was made evident reaction of a member of the public in the presentation of the book at the British Library in July 2014, an elderly man and veteran, who stood up to accuse the writers participating in the discussion of having no idea what the war had been about.

[6] Canadian literature, particularly prolific in this arena, offers excellent examples of ficto-criticism by Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje or Aritha van Herk, and already in the new century, Lawrence Hill or Esi Edugyan, at times coining new genre terminology, such as van Herk's *geografictione*.
[7] Guo lives in London, also spending periods in Berlin. She is usually described by promotion material as "Chinese-British" and was listed in Granta's Best of Young British Novelists in 2013. Her films and novels range from documenting London's nocturnal dwellers to fictionalising Chinese and Western characters, cities or history. She has also published a collection of short stories, *Lovers in the Age of Indifference* (2010).
[8] The etymology of the word is traditionally traced to Tamil or Hindustani, and the concept was most famously applied to Indian unskilled labourers in colonial times, the term subsequently becoming generalised to refer to any unskilled, exploited labourers.
[9] For a summary of some of these, see Cockburn, who discusses studies such as Robert Dean's *Imperial Brotherhood* (2001) on the elite men surrounding John F. Kennedy at the time of the Vietnam war, "warrior intellectuals" educated and socialised in male-only institutions; or Altinay's study of the militaristic birth of the Turkish state founded by Artatürk, where education turns every male child into a soldier (*The Myth of the Military Nation*, 2004).
[10] Fogarty distinguishes between immediate prompts to war (for instance, access to oil), antecedent causes (such as ethno-national interests) and *root* causes, which predispose societies to belligerence.
[11] For the theoretical and ethical difference between these two related terms, see Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and Elias and Moraru *The Planetary Turn*.