

[H-Diplo Review Essay 269 on Curtis. Writing Resistance and the Question of Gender: Charlotte Delbo, Noor Inayat Khan, and Germaine Tillio](#)

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Lara R. Curtis. *Writing Resistance and the Question of Gender: Charlotte Delbo, Noor Inayat Khan, and Germaine Tillio*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. ISBN: 978-3-030-31241-1 (hardcover, \$89.99).

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In *Writing Resistance and the Question of Gender*, Lara R. Curtis re-introduces three extraordinary stories of female engagement in the French Resistance through a new lens: literature and writing. Throughout the book, Curtis weaves together the autobiographical narratives and a range of writings from three well-known female resisters: Charlotte Delbo, Noor Inayat Khan, and Germaine Tillio. All three women were members of organized French resistance networks and risked their lives fighting against Nazism and fascism. All three paid a high price for their resistance: Tillio and Delbo spent years in Nazi concentration camps; Khan was executed at Dachau in 1944. These women have rightfully been celebrated as national and international heroines. Their lives have inspired biographies, films, documentaries, archival collections, and popular histories. In 2014, the French government granted Tillio's body an eternal resting place in the Pantheon, France's shrine to national heroes; her remains and life story represent France's universalist narrative of a people in resistance.

Revisiting their stories of resistance and experiences of captivity through their writings, Curtis argues for a broadened, more subjective, view of resistance that may allow for the ascendancy of other voices of female *résistantes*. Curtis contends that a narrow focus on acts of heroic resistance or engagement with organized resistance networks is reductive. For Delbo, Khan, and Tillio in particular, all women who fit this view of resistance, it turns attention away from the nuances of their stories as *résistantes*. It also minimizes these women's prewar intellectual training, spiritual and moral values, political commitments, and "gendered subjectivity," all of which conditioned their resistance and their mechanisms for coping with captivity. Moreover, resistance as a category can obscure the myriad roles of women more broadly, whose resistance intersected with their other roles as wives, mothers, homemakers, and workers.^[1] In response, Curtis offers "writing resistance," a term which encompasses both personal and private as well as intellectual, fictional, and theatrical texts to pull apart the subjective threads of resistance that influenced their understanding of their roles as *résistantes*. These women's backgrounds, life experiences, and forms of their writing were all

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notably diverse. What links them together was their courage, their willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to fight fascism, and their use of writing to make sense of, document, and cope with their experiences.

The first *résistante* Curtis introduces is Charlotte Delbo, who spent three years imprisoned at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. In her youth, Delbo was committed both to politics and the theater. She joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1930s and published in the Communist journal for the arts, the *Cahiers de la jeunesse*. In 1936, she married fellow activist Georges Dudach. On March 22, 1942, the Delbo and Dudach were arrested. While Dudach was executed only a few months later in May 1942, Delbo remained in a prison near Paris until January 1943. She was then deported to Auschwitz on a convoy of non-Jewish prisoners. Delbo was one of the few survivors of that convoy: of 229 women, only 49 survived.^[2] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Delbo published literary reflections on her traumatic experiences from the camps and the loss of her husband. In reading Delbo's resistance, Curtis weaves in a range of Delbo's postwar texts. She revisits Delbo's trilogy of poetry, prose, and personal memories, *Auschwitz et après* (1965-1971) and analyzes it alongside lesser known texts, including *Spectres, mes compagnons* (1977), *La sentence* (1972), and *Qui rapportera ces paroles* (1974).^[3] In her analysis, Curtis focuses closely on Delbo's portrayal of female trauma and nostalgia in her fictional and personal writing. Curtis argues that Delbo populates her stories with spectral vestiges of the past. These ghosts are reflections of women she met before the war and in the camps and they demonstrate Delbo's subjective attachment to her traumatic past. Delbo makes constant reference to aspects of traumatic experience, including the loss of her husband, and the pain of survival, and she shares in the agony of her characters. Curtis argues that Delbo's act of "writing resistance" is the creation of this literary "afterlife" (25), constructed by Delbo's powerful memories of life in the camps, where the past and present, the living and the dead, meet.

On Noor Inayat Khan, Curtis is the first scholar to take seriously the impact of Sufism on her resistance. Curtis reads Khan's resistance through her largely prewar writings and personal letters that espouse her moral and spiritual values. Khan was the first female wireless operator in the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and she was infiltrated from Britain into enemy occupied France. Khan was captured, tortured, and executed in September 1944. The French government posthumously awarded her the Croix de Guerre with a gold star, the highest civilian award. Although the story of Khan's courageous resistance and her tragic sacrifice have inspired much popular interest, her dedication to Sufism have largely been left out of her story. Curtis shows us that Khan's resistance and her spiritualism were inextricably intertwined. Curtis's reading of Khan draws out her support for resistance narratives and female courage in her prewar writings, including letters to her fiancé, a Jewish pianist Azeem Goldenberg, and Curtis argues that her resistance was rooted in these spiritual and moral values.

Curtis's analysis of Khan centers on her prewar published text, *Twenty Jakata Tales* (1939)—inspired by the Buddhist *Jakata Tales*.^[4] Curtis contends that Khan's writings on Sufism, many of which were fables, served as a "bridge" that led her to write narratives of resistance that reflected her later wartime sacrifices. Although Khan's prewar fables were "not initially intended to be wartime literature nor to offer metaphorical representations of the two contemporaneous wartime situations Noor was witnessing," they highlight how Khan wrote about resistance alongside her moral and spiritual values (70). In these writings, Curtis locates Khan's valorization of resistance as a human

value and collective response to crisis and a spiritual and moral self-awareness that sustained her throughout the war. Khan's stories are peppered with female protagonists who survive their oppression and "they either leave some remarkable legacy to posterity or become exemplary spiritual figures whose stories, while conveying moral instruction to the reader or listener, are imbedded with themes related to Sufism" (79). These writings insist upon the fact that Khan's Sufism was essential, not peripheral, to her later resistance. Khan's largely unpublished letters to Goldenberg stand as some of her earliest writings and underscore how Khan saw music, writing, and her spirituality as affectively interconnected (89). Khan's writing resistance as expressed in these myriad texts was, as Curtis puts it, the "ingenious ways she creatively sought to 'adapt and blend' traditions...to mirror the turbulent and political circumstances of her life." (91).

Curtis last analyzes Tillion, who was an ethnologist. She juxtaposes Tillion's writings on Algeria and Ravensbrück, which utilize her ethnographic training to observe and represent power structures and experiences of captivity. Tillion studied under the storied sociologist Marcel Mauss and spent much of the 1930s living in Algeria researching the Berbers of Aurès for her doctoral thesis. She returned to France in 1940 and joined a resistance network of academics and intellectuals, the *réseau du musée de l'homme*. Tillion was arrested in 1942 and deported to Ravensbrück in 1943. Tillion lost many of her field research notes during her captivity and turned her attention instead to observing and documenting daily life in the camp. Owing to her intellectual training and field research, Tillion developed a methodological framework for writing about her captivity and recording her observations of camp administration. In her analysis of Tillion, Curtis chooses to examine not her more well-known memoirs, but a quasi-scientific operetta written during her captivity and published in 2005.^[5] The operetta, *Le Verfügar aux enfers*, reveals Tillion's vantage points as ethnologist, *résistante*, and captive.^[6] It parodies ethnography by creating scientific power structure fit for life camp life; Tillion imagines the character of the authoritative "Naturaliste" an ethnographer witnessing the dehumanization and birth of a new species: the *Verfügbaren*, referring to those that were "available" to undertake dehumanizing work (100). The Naturaliste's brutal disregard for the prisoners and their agony powerfully represents the brutality of the camp system itself. The Naturaliste, an ethnographer interested not in humanity, but inhumanity, becomes a proxy for the camp system. The operetta demonstrates how Tillion creatively adapted ethnologic methodologies to observe and represent the institutional structures of the camp and the daily life of its internees.

Fourteen years after first leaving Algeria Tillion returned in 1954 to evaluate the political situation in the midst of the Algerian War. Curtis traces how Tillion's dual vantage point as 'deported resistor' and 'ethnologist' informed her advocacy for the rights of prisoners during the Algerian War. Writing as a former captive herself, Tillion penned an essay in the midst of the war for the *Association nationale des anciens déportées* (ADIR) that pulled at their common experience as deportees to advocate for the humanitarian treatment of Algerian prisoners. In 2000, Tillion published *Il était une fois l'ethnographie* built from her doctoral field work in Algeria.^[7] As Curtis concludes, Tillion's writing resistance centers on the imbrications of these experiences as deportee and ethnologist: "The ways in which Tillion incorporates her retrospective reflections on imprisonment at Ravensbrück into her perspectives on the Algerian situation in 1957 suggests that, for her, 'writing resistance' meant accounting as fully as possible for both the experiential and ideological significance of her engagements in the perilous struggles that confronted mankind during her lifetime" (127-128).

This book will be of particular interest to a range of scholars studying writings about and memory of

the Nazi concentration camps, as well as those researching gender and World War II, the concentration camps, the French Resistance, or trauma and aesthetics. Throughout this fascinating book, Curtis navigates the problem of defining resistance and how female resistance often remains under-studied and even invisible. Curtis's work heeds Dahlia Ofer's call for using gender and women's narratives to "widen and nuance both the concept of accommodation and of resistance and force historians to reevaluate what they had formerly defined as heroism and resistance."^[8] Curtis insists that a strict focus on resistance activities not only obscures important aspects of these women's lives, influences, and other strands of their resistance, it also serves to obfuscate larger studies of female resistance.

A few of Curtis's larger points regarding women's resistance and visibility deserve to be further extrapolated. First, as Curtis points out at the end of the book, women's resistance was particular and variegated; female resistance often looked different than that portrayed in typical narratives of heroic resistance, and women were more likely not to identify as resistant. This means that women engaged in resistance were less likely to have been recorded or remembered as such. Therefore, scholars need new strategies for 'reading' their stories and locating their voices. Curtis offers literature and creative writing as a lens for locating these more subjective and quotidian forms of resistance. In Curtis' work, these three women's resistance to Nazi oppression, their courage, and their emphasis on certain values, can be extrapolated from daily writings—including fiction, scholarly, and personal. Curtis reveals how a move towards different types of textual (and perhaps non-textual) sources, can reveal subjective facets of resistance and elevate new voices that often are not recorded in traditional archival records. Her analytic strategies would work well with other forms of artistic output, such as photography and art, which individuals also used to record what they witnessed and mediate their responses. For example, one of the subjects of my own research, Julia Pirotte, a Jewish photographer in occupied France, created a corpus of subjective photographs of life for working class and impoverished women in Marseille that expressed her own commitment to humanitarian and social reform.^[9] These photographs of occupation engage with Pirotte's own life experiences and represent a photographic resistance to Nazism and Vichy. Curtis's work underscores a need for more nuanced approaches to studying female resistance and offers writings as one lens for unearthing the gendered and subjective strands of resistance.

Second, many of these women's stories and writings publicly emerged much later. Curtis credits the belatedness of their writings both to their self-perception of the significance of their resistance and their writings and to a lack of scholarly interest in women's stories until more recently. Although Delbo began to write her oeuvre on Auschwitz as soon as she recovered, she only began to publish her writings on the camps in the mid-1960s, almost 20 years after her release. Tillio published a trio of memoirs on Ravensbrück beginning in 1946 and wrote extensively about Algeria throughout the 1950s in the midst of another international human rights crisis. However, she did not publish her operetta until the 2000s—sixty years after writing it.^[10] Curtis argues that they did not necessarily perceive their reflections on their captivity, or their resistance, as "significant contributions to the historical record" (140). A common trope particular to female survivors of the camps was a fear or perhaps expectation that the public would not want to hear about their traumas in the aftermath of war, occupation, and the Holocaust. As survivors, they may not have thought that their resistance was significant. Curtis notes that their continued emergence of their stories within the historical record also coincided with growing scholarly and popular interest in women's resistance stories. The

history of these texts, however, could be further examined in relation to collective memory; how are these texts entanglements of historical experience and memory? How have the public afterlives of Delbo, Khan, and Tillion's resistance been colored in particular ways by their presence in collective memory? How has the timely publication of their texts served specific objectives? Although collective memory is perhaps outside the scope of this project, paying attention to how structures of memory impacted how these women wrote their resistance in retrospect or published these texts within particular contexts would further spotlight the myriad threads of writing resistance.

By focusing solely on the texts written by such well-known female resisters, Curtis potentially misses an opportunity to elevate new female voices of resistance. However, her approach instead demonstrates the merit of her methodological focus on writing as a lens for studying female resistance more broadly. Even important aspects of these three well-known stories have been obscured. On this note, the book ends with a refreshing look forward. Curtis lays out a potential research program: pages and pages of stories of female resisters that Curtis could research next, all of whom are individuals with less public profiles than Delbo, Khan, and Tillion. She thus highlights the fact that this work of amplifying stories of female resistance is far from over.

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Notes

[1] On this point, Curtis draws on the work of *Margaret Collins Weitz, Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York: Wiley, 1995).

[2] Charlotte Delbo, *Le convoi du 24 janvier* (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1965).

[3] *Auschwitz et Après* was published in three parts by Éditions de Minuit between 1970 and 1971: *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* (1965); *Une connaissance inutile* (1970); and *Mesure de nos jours* (1971). Delbo, *Spectres mes compagnons* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1977); *La Sentence* (Paris: Éditions P.J. Oswald, 1972); *Qui rapportera ces paroles* (Paris: P.J. Oswald, 1974).

[4] Noor Inayat Khan, *Twenty Jakarta Tales* (London: East-West, 1939).

[5] Tillion published a trilogy of memoirs about Ravensbrück between 1946 and 1988: *Ravensbrück* (Paris: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1946); *Ravensbrück* (Paris: Éditions Famot, 1976); *Ravensbrück*

(Paris: Seuil, 1988).

[6] Tillion, *Le Verfügar aux enfers: Une opérette à Ravensbrück* (Paris: Martinière, 2005).

[7] Tillion, *Il était une fois ethnographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

[8] Dahlia Ofer, "The Contribution of Gender to the Study of the Holocaust," *Gender and Jewish History* (2011), 131-132.

[9] Abigail E Lewis, "Photographic Perspectives on the Everyday: Julia Pirotte's Images of Occupation in Marseille," *Film and Fiction for Scholars of France* 10:2 (March 2020), H-France, <https://h-france.net/fffh/reviews/photographic-perspectives-on-the-everyday-julia-pirottes-images-of-occupation-in-marseille/>.

[10] Donald Reid notes that Tillion mentioned the operetta in her studies of Ravensbrück, but until 2005 only camp prisoners had read the text. Reid writes, "it was an experience that bonded them—not because of the variety of arcane references—but because only they could truly understand the experience of reading such a work in the *univers concentrationnaire*." Donald Reid, "Available in Hell: Germaine Tillion's Operetta of Resistance at Ravensbrück," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 25:2 (Summer 2007), 141-150, here 147.