

Flesh-witnessing and the testimonial imagination: Ukrainian women's poetry and diaries in wartime

LADA KOLOMIYETS

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Ukrainian women's poetry. Testimonial poetics. Flesh-witnessing. War
diaries. Affect theory. Vernacular archive.

This article examines the emergence of a distinct testimonial poetics in contemporary Ukrainian women's writing during the Russia–Ukraine war. Drawing on Yuval Noah Harari's concept of *flesh-witnessing* and recent scholarship on citizen media, I argue that Ukrainian women poets and diarists have developed a literary mode that fuses embodied experience, civic participation, and documentary precision. Their work – circulating in print, online platforms, and volunteer networks – constitutes a vernacular archive of wartime life grounded in affective states, sensory immediacy, and the ethical imperative to bear witness. Through close readings of poems, diaries, and digital testimonies produced since 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, the article demonstrates how women writers have assumed the role of citizen-participants who chronicle war in real time. This testimonial poetics departs from pre-war metaphorical abstraction, foregrounding concrete imagery, emotional lexicons, and the phenomenology of survival. I propose a theoretical framework for understanding these texts as epistemological instruments that resist cultural erasure, preserve memory, and articulate the lived experience of war.

Lada Kolomiyets
Department of East European, Eurasian,
and Russian Studies
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Dartmouth College
USA
Lada.Kolomiyets@dartmouth.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-8327-6672

WOMEN'S VOICES AS WARTIME EPISTEMOLOGY

The Russian war against Ukraine has generated an unprecedented wave of literary testimony. Among the most compelling contributors to this emergent field are Ukrainian women writers whose work documents the war's impact on bodies, homes, language, and memory. Their writing is not merely reactive; it is constitutive of a new cultural formation in which literature becomes a mode of survival, resistance, and ethical address. This article argues that contemporary Ukrainian women's wartime writing develops a distinct testimonial poetics, a set of aesthetic and ethical practices that transform lived experience into a shared affective archive.

Ukrainian women writers navigate the fraught terrain between witnessing and staying alive, between the urgency to articulate and the weight of trauma, between the intimacy of private grief and the demands of collective responsibility. Building on key insights from testimony studies (Felman and Laub 1992; Agamben 1999; Bollinger 2010; Bickford 2008, n.d.; Webb 2019; Mazzi 2025), affect theory (Ahmed 2014; Cvetkovich 2003), and feminist analyses of war writing (Sjoberg 2014; Whitlock 2007), I argue that their texts form a distinct affective archive – a living, continually expanding repository of embodied knowledge, emotional labor, and ethical self-positioning. Although the concept of testimony is deeply rooted in Holocaust studies and trauma theory, Ukrainian women's wartime writing both inherits and unsettles this lineage. Unlike retrospective survivor accounts, these works are composed in the midst of danger – under shelling, during displacement, or within occupied territories. They function not only as records of injury but also as acts of agency, solidarity, and civic participation, thereby challenging the temporal, generic, and epistemological assumptions that have long structured Western understandings of testimony. Crucially, these writers foreground the gendered conditions of witnessing, reclaiming domestic spaces, caregiving practices, and embodied vulnerability as legitimate sites of wartime knowledge.

Moreover, Ukrainian women's wartime writing foregrounds the gendered dimensions of witnessing. Scholars of feminist war studies have shown that women's experiences of conflict are often marginalized or instrumentalized within national narratives (Sjoberg 2014). Ukrainian women writers resist such erasure. Their work reclaims the intimate sphere as a locus of historical and political meaning, expanding the scope of what counts as war literature.

Through close readings of poetry, diaries, and essays by Victoria Amelina, Olena Astaseva, Larissa Babij, Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko, Inna Honchar, Halyna Kruk, Natalka Marynychak, and Lyuba Yakimchuk, this article demonstrates how testimonial poetics operates across genres to foreground vulnerability, relationality, and the materiality of war. Ultimately, Ukrainian women's wartime writing offers a transformative model of literary testimony that expands the boundaries of world literature and redefines the cultural work of literature in times of crisis.

The Russia–Ukraine war therefore has produced not only geopolitical rupture but also a profound transformation in the cultural and literary landscape of Ukraine. Among the most significant developments is the rise of women poets and diarists who challenge traditional hierarchies of war literature. As Victoria Amelina writes

in her poem “Svidchennia” (2024; Eng. trans. “Testimonies”, 2023): “I already know everyone in this city / and all of its dead are my dead / and all the survivors are my sisters” (n.p.). This articulation of shared vulnerability and collective responsibility encapsulates the ethos of contemporary Ukrainian women’s wartime writing. Their literary production constitutes a new epistemology of war grounded in embodied experience, affective precision, and the urgency of testimony. Their texts function not merely as artistic expressions but as historical documents, ethical interventions, and acts of civic participation. They record the war from within – through the body, through daily routines disrupted by violence, and through the emotional states that accompany survival. In doing so, they challenge the assumption that literature must retreat in the face of atrocity and demonstrate that writing can become a vital instrument of resistance, memory, and truth-telling.

The argument unfolds across seven sections. It first revisits the theoretical distinction between *eye-witnessing* and *flesh-witnessing*, drawing on Yuval Harari’s work on modern war culture (2008; 2009), then examines the rise of citizen-poets who document war through literary and digital forms. Subsequent sections trace the evolution of wartime poetics from the linguistic disintegration of 2014 to the consolidation of civic authority after 2022. The analysis of the role of diaries and digital platforms¹ in creating a vernacular archive of wartime life is followed by a discussion of the new affective lexicon emerging in poetry and non-fiction. The article concludes by proposing a theoretical framework for understanding testimonial poetics as a crucial epistemological resource in Ukraine’s ongoing struggle against cultural erasure and genocidal violence.

FROM EYE-WITNESSING TO FLESH-WITNESSING: RETHINKING TESTIMONY

The conceptual foundation for this study rests on the distinction between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing that has shaped modern understandings of war testimony. In his work on military history, Harari (2008; 2009) argues that modern war narratives increasingly privilege the embodied, sensory, and emotional dimensions of combat over detached observation.² Eye-witnessing, associated with factual reporting and visual perception, gives way to flesh-witnessing, which foregrounds the internal, affective, and transformative experience of war. This shift reflects broader cultural movements – from Enlightenment sensibility to Romanticism – that valorize individual emotional experience as a source of truth.

Harari’s insights are particularly relevant to the Russia–Ukraine war, where civilians – not only soldiers – have become primary witnesses to violence. Women poets and diarists exemplify this expanded category of flesh-witnesses. Their testimony is grounded not in strategic overviews or military analysis but in the lived experience of war as it unfolds in physical and digital spaces. Their writing captures what Harari describes as the *privileged authority* of embodied experience (Harari 2009, 217; 2010), authority that cannot be accessed through distant observation alone.

Recent scholarship on citizen media further illuminates this shift. Lilie Chouliaraki and Omar Al-Ghazzi (2021; 2023) argue that user-generated content – videos,

posts, and images created by civilians – constitutes a form of “media witnessing” that appeals to global publics through its authenticity and moral urgency (2021, 1). They describe this content as grounded “onto the body as an existential dimension of ordinary testimonies of conflict” (6). Their framework provides a crucial bridge between Harari’s concept of flesh-witnessing and the literary testimonies produced by Ukrainian women. While Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi focus on digital media, their insights can be extended to poetry and diaries, which likewise emerge from the embodied experience of war and circulate through social media posts, volunteer networks, literary platforms, public readings, and international cultural events, often long before they are published as standalone books. Extending the concept of flesh-witnessing to the experience of civilians and the domain of citizen media is essential for understanding Ukrainian women’s wartime writing.

This article proposes the term citizen-poet³ to describe Ukrainian women writers who document war through literary forms that merge personal experience with civic responsibility. Their poems and diaries function as vernacular archives of wartime life, since they write not from a position of retrospective distance but from within the temporal and spatial immediacy of war. Their testimony is therefore both literary and documentary, aesthetic and historical, personal and collective.

CITIZEN-POETS AND THE RISE OF VERNACULAR WAR DOCUMENTATION

Beginning in 2014 and accelerating dramatically after February 24, 2022, Ukrainian women poets and diarists assumed roles traditionally associated with journalists, historians, and public intellectuals. Their writing constitutes a decentralized yet cohesive archive of wartime experience. This phenomenon can be understood as the emergence of the citizen-poet, a figure whose literary production is inseparable from civic participation and whose testimony is grounded in the immediacy of lived experience.

Women poets such as Yakimchuk, Kruk, Marynchak, Amelina, and many others (see, for example, Voznyuk 2025), as well as war diarists such as Iryna Feofanova (see Hajduk 2025), Yaryna Chornoguz (see Romanenko 2025), and others, have become indispensable chroniclers of the war. Their poems and diary entries document not only the events of war but also the emotional and ethical labor of survival. Their texts are shaped by the rhythms of air-raid sirens, the uncertainty of displacement, and the grief of loss.

This new testimonial landscape is exemplified by the All-Ukrainian Academic and Artistic Forum “Muses Are Not Silent!” held in June 2022. The forum brought together scholars, writers, and artists to reflect on the role of culture during wartime. Its outcome – the almanac *Vichnist’ tryva tsei den: Khudozhni khroniky viiny* (This day lasts forever: The artistic chronicles of war; Zhulynskyi 2023) – is emblematic of the collective commitment to documenting war through literature. The volume includes poetry, short prose, dramatic works, interviews, and other materials developed during the forum. In the accompanying literary essays, the editors examine the role and significance of artistic literature during times of genocide. The almanac’s

cover, illustrated by Kharkiv artist Dariia Khrysanfova, features ripe apples, a symbol of resilience and the fragile persistence of life amid destruction.

The rise of citizen-poets is closely linked to the proliferation of digital platforms. Social media has become a crucial space for the circulation of poetic testimony, enabling writers to reach audiences far beyond traditional literary circles. Many women poets have effectively taken over the journalistic function of recording history as it happens, posting poems, reflections, and participant/volunteer accounts in real time.⁴

This hybridization reflects broader shifts in global media ecology. As Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi (2021) argue, user-generated content has transformed the landscape of war reporting by foregrounding the voices of ordinary individuals. Ukrainian women poets extend this logic into the literary sphere, producing texts that function as both artistic expressions and urgent appeals for global attention. Their writing embodies what Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi describe as “media witnessing”, but it also exceeds it by drawing on the resources of poetic language, metaphor, and narrative structure.

The testimonial authority of Ukrainian women writers is grounded in their status as citizen-participants. Their testimony is therefore both embodied and ethical. As Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko writes in her untitled poem, cited here by its opening line, “We were told: ‘Take only the most valuable!’”, “We are witnesses of war crimes”⁵ (2024, 5). This declarative statement encapsulates the civic dimension of contemporary Ukrainian women’s writing. Ukrainian poetry did not vanish with the onset of Ukraine’s own Auschwitz; rather, it underwent a transformation.

THE POETICS OF DISINTEGRATION: LANGUAGE UNDER SIEGE (2014–2022)

In comparison to pre-war poetics, wartime poetry made a shift from symbolic metaphors to affective immediacy. This shift marks a departure from pre-war poetic traditions, which often favored intellectualist, metaphorical abstraction. The war forced poets to abandon symbolic distance and confront the raw materiality of violence. In broader terms, this is the collapse of traditional metaphors, which is not a failure of imagination but a cultural event, marking the transition from symbolic representation to testimonial immediacy; the collapse of symbolic language under the pressure of real violence.

The first phase of contemporary Ukrainian wartime writing, beginning with Russia’s hybrid war in 2014, is marked by linguistic fragmentation, existential disorientation, and the collapse of familiar symbolic structures. This period produced a poetics of disintegration⁶ in which language itself becomes unstable, mirroring the physical destruction of occupied territories and the emotional dislocation experienced by internally displaced persons.

The poem “Rozkladannia” (Decomposition, 2014) by Lyuba Yakymchuk (Lyubov Yakymchuk), who was herself displaced from Luhansk, captures the breakdown of language, identity, and geography. The final stanza reads (in the translation by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky):

I stare into the horizon
it has narrowed into a triangle
sunflowers dip their heads in the field
black and dried out, like me
I have gotten so very old
no longer Lyuba
Just a -ba (Yakimchuk 2017, 153)

The poem's visual structure – descending like an inverted staircase – mirrors the speaker's psychological and linguistic collapse. The fragmentation of the name “Lyuba” into “ba” symbolizes the erosion of personal identity under the pressure of war. The decomposition of language parallels the decomposition of cities, homes, and bodies in the Donbas region. The poem thus becomes a site where linguistic form and wartime experience converge.

This poetics of disintegration reflects a broader cultural moment in which the war destabilized not only physical spaces but also linguistic and symbolic frameworks. The hybrid war of 2014 produced a sense of uncertainty and confusion that permeated literary production. Writers grappled with the challenge of representing a conflict as Russia's war against Ukraine that was both visible and invisible, both acknowledged and denied in the West. The ambiguity of the early war years is reflected in the fragmented, impressionistic, and often surreal quality of the poetry produced during this period.

The linguistic decomposition observed in Yakimchuk's poem can be understood as a form of affective rupture. War disrupts not only the external world but also the internal structures through which individuals make sense of experience. Language, as a medium of meaning, becomes strained under the weight of trauma. The breakdown of syntax, the fragmentation of words, and the collapse of metaphorical coherence all reflect the difficulty of articulating experiences that exceed the limits of representation:

there's no poetry about war
just decomposition
only letters remain
and they all make a single sound – rrr (Yakimchuk 2017, 152)

This early wartime poetics stands in stark contrast to the literary production that emerged after the full-scale invasion of 2022. The poetics of disintegration (2014–2022) forms the necessary precondition for the testimonial poetics that emerges after February 24, 2022. While the early period is characterized by fragmentation, disorientation, linguistic breakdown, affective rupture, and the collapse of symbolic frameworks, the shift from disintegration to consolidation marks the emergence of a new civic muse⁷ and a new testimonial authority. Halyna Kruk's 2022 Berlin speech crystallizes this transformation signaling a profound shift: metaphor no longer mediates experience but is replaced by direct articulation of affective states grounded in lived reality. She explains the inadequacy of traditional metaphors in the face of atrocity, unimaginable in the pre-war time: “We will always have a gaping wound from

the loss of these people – in our souls, in our culture, science, economy, industry, society. This is not a metaphor” (n.p.).

The devastating loss of civilian lives and the destruction of human and natural environments caused by Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine demand that memory take precedence over imagination. The restorative and transformative power of testimonial poetry – as a form of witnessing the war crimes committed in Ukraine – runs through Kruk’s verse, where she often adopts the collective *we* to articulate shared suffering. This communal poetic persona becomes a conduit for expressing collective trauma and hope, as in the poem titled by its opening line: “we will come out of what has happened different, we will come out” (2024a). What distinguishes these works is their reliance on a plural speaker, through which individual experience is absorbed into a broader social narrative. This strategy may be understood as a form of narrative volunteering, in which the poet, as a citizen-participant, steps forward to speak for those whose voices are silent, muted, or dispersed.

AFTER FEBRUARY 24: CONSOLIDATION, AUTHORITY, AND THE NEW CIVIC MUSE

“The Muses Are Not Silent” remarkable consolidation of literary authority and civic purpose after 2022 is not merely psychological; it is aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological. Women poets, in particular, emerged as central figures in articulating the stakes of survival. This transformation is evident in the shift from metaphorical abstraction to testimonial clarity. Inna Honchar’s poem “Musy ne movchat” (2022; Eng. trans. “The Muses Are Not Silent”, 2024) captures this new sensibility:

The last pics in someone’s camera –
are not a metaphor anymore.
Messages
homelessly silent
unable to get through voice,
to traverse the abyss,
the shell crater...
Poetry
exists (4)

In Ukrainian, this poem was published as an epigraph to the article “Kil’ka shtrykhiv do suchasnoi liryky pid obstrilamy” (A few touches to modern lyrics under fire) by literary critic Yuriy Kovaliv (2022).

Honchar’s insistence that “this is not the place for poetry / (as commonly believed)” (Honchar 2024; see Kovaliv 2022) reflects a widespread sentiment in the early days of the invasion: that the enormity of violence rendered traditional poetic forms inadequate. Yet the poem ultimately affirms poetry’s persistence – not as aesthetic ornament but as testimony. The muses do not fall silent; they “scream beneath the rubble”, as Honchar so powerfully observed (2024). Poetry becomes a mode of survival, a means of recording what cannot be forgotten.

The civic muse is not a distant observer but an active participant in the war effort – volunteering, documenting, witnessing, and grieving. Didukh-Romanenko artic-

ulates this civic role of poetry with stark clarity: “each of us is now a hard disk, / Data carrier, a memory card for hundreds of terabytes, / Which cannot be formatted by daily bombardment” (2024, 5). This metaphor – of the body as a memory device – captures the epistemological burden borne by civilian witnesses. It also exemplifies the shift from symbolic metaphors to affective metaphors, grounded in the materiality of war.

The declarative force of the above lines signals a new understanding of poetic vocation. The poet is no longer a contemplative observer but a civic actor whose testimony carries moral and historical weight. The authority of the poet derives not so much from literary tradition as from embodied experience – from the fact of having lived through bombardment, displacement, and loss.

Few poets embody the civic muse as powerfully as Natalka Marynychak, who continues to live and volunteer in Kharkiv. Her untitled poem dated March 9, 2022 (Zhulynskyi 2023, 174) opens with the line: –“and each of us will have a separate war” (2024, n.p.). This line encapsulates the individualized yet collective nature of wartime experience. The poem concludes with a declaration of emotional metamorphosis:

I now have a heart
of reinforced concrete
it knows neither pity
nor comfort (n.p.)

Marynychak’s lines capture the psychological metamorphosis and the phenomenology of survival wrought by war: the hardening of the self, the recalibration of emotional registers, the emergence of a new affective vocabulary. Her poetry embodies what might be called the civic muse – a figure who speaks not only for herself but for a community under siege. Marynychak’s poetry exemplifies the new affective lexicon of wartime Ukraine – one in which emotional states are articulated through concrete, bodily imagery.

The consolidation of literary authority and collective testimony after February 24, 2022 is also reflected in the proliferation of public events, anthologies, and cultural initiatives such as the already-mentioned All-Ukrainian Academic and Artistic Forum “Muses Are Not Silent!” (June 20–25, 2022). Emerging from this forum, the almanac *Vichnist’ tryva tsei den* (2023) stands as a collective chronicle of the war’s early months. The ripe apples on its cover symbolize not only the persistence of life and hope amid devastation but also the almanac’s dual function as artistic expression and documentary record. Its contributors include both established poets and emerging voices, united by the urgency of testimony.

This period also saw the publication of another almanac, *Neskorena Ukraina* (Unconquered Ukraine) – a three-volume poetic chronicle that stands as one of the most ambitious collective literary projects of the war (Shavarska 2022–2023). The almanac includes poems about escape from occupation, such as Mila Soniachna’s “Dovelosia but’ boiahuzkoiu...” (I had to be cowardly, 2022, 88); internal displacement, for example, Zhanna Dmytrenko’s “Pereselentsi” (The displaced, 2022, 29); symbolic spring imagery juxtaposed with destruction, as in Halyna Slyvka’s “Snihom kvit-

nevym byntuiut'sia rany..." (Wounds are bandaged with April snow..., 2022, 85); poems about murdered civilians, such as Oksana Handurska-Pavlenko's "Chervonyi manikiur zavmer na asfalti..." (Red manicure froze on the asphalt, 2023, Book II, 24); and memorial poems, for instance, Iryna Rodchenko's "Serezhky na snihu. Freska pam'yati" (Earrings in the snow. Mural of memory, 2023, Book II, 78). This documentary impulse marks a decisive departure from pre-war poetic traditions. While the almanac includes male voices, women poets are notably more prevalent. Their poems document escape from occupation, internal displacement, volunteer work, and the daily realities of survival. Many poems reference specific individuals, cities, and events, creating a mosaic of wartime experience that is both personal and collective. This consolidation of literary authority is grounded in embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and a documentary impulse. Together, these elements constitute the foundation of testimonial poetics.

POETRY AS CHRONICLE: DIARIES, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND THE ARCHIVE OF THE EVERYDAY

Alongside poetry, wartime diaries have become a crucial medium for documenting the lived experience of war. These diaries – often written by women – record not only events but the emotional and ethical labor of survival. Their testimonial value lies in their immediacy, their attention to detail, and their capacity to capture the affective texture of wartime existence.

Two diaries are particularly significant: Larissa Babij's *A Kind of Refugee: The Story of an American Who Refused to Leave Ukraine* (2024) and Victoria Amelina's *Looking at Women, Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (2025). Both authors write from within the war, documenting their experiences as civilians, volunteers, and witnesses.

Babij's diary is notable for its reflections on the shifting threshold of the "unimaginable". She writes: "There is a difference between 'I cannot imagine' and 'unimaginable.' Russia's unjustified invasion and ongoing brutal assault of Ukraine [...] has drastically moved the threshold for what can be called 'unimaginable'" (2024, 65). This distinction underscores the epistemological rupture produced by war. The diary becomes a tool for recalibrating perception, for making sense of a world in which the boundaries of the possible have been violently redrawn.

Babij also emphasizes the importance of maintaining "touch with the war". She writes: "There are two ways to lose touch with the war: one is by feeling safe and comfortable [...] while the other is by entertaining threats and potential dangers [...] so that your senses become garbled and clouded by fear" (66). This reflection highlights the delicate balance required to remain grounded in reality. The diary becomes a means of sustaining this balance, a practice of attentiveness that resists both denial and panic. Wartime diaries are epistemological instruments of keeping "touch with the war", avoiding both an exaggerated sense of security and an exaggerated sense of danger. This balancing act – between denial and panic – defines the epistemological labor of wartime diaries. They serve as anchors of reality, grounding the writer in the present moment and resisting both numbness and hypervigilance.

Amelina's war diary *Looking at Women, Looking at War*, which was not finished at the time of her tragic death in 2023,⁸ offers a complementary perspective. Her writing foregrounds the ethical dimension of witnessing, particularly in relation to women's experiences of war. Her reflections on gender, violence, and justice expand the scope of wartime testimony, highlighting the intersections of personal vulnerability and civic responsibility.

Digital platforms play a crucial role in the circulation of war diaries and poetic testimonies. Social media enables writers to share their experiences in real time, creating a decentralized archive of wartime life. This archive is characterized by its immediacy, its emotional intensity, its accessibility, and civic urgency. It includes poems, diary fragments, photographs, volunteer reports, and eyewitness accounts. Together, these materials form a rich tapestry of wartime experience that challenges official narratives and preserves the voices of those most affected by violence.

The testimonial function of poetry and diaries is further reinforced by the proliferation of anthologies, online publications, and cultural initiatives. The almanac *Neskorena Ukraina* (Shavarska 2022–2023), mentioned earlier, is particularly notable for its chronological structure: each poem in the first and second volumes is dated, creating a collective diary and transforming poetry into a chronicle. The almanac includes poems devoted to specific individuals such as Lidia Ryzhkova's poem "Pershoprokhodets'. Balada z ukrains'koho zhyttia" (Trailblazer. A ballad from Ukrainian life), referencing volunteer Mykola Nazarovets' (2023, Book II, 75–77), specific cities, e.g., Oksana Dnistran's poem "Izium" (2023, Book II, 33), specific atrocities and specific memorial objects, e.g., the previously mentioned poems "Red manicure froze on the asphalt" and "Earrings in the snow", creating a mosaic of wartime experience that is both personal and collective.

This emphasis on specificity – on names, dates, places, and events – reflects a broader shift in wartime literature toward documentary precision. Poetry becomes a form of chronicle, a means of recording history as it happens. Diaries become repositories of affective knowledge, capturing the emotional states that accompany survival. Together, these forms constitute a "vernacular archive" of the everyday, an archive that preserves the lived experience of war in all its complexity. The concept of the vernacular archive – a decentralized, grassroots documentation of war through everyday writing practices, including poetry, diaries, and social media posts – is pivotal to understanding testimonial poetics. This archive resists erasure by preserving memory, asserting civic agency, challenging official narratives, and foregrounding marginalized voices. It is a form of cultural resistance, grounded in the everyday labor of writing, witnessing, and remembering.

EMOTION, METAPHOR, AND THE AFFECTIVE LEXICON OF WAR

One of the most striking developments in contemporary Ukrainian wartime literature is the emergence of a new emotional lexicon – an affective vocabulary shaped by the unprecedented conditions of Russia's war against Ukraine. Traditional met-

aphors, once central to Ukrainian poetic expression, have lost their explanatory power, as Kruk stated in her Berlin speech (2022). This transformation is vividly illustrated in Olena Astaseva's "A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War" (2023), a work that catalogues complex emotional states through diary-like entries. Each entry – panic, fear, hunger, betrayal, guilt, choices, time, weather, de-realization, among others – functions as what T. S. Eliot once called an "objective correlative", a concrete image or situation that evokes a particular emotional state.⁹ Yet Astaseva's entries go beyond traditional correlatives: they operate as absolute metaphors,¹⁰ terms that do not merely describe emotions but create new affective categories shaped by wartime experience.

Kathrin Bethke's work on emotion metaphors provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this phenomenon. Bethke argues that poetic metaphors can "capture affective states that have no stable place in the English emotion lexicon" (2021, 15). In the Ukrainian context, Astaseva's dictionary performs precisely this function. Her entry on "de-realization", for example, redefines a psychological term associated with dissociation. In psychology, derealization refers to a dissociative state in which the world feels unreal or dreamlike. But Astaseva radically redefines the term. Rather than detachment, Astaseva's "de-realization" signifies the painful contrast between peaceful European landscapes and the brutal reality of war in Ukraine. She writes of encountering "a fake world filled with toys [...] sweet little houses" in Western Europe while simultaneously thinking: "Are there still women and children in Kyiv? I thought there were only soldiers there. I don't watch the news anymore. It's too hard" (2023, 57). This juxtaposition creates a new affective category: the pain of inhabiting two incompatible realities at once – one peaceful, one genocidal. Astaseva's entry "de-realization" thus works as an absolute metaphor.

This redefinition exemplifies how wartime literature reshapes emotional vocabulary. Words that once carried neutral or familiar connotations acquire new meanings rooted in the phenomenology of war. Emotionally neutral terms – weather, time, cleaning – become metaphors for survival, loss, and endurance.¹¹ Conversely, traditionally charged words – fear, hatred, bitterness, despair – expand to encompass new shades of meaning shaped by the daily realities of bombardment, displacement, and grief.

The emergence of this affective lexicon reflects a broader shift from conceptual abstraction to experiential immediacy. Wartime literature no longer relies on symbolic or allegorical frameworks; instead, it foregrounds the sensory and emotional dimensions of experience, when "fire" no longer signifies symbolic passion; it signifies literal bombardment. For example, in Astaseva "cleaning" becomes a metaphor for the compulsive need to impose order amid chaos, even though cleaning turns into "the wasted effort" in a time of war, and "weather" becomes a metaphor for emotional volatility, when shells explosions can be mistaken for thunder in someone's sleep.

This shift marks the collapse of what Edward Said calls "old-style metaphors" (2004) – metaphors that belong to the symbolic space rather than the real space

of war – and simultaneously it aligns with Harari's concept of flesh-witnessing, which emphasizes the epistemological value of embodied experience. In the context of Ukrainian wartime writing, emotion becomes a form of knowledge, a way of understanding and conveying the reality of war that cannot be captured through factual reporting alone.

The affective lexicon also plays a crucial role in preserving memory. As scholars of trauma have long noted, emotional states often serve as anchors for memory, shaping how individuals recall and interpret past events. In Ukrainian wartime literature, emotion metaphors function as mnemonic devices that encode specific episodes of war. Each entry in Astaseva's dictionary, for example, is tied to a particular moment, place, or encounter. These entries form a constellation of affective memories that collectively document the lived experience of war.

This emphasis on affective states challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge. In wartime, emotional responses are not merely subjective reactions but essential components of testimony. They reveal the psychological and ethical dimensions of survival, offering insights into the human cost of war that cannot be conveyed through statistics or military analysis. By foregrounding emotion, Ukrainian women writers assert the legitimacy of affective knowledge as a form of truth beyond the reach of military analysis, political commentary, or journalistic reporting.

Finally, the affective lexicon is not only personal but collective. Kruk's Berlin speech articulates a shared emotional reality: "This war is killing us all, [...] we move in short jogs through life now, [...] our little children, who have experience sitting in basements under fire, do not cry out of fear. Even at such a young age, they understand that crying can cost lives. And this is not a metaphor either" (2022). Kruk's poetry presents the civilian woman's body as an archive of wartime violence and human fragility, often through a single, sharply observed detail. In one poem, the emergency backpack becomes a metaphor for the gradual depletion of physical needs as the body adapts to the quotidian pressures of war. The opening lines read: "with each passing day of the war / my emergency backpack became lighter and lighter" (Zhulynskyi 2023, 132). In another poem, "tudy i nazad" (to and back), she replaces direct descriptions of what she witnessed with the stark naming of medications required to dull the pain: "I rode there on sedatives, back on painkillers; there were no other routes" (Kruk 2024b; Torkut 2023, 48–49). These embodied, affective details – rooted in shared experience – form the emotional foundation of testimonial poetics.¹²

TOWARD A THEORY OF TESTIMONIAL POETICS IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE

As outlined above, the convergence of embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse in contemporary Ukrainian women's writing points toward the emergence of a distinct testimonial poetics. This poetics is not merely a stylistic development but a new mode of literary epistemology shaped by the conditions of war. It reflects a shift in the function of literature from aesthetic

contemplation to ethical action, from metaphorical abstraction to embodied testimony.

Several key features define this testimonial poetics:

1. Embodied testimony (flesh-witnessing)

Ukrainian women writers ground their testimony in the body's encounter with war. Their poems and diaries document sensory experiences – the sounds of explosions, the smell of burning, the physical exhaustion of displacement, the bodily fear of bombardment, the tactile routines of survival – that convey the immediacy of violence. Embodied testimony thus becomes a primary epistemological mode that aligns with Harari's concept of flesh-witnessing, which emphasizes the epistemological value of sensory and emotional experience.

2. Civic participation (citizen-poets)

The testimonial authority of Ukrainian women writers derives from their status as citizen-participants. Their writing is inseparable from their civic engagement – volunteer work, activism, community support. This fusion of literary production and civic responsibility challenges traditional distinctions between art and politics. The poet becomes a chronicler, a volunteer, a witness, and a cultural defender. The term citizen-poet encapsulates this role. Didukh-Romanenko's lines, cited earlier, exemplify this civic dimension of the poet as a repository of memory.

3. Affective precision (emotion lexicon)

The emergence of a new affective lexicon reflects the centrality of emotion in wartime testimony. Emotion metaphors function as epistemological tools that capture the nuances of wartime experience. This affective precision distinguishes contemporary Ukrainian wartime literature from pre-war poetic traditions, which often favored metaphorical abstraction. Astaseva's "A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War" exemplifies this shift. Each entry functions as an absolute metaphor, creating new affective categories. This affective lexicon is epistemic. It encodes memory, articulates trauma, and preserves emotional knowledge.

4. Documentary impulse (chronicle and archive)

Poetry and diaries document events, record emotional states, and preserve memories. This documentary impulse is evident in the proliferation of almanacs, anthologies, online publications, and social media posts. The chronological structure of works like the almanac *Neskorena Ukraina* (Shavarska 2022–2023) underscores the archival function of poetry, transforming literary texts into historical documents. As a prime example, this three-volume poetic chronicle includes poems about escape from occupation, internal displacement, murdered civilians, memorial objects, destroyed cities, and daily survival.

5. Ethical urgency (the imperative to speak)

Testimonial poetics is driven by an ethical imperative to bear witness. This urgency is evident in the declarative force of lines such as "We are witnesses of war crimes"

(Didukh-Romanenko 2024, 5). Kruk's Berlin speech articulates this ethical imperative to bear witness: "The war makes everything unambiguous to such an extent that there is practically no room left for poetry. Just for testimony" (2022, n.p.). This ethical urgency is not optional; it is existential.

Drawing together all these elements, testimonial poetics can be defined as a literary mode in which embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse converge to produce ethically urgent testimony that preserves memory, asserts agency, and articulates the lived experience of war. Together, these features constitute a new literary paradigm that challenges traditional understandings of poetry and testimony.

This theoretical framework also has broader implications for the study of war literature. It suggests that civilian testimony – particularly women's testimony – should be recognized as a central component of wartime epistemology. It challenges the privileging of soldier narratives and highlights the importance of everyday experiences, emotional states, and domestic spaces in understanding the impact of war. It also underscores the role of digital platforms in shaping contemporary literary production, suggesting that the boundaries between literature, journalism, and activism are increasingly porous.

CONCLUSION

Women's war writing demonstrates that literature is not merely a medium for reflection but a vital instrument of resistance, memory, and survival. Through embodied testimony, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse, Ukrainian women writers have developed a testimonial poetics that challenges traditional hierarchies of war literature and redefines the epistemological function of literary expression.

This testimonial poetics emerges from the convergence of several forces. First, the embodied experience of war – what Harari terms flesh-witnessing – provides the foundation for a mode of testimony grounded in sensory and emotional immediacy. Second, the rise of the citizen-poet reflects the fusion of literary production and civic responsibility. Third, the emergence of a new affective lexicon underscores the centrality of emotion in wartime testimony. Emotion metaphors function as epistemological tools that capture the nuances of wartime experience, encoding memories and articulating psychological states that cannot be conveyed through factual reporting alone. Fourth, the documentary impulse evident in poetry and diaries transforms literary texts into historical documents. Almanacs function as collective chronicles of the war, preserving names, dates, places, and events. Finally, the ethical urgency that drives testimonial poetics reflects the imperative to bear witness in the face of genocidal violence. As Kruk states, "the war makes everything unambiguous" (2022, n.p.).

In this context, literature preserves the voices of those most affected by violence, asserts the truth of their experiences, and challenges the forces that seek to erase them. Ukrainian women's wartime writing demonstrates that poetry, diaries, short prose, and verbatim pieces can function as powerful tools of cultural defense, ar-

ticulating the emotional, ethical, and political stakes of survival. Their work ensures that the war is not only recorded but understood, felt, and carried forward as part of Ukraine's collective memory. Testimonial poetics as a new epistemology of war offers a new framework for understanding the cultural and ethical significance of Ukrainian women's wartime writing – and a new lens through which to view the role of literature in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine.

NOTES

- ¹ Before appearing in print, numerous poems, short stories, and diary fragments circulate on social media platforms – most commonly Facebook and Instagram – as a space for initial sharing and reader engagement.
- ² Harari's distinction between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing is particularly useful for analyzing civilian testimony because it foregrounds the sensory and emotional dimensions of experience that are often marginalized in traditional war historiography.
- ³ The term "citizen-poet" emphasizes the fusion of literary production and civic responsibility, highlighting the role of poets as active participants in the documentation of war rather than passive observers.
- ⁴ See Facebook accounts of Natalka Marynychak, Halyna Kruk, and many others.
- ⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian are made by the present author.
- ⁶ The poetics of disintegration should not be understood as a failure of language but as a deliberate aesthetic strategy that reflects the psychological and social fragmentation produced by war.
- ⁷ The term "civic muse" highlights the fusion of artistic expression and civic responsibility, emphasizing the poet's role as a cultural actor in times of crisis.
- ⁸ Since 2022, Amelina has been working with Ukrainian teams to document Russian war crimes and make sure the international community holds the Russian Federation and its troops accountable for the crimes they have committed on Ukrainian soil. On June 27, 2023, she was deadly wounded in a rocket attack on Kramatorsk by Russian troops.
- ⁹ T. S. Eliot used this phrase to describe "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader (Eliot 1920, 92).
- ¹⁰ The concept of absolute metaphor was theorized by Kathrin Bethke (2021).
- ¹¹ Emotion metaphors in wartime literature function not only as descriptive tools but as epistemological instruments that encode and transmit the lived experience of war.
- ¹² Testimonial poetics should be understood as a dynamic and evolving literary mode that reflects the changing conditions of war and the shifting role of literature in society.

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