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Janine Utell
Widener University, jmutell@mail.widener.edu

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Writing War: The Memorial Design Project

Janine Utell
Widener University

It seems a fortuitous—and frightening—time to be teaching a course on literature and art of war in the twentieth century. As an assistant professor in a small English department within Widener University's humanities division, which serves a range of students through our general education program, I am constantly mindful of making the aesthetic socially and ethically relevant. Furthermore, as a sometime-teacher in the General Education Honors Program, I am conscious not only of making the arts and humanities relevant to a diverse body of students but of challenging some very driven and engaged thinkers and writers.

My desire both to present the humanities as socially and ethically relevant and through them to challenge students to question their own deeply held beliefs led me to propose an honors colloquium entitled "Literature and Art of War in the 20th Century." Honors colloquia in our program are seminar-style classes often with an interdisciplinary design and a focus on active student participation. Students usually lead a significant portion of the class and complete less conventional, more interactive projects. (Other recent offerings in the humanities include "The American Movie Musical" and "The Material Text.") The colloquia are open only to honors students, who are required to take two in order to graduate with advanced honors. The classes meet once a week for three hours.

My course included a range of literary texts from World War I to the present (American, British, French, German) as well as the visual arts (painting, photography, sculpture, film). I drew on my own research in literature of the First and Second World Wars as well as a background in film to formulate the syllabus, and I used as a guiding framework my scholarly interest in collective and individual constructions of subjectivity in wartime.

As part of my general desire to treat such a complicated course as an experiment in intellectual tightrope-walking and to bolster and support the interdisciplinary nature of the work, I included types of assignments I had never tried before. In addition to oral presentations, a formal analysis of film, and a conventional literary interpretation/reflection paper at the end, I included a creative assignment: the Memorial Design Project. James Young notes of memorials that "as part of a nation's rites or the objects of a people's national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory . . . Once created, memorials take

on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions" (2–3). Young's statement applies even to the work created by the students. In wrestling with the assignment and what the students brought to it, I came to a renewed understanding of what I can learn from my students, my own limitations as a teacher and assessor, and the commitment necessary to treat our engagement with deep ethical issues respectfully.

It was my goal to engage explicitly with the current conflict in Iraq over the trajectory of my course. Beginning with an intellectual framework elucidated by Margot Norris in her book *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, the students and I proposed in an individualized, discussion-based setting to define and employ the strategies of the arts and humanities to come to terms with the ethical and aesthetic questions raised by the experience of war. Norris writes:

> Looking back at the twentieth century, we might at first be struck by the incommensurability of two of its hallmarks: modern mass warfare and innovative art. How is the century's burgeoning of rich, new conceptual forms and aesthetic technologies related to the fact that the twentieth century has been the bloodiest century in the human history of the world? Was modern war a stimulus to aesthetic revolution, as early twentieth-century artists and writers claimed, or did art become increasingly aghast and defeated by events and spectacles beyond its powers of representation as war became unspeakably immense in scale and unutterably violent in conduct? (1)

Norris here articulates the key question that would preoccupy us over the course of the semester: what is the relationship between art and war? While a final, closed answer was not and never could be provided, I hoped the issues raised in this course would intrigue and trouble the students. I hoped examination of war through the lenses of art and literature both public and private would facilitate an interrogation of the students' own ideas about war, and I did not shy away from raising the implications of the current war.

I approached discussion of the war in Iraq with some trepidation. Some would call the students of Widener University conservative; many of them come from the surrounding area, which has tended to skew Republican (although less so in more recent elections). A fuller picture emerges by thinking of our students as somewhat homogenous (mostly white, many Catholic), somewhat provincial (coming from several feeder schools within a thirty-mile radius and often the first in their families to go to college), and somewhat less than politically engaged although quite active in various forms of community service. We are a regional school that, in its mission, proposes to combine liberal arts with professional training and civic engagement. Consequently, Widener students, especially those in the General Education Honors Program, are varied in their commitment to study of the humanities but are typically concerned about their career paths and are engaged with the outside world not necessarily through politics but through other forms of civic awareness and commitment.

Additionally, Widener has a small but highly visible contingent of ROTC students—commencement always features some commissioned students who have almost immediate plans to go to Iraq—and a large number of students who have close friends, family members, and acquaintances who are currently serving. My course on the literature and art of war was populated with a number of students who have been touched personally by the war in Iraq over the past five years; furthermore, many of them had close male relatives who served in Vietnam. The military, therefore, was very much a part of their experience, and I was asking them to think deeply about it in a personal and philosophical way.

A colloquium seemed to me a perfect setting for what I hoped to accomplish in the course. Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill claim that an educational setting that gives priority to discussion fosters the co-creation of meaning and an embrace of ambiguity and multiple perspectives; they argue persuasively for its direct correlation to functioning in a democratic society: "In revealing and celebrating the multiplicity of perspectives possible, discussion at its best exemplifies the democratic process. All participants in a democratic discussion have the opportunity to voice a strongly felt view and the obligation to devote every ounce of their attention to each speaker's words" (3). This process was integral to the work I was asking the students to do: questioning assumptions and beliefs, listening to others' arguments and reflections, delving into aesthetic and ethical issues crucial to our sense of ourselves as citizens. This final goal called for the engaged pluralism I hoped to foster (Brookfield and Preskill 17). To explore issues that affect us profoundly as citizens in our democratic society, the students and I needed to (co-)create a learning community that replicated the best of civic debate (even as, at times, society outside the walls of the classroom might have forgotten what such debate might look like).

The course design thus called for the predominance of student voices and a bridging of past and present. Each class meeting was divided into two parts. The first part was devoted to studying literature and art of conflicts past, starting with the First World War: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet . . .* , Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Iréne Nemirovsky's *Suite Française* as well as films (the adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front, Saving Private Ryan*, *300*) and art (John Nash, Pablo Picasso, Kathe Kölwitz). The second part of the class consisted of student presentations. Each week, in consultation with me, students chose a lens, grounded in the arts and/or humanities, through which to look at the current war in Iraq. They studied and analyzed the work on their own, and then presented it to the class, thus increasing awareness of the ways people use the humanities to think about war today and applying the work of interpreting the humanities to artifacts they had found independently. Students analyzed the poetry of Brian Turner (both his texts and his performance in readings around the country), artwork by Israelis and Palestinians, and pop songs, cartoons, and propaganda from the Vietnam era to today in a comparative study. In this way, by choosing the material and sparking Q & A sessions, students claimed the work of the course and dedicated it to investigating their own world and time. They were

responsible for learning how to read that world through the lens of the arts and for teaching each other how to do so.

In teaching each other how to read, they were also teaching each other how to respond to divergent opinions and difficult responses. From early in the class, a tone was set wherein students felt comfortable bringing in their personal stories and sharing their views. We questioned the received narratives of the war; we debated the place of the individual in a society at war; we defined and redefined concepts like "duty" and "patriotism"; and we asked necessary ethical questions about the value of human life. What is a human life worth once it becomes part of what Margot Norris calls "the death world" (15)—an ontology of trauma that emerges from war experience—and what is it worth when such an ontology becomes embedded in our very culture?

In talking about the Iraq War, I was very conscious of my own biases and just as conscious of keeping them to myself. I saw my role as facilitator to be creating and sustaining an environment of productive collaboration, keeping students accountable for their arguments, respecting their personal feelings, and ensuring intellectual and hospitable openness. I had no idea that my strong biases against the war would come to inform my reading of their work or that my closed perspective would be radically altered.

In preparation for the Memorial Design Project, we spent a class session talking about public art and the role it plays in rituals of memorialization and commemoration. I asked students to bring in examples of memorials, and from these artifacts we constructed a list of qualities memorials have and purposes they serve. We talked about the role of interpretation when applied to public memorials and monuments rather than to other forms of art that we had been covering. We considered the roles that the public—the state and the citizenry—plays in naming, defining, constructing, and reading memorials, and we considered whether these roles are static. Finally, we asked ourselves what public memorials of war can and should do to and for *individuals* as opposed to or in conjunction with *the country as a whole*.

Memorials are meant to serve cultural memory in a ritualized form; Wulf Kansteiner writes, "Cultural memory consists of objectified culture, that is, the texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments which are designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective" (182). The operative word in thinking about memorials that commemorate loss on a mass scale is *collective*: the emotional needs of the individual must be weighed against those of the citizenry, both those who fought and those who did not, those who supported the war and those who protested. Memorials must gratify a multiplicity of purposes but themselves cannot be too open to a multiplicity of readings. Thus, in my mind, the study of memorials would serve an interesting interpretive and creative purpose, asking students to apply the delicate balance between individual and collective memory to a concrete event.

For their first assignment, therefore, I asked students to design a memorial for the Iraq War. Imagining themselves in the future, they were to design a piece of public art to commemorate and memorialize the war we are in the middle

of right now (see Appendix). The project would consist of the design description as well as a rationale for their choices that would be persuasive to multiple constituencies. Laura Brandon's conceptualization of public memorial art served as a guiding idea: "It is not so much a work's aesthetic qualities that ensure its significance in the making of memory as the particular meaning that interacting political and social groups impose on the piece or derive from it" (120). The students were to think about the audience the memorial would speak to and the purpose it would serve. They were to consider materials, structure, landscaping, what it would look like in light and darkness, how individuals would physically and psychically approach the site, and how they would deal with people who might hold differing opinions about the war—even whether it should be memorialized or not. I imagined that students would welcome the chance to be creative, that this assignment would provide a perfect opportunity to apply theory to practice, and that it would provide a concrete way to engage with the current conflict.

The quality of the papers was staggering. In their work, the student writers engaged with not just the guidelines of the project but its intellectual and emotional demands. One wrote, "How does one honor a war that no one wants to be part of?...When talking about the construction and meaning of memorials in class, one thing that struck me was that not one memorial can encompass the destruction and change that war causes." The students were detailed and thoughtful in their work, offering aesthetic and theoretical justifications for the design conceptions. They made compelling arguments for their choices, taking into account the divergent political stances and emotional needs of their audience members. They included pictures and models. They were sensitive to the complicated nature of the war and to the problem of trying to memorialize a war that has yet to be resolved.

I could not grade them. They were ungradable. I have been teaching for ten years in a variety of settings, and I had finally received a batch of papers I could not grade. The papers were beautifully written, thoughtful, and patriotic—and almost to a person included some reference to the attacks of September 11, 2001. The events of 9/11 seemed to be so linked to the war in Iraq in the minds of my students that their designs included Twin Towers and airplanes along with statues of soldiers and landscapes of sand. *How could they be so wrong*? I thought. *Didn't they know Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11? Didn't they read the 9/11 Commission Report or even a newspaper?* I was seething and confused . . . and realized I could not grade the papers. They had done exactly what they were supposed to do, and their papers were founded on a misconception that seemed to be shared with almost all of their compatriots. I was afraid to grade them because I disagreed so strongly with what they were doing. Originally, I had intended to grade the papers as I would any other assignment: a qualitative assessment of the writer's argument. I would consider the writer's rhetorical choices and use of appeals, the level and quality of detail, and the deployment of theoretical frameworks we had been considering. But I could

not approach these papers objectively; I could not grade them as I would any other assignment.

The next class meeting, I raised the issue. "You ARE all aware that Iraq had nothing to do with the attacks on September 11, right?" They said yes. I then asked why they chose to include references to 9/11 in their designs. I put myself in the position of an audience: could they persuade me in my role as a "tax-paying, peace-activist member of the community board" or as a "congresswoman who voted against the war and didn't want to appropriate money in the budget for such a memorial" that their design should be considered, that it would meet the needs of a public ritual of mourning and collective memory?

In the end, they not only convinced me but showed me the presumption of what I was asking them to do, and they revealed to me the limitations of my own stance. They argued that, although it was true that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11 and it was true that many truly patriotic people were against the war, too many people nevertheless see the events as linked, as part of the same national trauma, a moment when we saw ourselves as endangered. One student wrote in his paper, "Cynics may say that national identities and memories are artificial constructs peddled by the powers that be for unscrupulous means, yet these memories can also represent cultural moments that have deeply affected a large swath of the population." For my students, as citizens, the events of the last seven or eight years have a been a time of profound destabilization; their memorials mourn not only the fallen, many of whom they know personally, but an America that has ceased to exist for a large part of the population and that many of them are too young to remember. Finally, they said, *you asked us to memorialize a war that's still going on. This* is *the war that is still going on. Maybe some day it will be different. But how are we to know?*

My students, through the Memorial Design Project, revealed to me the ambiguity and complexity of being an American in a country at war. They engaged directly with the emotional and psychic work of the war memorial and with our collective need for such commemoration. Parker Palmer writes that we as teachers, when we are at our best, "embrace ambiguity not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things" (107). My students were willing to question their own beliefs, many of them cherished, in a setting I tried to create for them and in which I then became uncomfortable myself. The assignment demanded uncomfortable intellectual work from all of us; it also brought out the limitations of conventional classroom work and assessment in the face of such difficult issues.

Ultimately, I did not grade the papers. I asked each student to meet with me individually so that we could continue our conversation and hear from each other. In their arguments for their choices, they revealed an understanding of the need for and purpose of memorials and collective meaning-making that eloquently demonstrated their grasp of the emotional and ethical issues we had been grappling with. We learned more from furthering the dialogue about these

issues than we would have from my original assessment approach. Sometimes our honors students deserve more than just good grades; they deserve moments of mutual sharing and connection across questions painful and necessary.

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The author may be contacted at

jmutell@mail.widener.edu.

APPENDIX

The Memorial Design Project
HUM 388: Art and Literature of War in the 20th Century

Paper One: The Memorial Design Project

In reading personal narratives and memoirs of war experiences, we have been talking about private, individual testimonies, and asking how individuals remember and represent war. However, we also need to think about how a society or culture responds to and remembers war. What needs are fulfilled by the creation of war memorials? What tensions arise? Laura Brandon, in her book *Art and War*, writes:

> The literature presents national memory as a fluid phenomenon that can both exist and evolve at the same time. What people make and understand exists within an often-contested dynamic that involves many interests, including power. This dynamic gives shape and meaning to the rituals and objects associated with the ever-changing memory. Further, in art, it is not so much a work's aesthetic qualities that ensure its significance in the making of memory as the particular meaning that interacting political and social groups impose on the piece or derive from it. Within this informing context, we can grasp how memorial art has moved in and out of the shadows of history, art history, identity, and memory in a manner beyond the strictly narrative. (120)

As we discussed in class on Monday night, a great deal goes into thinking about war memorials and the commemoration of war through their creation. As we have also been discussing, our country is still grappling with the meaning and consequences of the war in Iraq: how will we make meaning from this war? how will we remember it? how will we commemorate its dead and wounded?

In this paper, you will design a memorial for the war in Iraq. You will provide details of its design, visual presentation, and significance. You will also write a rationale for why you think your design is the most effective or appropriate. Imagine you are submitting a proposal to a committee charged with creating the memorial; you have to convince politicians, veterans, families, and community members, all with different opinions, that your design is most effective.

Here are some details and questions you should think about:

- what should the memorial be made out of?
- how big should it be?
- where should it be placed: city street, garden, cemetery, park, etc.
- should it be abstract? should it be representational?
- what kinds of symbols, if any, should it incorporate?
- what text, if any, should it incorporate?

- what should be its focus: victory, loss, death, freedom, etc.?
- should it take any particular stance on the war? make any political statement?
- ***key question: how do you want visitors to feel? what thoughts or feelings do you want to evoke?***

Look at some of the memorials mentioned in Brandon's book for ideas (Google them), and think about some of the examples from class. A successful paper will ***describe and argue***; it will:

- be creative
- provide plenty of details in response to the questions above
- make a clear and convincing argument for why this design is best
- show an awareness of audience: people who want a memorial but might not agree on what it should represent—in your argument, you should be aware of possible tensions and conflicts of interpretation and need