

# *InterCulture*

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**VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2 JUNE 2008**

ISSN 1552-5910



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# Perspectives on War: Media and Memory

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## Introduction: The Fear of Forgetting

Katheryn Wright,  
Managing Editor

There is something seductive about remembering war. The re-enactment of a call to nation-building, finding again the material connection with an abstract ideal like freedom, or the fear of repeating a forgotten past brings people closer to understanding their own humanity. Or, maybe it takes them further away from it. A striking feature of the articles in the “Perspectives on War: Media and Memory” edition of *InterCulture* is how they facilitate a compulsion to remember, for various reasons, the violence and victories of past and present wars.

Danicar Mariano’s review on Bruce Cumming’s *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia* (2007) begins with an excerpt quoted from the text, “Happiness, cheerfulness, hope—they all have as their talisman, a salutary forgetting. The opposite faculty is, of course, memory. The preservation of memory is a struggle precisely with inertia: ‘an active *desire* not to rid oneself’ of memories, however unpleasant; a will to memory; a conviction never to forget” (150). Do the memorials, memoirs, letters, and photographs like those discussed here answer this fear of forgetting the past? Is memory how people reconcile with the passage of time, carrying the hope of redemption for a wasted life? These kinds of questions raise some thorny problems about the complex connections between media, memory, and war. Together the essays and reviews outline a way to proceed.

The articles in this issue are chronologically organized, beginning with the most recent subject matter and ending with the Mexican Revolution. They are followed by two book reviews. The first article focuses on the significance of “remembering” the current war in Iraq. Central to the memorialization of this war is the void, the empty space that stands in for those bodies lost, sacrificed, for the good of a nation. David W. Seitz’s “Silent Thunder: War Memorials and the Break Up of the Collectivistic Motive to Sacrifice” discusses how the void is constructed, hiding the horrors of war within the iconic sheen of sacrifice. The Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom honors American soldiers killed during the Iraqi war. Outlining a history of narratives of soldierly sacrifice

dating back to Pericle's funeral oration, Seitz analyses how this memorial signifies a "collapsing of time" that creates a tension between the instantaneity of the initial strike with the enduring, ongoing conflict. Erin McCoy's "All the Good Things You Are" is, in itself, a memorial. Her short story juxtaposes the process of mourning experienced by the family of a soldier who was killed in Iraq with personal emails sent by the deceased to his younger brother. The poignancy of the narrative is its seeming simplicity, with the network of memories focused through images like "the little wooden box" (96) carrying the soldier's remains.

Anthony Kolenic's "Mourning Memory: Performing Sanctity through September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorials" analyzes "public mourning" and the construction of collective memory. Kolenic argues that these memorials distance the fear of death for us; "We build performative memories of death so we can forget the experience that awaits" (101). The individual is subsumed through the collective experience of national mourning. Discussing "Ground Zero," Kolenic points out how the memorials assume that survivors are less important than those that died, making death "reproducible" within the national-sacred space of the memorial. These memorials reproduce the performance of self-sacrifice for the nation, and visitors are brought into this on-going production.

Ross Wilson's "The Trenches in British Popular Memory" asks, why have the trenches of World War One remained a central image in British popular memory? In order to answer this question, he looks to the memoirs of Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Robert Graves (1895-1985). His conclusion considers how the memory of the trenches resonates in British political policy concerning Iraq. Everard Meade's "Modern Warfare Meets "Mexico's Evil Tradition": Death, Memory, and Media During the Mexican Revolution" catalogues pictures of executions that inform the "collected memory" of the Mexican Revolution. Through these representations, ritualized killing weaves into the everyday life of Mexico. Meade's conclusion focuses on how the work of Agustín Víctor Casasola illustrates the tension between war photography and images of executions, which proscribe the centrality of death for the Mexican people during the Revolution.

Following Mariano's aforementioned discussion of *Ruptured Histories* is a book review about Adam Katz's edited collection *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*. The reviewer Amir Khan focuses on the question of "origins," an interesting hypothesis considering that war is often considered a necessary starting-point for the constitution of society. A tradition like generative anthropology contextualizes this kind of presumptive claim.

I can't help but think that a primary role of artists and academics is to craft memory, molding it into the fragments that make up the parameters of history. This crafting seems especially poignant when considering the historical significance of war. In "On the Concept of History" (1939), Walter Benjamin writes, "Articulating the past historically...means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger" (Thesis VI). A memory is fused with productive power, but the appropriation, capturing, and classifying of memory as "historical materialism" starves time of its revolutionary potential. At the center of this push and pull is media, archiving experience and producing memories. While attempting to capture my own "flash" of history and mold it into a career, these essays are

themselves reminders to stay attuned to the political, social, cultural, and economic consequences of the compulsion to remember or the fear of forgetting, whatever the case may be.

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Thank you to InterCulture's editorial board for their dedication, Dr. Martinez for her continued commitment, Jeremy Bassetti for his expertise, and Clinton Bryant for his invaluable contributions to this issue. Everyone at InterCulture appreciates Dr. Johnson and everyone in Interdisciplinary Humanities at FSU for their continued support.