

The Tense Present History of the Second Gulf War: Revelation and Repression in Memorialization

Ken MacLeish

Provocative questions about history and memory are both addressed and posed anew by two “live,” temporary memorials to the current war in Iraq: the American Friends Service Committee’s Eyes Wide Open and Veterans for Peace’s Arlington West. This article analyzes the memorials themselves, along with the substantial and complex body of public response and media coverage they have generated. I draw on various details of the memorials and their attendant discourses, including the marginal place of the civilian Iraqi dead, to speculate about the potentials and inevitable limitations of this sort of commemoration. I am not interested in the completeness or “correctness” of the Iraq war memorials’ representations of loss, but rather in the peculiar and perhaps inevitable aporias of historical and personal commemoration—heavily inflected by post-9-11 nationalism and militarism—that a critical engagement with these projects brings to light.

Introduction

How are we to remember the past when we cannot agree on its meaning or even its material facts? And how are we to make it into “history” when it is so recent that its affective traces are still powerfully present, or when it is the history of events that are playing out in the present on a daily basis. These are questions that are both addressed and posed anew by two memorials to the current war in Iraq: Eyes Wide Open, a traveling installation sponsored by the Quaker peace group American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) that includes one pair of combat boots for every American casualty in Iraq, and Arlington West, a temporary “cemetery” of white wooden crosses for American soldiers fallen in Iraq erected every weekend on a southern California beach by a local chapter of Veterans for Peace (VFP). These memorials have generated a substantial and complex body of public response and media coverage. While the responsible groups share an avowedly anti-war orientation, they also both claim that the primary purpose of the memorials is to publicly recognize the personal and individual consequences of war. Veterans, the families of the fallen, and other visitors come to the memorials to grieve their losses, to mark the cross or pair of boots representing a friend or relation with notes and mementos, to pay their respects to strangers, and to support one another. Like the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, Eyes Wide Open and Arlington West attempt to respond to an event laden with political controversy and high personal and emotional stakes, as they address not just a war—an abstract historical event—but the absence and memory of the people whose labor and lives make war.

These memorials, in their very presence and form, both answer and ask questions about history. I say answer and ask, and in that order, because these memorials’ very self-conscious marking of history and loss is a necessarily ambivalent affair, on more than one front. They present the dead as anonymous masses of boots or crosses, but at the same time invite the individuation and personalization of the fallen. They evoke feelings of despair and sadness, but also provide a setting for the healing of emotional wounds. The straightforward, unitary sym-

bolic gesture made by each memorial provokes an array of responses that is both eclectic and contentious—many viewers are moved by its personalization of distant and abstractly conceived events, while others are angered by what they perceive as the opportunistic politicization of soldiers' deaths. This is hardly surprising, given both the historical precedent of the Vietnam War and first Gulf War's looming ambiguity in the national imagination, and the status of the soldier, straddling the gap between the public and the private, as a figure of ambivalence par excellence (Lutz 2001).

But even beyond all these things is the inescapable reality that no event can be named, described and put into place without on the one hand objectifying it, and on the other opening it up as a site for dialogue or conflict over its meaning and significance; one need not look far into the public responses to these memorials to see that they have done exactly these things. Even to suggest a political reading of the memorials provokes dissension and debate among organizers and visitors, many of whom are eager to validate the memorials' commemorative function precisely on the basis of their apolitical character: one widow "didn't see the politics of war or a protest when she looked at the rows of white crosses" of Arlington West, according to one reporter. "'I just see heroes,' she said" (Torrejon 2004). Other visitors feel strongly that the memorials should provoke offense and outrage. In this sense the memorials function, as does the Vietnam Veterans' memorial, as screen memories, a psychoanalytic concept that Marita Sturken (1997) borrows from Freud in her analysis of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. A screen is an object that "both shields and is projected upon" (Sturken 1997:45); in psychoanalysis, it constitutes a sort of active forgetting in which "real" traumas are hidden beneath the screen and neuroses and anxieties are cast upon it. Sturken suggests that this division is not so absolute, however, writing of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (or more simply, the Wall), "the walls of the memorial act to eclipse—to screen out—personal and collective memories of the Vietnam War in the design of history [but] the textures of cultural memory are nevertheless woven throughout, perhaps over and under, these screens" (Sturken 1997:45).¹

So while the memorials may fail at the task of "just" commemorating the dead, in the process they do succeed at making the dead present in a new way in the public sphere. They betray an intention and desire to think historically about the present, and in the particular context of controversial and still-unfolding events (cf. Jameson 1991; Trouillot 1995). *Eyes Wide Open* and *Arlington West*—and by extension the veritable genre of "human interest" news media narratives about fallen soldiers and troubled and injured young veterans—constitute sites of what Sturken (1997) has theorized as the profound mutual "entanglement" of history and memory. According to Sturken, these two realms of knowledge, one 'official' and the other 'subjective,' are distinct but mutually constitutive, especially in instances of "the popularization of history, specifically how histories are told through popular culture, the media, public images, and public memorials—how cultural memory engages with historical narrative in this public sphere" (Sturken 1997:5). The stories that these memorials sug-

gest about war, violence, national identity, and loss are thus different from but intractably imbricated with the rarefied and professional academic narrative bearing the name "history." While conventional theories of history typically fail to account for the fact that academics are not the only narrators involved in the production of history (Trouillot 1995:19), in these memorials we can trace this production in the public sphere by individuals and groups who are active, interested, deeply emotionally invested, and often divided.

One of the primary functions of commemoration and memorialization is to assimilate disruptive events into historical narratives—that is, to fix a war, a disaster, an atrocity, an assassination in a moment in the past by means of generalized, unified aesthetic gestures, to separate it from the present, and worst of all, to implicate it in the teleological unfolding of the best of all possible worlds. Even more, they offer the possibility of a critical approach to historical narrative along the lines of Walter Benjamin's materialist historiography (Benjamin 1968; Yoneyama 1999; Wang 2004): they constitute an effort to come to terms with the dead, with the chaos and disaster of history, against the impulse to keep looking forward, to be swept along by progress, and so to forget. Quoting Charles Griswold, Marita Sturken writes that memorials are "a species of pedagogy" that "seeks to instruct posterity about the past and, in so doing, necessarily reaches a decision about what is worth recovering" (Griswold as cited in Sturken 1997:48). Benjamin's theory of history refuses to take this pedagogy for granted, and insists that it must be produced by the active and critical engagement of viewers. To put it another way, is not this pedagogy itself an aspect of the screen? If so, what does it conceal, and what might be revealed if it is recognized as such?

I take seriously Trouillot's assertion that such a thing as "history" does exist, and that to too hastily "reduce what happened to what is said to have happened"—to take all history as simply competing, situated narratives—is to ignore the undeniable presence of some real referent "out there," of material realities and their effects and traces (Trouillot 1995:13).² But the particular phenomenon of these memorials demands that history and memory be taken into account together, perhaps distinguished, but not separated. For in them is apparent the entanglement of the affective character of memory with the material effects that make war historically "real," the personalization of individual narratives of grief, loss and rage within and against the "official" discourse of policy, politics, and mass-mediated public debate on war. As Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1968:255). Again I emphasize how, in the dilemma of inscription, the memorials both answer and ask questions of history and memory, so even as they can be seen to do the work Benjamin describes, they bring with them their own moments of danger.

I will proceed here with first with an overview of the way the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial raises many of these same conceptual issues. The Wall sets the precedent in the recent history of the U.S. for understanding memorials as public symbols of historical narratological production, as sites of conflict and

grief and healing and forgetting. My analysis of the Iraq War memorials themselves is based on a broad selection of media reports, editorials, and the relevant groups' own literature. Several notable themes emerge in the talk provoked by the memorials (in which I include commentary and journalistic framing as well as direct responses from visitors and organizers), including the tangibility and visibility of their representation of loss, their ostensibly political or apolitical character, and the sense of moral obligation to, respect for, and stewardship of the dead. I conclude by examining another salient feature of the memorials: the marginal presence of the civilian Iraqi dead. While both memorials make serious gestures to commemorate these casualties as well, they are undeniably peripheral to the commemoration of American soldiers, a fact that is mirrored in the public and media discourse on the memorials. I use this fact as a sort of diagnostic for thinking about the potentials and inevitable limitations of this sort of commemoration. I am not interested in the completeness or "correctness" of the Iraq war memorials' representations of loss, but rather the extent to which they can be said to present what Trouillot calls an "authentic" (1995:148)—which is to say honest and self-critical—relationship between the past and the present. To put it in a more open-ended way, can we read in these memorials, or any other, as a "conception of the present as the 'time of now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" and the promise of redemption (Benjamin 1968:263), or are they simply screens, reflecting back at us visions of what we most desire or fear?

Reflections on the Wall

In her brief and insightful history of the Wall, Hass (1998) emphasizes the obvious but highly significant point that the this memorial commemorates the veterans of the Vietnam War, rather than simply the (ignominious) outcome of the war itself, the (defeated) might of the superpower state, or the (doubt-plagued) patriotism of the American citizenry. The design of the Wall had to somehow address both the divisiveness of the war and the marginalization of Vietnam veterans (Sturken 1997:45). In particular, the sponsoring group the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Fund (VVMF) specified that the memorial be "apolitical" and "harmonious with the site," somewhere on the Washington, D.C., Mall. The winner of the juried competition held by the VVMF was the now famous V-shaped black granite wall designed by Maya Lin, a 22-year-old Chinese-American Yale art student. The antimemorial design of The Wall is a self-conscious rejection of conventional aesthetic codes (Sturken 1997): its low profile cuts into the earth rather than rising above it, and its shiny, densely engraved surface and lack of literal figuration invite viewers' reflection and engagement rather than overwhelming them with phallic grandiosity. These inversions disavow the closure offered by earlier memorials, which, by "declaring the end of a conflict," can "serve to sanctify future wars by offering a complete narrative with cause and effect intact" (Sturken 1997:51).

The names of the dead and missing soldiers engraved on the memorial (over 57,000 of them) are another key feature distinguishing the memorial from pre-

vious national monuments. Though this comprehensive listing does have some precedent in certain European monuments to particularly devastating World War I battles, in which the sheer quantity of names constituted the substance of the memorial, it was never popular in the U.S., where the desire for a more practical and celebratory style prevailed in the practice of commemorating the dead with buildings and public works projects (Hass 1998). The names on The Wall are its central feature, though, and in its original design it was to bear no other inscription or mark.³ Etched into the wall, the names have a physical presence—a presence derived from absence. They have a tactility that goes far beyond mere writing: it invites visitors to literally feel the names as absences in the carved surface, and to reproduce and disseminate the names in rubbings. In the reflection of people and landscape thrown back by the polished granite, the names float hauntingly in the foreground.

The mass of names, far from anonymizing the dead, offers a profusion of individual stories of pain and loss. "In response to the memorial," Sturken writes, "visitors commonly think of the widening circle of pain emanating from each name, imagining for each one the grieving parents, sisters, brothers, girlfriends, wives, husbands, friends, and children—imagining, in effect, the multitude of people who were directly effected by the war" (Sturken 1997:58). More names can always be added, and have been, as the remains of long-missing prisoners of war are discovered. The diffusion of individual memories linked to names spills beyond the confines of the Wall's representational gesture even as it is invoked by it. The Wall not only triggers individuals' own memories of war and loss, but suggests for all who see the memorial an endless multiplication of such memories. This open, ongoing character to the trauma of the war is central to the constitutive, productive entanglement of memory with the effort to historicize the war. In this sprawling, open-ended evocation, the Wall recalls Benjamin's rejection of progressive historical narratives in favor of a conception of history as montage, a collection of fragments that are linked, contiguous, but not linear or unifiable (McRobbie 1999). The Wall, at least to some extent, encourages viewers to dwell in these fragments and reflect on the dead, to resist the forward pull of progress, to make history from memories that "[flash] up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1968:255).

But the effects of the monument cannot be limited to the intimate impact of its aesthetic form; it inhabits a much broader social context, one in which it has acquired iconographic status and so is the object of the multiple projections of a screen memory writ large. While Hass writes that "The work of any memorial is to construct the meaning of an event from the fragments of experience and memory" (1998:9), this emphasis on "meaning" can be a misleading when applied to such a conflicted and contentious and projected-upon object. Even the mourning and healing the Wall was meant to facilitate (and undoubtedly has) is ambiguous, intended as much for the divided and anxious nation as a whole as for veterans themselves. The design's evocation of a healing wound—a slash cut into the earth that over time grows green with grass again, but remains visible—suggests not just the bodies of veterans, but of the American nation

(Sturken 1997). There is a sort of mimesis here, in which the wounded nation is figured in the wounded soldier. But what does it mean to “heal” each of these different bodies? Sturken writes that “the healing process of the veterans has been couched in terms of atonement and asking forgiveness; when applied to the nation, this process connotes not remembrance but forgetting, an erasure of problematic events in order to smooth the transition of difficult narratives into the present” (ibid.:74). The ambiguity of the memorial as screen is made apparent here, and the question is raised of whether “healing” means to embrace fully the trauma of the war, or to attempt to forget it and move on. Sturken implies that, at least for the American public, the latter meaning dominates. The result is an emotionally charged nostalgia that nevertheless releases the public from the guilt and responsibility the veterans are presumed to have to face, an ironic recapitulation of the scapegoating and marginalization of veterans that followed their return from war.

The ambiguity of the Wall does not end there, however. The design of the Wall, true to the intentions of the VVMF, does not promulgate any particular interpretation of the war.

The black granite walls of the memorial act as a screen for myriad cultural projections; it is easily appropriated for a variety of interpretations of the war and of the experience of those who died in it. To the veterans, the memorial makes amends for their treatment since the war; to the families and friends of those who died, it officially recognizes their sorrow and validates a grief that was not previously sanctioned; to others, it is either a profound antiwar statement or an opportunity to recast the narrative of the war in terms of honor and sacrifice. (Sturken 1997:75)

But in foregrounding veterans and the names of fallen soldiers, Sturken argues, the Wall implicitly privileges narratives of heroism, honor and sacrifice and casts American soldiers as the primary *victims* of the war. The emphasis on the veterans is doubtless appropriate to an extent, but worthy of suspicion in its own way, as it elides both the mistreatment of veterans by the state and the public in the aftermath of the war, and any kind of public culpability for the depredations experienced by Vietnamese civilians and soldiers (Sturken 1997)—these latter are the things that reside unseen on the other side of the screen.

The inextricable entanglement of history and memory is distinctly visible here, as the desire to forget clearly weighs heavily on the ways that popular memories help constitute the historicization of the Vietnam War that the Wall facilitates. It is worth noting that not only are history and memory mutually complicit in narrativizing the war in a certain way—one that, according to Sturken, redeems the U.S.’s wounded imperial pride and recuperates the horrors of Vietnam in terms of honor and sacrifice—but both realms are key to complicating or confronting the resulting narrative. History as real referent (in Trouillot’s sense of the term)—the irreducibly complex and messy realities of war that lie immanent in artifacts, archives, and critical historiography—can be called on to counterbalance the forgetful, reductivist narratives of popular memory. And only memory can keep open the attempted closures of progressive historicization.

Memorializing the present

The dilemmas of memorialization and historicization—of inscription and narrativization—that plagued and were provoked by the Wall persist today. And while the current moment is by no means identical to the Vietnam War era (the efforts of some politicians and commentators to paint it as such aside), it undeniably bears some similarities that are significant for this investigation: the current war is nowhere near as popular as the first Gulf War, nor, despite its official cessation, does it show any sign of definitively ending. Like Vietnam, the war in Iraq is fragmented and chaotic, a state of confusion mirrored in public sensibilities about it (cf. Sturken 1997)⁴ and contentious collective efforts to narrativize it. According to a recent CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, for example, a majority of Americans believe that the Iraq War was not worthwhile, but a substantial minority (41 percent) maintains that it was (CNN 2005). At the same time, haunted by the looming specter of the Vietnam War and its veterans, the American public has exalted soldiers in the current conflict to heroic status,⁵ and with an enthusiasm that does not seem to have been dampened by the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal or the numerous other reports of torture and abuse coming out of Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay. A detailed investigation of this fact is beyond the scope of this essay, but I would argue that possible explanations include not only the memory of Vietnam, but the disruption caused by the disproportionately high number of National Guard and Reservist troops deployed to Iraq, deadly fighting that has continued long past the declared cessation of formal combat operations in April 2003, and, following Sturken, a “screening” compensation for the duplicitous recruitment tactics (e.g., Ferner 2004), poor pay, neglect, and lack of adequate services that many veterans of the first and current Gulf Wars have or will soon face (see Lutz 2001). Whatever the case, it is undeniable that the current moment lacks a “clear ideology around which a community of grief” could be formed, just as Hass writes of Vietnam-era America (1998:9).

The Iraq War memorials thus share with the Wall the aesthetic problem of providing, with a single aesthetic gesture, a space to reflect on an event with very high political and affective stakes. The organizers of both projects are keenly aware of this, and while they do not disavow their antiwar principles, they take great care to insulate the memorials themselves from these larger social concerns.⁶ According to the original statement on Arlington West released by VFP, “The purpose of the project is to make the consequences of war real, and to allow people to express their grief, respect and thoughts” (VFP 2003). Similarly, Mary Ellen McNish, General Secretary of AFSC, describes Eyes Wide Open as a place where “families and friends come to grieve for lost loved ones and strangers honor those who gave their lives to a cause far from home,” while in the same passage, she affirms her group’s unequivocal “belief that no war can justify its human cost” (McNish 2004). At the sites of the memorials themselves, visitors and organizers repeatedly distinguish their desire to illustrate the toll of war from an overt antiwar statement (e.g., Hollet 2005; Moss 2004; Torrejon 2004). For example, one visitor to the Austin, Texas, appearance of Eyes Wide Open wrote in a letter to the editor, “I saw respect being bestowed to unknown

lives that have been lost. I didn't see it as an antiwar movement. I saw it as it was intended—as a memorial” (Giles 2005:A12). An editorialist in the Santa Barbara Independent writes of the VFP organizers of Arlington West, “Because they recognize that others misinterpret the memorial, they sublimate their partisanship for the greater good. Sure, they find it hard to be apolitical, because most of them have pretty strong views on what's going on in this country and overseas, but they are sensitive to the opinions of others. This is not a platform” (Stockton 2004).

The two memorials respond to this difficulty of representation in different ways, but they share with the wall an emphasis on collectivized individuals, on the fallen soldiers rather than the state. As its name indicates, Arlington West mimics the official commemorative style of Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., on a beach in Santa Monica, California, with orderly rows of white wooden crosses that are set up and taken down (and augmented as necessary) every weekend. The crosses are unmarked, but off to one side is a long list of the names and head shots of the soldiers they are meant to represent. Family members, fellow soldiers and other visitors are encouraged by the organizers to fill out paper tags with the names of the dead and attach them to the empty crosses.⁷ Over the course of the weekend, flowers, photographs, letters, and other personal mementos collect around various crosses. Some nights, they are illuminated with small, shielded candles. The stately military style of Arlington West is somewhat ambivalent. It clearly draws some of its power from its embrace of the formal orthodoxy and military aesthetics of conventional, official memorialization, and the cemetery imagery suggests in a very concrete way the closure of bodies laid to rest. On the other hand, by its very existence the memorial indicates that someone, namely VFP, has had to step in to do perform a duty of commemoration neglected by the state. “They are our protectors, and we are stewards of them,” says one VFP member of the fallen soldiers (Dudar and Marr 2004).

The boots of Eyes Wide Open also mimic a military style of commemoration: the battlefield memorials constructed by soldiers in the midst of war, consisting of a fallen comrade's boots, rifle and helmet. Notably, this kind of memorial marks an absent person rather than a grave, since even on the battlefield the remains of the deceased would be retrieved and returned home as soon as possible (see Hass 1998). Tagged with the names, hometowns, and circumstances of death of each fallen soldier and accompanied by offerings of flowers, photographs and other offerings, the boots of Eyes Wide Open share this provisional, temporary quality. At the same time, they mark the dead in a distinctly literal way: that is, with real, concrete objects, rather than abstract symbols like crosses. In some cases—nine pairs of boots, to be exact—this literality goes further, as families have donated the actual boots of their fallen sons, daughters or spouses to be included in the memorial. According to one reporter, “Some visitors said it was easy to imagine those boots filled with real feet, and above, legs, a body and a face” (Fitzsimmons 2005:B1). Michael McConnell, the former priest and AFSC organizer who conceived the memorial, explained how he

was struck by the sense of absent presence the boots invoke: “That represents a life. It helps people imagine someone who should be standing there but is not” (Hart 2005:E3). In this way the aesthetics of Eyes Wide Open conjure a sense of trauma and loss far more troubling than Arlington West. Marking the fallen with white crosses locates them in their final repose. The corporeal absence evoked by the boots suggests a haunting incompleteness, though—the person who once occupied them is simply gone.

Both memorials occupy heavily trafficked sites, and so for passers-by bring the memory of the dead suddenly into other spaces of public life. Arlington West is located on a popular public beach beneath a boardwalk, and in video of the memorial a constant stream of milling beachgoers is visible in the background. In its travels Eyes Wide Open has occupied a variety of public spaces, mostly outdoors except in case of inclement weather: parks, college campuses, and the lawns and steps and foyers of public buildings and churches. Again Eyes Wide Open seems to have a particularly uncanny effect on viewers, moving from place to place every few days and appearing suddenly to surprise people in the course of their daily routines (Fitzsimmons 2005). And this is precisely the point: “I enjoy putting this up where what I call the accidental tourist will stumble across it,” says Marq Anderson, the AFSC member directly responsible for installing the memorial at each new location (Hart 2005). The relative permanence of Arlington West, on the other hand, lends itself to the sort of regular pilgrimages (on a more local scale) that the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial has also inspired (e.g., Torrejon 2004).

Organizers and visitors attribute the memorials' power and significance to their ability to make the “human cost” of war—particularly in the lives of American soldiers—apparent to the viewing public. “When American see the price we are paying, they will understand,” said Steve Sherrill, who conceived Arlington West (Torrejon 2004); “We want to show the human element of the war,” said Ed Ellis of VFP (Ettenhofer 2004); “To too many Americans, it's not real,” said the mother of one fallen soldier (Fitzsimmons 2005). Others write or testify that “It was very moving to see the loss represented” (Parrish 2005); “It is too easy to forget the cost of this war” (ibid.); “The tragic consequences of the war are brought home with an unimaginable impact” (Shirley 2005); the boots and shoes of Eyes Wide Open “filled me with overwhelming grief for the loss of so many lives” (Jezorek 2005) and offer “tangible evidence of lives actually lost” (Hood 2005). The vivid presence and sheer visibility of the memorials seem to be the basis for their affective power. They recognize and allow reflection on bodies that would not otherwise be visible en masse. This visibility contrasts dramatically with the hyperreal detachment with which the first Gulf War was viewed (Baudrillard 1995), and with the secrecy that now surrounds the return of fallen soldiers' bodies from Iraq and Afghanistan—“The Pentagon outlawed any pictures of flag-draped coffins coming home,” says Eyes Wide Open designer McConnell, “so the challenge was to present the lives that were being lost daily without battering people with real images of war” (Hart 2005).

Like the Wall, the individuation and naming of dead soldiers here evokes a “widening circle of pain” around each cross or pair of boots, a multiplicity of affective excesses that cannot be contained by any single narrative. One woman who visited Eyes Wide Open to mourn her son, for example, attested, “I’m in unbearable pain every second of every day because of only one pair of those empty boots” (Hettena 2005). And as with the Wall, there is no closure, because the list of names is continually growing on a weekly and daily basis—the organizers of Arlington West have even taken to marking the past week’s fatalities with blue crosses in order to emphasize the dramatic leaps the death toll can take (Ettenhofer 2004). But beyond mere quantities and increases, what is striking about the memorials is the fact that even one single marker among the currently 1,589 can be a source of constant, “unbearable pain,” materialized in the memorial but not containable by it. And again this impact is not limited to those immediately affected by the war, but seems to be a common experience of many who view the memorials, who express their responses in terms of almost inarticulate emotion: people “not knowing what to make of it” (Hart 2005), enduring “almost more than I could bear” (Hood 2005), or simply “[having] an experience” (Larson 2005).

These responses suggest a Benjaminian sensibility of traumatic rupture, an inability or unwillingness to leave the past behind. Many responses to the memorial refer to a sense that “this is not the way things are supposed to be” (Hood 2005); that the war is a “waste” (*ibid.*); that “Each of these people, ... they had so much to do in this world” (Torrejon 2004); and that the veteran organizers “have seen the worst and don’t want a repeat, more virulently, more violently” (Stockton 2004). These sentiments “[seize the past] as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1968:255); they suggest a past full of chaos and wreckage, rather than a logical progression leading to the present. If the war is a “waste,” if it takes the lives of people with “so much to do,” how can it be regarded as progress? And if the war does not constitute progress, what sort of present is it creating? These implied questions resonate strongly with Lisa Yoneyama’s description of the narratives of Hiroshima A-bomb survivors, which combine irreversible tragedy with a suspicion that “opportunities to prevent the moment of destruction might have been seized, but were not” (Yoneyama 1999:30). When considered as the product of such events, the present becomes provisional, mutable, open to changes that will avoid “a repeat, more violently, more virulently.”

The limits of representation

As with the Wall, the memorials are driven by a sense of urgency, a feeling that a place for grieving and healing is needed. “After Vietnam, we had to wait twenty years to get the Wall,” said Ed Ellis, a VFP organizers and Vietnam Veteran. “This memorial allows people to express their grief now” (Ettenhofer 2004). I read this desire to reflect and grieve, combined with the memorials’ sensibility of tactility and visual presence—of making things “real” to viewers—as a complex effort to accommodate memory in the otherwise abstract conception of ongoing

events and to give those events a historical coherence in the present. The memorials attempt to somehow, even in a politically divided context, make a gesture that “gives shape to and consolidates public memory,” that “makes history” (Hass 1998:9). As Sturken suggests with regard to the Wall, it is important to ask here who these memorials are meant to grieve for and heal—soldiers, civilian dead, the American public—and who what they exclude implicitly or explicitly exclude as a result. To put it in Sturken’s terms, if these memorials constitute a screen memory, what is being projected upon them, and what do they conceal?

The memorials clearly reflect a range of different projections. While organizers and many viewers strive to maintain an apolitical atmosphere of respect, tribute, and mourning, some who view the memorials argue that grief and recognition are inadequate responses: that, for example, “people should be outraged at the way our government has handled this situation and be moved to speak up and pay attention” (Jezorek 2005). Others see the memorials as an opportunistic politicization of the dead that distorts their individual intentions or the supposed purpose of the war: “Eyes Wide Open is ... using them as pawns” (Hettena 2005); “These brave people whom they [AFSC] disrespected deserved better” (Clemmons 2005); “It is a shame to see the names of the dead used by this agenda-driven antiwar group [VFP] ... sometimes war *is* the answer” (Dudar and Marr 2004). So not surprisingly, in spite of their apolitical aspirations, the memorials reflect a range of conflicting interpretations.

What is more ironic, and more disturbing in light of Sturken’s analysis, is the fact that even in their efforts to expose damage inflicted by the Iraq War upon *all* parties, including Iraqi civilians, the aesthetic schemas and popular and media reception of Eyes Wide Open and Arlington West consistently foreground the honor and sacrifice of fallen American soldiers. As with the Wall, this is not altogether unfitting. But as with the Wall, such emphasis obscures not only the social and economic marginalization of soldiers (and of those who choose to become soldiers) and their communities, but the loss and destruction experienced by Iraqi civilians as a result of the war and the violent insurrection it unleashed, the U.S.’s decades of complicity with Saddam Hussein’s regime, and the very contentious public debate over the war itself.

The memorials do make determined efforts to draw attention to these things. Arlington West includes a sign indicating that crosses marking every Iraqi civilian death would cover the entire beach. Eyes Wide Open goes further, featuring a token quantity of civilian shoes accompanying the boots, a wall listing the names of Iraqi war dead, and a multimedia exhibit that openly questions the logic of the war. But the aesthetically and conceptually central place of the crosses and boots in the memorials clearly overrides these other representations, which can at best only refer back to the dead American soldiers. While some public responses refer either supportively (Jezorek 2005; Moss 2005) or angrily (Crabtree 2005; Clemons 2005; Swink 2005) to the notion that all losses in the war should be mourned equally, the aesthetic emphasis on the soldiers is mirrored in the majority of comments and in the very framing of media reports, which typically give the memorials’ allusions to Iraqi deaths a peripheral, one-

sentence mention if they bring it up at all. By relying on the symbolic capital of fallen soldiers to illustrate the losses that result from war, the memorials place themselves in the heart of this contradiction. For as with the Vietnam War, while the memorials themselves may refuse to glorify war, and even contain elements that condemn war far more explicitly than the Wall does, their focus on positively valued aspects of soldiers' duty and honor carries an implicit legitimization of the institution of war itself (cf. Sturken 1997:84). This treatment illustrates what Sturken refers to as "the fundamental limit of commemoration within nationalism" (1997:83): the enemy dead go unmentioned, the complicated burden of taking life is transferred from the nation and its institutions to individual soldiers, and the public retains a troubled innocence.

Despite their best intentions and their relative newness, I wonder if the memorials might be seen to hint at the sinister impulse Sturken detects in the public popularity of the Wall: "the relief of telling a history that has been taboo, but also a desire to reinscribe that history" (Sturken 1997:75). So again it is important to ask, whose grief is being addressed and whose healing is meant to be encouraged by these projects? The memorials invoke a spreading network of narratives of loss; but for those not directly affected, they also contain the traumas of grief and loss by materializing them in the specific sites and objects of Arlington West and Eyes Wide Open. Their emphasis on these individual narratives of honorable sacrifice threatens to transform their critique into the innocuous aura of nostalgia, or what historian Michael Kamen has called "history without guilt" (as cited in Sturken 1997:78). The overwhelming affective character of the memorials can be engaged with at will, and then left behind—in the past, as it were. As such, while these memorials are ripe with potential dialectical readings of history, with memories that exceed easy representation and must be seized as they "flash up," they also constitute their own "moments of danger," moments when recognition is replaced by repression and projection, by the screen memory.

This is not to condemn Arlington West and Eyes Wide Open or VFP or AFSC: these projects and groups do important political and pedagogical work, and the memorials perform the important function of raising the issue of war, which so easily recedes to the background of public consciousness, in dramatic, affecting, and highly visible ways in the public sphere. That these representations cannot accomplish everything, and perhaps cannot even perform any single representational function free from ambivalence and controversy is simply the inevitable aporia of inscription. Benjamin Brower (1999) suggests that despite the maneuvers of exclusion and repression involved, some redemption can be found here, in the very task of making events public and thus opening them up for discussion. So likewise we need not side with Freud and Sturken over Benjamin, or vice versa, in our understanding of how history and memory constitute one another—by repression and self-deception as much as by an intuitive attention to radical possibilities.

My concern is rather to highlight the ways that publicly celebrated efforts to complicate the war, to show its "true" or "human" cost, to make people "see" and "feel" the weight of those losses, cannot help but be constrained by particu-

lar exclusions and blind spots. The increasingly prominent presence of patriotism, nationalism and militarism in national discourse over the years since 9-11 hold a decisive sway on the ways projects such as Eyes Wide Open and Arlington West can be framed: their organizers are themselves constrained by these influences, and can only do broadly appealing work with the particular formations of mainstream public culture that are available at any given time. Indeed, in the past several years, the American Left has come increasingly to rely on a sort of humanistic pro-soldier rhetoric in its efforts to consolidate a politically broad-based antiwar movement. But the representational aporia of this moderating political strategy cannot simply be blamed on the current administration's unpopular hawkishness. It can perhaps be traced to the powerful imagined mimesis between the body of the individual soldier and the national body politic (Hass 1998; Scarry 1985 as quoted in Sturken 1997), along with the powerfully ambivalent figure of the soldier itself (Lutz 2001): if the soldier stands for the nation, then to question the worthiness of the soldier's death, to place him or her on a level plane with those who he or she is responsible for killing, is to perform a parallel maneuver on the nation itself. But we know that such maneuvers must be repressed, for the nation's identity depends upon its difference from and superiority to those beyond its borders (Anderson 1983), and no less on its hiding from itself and excluding from its public sphere the violence that makes possible its very existence.⁸ This need to exclude, to maintain an innocent sameness against threatening difference, exerts a decisive influence on how Americans, in the imbrication of history and memory, make sense of our relationships with our national Others, and thus of ourselves.

NOTES

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1 Sturken defines "cultural memory" thusly: "To define a memory as cultural is, in effect, to enter into a debate about what that memory means. This process does not efface the individual but rather involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of cultural meaning. Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Sturken 1997:1).

2 An in-depth analysis of the phenomenological and semantic baggage that complicates and distinguishes the various terms attached to history and memory is beyond the scope of this article. Authors like Trouillot (1995), Paul Ricoeur (2004), and Pierre Nora (1996) address these important issues in great depth.

3 Ultimately this original design was modified at the objection of several of the VVMF's most prominent financial backers, and a figurative bronze sculpture by Frederick Hart was added several hundred yards away. Opening and closing inscriptions indicating who The Wall was intended to honor—both fallen and living veterans—were added to its surface as well (Sturken 1997).

4 Sturken cites Elaine Scarry's insightful critique of the way the metaphorization of an army as a body obscures the damage done to the actual, individual bodies that make it up. But Sturken adds here that Scarry presumes a unified, orderly military body, one with a shape, a center, and an identifiable enemy. "In the Vietnam War the army was not, from

the beginning, a whole body but rather a body of confused signals, infiltrated bases, mistaken identities, fragging (the killing of incompetent or unpopular officers by their own troops), and a confusion of allies and enemy. In this already fragmented body, remembering (restoring the wholeness of the body) is highly problematic” (Sturken 1997:74).

5 By way of example, “The American Soldier” was named *Time* magazine’s 2003 “Person of the Year.”

6 There are undoubtedly important differences between AFSC and VFP, not least the fact that the latter group is composed specifically of veterans. From the perspective of this analysis, however, their memorial projects parallel one another closely.

7 Sturken writes that the Wall embodies the controversy sparked by its aesthetics by means of its inclusion of the opening and closing inscriptions and of Hart’s figurative sculpture, neither of which were part of the original design. It is worth noting that the Iraq War memorials perform this odd inclusion as well, with crosses or pairs of boots marked “name withheld by request.”

8 On the subject of commemoration, national memory and foundational violence, see, among others, Klima 2002 and Ricoeur 2004.

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Ken MacLeish
Program in Folklore, Public Culture and Cultural Studies
Department of Anthropology
University of Texas at Austin
k_mac@mail.utexas.edu