

APPLICATION FOR  
MEMORY POLITICS: EDUCATION, MEMORIALS AND MASS MEDIA  
ELEVENTH BERLIN ROUNDTABLES ON TRANSNATIONALITY ESSAY COMPETITION

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### **(1) TITLE**

Rewriting War: Exploring Memories of the Afghanistan War Through Interactive Media

### **(2) ABSTRACT**

Like all events within a society's public memory, the concept of the 2001 Afghanistan War is collectively constructed from the lived experiences of those affected by it. In the case of this international conflict the voices that contribute to the remembrance of the war are decidedly varied and complex. My dissertation focuses on a series of stories about the current War in Afghanistan collected within several communities in New York State and on the presentation of these stories through new media. Through the design of an interactive online display for the stories with user-generation capabilities, this project examines the complexity of individual lived experiences in relation to public memory and offers a location for those experiences to be displayed and explored by users of and contributors to the site.

This project moves beyond relaying oral history data to challenge the audience to participate in the display and representation of the Afghanistan War. Drawing on public memory studies, new media theory, ethnography, cultural analytics, and rhetorical theory, this project illuminates events of contemporary America public memory while exploring how authorship, context, and experience affect memory and the methods through which individual lived memories become subsumed by public memory.

### **(3) ESSAY**

My interest in the current Afghanistan War stems from the ways in which the war is publicly remembered and, at the same time, forgotten. Since 2003 the larger scale and more controversial Iraq War has over shadowed the "other war" in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that engagement in these wars results from different circumstances, US public remembrance often conflates the wars. There is little in the way of public memorialization devoted specifically to the War in Afghanistan. However, the gaze of the American public is shifting back to Afghanistan and as the war rises in prominence, the need for a space devoted to the experiences of this war will become increasingly important. By no means am I arguing that the Iraq War deserves less attention. Rather, I am suggesting the stories of the Afghanistan War warrant a place in the US public memory that it distinct from the Iraq War.

This project evolves out of the premise that oral history projects can be problematic insofar as a person's story ceases to be solely his or her own once it is disconnected from the individual and displayed in a new context. This makes such stories susceptible to being misrepresented or misappropriated. This is of concern in archival work where stories are fit within an archival collection through themes, hierarchies, and other imposed structures in ways that affect the contextual understanding of the story. Historically these problems have manifest themselves through the suppression of the voices of dissenters, marginalized groups, and minority opinions. However, while these instances of suppression are the most clearly problematic, the harm caused by preserving and displaying narratives is not limited to such groups. Indeed, the ways in which oral histories are displayed can distract from subtleties in individual accounts or pre-form audience opinions and associations. In my research I seek to utilize user-generated new media technology to reframe the forms that oral history collections

can take and the kinds of information they can relay, including information about the intrinsic nature of oral history projects.

In order to help provide a record of diverse memories associated with the Afghanistan War, this project will include both a written dissertation as well as an online platform for the display of oral histories relating to the war. The platform will draw from a database of stories seeded by those collected in my fieldwork. The population included in the fieldwork is comprised of civilians and soldiers affected directly or indirectly by the war, including soldiers in various stages of service, families of soldiers, Afghan immigrants, 9/11 survivors, and other civilians. Contributors will share stories based on their diverse experiences with the war. The contributors will be solicited in New York State through local brigades, Veterans Affairs, communities of Afghan immigrants and other organizations. While these oral histories seed the database, the database will continue to grow as users upload their own stories to the site. Likewise, the structure of the collection will evolve out of user-generated input through tags, networks, commenting functions, and linking capabilities drawn from social networking and decision-making sites like flickr, facebook, and YouTube.

The goal of the project is not simply to archive the stories of the war but to encourage active engagement with the process of constructing public memory and an understanding of how public memory subsumes individual memory. The online database offers visitors to the site the ability to hear the stories in the collection as well as to help construct the content and structure of the database. Specifically the site will offer the following functions: (1) upload a story, (2) tag existing stories, (3) network and comment functions to link between stories, comments, and outside sites, and (4) visualization of tags, stories, and keywords. Using theory and techniques

from public memory, ethnography, rhetoric, and cultural analytics, the site will provide a complex exploration of the Afghanistan War over time and among particular lived experiences.

### *Public Memory, Collective Memory, and Afghanistan*

Stephan Browne, in his 1995 article “Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory,” explains that public memory constitutes a group’s “shared sense of the past, fashioned from the symbolic resources of community and subject to its particular history, hierarchy and aspirations” (p. 248). Public memory is negotiated; over time it responds to the changing interests, activities, and concerns of a society. Michael Halloran (2001) in his “Text and Experience in a Historical Pageant: Toward a Rhetoric of Spectacle,” states, “...each rendition of an historical tale is an *appropriation* of the past whose form is adapted to the purpose of giving meaning to the specific present in which it is told” (p. 7). Public memory allows a society to recontextualize and reconfigure its past so that it resonates in the present.

Public memory constitutes a generalization built from individual memories. This means that certain memories, experiences, and interpretations of the past are necessarily left out of public memory. My use of the term public memory follows Edward Casey’s (2007) definitions from his chapter “Public Memory in Place and Time” in the collection *Framing Public Memory*. Casey explains that collective memory contributes to public memory; it is the “outer perimeter of public memory, the loose net within which events and other items are recalled” (25). Collective memory is constructed when different unrelated people remember the same event, but their remembrance of it is plural. In other words, they may not recall the event in the same way or at the same time; the commonality of the memory is in the content. Public memory, on the other

hand, is public. It necessitates interaction in a place in which people are co-present to each other (Casey, 2007, p. 32).

In the case of Afghanistan, while the collective memory of the war and the events associated with the war exists, representative public memory is distinctly lacking. There are few locations devoted to the public memory of this war; those that do exist tend to conflate Afghanistan and Iraq. This can be seen, for example, in the ephemeral war memorial, Arlington West, discussed by Ekaterina Haskins in her conference paper “Ephemeral Visibility and the Art of Memory” (Oct 2008). Arlington West, a temporary Iraq War memorial, is a pseudo graveyard in the sand built to represent fallen soldiers. The memorial also includes displays of the number of soldiers wounded in Iraq, the number of Iraqi citizens killed in the conflict, as well as the soldiers killed in Afghanistan. It is a striking memorial to the Iraq War. However, it treats the "other" war, the war in Afghanistan, as a related afterthought. Further conflation between the wars can even be seen within the Library of Congress, where the Veterans History Project structures the contents of their archives by war. Every war is named separately, with the exception of the label “Afghanistan and Iraq Wars” (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/html/search/search.html>). As the national gaze returns to Afghanistan, how and where will the public commemoration of it take place?

### *New Media Contributions to Public Memory*

At its very nature public memory contains the dualism of being both particular and universal. Public memory is based in lived memories; although they represent a universal idea for some, they are born from the individual and/or collective memories from which they evolve (Casey, 2007, p. 25). This dualism is played out in Marita Sturken’s discussion of American

public memory in her book *Tourists of History* (2007). Sturken argues that Americans who are removed from the lived memory of our collective tragedies, such as the events of 9/11, act as “tourists of history,” or individuals “for whom history is an experience once or twice removed, a mediated and reenacted experience, yet an experience nevertheless” (p. 9). The tourist may assign a different meaning to 9/11 than someone who worked in the Twin Towers but the source of the memory and the meaning is the same.

Recent advances in interactive media have resulted in a shift in the ways in which individual and collective memory affect public memory, effectively preserving such “tourist” memories for posterity when they might otherwise have been forgotten by history. As Walter Benjamin predicted in his 1935 work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character...At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (p. 28). While Benjamin refers here to an era of mechanical reproduction, his description predicts the age of digital reproduction in which contemporary users of new media switch fluidly in one moment to the next from their role as “reader” to “author” of a text. These technological shifts allow users of new media to create and access an apparently infinite amount of information.

Ekaterina Haskins suggests in “Public Memory in a Digital Age” (2007) that the unlimited storage capabilities of digital archives, like the 9/11 Digital Archive, allow the traces of the collective memory surrounding an event to be collected limitlessly. The 9/11 Digital Archives states that the goal of the site is to preserve the stories and resources related to September 11, 2001 with special consideration of those “voices currently underrepresented on the web” (<http://old.911digitalarchive.org/about/>). Furthermore, the archives suggest that all voices relating to the event are of importance: “Every submission to the September 11 Digital

Archive -- even those that are erroneous, misleading, or dubious -- contributes in some way to the historical record” (<http://old.911digitalarchive.org/about/faq.html>). Prior to the new media era, those texts worthy of preservation for the cultural memory “were typically the products of intellectual and artistic elites” (Haskins, p. 402). The idea that every record is important, that each voice adds something to the historical record is born, in part, from the recent ability to build a limitless archive. This leads to what Andreas Huyssen terms “compensatory organs of remembrance” (qtd in Haskins, p. 402), thus limiting the need for human memory and accelerating societal “amnesia” (Haskins, p. 418). While this ability “appears to mitigate against the ideological ossification associated with official memory practices and the fragility of vernacular memory gestures” (p. 418), Haskins posits that this inclusiveness creates a potentially unusable record of the past that does not promote some form of shared interpretation or effort to encourage the audience “to explore views different from their own” (p. 419).

### *Cultural Analytics, Beyond Simple Digitization*

The questions relating to the archiving of memory are, in many ways, questions of display: Whose stories are displayed as public and how? As Lawrence J. Prelli argues in his Introduction to the collection *Rhetorics of Display*, the act of displaying a historical record of the past brings with it “assumptions about what is worth remembering about the past and about whether the remembered is worthy of praise or condemnation, acknowledgment or disparagement, celebration or lamentation” (p. 11). Public memory can privilege the experiences of the few, creating questions about whose stories are displayed and whose are concealed. However, the increasing preservation and interest in the memories of the many, the “tourist” memories, and even those memories that are “erroneous, misleading, or dubious” creates a

question of how the *display* conceals the stories through the sheer bulk of content within the archive.

In part, the significance in collective digitizing efforts such as the 9/11 Digital Archives lies in the display of the massive and collective nature of the documenting itself. These archives function as Michael Halloran's definition of "spectacles," or "a gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other" (p. 5) in which "the lived experience of those present overwhelms the text" that they have gathered to witness (p. 6). The coming together of the users of and contributors to digital archives, in allowing a space for memory, is as much the point of the display as the content itself.

However, new media technology has evolved to sustain more complex interactions with large datasets, such as archives. Lev Manovich, in his article "Cultural Analytics: Visualizing Cultural Patterns in the Era of More Media," explains that such cultural datasets can be treated to generate complex and "large-scale computational analysis and interactive visualization of cultural patterns." Manovich, together with the San Diego and California Institute for Telecommunications and Information (Calit2), is currently exploring a new paradigm, cultural analytics, for the study of the seemingly infinite online cultural data. Drawing from the scientific world's use of computer analysis and visualizations, Manovich is "systematically applying these techniques to contemporary cultural data" (Manovich, forthcoming). In so doing, Manovich and others at Calit2 are creating projects that analyze patterns and display them in visual media. Through creative use of existing computational and visualization platforms, the contents of digital archives need not remain solely the realm of un-navigable prosthetic memory. Rather, digital archives can form user-developed displays of cultural data that reveals the voices of the many while creating evolving maps through the data.

## *Conclusion*

While the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan affects soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan and the US, among other countries, the stories from this war have been situated in the shadows of the more controversial Iraq War. Like all events of public memory, the Afghanistan War constitutes a negotiated concept constructed from the lived experiences of those affected by it. This war, like all international conflicts, affects many people with diverse cultural and individual experiences, and therefore invites a wide variety of interpretations, beliefs, and related experiences. In the increasingly networked and digital world of which the US is a part, spaces of public memory are no longer limited to the preservation of a dominant and dominating voice any more so than they are limited to the preservation of an unintelligible cacophony. More nuanced, complex spaces of public memory are possible, indeed necessary, in the contemporary world. By encouraging users of this project to come in contact with diverse human experiences with this war, this project aims to support Dr. Batya Friedman's assertion, quoted this year in the New York Times regarding her research in Rwanda, that creating digital archives should go beyond preservation to try "to solve socially significant, real-world problems."

This dissertation aims to preserve the stories of a population affected by the Afghanistan War, much as the 9/11 Digital Archives and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank have done for 9/11 and the Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. However, this project takes a critical step further by using user-generated content to provide an evolving structure to help make the data navigable and meaningful. While the project is seeded by stories from a particular community, the user-generated content can come from a broader audience with Internet access over time and future work will see the addition of oral histories gathered in populations lacking such access. This

project serves as an instrument for mapping the memory of the Afghanistan War and in so doing contributes to the fields of public memory, cultural analytics, and new media studies.

Furthermore, the interactive project is a public contribution as an archival system that generates an evolving interactive space for those stories, opinions, and experiences that affect the public memory of the Afghanistan War.

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